
Fresh Showers for the Thirsting Flowers

A Play by David Muncaster

Cast (in order of appearance)

ALICE – 70

EMMA – 14

The title of this play is taken from the poem ‘The Cloud’ by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1 – late afternoon weekday in winter

Scene 2 – late afternoon a few days later

Scene 3 – early evening a few weeks later

Scene 4 – early evening the next day

Scene 5 – early afternoon the following Sunday

Scene 6 – early evening a few days later

Time: the present

Setting: the play is set in the living room of ALICE’s semi-detached house. On one side of the stage is the exit to the kitchen, which is opposite the exit to the hall and front door. In the centre of the stage is a dining table at which there are two chairs. The one closer to the kitchen is ALICE’s high-backed armchair. Also in the room there is a small table or similar, on which sits a CD player or mini hi-fi and framed ‘photos of Alice’s two grown up sons and dead husband. Other furniture is at the director’s discretion.

Fresh Flowers for the Thirsting Flowers

Scene 1

ALICE's living room. It is neat and tidy. ALICE sits in her armchair reading. We get the impression that ALICE spends much of her time sitting here. After a few moments we hear a door slam distantly. ALICE glances at her watch. A few moments later we hear Eminem's 'The Real Slim Shady' playing. The sound is muffled because the music is coming through the wall from the house next door. ALICE puts her book down and crosses to a table on which the CD player sits and puts on a CD of serious classical music to drown out the music from next door, then returns to her chair where she resumes reading).

Scene 2

The room is empty. After a moment ALICE enters, wearing a coat and carrying some supermarket carrier bags.

ALICE: Come in dear. *(EMMA enters wearing her school uniform. ALICE goes into the kitchen and returns a moment later minus her coat and bags)* Now then. How about a cup of tea?

EMMA: Thanks. Oh, I mean, I'll do it.

ALICE: That's kind of you dear. *(ALICE sits in her chair. EMMA goes into the kitchen)*

EMMA: *(off)* Where do you keep your mugs? *(Entering)* Oh, Sorry. You probably have a teapot and teacups, don't you? Don't worry I'll find them. *(She returns the kitchen. Off)* This is kind of you. Asking me in, I mean.

ALICE: Oh.

EMMA: *(entering)* Sorry?

ALICE: I couldn't leave you standing out there in the cold. What time do you expect your mother home?

EMMA: Usually about 6. Unless she goes straight out from work. Then... *(she shrugs)*

ALICE: Would you like to telephone her? Let her know you've mislaid your keys.

EMMA: *(holding up her mobile phone)* Sent her a text.

ALICE: Of course.

EMMA: She hasn't replied yet, though. Kettle's boiled. *(EMMA goes into the kitchen and returns after a while with a tray carrying a teapot, two teacups, a teaspoon, a bag of sugar and a carton of milk. She places them on the table next to ALICE and sits on the chair the other side of the table)*

ALICE: The sugar bowl and milk jug were with the teapot.

EMMA: *(abashed)* Oh. Sorry. Not used to this. Teabag in a mug at home. *(She pours the tea and they help themselves to sugar and milk as required)*

ALICE: Is it just your mother and you at home?

EMMA: Where's my Dad, you mean?

ALICE: Oh no. I didn't mean...

EMMA: It's OK. He doesn't live with us. Never did. I used to see a fair bit of him when I was younger but he doesn't call me so much now. Bit scared of me I suppose. Now I've reached the terrible teens *(she grins)*

ALICE: You don't seem very terrible to me.

There is an embarrassed silence).

ALICE: I'm Alice by the way. And please call me Alice. After a lifetime of Mrs Meakin or, God forbid, 'Miss', it is a pleasure when someone uses my given name.

EMMA: Were you a teacher then? It's just with you saying people called you 'Miss'.

ALICE: That's right. Over at Hillingdale.

EMMA: What did you teach?

ALICE: English.

EMMA: Cool. *(Pause)* My English teacher is Mr Henderson.

They sip their tea.

EMMA: Oh. I'm Emma. That's not my real name. My real name's Susan. But I call myself Emma.

ALICE: Not Rita?

EMMA: Sorry?

ALICE: Never mind. So why Emma?

EMMA: I named myself after Eminem. I think he's great. Sorry. Bet you don't know what I'm talking about.

ALICE: Oh, I've heard the name. And is it Em and Em that I hear coming through the walls most evenings?

EMMA: Is it that loud?

ALICE: Well, sometimes.

EMMA: Sorry. I'll keep it down. *(Her phone beeps and she reads her text)* Oh, she isn't very pleased. But she's on her way. Another cup?

ALICE: Thank you *(EMMA pours)*

EMMA: This is a nice room.

ALICE: Isn't it just the same as yours dear?

EMMA: Well, the room is the same, yes. But the decoration is different. I don't think the last lot who had our house were all that bothered. I keep offering to do it but Mum says she's going to get someone in. Doesn't trust me I suppose. You lived here long?

ALICE: Four years in June. I had a house on Conway Street but I decided to sell after I retired. My husband died some years ago and the boys, Peter and Alan, my two sons, well, they are long gone, so there didn't seem any point in staying in that big old house. Too many rooms that needed dusting!

EMMA: You must have made a packet as well. Selling a house on Conway Street to buy one round here. Sorry, I shouldn't have said that, should I?

ALICE: *(smiling)* That's alright dear. It's true that I have a little to bolster my pension.

ALICE finishes her tea and starts to put things back on the tray.

EMMA: I'll do it *(EMMA picks up the tray and takes it to the kitchen)*

ALICE: Just leave it on the side dear. I'll see to it later.

EMMA: *(returning)* Alice. Can I ask you something?

ALICE: Of course you can my dear.

EMMA: It's with you being an English teacher.

ALICE: Was.

EMMA: Yeah. My English teacher, Mr Henderson. Well he calls me Susan because that's what's on the register but I told him that I like to be called Emma after Eminem and he said 'I suppose you are attracted to his internal rhymes' Well, obviously, he's taking the piss. Sorry. Taking the mickey, but I don't get what he's on about.

ALICE: You are asking me 'what is an internal rhyme?'

EMMA: Yeah

ALICE: Well. It's a rhyme that occurs within a single line of a verse.

EMMA: Oh.

ALICE: 'Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary.' You see? Or 'I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers'

EMMA: 'My destiny's to rest at ease until I'm impressed and pleased'?

ALICE: Yes.

EMMA: 'The years that I've wasted are nothing to the tears that I've tasted'.

ALICE: Yes. That's rather good. Is that your Em and Em?

EMMA: Yeah. There's loads like that. Do you want to hear some more?

ALICE: Well. Another time.

EMMA: Oh right. Yeah.

ALICE: No really. I should like to hear some more examples. If you fancy popping round again sometime...

EMMA: Yeah. Yeah, I'd like that. Thanks. My mates reckon I'm weird you know. They say he's boring now. Nobody listens to Eminem these days. But I heard one of his songs a few years back and it was like he had written it just for me you know. You think I'm daft don't you?

ALICE: Not at all.

EMMA: When I've had a rough day or if someone has, er, annoyed me or something, then I like to get home and just listen to the words and escape.

ALICE: Music has a power to heal. I suppose I escape as well. Only with me it's books.

EMMA: It would be wouldn't it? With you being an English teacher. *(A distant door slams)* Oh, there's me mum. *(Getting up)* Look thanks, um, Alice, I'll come again. If I can?

ALICE: Yes, please do.

(EMMA exits)

Scene 3

ALICE is reading whilst EMMA is sat at the table writing in an exercise book.

EMMA: There! *(She passes her exercise book to ALICE who puts down her own book to read what EMMA has written.)* Be honest! *(ALICE continues to read so EMMA gets up and starts to examine various ornaments or pictures around the room. Eventually ALICE speaks)*

ALICE: It's satisfactory.

EMMA: You are a teacher aren't you?

ALICE: It was you who said that I should be honest. Now if you want to get a really good mark...

EMMA: (*taking the book*) Satisfactory is fine!

ALICE: (*smiling*) I didn't think you'd come again. It's been a few weeks.

EMMA: Yeah. Sorry for that. Been playing my music more quietly though, haven't I?

ALICE: Yes, I'll give you that dear.

EMMA: Well, thanks for your help with this. You got me out of a hole.

ALICE: That's alright. But in future if you don't understand something in class, just ask. Nobody will mind.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah I will. (*Picking up a framed photo*) Who's this?

ALICE: That's Peter. My eldest.

EMMA: Where does he live?

ALICE: Reading. Awful place but he seems happy enough.

EMMA: What does he do?

ALICE: Oh, something to do with computers. Software Development, he said.

EMMA: Does he come to see you?

ALICE: Well, he's very busy.

EMMA: He should come and see you though

ALICE: Oh, we keep in touch. Mary, that's his wife, writes and let's me know what's happening.

EMMA: What about the other one?

ALICE: Alan, you mean. He's doing well for himself. He works for a recruitment company. Head hunting they call it, but it's not as violent as it sounds. He's in America just now, a special contract.

EMMA: (*picking up another framed photo*) Is this your husband?

ALICE: That's Gordon yes.

EMMA: Was he a teacher?

ALICE: As it happens, yes he was.

EMMA: Yeah, he looks like one. Oh God, I'm sorry

ALICE: Whatever for?

EMMA: Being insensitive I suppose. I'm always doing that. Putting my foot in it. Do you mind talking about him?

ALICE: Oh no. We were very happy together. I wish he was still here of course, but it's nearly twenty years since he died. Cancer. He smoked like a chimney, but then so did I. I stopped when he died. The difference is he barely saw his fiftieth whilst here I am past seventy.

EMMA: You must have missed him.

ALICE: I threw myself into my work. It's what people do. It's funny, we were going to take early retirement. Buy a big camper van and go all over Europe. As it turned out they had to drag me out of the school kicking and screaming that I wasn't ready for retirement. That's when I missed him.

EMMA is terrified that ALICE is going to cry and the next line is an excuse to get out of the room.

EMMA: Why don't I make us a cup of tea?

EMMA exits to kitchen. There is no dialogue for the time it takes EMMA to make the tea. ALICE crosses to the photo frames and picks each one up in turn, looks at them and returns them to their position. She returns to her chair and composes herself before EMMA returns with the tea things on a tray, this time including the milk jug and sugar bowl, which she indicates as she lays the tray down.

EMMA: See. I'm getting better!

EMMA pours the tea and they help themselves to milk and sugar as required.

ALICE: You make a good cup of tea; I'll give you that dear.

EMMA: (*grinning*) I've plenty of practice. I do what I can for my Mum.

ALICE: You're a good girl.

EMMA: Stop it, you're embarrassing me!

ALICE: Where does she work?

EMMA: Mitchells. The bakers. I'm always telling her she's far too thin for someone who works in a cake shop. The customers will think the cakes are rubbish! It's not much of a job is it? I want something better than that.

ALICE: Well my dear, there is no substitute for paying attention at school.

EMMA: I think mum did pay attention.

ALICE: No, I didn't mean...

EMMA: (*a little angry*) I don't think Mum was an academic genius but she's got it here (*she lays her palm on her heart*) if not here (*she lays her palm on her forehead.*) She still does what she can. Most nights, helping people worse off than herself.

ALICE: Oh.

EMMA: What?

ALICE: Oh, nothing.

EMMA: No, what does 'oh' mean.

ALICE: Nothing, I just...

EMMA: (*definitely angry now*) Oh, I see. I understand

ALICE: Emma...

EMMA: You thought she out boozing every night. Leaving me to fend for myself. Is that it?

ALICE: No. Not at all. It's none of my business. I didn't think anything!

EMMA: (*furious*) Is that why you asked me in? You thought: 'poor deprived girl'. One parent family. Dad's away, Mum's in the boozier. Poor little girl standing in the cold. Thought you'd do your bit for society did you?

ALICE: No, Emma!

EMMA: I'm proud of my Mum. She brought me up on her own. I never needed anything. And when I was old enough to look after myself she asked me - asked me, not told me - asked me if I would mind if she did a bit of voluntary work on the odd evening. You've got no right.

ALICE: Emma, I didn't...

EMMA: No wonder you're a lonely old bat. Get your own tea in future.

EMMA storms out leaving her exercise book behind.

Scene 4

ALICE is sitting in her chair reading. The exercise book has been struck. After a moment her doorbell rings. ALICE goes off to answer the door.

ALICE: (*off*) Emma! Come in dear.

EMMA: (*off*) Mum says I'm to thank you for posting the exercise book through.

ALICE: (*off*) It was nothing. Come on in.

EMMA: (*off*) No. I don't want to come in. Mum says I'm to apologise for calling you names.

ALICE: (*off*) It's me that should be apologising. Won't you please come in? As a favour to me? (*ALICE and EMMA enter. As usual, EMMA is in her school uniform*) There now. Sit yourself down. (*EMMA sits*)

EMMA: I was really angry

ALICE: I gathered that. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to sound the way it did. The truth is you were right. Well, half right. I did - kind of - assume that your mother was leaving you on your own whilst she was out with friends. It was when you said that she is usually home by six unless she goes straight out. I just assumed 'going out' meant going out with friends, it never occurred to me that she was going on to another job. (*Sitting*) But please, believe me when I say that that is as far as the thought process went. I didn't condemn your mother for the behaviour that I had imagined, simply because I hadn't given it a thought.

EMMA: But if you had thought about it you would have - what did you say - condemned her.

ALICE: Ah. Well, possibly yes. But I would have been wrong. Your mother is obviously a very fine woman. Even the fact that she sent you round to thank me for the book shows what a wonderful nature she has.

EMMA: (*standing*) It's no good creeping round me now. You still don't get it do you? It doesn't matter whether you 'condemned' her or not. What matters is that you thought you knew what type of person she was without knowing anything about her. In Sociology they call that 'prejudice'. You are prejudiced against my mum because you've got something against single mums or something.

EMMA sits. She is angry but wants an argument this time instead of storming out.

ALICE: (*remaining calm*) Oh, I don't think I have anything against single mums. But you're right, I did pre-judge the situation and for that I apologise. But that is something that we are all guilty of Emma. Now, don't get angry, but you assume that I am lonely just because I am old and live on my own. That is, itself, another form of prejudice.

EMMA: I never...

ALICE: Oh, but you did Emma. And I'm afraid as you go through life you will learn that we all do it. We all make assumptions based on prejudice. The most obvious example is the police force. If your house was burgled tonight and you reported it to the police the chances are that they could, if they wanted, give you half a dozen names of which one, they would be pretty certain, would be the culprit. That is based on prejudice. They would have no information whatsoever to implicate these people but because they had previously been guilty of similar crimes the police would assume it would be one of them. Of course, without the burden of proof they wouldn't be able to do anything, and that is why so many

crimes go unsolved, but a fly on the wall in any police station will tell you that have a good idea who is actually responsible.

EMMA: But that's not being prejudiced. If these people had broken into houses before, if they had a record, then it stands to reason that they probably did it again. Being prejudiced is assuming someone is guilty because he is black.

ALICE: No, you are wrong. Being prejudiced is assuming that all gay people die of aids. Being prejudiced is assuming someone in a wheelchair is less intelligent than the person pushing it. The big things like 'all Muslims are terrorists', very few of us think like that, but we all have our petty prejudices and, I'm afraid, you succeeded in exposing one of mine. To take it to an extreme, if you were to lose your house key every day for a week, for anyone to assume that you are going to lose it again the next day is displaying a form of prejudice.

EMMA: That's stupid.

ALICE: Maybe so. But I want you to understand that there is no hard line. This is prejudiced and this isn't. There has to be a degree of common sense. That is why, whilst I regret the assumption that I made about your mother, some people would consider it a reasonable assumption and others not.

EMMA: Is that what this lecture has been all about? Trying to make out that you did nothing wrong?

ALICE: Not at all. I've admitted that I was wrong.

EMMA: What then?

ALICE: Oh, I just want you to see that none of us are perfect.

EMMA: Why?

ALICE: I'm sorry.

EMMA: I know you think I'm thick.

ALICE: That's not true.

EMMA: But I've been thinking. You reckon that I'm prejudiced because I said you are lonely, right? But if you are not lonely then why does it matter to you what I think? I'm just someone who lives next door. You don't ever have to see me if you don't want. So why go to all that trouble, saying 'none of us are perfect' so I don't

think so bad of you unless you are actually lonely and you need someone like me to talk to?

ALICE: Enjoying conversation doesn't make someone lonely.

EMMA: Not if you've got plenty of people to talk to.

ALICE: Well, perhaps the point is not whether I am lonely or not but whether you are in any position to judge when you hardly know me.

EMMA: (*rising*) Touched a nerve!

ALICE: (*getting irritated*) Certainly not. I believe you are being deliberately obtuse. In the short time I have known you I have come to the conclusion that you are an intelligent girl but now you simply refuse to get my point.

EMMA: Your point being?

ALICE: You know very well. That we are all guilty of judging people. If you make that judgement without the all the facts, as we all do, then we are prejudging them. I prejudged your mother based on the few things I had gathered about her, you prejudged me based on stereotypes. I don't blame you, but you shouldn't blame me.

EMMA: So are you apologising or not?

ALICE: Yes, of course.

EMMA: Fine. Well, in that case I apologise as well.

ALICE: (*composing herself*) Thank you. Apology accepted.

EMMA: Do you know Alice. I don't think I've ever had a conversation quite like this before.

ALICE: (*suddenly moved*) I suppose it's been a long time for me as well. (*Looking up at EMMA and smiling*) You should be grateful that I am out of practice; otherwise I would make mincemeat of you.

EMMA: (*smiling back*) I wouldn't be so sure. (*She sits. All the tension has now gone*) Do you really believe all that stuff then? What you were saying about the police?

ALICE: I'm quite sure they couldn't function otherwise. They call it profiling these days. But really it's just using stereotypes. 'The sort of person who would do this is this sort of person.' Then they look for that type of person.

EMMA: You seem to know a lot about it. (*Grinning*) You haven't been in trouble with the law have you Alice?

ALICE: I shall ignore that. I just observe things. Sitting here in my, ahem lonely, room, watching the world go by. I still have an active mind, however decrepit I might appear to be and I certainly have plenty of thinking time these days.

EMMA: It must be great though. To be able to think like that. Why don't you write? You could write letters to the paper. Or have your own column. The thoughts of Alice, aged 70 (*she giggles*).

ALICE: God forbid. There are enough crackpots filling the papers with their random thoughts without me adding to the mix.

EMMA: Well, you'll just have to talk to me then, give me the benefit of your wisdom

ALICE: Do I detect a modicum of mockery?

EMMA: What?

ALICE: Are you taking the piss, dear?

EMMA: Alice! You do make me laugh. I'm glad we've made up.

ALICE: So am I.

EMMA: But it's true though. I mean, I feel like I've learnt more here tonight than I learn all week at school. You have a good way of explaining things.

ALICE: Well, it helps to have an attentive pupil. I'm sure your teachers are perfectly adequate but the classroom situation is very different to where we find ourselves just now. What I mean is, if you are not going to listen to me then what are you going to do? There are no distractions. But in the classroom there are all manner of things to take your mind away from where it should be. Teaching is no easy task, but neither is learning and I'm afraid, too often, the pupil only realises the benefit after the opportunity is gone.

EMMA: Yeah. But I try to do my best at school. You know, pay attention because I want to get good grades, I want to go to university and make mum proud of me. God knows how we will afford it, mind, but that's another matter. You're right about lots of distractions, but it's down to the teachers to make the lessons interesting isn't it? That way we wouldn't get distracted.

ALICE: They have a difficult job and one has to make allowances. But don't get me wrong, I loved every minute of it. If they would have me back I would be standing outside the school gates tomorrow. There are frustrations of course, but there are also rewards and best of which are the pupils who really want to learn. The thirsty flowers to whom I can bring fresh showers.

EMMA: Ooer Alice!

ALICE: OK. Perhaps I'm getting a bit carried away, but I'm sure you get my point.

EMMA: Yeah. And I wish they would take you back. You're a great teacher.

ALICE: Thank you.

EMMA: Look, I'm going to go, but I'll come back and see you again. How about Sunday? Mum's doing a stint for WVS so I could come round in the afternoon.

ALICE: That would be lovely.

EMMA: See you then *(she crosses to the door)* Bye Alice. *(She exits)*

ALICE crosses to the CD player and plays a piece of serious classical music. She moves towards her chair but then stops and returns to the CD player and takes out the CD. She rummages for a while and eventually finds the CD she is looking for, puts it into the CD players and presses play. The music is Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five'. ALICE sits and listens to the music with a smile on her lips.

Scene 5

ALICE is in the kitchen. On the table is a plate of biscuits. ALICE enters with a plate of small cakes and places them on the table. The doorbell rings, making ALICE jump. She exits to answer the door.

ALICE: *(off)* That was good timing.

ALICE and EMMA enter but ALICE crosses and exits straight to the kitchen. As it is Sunday EMMA is in ordinary clothes. She is holding three or four Eminem CDs. ALICE enters.

ALICE: Kettle's just boiled.

ALICE returns to the kitchen then emerges with the tea things on a tray and puts them on the table.

EMMA: Are we having a party?

EMMA sits in her usual chair.

ALICE: What? Oh, well I thought you might like a biscuit with your tea.

EMMA: Ha. Thanks Alice, this is really nice.

ALICE: How would you normally spend your Sunday?

EMMA: In the town with my mates probably. Looking at clothes, hanging around HMV. Boring really but we sometimes have a laugh.

ALICE: Is that where your friends will be now?

EMMA: Yeah. Said I wasn't coming out today. Didn't tell them I was coming here. Keeping them guessing. Sara, she's the nosy one, she said 'what's his name' because she reckons I must have got myself a boyfriend. That's all they think about. Boys, boys, boys. That and clothes and music.

ALICE: Are you not interested in boys then?

EMMA: Yeah. Course I am. But it's not the be all and end all is it? There's plenty of time for all that. To hear them go on though. There's this lad, Simon. And he's good looking, I admit that, and he's kind of nice, you know, the way he smiles at you, that sort of thing. But I don't want to spend my whole weekend talking about him. 'Ooh Simon smiled at me today' or 'Ooh Simon brushed past me and I could smell his aftershave'. All that sort of thing. It's just pathetic.

ALICE: Aftershave?

EMMA: That's part of the attraction I think. Because he is shaving at fifteen it makes him more of a man I suppose. I used to see this lad, Greg. He said that

everyone was jealous of Simon but he reckoned that he would look like a baboon by the time he was 20 and no one would want to know anymore. (*Laughs*) Greg was funny. We got on really well and he was happy just to go out with me or sit around and talk, you know. Didn't try to push me if you know what I mean. There aren't many like him, that's why I don't pay too much attention to boys now, it's too much hassle.

ALICE: What happened to Greg then?

EMMA: Oh, nothing. We still see each other, but we're not going out anymore. Maybe we will get back together one day. I hope so.

ALICE: It sounds like you wish you were still seeing him.

EMMA: No. It was a mutual decision. It's because people started thinking of us as a couple you know? It wasn't Emma, and Greg. It was Emma and Greg. You see the difference? We aren't ready for that. Also, everyone kind of assumed that as we had been going out for a while, over a year, then we must be, well, sleeping together

ALICE: At fourteen!

EMMA: People start young these days you know. But not me and Greg. I suppose, because we have been friends for so long. I knew Greg in juniors before I moved round here, I used to live near to him; I've known him since we were about six years old. You could say we grew up together. I certainly never imagined that we would start going out together. In fact, it never really seemed like we were going out, not like others, we were just mates who happened to be a boy and a girl. Then everyone's going, 'how long have you two been an item' or teasing us because we were always together and we just got sick of it.

ALICE: That's sad. But surely you don't have to stop seeing each other because of a lot of silly comments from people who are probably just jealous.

EMMA: Yeah. But we do see each other at school. It's not like we don't ever have the chance to talk or anything. I do miss having long talks to him though. We used to talk about all sort of rubbish, the most insane conversations. Sometimes we used to pretend we were other people. Like we would pretend to be David and Victoria Beckham and spend the whole evening having conversations as if we were them. It would be 'Have you seen my gold plated football boots dear?', 'no dear, did you leave them on the croquet lawn?', 'Oh, I might have done, I'll ask the butler to take a look' and we would go on like that for ages until we just cracked up. I bet you

think I'm mad. (*ALICE shakes her head*). We had a laugh though. That's what I miss.

ALICE: Well, if I were you dear, I would ignore what people say and do what *you* want to do, never mind anyone else.

EMMA: Yeah. Maybe you're right. Oh look, here we are gassing away and we haven't even poured the tea yet.

EMMA pours the tea. ALICE takes a biscuit and places it on her saucer next to the cup. EMMA then does the same. They then nibble at biscuits and take sips of tea as appropriate but neither eats the cakes.

ALICE: So. What is that which you have brought with you?

EMMA: Oh, just some Eminem CDs. With you saying that you like that bit I did, 'The years that I've wasted are nothing to the tears that I've tasted' that's from Hailie's song, which is about his daughter. But actually, no. I don't know what I was thinking of.

ALICE: You've changed your mind?

EMMA: Yeah, it's... No I think you you'd better not.

ALICE: What is it dear?

EMMA: It's just... I wasn't thinking. There's, well, you know, a lot of bad language.

ALICE: And you think my ears are too delicate to cope?

EMMA: No, I mean. A *lot* of bad language. *Really* bad language, if you know what I mean.

ALICE: Oh, I suppose your generation invented swearing?

EMMA: No...

ALICE: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do."

EMMA: ALICE!

ALICE: Philip Larkin dear. And he was born even before me!

EMMA: Well I never! Did you used to teach that in your classes then?

ALICE: Ha ha. I think that authorities would have disapproved. But I think Larkin knew what he was doing. Of all the poems he wrote this is the one that everyone remembers. I believe it even made it into 'The Nations Favourite Poems' on the BBC. I don't know if they broadcast it though.

EMMA: Was he just out to make a name for himself then?

ALICE: Oh no. He was already very popular. He didn't really need to 'make a name for himself'. Of course, he intended to shock but the interesting thing is that the shocking language accompanies a very ancient subject matter. "For I the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children".

EMMA: Huh?

ALICE: From the Bible of course. I don't know the chapter and verse. I'm not so religious, but I am sure that Larkin knew it. Perhaps that why he called the poem 'This Be the Verse'. Though it is, of course, a direct quote from Robert Louis Stephenson

EMMA: (*smiling*) Oh, of course. So was Larkin religious then?

ALICE: Well, the homiletic reference suggests that he knew his way round the bible, but then people of his generation - and (*smiling*) notice I say *his* generation, not *our* generation - usually had the bible thrust upon them, whether they liked it or not. However, despite this, indeed perhaps because of this, Larkin was a committed atheist.

EMMA: Have you got it? That poem?

ALICE: Indeed I have.

ALICE exits and returns after a few moments clutching a book of poems).

ALICE: My bookcase is in the back room. I like to have some distance between where I read and where I keep my books. That makes it easier to resist the temptation to give up and swap a difficult book for an easy one

EMMA: Why bother reading something you don't like? This it then? (*taking the book*)

ALICE: You will find it in there.

EMMA looks at the contents page then finds the correct page and starts to read.

EMMA: You weren't joking were you? (*She continues to read, then reads out loud*) "And don't have any kids yourself." (*Laughs*) Not much of a family man then! It's great. Mr Henderson goes on about Larkin but I didn't know he wrote stuff like this.

ALICE: Well, why don't you borrow the book? I can't promise you that they are all quite the same as that one but I think you may find others that you enjoy.

EMMA: Thanks Alice. I will. I'll make sure I'll look after it. (*Referring to the tea things*) Shall I clear these away?

ALICE: Yes dear. If you're finished. Oh we haven't touched the cakes.

EMMA gathers all the tea things onto the tray and takes them into the kitchen. Whilst she is out of the room ALICE studies the Eminem CDs EMMA has brought with her. EMMA returns.

ALICE: Which do you recommend?

EMMA: (*returning to her seat*) Well, Hailie's Song, the one we were on about is on 'The Eminem Show', that one (*indicating one of the CDs*). But my favourite is 'Encore'. (*She picks up 'Encore' and passes it to ALICE*)

ALICE 'Parental Advisory': I think we've just about covered that.

EMMA: Why don't you borrow it? That makes us even. You can listen to it in your own time. There's a sheet inside that's got the lyrics on if you want to read them. You'll probably have to because he talks that quickly. You probably won't like it though. Not compared to the sort of stuff you're used to reading.

ALICE: That's very kind of you. I will certainly listen to it and let you know what I think.

EMMA: OK. Look I had better be going. I want to tidy up a bit before mum gets back.

EMMA and ALICE both stand. EMMA picks up the Larkin book.

ALICE: Goodbye then.

EMMA: Bye Alice. *(She kisses ALICE on the cheek, somewhat to ALICE's surprise and pleasure).* I'll pop round one evening if you're in.

EMMA exits.

ALICE Goodbye dear.

ALICE sits in her chair.

Scene 6

ALICE is sat in her chair reading. There is classical music playing on the CD player. ALICE puts down the book and glances at her watch. She picks up the Eminem 'Encore' CD that EMMA has left, crosses to the CD player and replaces the classical CD with Eminem. She looks at the cover.

ALICE: Oh. Mockingbird.

ALICE chooses the correct track and plays 'Mockingbird'. She exits to the kitchen. After a few moments the door bell rings. ALICE crosses the room to answer the door.

ALICE: *(off)* Come in dear. *(ALICE and EMMA enter)* Sit yourself down whilst I fetch the tea.

EMMA crosses to the CD player and picks up the 'Encore' CD and then sits in her chair and takes out the CD sleeve, which she studies. ALICE enters with the tea things on a tray, which she places on the table and EMMA pours the tea. The action up to now should have taken us to close to the end of the song. EMMA passes ALICE the CD sleeve, pointing out the lyrics to the song we are listening to. When the song reaches the final line ALICE laughs uproariously at the same time as Eminem's guffaw.

Curtain