

Home Sweet Nursing Home

By Pete Malicki

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Contact:

petemalicki@gmail.com

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Cast

Rhonda – a widow

James – Rhonda's son

Bev – the family's dementia-afflicted grandma

Stage

A living room. There is a couch on one side of the room, beside it a coffee table with a telephone. On the opposite side of the room is a modest dining table. Any other suitable living room items such as paintings, a clock, shelves or bookcases can be included. There are three exits, one being the front door, one leading to James' room, and one leading to the rest of the house.

Scene One

A distressed and frazzled Rhonda is sitting on the couch, speaking into the phone. Pauses denoted by ellipses '...' vary in length.

RHONDA: No, please don't put me on hold!

Rhonda curses and hits the lounge. She waits impatiently.

RHONDA: Hello?... (*Indignant*) Excuse me!? What seems to be the problem!? Who I am talking to?... Well Ronald, do you have any idea what it's like to lose your husband?... You're not *what*? To lose your bloody *wife* then!... I didn't think so. Not three weeks since the man I loved was brutally killed in a car accident, and you bastards are chasing me for money. Can you guess why I'm not very happy right now?... Don't give me that false sympathy. If you really cared you wouldn't be doing this to me... I know you need the money. I don't see why you're demanding it off *me*. She's not even my mother... Oh screw the laws, Ronald. Shouldn't this be the government's responsibility? Quite frankly I can't afford to pay the bill. I have a young son to look after and that's going to be hard enough without giving half of my money away to you; for the sake of a senile old woman... I told you to cut that false sympathy!

Rhonda puts her head in her hands for a long moment, fighting the urge to sob.

RHONDA: So what do you suggest I do? There's no way I can afford to keep her there... No, I can't do that... There *must* be some alternative. I've already told you how hard it's going to be for me as it is... Well, I'll have to think about this. I'm sorry to take it out on you Ronald – I know you're just doing your job.

Rhonda hangs up the phone and leans back in the lounge.

RHONDA: You miserable little cunt. (*Yells*) James! JAMES!

Twenty year old James comes in from the back room. He looks very disinterested.

JAMES: What?

RHONDA: James, I have some bad news for you. The nursing home say they need more money to look after Grandma, else we have to look after her ourselves.

JAMES: But she's senile.

RHONDA: I know.

JAMES: She's not even *your* mother. Why should we be responsible for someone else's vegetable?

RHONDA: Excuse me? This is your *family* you're talking about. She may not have her faculties any more but we're her only relatives and we *are* going to make sure she's looked after.

JAMES: So what do you want me to do about it?

RHONDA: You have to find some work, James. I know you're really serious about your band and I support you doing that, but we're in desperate times now that your father's gone.

JAMES: I'm sorry, but I'm too busy writing to waste my life serving greasy food to fat people.

RHONDA: You don't have a choice James. It's either working, or babysitting Grandma. Either way you're about to lose a lot of your free time.

JAMES: Well, that's not going to happen.

RHONDA: There's no alternative son.

James stares at Rhonda, his jaw set tight. He heads back towards his room.

JAMES: I don't have time for this.

RHONDA: You're going to have even less time when you're looking after your grandmother.

JAMES: Look mum, I am *not* getting some shitkicking job, and I am *definitely* not babysitting my father's mother. That's what God invented nursing homes for.

James slams the door as he exits. Rhonda stews for a moment, then calls out:

RHONDA: Mark my words, James Mathers. If you don't get a job you will regret it.

JAMES: (*Calling back*) I'm sure I will, Rhonda Mathers.

RHONDA: I need a gin.

Rhonda exits through the rest-of-the-house door.

Scene Two

James is slouching on the couch looking annoyed. Rhonda opens the front door and enters, making encouraging phrases and gestures. She helps Bev inside, who is hunched and walks very slowly with the aid of a walking stick.

RHONDA: Come on in, sweetie. That's the way, come on. Just a bit farther. Get off the couch James. That's it. Watch your step. Not far to go. Get off the damned couch, James.

James makes a show of getting up slowly. Rhonda helps Bev to be seated.

RHONDA: There you are Bev. Are you alright?

Bev makes a muttering noise. James looks disgusted.

RHONDA: James is going to look after you today okay sweetie? I'm already running late for work, so I can't stay with you.

JAMES: I'll whip out the cat food, shall I?

RHONDA: James!

JAMES: What does it matter mum? She's got dementia.

RHONDA: I don't have time for this. Just respect your grandmother, okay?

JAMES: Yeah righto.

Rhonda exits, shutting the door firmly behind her. James sighs, looking at his grandma, slowly walking over to be seated next to her. She rocks back and forth slightly and mutters a little bit¹, staring vacantly in front of her. James passes his hand in front of her eyes.

JAMES: Here we are hey Grandma? Here we are. *(Pause)* So how are we going to entertain ourselves? Will you sing me a song? I can go grab my guitar and play you some backing chords. No? You don't like that idea? Maybe we could do some line dancing. Hey, are you even listening to me Grandma? I just realise you haven't said a single thing. I'm sorry, I must be hogging the spotlight. Here, say a few words.

James holds an invisible microphone in front of Bev. He looks at her expectantly, but she doesn't react.

JAMES: Have anything to say, ma'am? Would you like to thank your agent? Fine then Grandma, we won't do anything. We'll just sit here and dodder all day. *(Looks away for a moment)* To tell you the truth, I don't even want you to be here. It's a joke. My mum tried to blackmail me and say that if I didn't get some stupid job I'd be forced to look after you all day long. Let me tell you right now Grandma that I'm above her cheap tricks. I'll find a way to get rid of you without sacrificing my own life in the process. There are easy ways to make money. You don't need a job. You just have to exploit the stupidity of a rich person. Or gain... an inheritance.

James looks thoughtful, then leaves the room briefly to get his laptop. He sits back down.

JAMES: I suppose you won't really appreciate this one Grandma, but I have myself a built-in, wireless modem. Now, you might be wondering what's the advantage of this?

James pretends he is a ventriloquist and is speaking from Bev's mouth. His voice is high-pitched.

JAMES: Yes James, what is the advantage of your wireless modem? *(Normal voice)* Aah, good question Beverley. Well, it just so happens my neighbour uses wireless internet. I'm

¹ Note that Bev mutters constantly while on stage. Usually it is very soft, but when it is supposed to be intelligible it has been included in dialogue.

able to use *my* modem to leach *his* connection, in other words, free internet! Brilliant, eh?

Anyway, I have a strong feeling that I'm able to transfer funds from your bank account into mine. All I have to do is get into your account, apply for a password to be mailed to our house, then I can log in as you. What do you think, Grandma? Good idea?... You're not talking to me!?! Oh come on, it's not like you use it. Hell, I deserve to be paid for babysitting you, though I must add that this won't be for long.

James frowns as he is using at his computer. He clicks, waits for something to load, then curses.

JAMES: Crap. It's already password protected. Dad must've done that recently. (*Thinks*) Do you have a chequebook, Grandma? I could forge your signature. (*Looks around*) I reckon mum's got it somewhere. I'll go have a look for it.

James gets up and leaves the room via the rest-of-house exit. Bev watches him go, continues her slight rocking, then lets out a few raspy coughs. Lights fade.

Scene Three

Rhonda arrives home, opening the door to reveal Bev sitting in the same place on the couch. She enters, calls for James, and goes over to place her handbag on the table. She sees a note, picks it up, and reads it. When she's done, she goes to sit with Bev.

RHONDA: The little bastard absconded! Are you alright, Bev? I can't believe he just left you here all by yourself so he can create white noise with those tone-deaf little monkeys. I could break that guitar over his goddamned head. Are you okay, sweetie? Can I get you anything? You must be thirsty in this heat. Let me get you a glass of water.

Rhonda leaves through the rear door and returns shortly with water. She gives it to Bev and assists her in drinking it.

RHONDA: There you go. That's better, isn't it?

I am so angry with James. He is such a lazy boy. To sit back while his mother slaves her arse off every day, earning money for *his* food and *his* bills. It upsets me so much. I thought after Gary passed away he'd change, you know. I thought he'd clean up his act, find some work, and start behaving like an independent young man. I couldn't have been more wrong. He's gotten even worse. I suppose I should cook us some dinner.

You know, people at work have been so unsympathetic. You'd think that after somebody loses their life partner, you'd treat them with a bit of sensitivity. Instead I had to give up half of my lunch hour because the girl who normally covers for me was in a meeting. Work myself sick, stuck in a traffic jam for at least twenty minutes, and come home to find my son's bugged off and left his helpless grandma all by herself. And my neck is killing me.

Bev coughs and makes a feeble attempt to rise. Rhonda jumps up to help her.

RHONDA: What's wrong, sweetie? Do you need to get up? Do you need to go to the toilet?

BEV: Toilet.

RHONDA: Come on then. Let's get you to the bathroom.
The two women leave.

Scene Four

Rhonda is sitting at the table, drinking what appears to be an alcoholic beverage. It is fairly dark in the room. James enters through the front door carrying a guitar.

JAMES: Hey mum, how you going?

RHONDA: Ah look. The maestro finally returns from a hard day's work.

JAMES: Hmm, that's funny. I've just come in the door and my narky-bitch-detector seems to be going right off the scale.

RHONDA: Oh, now you're abusing *me*. I'm sorry, how dare I challenge an angel such as yourself.

JAMES: What the hell are you talking about? How much of that stuff have you drunk?

Rhonda slams her drink on the table.

RHONDA: God damn it, James. I worked my arse off all god damned day and returned to find your grandmother abandoned. You left her here all by herself. What if she'd fallen and broken something? Or if she needed some water? It was hot as a desert today.

JAMES: Well I'm sorry but I can't be expected to babysit her all day long. I have a band...

RHONDA: Oh yes you damn well *are* expected to look after her all day long. She is a frail, senile old woman and needs to be attended to constantly.

JAMES: I'm not going to do that.

RHONDA: Then you're not going to live here.

JAMES: You'd kick me out of home, would you? Who'd look after Grandma if you did that?

RHONDA: The nursing home would because I could bloody well afford to keep her there if I wasn't paying your way. You can either get a job and help pay the bills or you can be her god damned babysitter.

JAMES: That's completely unfair.

RHONDA: Don't tell me about unfair. My loving husband died well before his time and now I'm forced to be the sole income earner for my entire family, because my *son* is *above* a checkout job.

JAMES: Whatever mum. I'm not going to fall for your dirty tricks. (*Starts exiting to his room*)

RHONDA: You disgust me sometimes, James. If you ever leave your grandmother by herself again you will be out of here for good, do you hear me?

JAMES: Righto.

RHONDA: And don't think you can bugger off while I'm at work. I'll call home five times a day to check on you if I have to.

JAMES: Fuck this. I'm going to sleep.

James exits and slams his door. Rhonda takes a sip of her drink, then starts sobbing.

Scene Five

Rhonda bursts out of the back room, dressed for work and hurrying around. She picks up her handbag from the dining table where it had been left the previous night.

RHONDA: James. James! Get out here you lazy sod.

James appears after a long pause, looking annoyed and dishevelled from sleeping.

RHONDA: Get your grandmother up before I go. She can't stay in the spare bedroom all day.

JAMES: I'll do it later.

RHONDA: You'll do it now. I want to make sure you help her properly.

JAMES: Don't patronise me mum, I won't break it.

RHONDA: It?! You're a disgrace, James.

James baulks at his mother as he walks by. She flinches, then holds her neck.

RHONDA: Ow! What did you do that for? You know my neck's stuffed.

JAMES: What's wrong with your neck?

RHONDA: I don't bloody know. Just go get your grandma.

James leaves. Rhonda turns her head cautiously, and moves over to sit at the table.

RHONDA: That little bastard's going to be the death of me, I swear it. I don't understand why he has to be so lazy. I've failed. I've failed as a parent. I don't know why. I tried my best.

James returns, leading Bev into the main room, helping her over to the couch. Rhonda looks at them, then smiles.

RHONDA: At least you can show a bit of compassion occasionally.

JAMES: What are you talking about? I'm good with animals. *(Laughs)* And vegetables.

RHONDA: I'm going to work now, James. I'll be calling the home phone to check on you, so don't even think about going out.

Rhonda takes her bag and leaves. James shakes his head at her, then sits with Bev.

JAMES: You know Grandma, that heinous bitch actually gave me an idea just now. Her neck is sore, right? It sounds like it's been an ongoing thing, too, although that's the first I've ever heard of it. 'What's so special about this?' you wonder. Well, let me explain.

Lots of people get sore necks, right? They're also hard to diagnose, because muscle problems can be caused by a variety of things such as stress, posture, exercise, lack of exercise, dehydration, injury. What the world lacks is a universal diagnoses for any kind of neck problem and a placebo to cure it.

Here's what I'm trying to say. I'll go onto the internet and create a website which is all about 'Neckitis.' It will explain what it is and how you can buy my online manual which tells you how to beat it. And I'll link it to Wikipedia for validation. Listen here:

'Neckitis is a common condition where the affected person experiences inexplicable pain or discomfort in the neck.' See Grandma, that's pretty much everyone with neck pain. 'It mostly affects the elderly and people in their middle ages, but it is not unknown for those as young as twenty to suffer from Neckitis.' Cover all possibilities. 'The cause of this disorder is mostly unknown. It is a scientific "gray area." However, treatment is possible and doesn't require dozens of trips to the doctor or chiropractor.'

See what I'm getting at, Grandma? People are desperate to fix their problems but too stingy to pay a specialist to treat them. When they see an easy, cheap solution, they'll snap it up. All I have to do is copy and paste information from other sources, and presto! I'll have a twenty dollar manual which will be bought by every second Neckitis sufferer in the world. Utter brilliance, isn't it?

BEV: *(Stutters a bit)* Chocolate.

JAMES: Did you just say 'chocolate?'

BEV: Chocolate.

JAMES: Interesting. Hey, when's your birthday? Let's celebrate it now to get it over and done with. Happy birthday dear Beverley, etc etc. For she's a jolly old fellow. Hip hip... hooray! Hip hip... replacement!

(Sighs) Well, you'll be right here by yourself for a bit won't you? I just have to go and use my computer for a while. Give us a yell if you need anything.

James disappears into his bedroom. The lights fade.

Scene Six

The telephone is ringing. Bev is making a feeble attempt to answer it. James comes from his room carrying his computer and answers the phone.

JAMES: Hello?... I was on the toilet, mum. Am I supposed to hold it in all day in case Grandma jumps up and makes a dash for freedom? Maybe I should use a pan... Alright. See you.

Hangs up the phone and sits down next to Bev.

JAMES: Can you believe it, Bev? I get yelled at for taking fifteen seconds to answer the phone, then she hangs up on me as soon as she's satisfied with my answer. It makes me feel like a dirty servant. A housemaid, nay a *slave*, forced to spend his days looking after the cattle with naught but dreams of a financial reward.

Speaking of which, Grandma, I have spent the last four hours writing my manual on Neckitis and posting samples of it on various internet forums run by different hippy groups. If enough people email me asking for more information, I'll put it up for sale on my website. It won't be long before the cash is flowing in and we can get you back to a place where the people at least have it in their professional interests to look after you. Isn't that chocolate? Bravo. It's been nice having you here over the last thirty or so hours, Grandma. Enjoy it...

James is cut off by the phone ringing. He frowns, then answers it gruffly.

JAMES: What do you want, I'm still here... Oh, hi buddy. I thought you were someone else... So what's up?... Practice? 'Fraid I can't for a while, mate. The dragon lady says she'll kick me out of home if I leave my grandma here by herself... She *is* serious and so am I. It's fucked up but I can only come on weekends now, unless you want to bring your drum kit round here?... (*Indignant*) You can't threaten *me*. I started this band... It's not going to be for long. I'm getting rid of her as soon as bloody possible. All I need is a whole bunch of money... Inspiration just struck. Gotta go.

James hangs up then takes Bev's hand.

JAMES: I've got it! I know a sure-fire way to make lots of money. Do you remember that girl who hid in a closet for years? Or that guy who disappeared into the bush for a few weeks, then returned to civilisation all malnourished and hairy? Tell me what they both had in common Bev, I dare ya. No takers?

They sold their stories to current affairs programs for tens of thousands of dollars. All I have to do is adopt some irrational behavioural characteristic and people will be desperate to know why. Why do I refuse to walk forwards? Why will I only eat with a knife? (*gasps*) I have it. Why am I refusing to talk? I could sign a contract saying that I will explain myself on camera for the sum of twenty thousand dollars.

James puts his hand over his mouth as if trying to say he is mute. He laughs silently then takes his laptop over to the dining table, where he begins to type. The lights fade out. After a few seconds, the phone rings and the lights fade back on to denote time passing. James sighs, closes his computer, walks over to the phone, then pauses thoughtfully before answering it. He picks up the receiver, puts it to his ear, then taps the mic with his fingers. He looks panicked, then jams the keypad, making gestures with his free hand to try to prove that it's him. He holds the phone next to his grandmother and pokes her. She whimpers. He holds it back to his ear, scratches his head, then hangs up.

BEV: Chocolate.

James nods in agreement, then takes his computer and leaves the stage.

Scene Seven

Rhonda bursts inside angrily to find Bev sitting by herself on the couch.

RHONDA: Where'd that little bastard go? I can't believe he's pissed off again *even after* I threatened to kick his butt out. That's it, I'm locking the bloody door. He can stay out.

Rhonda locks the front door then sits down with Bev.

RHONDA: I had another shocker today. I got in one hell of a temper after I rang home and you answered. God I was angry. I was storming about the office swearing to high heaven, telling everyone I saw how I was going to rip James's head off. So of course the boss decides that my behaviour is irrational and inappropriate, and that if I don't start getting counselling, I can't come back to work. This is fine, of course, because he's very experienced at losing spouses. It's one of his monthly chi-building exercises.

Oh Bev, I don't want to be interrogated by a stranger who sits at a forty-five degree angle and constantly nods at me with false sympathy. I like the details of my personal life to stay with me. But I want even less to lose my job. I don't want to spend a cent of your savings unless the alternative is death or starvation. I know you aren't in a position to even use your money, but I'm a woman of principles and your money should be yours until you're dead.

I'm going to wring that little bastard's neck, I swear it.

As if on cue, James comes out of his bedroom carrying a pen, a clipboard and paper. He smiles at his mum and waves.

RHONDA: I didn't realise you were home. Did you have a good time abandoning your grandmother and earning yourself a new home?

James shakes his head, points at himself, then gestures around the room, trying to say he's been home all day.

RHONDA: What's this?

James puts a hand over his mouth and shakes his head.

RHONDA: What? Have you become a mute?

James nods and smiles. Rhonda puts her head in her hands.

RHONDA: James, I need your support mate. I've had a rough time since your father died. Work is getting more and more stressful; they say I have to start counselling else I'll be fired. It was hard enough to find the time to do the shopping and the cooking for two people, and now I have to help look after Grandma. My back is stiff as a board and my neck is in a perpetual state of agony. I don't need a mute son, okay? Whatever scam you're trying to pull off, just drop it. Please.

James puts up a finger, then scribbles something on some paper. He gives it to Rhonda.

RHONDA: 'Cure Neckitis dot com.' What the hell is Neckitis? (*James does not reply*) James, if you don't start speaking I'm going to kick you out of this goddamn house. I can't take any more stresses.

James gestures that he will not speak and crosses his arms defiantly.

RHONDA: Fine. Get out!

Rhonda goes over to the door, unlocks it, and holds it open for James. He walks over, holds his mid-digit up at his mother, and leaves. She locks the door behind herself and goes over to the couch, where she starts sobbing. After a short time, there is a knocking.

RHONDA: Go away!

There is more knocking with a funky pattern, then butchered Morse code, then there is scratching.

RHONDA: If you want something, James Mathers, then just ask. I am *not* going to let you back in until you start speaking.

A few seconds later a piece of paper appears under the door. Rhonda storms over and snatches it up.

RHONDA: 'Guitar.' What about it, James? Do you want me to start taking lessons? I think I can do that. Thanks for the suggestion.

Rhonda walks off as there is more knocking. It gets louder and more violent.

JAMES: Just bring me my guitar! (*Pause*) Fuck! Fine then. Just let me back in, bitch.

RHONDA: What did you call me?

JAMES: Okay, I'm sorry. Please mum, I've only got the family's best interests at heart.

Rhonda opens the door and James enters.

RHONDA: If you had the family's best interest at heart James, you would get a job so I don't have to work myself to an early death.

JAMES: Alright, I don't need a lecture. I've had a hard enough day as it is.

RHONDA: Hard?! How many times was your job threatened today?

JAMES: Yeah whatever. I'm out of here.

James goes to his room. Rhonda snarls at him as he leaves then sits back down with Bev.

RHONDA: Oh Beverley, why did all this happen to me? What'd I do wrong. (*Sighs*) I wish you could understand what I'm saying. I'm sure your many years would have given you enough wisdom to think up a solution for this mess I'm in. But I suppose it's your *years* that have been your enemy, and if you still had your faculties I wouldn't have a problem.

I really need a drink, Bev. I'm sorry. I have to make us some dinner, too. Don't worry, I'll come check on you every couple of minutes.

Rhonda rises laboriously and exits via the rest-of-house door.

Scene Eight

It is the next morning. Rhonda is standing in the doorway about to leave for work.

RHONDA: James! Get up, will you. I'm leaving for work. Come look after your grandmother.

Rhonda exits. James enters the stage from his room, hopping. He hops over to Bev and sits down.

JAMES: Good morning, oh eloquent chocolate queen. How are you today? Just as I thought, still a moron. Hey, when's your birthday? Well, I'm in a fantastic mood thank you very much for asking. Do you want to know why? Of course you do! Because I have thought of a way to make a guaranteed small fortune. Look, you're drooling in excitement.

Bev is drooling, so James picks up her arm and uses her own sleeve to wipe it from her mouth.

JAMES: Now hold on just a second. I've got something better to use than your own clothes.

James gets up and hops enthusiastically out of the room, through the rest-of-house exit. He returns shortly thereafter with a pen and chequebook. Sits with Bev and starts filling out a cheque.

JAMES: So you see, Grandma, my idea is this: I was looking through a hardware catalogue and came across something very interesting. You ready? A small, metal toolbox with a lock. 'How droll,' you think? But wait Grandma. You haven't heard my idea yet.

Seeing this metal box gave me an idea. What I'm going to do is buy a *huge* metal box – like a full-on treasure chest – that has a lock on it. I'll take a photo of it, then sell it on eBay for fifty thousand dollars.

I don't hear any gasps of surprise, Grandma. Perhaps you don't quite follow yet? Well, it is simple. 'Curiosity killed the cat and parted the stupid rich guy with a bunch of his cash.' Think about it. If you saw an advertisement for a huge box, and it cost as much as a sports car, wouldn't you wonder *why* the huge box is so expensive? You'd think 'That's a lot of money for a huge metal box. I wonder why it costs so much? I mean, there must be something more to this picture than meets the eye. Perhaps there is something rare and valuable *inside* the box,' etc etc. People will be curious and I'll bet someone out there will be curious enough to spend at *least* twenty grand to find out what's going on. I can write a poem about 'the price we pay to uncover mysteries' and leave it inside the box as a tribute to the buyer.

Essentially what I'm saying is that there are rich and stupid people out there and I intend to exploit these people. Speaking of which, would you mind signing this little cheque here?

James picks up Bev's hand and uses it to sign the cheque he had been filling out.

JAMES: One thousand dollars! Thanks Grandma, that's very generous of you. You know, I'm going to use this money to buy myself... oh, a big metal box. It just works out perfectly, doesn't it?

(*gasps*) Do you know what just happened Grandma? I think I had a stab of conscience. Why would that happen? Let's think about what I'm doing. I'm ripping money off my elderly, dementia-afflicted grandmother so I can scam an even larger sum of money. Now, that does sound bad, even I'll admit it, but we should think outside the square. I'm going to use this money to put you back in a home, where you'll be looked after properly. Quite frankly I'm not doing a good job of looking after you, because one: I don't care about you, and two; I resent the fact that you're ruining my life just by being alive. So it's actually not a bad thing I'm doing. In the long run it'll be better for everyone.

James pockets his cheque, then leans back with a contented sigh. The phone rings, and he answers.

JAMES: Yo... Hey mum, how's it going?... Yeah good. Look mum, do you still need to call me every day? How long's it been now? A week?... Four days, whatever. You know I can't go anywhere without hopping, don't you?... So do you really think I'm going to hop round to Dan's place with my guitar?... Suit yourself. I'll speak to you in fifteen minutes when you feel untrusting enough to check on me again... See you.

James hangs up then gets to his foot.

JAMES: Great. I reckon I have at least two hours until she rings again. Well Grandma, I gotta go bank a cheque and buy myself a treasure chest. I'll catch you in a few, okay? Be good.

James hops out the front door.

Scene Nine

The telephone is ringing. It stops, and the lights come back on. Bev still hasn't moved. James comes hopping through the front door. He sits down and starts rubbing his backside.

JAMES: Jesus, my arse is killing. Have you ever tried hopping all the way to the frigging Westfield and back? It's harder than it sounds. And you bloody grannies don't make it

any easier. Have you ever noticed how when you're approaching an old person, they step in front of you the *moment* you try to overtake. Especially if you're in a hurry. In fact, the faster you're going, the longer they'll manage to get in your way for. I bet you bastards do it on purpose. It's a giant conspiracy that comes with the pension. 'Here's your weekly pay, Beverley. Oh, and by the way, make sure you get in the way of as many young people as possible on your way home.'

Anyway I suppose you're wondering where the box is? I'm getting it custom made from the local hardware store for just a large fraction of the money I stole off you...

The telephone starts ringing. James quickly grabs it.

JAMES: Yallo?... Oh, hi mum! Nice to see you still don't trust me... Where was I? Didn't I tell you about that toilet thing we human beings have to use every so often?... What's that supposed to mean?... Did I eat *what*?... You rang seven times?! Uh, are you sure you were ringing the right number?... (*This next pause is quite long, with James uttering a few chastised 'uh huh's and 'yes's*) Okay mum. See you tonight.

Hangs up the phone and grins at Bev.

JAMES: Sprung! Looks like I was wrong about the whole not-ringing-more-frequently-than-every-two-hours thing, wasn't I?

Now while I wait for the apocalypse, I'm going to go and put an ad up on eBay. I have decided, also, to use *your* name and bank account details for security reasons. You know, in case somebody buys it then comes looking for me. It's okay, you can always write me another cheque when the transaction's complete. See you later!

James pats Bev on the shoulder and leaves the stage to his bedroom, still hopping. Lights out.

Scene Ten

Rhonda staggers in, drunk. She sits with Bev, holding a small wad of paper.

RHONDA: Hi Beverley. I think I might have lost my job today. I kind of called the boss a 'fucking cocksucking cunt-faced piece of shit-eating shit.' Maybe he didn't approve of my grammar, but he told me not to bother coming back in tomorrow. I'd already told him I was going to take the day off to make a guillotine small enough to cut off his penis, but I think he meant I was fired.

BEV: Jimmy. Have you seen Jimmy?

RHONDA: Jimmy Bev? If you're talking about James, I wouldn't worry about seeing him again.

Bev starts babbling in a soft voice.

RHONDA: After I sober up, if I ever do because I don't intend to, I'll be putting his arse out onto the street. And I'm not going to wait for him to get his guitar, in fact, he can take that guitar and shove it up his unemployed, homeless clacker. I'm not supporting him any longer, and I'm not supporting you. I'm going on welfare and using it to... no wait, I didn't think this through. I need that money myself. That means I'm stuffed! I can't do this without getting a new job. Guess I'll just have to stay drunk forever then all my problems will float away like Helium-filled birdies.

You know, when Gary died I thought I'd reached the bottom. It seemed like someone had torn out my heart and replaced it with a rotten apple filled with crawling, wriggling worms. You know when they show you a photo of a big fire and there's lots of

helicopters and firemen and stuff, and then they put it out until all you have left is blackened stumps letting off steam. I'm like those blackened stumps, but the steam has stopped coming off me.

BEV: What happened to the Hun?

RHONDA: Who, Attila? Hey, look what I got here. (*Shows papers*) It's some exercises for my neck. If I follow these instructions, it'll be back to normal in no time flat, apparently. I paid for it with the boss's credit card, because he's a stupid git. I'm going to sort out my life when I get sober again, which I don't plan on doing, and I'm going to start with my neck. I'll look at this when my eyes can focus... good? Better.

Do you remember when Gary and I got married? That was the best day of my entire life. I looked sexy and Gary was just scrumptious, and we got to kiss each other in front of a bishop, which was kind of always a fantasy of mine. He didn't have the big Pope-staff thingy, but it was still really kinky.

I never told you this, but I'd found out earlier that week that I was pregnant with James. Not... *with* James, but like, with him, you know. So I thought as a wedding gift I'd tell Gary my little secret.

As it turned out, Gary had a little secret of his own. Gary had had some tests done when he was a bit younger and they'd confirmed he was sterile. 'Oh?' I said to him as our limousine bumped down the road. Then I realised what that meant, and I said 'oh.'

But you know what? Gary never raised it ever, and he nurtured James like he was his very own son. I couldn't believe that. It scared me for months actually, because I was terrified of what I thought was an inevitable fight. It never came. One night he looked at me and without saying what he was on about, he just said 'I don't care, Rhonda. I don't care.'

Do you have any idea what it's like to lose someone that amazing? Well I guess you do, 'cause he's your son. Well, you probably don't because you're senile. Do you even know what's happened, Bev? Your son is dead. Did you know this? Can you understand me? He had a tragic accident and broke into lots of little pieces, and we burned them so he's just lots of little ash.

Anyway it's been vaccinating talking to you sweetie but I think I have to go throw up and pass out. Shall I take you to your bed now? Come on, let's go to bed.

Rhonda helps Bev up, who protests feebly. Bev is assisted out of the room then the lights go out. They come back on dimmer. James hops out, places his laptop on the table, then stretches magnificently and makes a show of having just woken.

JAMES: Good morning nobody. Normally I'd throw insults at you but you don't appear to be here. (*Checks watch*) Midday. This is strange. Either mum's forgotten to wake me or she hasn't gone to work yet.

James opens the rest-of-house door and pokes his head in. He disappears.

JAMES: (*Calling*) You in there mum?

RHONDA: Go away.

JAMES: Shouldn't you be at work?

RHONDA: Shouldn't *I* be at work? Shouldn't you have had a single day's work in your fucking life?

JAMES: Hey, no need to be rude. It's just that you have a job and all, and I thought you'd...

RHONDA: Fuck off!

James appears moments later, looking chastised. He hops over to the lounge, and Rhonda storms into the room, dressed casually to go out. She puts a bottle of alcohol on the dining table.

RHONDA: Grandma and I are going out. Help her into the living room while I get ready.

JAMES: Oh? Where are you guys...?

RHONDA: James, don't ask any questions. Just get your grandmother before I remove your delicate little guitar-playing fingers with an axe.

JAMES: Right.

James exits; returns slowly helping Bev. This is awkward because he is still hopping. In the meantime, Rhonda sits down with her head in her hands, then drinks generously from the bottle.

RHONDA: Thanks. I'm taking grandmother out today, so you can do whatever the hell you like.

JAMES: Are you sure you're okay to drive, mum? That bottle's a lot emptier than it was last time I...

RHONDA: *(Interrupts snappishly)* Yes I'm fine.

JAMES: Alright, alright. Don't mean to offend her Highness.

RHONDA: Just shut up. Go play your guitar, or hop down to the Westfield, you little weirdo.

JAMES: What's wrong mum? Did I miss something?

RHONDA: You miss everything James, because you do nothing but stay at home all day.

JAMES: Because you make me look after Grandma!

RHONDA: Oh sorry. That's right. I forgot how you *used* to work five days a week, come home and cook dinner, then do all the housework before going to bed.

JAMES: I don't remember that.

Rhonda grabs Bev's arm without her usual gentleness and pulls her to the front door. Bev mumbles.

JAMES: Have a nice picnic.

Rhonda doesn't reply before slamming the door behind herself. James makes a face, then sits at the table and turns on his computer. He looks over at the couch, then starts typing and using the seeker (built-in mouse). He looks at the couch again.

JAMES: It just doesn't feel right.

James takes the computer over to the couch and sits there, looking at the space which Bev usually occupies. He continues using the computer.

JAMES: I know you're not here, but I'm going to talk to you anyway. I must admit I've grown fond of our little discussions, or... what do you call a conversation where only one person says anything? Whatever they are, I like them.

So how are you today, dearest Grandma? Really? Fascinating. You know my eBay auction is on tonight? I'm going to make so much money. It's quite exciting.

Oh, did you hear my latest idea!? I know I've got plenty of money coming in with the Neckitis and the metal box and from A Current Affairs, but you can never have too much. You...

James trails off as he sees something on the computer. He claps his hands together.

JAMES: Score! I've sold my first Neckitis manual. That's nine dollars and ninety-five cents of my first million. The butterfly effect's gonna kick in soon and I'll be laughing my way to the bank. Yeah!

Oh, sorry, I interrupted myself. I was telling you about my latest scam, wasn't I Bev? Well, it goes like this: I pretend to lose my birth certificate, then I apply for a new one. When I receive it, I change my name, which means I'll get a new birth certificate for my new name. This leaves me with two separate birth certificates. I apply for a TAFE course, get myself a student card with my new name, then take that and my birth certificate to the bank and open a new account. I can live two separate lives which are both completely accountable. I'm sure I can use this to my advantage, like, I could work two jobs and stay below the tax threshold, or get the new home-owners grant twice. I could even commit fraud with one persona and filter the money into my other persona's account. It's gonna be fantastic.

James looks at the empty lounge, then lets out a sigh. He gets up, then hops his computer back to the table. He hops towards the front door exit.

JAMES: I think I'm going to go out and do something. Maybe I'll drop in on the guys and see if they want to have a bit of a jam.

James exits.

Scene Eleven

Rhonda enters with Bev. She is carrying a small, full sack. She leads Bev over to the table and helps her to a seat. She is crying.

RHONDA: You know I wouldn't do this unless there was another way. I'm so sorry. But you really can't use this money. I doubt you even know what I did today.

Rhonda hides the sack under a cushion on the lounge and sits down with her head in her hands. She suddenly sits up straight, placing a hand on her shoulder and bending her neck to the opposite side.

RHONDA: It's fine. Everything's fine. I'm going to do my exercises and I'm going to feel better. Tonight, I will start afresh. I can start a new life and leave all this misery and shit behind. I'll find a new place to live and a new job and maybe even a new family.

James opens the door, hops a few steps, then collapses on the floor.

JAMES: Boy, am I wasted. I hopped at least five kilometres! My left butt cheek is going to look like a soccer ball.

RHONDA: I don't know where I went wrong with you, James.

JAMES: James? Who is James. I think you mean 'Zarkanoid the Hopping Warrior-Wizard.'

RHONDA: What?

JAMES: I've always wanted my surname to be contain the word 'Warrior.'

RHONDA: I can't look at you any more.

JAMES: (*Getting up*) Huh?

RHONDA: Please James, don't make this any harder for me. Just go to your room.

JAMES: Right. You know mum, you've really lost it recently.

RHONDA: I lost everything I ever cared about. Please leave me be.

JAMES: Well, whatever. If you're gonna look after Grandma, I'll play my guitar or something.

James hops to the table and picks up his laptop.

JAMES: Grandma, it's nicer talking to you when you aren't around. It doesn't smell as much.

RHONDA: GO!

James hops out of the room and slams his door shut. Rhonda sighs, rises and goes to Bev.

RHONDA: I'm going to get a few hours sleep before I do this, Bev. I can't tell you enough how sorry I am. Let's get you to bed.

Rhonda walks over to Bev, looking back at the couch. She kisses Bev's forehead, then helps her through the 'rest-of-house' exit.

Scene Twelve

The lights are off. Rhonda slowly opens the door and creeps into the living room. She hurries over to the lounge and rummages through the cushions. She can't find what she's looking for.

RHONDA: Shit. Where the fuck is it?

She continues searching, then curses again and turns on the light. She goes back to the lounge and turns up the cushions. There is no sack.

RHONDA: That little fucker has stolen my inheritance. I'm going to kill him.

James hops out of his bedroom, wearing his pyjamas and carrying his laptop. He looks bewildered.

JAMES: Mum! What are you doing up? It's three in the morning?

RHONDA: Where's the money? Give it to me, you little bastard!

JAMES: The money? How did you know?

RHONDA: I took it out of Bev's account yesterday afternoon. I put it under the couch. Give it to me now or I swear I will kill you.

JAMES: You've gone insane, mum. I've finally solved our problem and you flip on me.

RHONDA: Where is it!?

JAMES: Mum. Calm down. I have just earned us fifty thousand dollars.

RHONDA: You've just *stolen* fifty thousand dollars!

JAMES: No I didn't. Look here. On the screen. I sold a huge metal box on eBay for fifty thousand dollars. The money will be in Grandma's bank account by next week.

Rhonda comes over and looks at the screen. She frowns at first, then her jaw drops.

RHONDA: Oh my god, is this for real?

JAMES: Yeah. You can ask Bev if you like. She helped fund me.

RHONDA: So you *did* steal her money!

JAMES: No, well, not much of it. But it doesn't matter. I've just earned her fifty times her investment. That's one hell of an interest rate.

Bev appears in the doorway and slams the door shut behind her. She has the sack in one hand and her chequebook in the other. She walks past James and Rhonda and stops in the middle of the room. She speaks in a loud, clear voice.

BEV: Good evening James. Good evening Rhonda. I thought I'd just let you know that you're both scum and you're going to Hell. Especially you, James.

Bev limps out of the house, singing happily. She slams the door behind her, and seconds later the sound of a car driving off into the distance can be heard. James and Rhonda are flabbergasted. Eventually, James speaks.

JAMES: Bev just... she just... *(he trails off)* She was carrying her chequebook. That means I... I can't... the money...

James faints. Rhonda looks down at him, completely shocked.

RHONDA: Grandma can't walk! But she... walked out of the house, with my... with *her*... money...

Rhonda looks to the ceiling, then grabs her neck with both hands. Her jaw drops and a pained expression crosses her face.

RHONDA: My Neckitis!

Rhonda collapses.