

By the same author

The Piccadilly Bushman
The Doll Trilogy
Kid Stakes
Other Times
Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

Ray Lawler



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TO JOHN SUMNER

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Summer of the Seventeenth Doll

English and so do we, we assume that "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" says the same thing to us that it does to Australians. But this theatregoer felt that the real quality . . . was escaping him. But . . . like a commonplace drama written around commonplace people. Although it is good natured it lacks distinction.

Walter Kerr in the *New York Herald Tribune* echoed this disappointment:

The difficulty is, I think, that the party is really over—not only for them, but for us. Somehow we have missed the moment of attachment: we have come in for the deflated recriminations, and the moral . . .

Richard Watts, of the *New York Post* perceived a likely reason for the failure with first-nighters:

The vitality of its impact is less startling in the American theatre, which goes in for vigour, whatever its other defects. And I suspect that its material, dealing as it does with the roving workers of a vast and youthful land, isn't as exotic to us as it appeared to the playgoers of Britain . . . Its difficulties are regrettable, yet I think the play possesses notable virtues which deserve our attention, respect and admiration.

The run lasted five weeks.

And so ended the spring of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Ethel Gabriel returned to Australia in March 1938. June Jago, Madge Ryan and Kenneth Warren settled in Britain and became part of the English theatre. *The Doll* continued to tour Australia through 1958; and in due course a mediocre film was made for Hollywood, directed by Leslie Norman with Ernest Borgnine as Roo, John Mills as Barney, Anne Baxter as Olive, Ethel Gabriel as Emma and Angela Lansbury as Pearl. The setting was moved to Sydney and a happy ending added with Olive changing her mind and marrying Roo. Since then the play has been performed in many languages, studied and revived in performance by the Q Theatre in Sydney in 1965, in which Ethel Gabriel gave one of her last performances before her death, one by the Nimrod Theatre in 1973 and by the Queensland Theatre Company in 1974. The Melbourne Theatre Company revived it in 1977 as part of *The Doll Trilogy*.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll was first performed by the Union Theatre Repertory Company at the Union Theatre, Melbourne, on 28th November 1955 with the following cast:

PEARL Roma Johnston
BUBBA Fenella Maguire
OLIVE June Jago
BARNEY Ray Lawler
EMMA Carmel Dunn
ROO Noel Ferrer
JOHNNIE Malcolm Billings
Directed by John Summer
Setting Designed by Anne Fraser

CHARACTERS:

BUBBA RYAN, twenty-two
PEARL CUNNINGHAM, a widow
OLIVE LEECH, thirty-nine
EMMA LEECH, approaching seventy
BARNEY IBBOT, forty
ROO WEBBER, forty-five
JOHNNIE DOWD, twenty-five

SETTING

Charming and fast-vanishing relics of Victorian architecture in Australia are the double-storied brick cottages with elaborately patterned ironwork decorating their verandahs—hanging in fringes from above, and forming pale, intricate barriers down below.

These are almost invariably found in the older section of the city, and the house of the play is situated in Carlton, a now scruffy but once fashionable suburb of Melbourne.

The setting is a composite study of a ground-floor front room, with adjacent hallway, staircase, and a passage leading to kitchen, held between a front and a back verandah. It should be noted that, although the main scene of the action is the interior of the house, the front verandah, with a section of overgrown, patiny garden before it should be visible either through a screen wall or a cut-away section. This is not an essential point with the back verandah, however, which exists mainly to provide a connection with Bubba's place next door.

Narrow-leaf French windows give entrance to the room from the back verandah, and a front door lets on to the other; both verandahs are profusely decorated with green shrubbery and ferns. These, together with the wildness of garden, should make an enshrining contrast to the interior of the house, which has a dominant note of cheerfully faded pink in its colour scheme.

There is little pattern or taste evident in the furniture, ranging as it does from the heavy upright piano bought second-hand by Emma in 1919, to the chromium smoker's stand won by Olive in a pub raffle last month. The main decorative features are the souvenirs brought down by Roo on past visits.

The most notable of these are sixteen keepsie dolls, wearing tinset headdresses and elaborately fuzzy skirts, attached to thin black canes shaped like walking-sticks. These peep copy from behind pictures, flower in vases and threes from vases, and are crossed over the mantel-piece. They have as their companions a flight of brilliantly plumaged stuffed Northern Queensland birds, a variety of tinted coral pieces and shells from the Great Barrier Reef, and two picture frames backed with black velvet to which cling a crowd of shimmering-winged tropical butterflies.

The entire effect should be a glowing interior luminosity protected from the drabness outside by a light-filtered, shifting curtain of greenery.

The play opens in early December, 1953.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

It is five o'clock on a warm Sunday afternoon. The room of the play has a dressed up look that is complementary to, and yet extending beyond, the usual decorative scheme. A table is heavily set for the big meal of the week, Sunday tea.

BUBBA RYAN, a shy-looking girl of twenty-two, is busily tying wide blue ribbons to two of the red-and-white-striped candies known as walking-sticks. At the same time she is chatting with a touch of wispy authority to PEARL CUNNINGHAM, who is sitting smoking nearby on a sofa, ostensibly looking through a magazine, but listening rather suspiciously. PEARL is a bigish woman, well corseted, with dyed hair. She is a widow driven back to earning a living by the one job she knows well, that of barmaid, though she would infinitely prefer something more classy—head saleswoman in a frock salon, for instance. The pub game, she feels, is rather crude. She is wearing what she refers to as her "good black", with a double string of artificial pearls. Very discreet.

BUBBA: ... So I was the only one went to the wedding. August it was, and the boys were away, though of course when Olive wrote up and told them, they sent down money for a present. But I had to buy it and take it along, Olive wouldn't have anythin' to do with it. Wouldn't even help me pick anythin' out.

PEARL: [questioningly] The ... boys ... didn't mind her getting married, then?

BUBBA: [frowning a little] I dunno. I s'pose they did, in a way—specially Barney, it must have been a bit of a shock to him—but like I said, they wouldn't do anythin' to stand in her way. That's how they are, sec. Olive was the one really kicked up a fuss. She wouldn't believe, even up till the Saturday afternoon, that Nance'd ever go through with it.

PEARL: If you ask me, I'd say this Nancy had her head screwed on the right way.

BUBBA: [slowly, forgetting the walking-sticks for a moment] She got tired of waiting, I think. Olive doesn't mind it, she

just looks forward to the next time, but it used to get on Nance's nerves a bit. 'N of course, she reads a lot, and this feller, this Harry Allaway—he works in a book shop, and he'd bring books into the pub for her. I s'pose that's how he got around her, really. I don't reckon Barney's ever read a book in his life.

PEARL: [*broodingly*] Mmmm. Well, I'm fond of a good book myself now and then.

BUBBA: [*smilingly tolerant*] You won't need any till after April. Even Nancy, she only used to read in the winter. . . . [*OLIVE's voice, nervously impudent, calls from upstairs.*]

OLIVE: Bubba.

BUBBA: [*moving up to the arch*] Yes?

OLIVE: Those earrings of mine with the green stones. . . .

BUBBA: Haven't seen 'em.

OLIVE: Ooh, I'll bet the old girl's taken a loan of them, she knew I wanted to. . . . [*With a change of voice*] No, it's all right, here they are. Couldn't see 'em for looking.

[*BUBBA comes back into room, smiles at PEARL and speaks half apologetically.*]

BUBBA: Olive always gets nervous. We used to have to joke her out of it, Nancy and me. Only this time I think she's got it worse'n usual. I mean she's probably worryin' a bit how you're going to fit in.

PEARL: [*sharply*] I don't have to fit in. What I'm here for is a. . . a visit, and if Olive's told you it's anythin' else. . . .

BUBBA: [*hastily*] Oh, she hasn't. She's hardly said a word.

PEARL: In that case, then, there's no need for you to get nasty.

BUBBA: [*surprised*] I wasn't being nasty.

PEARL: You were. Nasty-minded. What you said before 'bout not needin' any books till after April was bad enough. It strikes me you know too much of this place for your own good.

BUBBA: I've lived next door all my life, why shouldn't I know?

PEARL: I'm not going to argue, you just shouldn't, that's all.

BUBBA: But you said I was being nasty—what made you say that?

[*Under the directness of her gaze, PEARL shifts uneasily, not*

willing to implicate herself further. BUBBA returns to table and continues quietly.]

I'll bet Olive never told you there was anythin' nasty 'bout the lay-off season.

PEARL: [*staring straight ahead*] That's none of your business.

OLIVE: [*off*] Hang on to your hats and mittens, kids, here I come again.

[*She comes downstairs, wearing a crisp green and white summer frock, and moves with a trace of excitement into the room, showing herself off.*]

Well, whaddya think this time? Snazzy enough? It mightn't knock your eye out, but it's nice and cool, and it's the sort of thing Roo likes. Y'know. . . . fresh and green

. . . . [*She postures, waiting for their comments. Despite a surface cynicism and thirty-nine years of age, there is something curiously unfinished about OLIVE, an eagerness that properly belongs to extreme youth. This is intensified at the moment by her nervous anticipation. She is a barmaid at the same city hotel as PEARL, but, unlike the latter, she enjoys the job. BUBBA, still a little unsettled by her spat with PEARL, blunts hastily:*]

BUBBA: Yes, it's—it's lovely.

[*OLIVE gives a nervous laugh and embraces her.*]

OLIVE: Pearl?

PEARL: [*reluctantly*] Yes, not my taste, but it suits you.

OLIVE: [*crossing to the mirror and making last-minute adjustments*] Well, it'll have to do, anyway. I haven't got time to change again. [*Turning to survey the room*] Now, what else is there? I know—get the beer in!

BUBBA: [*quickly*] I'll do it.

OLIVE: [*after her retreating figure*] Would yer, love? In the fridge. God, she's a good kid, that.

PEARL: Yeah. I'd say she knows more than her prayers, just the same.

OLIVE: [*mildly astonished*] Bubba? Don't be silly, she's only a baby.

PEARL: Not too much of a baby. If Vera ever spoke to me like that, I'd put her straight back across my knee. And I don't think it's nice the way this one acts. . . .

OLIVE: How?

PEARL: Just as if she owns the place.

OLIVE: Well, whaddya expect? She's been runnin' in and out ever since she was old enough to walk. Roo and Barney she treats as if they were uncles. [*Laughing suddenly, turning to shake her head at PEARL*] God, you're a wag. Talk about cautious Kate!

PEARL: Why?

OLIVE: Look at them suitcases by the stairs. You'd think someone was getting ready for a moonlight flit.

PEARL: [*firms*] That's different. I've taken my overnighter up, and I'm not taking anythin' else till I'm certain.

OLIVE: Don't be silly. I told yer, he's all right.

PEARL: Yes. Well, I'll find that out for meself, if you don't mind.

OLIVE: Oh, nobody's trying to talk you into anything. Just don't take too long to decide, that's all.

PEARL: Where's that photo you said you were gunna show me?

OLIVE: Oh, yeah. [*Collecting a framed enlargement from the sideboard and taking it to her*] You can see him much better in this one, those others he was always clownin' about.

[PEARL takes the photograph and studies it.]

It's the four of us at Luna Park the year before last. Nance is on the end there. Can you see what I mean?

PEARL: What?

OLIVE: You're a bit alike, you two.

PEARL: [*frowns*] How'd you mean?

OLIVE: Somethin' in the way you look. I noticed it the first time that we met.

PEARL: Can't see it myself. She looks to me like she was drunk.

OLIVE: Oh well, she was. Yes. She'd been on the whisky.

Right after that was taken she got sick on the Ocean Wave.

PEARL: [*nodding distastefully*] Mmm. I can imagine she'd be the sort to get sick on an Ocean Wave.

OLIVE: She wasn't like that, really. Nance was a—[*a hundred memories*]—she was a real good sport. Barney was pretty mad about her.

PEARL: [*snorting*] You can see that, the way he's holding her.

Bit intimate, isn't it?

OLIVE: Listen, lovey, you better make up your mind. These are a couple sugarcane-cutters fresh from the tropics, not two professors from the university. [*She carries the picture back to the sideboard.*]

PEARL: I know one thing, he'll never lay hands on me like that in public.

OLIVE: Won't he? Honest, you've never met a bloke like Barney. Only about so big, and yet—I dunno—the women go mad on him.

PEARL: I'll believe it when I see it. Didn't seem to stop her goin' off and gettin' married.

OLIVE: She made a mistake.

PEARL: Who says?

OLIVE: I say. Marriage is different, and Nancy knew it. Just because there was no hope of hooking on with Barney . . .

PEARL: Her own fault. I'll guarantee she made herself cheap. So long as a woman keeps her self-respect, any man will marry her.

OLIVE: I wouldn't bank on that, Pearl. Not with Barney.

PEARL: Oh, I'm not anticipating anythin', believe me. But from all you've said, it's about time some decent woman took this feller in hand. I don't reckon I've ever heard of anyone with more reasons to get married in all my life.

OLIVE: Maybe I shouldna told you.

PEARL: [*darkly*] Oh, don't worry, I would've found out. I'm a mother. A thing like that—you couldn't trick me.

OLIVE: He'll probably tell you himself, anyway; he doesn't make any secret of it—

[BUBBA enters quickly, her arms full of bottles of beer.]

BUBBA: Oh golly, these are cold . . .

OLIVE: Here, let me help you.

PEARL: Put 'em on the table and you'll get rings on the cloth.

OLIVE: [*as they set out bottles at regular intervals*] Doesn't matter.

A few bottles make a party look a party, I think. [*To*

BUBBA] Did you do your walking-sticks?

BUBBA: Yes, I haven't put 'em up yet. [*She moves to collect them.*]

PEARL: What are they for?

OLIVE: Tell her, Bubba.

BUBBA: [*lamely*] Oh, they're just a bit of a joke. One's for Roo and one's for Barney.

OLIVE: It started off the first year they came down, she was only a little thing—how old were you, Bub?

BUBBA: [*as she takes walking-sticks to set them up on mantelpiece*] Five.

OLIVE: She was always in and out here, and when Roo bought me the first lot of presents and she saw the doll among 'em she howled her eyes out. She wanted a doll on a walkin'-stick too, she said. So out the two of them go—after eight o'clock at night it was—tryin' to bang up a shop to get her one. But all they could buy were these lolly walkin'-sticks, and in the end that's what they had to bring her back. Well, she was as happy as Larry; off she went to bed, one in each hand. After that they always brought 'em down every year . . .

BUBBA: Till I was fifteen . . .

OLIVE: Oh yes, this is funny, listen. They didn't seem to wake up that she was gettin' too old for lollies, see, they kept on bringin' 'em down, bringin' 'em down, so Nancy put her up to a dodge. The year after the War, when she was fifteen, and they arrived with their bundles of presents, there she had a walking-stick for each of *them*, tied up with blue ribbons, sitting on the mantelpiece. It taught 'em a lesson all right. Ever since, whenever they've brought me a doll, they've always brought her down gloves, or scart, or—or something like that.

[*There is a faint pause. PEARL is clearly unimpressed by the story, and makes little attempt to hide it.*]

PEARL: I see.

BUBBA: [*a trifle ashamed*] I said it was only a bit of a joke. Is there anything else you want me to do, Ol?

OLIVE: No, I don't think so, love . . . but you're gunna stay and meet them, aren't yer?

BUBBA: No. I've got to change and everything. I—I think I'll come in after tea.

OLIVE: [*understandingly*] Just as you like. [*Moving to verandah with BUBBA*] What about comin' in and havin' tea with us?

BUBBA: [*anxious to escape*] No, I'll come in after.

OLIVE: Well, don't forget now.

BUBBA: I won't.

[*She goes. OLIVE surveys the sky.*]

OLIVE: It's starting to get dark. I wonder where that mother of mine can have got to?

PEARL: Where's she supposed to have gone?

OLIVE: The community singin'. But that oughta been out long ago.

PEARL: [*consulting her watch, and rising with alarm*] It's after six.

OLIVE: [*dashing back into the room*] Yeah. Oh, she's an old shrewdy, that one. I wouldn't mind bettin' she's gone down to the terminal to meet them. She'll get a fiver each out of them before they find a taxi.

PEARL: You shouldn't say things like that about your mother.

OLIVE: Listen, a fiver's nothing. She shakes them down for all they're worth the whole time they're here. [*Switching on the radio which presently plays a dreamy waltz*] Course they're awake up, but they don't seem to mind. Fact, I think Roo likes it. [*Looking at the photograph*] Good old Roo. I reckon he's got the best-looking mouth in the world.

PEARL: [*inspecting her make-up at the mantelpiece*] He's certainly a better proposition than the other one.

OLIVE: Oh, but you can't compare them, they're different types. I mean Roo's the big man of the two, but it's Barney makes you laugh. And like I said, it's Barney the women go for.

PEARL: [*aggravated*] I dunno why I always have to get tangled up with little men, just the same. Even Wallie, he was shorter than me. The day we got married I had to wear low heels . . .

OLIVE: Barney's not all that short. You wait, you'll see.

PEARL: Yeah. Well, he'd better not start countin' on anythin', I haven't made up me mind yet. How do you reckon my hair looks?

OLIVE: [*taking a cursory glance*] Pretty good.

PEARL: I don't think that new girl round at Rene's knows how to handle it, she doesn't seem to get down to the roots. [*Turning suddenly*] What do they call him Barney for,

ANYWAY?

OLIVE: Barney's bull, I think. His right name's Arthur.

PEARL: Oh.

OLIVE: [*enjoyably*] Did I ever tell you 'bout Roo's name? I used to think at first that it was short for Kanga, and that's what I called him once. He just looked at me silly like, and said: Kanga? Well, I said, isn't that what the Roo's part of? You should've seen him—he roared! Then he told me what Roo was, short for his real name, and just see if you can guess what that is?

[*PEARL shakes her head. OLIVE continues delightedly.*]
Reuben—wouldn't it kill yer? Reuben!

PEARL: It's out the Bible.

OLIVE: [*ironically*] Is it? I didn't know that.

[*There is the sound of a car horn offstage. OLIVE reacts excitedly and swoops to the window.*]

Oooh, me beads . . . that's not them, is it? No. Car up the road. Nearly died. [*Surveying the table*] Not that there's much more to do. I'll get some glasses out 'n' bring the salad in.

[*She exits, a second or two later breaking into a faintly soprano offstage, taking up the melody from the radio. PEARL stares the room over, then crosses to close the French windows. She moves to pick up the photograph, and studies it closely. OLIVE re-enters, carrying glasses. The daylight is gradually fading from the room.*]

Hey, did you hear that Charlie in the saloon bar last night? All the time we was cleanin' up he kept whistlin' "Old Black Magic". [*Placing glasses*] Havin' a go at me, a course; he's known about Roo for years, and he always gets in a crack every time. Not that I ever let on, mind yer.

[*She looks across at PEARL who is frowning over the photograph, and speaks with a note of reserve.*]
Well, what's the matter now?

PEARL: Nothin'. I'm just havin' another look.

OLIVE: [*moving in and taking the photograph from her*] If you don't watch out you're gunna start hating the poor bloke before he even gets here.

[*She goes back to sideboard with it.*]

PEARL: No I won't. [*Sitting, righteously*] At the same time,

I'm not letting myself in for any nasty mess, either.

OLIVE: [*contemptuously*] Nasty mess! What makes you think I'd have anythin' to do with it if there was any mess about it?

PEARL: It doesn't matter for you, you haven't got a daughter to think of. Vera's just at that age I gotta be careful. If she cottons on to me doing anything wrong, she's likely to break out the same way.

OLIVE: [*in quick hostility, snapping off the radio*] Now look, that's one thing I'm not gunna stand for. Right from the start!

PEARL: What?

OLIVE: You know what! That respectable mother stunt.

Don't you try and put that over on me.

PEARL: I didn't say a word.

OLIVE: You said wrong, didn't yer? 'N' nasty mess? That's enough. I've told yer over 'n' over again what this lay-off is, yet every time you open your mouth you make it sound like something—low and dirty. Well, if that's the way you look at it, you don't have to stay, y'know—nobody's forcin' you to make any decisions about it—you can get your bags from the hall and clear out before they get here.

PEARL: [*defensively*] Just because I don't think it's altogether proper.

OLIVE: Yeah. Just because of that.

PEARL: Nobody would say it was a decent way of living.

OLIVE: Wouldn't they? I would! I've rubbed shoulders with all sorts from the time I was fourteen, and I've never come across anything more decent in my life. Decency is—it depends on the people. And don't you say it doesn't!

PEARL: I meant decent like marriage. That's different, you said yourself it was.

OLIVE: [*with a slight shudder*] It's different all right. Compared to all the marriages I know, what I got is . . . [*groping for depth of expression*] is five months of heaven every year. And it's the same for them. Seven months they spend up there killin' themselves in the cane season, and then they come down here to live a little. That's what the lay-off is. Not just playing around and spending a lot of money, but a time for livin'. You think I haven't sized that up against what other women have? I laugh at them every

time they try to tell me. Even waiting for Roo to come back is more exciting than anything they've got. So you make up your mind right now—you're either going to be polite to them and hang on until you get to know Barney well enough to decide, or you're gunna get out of here right now.

[*OLIVE crosses to the table and wrenches the top from a bottle of beer, while PEARL fiddles uneasily. There is a pause. Finally*

PEARL breaks the silence, speaking with a rather helpless shrug.]

PEARL: Well, I dunno what it's gunna be like livin' here if you can't even pass an opinion on things.

[*OLIVE gives vent to a loud "Aah" of derision and pours two glasses of beer. PEARL continues, more defensively than ever.*]

That's all I was doin', passing an opinion. Anyone's entitled to do that.

[*Holding the two glasses, OLIVE thrusts one at her.*]

OLIVE: Here, sit down and shut up if you can't talk sense.

[*OLIVE moves to the window, and leans against piano looking out through lace curtains and sipping her beer. PEARL speaks rather indignantly.*]

PEARL: You told me yourself they hardly ever write you from the time they go away till the time they come back.

OLIVE: [*without turning*] They don't have to write me, I know where they are. Working their way through up north.

PEARL: Yes, but at least they could let you know how they're getting on.

OLIVE: [*slightly exasperated*] What, cutting sugarcane? What can they say about that? Roo's one of the best men they've got—runs his own gang—but even down here you never get him yappin' about his season's tally. That's all his part of it.

PEARL: [*defeated*] Well, it beats me how you can stand it. I know with Wallie I used to worry all the time. Even if he was late coming home from work I used to worry.

OLIVE: With these you don't have to. These are men, not the sort we see go rolling home to their wives every night, but men.

PEARL: I know, you keep tellin' me. I never knew there was any difference.

OLIVE: You never knew!

[*There is a pause, and then she speaks in a voice of defiant pride.*]

Nancy used to say it was how they'd walk into the pub as if they owned it, even just in the way they walked you could spot it. All round would be the regulars, soft city blokes having their drinks and their little arguments, and then in would come Roo and Barney. They wouldn't say anything—they didn't have to—there'd just be the two of them walkin' in, then a kind of wait for a second or two, and quiet. After that, without a word, the regulars'd stand aside to let 'em through, just as if they was a—a couple kings. She always reckoned they made the rest of the mob look like a bunch of skinned rabbits. [*Softly*] Poor old Nancy.

PEARL: She got what she wanted, didn't she?

OLIVE: [*hangrily*] I'd like to ask her. Right now, with them expected any minute, and her sitting chained up to that—book bloke—I'd like to ask her if she thinks it was worth it. And I bet that'd be one question she wouldn't be able to laugh her way out of!

PEARL: [*after a pause, unconvincingly*] Well, you know her, I don't. I'm sorry if I put you out.

OLIVE: [*mollified, as she goes to turn on standard lamp above piano*] Ah, my fault for flyin' off the handle. It was just that for a moment you sounded like my mother. She's fond of Roo, y'know, but every time he's away and we have a row Emma throws him up at me like a dirty dish-cloth. Every time!

PEARL: [*sympathetically*] I know. Aunt of mine was like that. Used to store everythin' up and let it go at family funerals.

OLIVE: [*tauntly*] Oh, chronic! Doesn't it make you mad?

[*She crosses and switches on a second lamp.*]

PEARL: They just want to make trouble, really.

OLIVE: That's all. Here, empty that and let's have another. [*She downs her drink.*]

PEARL: No, you have one, I haven't started this yet. Feel a bit gassy.

OLIVE: [*pouring her own*] C'mon, we'll have to get rid of this bottle otherwise they're gunna think we started off without them.

PEARL: [interrupting] Listen . . .

OLIVE: What?

[She pauses, then rushes to window as a car horn sounds offstage in mid-distance.]

Too late—that's them now!

[She sweeps into action, gulps down most of her beer, grabs the bottle and rushes over to stow it and the glass under the table.

PEARL rises and gestures with her glass in a near panic.]

PEARL: What'll I do with this?

OLIVE: Drink it, of course.

[She dashes over to pick up a small paper bag from the sideboard transfers something from it to her mouth, then thrusts the bag on PEARL, who is hastily swallowing beer and tidying her hair at the mantelpiece.]

Peppermints!

[Meanwhile, offstage, the taxi has drawn up in front of the house and has sounded a merry "Om diddly om pom" on the horn. As OLIVE moves towards the front door we hear excited voices.]

ROO: [off] Hey, wake up in there.

BARNEY: [off] You little trimmer, Emma, you little beauty.

[BARNEY moves easily up onto the verandah, carrying EMMA over his shoulder, EMMA shrieking with laughter and pretended anger, beating at him with aged fists. As OLIVE opens the door, BARNEY yells.]

Hey, missus, where's your rubbish heap? Got some old sugar gone dry.

[Laughing, OLIVE stands aside and they rock into the house, coming into prominence in the archway. ROO enters onto front verandah, OLIVE moves into his arms and they kiss long and warmly. PEARL is regarding BARNEY's antics with Emma in a restrained apprehension which she hopes looks like amusement, when BARNEY focuses her for the first time. He slips EMMA's rear and lets her slide down onto the sofa.]

Here, here, stop all this, you wicked old thing, you oughta have more sense, playin' up like that in front of visitors.

EMMA: [pummelling him] It was you—you started it.

BARNEY: [holding her off, his eyes on PEARL] That's enough, cut it out now or I really will toss you out with the rubbish—look at the lady watching you.

EMMA: [screwing round] Oh, her! She's the one I was tellin' you about.

BARNEY: Is she? Well, you nip out and give 'em a hand with the bags then.

[He puts her to one side and moves down on PEARL, but EMMA stands her ground. She is a wizened, life-battered wisp of a woman nearly seventy, with no illusions about humanity, expecting the worst from it, and generally crouching with cynical delight when her expectations are fulfilled. Her eye, as she watches this meeting, is definitely satirical. BARNEY swengers down, and PEARL stands in front of the fireplace, self-consciously formal. He pauses before her with a wide boyish grin.]

'Lo. Spose they've told you about me, have they? I'm Barney.

PEARL: [stammering] Yes. Olive did mention—I'm Mrs Cunningham. How d'yer do.

[She offers her hand awkwardly and he takes it, not shaking it, but holding it gently as if to feel its weight.]

BARNEY: I'm pretty good. How's yerself?

[He puts his other hand on top of hers, and, still grinning broadly, forces her to meet his eyes. BARNEY oozes most of his success in love to this natural technique: he has an overwhelming weakness for women, and makes them recognise it. Previous mention of him as a little man is not quite correct. He is short certainly, but not much below medium height, and solidly built. Probably his constant association with the bigger ROO emphasises his lack of inches. His manner is assertive, confident and impudently bright, perhaps a little overdone as a defiance to his forty years and the beginning of a pot belly. He has a returned soldiers' badge in his lapel. PEARL tries to carry off her embarrassment lightly.]

PEARL: Oh, you know, a bit hot.

[EMMA gives a cackle of laughter and skitters off towards the kitchen, passing OLIVE who, after her close silent meeting on the verandah with ROO, is returning to the front room. Meanwhile ROO has gone offstage and shortly reappears with two suitcases.]

BARNEY: [calling after EMMA] Cut out the rough stuff now.

OLIVE: [embracing BARNEY] What's the matter with the old girl?

BARNEY: [*giggling*] Phenyle decay, I think. It's getting her down.

OLIVE: [*moving into the room*] I suppose you two have met by now, uh?

BARNEY: Well, we've got as far as Barney and Mrs Cunningham.

OLIVE: Ah, Pearl it is. Don't let us have any of that Mister and Missus stuff. Pearl!

BARNEY: Pearl! [*Smiling, then swinging jovially up to OLIVE*] And how about you? Not down at Swannston Street to see us in.

[*He slaps his hands together suggestively and she fends him off.*]

OLIVE: Cut it out now—didn't want to have you two meetin' at the Airways 'mong a lot of people, that's all.

BARNEY: What—was you frightened I'd go off like a jet or somethin'?

[*He turns and winks at PEARL, who smiles feebly in return.*]

OLIVE: We'd have brought you down pretty quick if you had. Where's Roo? Come on, Roo...

[*He detaches himself from the arch against which he has been leaning, and OLIVE goes up to take him lovingly by the arm and steers him down.*]

I want you to meet a friend of mine. Pearl Cunningham,

Roo Webber.

PEARL: [*shaking hands*] How d'yer do.

ROO: Pleased to meet yer.

[*ROO smiles slowly at her, and PEARL relaxes a little. He is a man's man with a streak of gentleness, a mixture that invites confidence. Tall, forty-one years of age, hair tinged with grey, a rather battered face with a well-cut mouth. Recent experiences have etched a faint line of bewilderment between his eyes, but his manner seems free and easy-going. Both men are deeply tanned, a strong contrast to the white fleshiness of the women.*]

Mrs Cunningham, is it?

OLIVE: [*quickly*] Yes, she's a widow.

ROO: [*understandingly*] Ah.

[*BARNEY sees the walking-sticks on the mantelpiece and grabs one in a sudden burst of high spirits.*]

BARNEY: Hey, look at this, willya? Where is she? Where's that Bubba?

OLIVE: Home.

BARNEY: [*heading for the windows*] What's she doing at home? She oughta be in here.

[*He pulls open the windows and steps onto the back verandah.*]

OLIVE: She's coming in after.

[*OLIVE makes to arrest BARNEY but ROO holds her.*]

BARNEY: [*cupping his hands and yelling*] Bubbbaa, what are yer hiding for? Reckon we're gunna lam into you with a walkin' stick or something?

BUBBA: [*off, distant and laughing*] Take a bigger man than you, Mr Ibbot.

[*ROO joins BARNEY on the verandah as OLIVE guides PEARL soothingly to the sofa. OLIVE and ROO speak together.*]

OLIVE: Don't worry, they'll calm down in a minute.

ROO: [*yelling to BUBBA*] What about me, then?

[*BUBBA laughs in the distance.*]

How're you goin', Bub?

BUBBA: [*off*] Fine.

OLIVE: [*coming to the French windows*] Hey, cut it out, you two, it's Sunday. Come inside, you'll see her after.

[*OLIVE takes BARNEY's arm to draw him into the room.*]

ROO: [*calling in farewell*] Don't you be too long comin' in, now.

BUBBA: [*off*] I won't.

[*Inside the room, BARNEY sweeps OLIVE off her feet, twirls her around, cuddles his cheek next to hers and speaks expressively.*]

BARNEY: Ah, my favourite bairmaid.

OLIVE: You'd better not let Pearl hear you say that.

BARNEY: [*delightedly*] Don't tell me she's...

OLIVE: [*nodding*] Same pub—same bar!

BARNEY: [*jubilantly moving in to sit by PEARL on the sofa*] Whacko! That makes it just like old times.

[*PEARL wriggles uneasily, EMMA rushes into the room, furious.*]

EMMA: Thieves! Dirty thieves! Pinchin' an old woman's food while her back's turned.

BARNEY: Hullo, what's biting Emma?

EMMA: Vinegar, that's what's biting me. Who's been at my vinegar?

OLIVE: I took a tiny little skerrick to put in a salad.

EMMA: [*ferocely*] A whole half-bottle, that's how much a

skerrick it was. Robbing your own mother. Whose house do you think this is, anyway?

OLIVE: I pay the rates and taxes—

EMMA: Never mind that, I own it, and things in it is private. I've told you before to keep away from my cupboard.

OLIVE: That makes us quits then. I told you to keep away from the Airways.

EMMA: The community singin' was out early, else I wouldn't 'ave gone near the place. And you oughta be damned glad I did go, or these larrikins wouldn't be here...

BARNEY: [*covering up*] Hold your horses, Emma, you dunno what you're talking about.

EMMA: Don't I just?

ROO: Kickin' up a fuss about a bit of vinegar. You got enough to buy a new bottle, didn't yer?

EMMA: [*scoffingly*] Two quid, two lousy fiddlies, a fortune!

[*To her daughter*] I'm drummin' you for the last time, you touch my cupboard again and I'm off down to Russell Street...

[BARNEY, ROO and OLIVE join in a chorus; it is evidently a well-known threat.]

BARNEY } Just as fast as me legs can carry me.
OLIVE }

ROO

EMMA: [*terribly*] Yez'll be laughing the other side your face once the Johns git after yer.

[*She stumps out. BARNEY calls after her.*]

BARNEY: What do you need vinegar for anyway, you wicked old thing, you're sour enough now.

[*There is a general laugh. EMMA's entrance has dissipated a lot of strangeness.*]

ROO: Better get the bags out of the way, I s'pose.

[*He moves towards the arch. OLIVE interposes quickly.*]

OLIVE: Just your own, then. Don't take Barney's up.

BARNEY: Why? What's the matter with mine?

OLIVE: You're big and ugly enough to carry 'em yourself.

[ROO laughs shortly, picks up one of the cases and exits upstairs.

BARNEY *meantime threatens OLIVE playfully.*]

BARNEY: Oh, I can see I'm gunna have to take you in hand, they been lettin' yer run wild.

OLIVE: Yeah, stout and oysters. [*Moving to the mantelpiece*] Here, I've got a telegram for you. Came yesterday.

BARNEY: [*taking it*] For me? [*Eyeing it off*] Wonder what's wrong?

OLIVE: It'll be inside.

[*He begins to open it reluctantly. OLIVE crosses to PEARL and speaks with a broad hint in her voice.*]

Pearl, go out and rescue that salad from the old girl, will you? She's just as likely to tip it down the gullely trap.

PEARL: [*thankfully*] Yes. She might, too.

[PEARL exits discreetly. BARNEY reading the telegram, speaks with *bravado*.]

BARNEY: Whad'ya know—it's from Nancy.

OLIVE: [*tightly*] I guessed it would be.

BARNEY: [*reading*] Up there Cazaly, lots of love, Nance.

[*Folding the slip*] Where's she living now?

OLIVE: Never you mind, you leave her alone.

BARNEY: Just wanted to say hello.

OLIVE: Yes, we all know your sort of hello. You had your chance with Nancy.

BARNEY: What'd you bet I couldn't get her back?

OLIVE: It wouldn't do you a scrap of good. Not in this place, anyway. The day she got married I swore I'd never have the two of you here together again no matter what happened. Pearl's the one you've got to concentrate on.

BARNEY: [*turning away easily*] Ah, Pearl'll be all right.

OLIVE: Will she? Don't you be too sure of that. Fact, she's got her bags piled up by the stairs, 'n' if she doesn't take to you by tomorrow morning she's shifting out.

BARNEY: Why? What's the matter?

OLIVE: She's not too shook on the whole thing. Doesn't understand it, for one thing; then she's got a daughter, kid of eighteen. Livin' with relations at present, but it makes Pearl nervous, she's scared of putting her foot wrong. Then when I wisad her up about your handful of errors, that made her more nervous still—

BARNEY: [*astounded*] Don't tell me she's jibbin' at her age?

OLIVE: Oh, it's not for herself. She just doesn't think you've done the right thing.

BARNEY: [*indignantly*] What the hell does she know about

it? Did you tell her how regular I've been, coughin' up every week?

OLIVE: Yes, but she says it's not the money, it's the principle.

BARNEY: [*disgusted*] Oh, one of them, is she?

OLIVE: No, she ain't, she's a very decent sort. 'Matter of fact, I think she's got some idea of reforming you.

BARNEY: Yes? Well, that's been tried before today, too.

OLIVE: She's got this kid, Vera, and I'd say she was lookin' for some sort of nest for the pair of 'em.

BARNEY: With me? [*As she nods*] Well, what a thing to let a bloke in for!

OLIVE: You don't have to do anything about it if you don't want to, not even talk to her. But I'm warnin' you, you pass her up for any of those painted crows of yours, don't think you can bring 'em home here to live.

BARNEY: Looks like Pearl or nothin' then, eh? [*Expansively*] Righto, I'll have a word with her after. She'll be jake.

OLIVE: Pretty sure of yourself, aren't yer?

BARNEY: [*winking*] My oath.

OLIVE: Don't kid yourself, Barney. It won't be any walk-over.

BARNEY: No? Well, now I'll tell you something. You've got a bit of a battle ahead of you, too.

[*She looks questioningly at him. He speaks on a quieter note.*] You heard what Emma said, 'bout if it hadn't been for her we wouldn't be here? 'S true.

OLIVE: [*disbelieving*] Aah...

BARNEY: I'm telling yer, when you weren't down at the terminal, for a minute or two Roo was talkin' 'bout tryin' to get in some joint he knows at North Melbourne—

OLIVE: [*staring*] Lots of times I haven't been down to meet yer. Saturdays...

BARNEY: He wasn't mad at yer not being there. It's nothing like that.

OLIVE: What then?

BARNEY: [*hesitating*] He's broke.

OLIVE: Roo?

BARNEY: I had to buy his ticket down.

OLIVE: [*incredulous*] But how can he be broke? Before he even gets here?

BARNEY: [*sighing*] You dunno what a bloody awful season it's been, everythin' went wrong. Worst we've ever had, I reckon.

OLIVE: Couldn't you get work?

BARNEY: [*scornfully*] Oh it wasn't that, the work was there, any amount of it. It was just plain bad luck.

[*She makes a move towards the archway.*]

Now don't go runnin' up to him, he's chockablock, you'd better hear it from me.

[*She hesitates, then returns.*]

OLIVE: [*flatly*] What happened?

BARNEY: Well, first set off, Roo, the silly cow, strains his back—There's no need to throw a fit, nothin' serious, nearly better. But it slowed him down all through the season, see. [*Frankly putting his cards on the table*] Roo's a pretty hard man, y'know, on the job. Got no use for anyone can't pull their weight; and bein' able to pick and choose almost, 'coz everyone knows he's one of the best gangers there is, gen'rally he gets a champion bunch together. But he's gotta be hard doin' it sometimes. [*Facing her*] This year he got the boys to turn off Tony Moreno. You must've heard us talk of Tony, real character, everyone likes him, but anyway Roo thought he was gettin' too slow. Instead he takes on a big young bloke we'd heard a lot about, name of Johnnie Dowd. Cracked up to be as fast as lightning'.

OLIVE: Was he?

BARNEY: Yeah. Not as good as Roo, when he's fit, mind yer, but he could run rings round the best of us. And this time he even made Roo look a bit sick.

OLIVE: Did Roo know?

BARNEY: Well, that's the point. He's fast at both loadin' and cuttin', this Dowdie, and got a head on him, just the same as Roo, and it's not often you get fellers like that. The boys noticed it and they started pickin', tellin' Roo he'd have to watch out or they'd have a new ganger. Didn't mean nothin' by it, just jokin', but Roo takes it up the wrong way. Instead of pointin' out that he had a bad back, he puts himself to work by this Dowd—gunna show him up, see. Well, that's just what he shouldna done, the

kid towelled him up proper. I never seen Roo git so mad, in no time at all he'd made it a running fight between 'em...

OLIVE: The damned fool!

BARNEY: That's what I told him. Calm down, I says, what's it matter...

OLIVE: [*exasperated*] And with a busted back, how the hell could he win?

BARNEY: [*shrugging*] I dunno. Reckons he's twice as good as everyone else, I s'pose. Anyway, 'bout two months ago, flamin' hot day it was, gettin' near knock-off time, they had a blue.

OLIVE: Bad?

BARNEY: Pretty bad. I was right on the spot when it happened. Started off over nothing. They was workin' side by side, and when Dowdie finishes the strip he looks back to see how far behind Roo was. Well, right at that moment Roo's knees went. Never seen anythin' like it, they just buckled under him and there he was, down on the ground. This strikes Dowd as bein' funny, see, and he starts to laugh. Well, that did it. Roo went him and it was on, cane knives and the lot. Took six of us to separate 'em, could've been murder. I reckon. Course the boys all blamed Roo for it, so he did his block again, packed up his gear and walked off. [*After an uncomfortable pause*] I didn't see him after that till I picked him up at Brisbane a week ago.

OLIVE: You didn't go with him?

BARNEY: No.

OLIVE: Why not?

BARNEY: [*disturbed*] I dunno. It was all messed up. You know what Roo's always been to me, a sort of little tin god. I've never seen him in the wrong before.

OLIVE: He's been wrong plenty of times.

BARNEY: [*strongly*] Not to me he hasn't. Not even in the—
War.

OLIVE: Well, go on. What happened?

BARNEY: Nothin'. He went off and I stayed. Then, like I said, I picked him up in Brisbane a week ago. By then he hardly had a razoo.

OLIVE: What was it—booze?

BARNEY: Yeah. Been hitting it pretty heavy. We didn't talk much about it, I think he's got a spite on me for not walkin' out with him. But honest, the way I felt at the time, I just couldn't—
[*She is staring accusingly at him, and he escapes her eyes with a twisted shrug.*]

Apart from that, I needed the money. And of course I had to put me foot in it all over again by tellin' him how they made Dowdie ganger in his place, and what a bottling job he done.

[*Unperturbed by either of them, Roo moves downstairs to stand in the entrance.*]

Well, you gotta give him credit, for a kid he made a very smart fist of it...

ROO: [*caudely*] Yeah. And have you told her 'bout the big booze-up he threw when yez all got back to Cairns?

[*BARNEY looks at him and then turns away, ashamed.*]

BARNEY: Bein' sarcastic won't get you anywhere.

ROO: Blabber-guising doesn't take you far, either.

OLIVE: It's not his fault. I asked him. [*Addressing BARNEY*]
Better take your cases up.

[*He moves toward the arch and she adds hastily, remembering.*]
Oh, you're in the little back room for tonight.

[*BARNEY grins wryly, with a flash of his former spirits.*]
BARNEY: Is it as bad as that?

[*She nods and he carries on to pick up his bag and exit upstairs. There is an embarrassed pause.*]

ROO: If I know him when he opens his big trap, I don't s'pose he's left much to tell.

OLIVE: [*on edge*] One or two things. Where you was thinkin' of going in North Melbourne, for instance?

ROO: [*shrugging irritably*] Aah, who the hell cares about that?
OLIVE: Me, for one. I'd like to know what's around there you can't get here.

ROO: [*sulkily*] I got a kind of cousin, used to keep a grocery shop. Bloke named Wallace.

OLIVE: Well, that's lovely, that is. After seventeen years, the first time there's trouble, that's who you go to, bloke named Wallace in a grocery shop.

ROO: [turning on her angrily] Olive, I'm broke. D'yer understand? Flat, stoney, sinkin' broke!

OLIVE: [shrilly] Yeah, and I'd care a lot for that, wouldn't I? That's how I've always met you, standin' on the front verandah with a cash register, looking like a—like a bloody—

[She breaks off, overcome by sudden gasping tears, gropes for a handkerchief. ROO is troubled and comes from behind to take her in his arms, drawing her to him with the gentle ease of long familiarity.]

ROO: [humbly] Olive, I wasn't thinkin'. Aw, c'mon, hon, you know I didn't mean that.

OLIVE: [muffled] Fellers like you—yer ought to be kicked.

ROO: I was lookin' for something to make it easy.

OLIVE: [twisting in his arms to face him] What's wrong with me? I'm workin', ain't I?

ROO: [stabberly] I won't bludge on you.

OLIVE: [tearfully] You can lay off here just as you always have, and—and I can—

ROO: [finally] I won't bludge. I'll get a job or somethin', olive: A job?

ROO: Well, something or other, we'll think about it tomorrow. Now stop your crying and let's forget it. It'll work out all right. You pleased to see me?

OLIVE: [hoarsely] If you hadna come I would have gone looking for you with a razor.

[They hold each other in a long kiss.]

ROO: You know what we both need, don't yer? A nice long beer to cool us down...

[OLIVE draws away from him, giggling, her spirits already swinging back on the upsurge.]

OLIVE: I've already had some. Me and Pearl was in the middle of cracking a bottle when you got here. [Fishing it out from under the table and holding it aloft] Look, we hid it so you wouldn't know.

ROO: Well, what a pair of clowns you are! [Suddenly it seems very funny, and they roar with laughter. She rushes up to the arch. He crosses to the sideboard, turns on the radio, which presently plays gay infectious music.]

C'mon, my tongue's hanging out after that long plane

tip.

OLIVE: [calling upstairs] Up there, Cazaly—come on down—the party's on—

ROO: Get 'em all in...

OLIVE: [calling towards the kitchen] Pearl, don't be all night with that salad. I told him...

PEARL: [off] Be right with you.

[BARNEY comes downstairs with an armful of presents, among them the seventeenth doll. He sneaks past OLIVE to enter the room and hands the doll to ROO, who quickly hides it behind his back.]

OLIVE: Come on, Emma, Roo's poured you a beer.

EMMA: [off, her voice raised in mechanical fury] Wouldn't soil me lips.

[Laughing, OLIVE comes back from the kitchen entrance. PEARL enters bearing a large bowl of salad, followed by EMMA. When OLIVE is at archway ROO holds high the gift.]

ROO: Here you are—the seventeenth doll!

[She gives a cry of sheer happiness and rushes down into his encircling arms. BARNEY is standing by, watching with a grin. Music reaches a peak. Blackout.]

ACT

SCENE TWO

The following morning. The room has a stale, used look; the remnants of last night's meal still clutter the table; empty glasses and bottles are scattered about. A corner of the tablecloth hangs down as though someone has dragged on it. Wrapping paper clutters the floor. Lights come up on an empty stage, then EMMA enters from the kitchen with a floor rug which she takes on to the front verandah and hangs over the wrought-iron rail. She looks at the weather and sniffs the air. After a minute she returns to the front door.

EMMA: [calling] Better take your coat with you, Olly, it looks like rain.

OLIVE: [off] A day like today—you're mad.

EMMA: All right then, don't be told.

[She exits into the front garden, muttering. She returns with two milk bottles and a newspaper. In the hallway she meets ROO, who has descended the stairs. He is a little morning-after, but not much. She thrusts the newspaper at him.]

Here—there's gunna be a cool change.

ROO: Them weather blokes don't know nothin'.

EMMA: It ain't the weather blokes says so, it's me.

ROO: [grinning] Ah. That's different.

[EMMA snorts and exits to the kitchen. ROO throws the paper onto the table and decides that the room can do with some fresh air. He opens the French windows and steps out onto the back verandah, where he stands yawning in the morning sunlight and scratching his belly. After a moment something attracts his attention and he moves out of sight. There is the clink of her bottles being collected, and he re-enters carrying four empty bottles.]

OLIVE enters from the kitchen dressed for work in a light summer frock. She is finishing off a slice of toast.]

OLIVE: Roo?

ROO: That silly Barney, throwing these out on the verandah. Kid's trick. He oughta stop doing that. [He puts the bottles to one side.]

OLIVE: Pearl didn't like it either.

ROO: [sitting and picking up the newspaper] I don't reckon he's gunna hit it off with her.

OLIVE: Neither do I. Not by the way she's talkin'. Yet should've heard what she said about him tryin' her door

SCENE TWO

29

last night.

ROO: [opening the paper] Well, she could've expected that.

OLIVE: 'S what I told her. [Rubbing the back of her hand against his bristly cheek] If you'd stayed in bed a bit longer, I would have brought your breakfast up.

ROO: [stolidly reading] You know I don't like eating in bed.

OLIVE: Just for a change. [Beginning to massage his shoulder]

How's your back?

[ROO glances up at her.]

Barney told me how you strained it. Least, he didn't say how you did it, just about how it slowed you down so much.

ROO: Trust Barney.

OLIVE: How did you do it?

ROO: [grimly] Ask him, he's got all the news.

[He returns to his reading.]

OLIVE: [playfully] All right, no one's gunna make an invalid of you, I know you hate being sick.

[She moves away to pick up the seventeenth doll from the rocking chair, and stands stroking it tenderly.]

Prettier than ever. You know, I think they take more trouble with them than they used to. There's more tinsel and—and they're dressed better.

ROO: They're just the same as they always was.

OLIVE: [protestingly] No, they're not. Someone's taking special care. Other times they've been pretty, but this one's beautiful. You can see.

[She holds the doll almost as if it were a baby, and speaks suddenly.]

You know why I like the dolls more than anything else you've brought down?

[He shakes his head.]

Well, the birds and coral and—and butterflies and stuff—all that you got 'coz I wanted to know what it was like up there. But the dolls—they're something you thought of by yourself. So they're special!

[He looks at her questioningly, and then grunts, embarrassed. She fluffs out the doll's skirts.]

And don't make noises at me, they are. Where'll I put her?

ROO: Gettin' a bit crowded, maybe you should start upstairs.
 OLIVE: [*crossing to a vase*] No, I won't, she's staying right here with the others. [*Placing the doll in the vase*] Look at her now, she just dazzles yer.
 ROO: [*touched, but gruffly*] She's all right.
 OLIVE: Beautiful.

[*She moves to him to kiss the side of his head and run her fingers through his hair.*]

Beautiful. What do you reckon you'll do today?

ROO: [*absently*] Oh. I'll find something. [*He turns pages.*]

OLIVE: Do you reckon you might drop in at the pub?

ROO: Might.

OLIVE: [*gripping his hair and tugging gently*] Well, don't put yourself out, will you? I was thinkin' I might get you to book me a few seats. There's some good shows on I've been holdin' off on...

[*EMMA appears in the arch carrying an empty tray which she places on the sideboard.*]

EMMA: [*resentfully*] Anybody wants breakfast better come and get it, I'm not gunna keep it hot all day.

OLIVE: Did you give Barney a yell?

EMMA: I'm not yellin' for anyone, I got enough to do.

[*Coming into the room, clicking her tongue*] And just look at this, will yer? Course it doesn't matter to you, all youse have to do is make a pigsty of the joint and then go off and loll around bars all day.

OLIVE: Strikes me you did your fair share of the damage. And if you don't want to touch it, you don't have to, I'll do it tonight.

EMMA: Yeah, I'll bet you will.

[*OLIVE speaks to ROO, still immersed in the paper.*]

OLIVE: Will you get the tickets, then?

ROO: [*looking up*] Let's leave it for a coupla days, eh? I got to settle a few other things first.

OLIVE: [*restrainedly*] Righto. But you have to book ahead, y'know, if you want decent seats.

[*She leaves the room and a moment later is heard calling up the stairs: "Barney—breakfast."*] ROO returns to his paper, EMMA tidies the room.]

EMMA: [*slyly*] Was that why you only gave me a quid at the

Airways?

ROO: Why?

EMMA: 'Coz you're broke.

ROO: Who says I'm broke? it out yesterday—flat, stoney,

EMMA: Heard you yellin' it out

stinkin' broke, y'said.

ROO: Nothin' wrong with your hearing, is there?

EMMA: I 'ave to keep me ears open in this house. Learn enough to perrect myself. Got a bit of a check, haven't

yer, turnin' up like that?

ROO: [*equably*] Lay off, Emma. I'll make it up to you.

EMMA: Yeah, I've heard that before, too.

ROO: This place—[*Reading*] Lyman Paint Company, Weston

Street—is that anywhere near here?

EMMA: Around the corner, 'bout three blocks down.

ROO: [*a grant of satisfaction*] Ah.

EMMA: That Barney—is 'e broke too?

ROO: Don't reckon so. He oughta have pretty near his

usual packet.

EMMA: Just as well. I wouldn't think of helping him out.

ROO: [*trunking*] Was you thinkin' of helping me?

EMMA: I might. [*Hastily*] Only a loan, mind yer. I'd want

it back again.

ROO: How much—a fiver?

EMMA: [*coolly*] Smart Alec, ain't yer? What d'yer say to

fifty?

ROO: Quid? [*As she nods*] You got fifty quid?

EMMA: [*triumphantly*] I got more, I got nearly—well, never

mind. And don't you let on to anyone I even got fifty.

But that's what I could let you have, if you want it.

ROO: [*admiringly*] You beaut! Who'd you pinch it from—

Olive?

EMMA: Her? What I get from her hardly pays for me com-

munity. No, I got me own ways of earnin' a few bob.

ROO: I'll bet you have. Keepin' nit for the SP bookies, eh?

Drummin' up trade for the sly grogs—

[*BURBA, dressed for the street, enters on the side verandah.*]

EMMA: Ask no questions, you get told no lies. [*Catching sight*

of BURBA standing at the window] Well, you're an early bird—

don't tell me you've come to help me clean up?

BUBBA: [*Shaking her head*] I'm off to work, I only dropped in for a minute . . .

EMMA: Thought it was too good to be true. Same as usual—everything left to the old girl.

[*She exits to the kitchen with the trap. ROO grins at BUBBA.*]

ROO: She never misses a trick, does she? Come on in, Bub, how are yer? Didn't get much of a chance to talk to you last night.

BUBBA: No, I— I didn't stay long. [*Breathlessly*] Look, I've got something for Barney.

ROO: He's not up yet.

BUBBA: [*Holding out an envelope*] Will you give 'em to him, then? I don't want Olive to see them—they're some snaps I took of Nancy's wedding.

ROO: [*Accepting the envelope*] Oh. [*With a touch of reserve*] What was it like?

BUBBA: All right. Not big, y'know, just people *he* knew; I think I was the only one Nance invited. But she looked very pretty, a deep sort of blue it was. I thought Barney'd like to have the photos.

ROO: Yeah. Did you cry?

BUBBA: [*Nodding*] So did she.

ROO: I'll tell you somethin'. I think Barney did too. He went away on his own a whole afternoon, something I've never seen him do before. Whenever he's been in trouble he's always wanted someone standing by holding his hand. This time he didn't even want me near him.

BUBBA: I knew he'd feel like that. I told Olive. Roo, why didn't he come down? Four letters we wrote him—

ROO: Well, first I think he didn't believe she'd do it. Then, when it looked certain, he couldn't make the effort. He's been dodgin' it a long time, you know.

BUBBA: It's awful to think of the two of them, feeling like they do, and yet messing it up like that.

ROO: [*Trying to lift the conversation from potential embarrassment*] Yeah. But what about you? I s'pose the next thing we know you'll be popping off, too.

BUBBA: No. I don't think so.

ROO: [*Rolling a cigarette*] What about that Mac feller was chasin' you round when we left?

BUBBA: Who? Oh—Douggie! Haven't seen him since June or July somethin'. I been out with half a dozen since then.

ROO: [*Teasing*] Strikes me you're gunna grow up to be your Uncle Barney all over again.

BUBBA: [*Quietly*] I'm twenty-two now. How much more do you reckon I have to grow!

ROO: Ah, e'mon, I was only kiddin'. We all know you've left school.

BUBBA: Yes. [*Hesitating, spurring herself to ask the question*] Roo, can I ask you something?

ROO: What?

BUBBA: About the lay-off . . .

ROO: What about it?

BUBBA: It's going to be just the same, isn't it? I mean, it's still going to be Selby at Christmas time, and . . . and all the rest. You won't alter anything?

ROO: Course we won't, you little dill. Why should we?

BUBBA: [*Smiling tremulously*] I was scared—with Nancy gone

— the rest of us are still here, ain't we? What the hell, course it'll be the same.

[*She rushes over to hug him impulsively, as EMMA enters with a bowl of fruit.*]

EMMA: [*Drily*] Only dropping in for a minute, you said. Any more of this and I don't reckon Woolworth's'll be opening up today at all.

BUBBA: As if they'd miss me. [*Moving to the window*] Come in and see us if you've got the time, Roo. I'm on the perfumes.

ROO: Yeah. That's just about my form, ain't it?

[*BUBBA laughs and exits. EMMA places the fruit on the table.*]

EMMA: You'd be in to see her soon enough if she was serving beer, I bet. [*Sternly*] What about that money—do you want it, or don't yer?

ROO: The fifty, you mean?

[*She nods, he continues with gentle rivalry.*]

Don't reckon I'd better, Emma. Start taking oscar from women and don't know where you'll end.

EMMA: [*Shrewdly*] You can't kid me. 'S not enough, is it?

ROO: Well, it'd last a couple of weeks, I s'pose. Layin' off,

you go through a lot.

EMMA: Not a lot of mine you don't. Fifty's as far as I'd trust you. And you're about the only bloke I'd trust with that much.

ROO: [*sincerely*] I know. You're a real pal, Emma. But there's no reason why you should trust me any more than you would—Barney.

EMMA: [*blantly*] Don't be silly. I've trusted you with Olly all these years, haven't I?

ROO: Have you?

EMMA: Ever since she brought you in and introduced us standin' in that hall. You pushed back your hat and grinned at me. I summed you up right there and then: a packet of trouble, but he's honest—

ROO: [*veryly*] Trouble, anyway.

EMMA: It could have been worse. Seventeen years is seventeen years, even though they ain't nothin' but the lay-off season. But if you don't take the money, what'll you do?

ROO: I can always get a job.

EMMA: In the city?

ROO: Would it surprise you?

[*She nods emphatically.*]

Well, be prepared, 'coz that's what I'm going after.

EMMA: [*marvelling*] Talk about throwin' bombshells! I can't wait for this...

[*She starts to exit, encountering BARNEY as he comes downstairs.*]

Here, you, if you want any breakfast, you'd better get a move on...

BARNEY: [*pleasantly*] Ah, shut your face.

EMMA: Righto. You can just go flamin' well without for that. See if you don't.

[*She exits. BARNEY is wearing a shirt that he has obviously been to bed in, a baggy-kneed pair of pants sagging under his paunch, and a sloppy pair of slippers. He wanders down, bleary-eyed and yawning.*]

BARNEY: Sleepin' on that sofa up there's no joke. I'm gunna tell Olive.

ROO: She knows. You made enough fuss about it last night?

BARNEY: [*sitting*] Oh. Y'heard, did yer?

ROO: Couldn't help it. Lammin' away at that door.

BARNEY: What d'yer mean, lammin'? Just tapped light with me finger-nails.

ROO: Well, whatever it was, she didn't like it.

BARNEY: Oh, I'm awake up what's wrong with her. Did Olive tell you?

ROO: Yeah.

BARNEY: You know who she reminds me of? That little blonde woman had a shop in Townsville. What was her name? Dowson, Dawson.

ROO: Donovan. Somehow I don't reckon you're gunna get around this one.

[*ROO throws the envelope containing the snapshots onto the table.*]

BARNEY: Give us a go. I haven't had a talk to her yet. [*Seeing the envelope*] What's that?

ROO: Babba brought them in for yer, some snaps of Nancy's wedding. You're not to show Olive.

[*BARNEY opens the envelope, takes out the first photographs, looks at them a long moment, then speaks unemotionally.*]

BARNEY: She must have been ravin' mad. [*Showing the photos into a pocket*] What's there in the paper?

ROO: Nothin' much. All down South.

BARNEY: [*leaving through*] It would be. How we goin' to fill in the day?

ROO: Well, I dunno about you, but I'm goin' looking for work.

[*BARNEY is jolted into attention.*]

BARNEY: [*amazed*] But this is the lay-off. You can't go looking for work in the lay-off!

ROO: I told you on the plane when I got down here I'd get a job.

BARNEY: Yeah, I know, but I thought once you were here and with Olly—

ROO: Leave Olive out of it.

BARNEY: Well, me, then. I got money.

ROO: I don't want your money, I can still earn my own.

[*Bitingly*] Even if I have got a busted back.

BARNEY: [*stung*] You pig-headed mug. What about all those tins you've carried me—every year when I've run dry down here you've kicked me on...

ROO: Yeah, well, this time you'd better hang on to what you've got for as long as you can. That won't be happenin'.

BARNEY: It's all that lousy rotten pride of yours, ain't it? You're crook on me because I stayed up there with Dowdie and didn't walk out with you.

ROO: I'm not crook on anythin'.

BARNEY: Oh yes, you are. You got a snout on that kid the first day you saw him working.

ROO: [*intensely*] Cut it out...

BARNEY: I watched yer! The morning after you turned poor old Tony Moreno off...

ROO: [*furiously*] Cut it out or I'll bash your face in!

[*There is a silence for a second or two, then BARNEY turns away and picks up the paper, speaking in low, bitter resignation.*]

BARNEY: Righto. You go and get yourself a job. See if I care. I'll find some way of amusin' meself.

[*ROO turns his back on him. OLIVE enters briskly.*]

OLIVE: What's up with you two?

ROO: [*mumbling as he moves to the arch*] Ah—just arguin' the point.

[*He exits upstairs. OLIVE glances after him a shade impatiently.*]

OLIVE: Can't you ever give it a rest? [*Coming into the room, speaking rapidly*] Barney, look, it's time me and Pearl left for the pub. She doesn't want to talk to you, but I've persuaded her into it. Now be careful what you say, 'coz she's just about ready to ring a taxi truck to pick up her things. Smooze round her a bit...

BARNEY: [*sullenly*] Ah, if she wants to go, let her go. OLIVE: Like hell we will. I've worked hard on this, explainin' things, gettin' her interested—what's wrong with you?

BARNEY: Roo's goin' out to get himself a job.

OLIVE: What?

BARNEY: A job.

OLIVE: [*startled*] When?

BARNEY: Right now.

OLIVE: [*angrily*] Oh, no. No, he mustn't...

[*She hastens up the stairs, passing PEARL on the landing, calling.*]

ROO...

[*After her exit, BARNEY mouches over to the French window.*]

standing looking out. PEARL, a little bewildered, appears in the archway. She hesitates, then speaks tentatively.]

PEARL: Barney...

BARNEY: [*turning*] Oh, G'day, Pearl. Come on in.

PEARL: [*nervously*] Shut the window, will you? I want to talk to you.

BARNEY: A bit shy, eh? [*Closing the window*] Well, I can understand that.

[*He smiles vaguely at her. It must be understood here that BARNEY'S instinct for tooting is mechanically reacting at the beginning of this scene, his mind is on other things. Later on, however, he becomes genuinely interested.*]

PEARL: Olive's asked me—

BARNEY: [*interposing*] Wait a minute, first I got to apologise to yer. Roo says I kicked up a row outside your door last night.

PEARL: Don't you remember?

BARNEY: Well, this p'bably sounds like a bit of bull, but I don't. Most likely it was all that beer I put away, then it bein' my first night down here, and Nancy always havin' had that room other times...

[*He leaves a delicate pause.*]

PEARL: Yes-es. But it was my name you kept yellin' out.

BARNEY: Was it?

PEARL: Pearlie, you kept sayin', it's me, Pearl.

BARNEY: That's interestin'. Even when I didn't know what I was doin', I could still remember your name. Just shows you what an impression you must have made on me.

PEARL: [*still suspicious*] Umm, I don't think you can judge by that. Anyway, it's not what I've come to see you about. Olive said I ought to...

BARNEY: [*quickly*] Yeah, she told me too—we're to have a quiet little chat. That the idea? Well, there's no reason why you should stand up for it, is there? Take the weight off your feet.

[*He places a chair for her. She hesitates for a moment and then sits gingerly. He has robbed her of the advantage of a firm opening, and she now starts a little uncertainly.*]

PEARL: It's no business of mine, you understand, and you might reckon I've got a bit of a check, but there's some-

thing Olive didn't tell me when she first asked me if I'd like to be . . . [*throwing the word carefully*] a friend of yours.

BARNEY: Kept something back, did she?

PEARL: Yes, [*grinding herself*] Like I say, it's really no business of mine, but until last Saturday I didn't know you had any . . . de facto wives.

BARNEY: But I haven't! Ooh, what you mean is my kids?

[*As she nods stiffly*] I tipped it'd be like that. Yes, kids I got all right. In three States.

PEARL: [*sneaking hard*] Well, that's it. I didn't want to have to talk to you about it, but Olive said I couldn't walk out without tellin' you, so . . .

[*She makes a move as if to rise, he checks her.*]

BARNEY: Hold on a bit . . . did she tell you the rest of it?

[That I paid maintenance on every one of them till they got old enough to work—that I'm still payin' for the youngest girl?]

PEARL: [*bursting in*] Maintenance? Do you reckon that's the only claim they've got on you? Honest, when I think what their mothers must have gone through! I'm a mother myself, I can . . . [*Words fail her.*]

BARNEY: You're real mad at me, aren't yer?

PEARL: Yes, I am. There's no excuse for that sort of thing, you're just a no-hoper. You must be!

BARNEY: [*sincerely*] Maybe I am. But I can't help it. Honest. Ever since I was a kid, whenever I've met a good-looking woman, I've always felt like an excited eel in a fish basket.

PEARL: Don't make jokes about it.

BARNEY: I'm not. I know it's nothin' to be proud of—but I'm not gunna apologise for it, either.

PEARL: [*outraged*] And that's that! Just sayin' you're weak gives you the right to run around and have kids wherever you want to—

BARNEY: No, it doesn't. But the ordinary bloke's got a sorta out, he can get married. There's always been a sorta reason why I never could . . .

PEARL: [*incredulously*] With children in three States? I'd like to hear of any reason that big!

BARNEY: [*blantly*] Righto then, you listen. My eldest boys the two of 'em, are both about the same age.

PEARL: Well?

BARNEY: Well, use your nut, don't you see what it means? Their mothers was in trouble at the same time. Oh, I'm to blame for that, and I'm not saying I ain't, but I was only a silly kid when it happened. Eighteen, I was.

PEARL: Old enough to face up to your responsibilities.

BARNEY: Maybe it is, but it's hardly old enough to face up to a big decision like—which of the two was I s'posed to marry? You just think of it: two good decent girls, and you can only make it right for one of them. I nearly went mad. Whenever one of them I married, I thought it'd be a rotten insult to the other. And it would have been. Both of them said so.

PEARL: [*dogged*] You could have done something.

BARNEY: What?

[*She stamps for an answer.*]

Anyway, I didn't have time. My old man found out about it, and he kicked me out. Gave me a quid and a blanket, nearly twelve o'clock at night. Little place called Makarandi it was, up in New South. Well, that settled it. I knew I 'ad to make some big money fast, so I went where the big money was, then—off to Queensland.

PEARL: What you mean is, you run out on the girls!

BARNEY: I was doin' the best I could for everyone. I put me age up to twenty-one, and I worked like a Trojan. Paid all their bills right through, I did, everythin' for both of them. And after that I started payin' maintenance. But I left it up to them which one I was to marry. You decide, I said. [*With long-remembered relish*] Well—they're sitting up there in that little one-horse town in New South Wales still arguin' about it! And I'm as far off marriage as ever I was—'coz if there's one thing I do believe in, it's what Nancy used to say: first come, first served.

PEARL: [*confused*] That's all very well, but it doesn't excuse your—other mistakes. While you was waitin' you should have behaved yourself.

BARNEY: Pearl, those eldest boys of mine are old enough to vote now.

PEARL: Even so, I think it's criminal, real criminal. That's the only word for it.

BARNEY: Criminal, my eye. I've never had a complaint lodged against me in my life—official, that is. [*Amusedly, sitting.*] You're talkin' as if I've got a string of ruined women behind me. I haven't. One by one they've all settled down, pretty happy, too. Even that first pair up in Makarandi. I'll guarantee that if I was to go back there now and try to break up their argument by marryin' one of them—they'd both join together and cut me throat. No, I tell yer, if there's anyone left out in the cold as the result of what I've done, it's no one but meself.

PEARL: [*sternly*] Nothin' more than what you deserve. Not that you have been much out in the cold if what Olive tells me is true.

BARNEY: Olive! Ah, to listen to her you'd reckon I was the biggest Cassa in the North. It ain't as bad as that, you know. [*Considering*] Still, most places I've gone, in between, I have been pretty lucky.

PEARL: That's what you call it, is it?

BARNEY: Lucky? Yeah. You know why?

[*She shakes her head.*]

It takes a special sort of woman to understand a bloke like me. Most of them hear a thing or two and then get a set on yer, treat you as if you was poison.

PEARL: Can you blame them?

BARNEY: No, I don't. They dunno no better, sec. But every now and then you meet a woman who does. She takes a tumble that a feller might have done a bit of chasin' around, not 'coz he was after all the lovin' he could get, but because he had a lot of lovin' that he could give. That's a hell of a difference most women can never cotton on to.

PEARL: [*slowly*] No. I don't suppose they can.

BARNEY: That's why I say a man's lucky when he meets up with one of the other sort.

PEARL: [*thoughtfully*] Chases round not because he's what?

BARNEY: After all the lovin' he can get....

PEARL: But because he's got a lot of lovin' he can give? That right?

BARNEY: Yeah. Sounds simple 'nuff, doesn't it? Yet you'd be surprised how few women can cop on to it. Takes so many things, sec. [*With fine concentration*] She's got to have

experience, 'rinstance, so she can spot this kind of bloke from the mob. Then she's got to be able to take him for what he is, not try to tie him down....

[*OLIVE, wearing a hat and carrying a bag, appears in the archway.*]

And last of all, of course, she's got to have—[*Seeing OLIVE and breaking off*] Well, never mind that now, here's Olive.

[*They look up at OLIVE as she stands, sulky dejection in every line of her figure.*]

OLIVE: You better get your things, Pearl. We're late.

PEARL: [*slowly, to BARNEY, after rising*] What's she got to have last of all?

BARNEY: Tell you some other time. You gotta hurry.

[*She gives him a look of curious disappointment and moves up to exit, speaking to OLIVE as she does so.*]

PEARL: Won't be a minute, love.

[*She exits.*]

BARNEY: [*rising, anxiously to OLIVE*] Any luck with Roo?

[*She shakes her head.*]

He's rally going out now to get himself a job?

OLIVE: Yes.

[*She moves moodily out to the front verandah, leaving the door open behind her. In the room, BARNEY curses violently under his breath, flings himself into a chair. ROO comes downstairs, dressed, but with no tie, and with his coat hanging over one shoulder.*]

ROO: [*calling towards the verandah*] Olive?

OLIVE: [*looking back disagreeably*] What?

ROO: I'll walk you and Pearl down to the tram.

OLIVE: Well, I'm ready.

ROO: [*looking into the room at BARNEY*] Hurroo. I might be back later and I might not.

[*BARNEY turns his back, offended. ROO moves out to join*

OLIVE on the verandah.]

EMMA: [*off*] Hey, you're not goin' out, are yer? What about your breakfast?

ROO: [*calling back*] I don't want any.

EMMA: [*appearing from the kitchen*] After me slavin' me inside out cookin' it? Who else is gunna eat steak at this hour of the day?

ROO: Give it to Barney.

EMMA: Throw it over next door to the dog, that's what I ought to do. [*Looking into the room at BARNEY*] And you, yer lazy sod, lollin' there. Git on out into the kitchen.

BARNEY: [*annoyed*] Don't you order me around.

EMMA: Order yer round? I'll chuck the teapot over yer in in minute. [*Vengefully, for both their benefits*] You just wait till tomorrow mornin', see how far you go then. There's gunna be a few changes made round here.

[*With a nod of dire warning, she exits again into the kitchen.*]

OLIVE moves to the front door.]

OLIVE: [*calling*] Peccaarl!

PEARL: [*off*] I'm coming.

[*There is a slight pause during which OLIVE shifts back to her place. Then PEARL, a little breathless, wearing a hat, carrying a bag, and drawing on gloves, appears in the archway. She smiles, hesitates and speaks to BARNEY in what amounts to a girlish flutter.*]

Well, I'm off now.

BARNEY: [*looking at her and turning away*] Oh—ta ta.

PEARL: I was thinkin'—if you haven't much to do today—

BARNEY: Yeah?

PEARL: You might like to take my bags upstairs.

[*He looks back with a broad grin. She amends hastily.*]

But don't jump to any conclusions, there's nothin' settled yet.

BARNEY: [*rising*] You little beauty! Listen...

PEARL: [*nervously escaping*] No, I'll—I'll see you tonight.

Bye bye.

BARNEY: Pearl.

[*But she has scooped out to OLIVE on the front verandah.*]

BARNEY follows her to the door.]

PEARL: [*breathlessly*] Well, are we all ready? Let's go then,

eh? [*As they move off*] Lucky you're so close to the tram,

Ol.

[*BARNEY is standing looking after them and laughing as ROO moves out from the verandah shadows to follow. Their glances hold for a second and the little man's laughter dies away as ROO steps down from the verandah and exits. BARNEY closes the front door abruptly.*]

BARNEY: [*bitterly*] Dirty lousy rotten pride.

[*PEARL's cases, standing prominently in the hall, catch his eye, and a weak grin slides across his face. Self-esteem returns, and with an overdone jaunty swagger he picks them up, squares his shoulders to the burden, and starts to run upstairs.*]

END OF ACT ONE