

*She lies down.*

ROSALIND. Hey Jocelyn . . . saw you dancing with that funny chap . . . the vicar . . .

JOCELYN. Bless him . . . He'd had an arm amputated . . .

ROSALIND. What a shame . . .

HELEN. Hey, don't mock it . . . funny one-armed vicars don't grow on trees you know . . .

ROSALIND. Shhh . . .

HELEN. Don't shush me, there's nobody bloody here . . . No, all I'm saying is . . . We should jettison Shakespeare . . . overboard with him . . . 'TTFN'.

JOCELYN. The trick with Shakespeare is only to play kings and queens – you never have to carry props and you always get a chair . . .

FLORA *appears*. IVY *goes to the bathroom*.

FLORA. Shhh, you must all go to sleep . . .

CHARLIE. Miss Oak'll have us for dereliction of duty . . .

ROSALIND. Ooh scary scary.

FLORA. Stop it all of you . . . no more talking . . .

HELEN. Oh yeah, I know . . . thanks Flora . . . 'Rest, rest, perturbed spirit' – well no, I was born without brakes . . .

FLORA. I beg you to stop . . .

HELEN. No . . . no, listen Flora . . . we've travelled ten thousand miles around Britain and done one thousand performances of thirty-five plays – just seven of us – SEVEN – playing an obscenely ludicrous number of parts – driven by what? Who is she? Who does she think she is? Mrs Miniver?

FLORA. This is the drink talking . . .

HELEN *takes HETTY's trench coat and parades in it*.

HELEN. 'Why, man, she doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus' . . . but, you see, inside this ridiculous dog-

stinking coat . . . there hides the true Hetty Oak – a menopausal dwarf . . .

*The beam of a bright torchlight hits them.*

HETTY. Nobody's hiding anywhere . . . but we have three shows here tomorrow and if even one of you isn't up to the task, you will be jeopardising our whole enterprise and bringing down not simply the morale of this company but the morale of the people of Britain. We do have a duty to perform . . . this is your war effort . . . Now goodnight, all of you . . .

HELEN. Oh come on, Mister Churchill. Even soldiers get . . . compassionate leave or whatever . . . I mean, thanks a lot but we're dying here . . .

HETTY. No . . . Christ, how dare you? . . . Of course you're not . . . Young boys are lying bleeding in the mud . . . brilliant musicians and poets are hanging like scarecrows on barbed wire so that you can go galavantiing off and drink yourself stupid and make fools of yourselves . . . You want sympathy? You'll find it in the dictionary between shit and syphilis . . .

HELEN. Exactly . . . War doesn't give a shit about Artists . . .

HETTY. Oh for God's sake, Helen, grow up . . .

HELEN. Why the hell should I? What are you going to do . . . court-martial me? If you dismiss me, you don't just get rid of one mutinous foot soldier . . . oh no . . . I take with me over two hundred characters . . . I'm riddled with characters.

HETTY. May I speak . . .

HELEN. No . . . you can shut up for once in your life . . . Shut up!

ROSALIND. Mummy . . .

HELEN. For Christ's sake, we're women . . . but you need us to be men on and off the stage . . . because it terrifies you . . . because when we consort with real men . . . real men . . . it's like bullet-wounds in your side because you can't

control us any more . . . we're beyond the barbed-wire fence . . . (*She mimes a gun.*) Bham bham . . . because what do you know about how we feel? You know nothing about feelings, parading about in your stupid soldier coat. You've never been a woman – You've always been a man . . .

*There is a terrifying silence.*

HETTY. This coat isn't actually mine . . . it belonged to my father . . . who I loved . . . and I wear it constantly because when he was killed, it was the only way I could find of keeping him alive . . . And if in any other way you're interested in my female credentials . . . I have . . . I have a . . . Oh what does it matter? . . . Now I believe your other point was has this all been a waste of time? Well, has it? I don't think so when I look out at all those children's faces . . . But you're probably right – I've been taking refuge in fiction . . . I'm sorry . . . truly I am . . . so let's go home . . .

HETTY *leaves.*

HELEN. Has anyone got a cigarette I could borrow?

*The lights fade down until there is only HETTY sitting on a hamper, writing.*

HETTY (*reads*). 'Now the sun is finally up . . . I've packed everything and, when I have put this in the post, I'll be leaving . . . So, my darling, it's all over . . . let be . . .'

CHARLIE, FLORA and JOCELYN *arrive, looking at each other helplessly as they load all the things together.* FLORA *has a tray of tea and some biscuits.*

FLORA. I made a nice cup of tea for everyone and everyone's disappeared.

HETTY. Since there's no more company, they can do what they please . . .

CHARLIE. Ros went to try to find black pudding for breakfast . . . It is your favourite, isn't it, Miss Oak?

HETTY. That's very kind but I really must be on my way . . . You just need to load up and then the rest of you can go in Caprice. Remember to check her tyres, Charlie . . .

CHARLIE. At least have a cup of tea before you go . . .

FLORA. Oh Hetty, this is ridiculous, please re-consider . . .

HETTY. You're very sweet, Flora, but I think it's time everyone went back to their families and got on with their lives . . .

FLORA. This company is my family . . .

HETTY. Oh Flora, please . . .

CHARLIE. Oh Miss Oak, please don't mess it all up . . .

When I left school they said, if I was lucky I'd get a job in a shop . . . and, I mean, it was the same for all of us . . . we were nothing . . . and you made me believe I didn't have to be that . . . This company's been the best thing that ever happened to me . . . Oh can't we just all make up? Can I take one of them biscuits?

*She tucks in to the biscuits.*

JOCELYN. Oh Lord, are we all meant to be saying something inspirational? . . . I'm a batty old lady, as you all know . . . so old in fact that one of the children yesterday asked me if I knew Shakespeare! I said we were on very good terms . . . Oh don't go, Hetty . . .

HETTY. Very kind but honestly . . .

FLORA. Do have a shortbread finger, Hetty – they're McVities . . .

HELEN and ROSALIND *arrive with a black pudding.*

HELEN. Look what we found for breakfast! I have in my hand a black pudding – and I am not afraid to use it! I, of course, will be eating humble pie . . . Why are you all packed up? Oh no, this is all my fault . . . mea unilateral culpa. Has anyone got an aspirin I could borrow?

HETTY. Honestly, it's for the best . . . if someone could just refund this school for today's cancelled show, I'll sort out the rest . . .

IVY *appears.*

IVY. Miss Oak . . . I can't stay in the troupe . . .