

Once More From The Top

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

TONY: a singer

RICH: a guitarist and songwriter

PETE: a bassist

STEVE: a drummer

AMANDA: Rich's daughter, a lawyer

HARRY: a manager

CHRIS: a journalist

MALCOLM: an engineer

AUDIENCE MEMBERS

Characters named but not appearing:

CLARA: Rich's wife (*deceased*)

ALAN: the band's original drummer (*deceased*)

CORA: Tony's former manager

ACT ONE: IN PUBLIC



SCENE I: "THE NETTLE BY THE THORNS"

A public house. TONY, RICH and CHRIS are sitting at a table with pints of beer, conducting an interview.

CHRIS: Right, tape's rolling.

TONY: Really? You still use tape?

CHRIS: Nah, just a figure of speech. "Hard disk's whirring" doesn't have the same ring to it. Right, shall we talk about the band?

RICH: If we must.

TONY: Don't take any notice of this miserable git, we're thrilled to be back. It's unfinished business, we've still got tons to prove, and even more to say.

RICH: [*Raises eyebrow quizzically*] There's plenty we *could* say...

CHRIS: Great. We'll come back to that in a minute but, just to kick things off, memories of the early days?

TONY: If you can remember it you weren't there, ha, ha! Nah, seriously, heady days, heady days... We were like brothers.

RICH: Actually that's true. We lived in each other's pockets, plotting a shared future. The first single was done in one overnight session and though me and him [*nods at TONY*] were

on the Dole and could crawl off to bed at the end of it, the others went straight from the studio to work in the morning. They believed in it as much as we did and had more scope to prove it.

TONY: All for one!

RICH: [*With heavy irony*] Mmm. Sometimes fell down a bit on the one-for-all bit.

CHRIS: What happened? You were just starting to get somewhere when Pete left, right?

TONY: Didn't wanna risk giving up his day job.

RICH: It was more complicated than that and you know it. [*Looks at TONY*] He had a job to risk for a start, plus he was married with a kid on the way. He was beginning to grow up whereas we... [*Shrugs*] Al was older than us, he'd been in bands for years, so he knew the score and stuck it out. [*Pause*] It was never the same after Pete went but I s'pose me and him, [*nods at TONY*] well, we'd got tunnel vision, we thought we were God's gift.

CHRIS: You mean...?

TONY: Now, now, a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell. [*Guffaws*]

RICH: We thought we were unbeatable, him singing my songs, we thought the whole world would get it, and we thought we had something to say, or I did, anyway. Never been sure about anyone else. You know what it's like, at twenty you want to change the world but by forty you're alarmed to find it *has* changed and you'd rather like it put back the way you found it.

TONY: [*Butting in hastily*] Some of those songs mean an awful lot. I've had people come up to me saying our records got 'em through really dark times in their lives. [*Solemnly*] That's a privilege, y'know. So yeah, we really thought everyone'd get it.

CHRIS: Well now, of course, people are getting it and reunion rumours have been doing the rounds for a while, only there'd always been talk of insurmountable acrimony between you two.

TONY: Crap! I love this bloke. Always have, always will.

RICH: Acrimony? Nah, not really. We... We were holding each other back, as though we only had one life between us, so each of us was only half-alive except when we were working. You can carry on like that for a bit, when you're young, especially in an industry where stunted growth's a definite asset, only...

TONY: [*Cutting in again*] Steady on! Getting a bit deep, aren't we?

CHRIS: You met up again at Alan's funeral, right?

RICH: That hit us hard. We always thought Al was indestructible, that he'd outlive us all. I mean... [*Looks at his shoes*] We were hardly the wildest of bands but we still seem to've left a trail of widows and orphans in our wake. I don't s'pose it can be helped, but it's still too high a price.

TONY: [*Cutting in again*] Yeah, poor old Al. Great bloke... Terrible dress sense, mind... [*RICH gives him a baleful look*] No, seriously, lovely bloke, we all miss him like mad and he's with us in spirit, him and... [*Looks at RICH then continues hurriedly*] Anyway, our old mate Steve's stepped into the breach. And Al, if you can hear me... Get your hair cut by the time we make it up there, eh?

RICH: "Up there"? Optimistic, aren't you?

TONY: You know me, mate, always look on the bright side.

CHRIS: Right. This is obviously a painful subject so we'll move on. After the band split, Tony went solo and did pretty well for a while.

TONY: Can't complain, I've had a good run and I'm so grateful to everyone who's kept the faith; I'm told my stuff's really popular on these new streaming, er, you know...

RICH: Platforms?

TONY: Yeah, that's it, streaming platforms! So the future's looking good.

RICH: You might want to check your royalty statements. I got 23p in streaming income for the whole of last year.

TONY: Bloody hell, you've been had, mate!

RICH: You don't read your statements, do you? I'm getting songwriting *and* performing royalties. You'll've had about a penny for that same stuff.

[TONY looks aghast. Silence falls]

CHRIS: Moving swiftly on... The band only ever made one album, plus those amazing singles now collected on the *Recorded Sound* boxed set via the well-known Vanish crowd-funding site.

TONY: We're already at 75% of our goal, and only a month into the campaign! People've been so generous. Actually we're meeting some of the fans who've signed up tomorrow, really looking forward to putting faces to... Er...

RICH: Credit card details?

TONY: Names! It's such an exciting time, real opportunities if you're, y'know, prepared to grasp the nettle by the... er... thorns... [*Momentarily baffled*] Anyway, the package'll be full of extra material, things nobody's ever heard, even me!

RICH: Especially you.

CHRIS: What's it been like listening to stuff you recorded all those years ago? What can we expect?

TONY: Wait and see!

RICH: It's like being set up on a date with an ex-wife: incredibly familiar and utterly strange. You remember why you were so in love but also why you split up. Then, of course, the kids have flown the coop...

TONY: Sounds fantastic to me. I've recorded some top tunes over the years but nothing ever came close to this bloke's stuff... I just opened my gob...

CHRIS: Speaking of kids... Rich, your daughter Amanda's running the campaign and your old manager Harry's on board too. You've got the old gang back together, haven't you?

TONY: We're a family and Amanda's the brains, takes after her Mum, God rest her soul. As for Harry, he was always the fifth member, couldn't do it without any of'em.

CHRIS: How come he never managed you as a solo artist? D'you fall out?

TONY: Nah! Top bloke, Harry. Just wasn't meant to be.

RICH: I certainly wouldn't've done this without him.

TONY: [*Under his breath*] That's what I thought.



SCENE II: " ALL THE GRIEF "

An office. TONY and HARRY are sitting either side of a desk.

HARRY: Why the hell did I let you talk me into this?

TONY: Oh come on Harry, you'll have a great time, bossing everyone around, making sure it all runs smoothly, it'll be just like old times.

HARRY: That's what worries me. I'm only doing this because Rich insisted.

TONY: You always would do anything for him, wouldn't you?

HARRY: He's promised it's just for a few weeks then that's it, never again. [*Looks up warily*] Why're you so keen to have me on board, anyway?

TONY: Y'said it yourself: keeps Rich happy, thinks he's being loyal. Actually, I'm between management deals myself right now so who knows, mate, play your cards right...

HARRY: [*Shudders*] Not in a million years, "mate". Still, if your solo career's going so swimmingly I'm sure you've got managers queuing up. Be that as it may, I'll ask again: why're you doing this?

TONY: Unfinished business., like we've been saying. We've still got more to say and the world's finally ready to listen. Me and Rich, there was never anything to beat us, you know.

HARRY: Look, I may've been out of your own weird little loop for a while but I'm not an idiot, Tony, and I still hear things. I had a long chat with Cora the other day.

TONY: Ah.

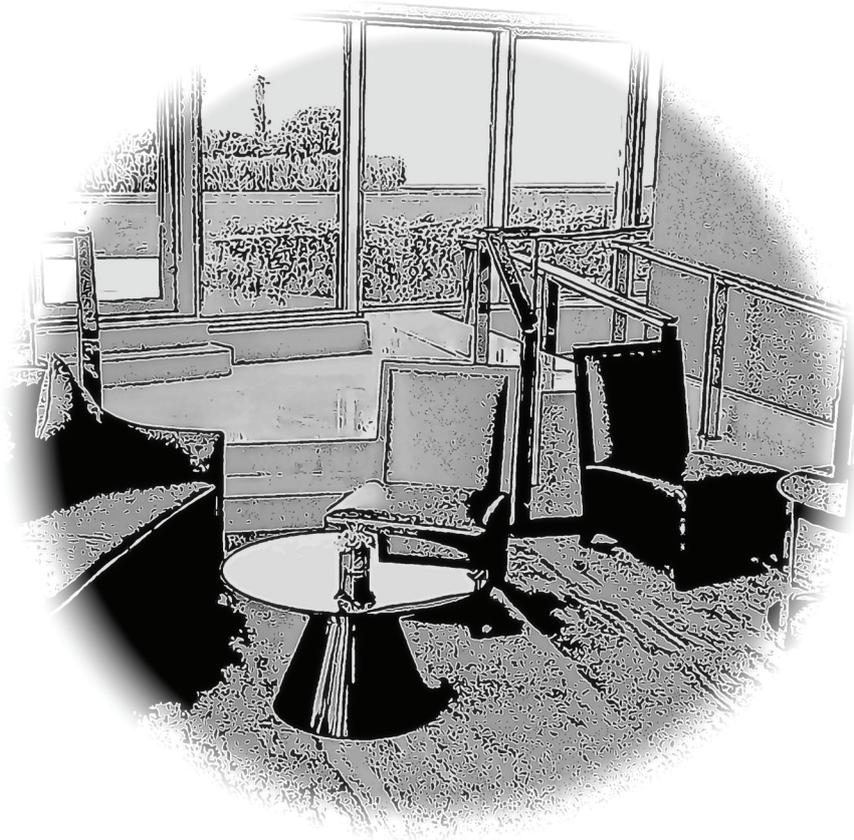
HARRY: She said it's no longer worth all the grief. Streaming's eating into your royalties, nobody's paying for recorded music any more. You're not even a big nostalgia draw on your own. Times are tough. Then, as if by magic, there's a reissue campaign by public demand, gigs and all the rest of it and hey presto, dates and stars somehow align, Pete's there waiting with open arms, Steve just happens to be available to fill in for Al... [*Sarcastically*] It's a miracle! Couldn't've worked out better if you'd had it all lined up before you rang Rich, could it? [*Shrugs*]

TONY: [*Pauses*] You never liked me, did you?

HARRY: That's not true. I loved you all equally. You needed me and I knew I could help you. Beneficence is a powerful philtre.

TONY: God, you even talk like Rich.

HARRY: [*Oblivious*] Standing in the wings watching you every night was magical... I mean... I always knew I wasn't one of you, but also that you'd get nowhere on your own. And you all knew it too. You needed me - you still do, if only to turn out the lights after you.



SCENE III: "NONE OF YOUR WEIRD STUFF"

A hotel lobby. TONY, RICH and HARRY are sitting around a table.

HARRY: Right you two, they'll be here soon, so behave.

TONY: Run this past me one more time: why're we doing this?

HARRY: These people have coughed up cash on Vanish and, for reasons best-known to themselves, they want to meet you. I've tried to warn them...

TONY: Oh right, flesh-pressing then, is it? Mind you, s'pose they'll all be blokes.

HARRY: Best behaviour, Tony.

TONY: Don't worry, I'm a professional, me.

RICH: I'm not, I'm an academic.

TONY: And don't we all bloody know it. Hmm, bet they'll all be weirdoes.

RICH: You mean only weirdoes like us?

TONY: Nah, but it's only weirdo blokes want to meet you, so you can autograph their LP sleeves with their [*nerdy voice*] SPECIAL PENS. Take it from me, I had a stalker once.

HARRY: You must've been so proud. Look, Tony, only weirdoes pay for music nowadays, normal people stream or download it for free. So I mean it, play nicely, the pair of you. These people've got no idea what you're really like and as your manager - however briefly

[*meaningful stare at TONY*] - it's my job to keep it that way. They'll've been exposed to you at an impressionable age, maybe built their whole lives around you. We can only hope that at some point they'll've seen sense... [*Shudders*] Anyway, to them you're not people, you're not even gods, you're dreams which never came true.

RICH: And would've been a huge disappointment if they had. Yes, that was part of the contract, wasn't it?

TONY: I don't remember signing anything like that. Then again there's tons of stuff I don't remember signing. Heady days...

RICH: I'm talking about the unwritten contract all artists have with their audiences. That's why these crowd-funding things make me uncomfortable. I mean, in the old days the artist'd say "here's my album, hope you like my startling new musical direction". With a bit of luck, the audience'd say "do you know what, Artist old chum? We DO like it. Have more cash than a sensible person could spend yea unto the seventh generation". Nowadays the Artist goes "if you give me some money I'll make an album. It'll be dead good, honest." The audience say "Hmm, all right then, but none of your weird stuff, OK? In fact make it a bit like the hit album, y'know, the really good one. Only a bit different, obviously..." Neither side has the faintest idea what the other wants. In any case, the whole point about art is that you produce your work then lay it before the world. This is closer to venture capitalism, like a business funding a boffin's research in the hope it might produce something marketable.

HARRY: You always were too clever for your own good, Rich.

TONY: Bloody teacher's pet.

RICH: Even so, we've got a duty of care, haven't we? I mean, the thing about Tony here is that when he opens his gob and sings, people have a tendency to believe him, GOD help them. They take the stuff I put in his mouth seriously; I mean, they play our bloody songs at their weddings.

HARRY: Mostly funerals nowadays, I think, Rich.

RICH: Er, yeah, now you mention it...

TONY: So what you're saying is they thought we MEANT it? [*Shakes his head in disbelief*] What'd I tell you? Weirdoes.

RICH: I did mean it. Once that sincerity's gone the whole deal's off. In fact, sometimes I think the whole music industry's in breach of contract and that's why we've ended up where we are. We dropped the mirror.

TONY: I never got into coke. Mug's game.

RICH: I mean the mirror we were supposed to be holding up to people's lives.

HARRY: Hmm. I see what you mean, but I think it's just cyclical. It's like this idea that being able to do a food shop online's the future we were promised when we were kids, somehow a bigger leap forward than jet packs and holidays on the moon. Actually, 150 years ago you'd've sent your grocer a list and a boy'd've turned up with your grub an hour later. Up until the early sixties, pop groups were all managed by impresarios who had jugglers, ventriloquists, comedians and animal acts on their books. Everyone made their money from personal appearances, product endorsements and the rest of it, there was no money in recordings back then. *Plus ça change...* [*TONY looks blank*]

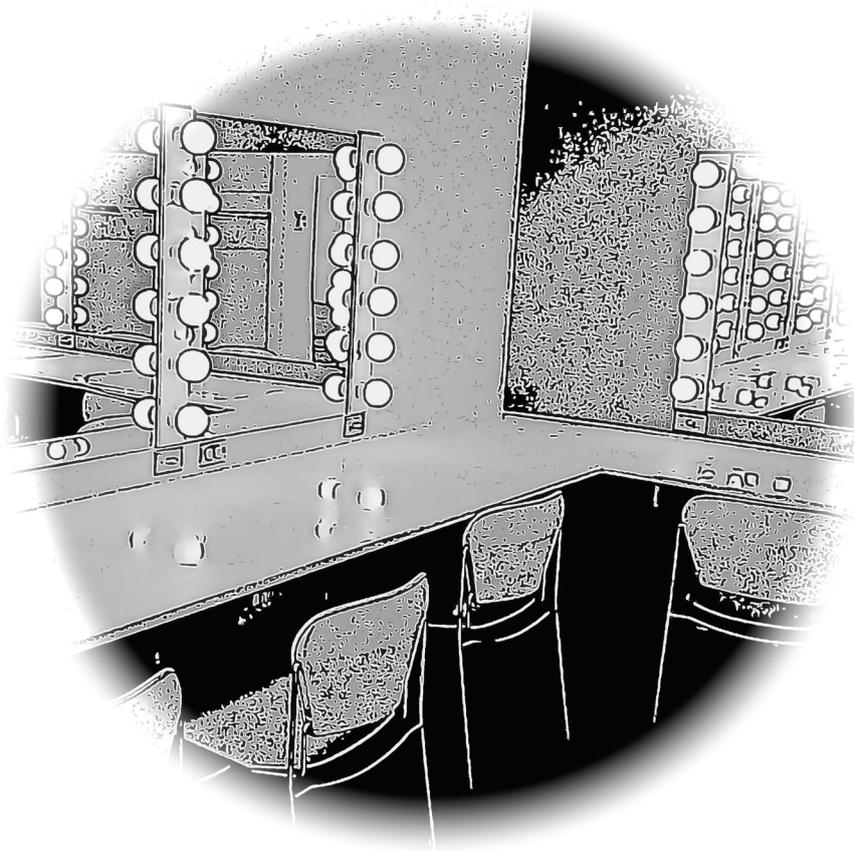
RICH: [*Reflecting*] Hmm. Yeah, I see what you mean. So you reckon crowd-funding's going back to patronage of the arts then? "Dear Mr Mozart, I enclose ducats. Please compose a string quartet with my name in the title. Only I want a nice tune you can hum, not the kind

of cacophony that passes for music nowadays. While you're about it, kindly knock up a nice calming sonata for her ladyship the missus as she's having trouble sleeping. I'll expect a bulk discount."

HARRY: Pretty much, yeah.

TONY: What in the name of blue blazes are you two on about? [*Looks up*] Uh-oh, weirdoes at 10 o'clock.

HARRY: That's no way to talk about your patrons, Tony.



SCENE IV: "GROUP TIME"

Backstage at the BALLROOM. TONY, RICH, PETE and STEVE are preparing to go on. Enter HARRY.

HARRY: Ready boys?

TONY: As we'll ever be!

RICH: Yeah, as we'll ever be... Though we're hardly boys any more.

HARRY: You'll always be my boys. [*Mimes wiping away a tear*] Still, full house out there tonight. All ages too.

TONY: Some of the old crowd must've brought their kids.

RICH: Some of them've probably brought yours, Tony.

TONY: Eh? Oh. [*Laughs uneasily*] Right, ha, ha! Speaking of which, I saw Amanda outside.

PETE: My boy's doing the lighting, you know. Got himself a trade.

RICH: Sensible lad. He'll be getting paid more than we are.

[*Enter CHRIS*]

TONY: Hi again... Er... [*Searches his memory for Chris's name*]

RICH: Hi Chris, good to see you again.

TONY: Chris! How the devil are you doing? Oh, and how's that article coming along?

CHRIS: Nearly done. Not sure who'll be publishing it yet though.

TONY: Loads of mags after it, I bet! Holding out for the highest bidder, eh?

CHRIS: Er, yeah, something like that.

[*Enter MALCOLM*]

RICH: All set up to record, Malc?

MALCOLM: Yeah, you lot just worry about playing. Gonna put this out?

TONY: Deffo!

RICH: Depends what it's like.

TONY: Er, yeah, obviously. But it's gonna be great, I can feel it in my water.

[*Enter AMANDA*]

AMANDA: Everyone decent?

RICH: Sweetheart, at least half the people here used to wipe your bottom and give you baths. We may need you to return the favour before long.

AMANDA: [*Grimaces*] Now there's an image I'd rather not've had in my head.

RICH: Come to wish your old man luck?

STEVE: Come to keep you in line, more like.

PETE: How'd she turn out so well? Must've been the quality of her babysitters, I reckon.

RICH: She takes after her mother.

PETE: Oh shit Rich, I'm sorry, I didn't think...

TONY: Come over here and give your Uncle Tony a hug.

[*AMANDA hugs TONY*]

AMANDA: Where's Harry?

HARRY: Over here, love. Don't let this lot muck you about.

AMANDA: Did I hear they need a pep talk before going on or something?

PETE: Actually that was always Clara's job. She'd check our clothes and hair, tell us we were a family and weren't alone and... Bloody hell, sorry Rich, keep putting my foot in it.

RICH: You're all acting like she died last month but then again I s'pose we're back on Group Time, so stuff that happened years ago feels recent. We're all behaving like a bunch of nineteen-year-old kids. Still, on the plus side, we've started living in the future again, or I have, anyway.

STEVE: Come again?

RICH: Until I was twenty I lived on Group Time. Then up to about forty I was still living in the future, always planning the stuff I'd do when everything came together and my life actually got going. Everything lay ahead of me. Then as you get a bit older, gradually you start living in the past, looking back at what was, what might've been and what never was. I don't think I've ever lived in the present, I wonder what that's like? Still, maybe you can

only do that once you realise you haven't got much of it left.

TONY: Speak for yourself, mate.

RICH: That's all I've ever done, though I sometimes used your mouth to do it.

HARRY: This is why you lot've always needed me.

TONY: [*Cutting in*] Amanda should do it. Give us THE TALK, I mean.

RICH: Sweetheart? You don't have to.

AMANDA: I'll give it a go. What did Mum used to say?

TONY: Don't bother your head about that. Just tell us what to do.

RICH: Remember that on Group Time we're just a bunch of feckless kids with zero discipline, though on the plus side I s'pose at least we'll all be more or less sober on stage. First time for everything and all that.

AMANDA: I'll tell you when I spot the difference. [*Exasperated sigh*] You two are a great help, aren't you?

HARRY: Welcome to my world.

AMANDA: [*Deep breath, eyes closed*] OK, here goes:
Though you belong to one another, you belong first to those who wait outside.
Fear and disappointment fizz along their lifelines, scuttling through their dreams;
Terror at the tangents taken since last you stood before them.
You failed to chart the middle years on the blurred border between splendour and poverty.
Now they look to you for late romance, falling not from heaven but from the venue rafters;
Up where the lighting flickers in the penumbra.
More than this, they long for hands held.
Aloft.
For unison, the single sound.
To know they never were, are, nor shall be alone.
Yours then, is to stand apart and play a part;
To mark and to keep time.
For everyone.



SCENE V: " BUBBLE OUT OF A CANNON "

On stage at the BALLROOM. TONY, RICH, PETE and STEVE are coming to the end of a song. HARRY stands in the wings watching, with AMANDA next to him.

TONY: Thank you! Wooh-wooh! Yeah!

RICH: Yeah, cheers everyone.

TONY: You've got no idea what this means to us. To see you all still out there after all these years.

RICH: Nice to see some of you have brought your kids.

TONY: Other way around in your case, eh Rich?

RICH: Well, yeah. Some of us had to get on with our lives. That's the thing about being in a band. It's a kind of surrogacy. Your band become your family, the audience are your friends and when you're young that's the most intoxicating thing you can imagine. You think you choose them, they choose you and they'll always love you. It helps if you're a sociopath, of course.

TONY: Don't take any notice of the Prof here. He's got a degree in this stuff.

RICH: *[Ignoring him]* Trouble is that though you're stuck with your family, your friends grow up, get jobs, start families of their own... So you lose touch except for Christmas cards, maybe the odd e-mail... But you don't call, you don't meet up any more, though you're still friends, of course... Normal people know this is the natural order of things, but in a band you're trapped in this bubble which, if you've had even the faintest whiff of success, has

been fired out of a cannon, and...

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Get on with it!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: Play *You Know All The Words!*

TONY: Yeah, come on, Rich, let's give the people what they want.

RICH: Well, I suppose most of them are old enough to know what that is. [*Shrugs his guitar into position*] The thing is we meant it. We really did. Or I thought we did, anyway. At the end of the day, we were only ever saying the one thing art can say. Which is that you're not alone. In the hope of an answer, or even just an echo.

PETE: Here we bloody go again. Stevie?

STEVE: Yeah [*Clicks his sticks*]. One-two-three-four...

ACT TWO: BEHIND THE SCENES



SCENE I: "SAFEST PLACE"

The control room in a recording studio. RICH and MALCOLM are seated behind a mixing desk. TONY is in the vocal booth, but his voice can be heard over the studio monitors.

MALCOLM: OK, tape's rolling.

TONY: What, really? You still use tape?

MALCOLM: Sometimes, yeah, when we've got a bigger budget, but I was speaking figuratively.

TONY: Where've I heard that before?

RICH: You've got no short-term memory left at all, have you?

TONY: No, it'd all gone by 1986. Or might've been 1992. I remember what a miserable bastard you always were though... [*Perks up*] What was that about a bigger budget?

RICH: Calm down. Let's just get on with tarting up this live stuff in case anyone ever wants to release it, shall we? You kept singing the wrong words, even though the audience were singing the right ones. Admittedly my BVs might've wandered off into the avant-garden from time to time as well.

TONY: The gig was good, wasn't it? It seems like only last week.

RICH: It was last week.

TONY: I'm still buzzing!

RICH: It's called tinnitus.

MALCOLM: Actually he's right, there's a hum somewhere, I'd better sort it out. Why don't you two take a break?

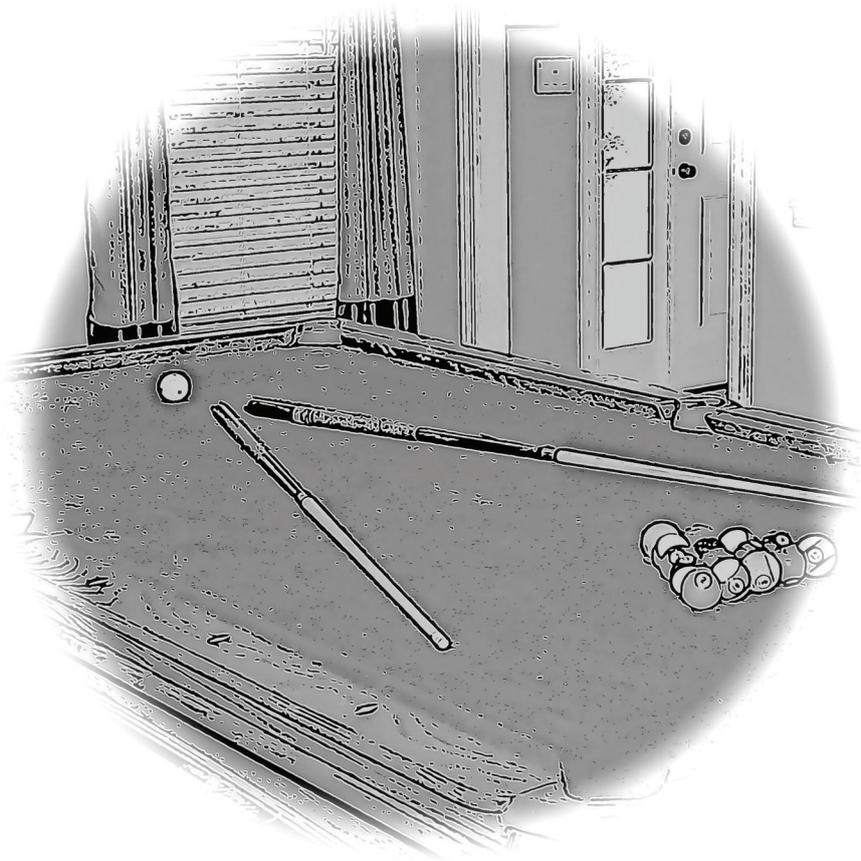
RICH: Not sure that's a good idea; the last one we took went on for over thirty years. Where are the others, anyway?

MALCOLM: Unless your rhythm section are wildly different to everyone else's, they'll be in the pub or maybe the pool room, griping about you and planning to form a band of their own.

RICH: How could I've forgotten? For 'twas ever thus.

TONY: [*Singing*] I know all the words... At least I used to...

RICH: Not quite what I was trying to convey when I wrote it, but songs eventually find their own meanings, I s'pose. Let's leave him in there, shall we? Safest place.



SCENE II: "NASTY HUM"

The pool room in the studio. PETE and STEVE are setting up the balls.

STEVE: Who's gonna break?

PETE: Well, I'd say Rich, he's been acting a bit weird, don't you think? Tony keeps pressuring him for new material.

STEVE: Rich always acts weird. Rich is weird. But I meant this [*gestures at the pool table with his cue*], shall we toss for it?

PETE: Oh. Right. Er... Heads.

STEVE: Heads it is. Away you go.

[*They start playing*]

PETE: Where are Eric and Ernie, anyway?

STEVE: Where do you think? They're in the, ahem [*adopts faux-portentous voice*] CONTROL ROOM.

PETE: [*Giggles*] Only place for them!

STEVE: [*Also grinning*] Yeah, I'm guessing it was always like that.

PETE: Nothing's changed at all as far as I can see. Rich's got a point about Group Time. We're all acting as though the band broke up a couple of months ago. Look at me, I'm

playing pool with the drummer while those two are in the control room. [*Renewed laughter*]

STEVE: Were you always this crap or are you just out of practice?

[*Enter Rich*]

PETE: Oh hi Rich. We were just... Er... How's it going in the... [*Trying to stifle giggle*] You know... In there... [*Gestures toward the door*]

RICH: The control room?

[*PETE and STEVE can no longer contain their mirth*]

PETE: Sorry... It's just...

RICH: [*Puzzled*] What's so funny?

PETE: Nothing.

STEVE: Nothing at all! So it's going well in the... In the...

PETE: In the c-c-control room?

[*Pete and Steve collapse into loud guffaws*]

RICH: [*Smiling faintly*] Oh, I see.

STEVE: Oh GOD, sorry, we really shouldn't...

PETE: Only...

RICH: [*Smiling warmly*] Yes, it's all about control, isn't it? Most human behaviour is, you know. I've never come across a band that didn't harbour at least one dictator. The ones that last tend to be either those where the dictator's got the sense to share the money, if not the credit, or else the ones with three or four megalomaniacs on different but complementary power trips, so they come to a compromise where each of them has totalitarian power in a particular area. The singer does all the promotion and spouts a load of crap about politics, the guitarist produces the records, the bassist does the books and the drummer...

STEVE: Here we go again. The floor's yours, prof.

PETE: Impart unto us your wisdom, oh most enlightened one.

RICH: [*Grinning broadly*] Ah, this is what I've missed. The problem with academic life is nobody ever tells you you're talking through your arse. They'll violently disagree with you, but no-one ever speaks through any other orifice so eventually you stop noticing that it's all crap.

PETE: Nice long summer hols though, eh?

RICH: There is that.

STEVE: Leaves you free to go off and... Oh, I don't know, write some songs, maybe?

RICH: *Et tu*, Steve?

STEVE: Nah, kicked the Creme Egg habit back in the nineties.

PETE: [*Suddenly serious*] You'd go mad if one of us said we had a song. Actually, I've got this riff...

STEVE: Couldn't you control yourself for long enough to knock out a few tunes then? I

know Tony's a royal pain in the arse but he's still a great singer, and he's at his best singing your stuff.

RICH: Yes, I do know that. In some ways creating art...

STEVE: Oh, is that what we're doing?

RICH: I know you're taking the piss, Steve, but yes, that's exactly what we're doing.

STEVE: [*To Pete*] That's us told, then. We're [*snooty voice*] artists, Pete, my old son.

PETE: Speak for yourself. I'm an electrician. [*To Rich*] It's why you wanted me in the band in the first place, remember?

RICH: Er yeah... Actually Malc's having a spot of bother with a nasty hum right now. I don't s'pose you could...?

PETE: I'll get my tool bag from the van, shall I?

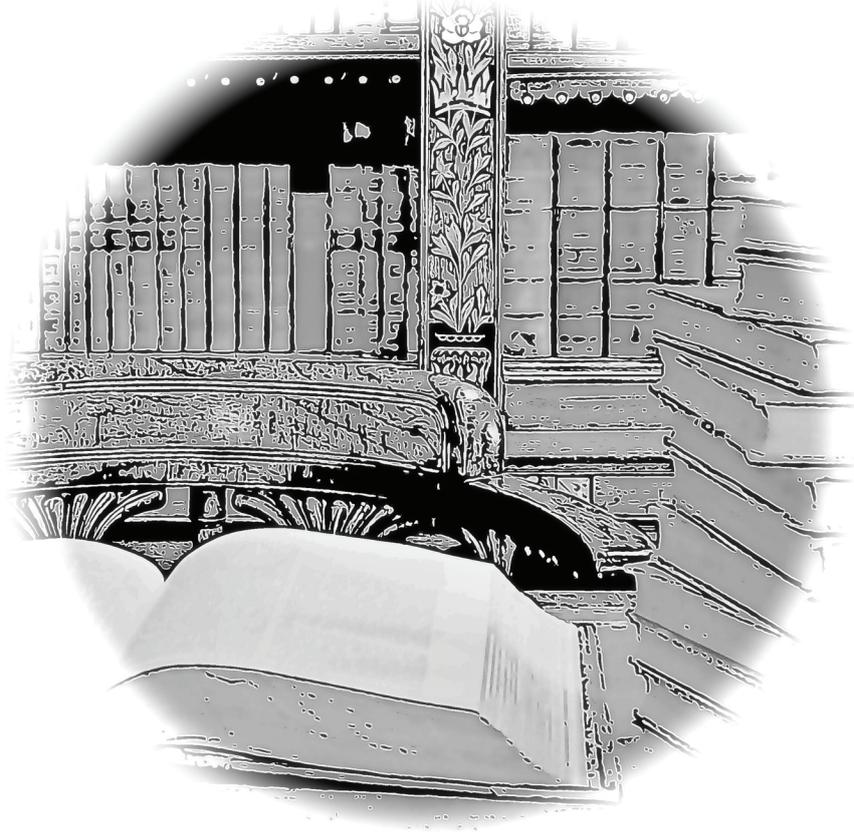
[*Exit PETE*]

STEVE: What about the drummer?

RICH: You what?

STEVE: In your hypothetical band of dictators a minute ago. What does the drummer do?

RICH: Whatever I bloody well say.



SCENE III: "WE DON'T BUILD CATHEDRALS"

A lawyer's office. AMANDA is seated behind a desk.

AMANDA: [*To herself*] Oh for God's sake. [*She gets up, walks over to a filing cabinet, pulls out a contract, then returns to the desk and reads aloud. RICH has appeared at the door.*] "We, the undersigned, declare this deed shall bind us all..." Who in the name of fluffy pink hell drafted this load of bollocks?

[*Enter RICH*]

RICH: That'd've been me.

AMANDA: [*Rolls her eyes*] Not worth the paper it's written on.

RICH: Actually you could probably get a few quid for it online, it's signed by all of us.

AMANDA: Wouldn't stand up in court.

RICH: Of course not, that was never the point.

AMANDA: Oh, so there was a point?

RICH: Most definitely.

AMANDA: Go on then, enlighten me, I can see you're dying to.

RICH: It was for you. Well, and for... Not exactly for us, not as individuals, though of course, being individuals, we each saw it differently, but... For us as a unit... You see, I

thought it was a declaration of brotherhood, only your Uncle Tony...

AMANDA: Ah. I wondered when Tony'd come into it. He shafted you royally, didn't he?

RICH: He certainly thinks so.

AMANDA: Oh come on, Dad. He tried to keep the band going when you left and actually made a career out of it.

RICH: A career of sorts, I suppose. But look at it from his point of view: I left him in the lurch. All he ever wanted was to be famous and he thought I was taking that away from him. Which I suppose I probably was.

AMANDA: Rich and famous, you mean.

RICH: Like most people, he assumed that if you were famous you'd be bound to be rich as well, it's a common enough misapprehension. I've probably done better out of the band - this one, I mean - than anyone else because I wrote the songs, although I'm hardly a household name. Maybe if we'd split the publishing equally things'd've been different. Anyway, Tony feels terrible about the way things turned out, even worse than I do.

AMANDA: Don't be so naive. Tony built a career on the back of the band and when you left he just got people to write songs in your style, with the rough edges smoothed off, then he'd change a couple of lines and claim half the publishing. He knew he couldn't do that with you.

RICH: Hmm, I suppose I kept him honest, but maybe I did it unfairly. Anyway, the public obviously wanted the edges removed; he was selling quite a lot of records at one point, you know.

AMANDA: He's not now.

RICH: Nobody is now. Nobody like us, anyway, the middle ground's gone. In our day you had a few people selling millions, then you had the whole cottage industry thing, tiny independents, but in the middle you had loads of bands who sold enough to make a decent living without troubling their local yacht dealerships. That's as far as Tony ever got. He always assumed he'd move up to the big league so he never put anything away, plus he never had any judgement, he'd think he was pulling a fast one but get overtaken. What he needed was someone like Harry with his interests at heart. Now his royalties have dried up, bigger stars are doing the package tours... He hasn't even got a pension whereas I have, much though it pains my principles to admit it.

AMANDA: Look, I'm fond of Tony...

RICH: You two adored one another when you were little and that's all Tony's ever wanted: mutual adoration. He could never understand why the critics didn't like his solo stuff.

AMANDA: What did you mean about it all being for me?

RICH: "*I have done nothing but in care of thee*". Culture's a continuum, each generation thinks it's making it all up from scratch but actually all you're doing is telling the same old story in your own way... Shakespeare didn't make up his plots, nor did Chaucer... In fact, more than any other, English culture is based on nicking bits from all over the shop and passing them off as our own, often rather brilliantly. It's all I've ever done, in my own small way. It's about recording ourselves, leaving a mark. After all, we don't build cathedrals any more, do we?

AMANDA: There speaks the sociologist.

RICH: The study of people who don't need studying, by people who do; yes, I know, but I

wasn't suited to any proper work.

AMANDA: I must be such a disappointment to you.

RICH: I'm prouder of you than anything else in my life, though so little of the credit's mine.

AMANDA: Really? I always thought your songs were your favourite children.

RICH: Oh no, they were less able to fend for themselves, that's all. You're my "*best piece of poetrie*": a real person.

AMANDA: Don't tell me...

RICH: Ben Jonson.

AMANDA: You were born four hundred years too late, weren't you?

RICH: He wrote that when his eldest son died. [*Shudders*] No, I was born in my own time, same as everyone else. I forgot to live in it sometimes and perhaps I could've done more... Or less... Does it matter? All I ever did was write some songs for a little while then step away from the platform. I'm not so different from Tony, though I probably wanted to be admired rather than adored. Or maybe just understood. I've never been sure. [*Pause*] Did you know poor old Ben asked to be buried standing up, only the pall bearers got confused and he ended up head down? [*Smiles*]

AMANDA: I'm amazed you never wrote a song about that.

RICH: There's still time. At least, there might be. [*Collecting himself*] Tony's on at me to write some new stuff, you know.

AMANDA: Funnily enough, what with my lawyer's eye for detail and all, I had noticed that. Well? There's nothing you'd like better and you know it. So what're you waiting for?

RICH: I don't know. Everyone always seems to think I just jot them down on the back of a fag packet.

AMANDA: Don't you? You always seemed to have one handy. A fag packet, I mean.

RICH: Sometimes, maybe... But only after I'd spent months mulling them over.

AMANDA: And smoking the fags. If I know you you've never given up mulling. You've never given up anything, have you? I bet you've got plenty coming to the boil, you just want to make Tony sweat.

RICH: Maybe. I never really subscribed to the whole "I am a mere channel for the Muse" thing. Mostly it was hard work, I needed to know what a song was trying to say, then I needed to have a sense of it, to be able to hear the voice... No, I don't suppose I ever have given anything up.

AMANDA: Was the voice Tony's?

RICH: A lot of the time that helped, yes. Say what you like about your Uncle Tony but he does have some kind of connection to a higher sphere when he's singing. He can make a lyric come alive. When you first hear him sing it you think "no, no, that's all wrong", but then you realise it's far more right than the way you wrote it. He has no idea how he does it. In fact he doesn't even know how good he is, which is his tragedy. If he'd known he'd never've sung all that crap. Still, if he ever found out how he does it he'd probably never be able to do it again.

AMANDA: He's not a poet though.

RICH: Neither am I. Most people aren't, thank goodness. I'm a lyricist, and a pretty decent one. Tony's talent's far more supernatural. He's more like an actor, I'd say. Actually if either of us were born out of time it's him, he'd've been much more at home as an Elizabethan player, or a Victorian lion of the theatre, even a silent movie star.

AMANDA: Tony? Silent? [*Guffaws*]

RICH: No, I mean it. He'd've been one of the few who made the transition to the talkies. Now, though... Well, he just doesn't understand where the music industry's gone.

AMANDA: None of us understands that.

RICH: Oh, I think I've some idea.

AMANDA: I might've known you would have.

RICH: Harry and I were talking about this the other day. He reckons things go in cycles and he's probably right. Every now and again an art form pops up and gets a grip on whatever passes for the popular imagination for a little while. Of course, up until the 20th century, most people's imaginations were entirely taken up with ways of finding the next meal, but the poor aren't the only ones who're always with us. In the 16th and 17th centuries the theatre was hugely popular, Shakespeare wasn't struggling in a garret you know, he went back to Stratford a man of property. Then in the 18th and 19th centuries you get the rise of the novelists, composers and virtuoso musicians... Even poets were famous! Nowadays most people can't quote a single line of contemporary poetry, but the likes of Byron and Shelley were notorious figures, their stuff sold and was quoted in drawing rooms across the land. Then in the early 20th century you've got the silent cinema, jazz, the early days of wireless, with popular music taking over in the 50s and, especially the 60s...

AMANDA: Spare me the sociology lecture, Dad.

RICH: Our turn in the spotlight's over, that's all. They said rock 'n' roll would never die and... It probably won't, certainly not in my lifetime and probably not in yours. Even so, the days when the pop music you liked defined your identity are behind us, at least in the way we knew it. Was it ever even like that for you?

AMANDA: Well, yes, music was always important, but me and all my friends... Well, we'd seen our parents looking so silly in old photos. Plus you'd been a musician, which made it worse, so I had to be someone else really... Either that or I had to try to compete with you and... [*Embarrassed*]

RICH: Oh sweetheart.

AMANDA: You were actually good. I... I never told you this but I tried out for a band once, I even wrote a few lyrics. Only they didn't measure up to your stuff, and... Well, one thing I definitely get from you is that if I can't do something well I'd rather not do it at all. [*Pause*] Anyway, I'm a bloody good lawyer.

RICH: I know you are. The world always needs good lawyers.

AMANDA: Now you're laughing at me. Oh and while we're on the subject, I've got some papers for you.

RICH: What do you want me to sign?



SCENE IV: "A FAIR BIT OF GRAVITY"

A hotel room. TONY and RICH are sitting on twin beds.

TONY: Got any new songs yet? Studio's booked, y'know.

RICH: Do you think I just jot down the first thing that comes into my head on the back of a fag packet, and it miraculously rhymes and comes with a tune?

TONY: Er... Well...

RICH: Oh for the love of... It's a lot of work, for me, at least. I need to know what the song's trying to say, then I need to work out the logic, sometimes it can take ages to get it right.

TONY: We don't have ages for you to get it right. We're in the studio this week, then that's it. Do you know how many favours I had to pull in to get this?

RICH: You guilt-tripped poor Amanda; don't think I don't know and don't think I'm going to forgive you for that.

TONY: But she wanted to do it, for you! You're not gonna let her down, are you? You must have something left to say.

RICH: I'm not sure that I do.

TONY: Sometimes I don't know what planet you're on, mate.

RICH: One with a fair bit of gravity, anyway.

TONY: You what?

RICH: All right, help me out here. Why am I writing this song you're so keen on? I mean, as the actress said to the bishop, "what's my motivation"?

TONY: Hey! That's quite good. [*Sings softly to himself*] "...so as the actress said on the bishop's bed: 'what's my motivation?'"

RICH: Are you going to want a credit for adding the words "so" and "bed"?

TONY: [*Looks guilty, then puzzled*] Er... Actually no. So when'll it be finished, then?

RICH: Hang on, that's not enough. What's the song about?

TONY: A bishop and an actress. Bishop... Bishop... Chess? Bashing the bishop?

RICH: You can't say "actress" anyway, they're all "ac-tors" now.

TONY: Sod that for a game of soldiers.

RICH: Look, as we're here and it's just the two of us...

TONY: Like the old days!

RICH: These are our old days.

TONY: Speak for yourself, mate! You're as old as the...

RICH: Hills, Tony. Look, there's something I've always wanted to know.

TONY: Name it!

RICH: Oh I can name things. I'm just not so good at understanding them afterwards.

TONY: What *are* you on about? What d'you wanna know?

RICH: When we were playing...

TONY: You mean the other night?

RICH: Any time we were playing, now or back in the day...

TONY: Right...

RICH: How did it make you feel?

TONY: Me?

RICH: Yes. You.

TONY: [*Bewildered*] I don't know that I ever feel anything much. On a good night, singing the right songs, it's more like I switch off altogether and something's coming through me. If anything I s'pose sometimes....

RICH: Yes?

TONY: Sometimes... It's like coming out of a trance afterwards and that can be a bit scary, like I'm the only person who's missed the show. Is that what you meant?

RICH: You've answered the question, yes. And thank you.

TONY: Pleasure, mate. What about you? Is that what you felt?

RICH: Oh no, to me it was more like... Like a feeling that we were one. And we had power.

TONY: What, like hypnotism or something?

RICH: [*Thinks*] Mmm, not really. It was just a raw, unbridled force... Like a storm.

TONY: Rich... I sometimes wonder... I mean, I know we're old mates and all that but...

RICH: Yes? You may as well ask.

TONY: Well, I've never been sure whether you actually like me much.

RICH: No, neither have I.

TONY: [*Hurt*] Oh.

RICH: You great oaf. You're like a brother, that's all. Liking doesn't come into it. You drive me to distraction most of the time but... I...

TONY: [*Brightening visibly*] Steady on!

RICH: Look, just so we're clear, if the songs come...

TONY: They will and they'll be brilliant!

RICH: If they come we'll do a record and, if it's any good, put it out. Maybe another couple of gigs, if anyone'll have us.

TONY: It'll be fantastic! A new lease of life!

RICH: Perhaps, but it is only a lease, not a freehold. Once we're done I'm going back to my life and you're to leave Amanda alone. Just be her Uncle Tony again, she's fond of you for some bizarre reason... So I want your word you'll let her be.

TONY: I... Look, I was never trying to... I just wanted...

RICH: I know. Give me your word. In fact sing it to me so I know you're telling the truth.

TONY: You'll have to write it down.

RICH: Hang on a sec. [*Tears off a piece of paper, scribbles something on it and hands it to TONY*]

TONY: [*Sings*] I give you my word

And the word is the law

That when all this is over

I shall withdraw.

[*Chortles*] Oo-er missus!

RICH: Not one of my best but it'll do.

TONY: Come on, just add a chorus, then second-verse-same-as-the-first and...

RICH: If I write something I'll do it properly.

TONY: [*Shrugs*] OK, but seriously, we're running out of time.

RICH: Don't I know it.



SCENE V: "THAT WAS WHEN"

The live room of a recording studio. TONY, RICH, PETE and STEVE are sitting around.

TONY: Come on Rich, mate. You must have *something*.

RICH: I told you the other day, it's a lot of work.

TONY: Ever the tortured genius.

STEVE: Haven't you heard? He's an Artiste.

PETE: Hey, I've got this riff...

TONY: Look, slag me off, if you want, write about what a nightmare I am to work with, or, y'know...

RICH: [*Under his breath*] Did that once, only you never noticed.

STEVE: [*Leans over his kit*] Yeah, side two, track one.

RICH: [*Raises his eyebrows*] Mouths of babes and drummers.

TONY: What about... I dunno, but just off the top of my head, you could write about some girl you fancy, couldn't you?

RICH: It may have escaped your notice, Tony, but we're not seventeen any more. Anyway, I didn't write songs like that even when we were, which is why we don't look total arses singing them now.

TONY: [*Bewildered*] Well, OK. You could have a go at the government, or the label or something, couldn't you?

RICH: The label? D'you think there's a queue to sign us, Tony, or did I miss the bidding war? In case you'd forgotten, our label happens to be run - and, if I'm not very much mistaken, funded - by my daughter, whom you blackmailed into it. As for the government... Well, to start with they're beyond satire and secondly, that's the job of younger people, though they don't seem much interested in doing it.

TONY: Y'don't have to mean it.

RICH: How many times? That's where you're wrong.

STEVE: We're fighting a losing battle here, aren't we?

TONY: Looks like it.

RICH: [*Looks up*] What did you say?

PETE: I said "I've got a riff".

TONY: I said "looks like..."

RICH: Not you. Steve: what did you just say?

STEVE: Something about it being a losing battle.

RICH: [*To himself*] Yeah... nobody expects you to win so there's no pressure... You may as well please yourself, I mean, it's not as if anyone else'll care...

TONY: Now hang on a minute! I think we can do really well if we all pull together like we used to in the old days, all for one...

RICH: [*Oblivious*] That's it... Losing battles still have to be fought, partly to determine the terms of surrender but also for their own sakes. We're British. Other countries don't understand that sometimes victory is built on the jawbones of defeat.

STEVE: What *is* he on about?

PETE: I've seen this before. He's got An Idea. Give him an hour and he'll tell us our entire lives have been based on an existential struggle against the loneliness of the long-distance plumber or something.

RICH: Loneliness! Pete, I could kiss you!

TONY: Steady on, you'll make poor old Harry jealous.

RICH: Got it, I know what to say. What's the one thing we've all been doing for the last half-century? What're we doing now?

STEVE: I thought we were trying to make a record, but I'm only the drummer so what do I know?

RICH: Playing with our friends, that's what! Forming gangs, fighting hopeless battles in the dark when they're not even worth the candle to light us to bed... And why? Because we're all terrified someone'll turn out the lights and we'll find we're on our own.

PETE: Candle? Do you want me to fix the lights? I can get the boy round to give me a hand if need be.

RICH: Someone find me a pen, quick. The rest of you bugger off to the pub. I'll have

something by the time you get back.

TONY: You heard the man. Pete, it's your round. I got the last one.

PETE: When? We've not had a drink together since...

TONY: That was when.

RICH: [*To himself, as he writes*] "That was when". He always has to have the last word, but he needs me to write it for him. 'Twas ever thus. OK then, "*once more unto the breach dear friends*". Once more from the top.

[*Exit all except RICH, scribbling frantically on a notepad*]

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