

2. INT. PRIVATE HOSPITAL ROOM. DAY.

Open on a clinical yet comfortable hospital room. A large bed stands in the middle, and beside it is a small bedside cabinet on which rests a huge bouquet of flowers. Littered around the bed on all sides are all manner of gift baskets, hampers, flowers and wrapped presents, all of them untouched. In the bed lies MARION (50-60), reclined against her pillows and apparently asleep.

Suddenly, a brisk knock sounds at the door - MARION's eyes open. JONATHON (30s) steps smartly into the room.

JONATHON
We're going now, Mother.

MARION stares at him, evidently a little confused.

MARION
Where's Nancy? I could have sworn
she was here ...

JONATHON
You said goodbye to her a few
minutes ago, don't you remember?

MARION
Oh ... yes, that's right. Of
course. Sorry ... must still be a
little groggy ...

JONATHON shakes back the sleeve of his coat and checks his watch.

JONATHON
The night nurse is late yet again.
Honestly, the bare-faced
incompetence of these people. I've
seen better-organised drug
administration round the back of
the local Aldi. Don't worry, Mother
- I'll have another word.

MARION
That won't be necessary, I-

JONATHON'S phone rings. He answers, irritably, waving MARION into silence.

JONATHON
Yes?
(beat)
I know, I'm coming. Where are you?
(beat)
The Children's Hospital? Why?
(beat)
(MORE)

JONATHON (CONT'D)

Well, you can't leave it there, you stupid woman, I've just had those chrome inlays replaced! All those brats running around, who knows what might happen to it?

(beat)

Look - wait, just wait.

He holds the phone away from his ear and walks smartly across the room to MARION. He bends and gives her a quick kiss on both cheeks.

JONATHON (CONT'D)

I'll be here again on Tuesday, Mother. Take care of yourself - any problems, you call me straight away, alright? I mean it, any hour of the day or night.

MARION

I will.

JONATHAN turns away and heads for the door.

JONATHON

(down phone)

Nancy - head for the entrance.

(beat)

What do you mean, 'which one'? The entrance we came in, do I have to draw you a map?

He leaves and the door bangs closed behind him. MARION reclines slowly back against her pillows and closes her eyes again. Silence falls.

Suddenly, there is another - quieter - knock at the door. MARION doesn't stir. It opens and JAMES (mid-late 20s) pops his head into the room. He observes her for a moment.

JAMES

Psst.

(beat, louder)

Psst!

MARION's eyes flicker open.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Has Mussolini gone?

MARION beams and holds out her arms.

MARION

My darling boy.

JAMES enters the room fully, clutching a potted cactus and a large paper bag. He crosses the room and enfolds her in a bear hug.

JAMES

Oh, it's so good to see you, Mum
...

(beat)

Careful - your hair is getting
caught on Jeremy.

MARION

Jeremy?

JAMES pulls back and extends the cactus out to her. She takes it, amused.

JAMES

Do you like him? I saw him at the
hospital gift shop and thought
instantly of you.

MARION

Charming. Because I'm old, spiky
and dehydrated, I suppose?

JAMES

Well, yes. But also because you're
a sturdy old bugger.

(holding up the paper bag)

I brought sandwiches.

MARION pushes the bouquet carelessly to one side and places the cactus on the bedside table, looking at it fondly. JAMES gestures to the enormous pile of gifts on the floor.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Although, as usual, I see I've been
spectacularly outdone by your flock
of admirers.

MARION

(snorting derisively)

Bunch of money-grubbing sycophants,
the lot of them.

JAMES laughs and turns around, searching the room. He spies a fold-up chair against the wall and arranges it beside the bed, taking a seat and lifting the paper bag on to his knee.

MARION (CONT'D)

And I'm not so sturdy anymore, I'm
afraid.

JAMES

Don't say that.

MARION

It's true. It's the end of the road
this time.

JAMES

I'm still not buying it. Knowing you, the doctors will come in tomorrow and tell me that you've burned up your own cancer from the inside out.

MARION

Very funny.

JAMES

No, really. It'll be yet another thing to add to your glittering epitaph when you do eventually die. I can see it now: 'Marion Tate: Businesswoman, Philanthropist, Mother, Wife, Medical Marvel-'

MARION

Son ...

JAMES

Although actually, come to think of it: you'll go way further than that. You'll live until the ripe old age of two hundred and six.

MARION

James, stop.

JAMES (CONT'D)

And you won't die of an illness or even heart failure - you'll just decide one day that you're bored, and that'll be-

MARION (CONT'D)

James! I mean it now. Stop.

BEAT.

JAMES

I was only kidding.

MARION

I know that it's difficult, but you need to start to face the facts.

JAMES

I am facing the facts. You don't think that I really believe you can eat up your own cancer, do you?

MARION

You can't keep convincing yourself that things are going to be okay.

JAMES

I mean, think about it - you'd have to have a bloodstream made up of hydrochloric acid or something-

MARION

And whether you decide to pay attention to it or not-

JAMES

Although actually, that wouldn't work, would it? Because it would burn through your skin and organs, as well-

MARION

I am going to die.

BEAT.

BEAT.

JAMES

Do you have to do that? Do you have to just ... just say it, straight out? So blunt, so final?

MARION

I think I do. Because I need you to start to understand that it won't be long now. I can feel it, and so can the nurses. I can see it in their eyes.

JAMES

You're just imagining it.

MARION

I'm not. They've done this thousands of times before, they recognise the signs.

(beat)

I see it in your brother's eyes, too, you know. That same look. As though he's wondering how many more times he's going to look at me and see me looking back.

JAMES

And you're quite sure it's not just pound signs you see in his eyes, are you?

MARION barks out a laugh, then shakes her head.

MARION

You know, it doesn't exactly fill me with joy to know that I'll be shuffling off this mortal coil and leaving behind two sons with all the fraternal love of Romulus and Remus.

JAMES

Interesting take. I've always thought of us more as Cain and Abel - place your bets now on which one I'll end up being.

MARION looks at him. JAMES shifts in his seat, uncomfortable.

MARION

I am not raising two sons only to die and have them become strangers.

JAMES

That's absolutely ridiculous, Mum. That would never happen.

MARION

I'm glad to hear it.

JAMES

Absolutely. We loathe each other far too much to become strangers.

MARION groans.

JAMES (CONT'D)

(beat, watching her)

Okay, how's this? Picture the scene: it's your funeral.

MARION

How cheering.

JAMES

No, no, wait - hear me out. So it's your funeral, right? Black ribbons adorn the walls. Pots - no, *troughs* - of lilies stand in a perfectly ordered line at the end of each aisle-

MARION

I hate lilies.

JAMES

Who cares what you think? You're dead. As I was saying - lilies line the aisles. Your casket, chosen specially by me from Budget Coffin Company Ltd.-

MARION
You cheeky little-

JAMES (CONT'D)
-sits pride of place in the
centre of the room. And on
either side of it stand me
and my dear brother. I'm
looking sharp, handsome,
dapper - a real English
gentleman, really-

MARION (CONT'D)
I could have sworn that my bedpan
was emptied before you came, but
the smell seems to be lingering ...

JAMES
We look at each other, we reach
forward ... our hands touch - and
then ...

BEAT.

MARION
Yes?

JAMES springs suddenly to his feet and dances around the bed.

JAMES
Without further ado, we take each
other's hands, skip maniacally
around your coffin, perform a quick
juggling act, and then for a
finale, we sing a rousing rendition
of 'You Raise Me Up' by Westlife
for the whole congregation to
enjoy.

MARION shakes her head, trying not to laugh.

JAMES (CONT'D)
And then we go home and braid each
other's hair. Was that the sort of
thing you were after, Mum?

MARION
I think you know the answer to
that.

JAMES
(shaking the paper bag)
Now - not that I'm not enjoying
wasting half of our conversation on
dearest Jonny, but can we finally
crack into these sandwiches before
they go soggy?

MARION folds her arms. JAMES smirks and ignores her, sitting
back down and opening the paper bag with a flourish.

He pulls out two sandwiches wrapped in brown paper, followed by two bottles of ginger beer. He waves one of the sandwiches in her face temptingly. MARION eyes it for a moment, then snatches it from his hands and opens it eagerly.

MARION

Ploughman's?

JAMES

Do you think I'm an amateur?

She smiles at him. She takes a bite of her sandwich and closes her eyes blissfully.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Good?

MARION

You have no idea. I can't remember the last time I actually enjoyed my food. Pretty much everything I'm given here has had all the flavour boiled right out of it.

JAMES

Can't you just slip the nurses the odd twenty, smuggle something in?

MARION

I tried. I think Jonathon must have told them that whatever I try to bribe them with, he'd beat it, because they're having none of it. I told him that living on rabbit food right up until the day I die is a cruel way to go, but he doesn't agree. He said that while ever I have a working body, I'm not allowed to fill it with junk. I don't understand it, I really don't.

JAMES

I wouldn't worry - he's probably just keeping you in prime condition for when he has you stuffed and propped up on his mantelpiece.

MARION

(ignoring him)

He'd never admit it, but I think a part of him believes that I'll come through it, too. Whenever I try to tell him that a couple of Caesar salads won't save me now, he mysteriously gets a phone call and rushes out of the room.

JAMES

You see? Much as it pains me to agree with him, nobody wants to hear things like that.

MARION

You're more alike than you think, you know.

JAMES

Oh, yes, we're very alike. I too am a money-grabbing, interfering, bossy, controlling son of a-

MARION

(flatly)

He's my son, too.

BEAT.

JAMES

I know.

MARION

Can he be difficult? Yes, I'm not denying that. But his heart's in the right place.

JAMES

I'm sure it is. It's just that I've been waiting for nearly twenty years for the part in the story where it grows a couple of sizes.

MARION closes her eyes for a moment, wincing in pain. JAMES gets to his feet and leans over her worriedly.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Mum? What's wrong? Mum?

MARION

I'm alright.

JAMES

Do you want me to get the nurse?

MARION

No, just ... just give me a moment.

JAMES slowly takes his seat, watching her. Slowly, MARION's breathing and posture eases and her eyes open.

JAMES

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Maybe we should just close the subject.

BEAT.

MARION
Okay. I can do that.

JAMES
(relieved)
Good.

Slowly, MARION begins to eat again. JAMES smiles at her and picks up his own sandwich. They eat for a few quiet moments in companionable silence. Then:

MARION
You were always so close as boys.

JAMES
Mum, I'm begging you. Just eat your sandwich.

MARION
Inseparable, in fact.

JAMES
Yes, weren't we? An enviable sibling relationship brought to an untimely end by a terrible accident.

MARION
Accident?

JAMES
You know, the one he had at around thirteen - when he landed on that big stick arse-first.

MARION
If you could only consider just-

JAMES
(interrupting)
Look, Mum. I've played along with all your little attempts to bring him into the conversation because the last thing I want to do is upset you. But I really need to ask you to stop. I came here to see you, not to talk endlessly about someone who has nothing but disdain for me.

MARION
He doesn't have disdain for you.

JAMES
Oh, really? What exactly would you call constant, unrelenting criticism and insults about my life choices?

MARION

He just wants you to find some direction. What's wrong with that? I feel the same - I've told you so.

JAMES

You've never tried to control me the way that he does. Someone needs to send him a memo that he's my brother, not my father.

MARION

He does try to help you sometimes.

JAMES

How?

MARION

With your career, for instance. He tries very hard for you. He had to pull a lot of strings to get you that job at his company and you couldn't even hold it down for a week.

JAMES

It was a mutual decision. They mutually decided that they didn't want me there, and I mutually decided that I would rather receive an enema with Carolina Reaper hot sauce than work in finance.

MARION

If you only knew how much I worry about you. All that talent, all that vitality and energy going to waste. No plans, no direction - just jokes and charm and cheek. Unlike your brother, I don't care what you do. I wouldn't mind if your calling in life ended up being as a surfing instructor on Bondi beach. All I care about is that you actually have one.

JAMES

Don't waste your time worrying about me, Mum. I'll figure something out.

MARION

I hope so. Because I'd really hate to waste all my final moments inventing novel ways to make you grow up.

JAMES

And I'd hate to have to add you to the list of people who've tried and failed.

They smile at each other.

BEAT.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Mum?

MARION

Yes?

JAMES

I will face it, you know. Every cell in my body wants to scream and rage and fight against it, but I'm not delusional - I know that I'll have to, in the end. But ... for the purposes of the rest of this visit, can we pretend - just for a moment, at least - that you're in here with an ingrown toenail instead?

MARION

Thank you for choosing such a disgusting ailment. I think I'd rather have the cancer.

JAMES

How about ringworm? Rampant athlete's foot? A septic earlobe?

BEAT.

MARION

It will hit you hard, you know.

JAMES

Someone certainly thinks a lot of herself.

MARION

If I could control my final moment, do you know what I'd wish for?

JAMES

Wait - let me guess. A four-poster bed with silk sheets and satin cushions. A last meal of Beluga caviar, served in a crystal glass on a bed of crushed ice, carried in on a silver platter.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

And finally, a quartet of musicians playing Vivaldi's 'Winter' to bow you out into eternal peace and tranquillity. About right?

BEAT.

MARION

The feeling of my Mother's cool, rough palm resting gently on my forehead. The smell of her lavender soap, wafting over me in waves. The sound of her voice in my ear, telling me that it's all going to be alright. Calling me home.

JAMES

Oh.

MARION

I'm fifty years old. I lost your Gran fifteen years ago, but that need never goes away. And some holes remain open.

JAMES

(quietly)

Yeah.

BEAT.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I'll just get a dog.

MARION picks up the bouquet from the bedside table and takes a half-hearted swing at him. He ducks the blow. She places it back on the table.

He reaches forward and takes her hand. For a moment, they stare at each other. JAMES looks away, overcome. He wipes his eyes, then crumples up his sandwich paper and reaches into the paper bag again, pulling out a long, thin wooden box.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Dominoes?

MARION nods. JAMES tips them out on to the bedside table and begins to arrange them. MARION watches.

MARION

You'll need each other, you know.

JAMES

What a dreadful thought.

They smile at each other. They begin to play.

FADE OUT.