

Time For Ben

a comedy drama in one act

by

Tony Layton

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By Tony Layton

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Synopsis

Mark Dean is a fifty year old who could have had a brilliant career as an academic, but retired from his post as a university lecturer to help look after Ben, his eighteen year old son. Ben is confined to a wheelchair and is severely handicapped. He can make sounds and some movements, and he can understand what people are saying to him.

It is the day of Ben's eighteenth birthday, and Mark's younger brother, Ralph and his wife and daughter, Jean and Pat, are the only guests at the birthday celebrations. Ralph and Mark are like chalk and cheese. Mark, being the brighter of the two, enjoys playing games to wind-up his brother's family. At the root of the wind-ups, is the fact that although Ralph is a successful businessman, he and his family have not taken a lot of interest in Ben over the years, and have little sympathy for the sacrifices that Mark has had to make.

The divide between the two families becomes more obvious as the play develops and ends with the cruellest wind-up of them all.

Cast

- Ben Dean** 18. A young man confined to a wheelchair. Severely handicapped, but can hear, make sounds and gestures.
- Mark Dean** 50. Ben's father, a retired university lecturer. Quick-witted, with a wicked sense of humour. Devoted to Ben.
- Sara Dean** 40's. Devoted to Mark and Ben, but often feels the pressure of her commitment.
- Ralph Dean** 46, Mark's younger brother, by four years. A successful businessman who has always been the butt for Mark's humour.
- Jean Dean** 40. An assertive woman who is clearly the strength behind Ralph.
- Pat Dean** 24. Ralph and Jean's daughter. A confident graduate, working in television news.

Running Time

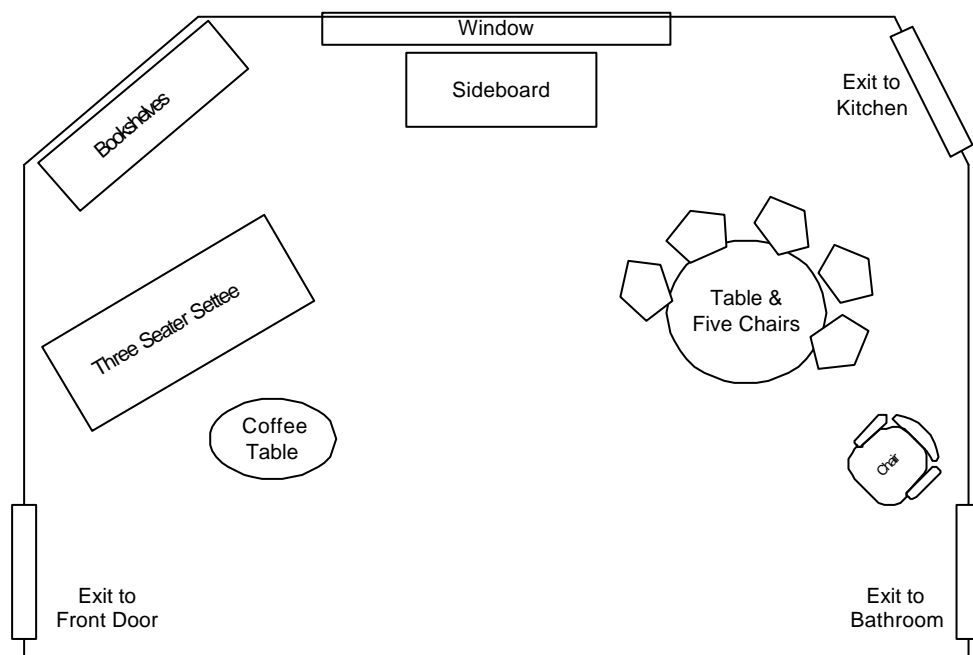
50 minutes approximately.

Conventions Used

Text in upper case is shouted, and underlined text is spoken with emphasis.

Set

A standard box set with three entrances and a window. The Front Door and Bathroom entrances must be wide enough to easily allow a wheelchair to pass through.



TIME FOR BEN

Scene One

The lounge of the Dean's suburban house. Present day. Evening. Ben is wheeled in from the Front Door by Mark. Ben is a severely handicapped teenager who is confined to a wheelchair. He can see, hear and make sounds approaching speech. He is tied into the wheel chair, and is wearing a crash helmet and goggles. Mark is an athletic fifty year old, casually dressed in T-shirt, track suit trousers and trainers. Ben is zoomed around the room by Mark.

Mark And it's into the chicane. Now the hairpin. Can he hold it? Yes he can. Terrific. What a driver this man is. Now through the gears. 200 miles an hour along the straight. There's the flag. He's done it. He's done it.

Sara *(Offstage)* Mark!

Mark Yes, it's Ben Dean, the new Formula One world champion ... not to be confused with Ben Down the world famous porn star. And the doctors said it couldn't be done.

Enter Sara. She is in the middle of baking, and is wearing an apron over her dress.

Sara Make a mess in here and I'll have your guts. Tidy him up.

Mark Tidy him up? Tidy him up? You're talking to the new world champion. A little respect wouldn't go amiss.

Sara Is he clean?

Mark Ben Dean, before I award you with your trophy, the world wants to know if you're clean. Millions of fans are waiting, Ben. Tell me, are you clean? We must have clean botties.

Ben *Nods and grunts.*

Mark Yes! We have a clean botty area. All bums are washed and talc'ed. The scent of lavender fills the air, and underpants are padded in case of emergencies.

Sara Listen for the door. I'm in the kitchen. Lay the table.

Exit Sara.

Mark Right! I'll do that. I'll listen for the door. We are listening for the door, Ben. If a door so much as creaks, give me the nod, okay? Doors are bloody funny things. You can't trust doors. One minute they're shut, the next minute they slide open. Then what? You get all sorts in here. Tramps, vagabonds, double glazing salesmen ... and once they're in, you're bugged. You've never been bugged, have you Ben. Not a very pleasant experience. Not one that I can speak about from personal experience, of course. You learn to keep your backs to the wall out there. That's where you're lucky. I can't recall a single case of a man in a wheel chair being bugged. Too exhausting I should think for all parties.

Enter Sara.

Sara I heard all that. Not funny.

Exit Sara.

Mark He's officially a man as from today. If he can vote, he's got to know all about buggery. *(He removes Ben's helmet and goggles).* Now then, before I present the champagne ... tell me, how does it feel to be world champion?

Ben *Grunts and moves backwards and forwards in his chair.*

Mark I see. So, now it's down to Monte Carlo by private jet, back to your villa by the sea, and the babes.

Ben *Grunts loudly.*

Mark You lucky devil! What a life, eh! What a life! Slim, bronzed babes on each arm, smelling of sweet cologne, there to satisfy every need. You know what, I reckon you're a greedy bugger, Ben Dean. *(He gets a bottle of Coke out of the sideboard and opens it).* Where's that champagne? Cars, birds, yachts, pictures in glossy magazines. I give you the world champion. *(He shakes the bottle and squirts the contents over Ben, who tries to protect himself, but his movements are unco-ordinated).* Smile Ben! The world is watching. Come on! Smile!

Ben *Squirms violently and grunts loudly.*

Enter Sara, quickly. She pulls Mark away from Ben and dries Ben's face with her apron. Ben is still moving violently. Sara holds him tightly, and sings, "Somewhere over the rainbow", until Ben quietens down. Mark stands in the background, drinking what's left of the coke.

Mark I am beginning to detest that song.

Sara Ben likes it, don't you love. There! There we are. All over your new shirt. Your father's an idiot. I apologise. I should have married someone with a little more common sense. *(To Mark)*. What were you thinking of?

Mark You're smothering him, woman.

Sara *(To Ben)* Guess what I'm making. Something with lots of thick marzipan and Royal icing and eighteen candles.

Ben *Grunts.*

Sara That's it. A cake. A cake for our birthday boy. And guess who's coming? Uncle Ralph and Auntie Jean. And your cousin Pat ... all the way from London to see you. Isn't that nice. *(She kisses him on the cheek. Then, to Mark)*. Has he had his afternoon pills?

Mark Not from me.

Sara So, what's he going to do? Get them himself? *(Mark comes to attention, salutes Sara and exits. Sara goes to a mini-hifi system on the sideboard, and turns it on)*. What we need is some music ... that's what we need. *('Relaxation' music is heard)*. There we are. How's that? That's more like it. A little more civilised. *(She picks up a packet of tissues from the sideboard and carries them to Ben. She wipes Ben's nose)*. Blow, Ben! Blow!

Ben *Turns his head away.*

Sara *(Pulling his head back)*. Blow! Don't be difficult.

Ben *Turns his head away again.*

Sara pulls his head back, holds it firmly and wipes his nose with some vigour, which causes Ben to buck his head in anger.

Sara That's it. Be silly. Have snot running down your face. Is that what you want? *(Ben continues to buck and grunt in anger. Sara tries to stop him, but he spits in her face. She slaps him across the face)*. I'm not standing for that. *(Ben stops bucking his head, but is now breathing loudly and groaning through his clenched teeth)*. Sometimes, I ... *(She moves across to up stage left and calls)*. For God's sake Mark!

Mark *(Offstage)* Where are they? I can't see them.

Sara For crying out loud! *(She exits. The sound of cupboard doors and drawers opening and closing violently is heard. Then, offstage)*. There they are. Where you left them.

Mark *(Offstage)* Me? Where I left them?

Sara *(Offstage)* Yes! Where you left them. I never put them there. Never! Take them! Take them ... standing there like an idiot!

Enter mark, carrying a small tray on which is a glass of water and a bottle of pills. He stands by the side of Ben.

Mark It's not you is it? You haven't been getting up in the night and hiding boxes of pills by any chance ... by any stretch of the imagination? You are not a phoney I hope. You haven't been having us on have you? What was that? Was that a glimmer of embarrassment I saw then? I think perhaps that you are a charlatan, my boy. You are a mischief-maker. You are up to no good. Yes! It all makes sense. Let us wait on you hand and foot during the day, and then, in the secret hours of the night, you roam the earth creating havoc. Are you willing to take a lie-detector test?

Ben *Grunts, and looks sideways at Mark.*

Mark What did you say? Was that a "no"?

Ben *Grunts and nods.*

Mark Is that "yes, it was a no", or is it "yes, you are willing to take the test"?

Ben *Nodding again, and grunting louder.*

Mark This really is not good enough. This sort of ambiguity will not stand up in court. It's got to be either yes or no. The jury is getting very impatient, Mr Dean. Please make yourself clear. So tell me, did you answer 'no' to the test or did you say 'yes' to the test?

Ben *Grunts and laughs.*

Mark I see. Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, as you can see, the prisoner is beyond hope. Guilt is written all over his ugly face. *(He puts the tray on the floor, then takes a pill out of the bottle, and prepares to give it to Ben).* I therefore suggest that we don't waste any more of the court's time. Ben Dean, open your gob! *(Ben obeys. Mark places the pill in Ben's mouth. He then puts the glass of water to Ben's lips).* Swallow. Come on! A bit more. More. *(Ben has his mouth full of water. He suddenly sprays it over Mark, who takes it full in the face).* Thank you! Very humorous. What we've got here is a comedian. I'm going to get you a job in a circus.

Ben *Grunts and laughs.*

Mark On the high wire ... no safety net. The first high-wire, paraplegic, clown-juggling act. Roll up! Roll up! See Ben Dean juggle with balls of fire, as he moves across the high wire in his chair, with no safety net, only a hungry pack of man-eating tigers, waiting to pounce. *(He guides Ben's chair across the imaginary wire. Ben gets over excited with much waving of arms and loud grunts).* Can he hold on? The crowd gasp. The tigers roar. Those beasts are voracious. He can see their fangs glistening in the spotlight. He's wobbling. He's losing it. He's losing it. Hold on! Is this the end of Ben Dean?

Enter Sara.

Sara *(Storming in)* Lay the bloody table. I can't do everything. *(Exit Sara. The door bell rings. Then, offstage).* The door! ... and Mark?

Mark What?

Sara *(Offstage)* None of your silly games please. This is Ben's day.

Mark Gotcha! *(He goes stage right and brings in Ralph and Jean. They are a staid married couple and this is reflected in their dress and attitude. Mark takes their coats and throws them on the floor stage right).* Welcome dearest sister-in-law and revered younger brother. The birthday boy awaits.

Ralph goes across to Ben, Jean is by his side.

Ralph So, how are we today, Ben?

Mark We're fine.

Jean He's looking flushed.

Mark Yes, he's been on the high-wire, juggling flaming balls. The tigers nearly had him but he got across in the nick of time.

Ralph Sorry?

Mark It's a game he plays. He runs away to the circus. Usually once a week.

Sara *(Calling from offstage)* Hi!

Ralph & Jean Hi!

Mark I've told him, if he wants to join the circus, that's okay with us. It's about time he earned a crust. I hear they're on very good money ... high-wire artists, and juggling's a bonus.

Sara *(Offstage)* Mark!

Mark Grab a pew. I've been summoned by the chef.

Exit Mark. Ralph and Jean sit together on the settee. There is a moment's pause whilst they look at Ben.

Ralph High wire act then, Ben?

Ben *Looks towards Ralph, but doesn't respond.*

Ralph And juggling, Jean

Jean Yes. I heard.

Ralph Another birthday, Ben?

Jean *(To Ralph)* You'll have to shout.

Ralph EIGHTEEN TODAY, BEN?

Jean I'd like a pound for every time I changed your nappies.

Ralph It's no good. You've got to go right up close.

Jean *(Walking over to Ben)* I said I'd like a pound for every time I changed your nappies. *(Enter Mark. He rushes in with a tray of cutlery and condiments for the table. He lays the table quickly with some panache).* I was telling Ben how I'd like a pound for every time I changed his nappies.

Mark Splendid! Anything to boost his self-esteem is good. Humour stimulates the brain they say. I've always been a great believer in humour. Humourless people are dull and boring I find. What do you think, Jean?

Jean Well, I ...

Mark The ability to turn tragedy into humour is a gift, I say. The humorists walk through this valley of the shadow like the rest of us, but they turn the darkness into light. Damn clever that.

Jean Does Sara want any help in the kitchen ... do you think?

Mark SARA! YOUR SISTER IN LAW OFFERS HER HELP. YES OR NO?

Sara *(Offstage)* Come through, Jean.

Jean squeezes past Mark.

Mark Nice dress, Jean.

Jean Thank you. It's new.

Mark Thought so. Oxfam? Could do with a touch more cleavage. *(Exit Jean, unsure whether to laugh).* Wonderful woman your wife, Ralph.

Ralph Glad you think so.

Mark Oh, I do think so. Salt of the earth. Has she ever thought of politics?

Ralph Not to my knowledge.

Mark I think she should. With her razor-sharp wit, she'd give some of those monkeys in power a run for their money. Drink?

Ralph Why not.

Mark Exactly. Why not? We still have free will in this country, do we not.

Ralph I like to think so.

Mark goes to the sideboard and looks in the cupboard.

Mark Yes. I like to think so. I think we should always think what we like and not worry too much about others liking what we think. I can offer you beer, or a cheap sherry.

Ralph Beer's fine.

Mark brings two cans of beer, which they open.

Mark To brotherly love.

Ralph Yes. Cheers. Does Ben like a drink?

Mark Does Ben like a drink? Does ... *(placing an arm around Ben)*. Tell him, Ben. Go on! Tell your Uncle Ralph. Tell him what you get up to on a Saturday night ... down the local ... with your mates ... and those girls.

Ben *Rocks in his chair, grunts and laughs.*

Ralph But how does he ...?

Mark I keep telling him, "You're wasting your money on those girls. I know the type". But he won't listen. Stubborn. By closing time he's legless. Isn't that right, Ben?

Ben *Roaring louder.*

Enter Sara.

Sara Now what?

Mark We're having a bit of fun, aren't we Ben. Party games.

Sara *(Wiping Ben's forehead with a cloth).* Ben! Calm down love. Calm down. You're all hot and sweaty. *(She feels down his trousers).* And he's wet. You'll have to do it Mark, I'm busy. *(She moves towards the kitchen).* I tell you, Ralph, it's a mad house.

Exit Sara.

Mark So, would you like to change him, Ralph?

Ralph Me?

Mark Well, you are a blood relative, and, as I remember, his Godfather. Aren't you supposed to look after his welfare or something like that?

Ralph I think that was spiritual welfare.

Mark Ah! Like sending him to Sunday School and such.

Ralph Yes.

Mark Making sure he structured his life according to the gospels and all that claptrap.

Ralph Well ...

Mark Do you go to church, Ralph? (*Beat*). Thought you didn't.

Ralph I think I'm a Christian.

Mark Confess, Ralph! You've fallen down on the job. You have not carried out the duties that the church lumbered you with. Very shoddy.

Ralph I ...

Mark Very shoddy indeed. It's people like you that give Christianity a bad name, you know.

Ralph When was the last time you went to church?

Mark You're asking an atheist when he last went to church?

Ralph Since when have you ...

Mark ... been an atheist? I owe my conversion to Ben. He showed me the error of my ways, didn't you Ben. He's a great thinker, a wonderful philosopher is Ben. Hidden depths.

Ralph You've never mentioned it to me. Never.

Mark About his philosophising? Oh yes. What he thinks about is beyond normal comprehension.

Ralph I was talking about you and atheism. Mother would turn in her grave.

Mark Dear old mum. Now, that would be a miracle. Tell you what. You and me, next weekend. Are you free next weekend?

Ralph Why?

Mark You and me, shovel each, down the church and dig her up. (*Ralph, lost for words, stands and moves down stage*). Ben, your Uncle Ralph doesn't want to change you, so it's just me and you. He's a Christian you know. Let's go.

Exit Mark to the Bathroom, taking Ben off with him. Enter Jean from the kitchen.

Jean There's nothing more for me to do.

Ralph Good.

Jean I couldn't live with that kitchen. Have you seen it?

Ralph It is small.

Jean It's minute. You'd think they'd do something wouldn't you. What's the matter?

Ralph Give you one guess.

Jean Mark.

Ralph He doesn't give up. He winds me up every time. Every time!

Jean Ignore him.

Ralph How can you ignore him? It's non-stop. He's always been the same. Ever since we were kids.

Jean I'd take no notice. You're his younger brother. He should show some respect. Where is he?

Ralph Changing Ben. He's wet himself.

Jean I couldn't live with that, could you Ralph. An eighteen-year-old boy. So, what's he said this time?

Ralph Says he's an atheist. He says they're all atheists.

Jean Ignore him. As you say, he's winding you up. Don't worry love. Underneath, he's still a Christian like the rest of us. I've seen so-called atheists. As soon as they get into a spot of bother they're on their knees praying to the Almighty for help and forgiveness.

Sara (*Entering from the kitchen*) We're just waiting for the spuds and we'll be right. I'll take off that music for a start. We'll all be dropping off. (*She does so and the 'Relaxation' music stops*).

Jean We've had a busy week, haven't we Ralph

Ralph Every week's busy these days.

Jean He's had to take on two extra men, haven't you Ralph?

Ralph We can't keep up with the orders. They all want conservatories these days.

Jean To be honest we'll be glad to get away this year. We've booked a fortnight in Florida ... car provided and live-in maid.

Sara Very nice.

Ralph Nice price too.

Jean And it's got a swimming pool and barbeque area.

Ralph It's right on the beach. Beautiful sunsets guaranteed. Pity you couldn't come with us.

Sara It is, isn't it.

Ralph There's always next year.

Sara I don't think so. I know what you're thinking. You say it every year, and to be honest it pisses me off just a little bit more each year.

Jean We're only thinking of you Jean, you know that. You can't carry on looking after Ben forever. You deserve a life.

Sara I've got a life. In fact I've got a very good life.

Jean Really.

Sara Really. I'd better check on Ben.

Exit Sara, to the Bathroom.

Ralph I come here ... I tread on eggshells.

Jean They've made their bed. If they want to sleep in it, that's up to them.

Ralph He'd be better off somewhere else, in a proper home.

Jean 'Course he would. Common sense.

Ralph With his own kind.

Jean Far more natural. *(Beat)*. Look at this décor.

Ralph What?

Jean This décor. Hasn't been touched for years. Mark could do that.

Ralph Too much like graft for an academic.

Jean Ex-academic. That's another thing, he could be back in his old job at the university if Ben was ... was ...

Ralph Put away?

Jean ... taken into some sort of care. Do we get drinks, or are we on some sort of alcohol-free diet.

Ralph They've got sherry or beer.

Jean I knew we should have brought a bottle.

Ralph *(Going to the cupboard)* Beer or sherry?

Jean If it's that shitty sherry they gave us at New Year, give me the beer.

Ralph No glasses.

Jean What do you expect?

Ralph carries a can of beer over to Jean. The doorbell rings.

Sara *(Offstage)* Can someone get that. We're struggling with underpants here.

Jean *(Under her breath)* That's it! Tell the neighbours.

Ralph I'll go.

Exit Ralph downstage right. Jean takes a long swig of her beer and nearly chokes on it. Enter Ralph and Pat.

Jean Pat, love.

Pat Mum. *(They hug and kiss quickly)*. Where is everyone?

Jean In the loo, changing underpants.

Pat Oh.

Enter Mark.

Mark Welcome, niece. Welcome. *(He makes a grand gesture, taking and kissing Pat's hand)*.

Pat Thank you, kind uncle.

Mark Please, do not sit according to the order of your station. Just plonk your arses down somewhere.

Pat *(Handing a small parcel to Mark)* I brought this for Ben.

Jean Which reminds me ...

Jean digs into her handbag and takes out a small parcel. She hands it to Mark who balances the parcels, one in each hand.

Mark Let me guess. No! I give up.

Pat It's a Walkman.

Jean No! So's mine. I told you I was getting a Walkman, Pat.

Pat No. You said, "You get the Walkman", meaning me, and you were going to think of something else.

Mark So, two Walkmen. Wonderful. What does he do? Strap one to each leg.

Jean grabs her Walkman back, and puts it back in her bag. Enter Sara, wheeling in Ben.

Sara Here's the birthday boy.

Pat goes across to Ben and kisses him on the cheek. She then kisses Sara.

Mark At last. Here we are, all together. The Dean family, what's left of it. Beer, Pat?

Pat *(Taking a bottle of wine out of her bag)* Tarra!

Mark Magnificent!

Pat Bottled in France, a good vintage, full-bodied and very fruity. Hope you like it.

Mark Ben will love it, won't you Ben. Any thing full-bodied and fruity is right up his street. I'll open it up.

Ralph Does Ben like wine?

Mark Does Ben ...? He's a connoisseur. He's not like you and me. He doesn't just whack it down. He savours it. He takes in the bouquet and then spits it out. That's class.

Jean I was telling Sara about our holiday to Florida. All first-class.

Mark Florida?

Jean Car, swimming pool, everything. Expensive, but worth every penny.

Mark You wouldn't catch me going to Florida.

Jean Too expensive for you, Mark?

Mark I'll tell you about Florida. It had it's hey-day when gangsters from Chicago and New York went down there to enjoy the heat, and to escape the heat. Now, every Tom, Dick and Harry goes there. They're building swimming pools in every bloody garden. And what's happening to the water table? It's dropping. Soon, the whole of Florida will be like a desert. It's a magnet for car thieves, pickpockets and low-life's. That's why I won't go there.

Mark opens the bottle and places it on the table.

Jean You had to say something didn't you Mark. You're such a clever bastard, excuse my language. *(Beat)*. I need the loo.

Exit Jean, to the Bathroom.

Sara Good journey, Pat?

Pat Yeah! Not bad. I had to shell out for first-class, but it's worth it.

Mark And how are you coping with the pressurised world of television?

Pat Just about surviving.

Mark This Ben, is your high-flying niece who moves amongst the great and the good in television news. She also digs the dirt on poor mortals who slip unexpectedly into the harsh glare of the public gaze.

Pat I only dig out the truth.

Mark Of course you do. Where would we all be without the digger-outers of truth? Now Ben, you and I know that one man's truth is another man's lie.

Pat Uncle, you don't change. You're as contentious as ever.

Mark Did you hear that, Ralph? Your daughter thinks I'm being contentious. Those years of higher education are bearing fruit. The system works. We are producing a breed of intelligent, perceptive women.

Ralph It cost me enough.

Mark Tell me Pat. What do you think of our Ben? Is he handsome?

Sara Mark!

Mark No, I'd like to know. I'd like an unprejudiced viewpoint.

Pat Of course he's handsome, aren't you Ben. You've got the most beautiful eyes and those hands are like silk.

Mark How does he match up to those city studs?

Pat Now let's see. Good strong legs. Mmm! Lots of muscle there. Let me feel that six pack. My God! He's firm.

Sara I'll pour the wine shall I?

Pat And these shoulders are broad and strong. I bet you work out don't you Ben boy.

Ben *Begins to moan and rock backwards and forwards.*

Pat How old are you now, Ben? Eighteen? How would you like to touch the soft skin of a young woman's body? Are you a virgin?

Mark That's enough, Pat.

Pat Tell you what, Ben. Let's get rid of this lot and we can have some fun. Would you like that?

Mark Enough!

Pat I was only playing your game, Uncle.

Mark My game ... I make up the rules.

Pat Too rough for you?

Mark And what's funny, Ralph?

Ralph Your face. I never thought I'd see the day.

Mark Oh yes. Well, the day's not over. It is far from over.

Pat Is that the first set to me then? You must admit I had you going.

Mark I have to confess young Patricia, that your transition from a spotty, pig-tailed teenager to a feisty, woman-about-town has taken me by surprise. Which begs the question ... why haven't we seen you for six years?

Pat Have you missed me?

Mark Nothing to do with the constant stench of stale urine, I suppose.

Pat I've been busy.

Ralph She's been very busy ... university. Cost me twenty-thousand quid.

Pat The urine didn't worry me. You don't notice it after a while.

Enter Jean.

Jean I'm afraid the toilet's blocked.

Sara I'll see to it. Mark, make sure everyone's got a glass.

Exit Sara, to the Bathroom.

Mark Absolutely.

Exit Mark, to the kitchen.

Ralph You shouldn't rise to him.

Pat Why not? He expects it.

Jean What?

Pat Uncle Mark's playing his games as usual.

Jean Oh that. *(Beat)*. That toilet. Stinking!

Pat Mum! Ben!

Jean He can't hear. It needs fumigating. The whole house should be condemned. It's criminal if you ask me, keeping this poor creature banged up in here morning till night. His nose is running. Pat, his nose.

Pat It's only a lump of snot. It won't kill you.

Jean Pat! Don't be disgusting.

Enter Mark with a tray of various shaped glasses that he places on the table.

Mark Glasses, wine for the use of.

Pat wipes Ben's nose. Ben takes hold of her arm. She responds by kneeling in front of him. Ben strokes her hair with both hands.

Pat Do you like that Ben? *(Ben's stroking becomes over-enthusiastic).* Ben! *(Ben grabs hold of her hair and pulls her on top of him).* Ben, you're hurting. Ben! Stop! Stop it! Stop him someone!

Mark runs forward and tries to pull Ben's hands away. Enter Sara. She joins Mark in grabbing hold of Ben's hands.

Sara Come on, Ben. There's a good boy. Come on.

Pat Get him off!

Mark Ben. Let go! Let go!

Pat He's hurting.

Jean Get the bastard off. Get him off! *(Ben suddenly releases his grip. She embraces Pat).* He's not safe. I knew it.

Sara He's over excited.

Jean He's dangerous.

Sara He's not used to all this fuss.

Ralph Is he all right?

Mark Right as rain.

Ralph Has he done that sort of thing before?

Sara Believe me, never. I'll get the chicken. *(She wheels Ben to the side).* You can stay there until you've calmed down. Shall we sit everyone? *(Exit Sara, to the Kitchen).*

Mark Good idea. You there, Ralph. Jean, you're next to me, thigh by thigh. Then Patricia and Sara close to the kitchen. We'll leave that space for Ben. Oh, I nearly forgot. Hats and squeakers! *(Ben bangs hard on the arms of his chair several times. Mark picks up a box containing party hats and squeakers from upstage of the sideboard. He hands them out).* Here we are. Let's all pretend we're enjoying ourselves shall we. Has everyone got a squeaker? Smile Pat.

Pat Whatever you say, master.

Mark Now. Sara, come here a tick.

Sara *(Offstage)* I'm busy.

Mark Come here. Do what you're told woman. Don't make me get the whip out.

Enter Sara.

Mark Grab your hat and shove a squeaker in your cake-hole.

Sara Yes dearest. Anything you say.

Mark Squeakers at the ready everyone. Whoops! Hold on. Sorry Ben boy. *(He places a funny hat on Ben's head and a squeaker in his mouth).* Blow, don't suck. Right everyone. On the count of three ... one, two, three! *(They all play 'Happy Birthday' to Ben, who rocks and grunts in appreciation. Mark then pours the wine. Exit Sara to the Kitchen).* Ralph, how old were you when you took Jean out in that old Mini Traveller of yours?

Ralph Why?

Mark You were eighteen. You came back with your shirt sticking out of your fly and scratches down your back.

Enter Sara, carrying two plates of chicken dinner, which she places in front of Pat and Jean.

Sara Mark, please.

Mark I never heard any complaints from Jean. It was Jean wasn't it Ralph. She was your first wasn't she? *(Exit Sara to the kitchen, trying to signal to Mark to shut up).* I remember, 'cos you couldn't stop talking about it for a week ... how she put up a fight. You could have had him for date-rape there, Jean. He was like a wild animal.

Jean So kind of you to bring it up, Mark.

Mark I've been cursed with a photographic memory, Jean. I can see those deep scratches now. Took a week to heal, at least. I would never take you for a passionate woman.

Enter Sara, with another two plates of chicken dinner, which she places in front of Ralph and her own place.

Sara Yours is on the cooker.

Mark Of course, oh precious one.

Exit Mark, running to the Kitchen. He re-enters immediately with his plate.

Pat What about, Ben? Does he get to eat?

Mark Of course. We put all the scraps into a big doggy bowl, and he has it out in the garden, don't you Ben!

Sara He's on a special liquid diet. We'll see to him later. Okay everyone. Dig in.

Mark Before that. Please everyone, raise your glasses and let's be upstanding. *(They all rise)*. To our dear son, Ben. Ben, I love you. We love you. You my boy, are very precious to all of us. You are a joy, a mystery, a constant bloody enigma, and you have taught me more about life than any of the books could ever teach me. To you, a very happy eighteenth birthday.

All Ben!

The lights dim on the table area as they all sit, leaving a spot on Ben. He rocks backwards and forwards giggling gently to himself. The spot fades.

Scene Two

One hour later. Lights up. The meal is over. Pat and Sara are clearing away the table. Mark is hand-feeding Ben through a straw. Jean is sitting stiffly next to Ralph on the settee, who is drinking another beer.

Jean I'm not letting you drive if you have one more.

Ralph I've had one. That's all I've had.

Jean I know you. A couple of pints and you drive like a maniac.

Ralph It's a fast car. It likes to go fast. Don't worry. I'm safe.

Mark Ben's the Formula One world champion, aren't you Ben. Took it on the last lap. Fantastic duel. Fortunately, we had the right tyres. We're thinking of going into rallycross next year. All we need's a sponsor.

Jean Do you think they need any help in the kitchen?

Mark I imagine they do, Jean. There's a few greasy pans need scouring. There's some wire wool under the sink.

Jean I'll go and help then. Ralph?

Ralph Yes dear?

Jean I'll go and help ... wash-up... in the kitchen.

Ralph Good. Yes.

Jean stands reluctantly and exits to the kitchen.

Mark Thanks for coming.

Ralph Well ...

Mark Thanks. I'm fifty this year. That makes you forty-six. My baby brother is forty-six years old.

Ralph Time marches on.

Mark I knew you'd say that.

Ralph What?

Mark "Time marches on". I can read your mind. I always could. There again, there's something re-assuring about always being predictable.

Ralph What's that you're feeding him?

Mark Jungle juice. A mixture of herbs and spices. An ancient recipe from the Orient, supposedly regenerates the nervous system.

Ralph Oh?

Mark And, as an added bonus it stimulates the reproductive system. Acts like an aphrodisiac. Very potent.

Ralph Is that wise?

Mark Wise? Ben has his needs, don't you Ben?

Ralph Does he? I thought ...?

Mark ... sex was out of the question? Don't let this wheelchair fool you. Tell me Ralph, how often does Jean ... you know, get frisky every month ... on average?

Ralph That's personal.

Mark Yes, but you can tell me. With Sara, it's a couple of times a week. What is it with Jean?

Ralph It varies.

Mark Once a week? ... Once a month?... Once a year?

Ralph Occasionally, once a month. I don't keep a record.

Mark How things change. When she was eighteen she was like an animal. She was doing all the rocking in that Mini Traveller, not you. You were just lying back wondering what the hell it was all about.

Ralph (*Standing up and moving SR to stretch his legs*) You set a wonderful example for your son, don't you Mark.

Mark Do you think so?

Ralph Christ!

Mark I like to think I help him to reach his full potential. Ben has a strong sexual drive, don't you Ben? And somehow, it's got to be satisfied.

Ralph I don't want to know. I hate to think what you get up to. You always did have a perverted streak.

Mark The natural result of working in a university all those years. Too much totty for one's own good.

Ralph I'm glad I didn't go to university.

Mark So am I, Ralph. You would have been a bloody disaster.

Ralph I could never have been as clever as you, could I Mark? You wouldn't have liked that. But who's got the last laugh? Eh? Who's got cash in the bank? Who changes his car every year? Who goes abroad at least four times a year? Who's got a house in five acres of land on the best side of town? (*Beat*). And I could go on.

Mark Are you listening to all this, Ben? That's your Uncle Ralph, a jobbing carpenter who made good. When he dies from a heart attack or ulcers in a few years time, he might leave you a plank of timber in his will, because he's a tight bastard.

Enter Jean, Sara and Pat from the kitchen. Sara hands round a box of chocolates.

Sara These are my favourites. Home made.

Jean I shouldn't.

Pat You always say that, then you scoff the whole box.

Jean Pat!

Pat Well, you do.

Jean I do sometimes. When I need comforting.

Mark I read somewhere that women who are sexually repressed, gain much pleasure from stuffing their mouths with sticky chocolate.

Pat You have a wonderful knack of always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Mark Thank you.

Pat It must be a gift.

Mark Oh no, it's a skill I developed during tutorials, when I had to put silly know-it-all students in their place. Were you a know-it-all student, Pat, in that third-rate, red-brick academy?

Pat There's a job for you in television. They're looking for bitter and twisted older men.

Mark Thirty years ago I would have been tempted. That's when television was a power in the land. Now it's dross, filth, lacking in style. Even some of the presenters don't understand the basics of English grammar.

Sara Coffee everyone? (*They all mumble "yes"*). We do have Earl Grey as a special treat if anyone would like it. No? Okay then. Coffee all round.

Pat I'll come and help.

Sara No, I can manage, Pat.
Pat I'd rather help if you don't mind, Auntie.
Sara Fine.

Exit Sara and Pat to the Kitchen.

Mark We were reminiscing before you came in, Jean, weren't we Ralph?
Ralph He was telling me how much cleverer he was, than I was.
Jean Was he. Nothing new then.
Mark I was saying how I remember what a wild, sexual animal you used to be Jean.
Jean I will not demean myself. I will not rise to the bait ... for the sake of Ben.
Ralph Well said, love.
Mark It was meant as a compliment. I was trying to draw a comparison between your behaviour, and Ben's.
Ralph Give me the nod when you want to leave, love.
Jean Don't worry. It's water off a duck's back.
Mark You see, I think we have a duty, as parents, as I was saying to Ralph, to encourage our offspring to reach their full potential. Agreed?
Jean Agreed. We've done our bit with more than a little success, I'd say.
Ralph Hear, hear!
Mark And all I want is to ensure that Ben gets total sexual satisfaction whilst he's in the prime of his sexual powers. What's wrong with that?
Jean I suppose it depends on 'how'.
Mark How would you do it, Jean? Give him a cold shower? Shove some bromide in his medicine? Maybe read a few chapters of the 'Famous Five', just to take his mind off it?
Jean I don't know what I'd do.
Mark So it's a cop out. What would you do Ralph? You're a big boy now. What would you do to help your son out?
Ralph You tell me. You're the brains, so you keep telling us.
Mark Shall we tell them, Ben? What do you think?
Ben *Looks at Mark with the hint of a smile.*
Mark Shall we tell them about Peaches and Layla, our two young ladies? How they entertain you, every week, one at a time, sometimes two at a time? How they massage you with aromatic oils and then gently make love to you?
Jean You're using prostitutes?
Mark Well, Ben is. Couldn't get them on prescription no matter how hard I tried. Eats up my pension, but it's a sacrifice I've got to make.
Ralph Where do they come from?
Mark Personal column.
Jean You bring prostitutes to the house.
Mark I'd rather that than a knee-trembler in some back alley, or a do-it-yourself job. You used to do a lot of that didn't you Ralph ... KY Jelly and a stack of girlie magazines under the bed, torch under the blankets. He'd be puffing and gasping, well into the night, weren't you Ralph.
Jean Have you thought about disease? What if he catches something? Have you thought about that? No, I don't suppose you have. And you call yourself intelligent?

Enter Sara and Pat carrying cups of coffee which they distribute.

Sara Now what?
Jean Do you allow this to go on, Sara?
Sara What?
Jean Prostitutes ...
Mark They're artists. Skilled artists with great bodies.
Jean ... common prostitutes, to come into your house to ... to ... service Ben.

Mark Service Ben? He's not a bloody horse, although having said that, there are some similarities.
Ralph I think you've said enough, don't you Mark?
Sara I don't know anything about prostitutes.
Jean You haven't got the guts to tell your wife what's going on.
Sara So, what is going on?
Jean You tell her, Ralph.
Ralph Well, Mark ... he's ... and I know he thinks he's got Ben's best interests at heart ...
Jean Tell her!
Ralph I am telling her. He's bringing prostitutes into the house to ... to ...
Mark Come on, you're nearly there.
Ralph ... to satisfy Ben.
Sara Is that what he's told you?
Jean It's that kind of slap-happy moral attitude that's ruining this country.
Pat I'm impressed. There could be a programme in this, "Sex In A Wheelchair".

Sara goes up to Mark. They begin to laugh loudly and Ben bangs violently on the arms of his chair, grunting and rocking. Ralph and Jean exchange sighs. The laughter subsides.

Jean Does this mean what I think it means?
Sara I'm afraid so, Jean.
Mark Good idea, all the same. I might give the personal ads a once-over.
Pat Still a good idea for a programme. I might try a pitch.
Mark Do that. Better still, go undercover. Give it a whirl. See how you make out.
Sara *(Suddenly)* The cake! Time for the cake. *(She exits to the Kitchen).*
Pat Yes, undercover. Could work.
Jean Don't even think about it.
Pat I think Channel Four would jump at it. Put 'Sex' and 'Paraplegic' in the main title, you can't lose. It's what people want to know about. They're curious. What would you do, mum, if dad was in a wheelchair?
Jean I don't even want to think about it, thank you.

... in this Preview Script, the remainder of the play has been deleted from here ...

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