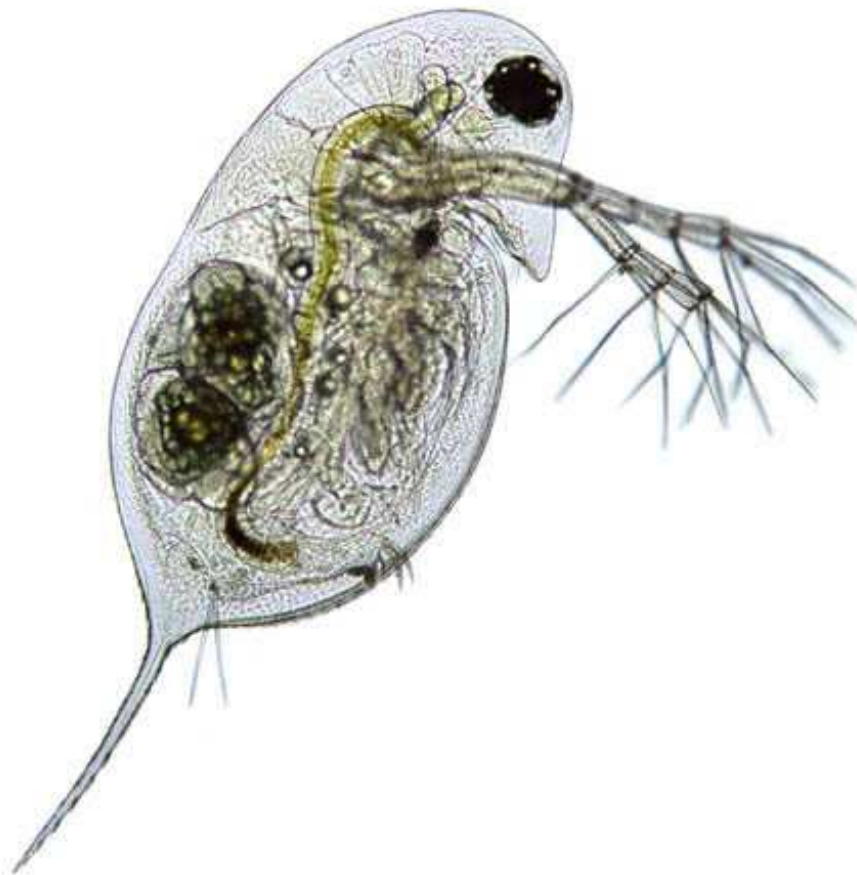


The Water Flea

By Felix Levinson



Characters

Peter – early 30s – asexual

Sal – early 30s – sexual

Nikki – mid/late 20s – asexual

Jack – mid/late 20s – sexual

Josie – late 20s – sexual

Peter is good-looking, but slightly unkempt in the way of a biologist who spends a lot of time in the field and isn't fussed about his appearance. Nikki has an edgy sexiness about her, almost despite herself. Sal is more classically pretty and attractive. Jack and Josie are less good looking than the others. Josie is slightly overweight and has a Derby accent.

The play is set in London, present day.

Note on set & staging

Most scenes take place in either Peter/Sal's or Nikki/Jack's flats, which is one set sharing key items of furniture: dining table, sofa, TV, kitchenette. Some scenes are set in both flats simultaneously so that, for instance, two characters can both be sitting at the same table but in actual fact be in the two different flats.

A double bed is added prominently and incongruously to the stage from Scene Three onwards. The metaphor is there for the making: the bed might be slap bang in the centre so characters constantly have to walk around it; it might hover menacingly over the stage; it might even be a see-through water bed containing live daphnia. The only practical constraint is that Sal has to get in it at one point.

Peter/Sal's flat contains an average sized aquarium tank filled with live Daphnia. These creatures are tiny – a few millimetres long – so it may be necessary to find an additional way of representing them, e.g. their shadows cast on the wall behind.

All stage directions on images and projections are intended as suggestions that may be elaborated on.



ACT ONE

Scene One

Sal and Josie looking at a laptop screen. A rendering of the screen – perhaps pixelated or impressionistic – is projected behind them. The first image: a standard Windows desktop.

Josie: What do you mean “worrying”?

Silence.

Surely if it were that bad he wouldn’t just leave it laying around for you to –

Sal: I took it out of his bag this morning. I swapped it for one of his textbooks so he wouldn’t – I just need you to look, Josie. Please. Tell me I’m not going completely –

Josie: Okay. Okay.

Josie hesitates...

Fuck Sal, it’s not *kids* is it?

Sal: Josie!

Josie: Well you did say “worrying”.

Sal: Yes, but not – This is Pete we’re talking about!

Josie: So it’s insects.

Sal: Sorry?

Josie: Insect fetish sites. I’ve read about them. God that explains so much.

Sal: Josie, please, I’m being serious.

Josie: So am I.

Sal: Look, it’s not – It’s nothing *like* –

Computer goes to screensaver – a magnified photo of a water flea. Josie gives Sal a look.

Just a screensaver. And they’re *crustaceans* not insects. For God’s sake don’t get that wrong. He goes mad if you get that wrong. Look, can you just – please...

The screen/images changing accordingly as Josie looks through the browser history:

Josie: Right... So, in *order visited yesterday*... BBC News. Okay... Insectsex.com... Only joking. University website. Fair enough... *ABBAsite.com*... Well I'll admit, that is slightly worrying... Oh, hello.

Images of fairly vanilla porn. She looks at Sal.

This it? God Sal, I've seen racier stuff in the bathroom bit of the Argos catalogue.

Sal: Go on.

Josie flicks through more sites. Videos now.

Josie: Ahh, Eastern European girls... Well, I don't blame him. Those squat muscular bodies and shaved heads... The guys, I mean. There's this Polish bloke comes and does the water coolers... Sometimes when no-one's looking I run them down so they need refilling quicker...

More sites. Getting more hardcore. Then an S&M video.

Okay... A bit more fruity... But it's only a bit of role-play. Sex as theatre. I thought you liked the theatre, Sal?

Sal: Go on.

The images change as Josie flicks through... She stops on a video of a rape scenario.

Josie: Hmm...

Beat.

Okay, not exactly my cup of tea, but – God Sal, it really doesn't mean Pete's about to go out and –

Sal: Go on.

A rhythmic banging starts up from the conjoining wall, faint, but growing louder...

Josie: I really wouldn't call any of this "worrying". It's all just –

Sal: To the last one.

Josie flicks through an array of sites until... a gay video.

Josie: Oh my God... Well, I suppose the whole ABBA thing's a bit of a clue... Right, so I see the problem now.

Sal: Wait, Josie, Pete's not –

Josie: The problem is: you're a prude.

Sal: I'm not a prude!

Josie: Face it, love. You're a raging prude. The guy's clearly got a healthy interest in the pleasures of the flesh – including, but not exclusively, the flesh of other men. If anything you should be – Flipping heck, are they trying to knock through?!

Sal: New tenants. A couple. Once it starts it can go on for hours.

Josie: Lucky buggers.

Sal: I wish they'd just – one day of fucking peace!

Beat.

Things haven't been going too well there recently. For us. In that department.

Josie: What do you mean?

Sal: I mean... not going at all really.

Josie: Well when was the last time you – ?

Sal: I don't know.

Josie: Come on. Last week? Month? *Year?*

Sal: Last month. I think.

Josie: You think? Bloody hell, Sal. No wonder the poor sod's been at it like a fifteen year-old. What's wrong? You aren't depressed are you?

Sal: It's not *me* Josie, it's – !

Beat.

Josie: Maybe he *is* fully gay then...

Sal: Josie, he's not –

Josie: Look, it happens to couples that have been together for a while. I'm sure with a bit of imagination you can get things back to how they used to be. Things used to be okay, didn't they?

Sal: Yes... Although we've never exactly been like rabbits...

Josie: Sal, the rabbit species would go extinct if it followed your copulation rate.

Sal: [*Suddenly angry.*] Don't! That's exactly what he does. Turns everything into a discussion on fucking evolution!

Beat. Josie a little taken aback.

Our first holiday – remember, we went to France. We’d been going out for almost three months and we still hadn’t... you know...

Josie: Three months?

Sal: Well he was always quite shy about it. I don’t think he was – *is* – very experienced...

Josie: Yeah, but – *three months*, Sal?

Sal: But now here we were – in Paris, in a hotel room with one bed. It was all him – he’d arranged the whole thing. And it had been the perfect day. In no small part because I’d banned all talk of biology. The only crustacean to make an appearance was the crab we had at dinner. And after, we climbed the Eiffel Tower and by pure chance we got to the top just as the sun was setting and the whole city was melting into soft pink brushstrokes, like a huge impressionist painting. It was so beautiful. And that’s when he told me he loved me for the first time. We shot down that tower like it was a helter-skelter, then through the streets – the whole city changed pink... and then red, dusky... and all the time this feeling building – I don’t think I’d ever felt anything like it before – this *agony* for his skin against mine...

Josie: Sal, you’re turning me on...

Sal: And then we’re on the bed, on this warm beautiful Paris night... and I love him too. I thought I did before, but now, in this moment, I love him totally. Always. I love him and we’re just about to – finally – after three months – and he says... “You know by definition people don’t have sex. It’s their *gametes* that have sex.”

Josie: What the fuck are gametes?

Josie Googles the word.

Sal: Oh he explained. And explained. And explained... In the end I had to say I was tired and wanted to sleep, just to stop him...

Josie: *Gamete: sperm or egg*... Yeah, bit of a mood killer that.

Sal: [*An ironic laugh.*] “By definition people don’t have sex...”

Josie: Wait, you two *have*...

Sal: Of course we have. I mean, it’s never been *amazing*. It’s always been... *okay*. Which was okay... But now it’s just completely...

Pause.

Josie: Alright. We can fix this. I mean Sal, just look at this lot. His balls are obviously full to the brim with flipping gametes, all bloody gagging for it.

Sal: But that's just it. Where is it all going? This desire?

Josie: Into a tissue presumably.

Sal: There's a colleague...

Josie: What colleague?

Sal: Her name's Robin.

Josie: And?

Sal: Suddenly they're having all these meetings...

Josie: And?

Sal: *Late* meetings...

Josie: Well that doesn't mean –

Sal: Look. That last page.

Josie: The gay one?

Sal: Yes, but – Look. Viewed 3.12pm. Then nothing. Josie, I came home at *five*. What was he looking at for *two hours* in between?

Josie: You mean apart from penises...? Maybe he wasn't looking at anything.

Sal: The way he jumped. Caught out. Guilty. He was looking at *something*, Josie. But what? He leaves all this but deletes – what? What the hell's more incriminating than rape scenarios and *gaysex.com*?! *What?* Hotels for *her*? Anne Summers for *her*? Buying the bloody Karma Sutra off Amazon for *her*?! Josie, I've been waiting... gently, patiently... waiting under a tiny crack, a tiny trickle... waiting for the dam to burst. And now it finally has. But not onto me. Onto some fucking *woman*...

Pause.

Josie: You know what? I think you're reading this all wrong. I think he *wanted* you to find this lot. Honestly, Sal, *look!* He's screaming at you, laying out all these fantasies, crying out to you to for God's sake just pick one up and whack a fucking whole in that dam!

She pushes the laptop to Sal.

So go on. Pick one. Any one... Well, apart from the gay one obviously...

Sal looks at the laptop uncertainly as the projected images grow and cover the whole stage. The banging from the neighbours suddenly becomes louder, climactic. Blackout.

Scene Two

Peter lectures to the audience. His slides are projected behind him.

Peter: Now this lecture is about what's been called the "outstanding puzzle in evolutionary biology". And no, I'm not talking about how Michael Jackson's children can all be white...

Slide 1 – a photo of Michael Jackson's children.

Sorry, I apologise if you feel it's still too soon... No, the puzzle I mean is –

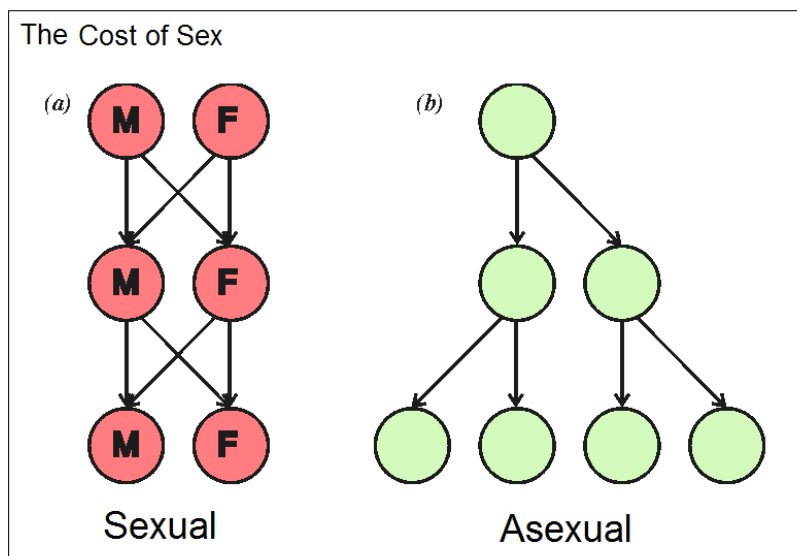
Slide 2 – lions mating.

Sex.

Slide 3 – caption: "Why sex?".

Why sex? The question refers to the difference between sexual and asexual reproduction. Why do so many species – the majority of species, in fact – reproduce with sex? Especially when sex seems to come with an enormous genetic cost...

Slide 5 –



This is on the handout by the way, so no need to copy it down. Imagine two strains of the same species... one sexual, one *asexual*. In each generation, the sexually-reproducing group wastes half its offspring as males who only produce sperm, not babies. The asexually-reproducing group, however, produces *only* females, *all* of which can produce their own offspring. So the asexual strain will in fact reproduce at *twice the rate* of the sexual one – an *incredible* advantage in evolutionary terms. So there must be some enormous genetic benefit to sex that overcomes this huge two-fold cost. What is it? What is the secret of sex? Well that is the outstanding question. The outstanding, most exciting question in biology...

Blackout.

Scene Three

Sal sits alone at the table with a glass of wine. The bed is now on stage. Nikki (in her own flat) is sitting on the sofa watching TV. It's an ad break, but she's watching intently, a stopwatch in one hand and a notepad in her lap onto which she scribbles. Front door opens. Jack hurries in, in chirpy spirits.

Nikki: [Not taking her eyes off the screen.] Late.

Jack: Sorry.

Nikki: I cooked.

Jack: Sorry, baby.

Nikki: Please do not use that paedophilic expression.

Jack: Sorry, baby.

Nikki: Tosser.

Jack: Baby.

Nikki: Tosser.

Jack: Baby.

Nikki: Tosser.

He's leaning over her behind the sofa.

Jack: Baby.

Nikki: Colossal tosser.

Jack: Whose fault is that, baby?

She lifts her hand up for Jack to hold. He takes it, kisses her head, rests his chin in her hair.

Nikki: There's a withered lasagne in the oven.

Jack: Lasagne? Excellent!

He makes a beeline for the oven, then suddenly stops.

Is it...?

Nikki: It's cow-free, yes.

Jack: But proper pasta? Made with egg?

Nikki: No chicken periods.

Jack: Cheese?

She gives him a look.

So this “lasagne” as you call it is dairy-free.

Nikki: Yes.

Jack: And meat-free.

Nikki: Yep.

Jack: And taste-free?

Beat.

I had a big lunch.

He starts taking off his shoes.

Nikki: Oh I’ve just had a bath, so you’ll have to take a shower.

Jack: It’s fine. I’m just going to have a quick whore’s wash.

Nikki: At least shower your feet.

Jack: My feet?

Nikki: Jack, if you want sex tonight – wash your feet.

Jack lifts a foot to his face to smell. He exits into an unseen bathroom. He either replies off, or pops his head back into the room, naked, washing his armpits and genitals with a flannel.

And don’t forget to sign the card before you go.

Jack: I told you, I don’t want to sign it.

Nikki: It’s their anniversary.

Jack: They’ve not fucking married.

Nikki: Since when were you a marriage fascist?

Jack: You know I can’t stand the sight of them.

Nikki: I’m not asking you to look at them. Just sign their card.

Jack: I don't even know why you're friends with them. They're so not your kind of people.

Nikki: I've known Carla for years.

Jack: Two lawyers. Two City lawyers. Two patronising City lawyer cunts. You know what Steve said last time?

Nikki: What did the big nasty lawyer say to my little angle cake?

Jack: He said he envies me. The life of the salesman. *Freedom, open road, the thrill of the chase.* He knows I'm not a fucking salesman.

Nikki: But you are.

Jack: I'm an Account *Manager*.

Nikki: Jack, you sell condoms. Ergo you are a salesman.

Jack: I sell condom *vending machines*, then *manage* the clients' *accounts*.

Nikki: By selling them condoms.

Jack: Look, here's my card. "Account *manager*". Look.

Jack comes back into the room naked, card in one hand, flannel in the other. He holds the card in front of her face.

Nikki: Please remove the small irritating object currently in my vision.

Jack: I should stuff it up Carla's arse.

Nikki: I meant your penis.

Jack: So did I.

He goes back into the bathroom.

Nikki: Anyway, there's nothing wrong with being a salesman.

He re-enters, sits down next to her as he gets dressed.

Jack: But there's definitely something wrong with being a cunt.

He looks at her, reaches out to play with her hair, something cautious in the gesture.

Nikki: Jack.

He removes his hand. Continues to dress.

Maybe *you* can tell me how two semi-naked people possibly induce anyone to buy toilet cleaner? Someone should study this properly. All this oxymoronic pairing of sex and household products. That's some pretty fucked up fetishes they're fostering there. A nation sexually aroused by Toilet Duck...

Jack: She could clean my toilet any day.

He takes some condoms out of his pocket.

We got some new flavours in today. We're meant to be trying them out. What do you think? Prawn cocktail, cheese and onion, or salt & vinegar?

Nikki: Can't you just go with plain ones?

Jack: I've run out of ready salted.

Nikki gives him a look. A little smile spills out. Jack sits back down next to her, closer. He plays with her hair again.

[At TV.] Look at her. If only you had tits like hers. If I could change one thing about you it would definitely be bigger tits. Oh Lord please let me find someone with tits like hers tonight...

Nikki: I thought you were into Polish at the moment.

Jack: Polish?

Nikki: The young ladies who greeted me upon opening the laptop this morning were of Polish origin, I believe...

Jack: Oh. Shit. Sorry.

Nikki: Jack, I already have to go round the house after you switching off all the lights and turning off the taps. Do I really have to start closing down your porn sites as well?

Jack: Sorry. I'll remember next time.

Nikki: And it's caught another virus.

Jack: Oh shit. Really?

Nikki: You'll have to take it in at the weekend.

Jack: Oh, Nikki, please, can't you?

Nikki: I don't think it came from anything *I* was looking at...

Jack: But I'll have to do the queue of shame. When I picked it up last time I went to shake the guy's hand and he looked at me as if I'd just held out a toilet brush. Please, Nikki... Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease...

He smothers her in a hug.

Nikki: Get off!

He doesn't.

Alright, alright. Get off! I'll do it.

Jack: Thank you thank you thank you.

Nikki: *If you sign the card.*

She's got him. He signs the card. After, he stands looking at her for a long beat.

[*Eyes still on TV.*] What?

Jack: You're beautiful.

Nikki: I don't care.

Jack: I know. But you are.

He goes over to her, kisses her on her head again.

Istniejemy na tyle, na ile kochamy.

Nikki: Have you been watching *Lord of the Rings* during work hours again?

Jack: It's Polish. It means, "We exist only when we love"...

Beat.

Do I look pullable?

She looks at him. Starts fixing his hair. A moment of silence, her proximity visibly effecting him.

Nikki: Rachel took me to that new restaurant by the cinema, the one you liked the sound of.

Jack: Oh yeah? How was the food?

Nikki: Good.

Jack: Yeah?

Nikki: Too good to waste listening to Rachel going on and on about her latest collapsed relationship. I spent every mouthful wishing you were there instead... The same tastes, the same textures on our tongues...

Beat.

Shit, I've completely blanked on its name...

Jack: The restaurant? Oh, it's – Shit. I know it. I read a review.... Ahh. This is like your gran. It was...

It's tantalising on the top of their tongues, but they can't get at it.

Nikki: Well anyway. We should go. You'd love it.

Jack: I love *you*.

She stands back.

Nikki: Go get 'em, stud.

He kisses her on the head again, then leaves. Her eyes linger on the door. Then she sits back on the sofa and picks up her stopwatch and pad... Sal stands up, looks at her face in the mirror. She's wearing makeup and a sleek dress that hugs her figure. Pete enters from front door, crosses straight to the tank.

Peter: [*To tank.*] My darlings, my darlings, my darlings! You know I've always loved you, but today I love you more than ever!

Sal: Why thank you, Pete.

Peter: Sal? I didn't hear you come in.

Sal: I didn't.

Peter: And here is the most beautiful of you all!

He goes to give her a kiss.

Hello, Daphne darling.

Sal: Pete!

Peter: Hmm?

Sal: Pete, from now on every time you call me that I'm going to call you the C-word.

Peter: You know full-well I've forbidden use of the C-word in this house.

Sal: Then stop calling me that name.

Peter: Alright, anything you say... Daphne darling!

Sal: Right, that's it, you –

Peter: Now, now, Sal, I was joking... Sal, do not even *think* of uttering that disgusting, dirty, perverse –

Sal: Creationist!

Peter: [*Clasping his hands over his ears.*] Arrgh! You wash your mouth out this instant you vile, revolting young lady!

They laugh. A quick hug, kiss.

Sal: You smell of fish tank again.

Peter: I was out at the ponds this afternoon.

Sal: Is that why you're so late?

Peter: Er, no... sorry... I was having a meeting with a colleague.

Sal: Another meeting?

Peter: You know my bloody laptop's been nicked. Some devious little sod switched it for a bloody book. This is what happens when you start charging nine grand a year. Turns perfectly decent students into horrible thieving little –

Sal: Pete...

Sal crosses to the laptop.

Peter: Oh. I could have sworn I... Oh well. Wonderful! I thought I was going to have to excavate the dinosaur from the loft.

Pete settles down to work at the laptop.

Sal: You're not going to start working are you?

Peter: Sal, I told you, I need to send my proposal in tonight... Wait, no, I didn't tell you did I. Well, that's what the meeting was about. Apparently they need to get a chunk of cash out the door ASAP otherwise it just gets sucked back into the abyss...

Sal: They're going to fund your project?!

Peter: Maybe...

Sal: Pete, that's wonderful!

Peter: *Maybe.* Sorry, Sal, I really need to –

Sal: So that would mean your job would be safe from the cuts?

Peter: Yes, yes, yes... But it's so much more than that, isn't. It's my chance to make a real contribution. A *fundamental* contribution.

Sal: To the mortgage?

Pete is about to remonstrate, but instead gets up, runs to front door, opens it.

Where are you going?

Peter: Billions and billions of organisms – *at it* – right now.

Sal: What?

Peter: Sex! Sex, sex, sex, sex, sex!

Sal: [*Laughing.*] Pete! The neighbours!

Peter: *They're* doing it more than anyone! An entire planet crammed full of life, and damn near all of it is the product of sex. And yet we don't know what the secret is! [*To street, to a passer-by:*] Excuse me! Excuse me! Yes you! Do *you* know the secret of sex?!

Sal: Peter!

She runs and closes the door.

Peter: Oh you're a layman you don't understand.

Sal: Peter, you've given me the lecture a dozen times. I think I understand the theory.

Peter: Not the theory, the *passion*! The passion that drives a scientist as he wades through textbooks, budget cuts, smelly freezing cold ponds on a Thursday afternoon! The dream of *creating* knowledge... adding a new, gold-leafed book to the great great shiny marble-pillared library of human knowledge! Alexandria, Sal! Alexandria!

He takes Sal's hand, runs over to the tank. She's laughing, enjoying his excitement, the physicality. They stand on the far side so we see their faces through it.

Experiment, Daphne darling. That's the scientific alchemy! Turning conjecture into fact, golden scientific fact! Or at least as close as we can bloody well – [Suddenly noticing her appearance.] Are we going out?

Sal: Out?

Peter: Oh God, have I forgotten something?

Sal: No.

Peter: Anniversary? Your birthday?

Sal: No, no.

Peter: My birthday?

Sal: Pete, we're not going out.

He looks at her, trying to make it out...

Peter: It's just... You look like we're going out.

Sal: Are you trying to say I look nice, Pete?

Peter: I think that's what it might be, actually... yes.

Sal: [*Flirting.*] Think? So it's only conjecture? Not scientific fact?

Beat. Pete walks round the tank so it lies in between him and Sal.

Peter: You know, I was looking at the beta culture today and I was thinking –

Sal suddenly leans over the tank, kisses him. It's not much more than a peck on the lips. They stand looking at each other, close, and for a moment it looks like he might push her away. But he kisses her. Full-on. He breaks away and reaches for his glass. But she keeps grasp of his hand. He smiles at her, as if this itself is some kind complete embrace; but she slowly draws his hand to her breast. A beat, looking at each other straight in the eyes. Then he takes her other hand and places it on his breast. The sexual gesture has been neutralised into a touching of hearts. He breaks it completely returning to the computer.

Peter: It has to be shit hot. Foolproof. A bloody masterpiece. There's no way I'm letting this opportunity slip out my fingers...

Sal: It can't wait till the morning?

Peter: Robin wants it tonight.

He crosses to the computer, opens it, starts working. Sal looks at him defiantly. She picks up her glass, downs it, exits into the bedroom... Nikki suddenly has a flash of inspiration and excitedly takes her phone out.

Nikki: Jack! I've just – [*Realises it's voicemail.*] Oh. Hi. It's me. Don't worry. No need to call back. Um... I just remembered the name of that restaurant... Anyway. Hope you've found yourself some hot Polish au pair piece of ass... See you tomorrow...

She hangs up... Sal re-enters wearing a dominatrix outfit put together from bits in her wardrobe, complete with whip and handcuffs. She's not just in role: the impression is of transformation, empowerment. If we haven't already, we realise how sexy she is.

Sal: Come here.

Peter: [*Not looking up.*] Just a minute, Daphne darling.

Sal: I said, come here.

He ignores her. She walks over to him. He's too wrapped up in his work to notice her, or feel her slip the handcuffs onto his chair.

Peter: Sal, you know I don't like it when you hover...

She clicks the other handcuff onto his wrist.

Sal, can you –

Sal: [*With a sudden, fierce, crack of the whip.*] Shut the fuck up!

Peter: Jesus! Sal!

Peter tries to raise his hands, and tumbles over.

Shit! What the –?! Sal?!

Sal: Stay there! Don't move or I'll hurt you.

Peter: Sal, what the hell are you –

Sal: I said shut the fuck up!

Peter: Sal, can you please take this off?!

Sal just cracks her whip.

Christ sake! Careful! Look, Sal, this is very funny but –

Sal: You're being very, very naughty.

Peter: Sal –

Sal: A very very naughty boy.

Peter: Sal, I'm not enjoying this.

Sal cracks the whip on his hand.

Fuck Sal, that hurt! That really hurt!

Sal: You like it, don't you! You like it when it hurts!

Peter: No I fucking don't!

Sal: You want more?

Peter: No!

Sal: You fucking want it.

Peter: Sal, please!

Peter tries to get up, falls to the floor, drags himself and the chair away...

Sal: That's it! Grovel! Beg!

Peter: Enough, alright! Fucking, enough!

Sal: You want it, don't you!

Peter: Sal!

Sal: [*Whipping him with increasing vehemence.*] You do! You fucking want it, don't you! You fucking want it! You want it! You want it! Want it! Want it!

Sal drops the whip. Shocked at herself. She turns away.

Oh my God, I'm sorry, I thought...

Peter: Please, I'm really rather curious to know...

Sal: Oh God. I look fucking ridiculous, don't I.

Peter: Yes!

Sal runs off.

Shit. Sal, I just... it was unexpected. I didn't mean... Fuck...

He tries to get up, topples over again. He gives up. Just lays there. Blackout.

Scene Four

*Night. Peter is working away at his laptop... Jack (in his flat) quietly opens the front door, creeps in, looks round to check no-one is there. Nikki is asleep on the bed, which is in fact in a different room, so he doesn't see her. Jack pops out and comes back in with **Josie**. Both a bit pissed. They kiss messily.*

Jack: Pragne sie z toba kochac...

It turns Josie on. They kiss some more.

Josie: Where's your room then?

Jack: Sssh. [*Points in direction of bedroom door, not the bed.*] No noise.

Josie: [*Whisper.*] Sorry... Bedroom?

Jack indicates the room they are in.

No, you know... Bedroom. Sleep. Bed.

Jack points to the sofa again.

Bed?!

Jack: [*Nodding.*] Tak.

Josie: Christ.

Beat.

You have drink? Wodka?

Jack: Yes. Yes. Tak. Tak. Wodka....

Jack goes into kitchen to fix drinks. Josie looks down at the pokey sofa, then at Jack, then at the door. She creeps to the door but Jack returns with the drinks. Josie takes hers.

Josie: Ta.

They sit on the sofa.

Jack: Naz Drovja!

Josie: Yeah. Cheers. So where you from?

Jack: Here.

Josie: No. Where – were – you – *born*?

Jack: London.

Josie: No. You – [*Miming.*] *baby* – Warsaw? Krakow?

Jack: Croydon.

Josie: Croydon?

Beat.

You're flipping English?!

Jack: Yeah...

Josie: So why the fuck have you been chatting to me in Polish all night?

Jack: You're not Polish?

Josie: Not unless they've recently annexed Derby.

Jack: Oh God.

Josie: Oh fucking God.

Pause.

I thought you were a bit bloody weedy for a Polish guy.

Jack: Thanks!

Josie: Wait, so how come you speak it? Are you a bit Polish? Just like a quarter would do me, you know...

Jack: Oh no, no. I just... [*Embarrassed.*] You know... For the Polish girls...

Josie: Well at least you thought I were Polish.

Jack: It was quite dark in there.

Josie: Watch it.

Pause.

Jack: So is this a deal breaker then...?

Josie: Oh no. I'll shag anything me...

Jack: Really?

Josie: Fuck off.

Beat.

Oh, I don't know. I'm fucking here now, aren't I...

She takes out her phone, writes a text, suddenly takes a flash photo of him.

Jack: [*Wincing*] Ow!

Josie: Just in case you got any fancy ideas about chopping me up and eating me or anything, I've just texted your photo to my friend, so they'll fucking get you, you fucking bastard.

Jack: Thanks. I'll bear that in mind.

Josie: So what do you do then?

Jack: I told you in the club.

Josie: [*Laughs.*] Oh yeah, condom salesman.

Jack: [*Defensive.*] *Account manager*, actually.

Beat.

Josie: Shit, sorry, I thought it were a joke.

Jack: You looked quite impressed before.

Josie: Well I thought it were quite a good joke for someone who doesn't speak English...

Beat.

Sorry.

Jack: It's okay. It's a shit job. I know.

Josie: No, no, thinking about it, it's quite –

Jack: Shit.

Josie: No... noble. You know, encouraging safe sex and that. I mean, obviously not as noble as a doctor, or a teacher, or a fireman, or a proper professional like that, but – God. Sorry. Bet you preferred me when you thought I couldn't speak English.

Jack: What do you do?

Josie: I don't have to work. My great-great-grandfather invented soup.

Beat.

I'm an accountant. I know, I know. Gonna get out of it soon. Do something a bit more... noble. I've always quite fancied working for a charity, actually. Something to do with animals...

Jack: Nikki works for a charity. Animal rights.

Josie: Nikki?

Beat.

Jack: My flatmate.

Josie: Ah. She who must not be disturbed...

Pause.

Jack: Jestes piekna.

Josie: Is that, “Would you like to buy a condom?” in Polish?

Jack: It means “You’re beautiful”.

Josie: Tosser.

Jack: [*Turned on.*] Say that again.

Josie: Sorry?

Jack: Say it again!

Josie: What? Tosser?

Jack: Baby!

Josie: Tosser!

Jack: Baby!

They’re at it again, suddenly start to undress each other... Nikki wakes up. She listens (to the opposite side of the stage to where Josie and Jack are actually positioned)...

Josie: Jesus! Is that your feet?!

Jack: Sssssh.

Josie: Sorry.

They continue to undress each other.

You got any condoms? Course you have. You’re a bloody condom salesman.

Jack: What flavour you want?

Josie: Don’t suppose you’ve got any pickled onion?

He feels in his pocket.

Jack: In the van. Don’t move.

Jack hurries out. Josie goes to her bag, starts changing into a bought PVC dominatrix outfit.... Nikki walks off stage and re-enters through the bedroom door...

Josie: [*Awkward.*] Oh, hi... I'm –

Nikki: A prostitute?

Josie: Oh no no... God no. I'm waiting for...

She realises she doesn't know his name. Nikki waits.

Your flatmate... Sorry, we tried to be dead quiet.

Beat.

[*Concerned.*] Has he... brought back *prostitutes* before then?

Nikki: No. Not *before*...

Silence. Jack enters, brandishing two condoms...

Jack: One pickled onion... and just in case you wanted desert... an After Eight Mint...

He sees Nikki.

Oh. Hi. Um, this is...

Nikki: Your flatmate. [*To Josie, dripping sweetness.*] Sorry, I didn't introduce myself. Hi, I'm Chlamydia.

Jack: [*To Josie.*] Sorry, I think maybe you'd better ["go"]...

Nikki: *Now* you start thinking? [*To Josie. Sweetness.*] So sorry, it's just he knows that there are certain little rules we both try to abide to, as *flatmates*, that just make life more *pleasant*. You know, always clean your dishes, always leave the loo seat down, no prostitutes after 1am...

Jack: Nikki...

Josie: Oi wait a minute, love. I'm not a bloody prostitute, okay?

Nikki: Wank rag. Blow-up doll. Whatever you want to call yourself.

Josie: [*To Jack.*] Oi – Whatsyourface... do you want to tell her to fuck off?

The two woman look at Jack. He stays silent.

Josie: You know what? You can fuck off the fucking pair of you.

She gathers her things to get the hell out of here.

Jack: Listen, wait – um –

Nikki: Just leave her, Jack.

Josie's gone.

Jack: What the fuck was that?

Nikki: You're asking *me*?

Jack: It doesn't work if you're jealous. You know that.

Nikki: You think I'm jealous of the sock you spunk into?

Jack: Then why were you so fucking vicious?

Beat.

Nikki: For Christ's sake, Jack. You know what this area's like. Go and find her and take her to the minicab place.

Jack hesitates.

Go on.

He goes out. She stands still a moment. Then she quickly tidies up, takes the glasses into the kitchen, picks up condoms. Just before she chucks the After Eight one, she opens it, sniffs it, grimaces, throws it in the bin. She sits on the sofa. Jack re-enters, breathless.

Jack: I couldn't find her.

Nikki: Do you have her number?

Jack: No.

Beat.

Look, she's a plucky girl. I'm sure she'll be fine.

Beat.

We couldn't go to hers. I thought – Nikki, I'm sorry. If I've hurt you. I'm sorry.

Nikki: Fuck Jack. I really don't give a shit how you masturbate. If you chose to do it in front of a computer or inside a fat northerner in a school uniforms it's up to you. I just want *this* place to be somewhere – the only place – where sex isn't the all-powerful tyrannical dictator.

Jack: I'm sorry.

Nikki: And you're supposed to tell them. They're supposed to know what they are.

Jack: We had... communication problems. Sorry.

Beat.

Sorry.

Pause. He goes up to her.

Don't suppose there's any chance of a little feel while I...

Nikki: Go fuck yourself.

Jack: Baby.

Nikki: I mean it.

Pause.

Jack: [*Hint of anger.*] Well, Chlamydia dear, looks like I'll have to...

Jack gets up, walks off. Blackout.

Scene Five

Sal stands looking at the Daphnia tank, sipping a cup of coffee... Nikki (in her flat) is frying vegan sausages. She's wearing a large t-shirt she uses as a nightie. It says "Asexuality – it's not just for amoeba anymore"... Peter enters, still half-asleep.

Sal: Morning.

Peter: Sorry. Morning.

Sal: There's coffee... Might be bit cold now, though...

He feels the pot, leaves it. He looks down at his hand and wrist as if they are hurting him. He realises Sal is watching and stops. He opens a cupboard. He lifts up a box of Frosties.

Peter: Darling, you've bought Frosties again. I've told you, you can always add sugar to proper cornflakes. It's a bit more tedious having to scrape it off individual flakes...

Beat.

[*Gentler.*] Sorry. Not much sleep. I'll just have toast...

Sal: You got it off alright in the end? The proposal?

Peter: Yes. Thanks...

Peter makes himself toast, then sits and eats while flicking through a paper. Sal sits down next to him. Looking at him all the time... Jack enters with groggy hangover eyes. He farts.

Nikki: Even I know that's not sexy.

Indicates sausages.

Peace offering.

Jack: [*Suddenly animated.*] Oh my God! I've dreamed of this! The moment you finally let carnal pleasure into this house! Ahhh... smell it! Meat! Meat! Meat!

He sees the box. Picks it up.

Vegan. Nikki, you're such a fucking tease.

Sidles up behind her.

You know what happens when you deny yourself a natural craving like that? An instinctive, primitive urge to devour flesh? Suddenly, one day, you just... Aghhh!

He's pounced on Nikki's leg and is pretending to devour it.

Nikki: [*Shaking him off.*] Farming animals is barbaric and cruel.

Jack: It's what happened to Heather Mills, you know. She was just sitting staring down at her plate of mung beans when suddenly... Arrghh!

He pounces again.

Nikki: [*Trying not to laugh now.*] Fuck off, Jack!

He gives her a little kiss, stands behind her, holding her.

Meat is murder.

Jack: No. An example of murder: someone walking up to their vegan girlfriend and bludgeoning her to death with the Linda McCartney sausage. Oh, the things I'd do to your dead naked body...

Nikki: Just please make sure I am actually dead first... And for your information, I chose these for you because they were voted most authentic by the Vegan Society.

Jack: How the fuck would they know? Iron-deficient freaks.

Nikki suddenly grabs a knife, give herself a little cut on the hand.

Nikki!

Peter: [*Looking at his paper.*] Cuts, cuts, cuts, cuts, cuts....

Nikki lets the blood drop and sizzle in the pan.

Nikki: There you go. Full of iron.

She bungs the sausages on a plate and proffers them to him.

Jack: I think I'll just have some Frosties, thanks...

Jack looks for Frosties.

You're fucking weird, you know that?

Nikki: I take that as a compliment.

Jack: I know you fucking do. It's fucking infuriating.... But not as infuriating as –

Holds up a pack of riceflakes.

What the fuck are these?

Nikki: Riceflakes. *Organic* riceflakes. They're basically Frosties.

Jack: They're basically hamster bedding.

Nikki: Look, if you really can't eat like a grown up – just add sugar. Not too much though.

He makes a show of taking a spoonful of sugar, then taking just a tiny pinch from that and adding it to his cereal. He throws the rest over his left shoulder. As soon as she turns, he rapidly spoons in more into his bowl. He sits at the table and munches defiantly. Silence. Then suddenly Peter shouts, making Sal jump:

Lingchi! That's what it is, you know. Death by a thousand cuts... Caused a bit of a stir when I said that in the canteen the other day. Someone from Oriental Studies took umbrage. That's the trouble with universities – there's always an expert lurking in the shadows waiting to pounce. Apparently, it's something of a Western myth. She said the victim was often dead beforehand. The cutting was symbolic humiliation – mutilation of the body in the afterlife. I suggested that it only made the analogy more apt. Blair et al pretty much killed us off, and now the new lot are just mutilating us, humiliating us, so that when the afterlife comes – and God hope there is a life after this Government – we'll be mutilated into nothingness. She said they used to give the live victims opium. Be nice, wouldn't it. If the Coalition could give us a bit of opium to get us through all these bloody cuts...

All this is said without his eyes leaving the paper, Sal looking at him all the time. Silence again. Sal she gets up, walks to the tank... Nikki comes and sits at the table.

Nikki: So I suppose we should probably...

Jack: Have our morning fuck?

Nikki: Of course. But before that, we should –

Jack: No time for foreplay, I'm afraid. Condoms to sell.

Nikki: Last night, Jack...

Beat.

I'm sorry I over-reacted.

Jack: Look, I should never have – It's fine. Don't worry about it. Forgotten.

Nikki: But I don't forget. That you're having to settle with... riceflakes instead of Frosties.

Jack: Oh, they're not that bad. And they're high in fibre.

Nikki: Jack, are you getting enough?

Jack: Fibre?

Nikki: Sex. Because if you felt this isn't working, you'd say something.

Jack: [*Takes her hand.*] Of course.

Nikki: And whenever you feel the need to find some, you should – it becomes the priority.

Jack: I know.

Beat.

It's working, baby.

Nikki: Pedo!

Jack: Sorry, baby.

Nikki: Tosser.

Jack: Baby.

Nikki: Tosser.

Beat. Then Jack gets up and washes his plate... Meanwhile, Sal is still watching Pete. Pete puts the paper down, looks up at Sal. She suddenly looks away, into the tank.

Peter: It's like meditation, isn't it... [*Walking over to her.*] I had goldfish when I was little. My first pets. One day dad came home with this brown paper bag. A *surprise*. I was sure it

was another fish – something special – a crowned pearlscale or something. Then he showed me...just a bag of water with all these tiny little pond creatures... But the more I looked, there was something mesmerising... the way they flitted about... and transparent! You could see all the organs flowing, flicking, beating. Little living biological museums! Dad poured them into the tank – these wonderful new pets – but suddenly the goldfish went crazy. I screamed at him, “*Do something!* They’re *eating* them!” He said, “Of course they’re eating them.” The tears were streaming down my face. I got a glass, try to scoop them out. Dad was getting angry. “For Christ’s sake Peter, they’re *meant* to eat them!” There were only one or two left, I was desperately trying to get them out...

Sal: Couldn’t you have just taken the goldfish out?

Beat.

Peter: Hindsight’s a wonderful thing, Sal. Anyway, I refused to come out of my room for the rest of the day. I just sat there holding the glass with the single little one I’d managed to save. I called it Albert. I could hear dad talking to mum. I was being *odd* again, he said. Always with that little pause, that intake of breath. He’s being – *odd* again. Like I had some disease, some disability. In the end mum made dad buy me a goldfish bowl to keep Albert in.

Sal: I’m sure he was very grateful.

Peter: *She.* I didn’t know they were all females...

Pause – as if he’s deciding to confess a secret...

That’s her. All of them. Exact copies. It’s the beauty of asexual reproduction...

Pause – looking at them.

I still get these nightmares sometimes. About my goldfish eating them...

Pause.

I always seemed to see things a bit differently to everyone else... As if I was always looking at a room from a different angle, standing there in a different spot to the crowd... My teachers used to say that’s what made me interesting to teach...

Beat.

Odd... I suppose I *was* quite odd.

Sal: It could be argued you still are...

Peter: I’m entitled now. An eccentric academic...

Sal smiles, gives him a little kiss.

Sal: Ow! Did you shave this morning?!

Peter: I'm thinking of growing a beard. If I'm going to be spending all this time out by those blasted ponds...

Sal: Oh God, you're turning into one of those professors aren't you.

Peter: What professors?

Sal: You know. Sexless cardigan wearers being gradually consumed by their own beards...

She smiles before she realises the awkwardness of what she's said. Silence.

Peter: Right, well... 10am lecture.

Sal: Which one is it today?

Peter: Sexual Selection.

Peter goes to put on his coat... Nikki gets up, joins Jack in the kitchen.

Jack: By the way, I won't see you before your meeting. I'm going gym.

Nikki: When did you join a gym?

Jack: I'm joining tonight.

Nikki: How much is that gonna cost?

Jack: You can't put a price on health.

Nikki: The gyms seem to manage it. What's wrong with the park?

Jack: I want to do weights and things too. You know, stop me looking so... weedy.

Nikki: Weights? Are you serious?

Jack: Look, I know you literally can't see the difference, but –

Nikki: I can tell the difference between a nice body and a weed, Jack. I'm just equally uninterested in fucking either.

Jack: Yes, but girls who fuck don't want to fuck a weed.

Nikki: I didn't mean –

Beat. Jack gets his phone out. Writes a text.

Peter: Sorry, I forgot to say. I've got a dinner. A working dinner. With a colleague. So I'll probably be in late...

Peter opens the front door.

Sal: It's with the cheating robin, isn't it?

Peter: Sorry?

Sal: Sexual Selection. It's the one with the video of the robin that cheats on its mate.

Peter: *Cuckolds*. Cuckolds its mate. And it's a sparrow, not a robin.

Beat.

But yes. That's the one...

Josie steps in through the front door.

Oops!

Sal: Try not to be *too* late, Pete...

Josie: Oh look at her, cracking the whip!

A beat, then Pete exits. Josie takes a big sniff of the air.

I smell sex...! So, Madam Swish, how'd it go?

Sal: It was... dramatic.

Josie: See! What did I tell you? Sex is theatre, Sal. It's all about the roleplay. No place for nudity in sex. So go on – what happened?

Sal: Wait, first tell me about the Polish guy.

Josie: How do you know about the Polish guy?!

Sal: You sent me a photo of your thumb at about 2am saying "Does he look Polish?"

Josie: Shit. Did I? Well anyway, turns out he was a condom salesman from Croydon living on a sofa *pretending* to be Polish with a psycho bitch flatmate who suddenly appears screaming at me I'm a fucking prostitute, get the fuck out!

Sal: Oh my God. What did the not-Polish guy do?

Josie: Mr Durex didn't do or say a fucking thing. So I got the hell out of there, only for him to come running down the road saying he's really sorry, it's his ex, she's got issues blah blah blah... anyway, can he have my number.

Sal: You're joking! God, what a tosser! How desperate does he think you are?!

Josie: I know!

A beat. Josie gets a text. Reads it.

Sal, you alright to give us the whip back...?

Sal: Oh yeah yeah. I'll just...

Sal exits into bedroom. Josie writes a text.

Nikki: The Lemon Tree.

Jack: Hmm?

Nikki: The name of that restaurant.

Jack: Yes! Yeah, of course. We should definitely go sometime.

Nikki: Well what about today? We could go before my meeting. Unless you're serious about joining that *cult*.

Jack: It's a sport you know. Weightlifting. An *Olympic* sport.

Nikki: I hear we're adding bulimia and anorexia this time too.

Beat.

We could go after. After my meeting. After your gym...

Jack: Good idea. I'll need a hearty meal. They do steak don't they?

Nikki: You're not having steak!

Realises he's joking.

Tosser.

Jack: Baby.

Beat. Jack takes her hand, kisses it. He receives a text. Lets her go to look at it.

Nikki: I had this desert... this chocolate fondant thing. Vegan. No wait. I really want you to try it. To show you that sparing animals from pain and exploitation can actually taste quite fucking amazing. It's not all about what you can't have... So, I'll book it for nine thirty?

No answer.

Jack...?

Jack: It's one of the girls I messaged from that site. A Polish girl, actually. She wants to meet. Tonight...

Josie and Nikki are now side by side... Blackout.

Scene Six

Sal sits alone on the sofa, listening to music, trying not to clock watch. The banging starts up next door. She turns up the music... then up more... up more to full blast. Suddenly she turns it off. Just the banging now. She listens to it. She walks up to the wall, leans against it... then suddenly pulls away, ashamed at her voyeurism. She goes into the kitchen, gets a bottle of wine, goes and stands in front of the mirror. She starts to undress slowly, watching herself. Pornographic images slowly fade up over her. A light comes up on Peter, sitting on a chair, apparently watching her. Then on Nikki on a chair opposite Peter, talking as if to a group.

Nikki: Right, last thing... A journalist from Good Housekeeping has contacted us wanting to do a piece on asexuality. My initial reaction was that I didn't see why an asexual person should have particularly good housekeeping advice, but then I was reliably informed that this publication for the modern woman is just as likely to feature articles on sex as the best furniture polish. So let me know if you're up for an interview. Right. Finito. Unless there's anything else, let's move it to the pub...

Nikki gathers her stuff to leave. At the door she pauses. To Pete:

You've come here before, haven't you. Didn't say a word then either. Are you sure you've got the right group? Sex addicts is down the hall. Were you after sex addicts?

Peter: No, no.

Nikki: You sure... because there's something about you...

Peter: Oh no no, I'm not – You're joking.

Nikki: Sorry, asexual humour...

She mimes drinking.

Peter: Oh, no. Thanks. I've got to...

Pause, Nikki taking him in.

Nikki: For years you feel like a little creature that can't shed it's skin. A little aphid so uncomfortable and tight and throttling just living in your own skin... and then one day you stumble across this one website and suddenly you've stepped out of that husk version of yourself... and it's the best day of your life. But you've become so used to guarding your secret, it doesn't even occur to you that's only the first skin you have to shed...

Beat.

See you next week...

She turns to leave.

Peter: You like insects?

She turns again.

[*Nervous.*] Just because you... *aphids*...

Nikki: Oh, another joke. Aphids are asexual.

Peter: Actually, they're heterogonic. They switch. Depending on the season...

Nikki: Ah, you mean they're *grey-sexual*?

Beat.

It's like the bi-sexual version of asexuality. Although you also get actual bisexuals who are grey-sexuals...

Pause, Peter uncomfortable under Nikki's confident gaze.

What are they doing now?

Peter: Sorry?

Nikki: Aphids. Fucking/not fucking?

Peter: Oh... at the moment they should generally be... *a-sexual*, I think...

Nikki: Well, we might see a few down the pub then... Come? Just for a quick one?

Sal, completely naked now, suddenly grabs herself...

Sal: Peter! Peter! Peter!

Peter stops for a second as if heard his name being called.

Peter: [*Offering his hand.*] Peter. By the way.

Nikki: Nikki. Follow...

Nikki leads him off... Sal opens a drawer, unearths a dildo. She opens another drawer, takes out one of Pete's shirts, runs and dips it in the Daphnia tank. All this done with a kind of trepidation. She gets under the covers and begins to masturbate with the dildo, the wet shirt on her face, looking like its almost suffocating her, sucked in and out with her breath... Josie and Jack enter, the space around the bed doubling as a Travelodge-like hotel room.

Josie: So, shall we get in some room service then? Champagne on ice? Caviar and vodka?

Jack: I don't think Travelodge do room service. I did ask if we could go back to yours...

Josie: Last time I brought a man home Terrence jumped him and ripped half his knackers off.

Jack: Who the fuck's Terrence?!

Josie: My boyfriend.

Beat. Jack looks appaled.

My dog, you numpty. You should have seen it. His left bollock was just dangling out like a conker on a string.

Jack: [*Cringing.*] Fuck... Shouldn't you have him put down for that?

Josie: Bit extreme to kill a man over a gammy bollock... But look, that were a while ago. If you want to risk it for next time...

Jack: You're alright, thanks.

Josie: You should have that bloody flatmate of yours put down. I wish you'd warned me she was your ex.

Jack: We split up like three months ago.

Josie: You need to move out.

Jack: You need to get a kennel.

Josie: You know, I half expect her to come barging into here with a meat cleaver...

Jack: Can we change the subject please?

Josie goes to her bag and takes out the whip.

Josie: Get down on your knees...

Jack obeys, shuffles on his knees towards Josie as she backs off, beckoning him, and exits...

Sal: [*Soft murmur.*] Pete... Pete...

Nikki leads Pete into her house. Both tipsy. She's telling a joke.

Nikki: So, this Ace guy is walking next to a pond when suddenly a frog jumps out and says, "If you kiss me right now I will turn into the most beautiful woman you have ever seen and as a reward I will be yours to make love to whenever you desire." The guy picks up the frog and puts it in his pocket. "Aren't you going to kiss me then?" says the frog. "You must do it now to break the spell." "No thanks," says the guy. "I'd rather have a talking frog"...

Peter laughs.

Drink?

Peter: Beer if you've got it.

Nikki: No beer. Wine?

Peter: Yeah. Great. Thanks.

She fetches two glasses of red wine.

Nikki: So do you get to travel to a lot of exotic places? The rainforests of Brazil? The savannah of Africa?

Peter: The ponds of Essex? About as exotic as it gets for me I'm afraid. Never met a talking frog though. Actually, most of the research is done on the animals in the lab.

Nikki: Live animals?

Peter: Well, they start off live... What do you do?

Nikki: I organise campaigns for a charity called CAAT. [*"Cat".*]

Peter: Rings a bell... abandoned cats?

Nikki: Abandoned morality. You're a fucking vivisectionist?

Peter: What?

Nikki: An animal experimenter, tormentor, torturer –

Peter: No, no. I work with *daphnia*. Water fleas. I don't cut up chimps or anything.

Nikki: You said animals.

Peter: They are animals.

Nikki: Insects are animals?

Peter: Yes. Of course. But *daphnia* aren't insects. They're crustaceans. Which are also animals...

He rubs off the shopping list on a chalk board and starts drawing the "Tree of Life" in a messy fast-flowing scrawl and spiel.

So... the Tree of Life... you have the whole of life... which is split into *kingdoms*. Plants, fungi, various bacteria and things... then the *animal* kingdom... which divides into several groups... which we call phyla, plural of *phylum*... molluscs... chordates (backbony things)... and, the largest actually – arthropods – that's segmented invertebrates with

exoskeletons – creepy crawlies basically... your insects, spiders... and *crustaceans*... that's lobsters, woodlice, shrimps... then you have the *class* – branchiopoda – shrimpy-things... then order – Cladocera, which contains... genus – *Daphnia* – the water fleas... of which there are about four hundred known species. I work with *limonica*, *Daphnia limonica*. There. That's the beautiful of the Linnean system of classification – simplicity.

Nikki: Well fuck knows what Jack is going to bring back from the supermarket now.

Peter: Sorry... I do have a slight tendency to turn everything into a lecture. Drives Sal mad. Basically, they're little pond creatures. Pet shops sell them as live fish food.

Nikki: Live?

Peter: When I was little I used to go to pet shops and buy them and set them free...

Nikki: So you're the Oskar Schindler of the insects.

Peter: *Crustaceans*. Not quite. They reproduce at a prodigious rate. I have to harvest them regularly or the population crashes. Empty tank. I'm afraid most of mine end up in the bellies of the fish in the zoology department...

Nikki: So where do you stand on animal testers?

Peter: Look, we're not here to talk about that. We're here because I'm –

Pause. She hands him his wine.

Thanks.

Nikki: Well what? What kind of Ace are you? How do you self-define?

Peter looks confused. Nikki rubs his diagram off. Scribbles her own.

The Tree of Sexual Orientation. Basic split – sexuals and, about one per cent of people, asexuals... which splits again into romantic, aromantic – those who experience romantic feelings, fancying people, love; those who experience purely platonic feelings... and all of these can be split into the usual categories... hetero, homo, pan, trans, poly, etc, etc...

Peter: Well I suppose I'm... hetero... romantic...

Nikki: And you said you've been going out with your girlfriend for almost two years. So obviously she knows...

Peter: [*Unconvincingly.*] Yes...

Nikki: Shit, she does know, doesn't she?

Silence.

Right... So how the does that work? The giant aphid in the room?

Peter: Well I suppose – Shit! I’ve spilt my – Fuck. Have you got a –

Nikki: Wait, wait. Hold on a second...

She runs to the sink, comes back with a cloth.

Where is it? I can’t see... [*Realises.*] A-ha. Very clever.

Peter: As you can see, I’ve become rather adept at changing the subject away from sex.

Nikki: Really? So you don’t fuck her at all?

Peter doesn’t know what to say.

Allow me. So what’s the topic of your research?

Peter: Asexuality.

Nikki laughs.

Nikki: You’re getting the hang of the humour.

Peter: No really – Daphnia are heterogonic – like aphids. In fact what’s so important about the research I’m proposing is – Sorry. About to launch into another lecture. God, you’ll think I’m a complete moron – I must have read, written that word a hundred thousand times. But it never once crossed my mind I could use it to...*self-define*...

Nikki: Have you ever actually looked it up in a dictionary? “Asexual. 1. Having no apparent sex or sex organs”. Well, they might be small but... “2. (Open brackets) Of reproduction (close brackets). Not involving the fusion of male and female gametes.” I mean, fucking gametes don’t have sex do they – people do!

Peter: Actually –

But he swallows the lecture.

Nikki: You weren’t “asexual”. You weren’t anything there was a word for. The *concept*, the *orientation* didn’t exist. *We* didn’t exist. Not before the website. We still don’t – not out there. In the public consciousness. We’re in new territory. We’re fucking sexual pioneers!

Peter: [*Sarcastic.*] Yee-hah!

Nikki: [*In response.*] So when are you going to tell her? Your girlfriend?

Silence.

Have you told *anyone*?

Silence.

The first person I told was my best friend at school. I was thirteen. Of course I didn't have the name for it then. But I got the standard reaction: [*Quick fire:*] You're just a late developer. You haven't met the right boy yet. Or is it the right *girl*. You know, if you're gay that's totally fine with me. Wait, you're not a paedophile though are you? Have you seen your doctor? Maybe it's a hormonal thing. I'm sure there's like a pill she can give you. Shit, are you being abused? Are you sure? Maybe you're repressing it. Try. Think. Does your dad touch you? Does your brother touch you? Does your mum touch you?

Peter: That's the standard reaction?!

Nikki: They can't help it. It just doesn't compute. You'd have more luck convincing them you did find a talking a frog. I can kind of understand. I mean, we have the same problem in reverse, right? I remember above the sinks in the girls' toilets someone had written "*Brad Pitt is sex on legs!*". I saw it every day and I never knew how to even begin to comprehend that sentence. I bought a poster of *Brad à la six pack* and put it up in my bedroom. "Oh look at me! I'm so *normal!*" You probably had centrefolds from FHM or something...

Peter: Bug Club magazine, actually. And one of ABBA. I was a bit of an... *odd* child.

Nikki: Well I had *Brad*... Although it was more than just for show. Every morning I'd close my eyes, walk up to those abs, and ask God please when I open them let me feel just a tiny bit of whatever it is, this thing that will make sense of the world, make me part of it...

Peter: But now. These days. Adults. Surely people must be more... *understanding*?

Nikki: If you're lucky enough to find someone who doesn't just assume you're medically or mentally imbalanced then they just look at you like you're some weird specimen or some –

Peter: [*Suddenly angry.*] Alright. Alright. I get it. I get. Telling people turns you into shit.

Nikki: No. It turns *them* into shit. Telling people turns *them* into shit. But we can change that. The only way to change that *is* by us telling people.

Peter: Pioneers, right?

Beat.

So how does it work with you two? You and –

Nikki: Jack? We talk to each other.

Peter: Easy as that.

Nikki: And he fucks other people.

Peter: Is that another joke?

She looks at him – no joke.

And you don't mind?!

Nikki: Does your girlfriend masturbate?

Peter doesn't know what to say.

Trust me. She masturbates. *A lot.* What Jack's doing – it's just masturbation.

Peter: How would you even know if it became... more... an affair? .

Nikki: How does he know *this* isn't an affair?

Peter: We're not very likely to have sex, are we.

Nikki: Exactly.

Pause.

Peter: I should... probably get going actually....

Nikki: Wine made you horny?

Peter: What?

Nikki: Want to get back to give her a good hard fuck?

Peter: You know I find some of your "asexual humour" really quite sexual and humourless.

Nikki: Do you fuck her, Peter?

Peter: Does the 397 come anywhere near here?

Nikki: No, but the 69 does. How long have you two been together? One year. *Two years?* God, *two years.* You must fuck her sometimes.

Peter: Fucking hell, this is so none of your business.

Nikki: Do you do other things to her? You can tell me. One asexual to another.

Peter: Sal isn't asexual and she's entitled to some privacy.

Nikki: She's entitled to some sex. Do you suck her? Do you lick her? Do you flick her clit?

Peter: Listen, at the beginning of that group you said no one should ever feel uncomfortable.

Nikki: Do you push your face into those little pink folds of flesh? What does it smell like? How does it feel?

Peter: I'm telling you I feel uncomfortable!

Nikki: Oh, I believe you. When you've got your tongue slodging around in all those vaginal juices. How much pubic hair does she have? A lot? Does it scratch your cheeks? *Very* uncomfortable!

Sal and Nikki cry out in unison:

Nikki & Sal: Peter! Peter! Oh God! Fuck me! Peter!

Peter: Shut up! Shut the fuck up! You know for an asexual you're pretty fucking obsessed with –

Nikki: [*Gentler.*] Look, sorry for the shock tactics. Sometimes you need them to make a –

Peter: [*Something suddenly occurring to him.*] You said CAAT, didn't you?

Nikki: [*A little thrown off course.*] Yes...

Peter: Campaign Against Animal Testing.

Nikki: Yes.

Peter: Fuck. Of course I've bloody heard of it. A couple of years ago. It was just after I'd joined but... You ran one of your *campaigns* against that poor bloke in Medicine... John, John Shaw. Horrible things. Horrific things. *Shock tactics*. Men in masks turning up at his home in the middle of the night. Smashing windows. Starting rumours. That he was a paedophile. That he was abusing his own kids. He had a sort of... breakdown because of it.

Nikki: That wouldn't have been us. We're not militant like that.

Peter: Really? Because I seem to remember it was orchestrated by people on your website.

Nikki: We're not responsible for the content on our forums.

Peter: Is *that* what your lawyers tell you say. Shock tactics. So what, am I going to get bricks through my window if I don't rush back to Sal and –

Nikki: I'm trying to help you. And your girlfriend. I've been there. I know –

Peter: We don't want your help thank you!

Pause.

Nikki: I remember worrying about my first time with my first boyfriend... weeks and weeks of worrying... then when the time came... well, so did he. In his pants. He kept apologising and I was just like, "It's fine. No *really*. It's *fine*."

Peter: You have no idea how envious I am of premature ejaculation.

Nikki: Oh, praise the Lord for premature ejaculation. But if he was drunk... God, he could go on forever. All sweaty. It was like being rolling-pinned out by a huge slippery cod. When I found out what I was... I just couldn't do it anymore. Not with him, not with anyone.

Peter: So you don't – anything with him? Jack?

Nikki: It's all about compromise. I let him touch me sometimes when he wanks off. Just my breasts. And no penetration. No oral. Oh no. And that includes kissing.

Peter: I don't mind kissing now. It's like broccoli.

Nikki: Only an asexual could make that analogy.

Peter: [*Smiles.*] Sorry. When I was younger I suddenly decided I should eat broccoli. Despite the fact I hated it. So I did. I forced it down my throat, every day, even though it made me retch. After a while it became tolerable. And now I actually quite like it.

Nikki: Why bother?

Peter: Broccoli's good for you.

Nikki: I meant kissing. I'm the opposite. I used not to mind it. Then one night this drunk guy in the street cornered me – stuffed his tongue down my throat. A sexual person would probably have shrugged it off... just a horny little shit trying his luck. But for me it was like he was raping me. I felt a pain, an actual pain, like his tongue was barbed wire... and I was suddenly so scared... I just froze... It seemed to go on forever... Well, after that – no more kissing. I suppose the broccoli trick doesn't work with sex?

Peter: No. Sex is like Brussels sprouts. Irredeemably repulsive.

They share a little laugh. Pause.

Nikki: Me and Jack, we do this thing... You might want to try it with your girlfriend. Hold out your hand. No need to look so scared! No wanking involved. Trust me. Hold out your hand. Like that... the fingers wrapped round... And bend the arms...

Nikki helps Peter bend his arms round hers in a hug resembling a kind of yoga pose.

Peter: [*Finding it difficult.*] Jesus...

Nikki: It's not that hard. There. For me, this is the perfect distance. Close, touching, intertwined... but the sex locked away. Jack calls it "asexual sex".

Pause.

Peter: It was sheer accident, that I found the website... trying to Google a research paper by this team in Norway... I'd been walking along this long black tunnel, years long, utterly alone... and suddenly I saw a light... and I got closer and I saw that the light was made up of thousands of little lights... thousands of people holding thousands of little lights...

Nikki: Peter, you're there too now – with us. You can shine another light!

Peter: But suddenly Sal came home and the lights went out. And it was darkness again. Endless tunnel again.

Nikki: We have *mass* now, *momentum*. We're a huge fucking wrecking ball and every time someone joins the website, every time someone comes out to their girlfriend, it makes it swing a few inches more and soon we're going to smash right through that tunnel!

Peter: Yes, you'll smash it to pieces and you don't care what else you smash in the process!

Nikki: You're scared. You're scared that if you tell her, then it becomes true. You break the lie you break the spell. But it's not a spell. It's just a lie.

Peter: That kind of lie grows... it buds... it reproduces itself like daphnia... *two years*... till the air is thick with them... choked with lies... the worst kind of lies...

Nikki: So tell her.

Peter: It's only sometimes. Only recently. When she's drinking. She just becomes... So more lies. More and more lies and I'm afraid... it's coming... the crash...

Nikki: So tell her.

Peter: Tell her?!

Nikki: *Tell her!*

Peter: That every time she stands naked in front of me, waiting for me, I want to –

Silence.

Nikki: You think the silence is any less cruel?

Nikki and Peter look at each other as Sal appears to be reaching orgasm:

Sal: Peter! Peter! I love you! I love you!

But the images projected on her start to flash almost subliminally with giant close ups of Daphnia. Sal squirms, tries to shake them out of her head, but the images become more persistent. Insects start to screech, Sal starts to screech. Blackout.

Scene Seven

Sal is sitting on the sofa naked under a dressing gown, nursing her wine glass. Pete enters.

Peter: You're up...

He goes to get a glass of water.

Sorry, the thing with Robin overran. We got stuck into the detail and... Don't you want a blanket or something? You're making me cold just looking at you...

Sal starts laughing.

[Smiling, wondering what the joke is.] What?

He goes over to her. Sees the wine.

Fuck, Sal. Are you wankered?

Sal pours herself another glass.

Umm, probably time to stop now...

She drinks.

What's this? The silent treatment?

Silence.

I said, Sal. I'm sorry I'm late. But you know how important this is...

Silence.

Okay. Well, I'm going to brush my teeth...

He gets up. Sal grabs his arm.

Sal...

She looks at him. She leans in to kiss him. The glass of wine spills on Peter.

Bloody hell. Now look what you've...

She suddenly sloshes the rest of the wine from the bottle on him.

Fuck! Sal, that was fucking out of order! Christ! Right, you need to drink some water and go to bed.

He holds up his glass of water to Sal.

Go on.

She takes it. Drinks some. Then spits the water over him in an almost playful fountain-like way. She laughs.

Oi! Oh very mature. Goodnight, Sal.

Sal grabs him again.

Sal.

She leans in as if to kiss him again... but instead sniffs his body, long and hard.

Sal, what are you doing?!

Sal sniffs all round his body.

Sal? What is this?

Sal: Evolution.

Peter: What?

Sal: Millions of years... sharpening, sharpening, sharpening into one infinitely sharp point... I had no idea how sharp...

Peter: Okay. Thanks, Sal. But I don't think I require a lecture on evolution thank you.

Sal: It's my turn. It's been your turn for two years. Two years stuck in this fucking *lecture theatre!*

Peter: Oh it's obvious you've drunk a lot, but you must have drunk *a lot*. Because this is new. I didn't know about – *this*. This *stage*. I've never seen *vicious* before.

Sal suddenly tries to kiss Peter again. He pushes her away again.

Sal: Don't talk to me about vicious.

Pause.

Peter: You need to drink some water and sleep this off. *Drink* some water and sleep it off. Thankfully evolution has also given you a liver...

He heads towards the bedroom.

Sal: What's it given *her*? What's it given her that it hasn't given me?

Pete ignores her. She runs after him, pulls at his shoulder.

Peter: I have no idea what you're –

Sal: I smell it, I taste it, I hear it, I feel it. I *know* it!

She starts to cry. He walks towards her tenderly.

Peter: Oh, my little darling Daphne...

Sal: Don't! Don't call me that stupid fucking name!

Peter: Sorry. Sal. Darling Sal. Please. Let's not argue. I hate it when we argue. Look, you've drunk too much again. And now... Come on. Let's go to bed.

Sal: To sleep?

Peter: Not a bad idea at 2am in the morning.

Sal: There are more important things than sleep.

Peter: Not when you've got to get up in five hours.

The banging starts next door.

Oh great. Perfect. Wonderful.

Sal: You don't have to settle in life.

Peter: What?

Sal: You shouldn't settle. Settling is selfish, cruel...

Peter: I love you, Sal.

Sal laughs.

What?

Sal: [*Suddenly switching.*] Stop it! Hiding behind that word. That whore of a word!

Peter: Sal, I don't know what you mean. I love you, Sal. I don't know what else to tell you!

Sal: Love is a kingdom. Tell me the genus. Tell me the species. Be *specific*!

Peter: I *love* you. There's only one word. It's not like – I don't know – it's not like rain or something.

Sal: But it *is*. It *can* be. Instead of this *drizzle*. I want it to *hail* down... I want to *feel* it!

Peter: I'm sorry if... I'm sorry if I'm a crap lover. I'm a nerd. A geek. You know that. I'm a scared little scientist hiding in ponds...

Sal: This house... this life with you... it's just a big fucking tank. I love you so much, Pete. You say you do too but it's all so much cold glass around me...

Peter: I'll get better. The sex will get better. I promise.

Sal: You spend your whole life explaining things to me. Why can't you explain this, now? Tell me, now?!

Peter: Tell you what?

She drops her dressing gown, standing there naked.

Sal: Tell me what you feel when you see this! Tell me! Pete, tell me!

A beat. She runs into the kitchen, gets a bottle of bleach, undoes the cap.

Peter: Fuck, Sal, put that down, don't be –

Sal: Is it weird? Is it *sick*? What you want? Is it? Dead bodies? Is that what does it for you? Is that what I need to be?

Peter: No, no, of course not!

Sal: Then tell me! What does she have? Bigger tits? Is she young? Is she old? Is she blonde? Is she black? Is she Asian? What is she? What do you want me to be?

Sal opens the lid of the tank.

Peter: [*Almost violent.*] Sal! Sal! Don't you fucking dare Sal!

Sal: Don't move.

Peter: Sal!

Sal: Take off your clothes.

Peter: Sal!

She means business.

Okay, Okay. Sal please, calm down.

Sal: Everything.

He takes off everything.

Now look at me. Tell me what you see.

Peter: Sal. Don't. Please. Not now. I'm not ready. Not tonight.

Sal: Come here. Touch me.

Pete puts his hand on her side.

I lay by your side in our bed at night, a yearning sparking on every nerve, every inch of my skin. And I can't sleep... how can I sleep?... I have to wait... wait till my heart stops beating so fast, till the fire has eaten me from head to toe... till there's nothing but the cold, charred flesh of despair. Dead flesh. Useless flesh. Is that what you see now? Is that what you see? Tell me what you see. Tell me what you *feel*!

She moves his hand onto her breast. Pause – her eyes burning into his.

Peter: I feel... nothing... I feel... nothing.

Sal suddenly feels her nakedness, gets down scrambles on her gown.

Sal –

Sal: [*Forcing herself to ask.*] And her? What do you feel for her?

Peter: There is no *her*. I... I don't feel anything for any woman.

Sal: Your *colleague*. Little Robin Redbreast. Little cuckolding Robin Redbreast.

Peter: Robin? Robin's a man. A forty-year old gay man.

Sal: You *are* gay?

Peter: No! Sal, I'm – I don't... feel... those kind of feelings. I don't even know how they feel. What you described... it's like trying to explain what *yellow* is to a blind man. Do you see? I don't desire in that way. I can't. It's how I'm wired. How I'm not wired. I've never felt those feelings. Not with you. Not with anyone. Fuck, Sal. Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm –

He stands there, naked, shivering in the cold.

End of Act One.

ACT TWO

Scene One

About a month later. Sal is standing looking at the Daphnia tank, sipping coffee. Pete searching for his keys. He's wearing a tie patterned with the purple and grey asexual flag.

Sal: Pete darling, they'll be at your office.

He carries on searching.

Peter: It's always the days like this – the *big* days...

Sal: Darling, I've looked there.

Peter: Why don't we have a spare set? It's madness not to have a spare set.

Sal: What do you think you've been using since you lost the last ones? Look, don't get in a panic.

Peter: I'm not panicking, darling. I'm just – Fuck where are they?!

Sal: [*Offering her keys.*] Here.

Peter: Well where the hell –

He goes over to her.

They're yours.

Sal: Take them.

Peter: I can't take yours, darling. What about you?

Sal: You'll be in before me, won't you.

Peter: But what if your thing... I mean, just in case something –

Sal: Then I'll call you. Or go to Josie's. Just try not to lose these ones or we'll really be in a mess...

He considers... then holds his hand out for the keys.

Peter: Thank you, Daphne darling.

At this she suddenly withholds the keys.

Sorry. *Sal darling.* Thank you, darling. I'll stay up to let you in.

Sal: I don't know how late I'll be. You can just leave them under the mat.

Peter: I don't mind. I'll stay up.

He gives her a little kiss.

Sal: Oh my God.

Peter: What?

Sal: You're wearing a *tie*...

Peter: Well, I thought – for the big day. You think it's too much?

Sal: No, no, it's... I like it. Is it one mum got you?

Peter: No, it's... the flag, actually...

Sal: The university?

Peter: No, um...

Beat.

Sal: Oh. Right. There's a *flag*...

Beat.

It's nice. I like it...

Pete goes to pick up a bag of live Daphnia from next to the tank. He stops in front of her.

Peter: You know what? Those bloody fish can go hungry for once. I'm going to stop off at the park. Today is a special day. Today I am going to set my Daphne free...!

He gives Sal a kiss.

Oh my God.

Sal: What?

Peter: Your breasts appear to have doubled in size.

Sal: Oh, it's... you know, one of those [*“bras”*] – You think it's too much?

Peter: No, no, darling it's... Like I said – big day today....

Sal: I've got to admit it feels a bit weird...

Peter: I'm not surprised.

Sal: No, I meant...

She gestures between them.

Peter: It's bound to take a little bit of getting used to. Like a new pair of shoes, a new toothbrush or something...

Sal: I know.

Peter: If it feels weird it's because you're still thinking in the old terms, the old frames of reference. But we've got to think in a new mindset now. Out with the socially-constructed corsets!

Sal: In with the wire-constructed bras!

They share a smile.

I suppose it also feels a bit... I mean, normally – sorry, not supposed to use that word... *Before*, I would have cleared everything. To be with you. To celebrate or whatever...

Peter: I'll be here. Waiting.

Sal: I could change to another day.

Peter: No, Sal. This shouldn't be something you have to squeeze in around me.

Sal: I know. But I don't mind. Just this once.

Peter: Anyway, [*Touching his tie.*] second Thursday of the month...

Sal: Oh... Of course. I forgot.

Peter: And before that I'm having dinner with a colleague.

Sal: Robin? [*With a smile.*] People will start talking...

Beat.

Peter: You know what ...

He takes the spread from the sofa, crosses to the tank.

If all goes well...

He throws the spread over the tank.

I won't even look at them. I promise. Till you're home. The official unveiling of the experiment. Of the rest of our lives!

He takes her hand.

I love you. You know that? [*A joyous cry of excitement.*] My darling Daphne!

Sal: Pete!

Peter: Sorry. Darling! Sal darling!

She goes to the fridge, gets out a plastic tupperware box with some sandwiches.

What's this?

Sal: I know you'll just forget to eat otherwise.

Peter: Ahh, darling... thank you...

He looks into the box dubiously...

Sal: Chicken and sweetcorn. You like chicken and sweetcorn...

Peter: Remember, darling...

Sal: Oh shit sorry! God!

Peter: It's just I'm trying to be quite serious about it...

Sal: I'll make you something else.

Peter: No, no, don't worry. I'll just... pick out the chicken... and the mayonnaise...

He picks up his bag, makes his way to the door...

Sal: Sorry darling. I'll remember from now on... Just going to take a bit of getting used to... the whole vegan thing...

Beat.

Oh, Pete darling, before I forget...

Peter: Hmm, darling?

Sal: I made us an appointment...

Peter: Oh my God, you're not – *fertilised?*

Sal: Darling, I know I'm not the one with the PhD in biology but I'd say that's rather unlikely in the circumstances...

Peter: Yes. Course. Sorry. I don't know why I –

Sal: I mean the one we talked about...

Peter: Oh. Right.

Sal: I hope that's okay, darling. I put it in for Tuesday. It's your free morning, isn't it?

Peter: Yes. Tuesday morning. Perfect.

Sal: They said it would be very informal, very relaxed. A lot of talking stuff through...

Peter: It'll be fun. Setting them a bit of a challenge. Won't know what's hit them. When I come in with my *tie*!

They share a little laugh.

Sal: I love you too, Pete. *You* know that?

She gives him a little kiss. He kisses her back, a proper kiss this time.

Peter: Although I mean look at us – it's hardly like we even need Relate now.

Sal: Relate?

Peter: Whichever one you've chosen.

Sal: Wait – darling...

Peter: No, no, I'm not saying we shouldn't go. I still think it's a good idea. I just meant – well, they're probably used to dealing with couples on the brink of slipping rat poison into each other's tea, not –

Sal: No, Pete darling – I meant – the *other* appointment...

Beat.

Darling, we did talk about it.

Peter: You *mentioned* it, weeks ago, when things were – I don't see why that means you then sneak off behind my back and –

Sal: Not behind your back, darling. We talked about it. As part of the compromise.

Peter: *Behind my back* and make an *appointment*. I mean, God Sal –

Sal: Come on darling, let's not –

Peter: At least Relate would be about *us*.

Sal: So's this, of course it is!

Peter: Oh no no. You know what this is about. *This* is about –

Sal: Come on Pete, what’s the harm in trying?

Peter: I don’t know – what do they want to do to me? Drugs? Cuts? Shocks?

Sal: What?

Peter: Is that it? *Shock tactics*. Strap me down, stick electrodes on my head, rack up the dial to a thousand volts and – *poof!*

Sal: As if they even do that these days!

Peter: Because if that’s what you’re really longing for, darling – a *vegetable* – then it might be quicker to just nip down to Sainsbury’s and buy one of a suitable morphology!

The banging starts up next door. It makes the water in the tank wobble.

A bloody weekday morning now?! This is getting ridiculous. Look! Look what’s it’s doing to the tank! I’m sorry, but this has got to stop. I’m going to go round there.

Sal: Christ, Pete.

Peter: A weekday fucking morning now! It’s ridiculous!

Sal: Fine. You go round there right now and you tell them, “Stop! Stop this *thing*. This ridiculous thing you probably think about all day and certainly *do* all night and now even a weekday fucking morning! I don’t care if it’s fun and thrilling and beautiful and good for you. I don’t care if it makes you feel *alive*. Have you any idea what you’re doing to my daphnia tank?!”

Beat.

Sorry. I’m just a bit – Tonight. My thing...

Peter: Sorry. Me too... It might be the only chance I ever get to do this work...

They melt into a hug. From within the embrace:

Do you understand Sal? It’s me. My life. There. In that tank. That is me...

Pause.

Sal: This appointment. The first session will be talking. Just talking. It’ll be just like *Relate*. And if you don’t feel comfortable – at any stage at all – we can just... And we can do *Relate* too if you like. I just feel, Pete ...

Pause.

Peter: Okay.

Beat.

Okay. Tuesday morning...

He kisses her head, although there's something reticent in the gesture. She holds up crossed fingers as he crosses to the door. As he opens it, Josie enters.

Josie: [To Pete.] Morning, Professor Pete.

Peter exits. Josie goes to make herself a cup of tea.

Ooh, grumpy boots today... [Jokey.] Hope all's still well in the boudoir?!

Silence.

God, it is isn't it?

Sal: [Spiky.] Yes. Thank you. Everything's fine.

Beat.

They're deciding on the funding today...

Josie: Ah... the big day. Want one?

Sal: No thanks.

Beat.

Josie, if a couple stood up in front of each other completely naked and each person said, "You have to accept me as I am, exactly as I am", what do you reckon would happen?

Josie: Has this got something to do with why you look like you've just swallowed Katie Price?

Sal: What? No. I'm not talking about *bodies*...

Josie: You said naked.

Sal: I meant – I don't know what I meant.

Josie: Look, I'll tell you exactly what would happen. Whoever loves the other person more says, *Yes, of course!* The other person says, *Fuck off!* So the first person says, *Please, please! I'll be anything you want me to be!*

Sal: And if they love each other the same?

Josie: He's not trying to get you to go to an ABBA concert is he...? [*Looking at wall.*]
Flipping heck. Weekday bloody mornings now. Doesn't it drive you mad?

Sal: I hardly notice it anymore. It's like a heartbeat...

Josie gets a text. Reads.

I saw them the other day. Coming out the house, holding hands. You'd never have guessed in a million years...

Josie: God, I don't even like barbeque beef.

Sal: Hm?

Josie waves her hand – "nothing".

Sometimes I think *this* is worse. The silence. The sound of them holding hands...

Josie: You know something tragic? I can't remember the last time I held a guy's hand...

Pause, frozen, both listening to the silence.

Sal: Josie, if you were looking for the easiest, cheapest sex you could find... where would you go?

Josie: What you asking that for?

Sal: A role-play.

Josie: Where would I go? Anywhere with men...

Blackout.

Scene Two

Peter sits on the sofa with a bottle of beer. He's wearing a laurel wreath on his head. Nikki is putting a DVD on, then sits back down and picks up her own beer.

Peter: Comedy.

Nikki: Cold.

Peter: Thriller.

Nikki: Colder.

Peter: Art house?

Nikki: Freezing.

Peter: Comedy? No I said that. Horror?

Nikki: Hmm... warmer...

Peter: Ah. I like horror... So it's a type of horror?

Nikki: Boiling...

The DVD starts up. It's projected behind them. Cheesy musac.

Doesn't sound like a horror...

It's a porn film. Nikki smiles back at him.

What on earth are two asexual people doing watching a porno?

Nikki: Just a little experiment.

Peter: On what exactly?

Nikki: You.

Peter: Me? I thought you were against experiments on animals. May I ask what your hypothesis is?

Nikki: If I tell you it'll ruin the experiment. Remind me about the –

She points to the laurel wreath.

Peter: Oh. They give them to you when you become a professor. It's a tradition.

Nikki: Fuck, they made you a professor as well?

Peter: Oh God no. It was... a colleague. Robin. A joke. After they gave me the funding. I should take it off...

But he doesn't. He shuffles uneasily.

Nikki: [At the porn.] Jesus Christ – look at those. What *is* that about? Boys' obsession with the size of a woman's mammary glands?

Peter: You're really asking the wrong person.

Nikki: I thought you had a PhD in sex.

Peter: -ual reproduction...

Nikki: Don't tell me Science doesn't have an answer!

He gives her a sideways look.

Peter: [*Quickly!*] Maybe some initial selective advantage – increased milk yields perhaps – led to the preference and the trait moving into linkage disequilibrium, creating positive feedback on the phenotype over generations. Then again, maybe it's just the fashion. If you look at the history of art, tastes change. At the moment, big is beautiful. Big tits, big willies...

Nikki: ...little brains, little else. Do you think one day the rest of the body will wither away like appendixes and we'll have evolved into a race of enormous waddling tits and willies?

Peter: Darwin was a little more optimistic. He thought humans might evolve into angels...

Nikki: Well he got that one wrong. Speaking of angels... any word from your girlfriend?

Peter: No.

Nikki: Means it must be going well.

Peter: Does it?

Nikki: Oh yeah. When you don't hear anything, it means it's going *well*.

Peter: Right.

Nikki: Well that's great.

Peter: Yeah.

She holds up her beer to cheers him. He does so. Nikki gets up, crosses to the tank (still with the sheet over it).

Where are you going...? Nikki, I told you – [*Getting up.*] Nikki, I promised Sal...

Nikki: [*Mock sexual.*] You can give me a little *lecture*. Oh come on Peter. I know you want to. Come over here and give me a good hard lecture! It's not like she'll ever know...

She reaches to pull off the sheet.

Peter: [*Batting her hand away.*] Nikki!

Beat.

Nikki: [*Hurt.*] Back to the tits and willies then.

Peter: It's just – I promised. Next time... Or tonight, when she comes back.

Nikki: *If* she comes back.

Peter: She said she'd come back. Afterwards.

Nikki gives him a doubtful look. They sit back down.

Nikki: So look at you now. Living the dream. Spending all your days with your water fleas and all your nights not having sex with your girlfriend. What more could a man ask for?!

Peter: Things are going really well now, yeah.

Nikki: The website saved your life.

Silence.

Oh come on Peter, it totally saved your life.

Peter: I know. I know. But only because it led me to you.

Nikki a little taken aback.

Honestly, Nikki. What you've told me, showed me. How to make it work. How to find a compromise. You and Jack – you've been our paradigm. And I'm grateful. Really.

He puts his hand on her shoulder. Beat.

Nikki: You know, about a year ago we had to repaint our bedroom. I'd written Jack a little *polite note* on the wall... Well anyway, it ended up we both went out and bought different colour paint. I'd gone for Thistle Green and Jack'd gone for Moroccan Red or whatever. So, feeling reconciliatory I got a bucket and poured both cans in. Fifty fifty. And that is why our bedroom is a beautiful shade of *Compromise Brown*... the exact colour of runny dog shit.

A beat – Peter not quite sure what to make of this.

I've never said things are perfect between me and Jack.

Peter: But it works. You've found a compromise that works.

Beat.

What did the polite note say?

Nikki: "If you ever try that again I will cut your fucking dick off."

Pause – just the sound of the porno.

Peter: She wants me to see a shrink.

Nikki: Fuck off. Fuck right off. I hope you told her to fuck right off.

No answer.

Peter?

Silence.

You need to tell her to fuck right off.

Peter: I need to show willing. I need to compromise.

Nikki: That's not compromise – it's denial.

Peter: Who knows – maybe they'll find something...

Nikki: “Does the patient present with persistent or recurrent extreme aversion to, absence of, and avoidance of all, or almost all, genital sexual contact with a sexual partner?”

She looks accusingly at Peter.

Yes. They'll find something. HSD. *Hypoactive sexual dysfunction*. It's in all the diagnostic manuals. Pity you're not gay. That stopped being a disease back in the 70s.

Peter: “The aforementioned symptoms imply a diagnosable disorder *only when they cause marked distress or interpersonal instability* to the patient.”

Nikki: Careful, don't get *distressed*. You'll make yourself ill.

Peter: Look, it's not like I want to go.

Nikki: Then tell her to fuck right off. Why don't you send *her* to a doctor?

Peter: Sal?

Nikki: There are plenty of drugs that dampen libido.

Peter: Don't be ridiculous, Nikki.

Nikki: What does she have for breakfast?

Peter: I'm not going to spike her cornflakes.

Nikki: You don't need to. Kellogg designed the recipe in 1894 *specifically* to suppress sexual desire. Not a lot of people know that. *Jack* doesn't know that. *Jack* thinks I make him eat them because they're healthy! Kellogg also advocated a twice-daily yoghurt enema to really cool a guy down. But sadly even *Jack* draws the line somewhere...

Peter: You are joking aren't you?

Beat.

I'm never bloody sure with you...

Nikki: I saw you wearing that tie today and I thought it *symbolised* something...

Peter: It does. Obviously.

Nikki: You know you haven't said a single word in any meeting you've been to?

Peter: I've done some pretty vigorous nodding.

Nikki: Remember, Peter – it's insect skins. It's –

Peter: [*Rubbing his eyes.*] Please, Nikki. Not now.

Nikki: It's closets within closets like Russian dolls. You've opened the little tiny closet in that bedroom there, only to find yourself in another, bigger fucking closet.

Peter: So what's next? Because the tie's obviously not enough. The t-shirts? The mug? The full-size flag rippling proudly from the window?! How about a tattoo?! I bet you've got a tattoo. A no-entry sign down you-know-where. I'll get one on my forehead. *A-Proud! It's ace to be Ace! Down with Sex Crime! Up the Anti-Sex League!*

Nikki: Oi! You leave that book alone. That's my favourite book.

Peter: Nineteen Eighty-Four? You're joking. Mine too.

Nikki: Yeah?

Peter: Since I was a kid.

Nikki: It's the *feeling* of it. He's totally alone...

Peter: Yes!

Nikki: The whole world warped by this *thing*, this fucking thing that just doesn't make sense, but everyone else is totally swept up in, in on it, like some weird *cult*.

Peter: Yeah, yeah – exactly!

Nikki: And all he wants to do is find an *ally*, a kindred spirit...

Peter: Mmm.

Beat.

Nikki: You know the Two Minutes Love for Big Brother? I remember when I was reading it thinking, *Oh my God, this is me*. This is me when the girls bring in one of their dumb magazines and I have to pretend to whip myself up into this frenzy over Peter bloody Andre or whoever. I suppose it's that rare thing... a classic piece of fiction that doesn't fixate on sex and love.

Peter: It's all about sex and love.

Nikki: It's all about Orwell's terrifying vision of dystopia. And how much of it came true.

Peter: Well yes, but –

Nikki: [*Suddenly shouting at the TV.*] Oh no woman, what are you doing?!

She buries her head into his side like a “girlfriend” watching a scary bit in a movie.

Don't put it in there – it's not food! Uggchh! Look at that thing. Do you really have one of those?

Peter: Well, a scale model...

Nikki: But look at it. It's so ridiculous... all swelled up like some *boil*... you just want to pop it. Aren't you fucking relieved you don't have to do it anymore. I mean, oral's probably worse than sex. Urrgh!

She looks over at Peter for agreement.

Oh Peter, please God don't tell me you still...

Peter: It was part of the compromise. It's something – the most – I said I'd still do...

Nikki: You fool! It should've been the first thing to go! Whenever I used to do it – back in the dark days – all I could think was *I'm actually sucking on his piss-pipe. I'm practically licking a urinal!* And you still do it. To her?

Peter: I don't mind it...

Nikki: Really? I mean, *really*? I can write a polite note on the wall if you like.

Peter: No thanks. You know, I'm surprised you don't start the meetings with a Two Minutes Hate against sexuals...

Nikki: Why don't you suggest it in the next meeting?

Peter: I don't hate sexual people.

The banging starts again next door.

[*Getting to the final straw.*] I don't fucking believe it! You know we get this all the fucking time now. Day and night. Those fucking bloody fucking bloody –

Nikki gets up, goes and thumps back loudly on the wall. The banging immediately stops. Nikki sits back down triumphantly.

[*Utterly impressed.*] Why the fuck have I never done that?

Nikki: Listen, Peter. I'm planning something... something big...

Peter: [*Slightly concerned.*] What do you mean?

Nikki: I want to turn the whole of Trafalgar Square into a giant bed and I want to get people – sexuals, asexuals, gay, straight, bi, tran, whatever – everyone lying together in this one massive bed, all not having sex. Imagine it! And in the middle of it all, on the column, we'll put the flag. The asexual flag flying on the cock of the nation! What do you think?

Peter: Yeah.

Nikki: Come on Peter, what do you *think*?

Peter: *If you pull it off...* I'm sorry, but I think a few rubberneck tourists will take photos. No-one else will notice. No-one else will care.

Nikki: I've been contacted by a TV company. They're making a documentary for Channel 4. A whole hour, just about asexuality. People are starting to notice, Peter. I want to plan the lie-in to coincide with the filming.

No response.

Bloody hell. Doesn't that excite you Peter? Don't you want things to change?

Peter: You know I do.

Nikki: Good. Because they've asked me to find them a focus point, someone they can follow, someone who's just discovered their asexuality...

Peter: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait –

Nikki: You'd be perfect.

Peter: Sorry Nikki, I'm not even close to being ready for something like –

Nikki: Peter, we're on the cusp of something. But we have to fight for it. Like gay people twenty, thirty years ago. Look at them now! Grown men licking each other's arses with Christ's blessings! But there's so few of us – less than a tenth of them – so we have to fight ten times as hard. You know what your problem is, Peter? You act like you wish you were sexual.

Peter: Oh really?

Nikki: Yes!

Peter: Because I do! Christ Nikki. Of course I do.

Nikki: It's just another closet, Peter. That's what that noise was. You're banging your head against it but you can't see it.

Peter: You and your bloody closets!

Nikki: [*Nodding at TV.*] Look at it and tell me you wish you were sexual.

Peter: I don't want to look at it. That's the problem.

Nikki: Look at it Peter. Properly. Experimental conditions now. Look. Sit and look at it and tell me you wish you were a raging red-blooded muff-munching sexual.

Peter: *This* is the experiment?

He looks at the screen.

I wish I was asexual.

Nikki: I don't believe you. *Experimental conditions*, Peter.

Peter: I find your method rather sloppy if I may say so.

Nikki: Swear on your daphnia.

Peter: Okay – I swear on my daphnia.

Nikki: Plumph! A hundred of your little darlings just fell to the bottom of the tank. Now look. Properly. Take it in. Before you answer again. Really look...

Peter looks at the screen. The woman starts to go down on the man.

Careful, Peter. Careful what you wish for....

She sidles up to him, whispers in his ear.

Vaginal juices. Bodily fluid. Pussy. Cock. Pubes. Herpes. Gonorrhoea. Muff. Minge. Oooh, tasty minge!

Peter: [*Starting to laugh-squirm.*] Okay, okay I get it.

Nikki: Cum. Pre-cum. Girl-cum. Tasty cum. Blow. Suck. Lick. Clit. Stroke. Taste. Penetrate. Mmmm. Lick. Lick. Clit. Lick. Mushy, rotting Brussels sprouts...!

Peter: [*Laugh-squirming*] Okay! Okay!

Laughing he snatches for the remote; she pulls it away from him.

Okay! You're right! Thank fuck! Thank fuck I'm asexual! Okay?!

Nikki: Yes!

She pauses the video. It now advances silently frame by frame in slow motion. She hugs him.

Peter: God where did they train you? Guantanamo Bay? Fucking hell...

Nikki: [*Whisper.*] Don't swear. You're live on Channel 4!

Peter: What?!

Nikki: The documentary team's been filming us.

Peter: [*Looking around.*] What? Nikki!

Nikki: Big Brother's watching you!

She laughs.

Peter: You know, I actually wouldn't put it past you...

Pete laughs back. Beat.

Nikki: I am meeting them next week though. Come with me. Just for a chat. What's the harm in a chat?

Peter thinks.

Peter: [*Uncertain.*] When?

Nikki: Tuesday morning.

Pause.

Peter: Okay.

Nikki: Peter, you won't regret this!

Peter: Just to talk.

Nikki: Absolutely no pressure.

He gives her a dubious look. She raises her bottle to cheers again.

So come on, you don't really like doing – [*Nodding at screen.*] that – do you?

His expression answers her question.

I fucking knew it!

Peter: You know, I have to change the water in that tank there every week or so. You suck on a pipe to get it flowing and you have to be careful not to get a mouthful of it. I have a bit of a phobia about it actually, getting into my mouth. But I have to do it. And when I – do that thing for her... I pretend like I enjoy it but... the truth is it's not far off from my Room 101. My version of the mask with the rats – you know, when it's covering his face and he can hear them *scurrying*.... Suddenly I get this feeling like that filthy water from the tank is

pouring into my mouth and I actually retch. She doesn't know it, but I'm down there, my face in it, retching...

Scuffle from back of the room.

Nikki: Rats?!

Peter: Christ, I hope not. We had mice last year. Sal made me put down poison. I wanted us to get a cat. Less cruel. And I like cats...

He gets up to look in the kitchen.

Nikki: Wipe up any crumbs. They love crumbs.

Sal: Eeek!

Peter: Fuck!

Sal scurries out from behind the counter on all fours.

Sal: Eeek! Eeek! Urrgch! Urgch! Urgch!

She bursts into laughter. Her mood should constantly flip between crippling laughter and a kind of withdrawn sullen despair. It can happen at any time – the middle of a word, a silence – and the mood can be contrary to that implied by the text.

Peter: Fuck, Sal! What the hell are you doing down there?

She scurries up so her face comes close to his crotch. Sniffs. He jumps back.

Sal! What are you doing?!

Sal: [*Laughing so much she can hardly draw breath.*] Eating... your... crumbs. Eeek! Eeek!

Peter: Sal, stop that!

Sal: Eeek! Eeek! Fucking eek!

Peter: You're paralytic! Did you pass out down there?

Sal: Where is she?

She scurries over to Nikki.

I'm Daphne. I used to be a flea, then I jumped onto a rat! Eeek!

Peter: [*To Sal.*] Sal. [*To Nikki.*] Sorry about this, Nikki.

Sal: And you're Nikki. Nikki the cat.

She crawls up so her face level with Nikki's crotch.

Sneaky little pussy.

Peter: *Sal!*

Nikki: And she wants *you* to see a shrink...

Sal: I was having a dream... I think. Everything is so fucking confusing these days!

Peter: How did you get in? I've got your keys...

Sal lifts up her arm. There's a long line of dried blood.

Christ Sal, what happened?

She's in sullen mode. Won't speak. Like a child who's being told off for doing something extremely bad.

Sal? Are you okay? Is it still bleeding?

Sal: I'm really sorry, Petey. The window in the bedroom... I was really cross... the glass just smashed... all the water running out... whoosh... and now I'm just drying up slowly... desiccating... like a little water flea on a glass slide... Maybe the flea should jump onto the cat!

She suddenly goes for Nikki, but she's too unstable and topples.

Peter: Sal! [*Then tenderly, helping her.*] Come on, Sal. Let's get you up... Sorry Nikki, I think please maybe you should – [*“Go”.*]

Nikki hovers a moment.

Nikki, please.

Nikki: Sorry, do you have a cab number?

Impatiently he hands her a cab card from his wallet. He stands Sal up slowly.

Peter: Let's wash that arm first, shall we...

Sal: Where are they?

Peter: Who?

Sal: The people?

Peter: What people?

Sal: The people that were having sex on the sofa?

Peter: There wasn't –

Sal: Of course! That must have been the dream. Imagine! People having sex – of all things – in this house! Sex! Urrgch! Right there on that sofa...! Urrggch!

Peter: It was... We were watching a blue movie. Just for – research. Nikki's from the group. Come on, Sal. Get this down you...

He offers her a glass of water. She takes it, drinks from it, turns to Nikki.

Oh, no Sal! Sal!

She spits out a fountain of water at Nikki's crotch. Laughs.

Peter: God sorry Nikki.

She gestures it's okay.

What happened, Sal, didn't you... you know?

Sal looks to the ground, shakes her head. Sullen, disciplined child again.

What, you didn't find him attractive?

Sal: Oh, Petey he was beautiful. He was so beautiful. There's not a woman in the world who wouldn't have gone weak between the legs.

An arch look at Nikki.

Well...

Peter: He didn't ask you back? I thought you'd –

Sal: I went downstairs to the toilet. "This is just masturbation." I said it out loud – you should have seen her face! And a cab was coming. For me and the fish. But not with my mascara running like that. Like bleeding eyes... Pete I'm so sorry...

Peter: Oh Sal... Sal, I'm so sorry... You should have been with me tonight. You should have been with me all the nights... I'm so sorry... I – Sal, I don't know who I am. I –

Nikki: Yes you do. You know who you are. What you are. You know. Don't apologise for it, Peter. Don't let her –

Sal: Clever clever cat. Sitting on a sofa, purring, smothering him with non-sex. Scoffing sex. Scornful sex. Hating bitter vicious jealous unsex sex sex sex! Seeex! Blaaaaaahh!!!

Peter: Please Nikki, just call your cab!

Beat.

Nikki: I'll... outside...

She exits. Sal a sullen child again.

Sal: Oh Petey darling, I'm sorry. I was on my way home. I promise. Then I saw it. Under the street. Under the gutter. Under red. Red neon sinking into my skin like wet fire. I didn't buy a drink. Because that was the price. Just a drink. The first drink. That was the price...

Peter: Sal, stop. Please.

Sal: "And one for the lady here". Oh, the fire! The wet fire! Oh, the texture of it – luxuriantly cheap! [*Shouts.*] Like a mink fucking coat from Primark! [*Whisper.*] Is she a vegan too? She looks like a vegan. I smiled back. I would have gone with any of them. I wanted meat. Big juicy pig meat. [*Sings:*] The Queen of Tarts she stole some hearts!

A burst of laughter.

I begged for it! I'd forgotten I could. Out loud. I begged for his little piggy cock. His stinking piggy screw cock. I could smell it – stinking but beautiful! I'd never wanted anything so badly. Little pig man's cock. "Bitch! Whore! Slut! You want it! You love it! Bitch! Whore! Slut!" I was cold, placid, hardly moving, barely alive. "Bitch! Whore! Slut!" But I was screaming for it. And all the time I was imagining, dreaming it was –

Peter: Did you use protection? Tell me you used protection, Sal...

Sal: Scared you'll catch fleas?

She laughs. Then suddenly serious:

What sound do they make?

Peter: What?

Sal: Do they scream little silent screams? At night, do they scream silently and cry into their tank? I didn't know what to do. All of a sudden. Bacon fat drying on my chest, his piggy cock shrivelled up again, I didn't know what to do. Laying there. Crinkled. Pete darling, you didn't tell me what I'm meant to do! He was snoring. Or laughing. I didn't know what to do. I was feeling a bit woozy, actually. Something was welling up here, inside my stomach. I was being sick. Retching. But only anger came up. Nasty rancid gushing anger. Like water from a fish tank. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to smash something. I wanted to smash myself...

Peter: [*Heart bleeding.*] Sal...

He tries to hold her.

Sal: Don't touch me! I don't know what it means when you touch me!

Peter: It means I love you!

Sal: Can you?

Peter: Yes! Of course! I *do*!

Sal: *Can you?!*

Peter: Yes! I can! I do! More purely than anyone else! Sal I –

Sal: They were in his fridge all along.

Peter: Sal, please, I don't understand what you're saying...

Sal: Hardly swimming at all, half-frozen in a bag... Cold, placid, hardly moving, barely alive. So I found it. How had I missed it? It was huge. Yes, dark. But full of life! So full of life! I turned on the light. Shining neon blue! But that feeling in my stomach, suddenly it welled up again and I wanted to smash it, I wanted to smash it to tiny tiny – All the little daphnia, they wanted to smash it, we were hurling ourselves against the side of the bag, trying to escape... So I opened it up....

She mimes pouring something into her mouth. Nikki re-enters.

Nikki: [*Uncomfortably.*] Address?

No answer.

Peter... Address? For the cab...

Peter: 23b Weston Avenue.

Nikki: [*Into phone.*] 23b Weston Avenue... Thanks.

Sal: I'm so sorry...

Peter: Please, stop saying that! I'm the one who's...

Silence.

Nikki: I'll phone you... about the interview.

Peter: Interview? Christ Nikki!

Nikki: Peter, I know this isn't the best time. But you can't let *this, her* –

Peter: [*Yanking off his tie.*] You asked what this symbolised? It's a noose. A chain. A fucking albatross! However selfish it sounds, however cowardly, I don't want the world to accept us. I don't even want the world to accept me. Just her. All I care about is her. Christ, Nikki look at her! What I've – Can you just go? Please.

A beat where it looks like she might react to this... but in the end she just exits.

Sal: I was dreaming. I was lying here and somebody was throwing acid on my body... I think it was a dream...

Peter: Oh God, Sal...

Sal: The most sensitive part of my body... Seeping inside... Liquid razor blades inside me. I was in so much *pain*...

Peter: I'll kiss it better, Sal. For you, I'll kiss it better. I promise.

Sal: [*Suddenly recoiling from him, terrified.*] It was you! Standing there! You! It was you! Pouring in acid!

Peter: [*Trying to grab her back.*] No! No! Sal! We'll go, on Tuesday, to our appointment... It'll all be alright! Sal! I'll kiss it better!

He manages to hold her... she falls limp...

Sal: I don't even know whether to be sorry...

Peter: God, this was supposed to be such a happy day...

Sal: He was worried I'd spill water on the seats. At the end he said he'd have to charge extra fares for them all. But it was a joke...

Sal looks over at the tank. Burst of laughter again.

Peter: No. No, Sal, wait. Don't tell me you brought them back. Sal? Don't tell me you put foreign daphnia into – Fuck Sal, you didn't. Not in the tank. It'll – It'll contaminate everything, fuck everything! It'll – Please Sal, tell me didn't? Oh fuck, Sal, you fucking idiot! You stupid fucking – !

He runs over to the tank. Throws off the spread. A horde of fat shimmering goldfish swimming about. Sal suddenly bursts out laughing.

Sal: I don't even know whether to be sorry...

Peter: Oh my Daphne...

Pete slumps down in front of the tank. Sal walks over to him. Sits beside him.

Do you remember those first few months? We used to just sit and hold hands and talk and laugh... and at night, we told each others stories – remember? And it was enough. It was everything...

Sal takes his hand. She speaks gently, like she's telling a child a bedtime story.

Sal: Cupid wanted revenge on Apollo so he shot him through the heart with a golden dart that made him fall passionately in love with the nymph Daphne. But crafty Cupid shot Daphne with a leaden arrow that poisoned all desire in her forevermore. Tormented by Apollo's pursuit, Daphne begged her father Peneus, the river god, to transform her into a laurel tree, forever. His love never dying, Apollo spends his days in the cold shade of the tree that was once Daphne, a laurel wreath on his head...

Fade to blackout.

Scene Three

Josie in a nurse's uniform. Jack in a doctor's uniform. Josie distracted, heart not in it.

Jack: You wanted to see me, nurse?

No answer.

Apparently there's been... complaints? By the patients...? Nurse...?

Josie: Yeah.

Jack: Complaints of... inappropriate behaviour?

No answer.

Oh please, nurse, I beg you! Don't report me! Punish me yourself! Please!

He wraps a bandage around his eyes as a blindfold. Josie just looks on.

Nurse, please! I can't stand the suspense! Please just do it! Nurse...!

Pause. Josie gathers her things, makes for the door.

Come on Josie, she'll be back in an hour... Josie?

He lifts the blindfold.

What are you doing?

Josie: Why did you bring me here, Jack?

Jack: What? You know why. We don't have enough money for anywhere else. Or enough testicles.

Josie: You can say that again.

Jack: Don't go. I've got the new flavour. Barbeque beef.

Josie: Jack, I'm fed up of licking fake flavours off bloody condoms. Even the bloody shagging's fake. I mean look at us.

Jack: What are you saying? You don't like the – You don't like this?

Josie: Not when we do it in her bed.

Jack: What? We weren't going to – We've *never* –

Josie: Every time, Jack. Every bloody time, wherever we are, it feels like we're doing it in her fucking bed. Why is that, Jack?

Beat.

Jack: Josie, please. Don't go... *prosze*.

Josie: Oh God, I don't bloody know. I shouldn't care. It's not like we're – are we...

Pause, looking at each other. She reaches for his hand, holds it. A beat, then Jack slowly pulls his hand away. Her question answered, she turns to leave.

Jack: Josie, wait! It's – Look, I need to – Fuck. Josie, it's complicated...

Josie: Come on, Jack. How bloody complicated can it be?

Jack: You have no idea. Listen, Josie.... I need to –

Nikki enters from front door.

Fuck.

Nikki & Josie: Oh great, Jack.

Nikki: The wank rag again. You know, he's got a rubber pussy in a box under our bed. When he jerks off into *that* he looks at pictures of thin pretty people.

Josie: "Our bed"? You know what? You're like a spider that's mated and then wrapped him up in your little web. Only you won't eat him. You just watch him twitch and squirm.

Nikki: [*To Jack.*] See what happens.

Josie: Oh go fuck yourself, love.

Nikki: The porn's revolting!

Josie: Instead of scratching the eyes out of the girls he brings back here, have you ever thought of just asking him to take you back?

Nikki: You haven't told her, have you. Oh fuck, Jack, that's not fair.

Josie: Told her? Told her what?

Nikki: You're still not going to tell her?

Josie: Fuck are you in on this? Is this some kind of –

Nikki: Jack?

Josie: What is it? Some dominatrix thing? You have to grovel for forgiveness afterwards?!

Nikki: [To Jack.] Fine. [To Josie, matter of fact.] I'm his girlfriend. I'm asexual. I don't do sex. We don't do sex. Jack is sexual. The compromise is that he can have sex with other people. Mindless, meaningless, empty sex. Otherwise known as – sex. I'm sorry, he should have told you. And he shouldn't have used you more than once.

Josie: What the fuck? Jack?

No answer.

I can still fucking see you if you close your eyes, you daft bastard! Fuck me, what is this place? Fucking perverts, the pair of you! You're both fucking Looney Tunes!

Nikki: I'm sorry, I thought you knew. I wouldn't have said the things I said. Although it wouldn't make them any less true. Does it, Jack? *Does it Jack?*

Jack: Fucking enough, Nikki!

Josie goes to the door.

Josie, wait!

Josie: What? She's right isn't she?

Nikki: Tell her, Jack. Have the guts to tell her what she is to you.

Jack: Josie, please. Give me five minutes. Just wait out here five minutes...

Beat.

Josie: I'm calling a cab. When it comes, I'm fucking getting in it.

Josie exits.

Nikki: If you're thinking of trying to convince us to engage in a threesome, you're handling it very badly.

Jack: Stop it. Nikki. The fucking irony.

Nikki: I'm sorry. I'm still coughing it up out of my lungs. The room's fucking full of it.

Jack: I should be able to have sex without leaving a bad taste in my mouth.

Nikki: Maybe you should stop going down on trollops then.

Jack: You can't fucking help yourself, can you?!

Nikki: *I can't help myself?! You look ridiculous by the way.*

Jack: This isn't how it should be.

Nikki: There's no should be. We're never going to be normal.

Jack: This isn't how anything should be.

Nikki: One thing I ask. Don't bring it here. *One* thing.

Jack: You ask a lot more than one thing.

Beat.

Nikki I know.

Pause.

You don't know what it's like for me. You can't.

Jack: And you don't know what it's like for me. You can't.

Pause.

Nikki: Wanking again and again into the same tissue. It's disgusting Jack. Stop looking at the door.

Jack: I owe her an explanation...

Nikki starts taking off her top and bra.

What are you doing?

She takes one of his hands, puts it on her breast.

Nikki: Stop looking at the door.

She takes his other hands and guides to his crotch.

Jack: You think that's all there is to it? Touching one of your little tits.

Nikki: Of course not. I think jerking off's a deep emotional experience.

Jack: I know you wish it wasn't, but sometimes, yes, tossing can be a deep emotional experience. Put your top back on.

She doesn't move.

You're fucking despicable.

Nikki: But you still want this.

Jack: People tend to want what they can't have.

Nikki: You want me to beg for it? Beg you to ram your big bulging dick hard into my pussy? Beg and beg until I come with sheer desire?

Jack: Never be the one that wants them more. My gran told me that. As long as they're the one that wants you even a little tiny bit more... you'll be fine. Be if it's the other way around – you'll feel it every day.

Nikki: I beg you. Please, I beg you to fuck me harder than you've fucked anyone!

Her hand moves onto his crotch. Pause.

Jack: [*Almost victorious.*] Nothing.

Beat.

Nikki: So now we're equal.

Jack: You think I'm just talking about sex? Shall we put our love on the scales and see what happens? Shall we?

Beat. Nikki moves away, puts her t-shirt back on. Jack walks up to her, holds her arm.

Let me kiss you.

Nikki: Jack.

Jack: I don't want sex. I just want to kiss you.

Nikki: [*A little scared/vulnerable now.*] No kissing, Jack.

Jack: It can't be that awful can it? Just a kiss?

Nikki: Please.

Jack: Two years of no sex, practically no touching, I think I deserve a fucking –

He pulls her to him and forces a kiss on her. She struggles, he holds her firm. She bites him.

Fuck!

He puts his hand to his lip. Wet with blood.

Look! I made the virgin bleed!

Nikki: I'm not a virgin. And that's your blood.

Jack: Oh yeah.

Beat. The following exchange should end up with a nostalgic tenderness...

Bitch.

Nikki: Cunt.

Jack: Bitch.

Nikki: Cunt.

Jack: Bitch.

Nikki: Cunt.

Jack: Bitch.

Nikki: Cunt.

Jack: Bitch.

Nikki: Cunt.

Jack: Bitch.

Nikki: Cunt.

Silence.

Cunt.

Silence.

[Almost frightened/ an echo.] Cunt...

Silence.

Jack: It used to be so overpowering, the love... just to touch you and... it was enough... but now...

Nikki: It suits you. The freedom.

Jack: Don't call it freedom.

Nikki: A lot of guys would kill to get the deal you've got.

Jack: It's not as easy as you think. To find sex.

Nikki: Of course it is!

Jack: Not the kind that makes you smile in the morning. Makes you whistle in the morning.

Nikki: The world's dripping with it, like honey in a fucking honeycomb!

Jack: Don't confuse sex with –

Pause.

Nikki: So you're fed up. With this monkish existence with me. This fucking beige existence. The colour of our bedroom...

Jack: It's not – It's not about the bedroom. Not just about the bedroom. It's –

Nikki: I'll let you keep her.

Jack: What?

Nikki: She can even be... more, if you like. She can be anything you – Just –

Silence.

Jack: We'll stay friends, yeah?

Nikki: Yeah. Because that's what people that don't have sex are.

Jack: I didn't say that.

Jack goes up to her. He tries to do the "asexual sex" we saw Nikki and Peter do in Act One. But she doesn't let him. He kisses her head instead.

You're beautiful.

Nikki: I don't care.

Jack: I know. But you are...

He goes to the door, mouths "I'll call", gives her a ruefully affectionate smile, then leaves. And she's alone. She sits on the sofa. Closes her eyes. A knock on the door. She goes to answer. Peter.

Peter?!

Peter: Sorry. Know it's ... But do you mind if I...?

Nikki: Yeah, yeah, course. Come in. How's... *things*?

Peter: Things just... fell apart... I've left her.

Nikki: On her own? Is that –

Peter: She's sleeping. And I just called her friend. She's on her way over. I just had to –

Beat.

But no, I meant... we've split up. I think. Whatever rope was holding us together... tonight it just...

Nikki: Snap.

Peter: [*Nods.*] Snap.

Nikki: I meant... me too.

Peter: Not you and Jack?

Nikki: Yep.

Peter: What? When?

Nikki: About two and a half minutes ago.

Peter: God, no, Nikki, I'm so sorry. What happened?

Beat.

Nikki: I think I'm going to have a drink...

Peter: Snap. Something... gin, vodka, whiskey...

Nikki goes into kitchen.

Snap... I'm still trying to work who's still attached and who's fallen into the mountain. Maybe both of us.

Nikki: I think maybe both of us...

Silence.

Peter: Are you... alright?

Nikki: Well I'm already missing the sex.

Peter: Ha.

Nikki brings him a beer.

Beer.

Nikki: I know.

Peter: But this is what I actually wanted.

Nikki: I know.

He takes the beer.

Cheers.

They drink in silence.

She put goldfish in the tank.

Nikki: Don't they eat –

Peter: Exactly. Months of research turning, as we speak, into fish shit.

Nikki: So it's completely fucked? The experiment?

Peter: The tank was the control. You always have a control. It's what you test your hypothesis against. No control, no experiment.

Nikki: But you just won the funding. You can start again.

Peter: Ah, yes, but the funding was predicated on my being able to start immediately...

Nikki: Vicious cow.

Peter: It's not her fault, Nikki... God, I thought we'd worked things out. I thought she'd – Oh, maybe there's still a chance. I'll just have to plead my case. Again. Harder...

Beat.

I mean, with the faculty.

Pause.

Nikki: Well, if you need a place to sleep, as of ten minutes ago there's a vacancy in my bed. I think I can trust you to behave like a gentleman. And if you can't, there's the sofa...

Peter: It's okay. I'm going into the lab in a minute. See what I can salvage so the experiment isn't a total disaster. Unlike my experiment with Sal...

Pause.

Maybe this just proves it's impossible. For us to be with one of them. I mean, you and Jack were the template. You were the *control*. Oh God. Listen to me. "Us" and "them". I've started to sound like... *you*. Is this what it'll be like? *Is this what it's like?* A slippery slope to mental apartheid...

Nikki: No. Peter, you still don't see the big picture, do you? Acceptance is just a first step. Why should we be content with existence? With co-existence?

Peter: If you're going to start this shit...

Nikki: Once they see us – and they will see us – then comes the call to arms!

Peter: You're mad. You're actually fucking mad. You think you're going to *convert* sexual people?

Nikki: No! A call to arms *with us*. To challenge the biggest lie of all!

Peter: This isn't what I came here for.

He slams down his beer, crosses to the door. She blocks him.

Nikki: What did you come here for?

Peter: Not this.

Nikki: We've been told how to live, to fuck, to love, to share each other, to own each other. But who's to say we should all have one partner, one *lover*, one husband, one wife, that we devote our lives to? Why should that be the norm for anyone, sexual or asexual or anything? Why can't one person have one platonic friend who's just as important as someone else's lover? Or fifty friends that together are just as fulfilling as a lover... maybe more fulfilling? You can argue why things are like they are – male oppression of the female, capitalist oppression of the individual, Christian oppression of everyone, *evolution* ... blah blah blah. Everyone has their philosophy. *Normalcy* – that's the biggest lie of all! You can even argue you like things just the way they are. Fine. But why should that be *normal*?

Peter: Because it's what normal people want!

Nikki: Fuck *normal*! True equality isn't "It's okay to be different". It's "*Be different*".

Peter: You want to know why I've never spoken in any of the meetings?

Nikki: Because you haven't found your voice.

Peter: Because I sit there and I look at you all and I think *what a bunch of freaks*. I'm sorry. But it's what I feel. And it's not just the fact that half of you are transgender, no-gender, demi-semi-androgynous sexual mutations. Even the normal ones are social misfits. Most of you even *look* weird. And I think, which came first? The weirdness or the asexuality? And the worst thing – the thing that really terrifies me – is that *you're all the same*. You look the

same, you speak your own invented language, your own asexual Newspeak with words like “Panromantic” and “nonheteronormative” that I’m not sure whether to laugh or cry at when I hear them. You share the same opinions on the world. The same humour. You’ll all clones! You smother individuality with acceptance! And it terrifies me! Sitting in that *group*. Sitting in a circle with twenty mirrors pointed at me. You know what I did after the first meeting? I ran straight to my computer and looked at every single porn site I could find, searching every fucked up fetish I could think of, hoping that I’d find *something*, some strip of flesh in the world that would resonate with this ridiculous strip of flesh down here. I’d never done that before. I’d never been so desperate before...

Nikki: You don’t really feel those things. It’s been a long day.

Peter: I’m sorry but I really feel those things. I’m terrified that you’ll put a tattoo on me and it’ll scare off normal people forever. Because that’s what the world’s full of. Ninety-nine percent of the population. A ninety-nine percent chance that that’s who you’re going to fall in love with. Your little *weltanschauung* sounds like it was cooked up by someone who’s never been in love.

Beat.

Christ, it *has* been a long day...

Nikki: No. No, Peter. You’ve got a lot to learn from the group. From all the *different* people in the group. Think of Jim. He’s gay. *And* asexual. What are the chances of him finding someone?

Peter: None. He’s a forty year old man with an unhealthy interest in Lego, and an unhealthy *lack* of interest in personal hygiene.

Nikki: He’s a nice man. And he’s happy. Enough. He’s settled for all the things life can bring *him*. What about Alice and Ben? They’re together. Two asexuals. Together.

Peter: Do they love other?

Nikki: I think they both self-define as romantic.

Peter: Christ. But do they love each other? Like normal couples love each other?

Nikki: There’s a thousand sexual people losing out on love every second. There’s plenty more that have to live without it. Maybe Jim’s the lucky one. He’s learned to settle...

Peter: You shouldn’t have to settle in life.

Nikki: Settling isn’t a capitulation to life, Peter. It’s a fucking victory! Jim doesn’t have to compromise who he is for another person. He doesn’t have to compromise his passion for another person. Swap his passion for another person.

Peter: Passion? We’re talking about fucking Lego! Anyway, you can’t just self-define as happy. It’s not something you chose. It’s something you *feel*. One way, or the other.

Nikki: What about Paul?

Peter: Paul? He's the biggest freak of the lot. What does he self-define as? Extraterrestrial?

Nikki: Heterosexual. He loves cunt. He's in the group because he's Laura's boyfriend.

Peter: Really? But he's so –

Nikki: They've been together almost four years.

Peter: Shit.

Beat.

Maybe me and Sal... I mean, she's so drunk she probably wouldn't remember anything in the morning. I could just go back now. Slip into bed...

He doesn't move. Pause.

Nikki: Did she actually think we were having sex?

Peter: Not us. She was convinced – you know, before I told her – she was convinced I was having an affair. With Robin. Maybe she still feared... hoped... Oh, I don't know...

Nikki: Who's Robin?

Peter: My colleague. The head of the faculty. He's the one that gave me the wreath...

Nikki: *He?*! Poor cow, she's really lost the plot, hasn't she...

Peter: I should have ended it a long long time ago. I should never have started it.

Nikki: Peter, you shouldn't regret your relationship with her. It's taught you so much.

Peter: Not with Sal. With *him*.

Beat.

Nikki: You're not serious?

Peter: I didn't have any feelings. I just... He's head of the faculty. He decides the funding...

Nikki: But you were having sex?

Peter: I was going to end it after I got the funding... But now... Christ...

Nikki: Did you tell her?

Peter: What? That I was prepared to fuck a man I don't even like – slightly despise even... but not the woman I love..? Even tonight she was looking at me with that look that sends shivers down my spine... crumpled on the floor, slowly dissolving... my chance of happiness slowly dissolving alive... The love sending shivers up my spine, that look sending them straight back down. So they cancelled out. And I couldn't move. I couldn't move...

Nikki: There are lots of things in this life... beautiful things... friends, music, sunsets... the contact of a friend... the hug of a friend... holding hands, telling stories...

She takes his hand. They do the “asexual sex” embrace. They stay in it for the rest of the scene..

Can I tell you a story...? I was 17, walking down the Embankment. It was a Thursday night. Late. Half-term. I was with a friend, Sarah. We'd been shopping and then gone to see a play on the Southbank. It was my treat for her because she'd chosen her name that day. She'd chosen Sarah. I liked that name. I could see it was going to suit her more and more... And one day it would be perfect. We went for a walk after the play. Sarah in her new shoes and her new name. “Freaks!” We carried on walking. It was hardly the first time. Then suddenly I stopped, I turned round and shouted “You're the fucking freaks!” A bottle. In the air. Faster than a blink. Maybe he'd already thrown it. It missed me. Hit Sarah on the head. Smashed her skull. The pavement smashed it again. It was before I had a mobile. I didn't know whether to leave and get help or stay and stop her bleeding. It seemed to be coming out of her hair... the hair she'd been growing for a year... that I'd lathered that afternoon with honey scented shampoo and gently squeezed dry with a towel. They said that if she hadn't bled to death she would probably have had brain damage. Well, her dad thought she was brain damaged to begin with. They had it all on CCTV. It was on the news, Crimewatch even. “She'd only been Sarah for a day”, they said. But she hadn't. She'd always been Sarah. We never found out *their* names. Never identified. They were just too average looking. Too normal. I have the VHS upstairs. But I don't need it to replay it. I never know why I stop. And suddenly I'm all alone... Like now, I'm fucking all alone...

Peter: No you're not. I'm here.

Pause.

[Soothing voice.] There must have been some daphnia left in the tank... every now and then the goldfish would suddenly dart in a little frenzy. So much, the water was shaking. I'd taken Sal up to the bedroom. I could hear her crying. Lying on the bed, the softest place in the house, the epicentre of so much pain... Crying there like she's probably done a thousand times. I stood there and watched the sloshing water. Until eventually the fish calmed down, and the crying stopped. And the water began to settle. It began to settle...

The End