

Storytime

deirdre burton ~ tom davis

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Act 1

1 Dramatis personae

Angela

Chris (Odysseus)

Peter the puppeteer (Hamlet the rabbit)

Albert the bear (Polyphemus)

Boris the tiger (Ulysees)

Cat (Penelope)

Koala (narrator)

Gloria the mouse (Angelique the siren)

Rag doll (Circe)

Margot the monkey (Calypso)

Shakespeare

Pyramus

Thisbe

Lion

Wall

Moon

Storyteam:

Charlotte Bronte

Emily Bronte

James Joyce

Ernest Hemingway

1. I'll tell you a story

A children's nursery/playroom with a large wicker hamper in it. This has various props in it, also some toy animals and puppets. Actors, the PUPPETS, are lying in a heap around the basket. Enter ANGELA. She takes stuffed animals and puppets out of the hamper and rather clumsily arranges them next to the box, so that they are looking at the audience. She arranges the PUPPETS in the same way. At the same time, she attempts to control a class of small (invisible) children. She is followed by a shy and extremely self-effacing individual, PETER THE PUPPETEER. He is wearing white, and trying very hard to be invisible. He can do this because he is wearing a white baseball cap with a long peak; all he has to do is to look down, and his face is hidden.

PETER crouches behind the hamper. It is not big enough to conceal him.

ANGELA:

Now children, if you're really really good I'll tell you one of your favourite stories. Yes! A favourite: Jack and the Beanstalk! Yay! *(Drops several toys)*. Now sit down in a nice circle, a *circle*, Simon, come over here, Adrian, *stop that*, yes, a circle, that's it—and I'll introduce you to the animals. Yes! Real animals! Real toy animals, yes Simon I know that's not the same, but this is a story, isn't it? Sit *down*.

First of all, let me introduce: my friend PETER! PETER THE PUPPETEER! Say hello, PETER!

She takes PETER'S hand, and brings him to his feet. He looks up, and we see his face. He opens and shuts his mouth. No sound emerges. He gesticulates at ANGELA. She is puzzled. More gestures; she understands, ah! and gives him a stuffed animal.

PETER (ANIMAL): *(brightly)* Hello boys and girls!

PETER hands back the animal, and becomes invisible again. He crouches behind the box, head down. In what follows he will (to begin with) act as puppeteer to the PUPPETS, and animate them as the script requires. Occasionally he may look up and do some dumb show, for comic effect, and to remind us (surprisingly) of his independent existence, but mostly he is face down, animating a PUPPET, or being invisible. ANGELA from now on picks up a PUPPET to introduce it, and appears to put it on the box, as if she is in control; this starts to get out of hand, however.

ANGELA: And now the puppets. Ladies first! Here is RAG DOLL, isn't she lovely? Say hello to the children, RAG DOLL.

RAG DOLL: *(Woodenly)* Hello children.

ANGELA: Hello RAG DOLL! And now MOUSE, so sweet, isn't she children, say hello, please, MOUSE—her name is GLORIA, children, isn't that a sweet name! And here is a real live monkey, MARGOT THE MONKEY, come and take a little bow, MARGOT, thank you, let's all clap, shall we, children? *Children?* Yes, thank you.

Now I want to introduce: ALBERT the bear! Say hello to ALBERT, children. Now, ALBERT, say hello to the children.

ALBERT: *(Suggestively)* Hey.

ANGELA looks at ALBERT. ALBERT looks at her.

ALBERT: Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side.

ANGELA puts ALBERT down, hastily, and picks up a stuffed tiger.

ANGELA: Now children, who is this? Yes, it's a tiger! Do you know what his name is? Have a guess, what his name might be. No, Adrian, that is *not* a nice name for a

tiger. His name is: BORIS. BORIS the tiger! Isn't that a nice name? Yes, it is, Adrian. It's a nice name. Say hello to the children, BORIS.

BORIS: *(He's a thespian)* But soft, what light at yonder window breaks?

ANGELA: What did you say?

BORIS: Do you want more feeling? Shall I put more yearning into it? But soft—

ANGELA: *(fiercely)* Shut up!

BORIS: Or pain? I can do pain. But soft what ligh—

ANGELA: This is not *Romeo and Juliet!* This is *Jack and the Beanstalk!*

BORIS: I don't do panto.

ANGELA: You will do exactly what I say.

BORIS: In all my years in the theatre...

ANGELA: *Shut up.*

Puts BORIS down. A bit of business with PETER, in dumbshow: ANGELA: what the bloody hell is going on? PETER: no idea, it's out of my hands, don't know what's got into them, honest. ANGELA picks up a fluffy cat.

ANGELA: *(To CAT)* are you going to be difficult, too?

CAT: *(Very camp)* No, darling, not for a *nanosecond*, I love panto.

MONKEY: *(Pops up)* Er, excuse me –

ANGELA: What do you want?

MONKEY: I'm ever so sorry to interrupt and everything, but –

ANGELA: But what?

MONKEY: Can I play?

2 We're doing *Ulysses*

Another PUPPET, the KOALA, animates, apparently worked by PETER.

KOALA: The snot green, scrotum-tightening sea.

CAT and ANGELA turn, transfixed, and stare at the KOALA, as does PETER. The KOALA climbs on to the box.

CAT: Oooooooooooooo!

ANGELA: *What* did you say?

KOALA: Joyce, darling;

MOUSE: *(pops up)* My auntie's called Joyce. She's an agit prop street theatre Country and Western singer, she is.

KOALA: James Joyce. Irish writer. Wrote *Ulysses*.

ANGELA: I *know* who Joyce was.

MOUSE: Is. Actually.

ANGELA: Is?

MOUSE: Yeah. Don't you mess with my auntie Joyce. She's ace she is.

ANGELA: That's enough.

MOUSE; *(in a huff)* Huh! And don't mess with me lady. I could tell you some stories about my auntie Joyce alright.

ANGELA: *(to Koala again)* Look, what I want to know is, why are you quoting James Joyce? I have a bunch of children here, waiting for a story, a *nice* story, a *children's* story, and you give them *Ulysses*?

KOALA: *Ulysses* is a masterpiece.

ANGELA: *Ulysses* is for grownups!

KOALA: Ageist. Isn't she, children? Ageist? Yes, that's right.
(*To ANGELA*) They think you're ageist. How would you like to hear the story of *Ulysses*, children? Does that tickle your little palates? Does that get your juvenile juices running? It does? Really? (*To ANGELA*) OK, you're outvoted. We're doing *Ulysses*. We'll keep it simple, do the Homer version, I doubt this bunch of has-beens can manage an Irish accent between them.
Chorus of protest from PUPPETS.
OK darlings, only joking. A more professional bunch of stuffed animals I have never had the privilege to work with. OK, here goes:
The PUPPETS are excited in anticipation of storytime—all ready to join in and seize opportunities for a part—sometimes competing—the pushiest actor gets the role.

KOALA (NARRATOR): Penelope sat all alone on her island, mourning her long absent husband, *Ulysses*, but since we're doing Homer, we'll call him ODYSSEUS. Poor Penelope...

CAT (PENELOPE): Woe is me, darling.

MONKEY: What about me? I can do poor Penelope –

CAT: I don't think so dear. This is a job for a professional.

KOALA (NARRATOR): He had been away, sailing the savage seas, for nearly ten years. In his absence, suitors came from far and wide, drawn by her amazing beauty.

CAT (PENELOPE): I am *amazingly* beautiful.

MONKEY: I'm quite pretty, me. Maybe?

KOALA (NARRATOR): It was very tiresome.

CAT (PENELOPE): So *boring*.

KOALA (NARRATOR): So she set them a test: she would marry the one who could string the massive bow of ODYSSEUS.

CAT (PENELOPE): Oo, it's so massive!

KOALA (NARRATOR): They tried and they tried, (*PUPPETS act this out*) but do you know, not one suitor could bend that terrible bow. So Penelope was left all alone, mourning her absent, and obviously very muscular, husband. Meanwhile –

MOUSE: This isn't much of a story, is it?

KOALA: What do you mean?

MOUSE: Left alone? Mourning? That's not much of a story.

KOALA: Meanwhile, in another part of the Mediterranean, ODYSSEUS (also known as Ulysses) (*PETER animates BORIS the tiger—other animals are disgruntled at not getting what they think of as the main part*) was having a hard time. First there was the enormous one-eyed giant Polyphemus.

ALBERT (POLYPHEMUS): Hey babe.

KOALA (NARRATOR): Whom he easily outwitted by pretending to be a sheep.

BORIS (ULYSSES): Baaa.

KOALA (NARRATOR): Then there was—

BORIS: Wait a minute, was that my part?

KOALA (NARRATOR): (*Forcefully*) then there was the terrible temptation of the sirens, who wooed him from the shore—

CAT (SIREN): Ooo, a sailor! I do like a sailor...

KOALA (NARRATOR): but they tied him to a mast—

BORIS (ULYSSES): wmmwm (*wrestles against bonds*).

KOALA (NARRATOR): and so he avoided that terrible temptation.

CAT (SIREN): Your *loss*, darling.

KOALA (NARRATOR): But the most perilous, the most dreadful adventure of all...

BORIS: Do I get a better part in this one?

KOALA (NARRATOR): *(Doggedly on)* the most dreadful of all was the adventure of CIRCE, the enchantress—

CAT: This is my part.

KOALA (NARRATOR): Who turns men into beasts—

CAT: This is *so much* my part!

RAG DOLL: My part, actually. I'm qualified. She is, you see, a female.

CAT: Some females, darling, are less female than they might be—

KOALA (NARRATOR): *(Interrupts hastily)* and then: Calypso.

CAT: Calypso?

KOALA (NARRATOR): The worst. The nightmare. Don't talk about her.

CAT: *(Thoughtfully)* now, who could play her, I wonder?

MONKEY: Her? Yay it's a her! Can I do this one?

MOUSE: Or me?

RAGDOLL: What about me?

3 This is not a story

ANGELA: Stop! This. Is. Not. A. Story!

KOALA: What do you mean, it's not a story? It's maybe the most famous story in the whole of western culture.

ANGELA: A story has a beginning.

KOALA: Yes, and a middle, and an end, that stuff: let me tell you, my dear, let me let you in on a secret, there are no beginnings. No middles. And the only ends you ever get are just the kind you don't want.

ALBERT: Hey, what are you talking about?

KOALA: Listen: what comes before a beginning?

ALBERT: Er. What comes before a beginning. Is this one of those Zen things?

KOALA: Just answer the question, dear bear.

ALBERT: Nothing! Nothing comes before a beginning; before once upon a time, there is no time at all.

KOALA: And after an end, what?

ALBERT: Depends on the end, baby, happy or sad. Depends on the end.

KOALA: Ok, after happy, what?

ALBERT: Endless happiness, ever after.

KOALA: And sad?

ALBERT: Walking home in the rain. For always; just walking home in the rain. Nothing but sorrow, always and again.

KOALA: So, dearest bear, there is your story. Out of nothing it comes, out of limitless circumstance, story happens, and a special time is born. Then it plugs and plods its way through a middle, and then it gets happy, or sad, and then it stops a special stop that doesn't stop. So ODYSSEUS pops up out of nowhere, in the victory at Troy, resourceful ODYSSEUS, newborn and ready for action. He bewilders Polyphemus—

ALBERT (POLYPHEMUS): hey babe—

KOALA: with his famous sheep imitation—

BORIS (ODYSSEUS): Baa—

KOALA (NARRATOR): comes eventually back to Penelope—

CAT (PENELOPE): HELLO, sailor! Oh, it's you (*disappointed*).

KOALA: Draws the mighty bow.

BORIS (ODYSSEUS): (*Immense effort*) Rrrrrraaaagh!

KOALA: Looses just one arrow.

BORIS (ODYSSEUS): Swoosh!

KOALA: At the poor suitors, who happened to be standing in an orderly queue.

CAT (PENELOPE): Get in line, darlings, one at a time!

KOALA: Sees off the whole shebang, one shot does the lot.

ANIMALS (SUITORS): Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah. Aah. (*Diminuendo*).

KOALA: Embraces Penelope.

CAT (PENELOPE): Put me *down*, you huge strong man.

KOALA: And walks off into the sunset, into the sunset.

BORIS: But where does he go, that's what I want to know?

KOALA: Yes, clever ODYSSEUS, he will have a trick up his sleeve, he surely won't be trapped for ever in never

ever land, where all the stories end; in banal happiness?

BORIS: Well, is he?

KOALA: What do *you* do, dear tiger, when the play is over?

BORIS: Well, you go for a drink, or not, or whatever. It's work, isn't it. What do you do after work? You go home, talk to your current co-inhabitant, go to a movie, go for a meal, go for a run, go for broke, no, you don't do that, you've already done that, night after bloody night.

KOALA: What you do, dear friend, is, you tidy yourself up and put yourself back in the box, don't you. And next night, you turn up at the theatre, in your cab, on your bicycle, wander in, do that strange kind of visible invisible that actors do, a cross between here I am look at me and no I'm normal, I'm not on stage yet, then you do your warm-ups, and then, finally, you get out of the box, and become the plaything of the play. Going, of course, for broke. For broke. And that broke is of a special kind, a story kind, that enables you to unbreak afterwards, all the pieces fly back together, you are no longer the beautiful ODYSSEUS, master of a thousand wicked strategies.

BORIS (ODYSSEUS): Baa.

KOALA: But a normal person. An imitation normal person. A very good imitation of a normal person. Back, my dear, in the box. But where, in the meantime, is the cunning ODYSSEUS, master of strategy?

BORIS: Baa?

KOALA: Oh shut up. Where he is, is in storytime, the space between beginning and end, where no time is.

4 They called me ANGELA

ANGELA steps away from the animals and into a circle of light; she addresses the audience.

ANGELA:

Before time was, they called me ANGELA. Before I was born. Heaven only knows what they'd have chosen if I'd been a boy. But then they weren't expecting a boy and so they didn't get one. Just me—the answer to their prayers—their little angel: ANGELA.

And so I was, and so I have been, and so I am. Good as my golden halo. Their little fairy. Their angel cake. Sweet enough to eat.

I could have been anything at all—a Marge—a Blodwyn—a Myrtle—a Jo. Maybe even a Dave. But, as it was, this little ANGELA came into being—moulded and shaped by anyone who used my name.

Every greeting named me as an angel, and every greeting would be followed by a sugar coated quip as a matter of course. I was quipped into shape. Every birthday card would have an angel on it. Family and friends and people I hardly knew would notice angel tee shirts, angel pictures, angel party wings, angel story books, and buy them for me. Unable to stop themselves. Addicted to their part in the making of this angelic being. This fantastic fantasy.

In return, I gave them the beatific smile, grew the gently flowing hair, developed the graceful movements of my perfectly dainty arms and legs and hands and feet. And so I floated sweetly through my formative years with every cell in my body inscribed as: angel. I

danced to their song. Sat on their clouds. Played their nostalgia on an imaginary harp. Everyone's angel.

And what does an angel do when she grows to adulthood? Well, as it happens, she doesn't grow to adulthood at all. No sex of course. No gender even. No fleshly thoughts allowed in their saccharine version of heaven. Until... that night. Until... but that's another story.

So here she is—patience of a saint—caring for these little cherubs. They are not, of course, cherubic at all. But angelic ANGELA knows the script. She talks the honey talk—held in check by the narrative implicit in her name. A prisoner of vowels and consonants. For the moment. For now.

5 This is my story

BORIS: I think we've been upstaged.

KOALA: Whose story is this anyway?

ANGELA steps back to the animals, and takes charge of the situation.

ANGELA: *(Her voice is now much tougher)* It's my story. It's time for me to be me.

CHRIS rushes on.

CHRIS: Oh God, Ange—I'm so sorry—the fucking taxi—

ANGELA: *(Hisses at him)* the children!

CHRIS: *(He hadn't noticed)* AH. Ah. Yes. Hello children. How lovely to see you again. Are you having a nice time?

(To ANGELA) They don't *look* like they're having a nice time—what's going on?

ANGELA: PETER, do you think you could take the children for their morning glass of milk? CHRIS and I need to have a little tiny talk.

PETER is very embarrassed, and there is a little dumbshow fuss, but he reluctantly agrees.

Now then children, off you go with PETER. No, Adrian, he is not a prat. That's very rude. Now, it's time for your milk and biscuits. Yes, Charles, I know it's earlier than usual, but today's a very special day. Ah well, it's special because—well—wait and see. I'll tell you later. No. *Later.*

PETER picks up a real puppet and uses it to take the imaginary children over to the corner of the stage and

take them through the milk routine. But at the same time he is clearly listening with some interest to ANGELA and CHRIS.

The PUPPETS without PETER are inert, but not absolutely; they are clearly listening in to ANGELA and CHRIS's conversation. They are beginning to have a life of their own.

ANGELA: It won't do, you know.

CHRIS: Look I've said I'm sorry—it was the taxi—

ANGELA: No.

CHRIS: Well OK, I suppose I overslept. I didn't hear the alarm.

ANGELA: No.

CHRIS: No?

ANGELA: That's not what I'm talking about, actually.

CHRIS: Oh.

ANGELA: Yes, you may well say oh.

CHRIS: Oh.

ANGELA: Well?

CHRIS: Well what?

ANGELA: Well what are we going to do?

CHRIS: Do? I don't know what you mean.

ANGELA: We have to do something.

CHRIS: Do we? I'm not sure I *do* doing things.

ANGELA: Well you certainly did something last week.

CHRIS: I suppose I did.

ANGELA: Look. It was really special. It really meant something. It did, didn't it?

CHRIS: I suppose it did.

ANGELA: I think I love you Chris. Oh please say it mattered.
Please tell me I'm important to you.

CHRIS: Oh Ange - *(uncomfortable pause)*

ANGELA: So what are you proposing to do now?

CHRIS: Er, proposing -

ANGELA: *Really?*

CHRIS: Oh, no, sorry, gosh, sorry. You know I can't do that.
Even if I wanted to.

ANGELA: Why not?

CHRIS: What?

ANGELA: Why not? Be bold for once in your life. Take a risk. Be
a hero. Take a chance. Do something you've never
done before. Go for broke.

CHRIS: Why?

*Peter returns with the children, gets them sitting in
their places, and becomes a puppeteer again.*

CAT: Oh dear.

BORIS: Mmn.

CAT: Not good.

BORIS: Mmn.

CAT: I know just how she feels.

BORIS: Do you?

CAT: Oh yes. Oh yes.

BORIS: Oh dear god, not now. We're working.

CAT: How can you be so unfeeling? Don't you care at all?

BORIS: Look. We'll talk about it later. We will, I promise. Right
now we've got a job to do.

CAT: And him. CHRIS. I know how he's feeling too.

BORIS: What?

CAT: I'm working darling. I'm a professional. I'm empathising.

BORIS: Oh god. Not the Stanislavsky trip.

CAT: Why not?

BORIS: Because, dear boy, we weren't hired to do the Stanislavsky trip.

CAT: No-one told me that.

BORIS: Maybe you weren't listening.

CAT: *He doesn't say a lot, does he? (CAT is referring to PETER here.)*

BORIS: True. So true.

CAT: But I know how he's feeling too. Oh. It's quite something.

BORIS: Really? What's it like?

CAT: Wait and see. Wait. He may not say much. But he's all heart. Oh yes. Quite special, in his own little way. You'll see.

BORIS: Really?

MONKEY: *(to the other female puppets)* What about us? When do we get a go?

RAGDOLL: Timing, darling.

MONKEY: Timing?

RAGDOLL: Timing. It's all in the timing. Wait and see.

MOUSE: Like poor Penelope?

RAGDOLL: Oh no. Not like her at all.

6 This is the tale of brave ODYSSEUS

ANGELA looks up: sees that the children have returned from their break.

ANGELA:

Ah. Back already. Marvellous. Thank you, PETER.

Now, children, listen quietly: this is the tale of brave Ulysses, also known as brave ODYSSEUS, who lived a long time ago, *(looks meaningfully at CHRIS)* if at all. Here he is: he will tell you himself.

ANGELA gestures to CHRIS to speak. She is issuing a challenge. Is he up to it? He looks to PETER for support. PETER shrugs. CHRIS reluctantly takes the ODYSSEUS role from BORIS (who gets a bit petulant at losing the star part) and becomes the tough, ruthless, and cunning ODYSSEUS, sacker of cities.

During each of the coming soliloquies, the puppets are a theatrical presence. They can be used (sensitively) to counterpoint the narratives, either as audience to the story or acting out parts where appropriate. They mustn't be allowed to upstage the soliloquiser, but can sometimes seem on the edge of doing so.

In what follows, CHRIS is both ODYSSEUS and everyday CHRIS. When he makes generalised statements about women, we have a sense that he is referring to his everyday life, and, especially to whatever is going on between him and ANGELA. He can use the power of the ODYSSEUS role to enable him to say things he wouldn't otherwise have the courage to say.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS):

Three thousand years ago, when the world was young and things were simpler (*looks pointedly at ANGELA*), I sailed the shining seas. I helped destroy the golden city, fabulous Troy, now buried in legend and archaeology. Then I took to the water, was blown about by the enmity of gods, suffered from giants, monsters, the amazing idiocy of my comrades, and the terrible waywardness of the sea. But, above all, from women, women. Searching always to come back home, to my wife last seen many years before, I was driven through a maze of circumstance, shipwrecked from woman to woman, (*Rag doll, Mouse and Monkey get very excited at the thought of parts for them*) from story to story, trapped in storytime.

That's all I wanted to do, you know, to get to the end of the narrative. To live happily ever after. To wake up from storytime. God, the sailors' tales that I can tell. The women I've known, all of whom wanted to keep me—in storytime. (*Little interaction with ANGELA here.*)

For instance: the sirens. I alone, of all the men there are, can tell what song the sirens sang.

There I was, strapped to a cross piece on the mast, the resemblance to Jesus was entirely superficial, and they flew about me like an imaginative nightmare. Look them up on a vase some time, you'll see: nightmare. Winged women, no arms, just wings; women's heads and women's breasts and, wait for it, nothing at all below the waist, nothing at all, except claws; let me tell you, aerodynamic they were not. The lads couldn't see them, which worried me somewhat, if those things came out of my unconscious then I had some serious personal work to do, I can tell you.

Rag doll, Mouse and Monkey kneel behind the hamper so you can see their heads and upper bodies. They sing. Beautiful. Eerie. Then rich. All whilst the soliloquy is happening.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS):

Oh, and they sang. Of course; they sang. What did they sing? What was their mysterious song? They sang me promises; it was very simple. Give us your soul, they sang, and we'll make you a musical genius. Briefly. We'll teach you to sing like an intolerable angel, and you'll make a beautiful corpse. What, you want to get old? Robert Johnson was wrong, down there at the crossroads? Jimi Hendrix made a bad career move? We don't think so.

Well, I was convinced. It was a tempting story, think about it, much more seductive than sex, though I have to say, they were quite sexy too, in a nightmare sort of way. My right hand was twitching for a pen, just give me a dotted line and I'll sign it, but sadly the lads had tied my right hand to the mast, together with the rest of me, so there was my chance to be better than Homer: gone for good. I had to put up with being ODYSSEUS, trapped in someone else's song, trying to trick his way out.

7 Angelique the siren

MOUSE steps forward. To night-club lighting, and to appropriate music. Throughout the following speech, she is doing being outrageously sexy. It is clear to us that it is an act—a choice made thoroughly consciously. At odd, brief, moments, for a word or a syllable, she steps right out of the part, and speaks like the child-friendly ANGELA—it should seem incongruous given the lighting. When she is in the sexy role, her accent is either Piaf or Dietrich. Consciously a cliché, but thoroughly seductive nonetheless, and with that hint of vulnerability that never sentimentalises.

It should be clear that she is offering ANGELA another role. It's an invitation to a different story.

GLORIA MOUSE (SIREN):

I am the siren Angélique. And I know all there is to know. An-ge-lique. *(She says the name slowly, syllable by syllable.)*

(She hums on 'mmm' the vocal exercise known as 'sirening;' suggestive, caressing but a very sympathetic sound that runs (here) from high to low to high again)

Ah yes! I am the intolerable angel. Blue? Oh yes—I sing it blue darling. From aquamarine to azure to lap lap lapis, I dive from sky to ocean. I pierce beneath the curling surfing surface and down down down to the very innermost depths. Of you. I know the molten core of you. I know the secret caves in the substrata of your desires. I know the sure lines where the jelly fish grasp the shingle of what. You. Want.

(More sirening—but using a more limited range of notes. Still on 'mmm,' but more intimate here. It's like the sound that people make when they are appreciating good food.)

They took the pretty poetry away from me. The neat sweet songs. Stripped me bare of lyricism. Denuded of romance. Did I acquiesce? Coalesce? Co-operate? More or less. Oh yes. What a mess. More or less. Bewildered. Becalmed. Bemused. Amused. Amusante. La plume de ma tante.

Music mustang tango a go go. Long long ago go. Where did she go go?

I had a choice. Decent descent into prose—desensitised, demoralised. Who on this wide mad blaspheming scheming earth would willingly choose prose? Or ascension into this. This rapture. This ecstatic song beyond the prison house of narrative. This.

Join me. I am waiting.

8 Peter the puppet

BORIS: Frankly, I am shocked. I thought this was a children's show.

ALBERT: I want to know why Ulysses has two names. Are they, like, interchangeable?

CAT: I think PETER should have a better part.

PETER shakes head furiously, cap down.

Ooo, he's shy! So sweet...

CAT turns towards PETER, and moves away from him, so that PETER is no longer manipulating him. He beckons the others to do the same. PETER is left empty handed. He stares, amazed, at his empty hands, no longer manipulating, and then at the PUPPETS.

There you are, you see, we don't need you, darling: you can be yourself. You can be a star! You can be a puppet, just like us!

PETER is flabbergasted. He looks at his hands. He opens and shuts his mouth, unable to say anything; looks around, helplessly, sees everyone is looking at him, and exits, covered in embarrassment.

KOALA: Congratulations. You appear to have demolished the poor man. Have you ever thought of becoming an academic?

CAT: *(Completely unrepentant.)* Best thing for him. Just needs to be drawn out of his little shell, you wait and see. He'll be back. He has star quality, that one. Just wait and see.

KOALA: Hush! We have a story to tell!

ANGELA: And what about her?

CHRIS: Her?

ANGELA: Oh come on CHRIS. Everyone knows.

CHRIS: Knows what?

ANGELA: Everyone knows you've been seeing your therapist.

CHRIS: So? That's what you go to therapy for isn't it? To see the therapist?

ANGELA: Outside the therapeutic hour? Outside the rules? On your own couch?

CHRIS: Well—er well—

KOALA: May we, perhaps, return to the story?

ANGELA and CHRIS: Which story?

KOALA: We were offering, I believe, Homer's *Odyssey*.

ANGELA: Ah yes. CIRCE is next, I believe; that's perfect. Perfectly perfect.

CHRIS: Look, perhaps we should leave this—try a game—an activity?

ANGELA: We have a story to tell. Remember? You might as well get on with it.

CHRIS sighs, picks himself up, takes the ODYSSEUS role, and gets on with it.

9 Circe 1: Falcon, flamehair, daughter of the sun.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): *Once again the role gives him authority, menace, stature.*

Falcon, flamehair, daughter of the sun. CIRCE. She caught me in her story, she kept me for a year. Tall, she was, and beautiful, beyond belief. The daughter of a god. She enslaved, with her medicines, she turned men into pigs. Easier with some men than others, of course. With me, well, yes, there is a beast in me, but my beast is a fox, a dog fox, and I am not easily enslaved. I had an antidote for her medicine, and I had a sword. I would have used it, too, and she knew that. So we found a compromise, and on that basis, went to bed to make friends. Ah. Friendship indeed (*remembering*). And in that bed I found, what? Wisdom, yes. Woman stuff. She was a fox too, there was no knowing her, she tricked and skipped and followed the wild. It was wonderful.

Oh, CIRCE. I remember her. I remember her interesting advice...

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Watch out for Scylla; that monster. Don't go near Charybdis, either, that sucking hole in the ocean...

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): We were in bed when she told me all this, you have to understand—

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Better to risk Scylla, dreadful though she is.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): Dreadful?

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Pretty bad. Below the waist she's a fish.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): That's not too bad.

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Out from under her waist there are six long necks, long long snake necks, and at the end of each is the head of a dog, with three rows of teeth. Each head is big enough to pick up and devour a man.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): *(To audience)* I tried not to hyperventilate. *(To CIRCE)* Yes—not very nice. She's not a vegetarian, then, Scylla, is she?

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Fish mostly, when she can't get men.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): Right. Why? How? How did she get that way?

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Oh *(casually)* she offended a god.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): Which god was that then?

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Oh, some god.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): It was her; I bloody knew it. And it was, too. Scylla was an innocent maiden, who fell in love with a shepherd, and was stupid enough to ask CIRCE for help. The shepherd was gorgeous. Join the dots.

Going to bed with CIRCE was a heroic enterprise, I can tell you. You found your self counting everything, afterwards.

She was a healer, too, did I mention that? An expert with the healing herbs. And a brilliant cook. Taste some of this, she would say, and then she would watch, while your mind tried to catch up with your mouth.

Women. Of all the seas I sailed, of all the monsters that I met, of all the beauty I have ever had, she was the best, she was the worst, she was the most wonderful. *(A thought crosses his mind. He shudders.)* No, not the worst. I'll come to that.

That year passed in a moment, in a microsecond. She was endless. She was everything. She was the cat's pyjamas. Where was I? Oh yes.

The lads. That's what woke me up. They were planning to tie me to the mast again, and sail on. A whole year of drinking yourself silly and eating yourself sick is about as much as the average sailor can take, and they had taken it, and wanted to go home. 'OK, lads,' I said, 'I'll just tell her, then, that we'll be moving on.' They looked at me. I looked at me. It was a tense moment. I went into her gorgeous bedroom, coughed nervously, and said: 'er.' She looked at me. She looked at me as if she was hungry, and I was a ham sandwich. 'Er,' I said again. She looked at me. 'The lads think we ought to be moving on,' I said. 'Time to up anchor and make tracks,' I said.

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): Towards your wife?

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): Well, that general direction, yes.

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): OK.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): OK?

RAGDOLL (CIRCE): OK. Oh, by the way, I'm pregnant. I am pregnant with your death. Our son will kill you, by mistake. Then I will marry your other son Telemachus. And my boy, Telegonus, your son, will marry your wife, your widow, Penelope. The four of us will become immortal. You, in the meantime, will be dead. And no, you are not making this up. Oh, and do watch out for Scylla, she is quite dangerous.

CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): You had to be a hero, to go to bed with CIRCE. And, to leave that bed, to walk away from her story, you had to be more. I am a hero. I am more. I am a dog fox. I left.

10 Circe 2: the arrogance of the man

RAG DOLL steps forward as CIRCE. She puts on a lightweight multi-coloured gossamer robe and twirls several times, as if admiring herself in a long mirror. She becomes CECILY, shopping for clothes in a department store. She is chatting to a companion, ANGELA, by her side. She is graceful, stylish, a woman of means. Matter-of-fact persona. As she tells her story, she is part healer, part witch. She may, or may not, be telling the truth. She may, or may not, be consciously fabricating.

She, too, is offering ANGELA another role. Another story.

RAG DOLL/CIRCE/CECILY: God the arrogance of the man. Wouldn't you just know it? He takes control of that time as if it were *his* story. Well, let me tell you how it really was. What do you think of this?

(She is looking at a piece of cloth—holding it up against herself in front of the mirror. As her speech unfolds, she keeps trying different materials, different wraps, different garments on hangers against herself in front of the mirror—all probably imaginary.)

It wasn't actually a year, of course—but he was so out of it, he thought it was. No mention, you notice, of the care he received from me. I took him in, listened patiently to his delusions, fed him, bathed him, held him close in his terror. Well, you learn not to expect thanks. Never contradict them, that's the important thing—not if you really want to help. And I did. I do. It's a calling, you know. I am called... I am called...

(Her voice trails away as she appears to listen to a voice from elsewhere—then she pulls herself together—back in her woman in front of shop mirror mode.) He decided I was the daughter of a god—well so I am in a way—aren't we all? I am... *(She listens for a moment again—then jerks herself back to her conversation.)*

So. Loads of TLC, good nourishing food, endless patience, trying not to take any of his stories too seriously. Smiling at his insults. Going along with his terrible visions. And they were terrible. Some nights were long and hard to bear. Such a relief when the team showed up in the morning. Marvellous girls you know—agency nurses—so reliable—don't know how I'd manage without their support.

There's an art to it you know. Helping them, I mean. You do what you can. They don't all recover of course. You come to accept that.

(She stops talking. She drops the social mask entirely, stands absolutely still and listens as if in trance. Gracefully, magically, she picks up an imaginary piece of cloth as if it were the most precious thing imaginable—holds it up to the light—views it—admires it.)

I am the weaver. I weave the cloth that holds the universe in place. I bring together the threads that form the warp and weft of every story. Space and Time. Sun and Moon. And he thinks his magic is greater than mine?

Fabrication. I slide the language through its labyrinthine journeys—under, over, under, over. Me. No-one else. Slow and solid the cloth must be lest the plot thicken before its time. Time. Goes by so slowly. Till the colour comes rushing in. The hue and cry. The

chase made. The chaste maid. Ah the knots. The
might have beens. The false deaths. The false clues.
(Pause) The sudden end.

11 What happened next?

A stunned silence.

CAT: She has taste. I have to say it. She has taste.

ALBERT: And me? Do I have taste?

CAT: Well—

ALBERT: Well?

CAT: Ssh... pay attention.

ALBERT: But I want to know.

CAT: Ssh.

ANGELA: Well?

CHRIS: Well what?

ANGELA: What happened next?

CHRIS: Why do you want to know?

ANGELA: Why wouldn't I? I want to know everything about you.

CHRIS: Do you?

ANGELA: Yes of course I do. If we're going to live happily ever after.

KOALA: Haven't you been listening to anything I've been saying? Oh I despair. I give up.

ANGELA: I was listening. But you're only a koala. What do you know about the human condition?

KOALA: Only a koala? Only a koala?

ANGELA: Well, ok, admittedly a koala who's read James Joyce. Who's thought a bit about narratology.

KOALA: A bit?

ANGELA: Well OK. Quite a bit. Quite a lot. Sorry – I didn't mean to upset you – it's just all getting a bit much.

KOALA: So you think you know better, do you? You think you have wisdom? Insight?

ANGELA: Well no—but—

KOALA: *Koala sighs, looks dramatically to the sky. Then speaks to CHRIS.*

Carry on with the story dear boy. You might as well.

12 Subplot

- CHRIS (ODYSSEUS): I left. It was hard, but it was not the worst.
- I met Scylla—remember her? Six dog heads on six long necks growing out from under her waist? She ate six of my men. I met, and survived, Charybdis, the huge sucking hole in the sea. And then there was the madness of my comrades, who killed the oxen of the sun. Our ship was wrecked, and the comrades died, all of them, screaming and drowning. Not good, to kill the oxen of the sun. I was alone in the sea, hanging on to a plank in the vast salt waste, nine days, nine nights. And none of that was the worst. The worst was—
- Everyone is on tenterhooks, waiting to hear the worst.*
- Enter a MAN dressed in black*
- MAN: Ok, hold on a minute, quiet everybody, it's our turn now.
- PUPPETS: What?
- MAN: Our turn now, I said.
- KOALA: Who the hell are you?
- MAN: I'm the subplot.
- KOALA: The what?
- BORIS: It's a supernumerary narrative device, usually downmarket, low comedy, designed to comment on and diversify from the main narration. A key device of Shakespearian theatre.
- KOALA: Shut up! Now, you, go away, this is our space.
- MAN: My space too: I'm the subplot.

BORIS: Aristotle didn't approve of subplots.

CAT: Didn't he?

BORIS: No, he thought they fractured the unity of action.

ALBERT: Hey, who the hell was Aristotle, and what the hell does he have to do with anything?

BORIS: He was a Greek.

CAT: Oh, Greeks; I knew a Greek boy once...

KOALA: SHUT UP! Now, we have essential work to do here. We have stories to tell.

MAN: Yes. So do I. But whereas you only tell one story after another, I propose to tell all the stories there are. In one convenient entertaining package: the deep structure. So back off. Give me some space.

KOALA: Why should I?

MAN: Because, darling, I am SHAKESPEARE. (*SHAKESPEARE mask?*)

KOALA: You are who?

Act 2

1 Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE: I am SHAKESPEARE. As such, I am immortal. So, back off! All of you! Make space for the fucking subplot. Lads! (*Piercing whistle*).

Arrival of Pyramus, Thisbe, Lion, Moon, and Wall

Ladies, gentlemen, and PUPPETS, I present my greatest work, the jewel of my oeuvre, my masterpiece, my miracle. The story that contains all stories. The lamentable tragedy, the intolerable comedy, of ... *PYRAMUS and THISBE*.

BORIS: *PYRAMUS and THISBE?* You mean the play within a play, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*?

SHAKESPEARE: I do, I do.

BORIS: But *PYRAMUS and THISBE* is a parody! It's ridiculous! It's a joke!

SHAKESPEARE: Right. And who wrote this joke?

BORIS: Er, SHAKESPEARE wrote it.

SHAKESPEARE: Yes. Me. SHAKESPEARE. World's greatest dramatist, right?

BORIS: Er, right.

SHAKESPEARE: So, back off, will you, and let me get on with it. Now, I present my actors. First, every play, without exception, must have a lion in it. And here he is: my LION.

LION does LION stuff, roars, menaces.

LION: I am death, the death that awaits you all. I am the fear in the night, the terminal verdict; I am the

hammer of god, the unlooked for, that will eat you up. I am, in fact, the eater of worlds, the widow maker, the murderer. But, please note, I mean no harm, not the least harm in the world, there is no need to be frightened, when I roar, it is only a story, and when I eat your children, it is only a dream.

SHAKESPEARE:

And in every story, without fail, a WALL is built.

WALL does Wall stuff.

WALL:

I am the obstacle that comes between desires. I am the bloody nuisance, the thing that gets up your nose. I mess you about, I am implacable, *natura naturans*, I am the way things are. Solid, unscaleable, a total pain in the – architecture. I am what undoes love. I am WALL.

SHAKESPEARE:

Above them all, overarching every drama, there must be: MOON.

MOON does MOON stuff.

MOON:

Luminous, lunar, enchanting, I am the essence of romance. I turn the darkness golden, I loom over lovers and make their madness sensible. I cast dark shadows, mysteries, illusions of the night. Glamour is what I am, a cold mistress, unobtainable, spellbinding the world of night.

SHAKESPEARE:

And, it goes without saying, a hero. Obviously. Here he is: my PYRAMUS.

BORIS/PYRAMUS:

And I of course am the lover. Longing, agonising, I am the want that drives me on. The fine delight that fathers thought, that's me, the purity of poetry; I am where all art starts. Desire that trembles with tenderness, always on the edge of ending; wanting, wanting, the play of wonder and delight. What would you do, where would you be, without me, ladies,

gentlemen, imagine how empty your little lives would be, without my possibilities?

SHAKESPEARE: And, finally, the adorable, the one and only, the love object: THISBE.

Pause

SHAKESPEARE: And, finally, *THISBE*.

THISBE comes slowly forward. Long pause.

THISBE: Ah. Yes. The one you've all been waiting for. The one everyone waits for, the wanted, the treacle well, is that it? The cliff over which you wish to fling yourself, again and again? The soft landing, the mattress? Well, gentle lovers, whoever you may be, here are two words from me to you: fuck off. I'll have none of it. I will choose to be me, not yours, not any unbelievable part of you, OK, is that clear? You can stuff your stories. Me, for once. I will be Me.

SHAKESPEARE: *(Imperturbably: pleased, in fact)* And that, my ladies, lords, and lovers, is my cast.

Bows, curtseys etc from subplot cast

BORIS: Hang on a minute. What about *our* story? He was just getting to the really interesting bit. The worst. He was going to tell us the worst.

CAT: I'm on tenterhooks. No. I am. I really am.

SHAKESPEARE: You may continue. We have time. We have all the time in the world.

CHRIS: I'm not sure I can go through with this Ange.

ANGELA: What do you mean?

CHRIS: The story. I mean the story.

ANGELA: Ours or theirs?

CHRIS: I mean the story. I don't want to do the worst bit.

ANGELA: Because?

CHRIS: Because I want everything to be nice. I want everyone to be happy. I want to believe in happy ever after. I'm not a bad bloke you know. OK my life's a bit of a mess. But I'm not a bad bloke.

ANGELA: You said you loved me.

CHRIS: I did. And I do. I'm just not up for anything long term. I don't do commitment.

ANGELA: Because?

CHRIS: Because—because—because it's dangerous. It takes your manhood. It chains you in a cave, in a cold bed, in sameness. It is terrifying.

ANGELA: Oh Chris. (*A tender moment*)

2 Dumbshow

- SHAKESPEARE: Excuse me. When I said we had all the time in the world, I wasn't assuming you would actually *take* all the time in the world. Where, I ask myself, as any even *semi*-proficient dramatist would have to do, where is the next piece of action? They'll be getting bored you know: you do realise that, don't you?
- ALBERT: They're children. They're being educated. They're supposed to be bored.
- ANGELA: *(Suddenly remembering)* Oh gosh—the children! Ssh. Please. I think we should let our nice visitor say what he wants to say.
- SHAKESPEARE: Thank you my dear. Now. What is a story, lovers and strangers? To answer that, I now present the essential introduction, the essence of storytime: my dumbshow.
- ALBERT: Is a dumbshow what it sounds like?
- BORIS: No, no, it's a mime, a synopsis, it's a theatrical convention.
- ALBERT: Oh. Not as dumb as it sounds, then.
The PUPPETS laugh. SHAKESPEARE gives them a hard stare.
- SHAKESPEARE: My story begins, as all the stories begin, with death and moonlight.
- ALBERT: What about *Jack and the Beanstalk*?
Laughter.
SHAKESPEARE walks over, takes his ear, twists it.
- SHAKESPEARE: What do all stories begin with?

ALBERT: Ow! Death.
SHAKESPEARE: And?
ALBERT: Moonlight, moonlight.
SHAKESPEARE: Thank you.

*SHAKESPEARE waves: LION and MOON set the scene.
The rest of the subplot cast join in as appropriate.
Appropriate reactions from everyone else in relation to
their own flirtations; especially Angela and Chris.*

SHAKESPEARE: Enter the Lover, enter tragedy: the story-weaving begins. Enchanted by Moonlight, unaware of Death, *(he gestures at MOON and LION, who react)* Love walks through the evening like an accident waiting to happen. And happen it does, for who should he see but Beauty, the amazing object of desire. Made golden by Moonlight, offset by Death like a jewel on black velvet *(interacts with MOON and LION)*, she shines in his eyes, she changes the world for him.

Unaware, impervious as the Moon, she moves on, leaving him—different. He is born again, changed and charged and choc a bloc with mystery. He follows after, hypnotised, never so happy, and runs into WALL, who stops him in his tracks. WALL in this story is what? A father, maybe? A husband? A dark wood, an enchanted castle? Poverty, prejudice, total war? Who cares? Without WALL there is no story, he is as necessary as Death and Moonlight.

And so begins a complicated dance, a million different narratives, as Love and Wall and beauty and pain intertwine and interact.

And the lover is sad and happy, he is transfixed and transformed, he is glorious; and he writes plays and poems, poems and plays, full of astonishing meaning. He thinks that love will last forever, that love has

made him immortal, that everything in the world makes sense.

CHRIS: That is so true. That is so ... *beautiful!*

ANGELA: Is it?

CHRIS: Yes. You have changed me. I hate to admit it. But I would do anything, anything at all to be with you.

ANGELA: Why? Tell me why?

CHRIS: You are the fulcrum. The still point. The harmony at the centre of chaos. The imaginable zero that encompasses everything and yet of itself is nothing. Beautiful and full. Full of emptiness. Without you I have no meaning.

ANGELA: But there is no Wall in our story. No forbidding father. No family feud. No ghost demanding my time and attention. Not even a wall for heaven's sake. I am here. I am free. I am yours.

CHRIS: In this story I am my own wall.

SHAKESPEARE: That is not the end of the story. There is more.

CHRIS: Wonderful! I can't wait!

SHAKESPEARE: As I was saying...

The lover, bless his eager innocent heart, thinks that love will last forever; he thinks that love has made him immortal, that everything in the world makes sense.

CHRIS: Yes, yes!

SHAKESPEARE: But then: Death steps in, whenever it takes his fancy to, whatever we do, whatever we hope, whatever we think we might have accomplished; in comes death, and adds his rigorous punctuation. His full stop. Perhaps death is a LION, this time round; perhaps he is a plague bacillus, perhaps a knife in the heart, there

is no limit to the parts he plays, but only one denouement.

And then, my dears, where is immortality? Or meaning? Does anything at all, anything in the world, make any sense at all?

Why yes. Surprisingly, yes. I do. I make sense. That's what I do. What remains is: plays and poems, poems and plays. And death. And moonlight.

Bows. Applause.

CHRIS:

But – but –

He is speechless, looks to Angela, looks to the animals, anywhere: no answer. Then:

BORIS:

I don't think we've got to the worst yet. Let's hear it. Now's the time.

3 Calypso

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: The worst was: CALYPSO. The sea threw me up on to her island. I crawled beyond the high tide line, vomited salt water, and fainted. When I woke up, there was singing; it was glorious. I opened my eyes and saw the singer, looking at me, lovingly; she was glorious, too. Well, she was a god. She could be whatever she wanted to be. Her beauty was: awe-inspiring; it was uncanny. She looked at me, unnervingly, and said:

MONKEY/CALYPSO: Hello. I love you.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: I looked at her. She smiled — her terrifying smile; it was like the ground opening in front of you.

MONKEY/CALYPSO: Drink this. (*Smiling*).

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: It was nectar, drink of the gods. Very sweet, it was.

MONKEY/CALYPSO: This is my cave.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Nice.

MONKEY/CALYPSO: Yes, it is nice, it is very nice. Come inside.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: And I did; she could have whatever she wanted, you see; she was a god.

Well, the cave was a cave: it was a hole in the ground. Dark and cold. I don't think gods can feel the cold.

MONKEY/CALYPSO: This is my bed. Come to bed.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: She was smiling. She smiled like an opening grave. There was no choice. The bed was cold, and she was: a god. Have you ever made love to a god? No, I thought not. It was like being back in the vast salt freezing sea, at night time, utterly alone. Only worse.

And that was it. Seven years, she had me, night after night; every night. During the day I would stand on a cliff and look at the skyline, tears running down my face. Then back to the cave, each night, and the cold.

But that was not the worst.

ALBERT: Is this what they call a cliff-hanger?

BORIS: Sssh.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: One morning I said to her: 'I will grow old, and die, but you will not. You are a god.'

MONKEY/CALYPSO: Yes, I am. *(She smiles)* And, while you stay with me, you will not grow old, either; you will be immortal. This will last for ever, this perfection. I love you, you see. So you will stay in my story always. Forever. And ever. What they say in the stories will really happen. We will live happily, ever after. Won't that be nice?

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: That was it. That was the worst.

Well, I got away. I made a raft. She knew, of course; she was a god. For some reason, she let me do it, after seven years. I don't know why. Maybe the gods were so appalled by her, they made her let me go.

As I left I looked back, and there she was, on the cliff edge, smiling. She waved, and smiled, and threw herself off the cliff.

Gods can die, you know. Did you know that? They can do anything they want.

I left.

4 You can't leave me

CALYPSO becomes CHLOE. She is on the phone. Like Siren/Angelique and Circe/Cecily, she is directing information at Angela and offering her other roles.

MONKEY/CHLOE:

You're leaving? You're leaving *me*? Why? I love you.
(Pause.)

You can't leave me. I'll die. I will kill myself. I am not being ridiculous. I mean it. (Pause).

Hallo? Hallo? Are you there? Where are you? What?

(Longer pause—then, slowly, she puts down the phone, turns directly to the audience and smiles. At first this smile is just a bit odd—out of place. But she holds it too long for comfort. Its fixity becomes disconcerting. False. Unnerving.)

Well you didn't fall for that one did you? That old trick? That 'you can't leave me I'll kill myself' ploy? That 'I'll make you suffer you bastard routine'? Good god. You're pathetic.

And so was he. Stupid. Stupid. Seven years I gave him. Seven heavenly sodding years. *(Grief breaks through the anger as she continues)* I hate him. I hate him. He was my waking dream. He made my life complete. We were happy—happy—why has he gone? Why now? He should have warned me. Should have said something to prepare me for this. How will I bear it? The cold nights. The cold. I cannot. I will not. I cannot bear this pain.

(Another pause. Another smile. Mocking.)

And did you fall for that one? That tawdry bauble of a story? That little piece of light soap opera? Did you think that a god—oh yes, I am truly a god—would indulge—would luxuriate—would willingly submerge herself in that gushing spluttering of froth and foam?

I. Am. A. God. I live in a landscape of my choosing. I do as I please. If I want I wish. If I wish I have. Hypotheticals are not in my repertoire. I know all there is to know. I see it all. There is nothing in the whole of the world that is not mine for the asking. I do not experience loss or regret or remorse or anguish or nostalgia or melancholy or pain.

And I do not experience love.

(Long pause—and suddenly a facial expression that is innocent, beautiful, vulnerable, appealing.)

I envy you.

5 HAMLET THE RABBIT

An actor playing a stuffed toy climbs on to the box. It is PETER. He is now HAMLET THE RABBIT.

HAMLET: Excuse me.

ANGELA: Who are you?

HAMLET: HAMLET.

ANGELA: HAMLET?

HAMLET: HAMLET THE RABBIT.

ANGELA: Oh.

HAMLET: Indeed, oh.

ANGELA: Why are you interrupting the story?

HAMLET: Because I speak the truth. I interrupt stories. That's what I do.

ANGELA: Oh.

HAMLET: Oh indeed. Now, let me speak to ODYSSEUS.

ANGELA: Look, whose story is this?

HAMLET: Nobody's, can't you tell? That's the point. Now, let me speak to ODYSSEUS.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: What do you want?

HAMLET: No, what do you want?

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS:: I want freedom from danger, women, narrative, the sea. I want the stable earth, my home, the cooking fire, peace. My wife, my son.

HAMLET: That is not an escape from narrative. That is just changing one story for another.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: It is the end of story. It is happiness. No more narrative.

HAMLET: you don't really believe that, do you?

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Yes!

HAMLET: Do you?

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: No.

HAMLET: I thought not. Changing the narrative mode doesn't get you out of storytime, you know. Escaping from epic into cheap realism won't get you anywhere. The soap opera is not the answer.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: How dare you! I love my wife! Anyway, you're just a puppet!

HAMLET: So are you.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Good point.

HAMLET: In any case, happy ever after is a nightmare, you found that out, did you not?

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Yes. Yes I did.

CHRIS: Precisely! (*To Angela:*) commitment is death. I knew it!

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Shut up, wimp.

CAT: So rude!

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: If there is nothing left to aim for, if there is no Penelope, then nothing means anything. No home to go to, I wander forever, one damn story after another.

HAMLET: Right. It's called life. Get used to it.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: And that's it? That's all there is?

HAMLET: No. Not all. Not all at all, of course not.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Right then, HAMLET THE RABBIT, who tells the truth, give us your wisdom. What else is there?

CHRIS:

Yes, come on, let's have it.

HAMLET:

Has it occurred to you, my heroes, my dear protagonists, that at no point at all in any of your narratives have you thought about anyone else but yourselves? These women whom you visit, use, fear, run from, run towards, these happenings, do they have a point of view, do you think? You happen to them too, you know, have you thought of that? Listen. Here is the final narrative. Listen, both of you. Learn something.

6 I have a story too.

THISBE: *(In this section it is clear that Thisbe and Hamlet and Shakespeare convey something very profound to Angela. She wakes up.)*

Here is my story.

It happened that, in the middle part of my life, in a dark wood I met a LION—

LION interacts

Who frightened me considerably, chased me, filled me with fear—

BORIS: It's an allegory.

KOALA: Oh god.

BORIS: I expect she was an English student. Many people are, you know. They never get over it.

Hamlet as Peter goes over to them and unpuppets them, or something, so that they slump.

THISBE: Filled me with fear, as I was saying, and so I went deeper, and deeper, into the wood, and there met my enemy, my tormentor, who trapped me there, who would not let me go.

WALL interacts.

And then along came a lover, armed with a sword—

Chris leaps forward hopefully, sword pointing upwards in a somewhat Freudian manner.

THISBE: And I said to him: no.

CHRIS: No?

THISBE:

No.

CHRIS:

Why not?

THISBE:

Because I think I'll sort out my own problems, thank you very much, so put that suggestive sword away and bugger off.

Now. Where was I? Oh, right. Locked in a dance with my enemy, my nightmare, I fell into hell. Falling, falling, I fell through all the stages of my life, through lovers, pride, ambition, ego, temptation, all the stories that tried to narrate me, until at last I came to a frozen lake. There in that nightmare landscape, where lived my nemesis, my destiny, my final lover, my fine finality. Look where he (*LION*) feeds on hope, on intelligence, on any individuality I might have, he chews it up. He is the very end.

So what happened then? Oh, all sorts of possibilities. Perhaps I was in a car crash, under the streets of Paris. Perhaps I put stones in my pockets, and failed to walk on water. Perhaps I tucked the children up, kissed them goodnight, tiny and warm, and then went into the kitchen, and filled the air with poison.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps one of the poets carried me past, Emily, Sylvia, such euphonious friends, and out on through into a strange day. Good morning midnight. Blues, how do you do?

And in that new morning, that starlit dawn, I am free. I am not defined by stories. I am not defined by desire. Neither by single minded lust, nor by the cuckoo gape of children, feed me, all of them, lovers, children, feed me, they say—no. I say no. I am free.

7 Stories are fine

ANGELA: And then what?

HAMLET: Love.

ANGELA: Love?

HAMLET: Love. Without narrative.

ANGELA: Yes.

HAMLET: Beyond death and moonlight.

ANGELA: Yes, yes.

HAMLET: That does not define, desire, entrap, entrance; love that freely gives, is a free exchange of gifts.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: And no more stories?

HAMLET: Oh, yes. Stories are fine. Stories are good, in their place.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Which is?

HAMLET: To hide the truth in an entertaining way.

CHRIS/ODYSSEUS: Riiiiight. (*Thinking about it.*) Why don't they just come right out with the truth then, why hide it?

HAMLET: Because the truth is so simple that if you didn't dress it in rags and rubies, in narrative niceties, turn and twist, like a changing flame, then no-one would notice it.

ANGELA: This truth thing. This truth that is so simple.

HAMLET: Yes.

ANGELA: What is it?

HAMLET: I think it's home time for the children, don't you? Time to put the toys back in the box?

ANGELA: Oh, gosh, yes, the parents will be wondering what's happening. Run along children, go and get your coats. Chris, you take them to the cloakroom, I'll tidy up.

She puts all the toys away. The PUPPETS become inert. HAMLET becomes PETER THE PUPPETEER again.

Angela turns to him, and they look at each other.

ANGELA: So: the truth? The simple truth, behind all the stories?

PETER: I love you.

ANGELA: You do?

PETER: I really do.

ANGELA: And that's what all this has been about?

PETER: What else?

ANGELA: Just that, nothing else?

PETER: My dear, there *is* nothing else.

He smiles. She smiles. They kiss. Chris re-enters, is aghast. The puppets wake up.

BORIS: *Waking up.* Hang on a minute! Just hang on a minute! What is this, the happy ending? I thought you wanted her to get out of storytime!

PETER: Nobody can get out of storytime. You can't live as a human being, do the human being thing, without having stories to be in. It's part of the deal.

ANGELA: So how can I stay free?

MONKEY: I want to know how it ends!

CHRIS: I want to know what to do with my life!

ALBERT: And what about living happily ever after?

CAT: I really don't see what the problem is, darlings.

ALL: Really?

CAT: Yes, really; so *obvious*. All you have to do is give the game away.

BORIS: What *are* you talking about?

CAT: If you give the game away, if you don't *give* a damn, darlings, if you know it's all a game, then you get to choose. You can choose your own story.

MONKEY: How do you do that?

PETER: Simply by knowing how the stories are made. By observing the stories you are involved in. By staying awake to the stories on offer, the stories that you are choosing even as they seem to be choosing you. And, most of all –

BORIS: Most of all, you have to be an actor, darlings, only actors are free. Only actors can move between the worlds, taking it lightly, navigating time.

But don't take any bad parts, dearest, choose your shows carefully, don't get caught. I've known good people get stuck in a soap and ruined, quite ruined, for life, my dear. Typecast. You must never let yourself get typecast.

If there's a danger of that happening, walk away. Walk away from money, walk away from your love life, walk away from glamour and glory, whatever your agent says, walk away and just keep walking until you're where you ought to be.

ALBERT: But do we get to live happily ever after?

SHAKESPEARE: I think I can answer that one. But first, let me arrange the ending. I happen to be a specialist in completely implausible endings. Rag doll, my dear, please come here. You, my love, are not a puppet at all! What a surprise! You were kidnapped as a child by pirates and by a series of remarkable coincidences ended up

disguised as a puppet! Isn't that amazing! (*Polite round of applause*). And you (*turns to Chris*) have, in fact, on hearing this, instantly fallen in love with her, I believe?

CHRIS: I have, I really have! (*More polite applause*).

SHAKESPEARE: So that's you sorted out.

PUPPETS: What about us?

SHAKESPEARE: You, my darlings, are professionals. You go back in the box.

ALBERT: What about living happily ever after?

SHAKESPEARE: Don't be silly. Nobody lives for ever, not even after a Shakespeare play. But what you do get to do, my lords, ladies, lovers, and puppets, is this: you get to live now. Here, and now. And happily, happily, my gentle friends, shall you live now: right here in the blissful moment. So, my dears, come forwards two by two to the actor's apotheosis, the pinnacle of bliss: come and take your bow, and maybe these nice people out there will have the goodness to clap.

The actors take their bows; music, confetti; curtain.