

ACT ONE

The scene is a sparsely furnished seminar room in an FE college on a weekday evening in late September. There is a flip-chart on a stand, a metal waste-paper bin, a small table, several stacks of plastic chairs and one chair on its own. ALAN enters wearing a Barbour jacket and carrying a small rucksack. He puts his jacket on the back of the single chair and sits down. The chair is faulty. He takes a chair off one of the stacks and transfers his coat to it and sits. He opens his rucksack and takes out an A4 pad and a propelling pencil which he starts to adjust. JOE enters wearing a large padded jacket in an unfashionable style.

JOE: Is this the, er...?

ALAN: The workshop... thing.

JOE: You think they'd have better signs, a big place like this.

ALAN: Well, if it's not the right room then we're both lost.

JOE: Only I haven't paid yet. The woman down in the office said it might be full but come along anyway. She said there's usually a few don't turn up.

JOE pulls the faulty chair towards him and sits on it. It gives way.

ALAN: I think that one's broken.

JOE gets another chair from one of the stacks and sits down. Alan tries out his pencil on the cover of his pad.

JOE: I was going to bring paper. Must have left it on the sideboard.

ALAN: Here... *(He tears out a couple of sheets and hands them to JOE)*

JOE: That's very civil. Is it all right if I pay you back next week?

ALAN: There's no need.

JOE: I like to pay my way.

ALAN: Forget it.

JOE: *(Groping in his pockets)* I think I must have left the pen as well.

ALAN reaches into his coat pocket and brings out a pen.

ALAN: There you are. It does black, blue or red depending on which button you push.

JOE: Are you sure? *(Takes the pen then holds out his hand)* Joe Purvis, by the way.

ALAN: Alan Wells. (*They shake hands. Pause. ALAN goes back to fiddling with his pencil*)

JOE: So. What do you drive, then?

ALAN: Sorry?

JOE: (*Miming a steering wheel*) Drive. Car.

ALAN: Ah. A Renault... something. I'm on the bike this evening though.

JOE: Orion — 1.3LX. D-reg.

ALAN: (*Politely*) Really?

JOE: Starting to show its age a bit now, of course, but it's a lovely runner. I was wondering about a respray.

ALAN: (*Only half-listening*) Uhuh.

JOE: That's one of the things I was hoping we'd cover — bodywork.

ALAN: Oh, right...

JOE: And cut down on the garage bills, of course.

ALAN: (*Uncertainly*) Of course.

JOE: So, Vera — that's the wife — Vera says, you ought to see if there's one of them evening classes up at the college you can go to. Do you good to get out more. And she can have some of her chums round while I'm out. You married?

ALAN: I, er, live with someone.

JOE: We only have small garden now, you see. Lawn mostly. Few gooseberries. Bit of rhubarb.

ALAN: I've got a few herbs, in pots. Avril's the main one really. That's my partner — Avril.

JOE: Avril, eh? That's French isn't it? Is that where you met her?

ALAN: Guildford.

JOE: I've got cousin in Guildford. Graham. Small world, eh. Any, er..?

ALAN: What? Oh.... no. We haven't... well, not so far.

JOE: Plenty of time.

ALAN: That's what I keep saying. You?

JOE: Two girls. Jennifer and, er, Catherine.

ALAN: That's nice.

JOE: Catherine's no longer with us.

ALAN: What — left home, you mean?

JOE: No, er...

ALAN: Oh, you don't mean...? Oh, I am sorry. I didn't quite...

JOE: It doesn't matter. Been a few years now. Car accident. (*Brightly*) Jennifer's just given us a grandson, though. Joseph. Well I say 'just' — first birthday's coming up in a couple of months.

ALAN: You must be very proud.

Enter MARTIN — he walks with a limp and uses a walking-stick-cum-crutch, the sort with a wrap-around forearm support rather than the under-the-armpit type. He has an unkempt beard but some skin disfigurement is still visible on one side of his face. His clothes look as if they come from the Oxfam Shop 'reduced' rail.

MARTIN: I was told definitely it would be on the ground floor. I underlined it on the application form — 'Any other information'.

ALAN moves to get another chair from one of the stacks.

MARTIN: (*Moving to the faulty chair*) I can manage, thank you. I'm going to write and complain. I phoned them up three times to check. It's always somebody different they put you through to.

MARTIN sits in the faulty chair.

JOE: That one's shot.

MARTIN glares at him. ALAN brings him another chair. JOE hovers, ready to assist.

MARTIN: All right. Put it here.

MARTIN sits in the chair. ALAN holds out his hand.

ALAN: I'm Alan. And this is Joe.

MARTIN: Grimshaw. Martin Grimshaw.

Instead of shaking hands, MARTIN hands ALAN his crutch and proceeds to try and make himself comfortable in the chair. ALAN lays MARTIN's crutch on the floor at the side of MARTIN's chair. JOE starts to unstack more of the chairs.

MARTIN: They don't care. Once they've got your money off you.

JOE: They haven't got mine yet. Said it might be full up.

ALAN: Doesn't look like it will be at this rate. What time do you make it?

JOE: Nearly half past.

ALAN: I'd have thought our leader would be here by now.

JOE: Hey up.

Enter STUART, wearing a jacket and tie and carrying a briefcase and a plastic coffee-cup. The others look at him expectantly.

STUART: Is this the, er...?

ALAN: Workshop.

JOE: Are you the teacher?

STUART: Not guilty.

JOE: Only you looked like, you know... the briefcase and all.

STUART: Straight from work, I'm afraid. Hasn't he turned up then?

MARTIN: We wouldn't all be sitting here like lemons if he had.

JOE: Perhaps he's got lost. I had a right job finding the place.

ALAN: He could have got stuck in traffic.

MARTIN: This time of night?

JOE: Or broken down. That'd be a good one, wouldn't it. The teacher breaking down.

STUART: *(Mysteriously)* He could already be here.

MARTIN: Oh, yeah? The invisible man.

STUART: No. Watching us all through a two-way mirror.

JOE: Where?

STUART: Well, a hidden camera then. It happened to me at a workshop once. They did a secret video of us all arriving and waiting for it to start so we could analyze our body language and territoriality and all that kind of thing.

JOE: Like Candid Camera, you mean?

ALAN: You could even be the tutor pretending *not* to be the tutor.

STUART: True. So could you. Or any of us.

MARTIN: What is all this crap?

ALAN: Perhaps someone should go down to the office and see if they know what's happening.

STUART: Good idea.

Nobody volunteers. STUART looks around expectantly.

JOE: I'm still a bit hazy about this place.

MARTIN: It's no good looking at me. (*Gesturing towards ALAN*) Anyway, it was his idea.

STUART: (*To ALAN*) Looks like it's down to you, old son.

ALAN: Me? (*Sighs*) Oh, all right.

ALAN exits.

STUART: I thought we'd have a few more than this. You need a good mix for these things to work.

JOE: You've been before then, have you?

STUART: Oh, you know. I've done a bit. A couple of weekend things up in London.

JOE: That's the only time I get really, weekends — this time of year. I was saying to the other chap I was hoping we'd do a bit on bodywork.

STUART: That's precisely what I was going to propose — balance our philosophical deliberations with some good solid bodywork. (*With the fingers of his two hands interlocked he stretches upwards, palms towards the ceiling*) Especially after a hard day. Help recharge the batteries.

JOE: Ah, now I've never had problems on that score, touch wood. I'll tell what you want to try. Vaseline on the nuts.

STUART: Really?

MARTIN: (*To STUART*) I've never heard that one before.

JOE: Keeps the damp out, you see. I read it in this magazine, years ago.

STUART: Well, it all depends on the bent of our leader, I suppose.

MARTIN: Even if he walks in now we'll still be late starting. I'll be putting in for a refund at this rate.

JOE: Place where I work, if you're a minute late clocking on they dock you a whole quarter. You know, quarter of an hour.

ALAN: Where's that then?

JOE: Reed's furniture.

ALAN: Out on the ring road?

JOE: That's right. I do upholstery.

ALAN: Oh, really?

JOE: Stuffing and stitching. Wadding and webbing.

ALAN: They make nice stuff.

MARTIN: For those that can afford it.

JOE: They're sticklers for time-keeping, though.

STUART: Well, I hope we can put ourselves above such petty mindedness. Take a wider perspective on life. That is what we're here for.

JOE: And here was me thinking we were here for spark plugs and gaskets.

STUART: Sorry, er... I'm afraid I don't know your name.

JOE: Joe. Joe Purvis. Pleased to meet you. (*JOE holds out his hand*)

STUART: Stuart Black. Look, I'm sorry, Joe, but what have spark plugs and gaskets got to do with anything?

JOE: Car maintenance. That's why we're here. For the workshop.

STUART: Ah...

MARTIN: Does it look like I'm here for car maintenance? I can hardly get in a bloody car.

STUART: I'm sorry Joe. I think you must have the wrong group.

JOE: But the other chap — Alan — said. When I came in. Workshop.

STUART: That's right. *Men's* workshop.

JOE: A what?

STUART: A workshop for men. To explore and rediscover what it means to be a man at the end of the twentieth century.

JOE: By heck.

ALAN: Sorry Joe. I just assumed...

JOE: No, no, it's my fault.

STUART: That's a real shame, Joe. I was thinking how good it was having someone like you in the group — so we wouldn't be entirely preoccupied with middle-class angst. Er, not that I'd want to prejudge anyone's socio-economic status, of course. Or imply that angst is the sole preserve of any one stratum.

MARTIN: I should stop digging if I were you.

ALAN enters

ALAN: I've just been talking to the woman down in the office. She was a bit confused. You'll never guess what's happened.

MARTIN: They've put us in the wrong room. I told you, they're useless.

JOE: They could do with better signs.

ALAN: It's not the room. It's... bad news, I'm afraid. We shouldn't be here at all. They've cancelled the course.

STUART: What!

MARTIN: Typical. You think they'd have let us know.

STUART: So what's happened?

ALAN: Apparently there's a minimum of five enrolments for all courses. This one only got four so they cancelled it. That's why the course leader hasn't turned up. We should all have got a letter last week.

STUART: Well, I didn't get one.

ALAN: Nor me.

MARTIN: They haven't heard the last of this. Not if I have anything to do with it. Letting people come all this way...

ALAN: I must admit it's a bit of a disappointment. I don't know what Avril's going to say. (*The others look at him quizzically.*) Er, it was her idea for me to come. Well, more of a joint decision really.

JOE: I think I'd better go and find the car maintenance. It's been very nice meeting you all.

ALAN: Car maintenance?

MARTIN: He's in the wrong class.

ALAN: That's a shame.

JOE: I expect they'll be wondering where I am. I'll say cheerio then.

ALAN: Well, if you change your mind....

Exit JOE.

ALAN: Well, that's that then. (*He starts to carry his chair back to the stack.*)

STUART: Look, hold on a minute. Even if they do cancel the course, we could still use the time. For this week at least.

MARTIN: Oh, yeah? Doing what — community singing?

STUART: No, I meant men's group stuff.

MARTIN: It might affect our refunds. You know what they're like. And there's only three of us now.

STUART: Some more might turn up.

ALAN: Actually, I rather agree with, er...

STUART: Stuart.

ALAN: Stuart. I know we haven't got a leader but I've done quite a few courses in my time... not quite this kind of thing, of course...

MARTIN: They're not cheap, these classes. Even with the concession.

STUART: Go on, Alan.

ALAN: You generally start off by everyone saying who they are and why they're on the course. I'm sure we can manage that much on our own.

MARTIN: What's the point?

ALAN: I just thought we could give it a try.

STUART: I agree with Alan. And if we need someone to try and facilitate things at any point, that's a role I'd certainly be prepared to....

Enter JEZ. He is wearing a scruffy leather jacket and chewing gum.

JEZ: Hi. Sorry I'm late. Is this the guy's thing?

STUART: There you are, four of us now.

ALAN: You are here for the men's group? Not car maintenance or intermediate basket-weaving or anything?

JEZ: Sure. I've come to re-vitalize my manhood. *(He winks at MARTIN)*

ALAN: We've been cancelled.

MARTIN: Story of my life.

ALAN: Not enough people. We were just about to pack up.

STUART: We were thinking we might as well stay for the rest of the evening, now we're here.

MARTIN: There's still not enough of us. They'll make us pay, you mark my words.

JEZ: How many are there supposed to be?

STUART: Apparently, there's some arbitrary regulation about five being the minimum for a class.

ALAN: And we're still one short.

Enter JOE.

JOE: Alan. I'm really sorry. I walked off with your pen, and as I realized I won't be seeing you again... not unless you come to the car maintenance, of course... *(He hands the pen back to ALAN)* Sorry. *(He makes to leave)*

STUART: Joe. *(Gently but firmly)* Sit down.

JOE: I've got to find the car maintenance.

STUART: Joe. Sit. *(JOE sits)* Look Joe, we need you. You wouldn't like to let your friends down would you?

JOE: Er, no, but...

STUART: And Alan here, who knows about such things, assures us that the first session of any course is pretty much the same. Do you hear what I'm saying, Joe?

JOE: Oh, yes. You've got a very nice voice. Very clear.

STUART: Well, there you are then. It would be silly wasting any more time going off to find the car maintenance class. So you may as well spend this week here with us.

JOE: I'm not sure if this really my cup of tea.

STUART: Look, Joe. Can I ask you just to think about something, for ten seconds, and give me your honest answer.

JOE: I suppose so.

STUART: What's more important to you... *really* more important... discovering more about yourself as a person and maybe making a difference to the rest of your life — your marriage, your grandchildren... or going to the introduction to the car maintenance course which you can probably get on a handout next week?

JOE: (*Good-humouredly*) You don't sell insurance, by any chance?