

ACT I

1

Scene 1

1

There's a homemade banner hung across the back of the stage reading "LONG LIVE LEN". Someone's taken a marker and added an asterisk after LEN then written along the bottom: "(even tho hes dead)".

JAMIE (23, North West Kent accent, kind-hearted, not the sharpest tool in the box) is on stage. He's wearing a black suit without a tie. He looks downwards and towards the front of the stage awkwardly. He's talking to Len's open casket.

JAMIE

Alright Dad?

(Beat)

I don't really like this sort of thing.

Behind him, PAULINE (50, East London accent, motherly, strong-willed) enters unnoticed. She's also wearing black and is carrying a tea towel and a tin of pineapple. She watches JAMIE as he talks.

JAMIE

I don't do prayers or nothing. But I thought, you know, a sort of... poem.

(Clears throat)

Slipping through our fingers, like the sands of time

Promises made, every memory saved, with reflections in my mind

PAULINE

(Making Jamie jump)

That's beautiful Jamie. Who's that then? Keats? Shakespeare?

JAMIE

Spice Girls. Viva Forever.

(Beat)

What you got there?

PAULINE

Three traditions for a proper funeral. Open casket, a shit ton of whisky, and a cheese n pineapple hedgehog.

JAMIE smiles.

PAULINE

I didn't have you down as a Spice Girls fan?

JAMIE

I spose me older brother had some impact on me, eh?

(Pause)

He'll be here soon?

PAULINE

Yep.

Awkward pause.

JAMIE

D'you like what I did with the sign?

(Beat)

You know, just so no-one got confused.

PAULINE

(Looking)

...Yeah... it's good that.

JAMIE

This'll be, err... the first time he's seen Dad for a while then?

PAULINE

It will yeah.

JAMIE

I'll never forgive Dad for what he did to him.

PAULINE

It wasn't easy for your dad when he... you know... converted.

JAMIE

Mum, he ain't Muslim, he's gay.

We hear a knock at the door.

JAMIE

I'm gonna go and put a tie on.

JAMIE exits.

PAULINE

(Deep breath, to casket)

Help me through this Len. And yes, I know he's ruined that bloody sign.

PAULINE answers the door. LENNY (28, North West Kent accent, intelligent, geeky) enters, with a suitcase.

A fairly cold, awkward conversation ensues.

LENNY

Y'alright Mum?

PAULINE

Well my husband's just died of a heart attack so I've been better you know.

LENNY

Sorry, I-

PAULINE

Ooo, but I won a tenner on the lottery so...

(She stops herself, sighs)

Cold out?

LENNY

Not bad for this time of year I spose.

PAULINE

Trains bad or-

LENNY

When are the trains to Bexleyheath not bad?

PAULINE

So... cold out?

LENNY

Nice sign!

PAULINE

Yeah.

LENNY

Jamie's been at it?

PAULINE

Yeah.

JAMIE enters, now wearing tie. He hugs LENNY. As they do, LENNY notices the casket.

JAMIE

Lenny, mate. Long time no see.

LENNY

Oh geez. I wasn't expecting an open casket. That's creepy.

PAULINE

Oi. This is an Irish Catholic funeral. It's tradition.

LENNY

We're not Irish Mum.

PAULINE

Your Great, Great Grandfather came over to the East End in the potato famine.

LENNY

Exactly.

PAULINE

Exactly!

JAMIE

D'you like my sign Lenny?

LENNY

Yeah... Very, erm... post-modern.

JAMIE

Yeah... yeah. That's what I was going for, yeah.

LENNY

Everything ready for tomorrow? You got flowers sorted and stuff?

PAULINE

Yeah. Yellow ones. No lilies. He couldn't stomach lilies. He was allergic.

LENNY

Well I don't think they'd do him much harm now.

LENNY peers into the casket. He gazes, lost in thought. He looks quite shaken.

LENNY

It's a burial, not a cremation right? Even though we're not exactly Catholic any more.

PAULINE

We are Catholic. At least when we're dead. And it's traditional. He'll be buried in the country he loved. Back into the Earth for more great Kent things to be built up on, like Romans, Tudors, heroes before him.

LENNY

Yeah and a fair few nobodies.

PAULINE

Don't you call him a nobody.

JAMIE

It'll be a couple of years since you last saw him, eh Lenny?

LENNY

...Yeah. Something like that.

JAMIE

He always knew you'd go off and do your own thing. You were the creative one. He admired that in you. He always said that about you.

(Beat)

But I tell you what, Lenny, I'll never forgive him for what he did to you.

PAULINE

Could you stop staying that? You don't even know-

LENNY

Can I... say a poem?

PAULINE

WHAT?

LENNY

Housman. Dad liked Housman, remember?

LENNY goes to his suitcase and removes a book from the top pocket: A Shropshire Lad by A E Housman.

JAMIE

Yeah, nice idea Lenny. Eh, Mum?

PAULINE sighs. LENNY reads:

LENNY

Far I hear the bugle blow
 To call me where I would not go
 And the guns begin the song
 "Soldier, fly or stay for long"
 Comrade, if to turn and fly
 Made a soldier never die
 Fly I would, for who would not?
 Tis sure no pleasure to be shot
 But since the man that runs away

Lives to die another day
 And cowards' funerals, when they come
 Are not wept so well at home
 Therefore though the best is bad
 Stand and do the best, my lad
 Stand and fight and see your slain
 And take the bullet in your brain

JAMIE
 Pffff. That's a bit bloody depressing, ain't it mate?

LENNY
 Dad liked Housman. The only poet he liked.

JAMIE
 I know, but still. Here, you told me he was gay once, didn't you Len?

LENNY
 He was, yeah.

JAMIE
 Did you know that Mum?

PAULINE shrugs, non-plussed.

LENNY
 Dad always said his poems reminded him of Granddad telling him about the war. He liked him too.

JAMIE
 The three Lennies.

PAULINE
 How d'you feel about that tradition, eh? Open casket no good, cremation no good, how's the naming after your father one?

JAMIE
 Mum, don't start.

PAULINE
 Well look at him coming round here all morbid when we're trying to keep our spirits up.

LENNY

It ain't morbid. Dad always said Housman's poems were his reminder to live while he was young.

PAULINE

Yeah well you're a bit late to come back and remind him of that now, ain't ya? You've got some nerve.

JAMIE

You understood him well Lenny. He always said that. But, honestly I'll never forgive him. The way he just rejected you like that. He'll regret that he never apologised. Never saw the error of his ways.

PAULINE

SHUT UP! SHUT UP TALKING ABOUT HIM LIKE THAT!

(To LENNY)

How dare you say you hadn't seen him two years?

JAMIE

Mum, what you talking about?

PAULINE

He came to you. He came to you and he apologised. Told you he loved you like nothing else on this Earth. And what did you do? You said nothing. You rejected him.

JAMIE

What? When was that?

LENNY

(Deep breathe in)

It wasn't exactly like that-

PAULINE

Oh yeah, how was it then?

LENNY

I tried, Mum. I tried. I wanted to say "I accept your apology. And... I love you too, Dad." I've played it out in my head over and over since. But at the time, I couldn't say it. I physically could not say it. It's like the words were hanging here

(Gestures towards neck aggressively)

they were hanging here, choking me, desperate to come out, but they just wouldn't. When he left that day, I sat there, and I sobbed. And I thought... pick up the phone, say it. Say it to him. I was still planning to, I was.

(Beat)

I didn't know he was gonna have a heart attack two months later, did I?

JAMIE

It's not your fault mate. You thought you had more time.

PAULINE

You had two months. Two months. Dithering about. And now he's gone. With that hanging over him. A son that didn't love him. And you're coming round here talking about living while you're young.

LENNY

Yeah. Well maybe I'm learning from my mistakes. And two months isn't long when it took him, what? 18 months after I came out to come and say anything at all?

JAMIE

You knew he always loved you though mate. Deep down. He was so proud of you, he always said that about you.

(To casket)

I feel sorry I doubted you now Dad.

PAULINE

I tried to make it happen sooner, Lenny. I tried all the bleedin' time. When he was working up Soho Saturday night and he came home and told me... I had these really fun guys in my cab this evening, I'd say... they were gay, Len. They're just like Lenny. Or when he's watching Ian McKellen in that Sherlock Holmes film, or talking about Ronnie bleedin' Kray his auntie was so proud of knowing, or A E fuckin' Housman. I said to him they're all gay. All just like you. And yeah he took his time. But, in the end,.. he did the right thing. He realised he'd done wrong. He loved you and he was a good man.

(Beat)

I really tried Lenny. I always tried to look after my boys.

LENNY

That's part of the problem I think Mum. It's about more than 18 months. He sprang that on me, after 27 years of not talking about anything. Maybe he always said he admired this or that or was proud of this or that. But he said it about me. He never said it to me. And I just didn't know how to say it back.

PAULINE

It weren't his fault. That's how he was raised too.

LENNY

Tradition. Traditional men, not talking about nothing.

PAULINE

Just try and make your peace now, eh? It's what he would've wanted. And don't you dare call him a nobody. Nobody on this Earth is a nobody. You can tell that to your bloody Housman.

Pause.

LENNY

Can I read another one?

JAMIE

Yeah, go on then mate. No guns in this one eh?

LENNY reads.

LENNY

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
 Is hung with bloom along the bough
 And stands about the woodland ride
 Wearing white for Eastertide
 Now, of my threescore years and ten
 Twenty will not come again
 And take from seventy springs a score
 It only leaves me fifty more
 And since to look at things in bloom
 Fifty springs are little room
 About the woodlands I will go
 To see the cherry hung with snow

Long pause. They all gaze down at the casket.

JAMIE

He used to read that to us when we were kids.

PAULINE

I know.

(Beat)

And my poor Len. He didn't even get seventy springs.

JAMIE hugs PAULINE.

LENNY

That one really is about living while you're young, not thinking time will keep going forever, not taking moments for granted.

(Beat)

I was wondering if I might read it at the funeral?

JAMIE

Dad would have loved that.

PAULINE

It's not traditional.

LENNY

Sometimes it's good to break with tradition.

Pause.

PAULINE

OK then, love. To help all my boys find peace.

LENNY

Thanks Mum.

(Beat)

We're all somebodies. Whether we're Housman, or Dad, or-

JAMIE

The Spice Girls.

LENNY

I was gonna say Mum.

PAULINE smiles. She takes LENNY's hand and squeezes it.

PAULINE

Now. Will you two come and help me in the kitchen? I am up to my neck in pineapple chunks.

LENNY

Yeah. I'll be there in a sec.

PAULINE and JAMIE go to leave.

LENNY

I won't be eating any cheese though. I'm vegan.

PAULINE rolls her eyes. JAMIE laughs and ruffles LENNY's hair playfully. They exit.

LENNY looks forward at the casket.

LENNY

I love you too Dad.

(Beat. He puts his hands together in
prayer.)

Please keep him safe Lord.

END OF PLAY