

# **What Invisible Rat**

**A Play in Five Acts**

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## **Synopsis**

A minor poet, Joe, becomes entranced with the work of a Madagascan poet of the early twentieth century: Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo. When his girlfriend kicks him out and takes up with a work colleague, Joe, in a mildly drunken state, is talked into entering an example of Rabearivelo's work along with his own in a prestigious poetry prize. Rabearivelo's work wins the prize and one of Joe's pieces comes third. The play examines the effect of sudden success on Joe, his girlfriend, and their friends; an equally sudden reversal of fortune follows. Although the theme of artistic plagiarism is the "background" of events, the interest centres on the relationship of the two main characters and the betrayal each suffers at the hands of their friends.

## **Characters**

<b>Joe</b>	A minor and unsuccessful poet.
<b>Maddy</b>	His girlfriend. A solicitor working for an unspecified company.
<b>Kasimir</b>	Joe's friend. A painter, becoming known around the traps, but still well short of fame.
<b>Jennifer</b>	A work colleague of Maddy's.
<b>Amanda</b>	Maddy's mother.
<b>Oscar</b>	Head of the Legal Department of the company for which Maddy works.
<b>Reporters</b>	
<b>Waiter</b>	

## Act One

### SCENE 1

*(The dark interior of a comfortable, inner city terrace house, fashionably shabby. The house has been opened out so that the kitchen is a continuation of the lounge/dining room. Amanda is in a shakedown on the couch - almost invisible to the audience. Joe fumbles a "silent" entrance. He is well oiled.)*

Joe: Shhh! Bugger! What a place for a rug. Last time I looked she kept them for hanging on the walls. Now she's started leaving them lying all over the floor. Where someone might tread on them. Come on rug. Time I straightened you out. Beautiful. Now, just lie there, okay? People have a right to expect to walk on you. And you have the right to expect to cop it, okay? We understand each other.

Know something, rug? I've never looked at you closely before, but now that I'm down here, I am prepared to acknowledge you as a work of art. How many fingers tied your thousand knots? Someone designed you. Worked you up. And breathed a curse of relief when you went out the door.

Good work rug. Good work. From now on, I will remember the fingers that tied the thousands of knots each time I stamp along your length. The rest of the household might think it's the floorboards creaking; I'll remember it's fingers breaking.

What about some light here?

*(He is lit by a single spot.)*

Joe: You know you're living in South Melbourne when every light in

the house is a spotlight.

*(He pulls a tattered paperback from his back pocket.)*

Joe:           *What invisible rat*  
Hard to read with that light in your eyes.  
*What invisible rat*  
*come from the walls of night*  
*gnaws at the milky cake of the moon?*  
*Tomorrow morning,*  
*when it has gone,*  
*there will be bleeding marks of teeth.*  
What a bloody beautiful description of a dawn, “bleeding marks of teeth”. Jean-Joseph, you’ve seen a few of the same dawns I have: Melbourne’s Madagascan dawns. There’ll be a few bleeding marks of teeth tomorrow morning when Madeline has her say! To look up at the sky and see a waning moon as a rat-gnawed cake! Fantastic!  
*Tomorrow morning*  
*those who have drunk all night*  
*and those who have abandoned their cards,*  
*blinking at the moon*  
*will stammer out:*  
*‘Whose is that sixpence*  
*that rolls over the green table?’*  
*‘Ah!’ one of them will add,*  
*‘our friend has lost everything*  
*and killed himself!’*  
Whose is that sixpence? Green table. I’ll have to find out if he played billiards, or something. A sixpence rolling on a green table. That’s a moon! That’s how you describe a moon!  
*And all will snigger*  
*and, staggering, will fall.*

Probably over a bloody rug like you. Sorry. I promised to remember the fingers, didn't I?

*... and, staggering, will fall.*

*The moon will no longer be there:*

*the rat will have carried her into his hole.*

Too bloody right. The rat will have carried her into his hole.

Amanda: You've been using that poem as an excuse to home drunk for months now.

Joe: Maddy! You stayed up for me? Very thoughtful, but you're sounding more and more like your mother. We both know where that's likely to lead.

Amanda: And where's that?

Joe: Any more light here?

*(The stage is lit. Amanda blinks at the light.)*

Joe: Amanda! Not the daughter, but the future daughter! I didn't see you there! What invisible rat...

Amanda: Thank you, Joe. I am just as pleased to see you, I'm sure. However, much as I relish the prospect of discussing poetry with you when you're drunk, I've had a long journey and I'd like to sleep a little, if I may.

Joe: Of course, Amanda. Maddy's made you comfy here?

Amanda: Thank you, yes.

*(Joe flicks through the book and finds the poem he's looking for.)*

Joe:           *She*  
                  *whose eyes are prisms of sleep*  
                  *and whose lids are heavy with dreams...*

Amanda:      Thank you, Joe. Not now, please. I need to sleep.

Joe:            A weakness I would never have suspected of you, Amanda.  
                  Quite endearing, I find it.

*(He kisses her on the cheek.)*

Amanda:      Ugh! You smell dreadful.

Joe:            I have eaten too much of the milky cake of the moon, Amanda.

Amanda:      Strange that you should smell of beer, then.

Joe:            Yes, it a very dry cake, moon. Sure you wouldn't like to hear any  
                  more before bed?

Amanda:      Perhaps later.

Joe:            Well, you'll have to hear it one more time:  
                  *What invisible rat*  
                  *come from the walls of night*  
                  *gnaws at the milky cake of the moon?*  
                  *Tomorrow morning,*  
                  *when it has gone,*  
                  *there will be bleeding marks of teeth.*  
                  *Tomorrow morning*  
                  *those who have drunk all night*  
                  *and those who have abandoned their cards,*

*blinking at the moon  
will stammer out:  
'Whose is that sixpence  
that rolls over the green table?'  
'Ah!' one of them will add,  
'our friend has lost everything  
and killed himself!'  
And all will snigger  
and, staggering, will fall.  
The moon will no longer be there:  
the rat will have carried her into his hole.*

Amanda: Now may I go to sleep?

Joe: Sweet dreams! The rat is off to his hole.

*(Joe heads off to his bedroom; Amanda sighs and bunks down again. Stage darkens.)*



## SCENE 2

*(As for previous scene. Amanda is still asleep. Maddy enters and begins making breakfast in the kitchen. Amanda is woken.)*

Amanda: Good morning, darling.

Maddy: Morning, mum. Sorry if I woke you.

Amanda: That's all right. Time I was up, anyway. *(She rises stiffly.)*

Maddy: Were you comfortable? Sleep all right?

Amanda: Like a top. Apart from the small interruption in the early hours of the morning.

Maddy: Did Joe wake you?

Amanda: Joe read poetry to me. I suppose I should be flattered. I haven't had a man read poetry to me since your father and I were walking out.

Maddy: I remember Dad reading Banjo Patterson to me as a kid.

Amanda: Banjo Patterson, C.J. Dennis, and who was that other one he loved? The Orange Tree one. I've forgotten his name. Your father used to love him.

Maddy: Don't know the Orange Tree one. Bugger! The toast's burning. No don't, I'll make some more. I'll toss it in the compost later.

Amanda: I wish I could remember the fellow's name. Something about a light in the orange tree. Your father was quite a romantic, you

know. Joe's poetry is different. I don't know what your father would make of it.

Maddy: He'd hate it!

Amanda: I don't suppose that would worry Joe. I'm sure he doesn't have any time for the bush ballad style.

Maddy: Joe quite likes bush ballads, actually. He recites them very well. Nearly as well as Dad.

Amanda: Ask him to do the orange tree, then. It's not a bush ballad, but he'll know it. And it would be nice to think there's some use in having him around.

Maddy: Mum!

Amanda: Sorry. How is his work going? Are we any closer to a publication, or is there still a conspiracy against young genius?

Maddy: He's not like that, mum. I know Penguin were interested for a while, but I don't think anything's come of it. He's doing a lot of readings.

Amanda: In pubs. I know. He gave me a reading last night. Don't you think he ought to try something else? I mean, how long can you pretend you're going to make a name for yourself as a poet?

Maddy: He's all right, mum. He's doing okay.

Amanda: He's doing just fine! You're supporting him! He needs to get out and earn a proper living. For his own sake, Maddy. He can keep writing in his spare time if he wants to.

Maddy: You can't write in your spare time. It's a full time job.

Amanda: Others seem to manage.

Maddy: Mum!

Amanda: All right. But I think he ought to do something else for a while.  
Or he'll end up in middle age a self-opinionated, alcoholic bore.  
He should take up journalism now. At least he'd be paid to end  
up that way.

Maddy: I've got to fly, Mum. See you tonight.

*(Maddy leaves.)*

Amanda: See you tonight, sweetie. Don't work too hard.

*(Amanda fusses about in the kitchen. Picks up the burnt toast that Maddy had  
put aside and places it on a plate.)*

Joe! Breakfast is ready! Joe! Joe!

### SCENE 3

*(Kasimir's studio. Disorganized, energetic, lots of canvases, small sculptures, prints. Several nudes are recognizably of the same model. Kasimir is working in a desultory fashion. An old fridge occupies a prominent position. A candle is stuck in wax to the top of it. Joe enters.)*

Joe: You interruptible?

Kasimir: The world will be one masterpiece the poorer; so if you can live with yourself...

Joe: *(Making for the fridge)* I'll risk it. Ah, St Kelvinator, I come to worship at your shrine. *(He picks up a box of matches which are stationed next to the candle, lights the candle, then opens the fridge and takes out two cans of beer. He throws one to Kasimir. Opens his own beer and drinks.)* Ah. It's a miracle, this fridge. Beer never tastes this good anywhere else. You sure you won't sell it to me? It's wasted on you.

Kasimir: Kelvin and I are inseparable. Not many people know this, but at birth, we were joined at the hip. You can still see the mark in his enamel.

Joe: Suddenly, I have a new respect for your mother. Must have been quite a birth. How's things?

Kasimir: Lousy. Can't work. Just had a blue with Debbie. She's got this idea that I've got the hots for Wendy.

Joe: You have.

Kasimir: I know that; you know that; but Deb's just guessing.

- Joe: *(inspecting some of the nudes)* Hate to say it, old man, but given the sort of paintings you've been making of Wendy, I'd say it was a guess she was bound to make.
- Kasimir: I'm a painter, for God's sake. I'm meant to paint naked women. It's one of the perks of the job. One of the few. Deb should understand that. I've painted her often enough.
- Joe: And what did that lead to? Perhaps you should stick to painting Deb.
- Kasimir: Deb's not interested anymore. Besides, Wendy's a fantastic model. She's got a different body every time I paint it. And, as it happens, she's the best fuck in Melbourne.
- Joe: You said last time you were only going to paint her from now on. What happened to the "I've got to concentrate on getting her right in paint."
- Kasimir: That was big knob thinking. The little knob's taken over since then.
- Joe: Stupid bastard. Deb'll leave you, you know.
- Kasimir: Don't think so. She's getting on, you know. And men like me aren't easy to find.
- Joe: Thankfully. What about Wendy. What does she think about it all?
- Kasimir: She's a model, mate. She's fucked the best painters in Melbourne. She's not worried. You've met her, haven't you?

There wouldn't be too many straight men who could watch her take her sweater off and keep their hands on their brushes. You'd jump at the chance if you could talk her into a nude poetry reading.

Joe: Interesting concept.

Kasimir: How are you getting on with Maddy? Her mum still staying with you?

Joe: Yep. Mum's taken a secret vow not to leave Maddy until Maddy's left me.

Kasimir: When's that going to happen?

Joe: Never.

Kasimir: Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?

Joe: I'd put money on it. Maddy 'll never leave me. She'll kick me out; she owns the house. Anyway, I've been thinking of travelling again. I'm getting stale living here. I need to get away. I want to start work on something bigger; I'm sick of poetry. Sick of my poems, anyway. I want to work on a larger scale.

Kasimir: Just keep me out of any novel you're thinking of writing.

Joe: Bugger novels. Women write novels. I'm thinking of an epic poem, or a series of poems. Something a bit interesting. Maddy's always reading those drippy travelogues - A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush, that sort of thing - and I thought I might do one in verse.

Kasimir: A Quick Slash in the Fitzroy Gardens?

Joe: A Short Bog in a Flinders Lane Doorway. Yeah, you get the idea.

Kasimir: Sell a million.

Joe: No, seriously, I thought I'd try a publisher with the idea. I've had enough stuff published now. I reckon it'd take off. For a starter, it would appeal to people like Maddy; people who not only haven't got time to travel, they haven't even got time to read about some other bastard travelling. Poetry's quicker.

Kasimir: So what does a travel poem sound like?

Joe: Funny you should ask. (*Takes a piece of paper out of his pocket.*) Here's one I wrote in Merimbula.

*The Coastal Poet*

*I ply my nothing.  
I stand and scan a small horizon, head  
to head, for freighters, images of trade,  
the commerce that distinguishes the species.*

*I make no bow wave.  
Sea-eagles cruise the waves of heated air  
and seek their morning's work; and I observe,  
forgetting in minutest detail, all.*

*I make no wake  
but foot prints scribbled wildly over sand  
and know the three directions life can take:  
north past the head, south past Short Point, and here,*

*among the shells  
and crab claws, bleached driftwood, the single gull wing.  
The surf fans lacy patterns on the sand;  
its own horizon. I stand watching it.*

Kasimir: Forget it. Won't sell.

Joe: Not even with a few line drawings by a soon to be well known artist?

Kasimir: That might make it sell. But I'm not doing anything until I see the colour of a publisher's advance.

Joe: Come on, mate, a couple of pen and ink washes. Wouldn't take you ten minutes. It'd help me convince a publisher.

Kasimir: Haven't got time. I've got an exhibition coming up. I have to do a couple more Wendys. Now they will sell. The corporate types will fork over in a big way to have her wiped all over their walls. I'll have to make sure she comes to the exhibition. In something revealing...

Joe: Deb 'll love that.

Kasimir: I'll look after Deb. You'd be better off making sure you're still in sweet with Maddy. Now, piss off, bard of Merimbula. I've got work to do.

Joe: All right, but think about a couple of quick seascapes for me.



**SCENE 4**

*(Maddy's office in the city, clean, clinical, bright. Maddy is working on something at her desk. After a few moments, she breaks off in obvious frustration and phones an internal extension.)*

Maddy: Jen? Have you got a moment? I want to talk to you about something. Bring a folder so it looks like work. Yeah. See you in a minute. Thanks.

*(Maddy stares distractedly at her work until Jennifer enters shortly afterwards.)*

Jennifer: I've got the file you wanted. *(She shuts the door and they laugh.)* What's all this about, Maddy.

Maddy: Thanks for coming over, Jen. I can't concentrate at the moment.

Jennifer: Man troubles?

Maddy: It's Joe. We're not having a great time of it at the moment.

Jennifer: You surprise me. Life with a vagabond poet not everything you might want?

Maddy: It's not the poetry. Or the poverty. I really wouldn't mind if he was just poor... it's just that he's not interested in making a go of anything. Even his poetry. If he was working hard at that, even if it wasn't going anywhere, I'd be happy.

Jennifer: Poetry's an excuse for bludging, Mad. It always has been. The world's greatest bludgers all thought they were poets. He's just using you.

- Maddy: He's not using me. He doesn't use anything. That's the problem. If he used something he might become a bit useful.
- Jennifer: Face it, Maddy, he's a drag on your social life and your career. Keep him around for company, if you must, but move on, girl!
- Maddy: You might be right. We just don't seem to be going anywhere.
- Jennifer: Have you been getting any better offers?
- Maddy: What do you mean?
- Jennifer: Oh, I don't know. I thought I detected a smouldering look or two from our mutual master...
- Maddy: Oscar? Don't be ridiculous. It's probably you getting the smouldering looks. He's still married, isn't he?
- Jennifer: Yes, but it seems to be a fairly flexible arrangement.
- Maddy: How flexible.
- Jennifer: He does what he likes and she puts up with it.
- Maddy: I think Joe would like the same sort of arrangement.
- Jennifer: How many men wouldn't? I better get going, Maddy. (*She gathers up the folder and prepares to leave.*) Take my advice, honey. Get rid of Joe. Your career will blossom.
- Maddy: Thanks Jen. I'll think about it.

## SCENE 5

*(Maddy's house. Joe is making preparations for dinner. Maddy enters.)*

Joe: Horrible day?

Maddy: Horrible enough. The weather's certainly foul. Are you making dinner?

Joe: Yep. Went to the market. The winter vegies are just coming good. I've bought a sackful of beautiful little brussel sprouts. Sweet enough to eat raw.

Maddy: Don't be offended if I don't kiss you then. Any wine open? *(Joe pours her a glass from an opened bottle.)* What are you going to do with the brussel sprouts?

Joe: Steam them tenderly, then fry them quickly in some bacon fat with crispy little bits of bacon, throw in some sour cream and voila!

Maddy: Mum doesn't eat brussel sprouts.

Joe: Curious. What does she do with them?

Maddy: She doesn't like them.

Joe: She knows they're not really from Belgium, doesn't she?

Maddy: Don't be a smart arse. She just doesn't like them.

Joe: She can have extra broccoli then: steamed and drenched in a garlic butter.

Maddy: Easy on the garlic.

Joe: How about easy on the cook? I've got a beautiful fillet here; I'm cooking a fabulous meal for your mother and you; all you can do is waltz in and criticise. Leave your pig of a day at the office, where it belongs. I don't want to have to pay for your employment.

Maddy: You don't mind it paying for you, though, do you?

*(Amanda enters from within the house.)*

Amanda: Thought I heard you, darling. Have a nice day?

*(They kiss.)*

Maddy: Not too bad. Didn't expect a temperamental chef waiting for me.

Amanda: I'm sure Joe is cooking something wonderful. Let me put your coat and bag away. You settle down there.

*(Amanda takes Maddy's coat and brief case and exits.)*

Joe: Temperamental chef? Who bit my head off for cooking brussel sprouts?

Maddy: Joe, we need to talk.

Joe: Swap recipes?

Maddy: Don't. I'm serious. I've been thinking about us. About where we're going.

Joe: I've been talking to Kasimir about the same thing.

Maddy: And?

Joe: And nothing. He wants to collaborate on a project with me. He'll do ink washes to illustrate my poetry. We want to make is a sort of travelogue; poems rather than text, though.

Maddy: You and Kasimir are going to travel together are you? And get some work done?

Joe: No. He can do his stuff from my poems. I thought we could go together.

*(Amanda enters.)*

Amanda: You two off somewhere, are you?

Maddy: Joe wants to fold his tent and become a wandering troubadour.

Amanda: That sounds exciting. Will you be able to support yourself, Joe?

Joe: I was thinking that Maddy and I could take some time off and travel around the country a bit together.

Amanda: Take time off what, Joe?

Joe: Maddy could take some time off work and we could travel together. I've got a publisher interested in a travel book.

Maddy: This is not the time in my career when it's advisable to take six months off. I know that may be hard for you to understand, but I

do want to have a job to come back to.

Joe: Doesn't have to be six months. We could see enough in six weeks or so. I can make up the rest. It is a travel book, after all.

Amanda: Who's the publisher?

Joe: Sorry?

Amanda: Who's the publisher who's interested.

Joe: Oh, someone Kaz knows. A barrister, I think.

Amanda: But it's not a definite offer, then?

Joe: No, it's not definite, but that doesn't matter. If the book is good enough, someone else will pick it up if he doesn't.

Maddy: Forget it Joe. You go if you want to, but don't count on me or my credit card to get you there.

Joe: Can I get back to cooking? We can discuss it after dinner.

Amanda: By the way, darling. You had a phone call just before you came in. Someone called Oscar. From your work. Didn't leave a number; said he'd talk to you in the morning.

Maddy: Wonder what he wants?

Joe: Brussel sprouts? There'll be plenty left over.

Maddy: I do want to talk, Joe. I don't want to put this off.

Joe: Fine. We'll all still be here after dinner.

## Act Two

### SCENE 1

*(Set in a bare, grubby room. Joe is “unpacking” cardboard boxes. These are mainly filled with books and papers, some unlikely pieces of clothing and bric a brac are also scattered amongst the boxes. As he addresses the audience, he makes desultory attempts to order his belongings, but because he has almost no furniture, there is nowhere in his new room to put anything away. As he unpacks, he gradually fills the stage with the detritus of his life.)*

Joe: *(pulling out a pile of old poems and flicking through them)* Some of these are pretty good. Ooh. That’s not. That’s all right. Great.  
*(Reading from one of the poems:)*

#### *The New House*

*I’m staying here - immovable as debt.  
I’m never leaving, never going to try.  
I stay. And when the floor sags, so will I:  
I will grow comfortable; I will forget  
the dreams I never had the will to prove.  
And I will sit all summers in the garden  
and drink cold beer and listen to the stars  
sing like mosquitoes. Comet tails of cars  
will trace the freeway. Arteries will harden.  
And I will age and die and never move.*

*Intention is a fickle kite to fly -  
I know the best laid slabs can shift and crack -  
but while the reel still holds the odd coil I  
look forward to a flight of looking back*

Wrote that after we moved into the South Melbourne house.  
*And I will age and die and never move.* Some might say that was the problem. Grew a little too comfortable with Maddy. But isn’t that what she wanted? Jesus Christ, I never wanted to live in South Melbourne. I never wanted a mortgage. Not that I ever contributed too much towards it. Look. If you want a partner who’ll contribute half the mortgage repayments each month, you



don't take up with a poet. She uses my erratic income as ammunition against me now, but it was never a problem, really. She earned enough for both of us. And poverty was part of my charm. I was her personal contribution to the arts. I was her way of showing the world that she hadn't lost the idealism of youth. "I may be a corporate hotshot, but I'm still passionately interested in the arts. Why else would I fuck and feed a poet?" Other people brought bottles of wine to the dinner parties; she brought poetry. While she was supporting me, she could deny what she had become.

Let me make it quite clear, that's not the way she would tell it. You're only getting my side of the story here, okay? But it wasn't such a bad arrangement. Her dinner parties got their poetry; poetry got its dinner. And the value of a good dinner starts to become apparent about now. Just hope she's feeling the loss of poetry as keenly. Where the fuck am I meant to put this?

Here's another one. The trouble with most of my poetry is that is only half makes sense if you don't know the story behind it. This one, for example, which I've always quite liked; editors hate it.

*She says she says*

*There's nothing to get so upset about.*

*(She says she says.)*

*If I cook tea, you take the garbage out.*

*The extras are the icing on the cake.*

*We only share the bathroom - not the soap.*

*(She says she says.)*

*We'll keep it clinical and clean, I hope,*

*and mop up any little spills we make.*

*Our bedrooms are our own affairs, unless*

*(she says she says)*

*they're simply too much of a bloody mess,*

*or other occupants are kept awake.*

*So make yourself at home. You're on your own.*

*(She says she says.)*

*I'll leave your messages next to the phone.*

*You write down any calls for me you take.*

*So make yourself at home. You're on your own.* Oh my prophetic soul, as another fella said. But that poem's bloody good. Sharp. To the point. Nice rhyme scheme. I wrote that after I moved into a student house Maddy was living in, and she and I sort of became an item. But she was concerned that we didn't intrude on each other's freedom. It was bloody ridiculous. She used to bring blokes home and fuck them just to prove she was independent. And to make me miserable. Which, I'm happy to say, it did. Write my best poems miserable.

*Kasimir enters.*

Kasimir: You look well settled.

Joe: Didn't I lock the front door? Thanks for helping me with the move, mate.

Kasimir: I told you I couldn't make it till late. And here I am. Late as promised.

Joe: Just too late to help lug anything up the bloody stairs.

Kasimir: Shame. Come on. Let's get out of this rat hole and have a drink.

Joe: I ought to clean up a bit, first.

Kasimir: We can buy a box of matches at the pub. Come on, it's your shout.

Joe: Why is it my shout, you prick?

Kasimir: Because you're a free man now. And a free man can waste his money on his mates without having to answer to anyone. That's what makes it so precious.

Joe: So that's why Nelson Mandela looks so happy...Liberte, fraternite, mates' payday...

*They exit together.*

## SCENE 2

*(A darkly fashionable, expensive restaurant. Oscar and Maddy are seated at a table; a waiter pours a splash of wine in Oscar's glass for him to taste. He tastes the wine with a practised, confident air, without exaggerating the process.)*

Oscar: That's fine for me. Maddy, would you like to taste the wine?

Maddy: No, thanks. I'm sure it'll be fine.

*(Oscar nods approval to the wine waiter who pours glassfuls for Maddy and Oscar and then exits.)*

Oscar: Yes, it's a lovely little wine. But it's important to taste it before you accept it. You'd be surprised what comes out of some bottles.

Maddy: I wouldn't know what I was expecting in the first place.

Oscar: So you just take the plunge; accept what's offered in good faith? That must make for an exciting life, Maddy. I'm jealous.

Maddy: Oh... I'm not sure it applies to my whole life. I'm just intimidated by wine waiters and all the mystique that surrounds wine.

Oscar: Mystique is always used to hide deficiency. And that does apply to the whole of life. People with something to hide use it to cloak whatever dreary little secret they don't want to expose. Mystique is of no interest to me.

Maddy: You don't like being surprised?

- Oscar: Quite the opposite. I go out of my way to find people who can surprise me. You, for example, Maddy. You surprised me.
- Maddy: When?
- Oscar: When you agreed to come out to dinner with me.
- Maddy: You are my boss.
- Oscar: And you're jest a gurl who cain't say no? I somehow don't think so, Maddy.
- Maddy: No. I did wonder if I should go out with you.
- Oscar: Your boyfriend or my wife...
- Maddy: I've broken up with Joe. But that's not the reason... I mean, I wondered if it was a good thing for people who work together...
- Oscar: It can be a wonderful thing. And a disaster, of course. That's what makes it interesting. Your boyfriend... ex-boyfriend... was he an interesting man?
- Maddy: Interesting? Yes, Joe was always interesting. Erratic, but interesting.
- Oscar: He's a writer of some sort?
- Maddy: A poet. Mainly. Although he'll turn his hand to anything if he needs the money badly enough.
- Oscar: Well, this must be quite a change from the sort of smokey, intense, bohemian evenings you must have shared with him. I

hope it won't be too dull, too suburban for you.

Maddy: Believe me, Oscar, it's a relief. I'm not a poet. I'm not an artist. I'm a well paid professional and I'm ready to enjoy myself without feeling guilty about having more money in my purse than the country's best painter made in the last five years.

Oscar: Well said. Now, let's start by tasting your wine properly. *(He pours her a fresh half glass of wine.)* I'm sure it would have been terribly bad form to bother tasting the wine that came out of the cardboard box at your painter friend's last opening. Bad form and bloody bad luck. But not here, Maddy. This time, tell me exactly what you think of it. *(Maddy tastes her wine carefully, a little self-consciously.)* Well?

Maddy: It's pleasant, but a little flowery, a little watery, or something.

Oscar: Wonderful! You see, you have a delicate palate if you give it a chance. Waiter!

Waiter: Would you like to order now, sir?

Oscar: No, we'd like to see the wine list again, please. We're finding this a little insipid. *(To Maddy)* We may have to work our way through their cellar, but I promise you we'll find the right wine! *(To the waiter, again)* And then we'll be ready to order.

*Maddy laughs; the waiter scurries off.*

Oscar: Please, Maddy. Try to remember the starving artists!

Maddy: *(Laughing)* I am!

### SCENE 3

*(Maddy's house. A small pile of Joe's possessions stands near the front door. The front door opens a couple of inches, but a security chain stops it opening any further.)*

Joe: Hello! Maddy! When did she start chaining the door? *(He tries to work the chain off the latch.)*

Amanda: *(Calling from inside the house, offstage)* Who's there? Is someone at the door?

Joe: It's me, Joe! Is that you, Maddy? You've got the door chained! Maddy?

Amanda: *(Still offstage)* Maddy isn't here. I'll be there in a moment.

*Joe, still rattling at the door, notices the pile of his possessions near the door. During the following speech, his arm is seen reaching around at the bottom of the door. He manages to draw most of the pile to the crack in the door where he examines bits and pieces.*

Joe: Hey! That's all my stuff! Maddy! What's going on, here? You can't leave this stuff where anyone can get it. That's Thai silk! And this is a first edition Lennie Lower. I paid thirty bucks for that! Maddy!

Amanda: *(Offstage)* Maddy isn't home. I'm coming. Please stop rattling the door. Is that you Maddy? I've put the chain on.

Joe: My silver pen set. Chucked on the floor. All these things mean something to me, Maddy.

*(A toilet flushes. Amanda enters after a moment.)*

Joe: My Pears Cyclopaedia. Been looking for that. Wonder where she found it.

Amanda: What's going on! Who's there!

Joe: It's only me, Maddy. You've got the chain on.

Amanda: *(Opening the door)* Maddy isn't here, Joe. And I can see we need a shorter chain for you.

Joe: My chain's been getting progressively shorter all my bloody life. I would get up, but there's so much interesting stuff down here. Care to have a squizz?

Amanda: I've seen it. I collected most of it for you. I thought it would be easier for you to collect or for Maddy to put out on rubbish night - whichever came first.

Joe: Some of these things are quite valuable, you know. Things Fall Apart - this is a first edition, you know. Chinua Achebe.

Amanda: It's a paperback. It must be worth all of ten dollars.

Joe: *(Standing up)* Is Maddy home?

Amanda: No. She's gone out. For dinner.

Joe: Oh well, I only stopped by to collect a few things.

Amanda: Is there anything I've missed?



- Joe: Probably. Who'd she go out with? Jennifer?
- Amanda: I don't think you know him. Oscar from her work. Tall, distinguished, well off.
- Joe: Sounds like a good catch at last.
- Amanda: Let's hope so. Do you need a bag for your things?
- Joe: I think I'll be able to manage it all. When are you expecting Maddy back?
- Amanda: You're assuming they'll come back here...
- Joe: Thanks Amanda.
- Amanda: I don't know what time they might be back, but I don't think it would be a great idea for you to be here, do you?
- Joe: I don't know. Maddy might like to introduce me. Oscar might like a few pointers.
- Amanda: Don't be silly, Joe. It's over. You won't do yourself any favours by being difficult. Do you need a bag for your things?
- Joe: Don't bother. I think I hear a car pulling up outside. Why don't you pop the kettle on and we can all have a cup of tea?
- Amanda: Joe, why don't you pop out the back door with your things. Please?
- Joe: Trust me, Amanda, it will be a lovely surprise. *(He sits in a chair not easily seen from the front door.)*

**SCENE 4**

*(As for previous scene. Joe's possessions are still by the front door, but no longer in a neat pile. Maddy and Oscar enter laughing.)*

Maddy: Still up, Mum? I see Joe's been. Mum, this is Oscar; Oscar, my mother, Amanda.

Oscar: Pleased to meet you, Amanda.

Amanda: Thank you...

Joe: And I'm Joe. Pleased to meet you, Oscar.

Maddy: What are you doing here, Joe?

Amanda: Joe just arrived to take his things away.

Joe: That's right; just leaving. Unless you'd like me to stay for a drink, Maddy?

Amanda: I think I'll push off to bed, now. Goodnight, Oscar. Goodnight Maddy.

Joe: Night night, Amanda. *(Gives her a kiss.)* How about that drink, Maddy?

Maddy: Joe...

Oscar: Come on, Maddy. I'd love a drink before I head off. No need for any embarrassment, surely. These are your things, are they Joe? *(He bends down and picks up a paperback.)*

Joe: Yes, some of the detritus of my life. You're an avid reader, are you?

Oscar: No. Don't get much time, sadly. *Things Fall Apart*. Interesting book to find on the top of the pile.

Maddy: What would you like to drink, Oscar? I've got some Scotch, brandy, some liqueurs...

Oscar: A brandy would be lovely. Joe?

Joe: It's cooking brandy. I'll have a Scotch thanks Mad.

Maddy: Oscar brought some cognac over earlier.

Oscar: Sure you won't try some?

Joe: Scotch will be fine, thanks. That's a first edition.

Oscar: Oh? I thought there was a hardback.

Joe: Not that I know of. You probably know a lot more about African literature than I do.

Oscar: I'm sure I don't, but I do have this one in hardback. *(To Maddy)* He's a delightful man, Chinua. Professor of English at Nairobi. Met him when I was over there for the Commonwealth Legal Issues conference. Insisted on giving me a signed copy. *(To Joe)* Do you know Professor Achebe?

Joe: Only through his work. I've read most of his novels.

Oscar: Can't say I have, but he is a charming fella. Still keep in touch

occasionally. I'll let him know I met a fan.

Maddy: Here are your drinks.

Oscar: Thank you. Sure you won't try the cognac, Joe? Maddy tells me you're a poet.

Joe: That's right. I expect you know most of the big names personally.

Oscar: No, I'm frightfully ignorant of Australian poetry. Is it easy being a poet in Australia?

Joe: As easy as anywhere else.

Oscar: I mean, can you make a living at it?

Joe: Nope. That's why I sponged off Maddy for so long.

Oscar: An agreeable means of support.

Maddy: Joe's had a lot of work published in poetry magazines. He's also in demand at poetry readings. You get the occasional stint on Radio National as well, don't you.

Oscar: Do you enter competitions, Joe? I imagine they must have some pretty prestigious poetry competitions, don't they?

Joe: I'm entering the Victorian Poetry Prize this year. And I'm actually pretty confident I'll do well.

Oscar: Know the judges?

- Joe: No I don't!
- Oscar: I didn't mean you might try to influence friends. I meant that the appreciation of poetry being so subjective, it must help to know what style the judges were looking for.
- Joe: Yes, well as long as they are looking for quality, I feel very confident. As long as their own friends aren't looking for favours themselves.
- Oscar: And if you win? How does that affect your career? Are you set for life?
- Maddy: Hardly.
- Joe: Well, of course, it doesn't do your reputation any harm. Gets your name in front of the publishers. And the prize money isn't to be sneezed at.
- Oscar: How much do you win, Joe?
- Joe: Two grand for first prize. One of the richest poetry prizes in the country.
- Oscar: Two thousand dollars? How many of those can you expect to win in a year?
- Maddy: It's not the money...
- Oscar: I can see that!
- Joe: The Victorian Poetry Prize is internationally acclaimed. It's like winning the Booker prize for novels.

Oscar: The Booker?

Joe: All right, it's not the Booker, but it's a well known prize. I know this isn't a fashionable position, but success can't always be measured in dollars.

Oscar: Indeed. But it's a handy yardstick, isn't it?

Maddy: Joe, I know you're having a wild time, but don't you think it's time you left?

Joe: *(Finishes his drink and starts collecting his possessions)* You're right.

Oscar: Can you manage all those things? I can give you a lift if you'd like.

Joe: I'll be fine.

Maddy: You can pick them up in the morning, Joe.

Joe: It's fine. I can manage them.

Oscar: Nice to meet you Joe. I'll look out for your name when they announce the winner of the prize.

Joe: Thanks, Oscar. I'll keep an eye out for your name in the papers.

*(He scramble out with arms full of possessions. As he leaves, Maddy calls out and he turns back expectantly.)*

Maddy: Joe! Wait!

Joe:           What?

Maddy:       Can I have my key back please?

*(Joe drops his possessions outside the door and fishes out the key.)*

## SCENE 5

*(Joe's digs, apparently empty when Joe enters, although the bedroom is occupied by Kasimir and Wendy. Joe enters, struggling with a bundle of possessions. He kicks the door open and throws the bundle in the middle of the room. He storms around the stage, looking for an outlet for his anger. Finally returns to the bundle, lines it up like a Rugby full back taking a place kick, runs in and kick the bundle violently.)*

Kasimir: *(Calling from the bedroom)* Anger is the last resort of the powerless.

Joe: What are you doing here? And I'm not angry; I'm fucking furious.

Kasimir: *(Wanders onto stage in a stage of undress.)* A new home decorating technique?

Joe: Why are you here? Been thrown out, too?

Kasimir: No, I needed somewhere where I knew we wouldn't be disturbed. *(He indicates the bedroom.)*

Joe: We?

Kasimir: Wendy. She wouldn't come to the studio in case I tried to get her into bed. So she agreed to meet me at your place. We were both surprised that you weren't here. Well, I was surprised. Wendy seemed mildly suspicious.

Joe: She's still here?

Kasimir: Sleeping like a baby. Exhausted. How's Maddy coping without



you? Racked with regret? Tortured by the thought of losing you?

Joe: Yes, she's pretty obviously mortified. She and her mother have had to take medicinal cognac with her boss to help them over the loss.

Kasimir: Taken up with her boss? Wonder how long that's been going on?

Joe: Thanks, mate.

Kasimir: Well, you can imagine how it happens... Long nights at the office... A boss who admires your work... The chance for an easy promotion... Who could resist?

Joe: Don't think I don't appreciate your sympathy, Kaz, but is there any chance you might piss off and let me go to bed?

Kasimir: If you think Wendy won't mind. But you're following a pretty impressive performance. In your present state you mightn't acquit yourself as well as you might, and to tell you the truth, I reckon Wendy might need to recuperate.

Joe: You two are planning to stay, are you?

Kasimir: It would seem the most civilised solution. My place is free if you need somewhere to crash. Here, let me get you a beer before you go. *(He pulls a beer from somewhere.)* It's a bit warm, but it'll do the trick. I take it you didn't get too much of the cognac?

Joe: No. That prick, Oscar, made a great point of offering it to me, however. She knew I'd hate him. I half suspect that's his greatest attraction.

- Kasimir: If that's all he's got going for him, he must be a pretty poor specimen.
- Joe: No he's not. He's a prime specimen of his type. He ought to be transfixed with a pin and exhibited alongside the other many-legged invertebrates.
- Kasimir: And labelled?
- Joe: Arseholus Legalistica.
- Kasimir: Habitat?
- Joe: Found infesting corporate ladders.
- Kasimir: And often found crawling over attractive underlings.
- Joe: Why would she kick me out for someone like that? She knows I'll despise him; it's meant to hurt me. Why would she want to do that?
- Kasimir: You knew what she was when you took up with her. You knew she wasn't going to be satisfied with the life of an itinerant poet forever. You ought to be grateful.
- Joe: Grateful?
- Kasimir: Grateful she put up with you for so long and grateful that she's finally given you the push. Time to move on, sport.
- Joe: You're right. But why take up with a bastard like Oscar?

Kasimir: She might need a bastard for a while. Besides, he'll end up making you look good.

Joe: Probably, but I 'd feel happier if I'd lost my place in bed to someone I didn't despise.

Kasimir: Pleased to hear it, old man. Good of you to look at it that way. You know where I keep the key to my studio. Come over in the morning and Wendy might knock you up some breakfast. Is there anything here?

Joe: Nope.

Kasimir: Well, bring something when you come.

*(Kasimir heads for the bedroom.)*

Joe: I haven't finished my beer yet.

Kasimir: Take your time. See you tomorrow. Not too early, okay?

*(Joe finishes the beer as sounds of Kasimir and Wendy begin another session. Joe exits, slamming the door.)*

## Act Three

### SCENE 1

*(Joe's digs. Kasimir is comfortably settled. Knocking at door.)*

Kasimir: Come on in. Door's not locked.

Joe: *(entering)* Why not? Think I want any bastard wandering in?

Kasimir: Any bastard already has. Forget your key?

Joe: Don't push it, Kaz. Wendy still here?

Kasimir: Left hours ago. Had to get to work.

Joe: I suppose you've drunk all the beer?

Kasimir: What, both stubbies? Yes, I have drunk **all** your beer, but luckily for you, I sent Wendy out for some more before she left.

*(Joe goes to the fridge.)*

Kasimir: Get one for me as well. I can't stand the thought of you imposing on my generous nature and drinking all **my** beer.

Joe: She's bought some groceries as well. *(Open his beer and tosses one to Kasimir.)*

Kasimir: Yes, she's a gem, that woman. And shopping is only one of her lesser talents. You've missed breakfast, but she may come back later and we'll see if we can talk her into cooking us something for dinner.

- Joe: This tastes horrible. I hope yours tastes as bad.
- Kasimir: Beer is seldom at its best first thing in the day. It's a lot like poets in that regard.
- Joe: Aren't you going back to the studio some time? I assume you do occasionally work?
- Kasimir: When absolutely necessary, of course. At the moment, however, I am waiting for inspiration.
- Joe: When are you expecting that to arrive?
- Kasimir: With luck, it's in the mail. I should be getting a DSS cheque today or tomorrow and I'll be able to buy a couple of canvases. Are you on your way back to that state you call normal? You were swearing bloody revenge on someone called Oscar last night.
- Joe: Yeah. But as you say, anger is for the powerless. I'm not letting that cunt worry me. Maddy's the one who'll regret it.
- Kasimir: Oscar is his own reward.
- Joe: She's seduced by his position, by his money. She says he's in control of his life. She doesn't realise that means he'll want to be in control of hers as well.
- Kasimir: Perhaps she wants someone in control of her life for a while. God knows you gave her enough experience of living a shiftlessly aimless existence.

- Joe: It's called freedom, mate.
- Kasimir: I knew it had a name.
- Joe: Anyway, she won't take long finding out what sort of bastard Oscar is.
- Kasimir: Your bastard is the rest of the world's successful man, Joe. She might settle down to a Vogue Living life of beautiful soft furnishings and marital infidelity. It's what people aspire to. You'll get your end in again in a few years' time. She'll be ready for a bohemian dalliance by then.
- Joe: I don't want a dalliance. I just don't want Maddy wasting herself on that cockroach.
- Kasimir: Not when she could be wasting herself and her salary on you.
- Joe: Oscar is obviously successful at what he does, but he's limited. He can't even understand that success for him, for what he does, would not be success for me. And ultimately, it won't be success for Maddy. The bastard was laughing at me for wanting to enter the Vic prize.
- Kasimir: I thought **you** laughed at the Vic?
- Joe: Yes, but I still enter it. That's what I mean about success. He doesn't know enough about the poetry scene to know that you have to win an award like that to get noticed. You can't go on publishing in small mags that no one reads.
- Kasimir: Why should a man like that know anything about the poetry scene? I mean, if I wasn't such a social pariah that I had to

hang around with you, I wouldn't know anything about the poetry scene either.

Joe: He was taking the piss when I mentioned the prize money.

Kasimir: How much is it?

Joe: Two grand.

Kasimir: So, about two days work for Oscar.

Joe: Probably. But that's what I mean. He's so stuck in his world that he doesn't realise that two grand for a poem **is** a big deal and that it means much more than the prize money to win. It means you're noticed; that a publisher can paste a golden sticker on the cover and sell five times as many. It means you're on your way.

Kasimir: If it's anything like the Archy, it means recognition from the public and ostracism from other poets. It's not worth it. The whole point of being an artist is that poverty and obscurity are infallible marks of ultimate success. Did you try explaining that to Ossie? Are we going to have another one of my beers?

*(Joe goes to the fridge; opens two beers and passes one to Kasimir.)*

Joe: I think Maddy might be a little tired of that one.

Kasimir: Well, your Madagascan friend. Did he win anything in his life?

Joe: I don't think so. He committed suicide when he was in his thirties. Died penniless.

Kasimir: Well, perhaps you should enter him in the Vic. Time the poor bastard won something.

*(Joe goes to a pile of papers and extracts an envelope and pulls out an entry form and four or five sheets of his poetry.)*

Joe: I've only got one form.

Kasimir: Put him in with your poems. There's no limit on the number of entries, is there? He deserves it.

Joe: He does! Especially as the winning poem has to reflect "some aspect of contemporary Victorian or Australian life". Do you think the judges will notice he's been dead fifty years and was writing about Madagascar?

Kasimir: Unless they're more astute than art prize judges, I'd say he had a distinct advantage.

*(Joe hunts around and finds his paperback edition of Rabearivelo and begins leafing through it.)*

Joe: Which poems do you think he'd want to put in?

Kasimir: You'll have to enter the rat poem. Contemporary Australia is full of unseen rodents.

Joe: Perfect! Here, you read it out, I'll type it.

*(Joe begins setting up a typewriter/word processor.)*

Kasimir: You should read it out. You're the one who'll have to recite it at the prize giving ceremony. I suggest you read *with feeling*.



*(Kasimir reads in an exaggeratedly “significant” way.)*

*What invisible rat  
come from the walls of night  
gnaws at the milky cake of the moon?...*

Joe: Hold on, I'm not ready. All right. And read the punctuation, too.

Kasimir: *What invisible rat new line  
come from the walls of night new line  
gnaws at the milky cake of the moon question mark new line...*

## SCENE 2

*(Oscar's office. Similar to Maddy's office, but larger and darker. Oscar is working late. A timid knock at the door.)*

Oscar: Come.

*(Jennifer enters deferentially.)*

Jennifer: Oh, excuse me Oscar. I wonder if I can bother you for a moment?

Oscar: A moment? Yes. Any more, and you might be out of luck.

*(Jennifer stands awkwardly in front of Oscar's desk.)*

I know this is only momentary, but it will probably still be worth your while sitting, don't you think?

Jennifer: Thanks.

Oscar: How can I help you.

Jennifer: Well, it's about the submission to the Telecommunications Department...

Oscar: I've given that to Maddy to handle.

Jennifer: I know. I've been speaking to her about it. I... I was wondering why you chose Maddy over me.

Oscar: I didn't choose her **over** you. I chose her. You have plenty to keep you busy, have you not?

Jennifer: Of course, but ...

Oscar: Don't you think Maddy is up to it?

Jennifer: Of course she is. She's very clever. But, I was wondering how I could get those sort of jobs. Because I think I can do as good a job for you as Maddy... If you give me a chance.

Oscar: I know you do a good job. You have a good head on your shoulders, Jennifer. Your time will come, believe me.

Jennifer: I'd like it to come sooner.

Oscar: I'll remember you next time something comes up.

Jennifer: I hope you will.

Oscar: In the meantime, do me a favour. Keep an eye on Maddy for me.

Jennifer: Of course, Oscar.

Oscar: We'll talk again soon. Now, if you will excuse me?

Jennifer: Thank you Oscar. Thanks for listening. I appreciate it.

Oscar: That's good to know.

### SCENE 3

*(Maddy's living room. Maddy is alone with an opened bottle of red, waiting for Jenny. Maddy speaks after a long pause.)*

Maddy: Look, I don't do soliloquies, okay? Joe's the talker. I'm waiting for a friend so I can talk this whole thing through. I've never been any good at resolving things on my own. *(Knock at the door; Maddy rises to answer.)* At last. Just hope she's in the mood to share my problems...

*(Maddy opens the door; Jenny enters.)*

Jennifer: Hi! Sorry I'm late. Putting in a bit extra for work.

Maddy: Don't worry, I haven't waited for you. Can I pour you a glass?

Jennifer: Great! Just a full one. Beautiful. Now, which is the comfiest spot? I'm shagged out.

Maddy: Sit here. I'll need to stay awake while I'm moaning about my life.

*(Jenny sits where Maddy had been sitting. Maddy pulls a chair closer.)*

Jennifer: Great house! It's so welcoming in here. You must love coming home.

Maddy: Thanks. I hardly seem to have been home much lately. I'm only here to sleep.

Jennifer: You should make a bit more time for yourself. You're knocking yourself out at work.

- Maddy: I am, you know, but I feel as though I've got to prove myself to Oscar.
- Jennifer: What for? Especially now that you and he are "special friends". You can afford to put your feet up, so to speak.
- Maddy: Don't! That makes it even worse, Jen. I don't want to give anyone the opportunity to say that I'm ... you know... taking advantage of Oscar.
- Jennifer: Oscar looks after himself. Heaven help the person who thinks they're taking advantage of Oscar! But who's looking after you, Maddy? You can't keep going at this pace.
- Maddy: I know. And Oscar is very supportive, but I also miss being able to talk to Joe. He was great for keeping things in perspective. He had a knack of looking at things in a different way.
- Jennifer: He had a knack of being different, too. Be realistic, Maddy. You'd outgrown Joe. He was holding you back. He was a hangover from your student days.
- Maddy: Joe had his points. Still... Do you feel in control of your life, Jen? I feel as if I'm only half in charge. I know I'm turning the wheel, and the car turns, but it never seems to end up where I thought it would.
- Jennifer: Melbourne's freeways. None of us are in control, Maddy. For a start, even when you're humming along in the middle lane, you never know when some bastard is going to run up your tail.
- Maddy: What do you think of Oscar?

Jennifer: He's a bastard. But he's certainly in control of his life. Seeing you've hitched a lift with him for a while...

Maddy: Hitched a lift? Why does it feel like he's thrown me in the boot?

Jennifer: Well, at least you don't have to worry about where you're headed. When Oscar turns the wheel, the car turns.

Maddy: And it's bloody uncomfortable in the boot when he does!

*(Knock at the door.)*

Jennifer: You're not expecting Oscar, are you?

Maddy: Relax! Sit down! No, don't worry, Oscar never arrives unannounced. It'll be Joe. *(Calls.)* Just a minute! *(Hurriedly to Jennifer)* Jen, I wanted you here tonight especially because Joe asked to come over and talk to me. I wanted to have someone else here when I saw him.

Jennifer: Are you worried he might talk you 'round?

Maddy: Not exactly. I've been working so hard and feeling so tired, I'm just not sure I can handle Joe. I need support.

Jennifer: I'm your backup, Mad.

Maddy: And you just dropped by, okay? This isn't arranged.

Jennifer: Understood. Although why you want to risk our friendship by making me sit through an evening with Joe...

*Maddy opens the door.*

Maddy: Hi.

Joe: *(kisses her awkwardly on the cheek)* You look like you need cheering up. *(Sees Jennifer.)* Christ, now I'm sure you'll need cheering up. How are you, Jennifer? Still prosecuting the poor?

Jennifer: No, you're safe. How's the poetry business? Made the big time yet?

Joe: The poetry business. Beautiful phrase, Jennifer. Business and poetry. How can anyone tell them apart?

Maddy: It's all for love, Jen. You insensitive, commercially driven boor. You mustn't insult the sensitive poet by mentioning business or money.

Joe: Poets have never minded money. We don't insist on living in poverty; we just prefer it to the desperate acquisitiveness and mindless scramble for social position that the rest of the world seems to regard as normal.

Jennifer: Joe, I don't know how good your maths is, but if the rest of the world regards something as normal, it **is** normal. By definition.

Joe: Stupidity may be normal, but you'll understand if I don't aspire to it.

Jennifer: You don't have to be stupid to be normal.

Joe: There are many more stupid people in the world than clever. Therefore stupidity is normal. To be normal, you have to be stupid. By definition. Your definition.

Maddy: Well, this is cheering me up no end, Joe. Thanks for dropping around. Did you have any other reason for calling or do you have to go now?

Joe: I just called around for some advice, actually. I miss talking to you, Maddy. I've been shortlisted for the Victorian Poetry Prize. They've asked me to send biographical information.

Maddy: Joe! That's fantastic! What advice do you need? Can't remember your birth date?

Jennifer: Finally wondering who your parents were?

Joe: No, it's a bit more complicated. I can't explain now, but I was wondering if I shouldn't withdraw...

*(Jennifer laughs.)*

Maddy: That's right. Work for years for some sort of recognition and then make sure you deny it. Brilliant, Joe. The rest of the world works for success; you work to avoid it. But I suppose that's not normal, so you must be clever. By your definition. Your clever definition.

Joe: It's not like that, Maddy. It's more complicated.

Maddy: Everything's always complicated, Joe. I haven't got time to discuss it with you. You've interrupted Jennifer and me getting seriously smashed. Time for you to go and be complicated somewhere else.

Joe: Just listen for a second, Maddy. I need your advice.



Maddy: You always need my advice, Joe. And you never take it. Can't you see I'm sick of these sort of games?

Joe: Maddy, if you'd just listen...

Maddy: Listen to you being clever? Listen to you agonising? Listen to you belittling people I like? No thanks, Joe. Had enough. Come back when you've grown up enough to want to succeed, to want to take control of your life.

Joe: *(leaving)* Thanks, Maddy. Thanks for the advice. I'll make sure I take it this time. Nice talking to you. See you Jennifer. Stay normal.

Jennifer: Goodbye, Joe. *(She laughs.)* God, Maddy! How did you put up with him for all those years?

Maddy: Practice. *(She drains her glass.)* Come on Jen. I promised him I'd get drunk.

*(Jennifer laughs and drains her own glass.)*

**SCENE 4**

*(Joe's digs. The phone is ringing. It stops before Joe enters. Joe enters in a foul mood.)*

Joe: "When you're ready to take control of your life..." That's great, coming from someone who's busy getting drunk with a slag like Jennifer. Coming from someone who's had to have their Mum come over to look after them. Coming from someone who's busy sweating away for a manipulative prick like Oscar.

Take control of life! Where do they get these phrases from? Who do they think they're fooling? You can sit forwards or backwards, you can change horses, you can sit in the elephant, you can walk unsteadily between the punters collecting tickets: you're still on the fucking merry-go-round until the ride's over, darling.

Does she think this is a Mickey Rooney flick? Are the kids just going to put on a show? Be discovered by the big time agent and see our names in lights? *(He sits and starts writing a letter.)* Well, I've got sad news for you, Maddy. Dear Mad, here's a little piece I wrote for you tonight. Hope you enjoy it and the rest of your life. Stay in control, won't you? Feet in the stirrups; reins just so. I know you'll be happy trotting around the riding school ring and won't miss those of us who let our horses take us where they will. Look for me in the ranges if your instructor ever lets you off the lunge rope. You won't find me. Love, Joe.

*(He starts rummaging through papers until he pulls out the poem he wants to send.)*

Here it is! *Dags and Fat Kids*. Perfect. Even looks like I'd just

written it.

*One day the news will break from Hollywood:  
the team of dags and fat kids never wins -  
the chiselled, handsome bastards **are** too good;  
the weak might make a stand (and so might nine pins)  
but true hearts only triumph in large frames.  
They won't beat city hall, put on that show,  
outbox the bullies, win the gorgeous stars;  
they'll cower in the crossfire, die in snow,  
be slain inglorious: the unknown extras.  
There! Missing from the credits! Read their names.*

*They'll pay to watch their stories on the screen,  
the orphans born without the royal mark,  
enduring life, scene after dreary scene,  
while spilling tears and popcorn in the dark.*

**SCENE 5**

*(Maddy's house. Maddy is is sweating away at her work - obviously under great pressure. There is a knock at the door. Maddy is expecting her mother.)*

Maddy: Hold on, mum. *(To herself)* Forgotten the keys again. She'll be vacuuming the lawn next, and following strangers home.

*She leaves her work and opens the door.*

Joe!

Joe: Steady on, old girl. You almost sound disappointed.

Maddy: Got your letter last week. Thought I wasn't going to hear from you.

Joe: Everything I write's a lie. Got a moment?

Maddy: Not really. I'm very happy to see you Joe. It's just that I'm so busy and I have to have this finished in a couple of days.

Joe: In that case, I'll have to be quick. Don't offer me a meal, but pour me a glass of whatever you're having.

Maddy: All right. Come on in. I need a break anyway. Glass of red?

Joe: Ah! She hasn't forgotten. The old flame still burns, eh?

Maddy: Don't be stupid. You can still have a cognac if you like. Here. What have you been up to?

Joe: Me? Same old things. Been trying to talk Kasimir into illustrating

a book for me. Entering a few competitions. Picking up my mail. Usual stuff.

Maddy: Me too. I'm under so much pressure at work at the moment I haven't had a chance to do anything but eat and sleep.

Joe: That must be cheesing Oscar off.

Maddy: I don't want to discuss Oscar with you, Joe.

Joe: Sorry. You've got to expect the occasional bitter aside.

Maddy: Leave the bitter asides to me, okay? Nothing's going right at work. Papers get lost, computer files disappear, my notes are accidentally shredded. Someone's trying to shaft me at work  
Joe.

Joe: He's still only trying? Sorry. Couldn't help it. Who do you think it is?

Maddy: Oh, I don't know. I'm probably just being paranoid. I'm just having a bad trot at the moment.

Joe: Hmm. Anything I can do to cheer you up?

Maddy: Whatever you're thinking, Joe, forget it. Don't say it, all right?

Joe: I wasn't going to say anything.

Maddy: Well, what's that funny look for?

Joe: That? That's a smile. I know you haven't seen one on my face for a while, but I'm told it's quite winning in its way. You'll be

seeing it on the teev shortly.

Maddy: What are you talking about, Joe?

Joe: Famous poet, Joe Raven. Winner of this year's Victorian Poetry Prize. Seen here celebrating with old flame.

Maddy: You won? Joe, don't play games with me! Did you really win?

Joe: Really did. First prize **and** third prize.

*Maddy hugs Joe excitedly.*

Maddy: Fantastic! That's really great, Joe. How much did you win?

Joe: Two and a half, all up. Two grand for first and five hundred for third.

Maddy: Joe, that's just wonderful. What are you going to do with the money.

Joe: Already done it.

Maddy: What do you mean?

Joe: I've already spent the money.

Maddy: What on? Joe, don't tell me you've spent the money on Kasimir and this book of yours!

Joe: Nope. *(He reaches into a pocket and pulls out two airline tickets.)* I've bought a couple of tickets to Tananarive.

- Maddy: Tananarive?
- Joe: Capital of Madagascar. From there, we can head into the mountains, or wander around the coast. Whatever.
- Maddy: We?
- Joe: We. You can leave this shit behind; I can be a famous poet until the money runs out. Come on, Maddy, it'll be great. Don't tell me you want to end up a office slag like Jennifer. Come away with me. We can forget all about this. You need a break, and I need to be with you again.
- Maddy: Are you serious, Joe?
- Joe: Never more so. I miss you Maddy. I want you to come travelling with me. We both need it.
- Maddy: Joe. What I need is fewer people telling me what I need. You haven't really spent the money, have you?
- Joe: I've still got some in traveller's cheques, of course. Enough to live on for months, probably.
- Maddy: Well, you'll live on it for twice as long without me. I can't believe you, Joe. How dare you treat me like that.
- Joe: I just want to look after you, Maddy. To repay you for everything.
- Maddy: I can look after myself, Joe. If I wanted to experience third world poverty, I would have stayed living with you. But I didn't, Joe. Or hadn't you noticed?

Joe: Come on, Maddy. This is a once in a lifetime chance.

Maddy: Once in **your** lifetime, Joe. Not in mine. I think you'd better go now.

Joe: Go?

Maddy: I was so happy for you Joe. So happy you'd won. Why did you have to pull a stunt like this?

Joe: Inveterate stunt-puller, I suppose. Sorry Maddy. See you round. I'll send you a postcard from Madagascar.

*(Joe leaves. Maddy tries to go back to her work. Begins crying. Amanda enters shortly after Joe leaves. She notices Maddy crying and sits next to her.)*

Amanda: Are you okay, sweetheart? Work?

Maddy: It's Joe.

Amanda: Joe? What's the matter, sweetie?

Maddy: Joe. He won the Victorian Poetry Prize. He came around to celebrate with me.

Amanda: And you had an argument?

Maddy: Not really. He's spent the money on two tickets to Madagascar. He wanted me to go with him.

Amanda: That was sweet of him.



Maddy: It was bloody stupid. It was just bloody stupid.

Amanda: I've been thinking of travelling myself. Going to the Gold Coast. I don't suppose that's any more appealing than Madagascar, is it? *(Maddy shakes her head. Laughing and crying.)*

## Act Four

### SCENE 1 - The Press Conference

*(A single seat facing the audience. Joe enters and sits self-consciously. An anonymous person hurries on, adjusts a lapel microphone, exits.)*

Joe: Good afternoon, as you can probably tell, I'm very new to this sort of thing, so let's get it over with...

*(Questions are fired from within the audience. Several questions are asked at once. Occasional flashes, etc.)*

Reporter: How do you feel winning the Victorian Poetry Prize? Is it the biggest win of your career?

Joe: Biggest win? It's the only win of my career. I've always thought poetry prizes were a lottery. Never paid much attention to them. My opinion of them has changed, of course.

Reporter: You won with your Homage to Rabearivelo, but another poem, Melbourne Scenes, also won third prize... which of the two do you prefer?

Joe: The Rabearivelo poem. He's a poet who should be better known. Winning the prize is one thing, but if a few more people bother to read Rabearivelo, that will be a bonus. I like Melbourne Scenes, as well, of course. I'd have been happier if they'd both won first prize.

Reporter: Will you be publishing a collection now?

Joe: If I can find a publisher.

Reporter: Joe, you're hardly a household name, how long have you been writing and how much do you write each day?

Joe: I've been writing poetry for as long as I've been able to write. How much I write depends. If I've got to do the shopping, I always write a list. I've got one here if you want to hear it, *Bread, Milk, Tea, Vegies, Mince...* I can go on if you like.

Reporter: How do you think winning the prize will affect your life, Joe?

Joe: Well, I'll be able to buy some of the things on my shopping lists - that'll be a big change. I'll be the best fed poet in the country.

Reporter: Joe, do have a full time job or do you just concentrate on your poetry?

Joe: Yes, I have a full time job: I'm a poet. It's full time; it just pays part time.

Reporter: Apart from the groceries, what do you intend spending the prize money on?

Joe: I'd like to visit Madagascar and see what I can learn about Rabearivelo. Very interesting fella. He's the bloke you should be interviewing, you know.

Reporter: Do you hope to visit him in Madagascar?

Joe: No, I hope I don't meet him. He's dead. Died in 1937, I think.

Reporter: How did you first become interested in Madagascan poetry?

Joe: I picked up a copy of a book of African poetry in a secondhand shop. Initially, I was attracted to the book by the comment on the back cover: "Poetry composed in African languages has been left out...". I couldn't resist buying a book of African poetry which excluded anything written in any African language. I'm still looking for the companion volume: Modern English Poetry (poetry composed in English has been left out).

Seriously, I was knocked out by the poetry, especially of Rabearivelo. I thought it was a crime that more people hadn't read him. So that's where the Homage came from. If you can get hold of a decent translation of *Translations from the Night*, you should read it. In conjunction with my poetry, of course.

Reporter: Which other Australian poets do you admire?

Joe: All the usuals, Les Murray, A.D. Hope... It's a hard question to answer off the cuff... I don't read people because they're Australian... Bruce Shearer, Robert Nowak... I don't know.

Reporter: You say you don't read poets just because they're Australian; do you think our poetry has reached a new maturity? Do you think our poetry is now less derivative?

Joe: I've just won a competition with a Homage to a Foreign Poet - how much more derivative can you get? Melbourne Scenes came third.

Reporter: You don't think Australian poetry has embraced a new internationalism?

Joe: I don't think so. What's a new internationalism? Just because I included a poem inspired by a Madagascan? That's not any sort

of ism; it's just that I think Rabearivelo's work should be better know. He is a major poet and deserves recognition.

Reporter: How do you feel now that your own work is becoming recognised?

Joe: Invisible.

Reporter: Joe, what about a picture of you holding the cheque?

Joe: I've already cashed the cheque. I can show you an airline ticket.

*(Joe stands and holds the two tickets in front of him. Cameras flash.)*

Reporter: I see you've got two tickets there, Joe. Who's going with you?

Joe: I'm open to suggestions.

## **SCENE 2**

*(Maddy's house. Maddy is working on the floor; papers spread around her. She rifles through a wad of papers and groans. Amanda enters with a mug of milk for her.)*

Amanda: How's it going?

Maddy: I'll never finish it by tomorrow.

Amanda: I've brought you some hot milk.

Maddy: Thanks, mum. It'll probably put me straight to sleep.

Amanda: That would be a good thing, my girl. You need to get more sleep. You're not eighteen anymore.

Maddy: Thanks for reminding me.

Amanda: Well, you're behaving just like you did when you were in your final year at school. Have you come this far and worked this hard just to end up as silly as a schoolgirl again?

Maddy: Probably. I sometimes feel like a schoolgirl at work.

Amanda: Well you're even sillier than you used to be. You're obviously good at your job or they wouldn't be relying so heavily on you. And that Oscar's a creep. If you don't mind me saying so.

Maddy: No, I don't mind. I can't wait for the day when you actually approve of someone I'm going out with.

Amanda: I didn't mind Joe.

Maddy: What do you mean you didn't mind Joe? You've been telling me for years that he'd never amount to anything and I ought to leave him.

Amanda: And I was right, but I didn't mind him as a person. I quite liked him. I just knew that you'd never work out together, that's all.

Maddy: Why not? I mean, I think you're right, but why didn't you think we'd work out?

Amanda: Because you were both holding each other back. You somehow managed to bring out the worst in each other.

Maddy: Thanks, mum!

Amanda: It's true. Some couples have a chemistry that makes them more powerful, more potent as a couple than they are as individuals. You and Joe had the opposite sort of chemistry. The whole was less than the sum of its parts.

Maddy: How can you say that?

Amanda: You think it's an accident that Joe wins a poetry competition straight after you split up?

Maddy: What, and I was somehow preventing him winning anything before that, was I?

Amanda: Of course. Just as your career has also suddenly taken off now that Joe is gone. Or is that another accident?

Maddy: My career may be coming to an abrupt halt if I don't finish this

tonight.

Amanda: Well, you get back to it. I'm going to settle down with a few more brochures before I go to bed.

Maddy: Gold Coast apartments?

Amanda: Yes, I know you'd love to have me stay forever, but you're cramping my style.

*(Maddy laughs; returns to her work.)*

Amanda: *(leafing through brochures)* That sounds all right...



### **SCENE 3**

*(Oscar's office. It is late; only the unnecessarily large desk is well lit. Oscar is seated at the desk. He languidly examines a sheaf of papers. A knock at his door. He waits for a studiedly long time.)*

Oscar:       Come.

*Jenny enters and approaches diffidently.*

Jennifer:     I wasn't sure if you'd heard me...

Oscar:       Sorry, Jenny. I was absorbed in a draft of Maddy's submission. I can't say I'm unhappy for the interruption. What do you want to speak to me about, Jenny?

Jennifer:     I came back to pick up some papers and noticed the light in your office...

Oscar:       And came to investigate? I always work late on Tuesdays, Jenny. I thought you knew that.

Jennifer:     Yes, I suppose I did... I just didn't make the connection, that's all... I mean that today's Tuesday and you'd be in late...

Oscar:       Please, take a seat, Jenny. Maddy will be there when I want to return to her. What do you want to see me about?

Jennifer:     I... well, it's about Maddy, really.

Oscar:       About her submission? Or about her?

Jennifer:     Both, I suppose. I've seen the first draft of what she is putting

together. You know I like Maddy; she and I are very close. She is more than a colleague. We spend a lot of time together outside of work. She's a very talented lady; I admire her work ethic enormously... but sometimes I wonder... she seems out of her depth sometime... with some of the things you call on her to do...

*Jennifer waits for Oscar to comment. He refuses to be drawn.*

Jennifer: ... I mean, she is very talented. You wouldn't have chosen her if you didn't know that. I know I'm not telling you anything when I say that. But does she always deliver, Oscar? Does she always deliver quite as much as you might expect of her?

Oscar: I have never found reason to complain. She has delivered to me everything I have asked of her.

Jennifer: Please, don't get me wrong, Oscar. I know her; I like her; she's got the talent to do anything... but sometimes she... she holds back. Oscar, I don't hold back. I don't do anything by half. I can give you total commitment, Oscar. Maddy... well, you know she's distracted at the moment. She's coming out of a long term relationship...

Oscar: She has spoken to me, of course, about Joe. You don't think that her leaving him mightn't allow her to blossom?

Jennifer: It ought to, of course, but it won't. She may be out of that relationship, but ultimately, she's looking for the same thing again. Probably with Joe, or someone like him. But she's looking for a relationship, all right. And that's a distraction, Oscar. That means she isn't giving everything she could. And I don't think she'll change. But I'm not distracted, Oscar. I can

give you everything Maddy gives you and more. Without distraction. I'm available, Oscar, to do anything that needs to be done.

Oscar: I like to hear that from a colleague, Jenny. You must know I've had my eye on you, even while I've been giving Maddy her chance.

Jennifer: Don't get me wrong, Oscar. Maddy's my friend.

Oscar: Of course she is, Jenny. You two are as thick as thieves, I know. But I understand what you are saying. I appreciate your honesty in speaking as you have. Honesty is something I hold in special regard, Jenny.

In many ways, I agree with you. Maddy is a delight to work with. I have enjoyed bringing her out a little. But - take her submission - it's just that: submissive. And I like a little more fire, Jenny. I'm a man who needs light and heat, Jenny. I like to surround myself with people who can provide that. Maddy's good, but I'm looking for better than good. Do you think you're better than good, Jenny?

Jennifer: I'm better, Oscar. She is good - I love her - but I'm better, Oscar.

Oscar: All right. I've been meaning to talk to your friend Maddy about her position. Let me make it clear, however, that there is no question of you replacing her straight away. I have to consider Maddy's feelings. You will be an ancillary. I will be using you to fall back on and you will accept this lesser role for as long as I think necessary. That is understood. But if you prove as much better as we both think you will, I will be trying you in more and more testing positions, Jenny. And don't worry about being

under utilised. I will extend you, Jenny; it was always in my plans for you. I'll find your limits.

Jennifer: Thank you, Oscar. I'm glad I spoke to you. I only hope you don't think I've been trying to criticise Maddy...

Oscar: Please, Jenny. I am not a new-comer to this game. I understand your motives perfectly. I appreciate what you have done. Now, I have to sweat through a few more pages, but if you can wait for me for half an hour or so, we can discuss things properly, over a drink.

Jennifer: Of course. I'll wait in my office. I've got things to do...

*Jenny leaves. Oscar picks up the papers and leafs through a page or two. He picks up the phone and dials.*

Oscar: Oscar. Hi. No, still at the office. No. No. Looks like another all nighter, I'm afraid. Yes. No, no, nothing I can do about it. Sorry.

*He hangs up.*

#### SCENE 4

*(Joe's digs. Kasimir enters with a paper; throws himself onto the couch and starts leafing through the paper.)*

Kasimir: Scandal; economics; gossip; murder; gossip; scandal; world news; something called 'Lifestyle' that looks a lot like crap; more crap; more crap - or should that be crappier? - crappier and crappier. Ah! The Arts pages! Crappiest, probably. Hidden in the bowels of the paper. Now, let's find the gallery reviews. What's the old toady written about this week. Any reviews of an exhibition by - oooh, I don't know - say, Kasimir Mahler, for instance? Brilliant young painter - youngish, any way. Doesn't look like it. What has the old arse licker got around to seeing? An exhibition of non-functional ceramics. Sounds fascinating. *(Kasimir reads from the review in an exaggeratedly "arty" way.)*

*"For Johnston, function is wholly repudiated in a work like 'Flower Bidet'. Texture, colour, glaze. These are her overriding concerns; the trinity of pure ceramicity that leaves no place for function, for utility."*

What a tosser! What else has he gone to? Let's see... No! Poor old Ken Browning's show! Ken's been painting the same thing since he discovered acid in the sixties.

*"It is especially pleasing to see the slow, unhurried flower of Browning's virtuosity is finally in full bloom. Here, in paintings that acknowledge the artist's past work, while hinting at a future direction, Browning achieves a remarkable, self-referential stasis. These are paintings of a mature enlightenment, of a painter for whom revelation is to be found not in the figurative elements of his work, but in the palette employed to create*

*those elements. Browning uses colour, or more importantly, changes of colour, to focus the viewer on the moment of painting..."*

You great nana! Ken Browning uses one colour until he runs out of it! Who else is getting the treatment this week? Sculptor I've never heard of... *"found objects... bark, twigs, and string..."* That's original. Who else? Another bloody ceramicist! The country's overrun with them. When we stopped using chamber pots, we stopped needing ceramicists. Mud tossing wannabes, the lot of them. Why doesn't this prat review a real show? I can't read any more of this garbage. What else is happening? *(He starts leafing through the pages again.)* Ho, ho! Brilliant young poet, Joe Raven! A critique of the winning poems. *(Reading.)* This guy 's worse than their arts critic. Must be a sports reporter who's being punished. *"... a sure sign of the maturation of Australian poetry..."* Cobblers. *"... a striking reflection of our confidence in our internationalism..."* Blah, blah, blah. *"... ironic that such a truly Australian voice should only be found by rejection of the insular and traditional and by embracing the exotic and foreign."* Oh yes! Joe's work is a triumph of the Australian genius for lifting other people's ideas!

This bloke 's got no idea. How do any of these people get employed to spout off this baloney? Time for a small dose of reality, boys.

*(Kasimir goes to the phone, still holding the paper. He checks the front of the paper for a phone number, then dials.)*

Hello? Yes, I want to speak to ... *(checks the byline on the story)...* Hold on... To one of your sports reporters, I think... Here it is... Simon Collings. That's right... He's not in sports? But he

writes with such a self-satisfied vacuity. Well, may I speak to him, please. I have a story for him... Hello? Simon Collings? Yes. I read your article on the poet, Raven. Yes, I thought it was brilliant. Truly. Really excellent. I haven't laughed so much since Grandma died. Great joke, Simon, but when are you going to let the rest of the world in on the gag?... You must know what I mean... Have you ever bothered to read Rabearivelo? Have a look at a volume of his called 'Translations from the Night'. It makes very interesting reading next to the "genuine Australian voice" you were praising so highly... That's right. Word for word... No, I don't know where you'll find it. Have you thought about a library? ... R-A-B-E-A-R-I-V-E-L-O. The E has an accent. Grav, I think... My name? Iscariot. No accent. Bye bye. *(He hangs up.)* Prat.

*(Kasimir returns to the couch and continues reading/leafing through the paper. Joe enters after a few moments.)*

Joe: What 're you reading?

Kasimir: Births, deaths, and marriages. You're not mentioned in any category yet.

Joe: Can I have the front half of the paper?

Kasimir: You'll be more interested in the middle bit. Here. A very flattering review.

*(Joe finds the appropriate page and reads, obviously happy.)*

Joe: Bit over the top, isn't it? This bit 's good. *"In some ways, the poet's 'Melbourne Scenes' is more satisfying than the winning poem, even if the verse is less adventurous."* What does he

mean, less adventurous? ... Still, they all like the 'Homage', don't they?

Kasimir: Shouldn't they?

Joe: Of course, but when are they going to read his work? I keep telling them to read his work.

Kasimir: Someone will get around to it. There probably aren't many copies of the work of an obscure Madagascan poet of the twenties floating around. In translation. You can't expect Australian journalists to read French. Unless someone instructs them, you'll have to wait for someone who know Rabo's work to stand up on his hind legs and point the finger at you.

Joe: They will know it's a joke, won't they? I've kept telling them to read Rabearivelo.

Kasimir: Of course they won't know it's a joke. It's not in their interests to have anyone think it's a joke. It's very seldom, in my experience, that the butt of a joke finds it funny enough to keep telling others. They'll crucify you.

Joe: Thanks, Kaz.

Kasimir: Look on the bright side.

Joe: There's a bright side?

Kasimir: Better men than you have been crucified. Barabas for a start.

Joe: He wasn't crucified. He got off.



Kasimir: In that case, there probably isn't a bright side. How many thieves can they afford to pardon?

**SCENE 5**

*(Oscar's office. Late at night. Oscar is standing, waiting for Maddy. Maddy enters with a sheaf of papers which she drops on his desk before rushing to Oscar.)*

Maddy: I'm glad you're still in. I've wanted to see you for days, but I haven't let myself until I finished the final draft. Just hold me for a moment. I'm so tired.

Oscar: You've taken on a bit much lately, haven't you?

Maddy: Probably. I know I haven't had much time to be with you.

Oscar: Would you like to go out now? We could have a quiet drink somewhere, or a meal?

Maddy: Sounds lovely, but I'm just exhausted. You don't mind do you? I need to go home and sleep for a week or so.

Oscar: Of course. While you're here, let me just have a look at how you've handled the submission.

Maddy: Sure. There's an exec summary in the top folder.

*(Oscar reads through the summary. Turns the page as if expecting more.)*

Maddy: What do you think? You seem unsure or something...

Oscar: No, no. I'll have a look in the morning. You go home and get some rest.

Maddy: You don't like it, do you?

Oscar: I'm sure it's an adequate response. The actions you outline in the executive summary aren't quite what the tender documents first suggest to me, but I will have to read the entire document, Maddy.

Maddy: An adequate response? I've worked my arse off on that report!

Oscar: I know, Maddy, I know. Let me give the report the attention it deserves. Perhaps your summary is a little too concise to do justice to your work.

Maddy: There's nothing wrong with the summary, and that's the best bloody report you'll read this year.

Oscar: Give me a chance to read it then, Maddy. You're tired. Go home and get some rest. I'll look over the report myself tonight. Perhaps I'll have someone else look over it tomorrow to see if they can assist you. I probably have loaded too much on you lately.

Maddy: What? You're going to get someone else to re-write it? I can't believe this!

Oscar: Your words, Maddy. Go home and let me read the report.

Maddy: Who in this office is going to "assist me"?

Oscar: Maddy, please. There's no need for this.

Maddy: You're right. You're quite right. There is no need for this. And I'm not putting up with it. You'll have my resignation in the morning. You can do what you like with the report. And for your

next impossible job, you'd better find another slave! (*Storms out.*)

Oscar:       Already taken care of, my dear.

## Act Five

### SCENE 1 - The Second Press Conference

*(A single seat facing the audience. Joe sitting as in Act IV Scene 1. Questions are fired from within the audience. Several questions are asked at once. Occasional flashes, etc.)*

Joe: Good afternoon. I would like to begin by saying how happy I am that I have brought the work of Rabearivelo to a new audience.

Reporter: Was that your only intention, Joe?

Joe: Of course not. I also wanted to have a laugh.

Reporter: Using another writer's work and passing it off as your own, Joe, can you explain the humour in that?

Joe: I haven't got time to explain humour to you.

Reporter: The Madagascan consul has called the plagiarism a "theft of one of the jewels of Malagasy culture" and has called for an apology. Would you care to explain humour to the Madagascan people?

Joe: Rabearivelo died a pauper. I'm sure that contemporary Madagascan poets are no better off. Poets are victims of a society that venerates the dead because it's easier than considering the living. Explain the humour in that for us.

Reporter: Are you asking the poet who came second and whom you've cheated out of first prize to see you as a victim?

- Joe: No. Why don't you ask her how she feels about it?
- Reporter: She says she feels cheated.
- Joe: If she's a poet, she should be used to that.
- Reporter: Now that you've had your laugh, Joe, what are you going to do with the prize money?
- Joe: What I've always done with money - spend it.
- Reporter: How can you justify that, Joe?
- Joe: You want me to justify money?
- Reporter: Haven't you obtained the prize money by fraud and shouldn't you return the money?
- Joe: Fortunately, I've already spent the money. So, no, I won't be returning any money.
- Reporter: The entry form for the Victorian Poetry Prize that you signed states that the writer certifies that "the works are original works of the writer and have not been previously published".
- Joe: As far as I know, these works **are** original works of the writer. The works are also meant to reflect "some aspect of contemporary Victorian or Australian life". Is it my fault if the judges can't tell the difference between contemporary Australia and Madagascar at the turn of the century? Not that there's probably much difference.
- Reporter: So you're happy to steal the work of another writer and of a

translator and pass it off as your own.

Joe: I entered Rabearivelo's work with my own because I wanted to share my discovery of his work with others. That may not make a lot of sense to you - it doesn't make a lot of sense to me, now - but that's the truth of it. If you remember the occasion when you were all fawning over me, I kept asking you and your readers to investigate his work. That's not the way a plagiarist behaves.

Reporter: If you weren't trying to steal someone else's work, Joe, were you just trying to capitalise on the publicity you knew would be generated?

Joe: Who's fault is the publicity? You're not under any compulsion to cover this story.

Reporter: You'd like to continue having people think Rabearivelo's work is your own?

Joe: All I'm saying is I can do without the publicity. I never wanted to be sitting here.

Reporter: And you discount any similarity between your poem *Melbourne Scenes* which won third prize and an earlier work by Vincent Buckley, *Golden Buildings*?

Joe: Golden Builders. Of course I do! Different styles, different themes, different underlying concerns, different, very different poems. Have you read either my work or his? This is ridiculous!

Reporter: Joe, I'm not as well read as you - I'm sure most of my readers

aren't either - so for my benefit and theirs, can you please tell me which other poets you've been trying to promote by plagiarising? And which of your other poems are not really yours?

Joe: All my poetry is my own. The Homage to Rabearivelo was a joke. A joke to expose the joke of literary competitions. That's all. I didn't stop to think that I'd have to put up with the joke of Australian journalism as a punishment.

*(Joe storms out. Cameras flash, reporters call out "Joe, what are your plans for the future?" "Do you plan to continue writing?" "What about an apology, Joe?" etc.)*



**SCENE 2**

*(Oscar's office. Oscar is working in his usual darkened solitude. There is a knock at the door.)*

Oscar: Come.

Maddy: Good evening, Oscar.

Oscar: Maddy. This is an unexpected pleasure. I haven't seen much of you these days.

Maddy: I've been fairly busy. The press...

Oscar: Ah yes. Still, a more sensitive man than myself might have been offended, might have felt he was being cut.

Maddy: Lucky you're not too sensitive then.

Oscar: Indeed. How did you get in here? Haven't they taken your key?

Maddy: Yes. But the doorman let me in. I told him I wanted to see you.

Oscar: Good of him. I take it there is a purpose in your visit tonight?

Maddy: I've come... I'm here to ask you for your help.

Oscar: My help? You are still surprising me, Maddy. I hope you know that you never need to ask me for my help.

Maddy: It isn't really for me. It's Joe. He doesn't realise it, of course, but he's going to need legal advice, possibly representation...

- Oscar: Why shouldn't he come to me himself if he needs my help?
- Maddy: You know he couldn't ask you himself. I'm not even sure he'll take your advice if you give it, but I'd like to try.
- Oscar: And I would waive my fees, I presume?
- Maddy: Well, he certainly couldn't afford to pay them.
- Oscar: It might be quite an amusing case. But something about this disturbs me, Maddy.
- Maddy: What's that?
- Oscar: I'm a very old fashioned man, Maddy. I feel you have used me badly.
- Maddy: I used you?
- Oscar: And now you're asking a favour of me. And yet I don't detect the note of supplication I might reasonably expect.
- Maddy: What do you want me to do? Get on my knees?
- Oscar: That would be a good start. I am quite old fashioned in these things. I will agree to help your poet friend, but you will ask me on your knees.
- Maddy: There. I'm asking you for a favour. On my knees. Does that make you feel big, Oscar?

*(Oscar stands and comes out from behind his desk and stands close in front of the kneeling Maddy.)*

Oscar: Yes, Maddy. I feel pleasantly big. *(He picks up the telephone from the desk.)* Let me leave a message on my secretary's voice mail. *(He dials a number and speaks into the telephone.)* Some time in the afternoon a Joe Raven will come to see me. Show him straight in. *(He hangs up the telephone.)* I don't want any histrionics from your poet friend, Maddy. He will come here and he will behave himself. Is that clear?

Maddy: Of course, Oscar. Thank you.

*(Maddy starts to get up, but Oscar puts a hand on her shoulder to keep her kneeling.)*

Oscar: Not yet, Maddy. You have used me badly and I don't think that should go unpunished. I told you I was old fashioned. Do you know how Victorian children were disciplined? Before they were caned, they were made to kiss the rod. I think that would be appropriate now, Maddy, don't you?

*(The stage is wholly darkened. After a long while, Oscar is heard picking up the telephone and dialling.)*

Oscar: Cancel the appointment with Joe Raven. If he shows up at any time he is to be told to leave the building. And I want the building supervisor contacted. The doorman tonight allowed someone without a key to wander about the building. The man must be sacked.

### SCENE 3

*(Joe's digs. Kasimir has made himself at home and is sifting through a pile of tapes and CDs. A travel bag is prominent.)*

Kasimir: Joe, your taste in music is nearly as poor as your taste in friends. This is crap. No wonder he turned to poetry. Must be tone deaf, poor bastard. *(He puts an unlabelled tape in the cheap tape player.)*

*(Kasimir goes to sit down. The tape plays 'Scumbag' - an early seventies John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band song. Kasimir rapidly returns to the tape player and shuts it off.)*

Does he actually listen to that? Too close to the bone for my liking.

*(Joe enters. He is obviously very upset.)*

Greetings earthling. The strange, percussive noise you call music puzzles us.

Joe: I'm not in the mood, Kaz. Maddy's playing games with me.

Kasimir: That sounds like fun. Nothing too asexual, I trust.

Joe: No, nothing asexual. She's fucking me around good and proper. What I can't understand is why. Why is she bothering to hurt me?

Kasimir: What are you whimpering about?

Joe: She set me up to see her friend Oscar. "Oscar can help you with

legal advice. I know you don't like him, Joe, but he's prepared to help you and you need help."

Kasimir: Can't argue with that.

Joe: So I agree to see him. After work at his office. That's where I've come from.

Kasimir: And?

Joe: Bastard wouldn't see me. The office bouncer threatened to call the cops.

Kasimir: Maybe they forgot the appointment.

Joe: Sure. And maybe it's just part of a little game they're playing. What's she trying to do? Why keep kicking me when I'm down?

Kasimir: You've never been too good at picking your friends.

Joe: That's unusually honest.

Kasimir: Honesty's a dangerous ideal. That's why I'm so scrupulous about not living up to it.

Joe: Well you're not alone. I used to think Maddy was the only honest person I knew.

Kasimir: Don't be such a sanctimonious asshole. Let's get out of here and have a beer somewhere.

Joe: I don't feel like going out. I feel like staying in. Alone.

Kasimir: Suit yourself. I was going to stay, but perhaps I should head back and see if the coast is clear with Deb and Wendy. One other thing, Joe.

Joe: What?

Kasimir: Sorry about the papers.

Joe: What do you mean? It wasn't your fault.

Kasimir: I know. But they were certain to find out some time. I'm sorry they've reacted with so little humour.

Joe: What are you saying? Did you put the papers onto me?

Kasimir: Of course. Someone had to. The whole stunt was dying.

Joe: Are you serious? You told the papers about the Homage?

Kasimir: I just suggested that the guy who reviewed your work ought to have a look at Rabo's work.

*(Joe walks around, speechless. He goes to the front door and opens it. Almost steps out, but decides against it.)*

Joe: Would you mind? This is my place.

Kasimir: Yeah, all right. See you later.

*(Kasimir leaves, taking the travel bag.)*

Joe: I fuckin' hope not.

#### SCENE 4

*(Joe's digs. Joe storms around after Kasimir's departure and then turns to address the audience.)*

Joe: I hope you've learnt something from all of this. If nothing else, you should have learnt the name of a Madagascan poet: Jean Joseph Rabearivelo. What have I done to myself? *(Reads from some papers.)* "But who has killed the black cow, dead without having lowed, dead without having roared, dead without once having been chased over that prairie flowered with stars?" Not bad Jean-Joseph. *(Reading from another paper.)* Mine's better.

*"She was an angel once - she didn't seem:  
a face the sun would never shine upon,  
a vision, packing up and being gone  
as she chose to, as certain as a dream,  
as maddening and futile as her kiss.  
She was a mermaid once - an old tale told  
to ever new belief: men chanced the main,  
tore back her comfortless grey counterpane,  
and found and fucked her, silver, sexless, cold.  
I should have learnt something from all of this.*

*She was a trick of light and wave and mind,  
a longing conscious thought could not dismiss;  
she vanished with the moment she defined.  
I should have learnt something from all of this."*

Nobody will take me seriously again. From now on, I'm the bloke who tried to pass himself off as a Madagascan poet of the twenties. It was a joke. It was a reaction to my life falling apart, that's all. How can they take their dreary little poetry competition so seriously? Earnest professors of literature spouting off about plagiarism, about the dangers of "intellectual theft". Academics complaining about intellectual theft! Australian academics! Devoted to the eradication of original thought.

Who cares? I was going to take her to Madagascar. (*He takes the airline tickets out of his pocket.*) To show her where Jean-Joseph lived. To try to understand him, and have her understand me. We could have spend our nights on strange beaches, or stayed in village huts and delighted children with our white skins and walkmen.

She will have men take her to more exotic places than Madagascar, I suppose. (*Tears the tickets up. Hears the door opening and turns to watch it. Kasimir lets himself in, carrying a small travel bag.*)

Jesus Christ! Haven't you given me that key back! What are you doing here, Judas? Come to borrow another thirty pieces of silver, have you?

Kasimir: Got halfway home and thought better of it. How're you doing?

Joe: Fantastic, thanks, mate. Every inconsequential member of the goon squad of the Australian literary scene is trying to make a name for themselves by finding more extreme ways to pillory me. My chances of ever seeing Maddy again have risen to zero. And worst of all, I'm pestered with backstabbing bastards who used to pass themselves off as my friend. So, my life is just dandy, thanks for asking. Leave the key and piss off.

Kasimir: (*Sees the torn tickets.*) You could have cashed those in, you know.

Joe: So that you could borrow the money from me? No thanks.

Kasimir: Apart from wanting to cheer you up, the reason I came back



was that I thought I might crash here for a couple of days, if I could.

Joe: What?

Kasimir: Been a bit of an explosion back at my place. Might be better if Deb didn't find me there for a while. And if Wendy didn't know my whereabouts. The women have turned on me.

Joe: And I'm interested?

Kasimir: Come on, mate. Won't be for long.

Joe: I can't believe you. You **are** the prick who shopped me to the papers, aren't you?

Kasimir: What do you mean "shopped you"? You weren't trying to pretend the poem was yours. You were always going to announce who the author was. At least, that's what you used to say. I just started to get worried that you were leaving it a bit long. Almost as if you'd changed your mind about owning up to the prank. You should thank me. The longer it went, the worse it was going to be for you.

Joe: Your spirit shines through you, Kaz. And here's me thinking you might have been jealous of the attention my poetry was attracting.

Kasimir: Whose poetry?

Joe: My poetry. People were finally reading **my** poetry. Now all I get are snide remarks about "where my inspiration" for every poem

comes from.

Kasimir: Forget it. The fuss will die down. Just play it cool and in six months time you'll be the brilliant young poet who fooled the literary establishment.

Joe: Sure.

Kasimir: Stop moping. Anyone'd think you were the only bastard with problems. Can I stay or not?

Joe: Judas asks if there's any room on the cross.

Kasimir: You think you're Christ now? And I was worried you thought you were Rabearivelo. Besides, for all we know, Jesus and Judas were best mates. Doesn't say anything about it. I'll sleep out here. Got any spare blankets? I'll need to borrow some clothes, too.

Joe: What did you bring in the bag?

Kasimir: *(emptying the travel bag)* Just what I had time to grab. A few acrylics, brushes, roll of canvas... and inspiration!

*(Kasimir pulls out a dozen beers; throws one to Joe; opens one for himself.)*

Joe: Cheers. Put the rest in the fridge. Why am I doing this? You betrayed me, you bastard!

Kasimir: Please. I'll put up with a moderate amount of abuse, but any melodramatics and I'm leaving.

Joe: Shit! That'll be a heart break. You'll leave? How will I stand the

emptiness?

Kasimir: Look, brother. I may be a cunt, but I'm the only cunt who's still here with you. I don't notice too many other great mates rallying around. Maddy coming around later to make sure you're all right, is she?

Joe: I'll never see her again.

Kasimir: I warned you about the melodramatics. In twelve months time, Maddy will be dining out on how she used to live with you. You're going to be famous.

Joe: What are you talking about?

Kasimir: Mate, you're now a figure in Australian literature. Don't you see what that means? You qualify as a subject for the Archibald. I'm going to paint you and win the Archy. We will both be famous and make lots of money. Fair enough?

Joe: So, having destroyed my own career, you now want to use me to establish your own. Sounds fair, Kaz.

Kasimir: I didn't ruin your career, Joe. Before Rabwhatsisname, you didn't have a career. And you only had one while everyone thought you'd written his poems. All I did was save you from forgetting to let everyone know. Have another drink. All right, so people were starting to read your poems - they'll be more likely to want to read them now. Your only problem is that they'll have to be good.

Joe: What's that meant to mean?

Kasimir: I mean, that the critics will be less forgiving of you, but that doesn't matter. You get a good, solid collection together and we'll time the publication to coincide with the Archy. My painting will help publicise your collection; your collection will help get my portrait in front of the judges.

Joe: You could paint me as Livingstone, in front of a huge map of Madagascar.

Kasimir: In front of a mirror with Rabo looking back?

Joe: Why not just do me blacked up like Jolson, reading from a copy of *Translations from the Night*.

Kasimir: Naked. We've got to do you naked. We need the shock value. It will add to that *frisson* of bad boy that will be clinging to you. And we want a poem about the painting as well, or about being painted, or something. Can you manage it?

Joe: Can I manage it? Don't worry about me. The question is, can you win the Archibald?

Kasimir: Not coming from Sydney, of course not. But we'll win the publicity comp. And that counts for a lot more. I want to start sketching. Get your gear off. You can drink naked, can't you?

*(Gradual fade as Kasimir spread paper on the floor; Joe undresses and adopts various unlikely poses. Both drinking and laughing.)*

## SCENE 5

*(Maddy's house. Throughout the first part of the scene, Amanda walks on and off as she packs. Maddy is slumped on a chair next to the telephone; sometimes addressing her mother; sometimes the audience.)*

Maddy: I can't move. Betrayal takes more than the wind out of your sails; it leaves you on the bottom of the ocean. Breathing, apparently. Lungs filled with water; body as heavy as lead.

Amanda: You'll bob up again, you know. With enough to attract the next school of sharks. Trust me.

Maddy: When are you going?

Amanda: As soon as I've finished packing. I'm sorry I'm leaving now. I can put it off if you like?

Maddy: No, mum. It's all right. The sooner you're settled in Queensland the sooner I can come and visit. I should get out of here myself. I need to change the externals; to help change the rest. Did I tell you Joe wanted to take me to Madagascar? Silly bastard. I can't imagine him outside Melbourne. He'll probably go there, I suppose. To escape reality.

Amanda: Can you ring a taxi, sweetheart? I'll be finished in a few minutes. And you know I like to get to the airport early.

Maddy: *(dialling for a cab)* Are you sure you don't want me to take you to the airport?

Amanda: No need, Maddy. There's something terribly depressing about airports.

- Maddy: Only if you're not going anywhere. Perhaps I could just get on the first international flight and see where I end up. *Twenty six, Station Street, South Melbourne. Private house. Going to the airport.* I feel as if I need to do something impulsive. *Yes, ready now. Thank you.* If ever I'm going to be able to move again. Cab will be here in a few minutes, mum.
- Amanda: I'm ready. I've checked through the house. If I've left anything behind, you're welcome to it, or you can send it on when I've got an address.
- Maddy: I've been thinking I might come out to the airport with you. Hop on a plane somewhere. The first one available. Let fate decide where I'm going.
- Amanda: Save your money. Fate never decides where you're going. Wait until you're feeling happy again. That's the time to be impulsive. When you're depressed, impulse is a lousy guide.
- Maddy: I might end up in Madagascar.
- Amanda: You might end up in Bahrain. Don't look for any sort of consolation. Wait for acceptance. Once it comes, you'll be able to start again. Come and visit me on the Gold Coast. That will be enough of a culture shock to start with. Madagascar can wait.
- Maddy: I think I'd like to go somewhere where I can't understand the locals. Where I feel an outsider. Where I can observe without feeling a part of the life observed. Just to live without any sense of belonging, of even being there as a participant. To be totally detached from the life around me.

Amanda: Gold Coast sounds like the place for you, then. Come on, Maddy. You need to take it easy for a while. Find a new job. Go back to study for a while. Don't do anything too rash, though.

Maddy: I just feel as though I'm the only one left with nothing. Joe's still got his poetry and his trip to Madagascar. But what have I got? Nothing. I'll be all right. I'm just feeling very alone, that's all.

Amanda: When you were a little girl, you wouldn't let me cuddle you if you were hurt or angry. You would first always want to be alone. Only when you'd got over the pain would you come for your cuddle.

Maddy: I suppose I'll see you in Queensland when I'm over all this, then. In about ten years.

Amanda: Give yourself whatever time you need. (*Knock at the door.*) Is that the cab already? Tell him to wait while I get my bags!

*(Exit Amanda; Maddy opens the front door to Jennifer.)*

Maddy: Jen! Come in.

Jennifer: Hi. Just thought I'd see how you're getting on. (*Kisses her awkwardly on the cheek.*) Hope it's not too late for a visit.

Maddy: No, come on in. I was expecting a taxi for Mum. She's flying out to the Gold Coast this evening.

Jennifer: Lucky her! I was going to bring a bottle of something...

Maddy: It's all right, I'll open a red. I feel like I need a hangover.

Amanda:     *(Calling from offstage.)* I'll be there in a minute!

*(Maddy opens a bottle of red and pours two glasses; Jennifer settles herself in the same manner as Act III scene iii; Amanda is heard bustling around offstage.)*

Jennifer:     Do you need anyone to share the house with you when your Mum's gone? I'd love to move in here.

Maddy:       I think I'll need a bit of time on my own, Jen.

Jennifer:     You'll just mope if you hang around on your own. Together we'd be a pretty good team. Get out amongst the boys; cruise the clubs for a while?

Maddy:       Later, Jen. I won't be great company for a while.

Jennifer:     Fair enough. Let me know when you're ready for some competition and I'll be here. I'm dying to get out of my little rat hole.

Amanda:     *(Entering with her bags.)* Jennifer! Where have you come from?

Jennifer:     Evening Amanda. Straight from work, as it happens. Our mutual master, Oscar, had some special requirements tonight. Couldn't wait for the morning, apparently.

Maddy:       He's working you hard these days.

Amanda:     Yes, he went through a phase like that with you, didn't he, Maddy?



- Jennifer: I don't mind it. Got nothing else to do with my time. Oscar's all right. You know where you are with him.
- Maddy: Under the leather sole of one foot or the other.
- Jennifer: He's not that bad, Maddy.
- Amanda: Not if you have a taste for leather, anyway. *(A car horn toots.)* That's my cab. *(Kisses Maddy.)* Goodbye darling. Take care of yourself. Mind the company you keep, and I'll see you in Queensland soon, won't I?
- Maddy: Of course, Mum. Let me help you with your bags.
- Amanda: Don't bother. I've only got what I can carry. Which is the way we all should live, I expect. Goodbye Jennifer. Don't work yourself too hard. *(Kisses Maddy again.)* Goodbye, darling. I'll call soon.
- Maddy: Bye Mum. *(Calling out as Amanda leaves.)* Ring as soon as you get to Coolangatta! *(Stands at the open door waving now and then.)* She's a funny thing. Mind the company I keep. She still treats me like an innocent.
- Jennifer: That must be nice, sometimes.
- Maddy: Sometimes. Bye Mum! *(She shuts the door.)* I feel exhausted.
- Jennifer: You should go to bed, Maddy. You look stuffed.
- Maddy: I feel it. I might take your advice on that.
- Jennifer: Before you go, Maddy, there's something I want to tell you...

Maddy: What's that, Jen?

Jennifer: I've always looked up to you, Maddy. I've always admired you. I feel closer to you than to anyone else I know.

Maddy: Thank you, Jennifer. I appreciate your coming here tonight. Especially after Oscar has had you working back.

Jennifer: Coming here is nothing, Mad. But there's something else... Something about Oscar...

Maddy: What's that?

Jennifer: Oscar was never any good for you Maddy. He was never going to be right. I only wanted... I only wanted to let you know that.

Maddy: I know, Jen.

Jennifer: Oscar betrayed you Maddy, and he's the sort who'll always betray you. You know, after you left, he put his own name on your submission. The clients loved it.

Maddy: Doesn't surprise me, but thanks for telling me - that the clients liked it.

Jennifer: Oscar treated you badly, Maddy. But I look up to you, you know. I respect you. Sometimes friendship is more crucial than love, Maddy. Friends don't betray you the way lovers do. A friend can stand by you. And I want you to know that I'm standing by, Maddy. That's why I came here tonight. And that's why I want to move in with you.

Maddy: Thanks, Jen. I think I understand what you mean. We can talk

about it in the morning if you like. I need to go to bed, I think.

Jennifer: Okay, Maddy. Do you mind if I stay for a bit? I don't know why. I'd just like to unwind a bit after work before I go home.

Maddy: Sure. Finish the wine if you like. I better go to bed. Good night, Jen.

Jennifer: Good night Maddy.

*(They kiss. Maddy exits. The stage darkens very gradually. Jennifer wanders about the stage for a moment. She pours another glass of wine and settles down on a couch. When the stage is very dim, the phone rings. After a couple of rings, Jennifer answers it.)*

Jennifer: Hello? *(She listens for a moment, then hisses:)* Is that right, Oscar. Suddenly you don't have to go home it seems. Unfortunately, Maddy's gone to bed, you bastard, and I'll make sure she doesn't know you've called. We can continue this conversation in the morning.

## Resume

Howard Firkin is one of Melbourne's least prominent writers. Although his stories and poetry have appeared in many of the country's leading literary magazines, including **Meanjin**, **Overland**, **Poetry Australia**, **Mattoid**, **Webbers**, **Verso**, **Quadrant**, and **The Age**, he is yet to win the sort of lasting fame that his mother thinks he should. This is a terrible burden for a 39 year old.

*What Invisible Rat* is his first attempt at a play.