

At Home With The Cartwrights

'Pilot'

by

Neil Bennett

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ACT I

1 INT.KITCHEN - MORNING

MARY, 40s, pridefully stylish, pours cereal for JACK, 10, cherubic and full of puppy fat.

MARY

What's this on your face? What d'you even do in the shower? Stand there?

Mary wets her thumb with her tongue, wipes a mark from Jack's face.

JACK

Mum!

ALAN, 40s, rushes in. He is world-weary and with a fashion sense stuck in a place time forgot. He kisses Mary on the cheek.

ALAN

Alright, everybody, we've got fifteen minutes before doors open. Where's Annie?

ANNIE, late teens and with a face waiting to be impressed, enters. She is visibly tired.

ANNIE

I'm here. I'm here.

ALAN

Love the energy. Get her a coffee. We all know our lines? We all good?

MARY

Uh-huh.

ALAN

Anybody need to go over anything?

ANNIE

Dad, relax.

ALAN

I am relaxed. And I'm also excited.

JACK

Hey Dad, can I show you a magic trick?

ALAN

Not now. Later. C'mon guys. This is going to be good. Our best season yet!

We pull back to see this is no ordinary home. This is a studio set[1]. The kitchen sits adjacent to other rooms, like open boxcars on a railway. Opposite, and behind the cameras, the wires, the lighting rigs is bleacher-style seating fit for a live studio audience.

2 INT.HOLDING AREA - DAY

The doors swing open. An audience begins to file in.

3 INT.BACKSTAGE - DAY

Alan goes over a script with producer MITCH, 30s, whose appearance suggests used to being behind the camera rather than in front of it.

ALAN

I think we can cut this scene.

MITCH

This one? You sure? It's expository. It helps with the set-up.

ALAN

Alright, I guess. Fine. Keep it.

4 INT.LIVING ROOM - DAY

CLOSE UP of a neon 'LIVE: ON AIR' sign up in the rafters.

We now see the quintessential multi-camera sitcom room: outward-facing couch in the foreground, staircase in the background. Front door stage left, kitchen stage right.

Alan, Mary, Annie, Jack gather around the couch. Dialogue is interspersed with audience laughter.

ALAN

Look, what did I say? Once a week. Family night. No TV, no social media, no distractions. Just us.

ANNIE

But I've got a date.

MARY

I've got Zumba.

JACK  
And I've got worms.

ALAN  
Guys, once a week! Is that really too  
much to ask?

A long, drawn-out pause. The family falls silent, struggling  
for conversation, and then--

ALAN  
Maybe Jenga?

MARY  
Why don't we do this tomorrow night  
instead?

ALAN  
Good call.

Mary, Annie, Jack disperse. Alan remains; switches on the TV.

DIRECTOR (O.S.)  
And, cut! OK and that's a wrap.

The studio audience applauds. Mary, Annie, Jack re-emerge.  
Together, along with Alan, they walk to the front of the  
stage, take the acclaim, bow, curtsy.

An ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR corrals the audience.

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR (O.S.)  
Alright ladies and gentlemen, thank  
you very much for coming today. We  
hope you had a blast. If you can make  
your way out row-by-row starting from  
the back we can avoid a stampede.

5 INT.BACKSTAGE - DAY

Alan, Mary, Jack, Annie enter and split in different  
directions. Alan appears distressed, concerned.

Various cast, crew and extras linger. One is KEVIN, 50s, wiry  
and rough around the edges. He stands reading a script,  
smoking a cigarette.

ALAN  
Are you allowed to smoke in here?

Kevin offers no response.

CUT TO:

Mary is mid-conversation with MAKEUP ARTIST.

MAKEUP ARTIST

I'll use more concealer tomorrow.  
Looks like you're having a bit of a  
break-out. Have you ever thought about  
cutting your hair short? Might frame  
your face better. Women tend to get  
kinda jowly when they're older.

Mary, incredulous. Alan wanders over.

MAKEUP ARTIST

Hey Alan, good show today.

ALAN

Really? You think so?

Mitch appears.

MITCH

Alan, a word?

ALAN

Sure.

MITCH

In private?

CUT TO:

Annie. Her demeanor suggests she doesn't want to be  
approached but a male STAGEHAND plucks up the courage and  
tries his luck anyway.

STAGEHAND

Hey--

ANNIE

--Fuck off.

STAGEHAND

Fair one.

6 INT.OFFICE - DAY

Mitch and Alan take a seat on either side of a desk.

ALAN

I've got a good feeling about this season, Mitch. I mean, admittedly, I think last season kinda lacked a little something but--

Mitch pulls a bottle of whiskey from his top drawer.

MITCH

--Drink?

ALAN

What are we celebrating?

Mitch's silence speaks volumes. Alan nods, Mitch pours.

MITCH

I got word from somebody whose been in meetings with the new Chief Commissioning Officer. Long story short, they're looking to '*take the channel in a new direction*' quote-unquote.

ALAN

What-- what does that mean?

MITCH

It means that this is probably going to be our last run. I'm sorry, Al.

ALAN

A new direction? What does that-- what does that even mean? We've been on the air for nearly ten years.

MITCH

I think that's the problem. They see us having gone stale. They want to target a fresh, younger demographic. This shit happens every ten years.

ALAN

Yeah, good luck prising the fuckers from YouTube! Look I know that viewing figures have dwindled somewhat, but as we've said, that's just the nature of the beast right now. We're competing with a thousand-and-one things. Smart phones, food blogs, Tik-Tok or whatever the fuck.

MITCH

The reality is that these 'nuclear family' sitcoms are considered kinda cliché nowadays.

ALAN

Mitch, they've been going since the fifties. You're telling me that after, what, seventy years they're suddenly--

MITCH

--I'm not arguing. I agree with you. But it's not me that you have to convince.

ALAN

Well, who do I need to convince?

MITCH

The new Chief Commissioning Officer's name's Alice. Alice McKeegan. A real stick-up-her-arse fire-breather by all accounts. She only started last month. They've already nicknamed her the Grim Reaper. And she's coming. Tomorrow. She wants to meet with us.

ALAN

Fuck. Fuck!

MITCH

And Alan, try and keep this between us, OK? I don't know any good that could come from telling everyone.

Alan huffs. He leaves, re-enters, grabs the bottle of whiskey, leaves again.

ACT II

7 INT.LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Annie and Mary are sprawled out over the chair and couch wearing pyjamas, dressing gowns. Alan enters, loiters.

ALAN

Where's Jack?

MARY

In his room. Practicing with his cards no doubt.

ALAN

Who's hungry?

8 EXT.BACKLOT.NIGHT

A motorbike pulls up. An 'EXIT' door opens. Alan emerges. PIZZA DELIVERY MAN gets off his bike, hands Alan a pizza box.

ALAN

Thanks.

PIZZA DELIVERY MAN

Hey, I know you. You're--

ALAN

--Yep.

PIZZA DELIVERY MAN

What? You, like, live on the set or something?

ALAN

Yeah. Good one.

Alan slams the exit door shut.

9 INT.KITCHEN.NIGHT

The family sit and eat pizza. Jack at double speed.

ANNIE

Do we always have to eat this way?

ALAN

Who doesn't like pizza? Look at your brother.



MARY

Jack, chew!

ANNIE

Why can we never eat something, you know, nutritious?

ALAN

Well alright. Next time we order, you can decide. How's that sound?

No answer.

ALAN (CONT'D)

So what did you guys make of today's episode? I thought, you know, it had its moments.

Mary and Annie shoot each other a glance.

MARY

Yeah. It was good. Fine.

ANNIE

Can I be excused? I need to go over my lines for tomorrow.

ALAN

But you've barely eaten anything.

MARY

Let her go.

Annie gets up, exits.

ALAN

What's with her?

MARY

She had an audition for a part in something. They turned her down.

ALAN

Audition?

MARY

Yeah, some indie movie she said.

ALAN

Indie movie?

Jack, continuing to wolf down his food, begins to choke.

ALAN (CONT'D)  
Jesus Christ, Jack. Chew!

10 INT.ALAN AND MARY'S BEDROOM.NIGHT

Alan sets up a room divider to provide privacy. He gets into bed alongside Mary, stares into the abyss.

ALAN  
I was just thinking, theoretically, if this was to be our last season--

MARY  
--Our last season?

ALAN  
Yeah. Just theoretically.

MARY  
Well, life would go on. You'd probably cling on to fame for a few years. Panel shows and the like. I don't think I'd be so concerned. Of course, because we're so synonymous with this show, acting work would be hard to come by. Save for Christmas pantomimes, that kinda thing. Eventually, but inevitably, we'd slowly drift into obscurity. The show would become a dot on the televisual landscape. And so would we. Forgotten.

Alan, incredulous.

ALAN  
Right. Great. Goodnight.

11 INT.BLEACHERS.MORNING

Empty seats. Silence. And then: an alarm clock sounds. A hand emerges to shut it off. A groggy Kevin, complete with night-cap, rises like a zombie from a casket.

12 INT.BACKSTAGE.DAY

A buzzing environment as cast and crew rush to get ready. Alan and Mary sit side-by-side. Mary drinks coffee, studies a script. Alan stares into the distance.

Suddenly, his eyes are drawn to a BACKSTAGE MAN wearing a tweed jacket and deerstalker hat.

ALAN  
Shit, look at this caricature. Eh  
Mary, have you seen this guy?

MARY  
Oh yeah. I like it.

ALAN  
You like it?

MARY  
Yeah. It's unique.

ALAN  
It's Sherlock Holmes.

Backstage Man takes out a pipe and begins to fill the bowl with tobacco.

ALAN (CONT'D)  
A pipe. Of course. Mary look, he's got  
a pipe.

MARY  
So what?

ALAN  
So everything he does is for this  
look. Can't you see? He's confined  
himself by this image.

MARY  
Why are you so judgmental? What, you  
want everybody to dress like you? Is  
that it?

ALAN  
What's wrong with how I dress?

MARY  
What's right with it? People like him,  
they make the world a little more  
interesting. Add a little colour.  
Right, I gotta go to makeup.

Mary exits, Alan ponders her words. He heads to take a peek out onto the set. A stand-up comedian is warming up the crowd.

WARM-UP ACT (O.S.)  
So just a quick show of hands. How many of you have been to a live taping before? ... OK quite a few.

Mitch approaches Alan. Jack in tow.

MITCH  
She's here.

JACK  
Dad, can I show you my magic now?

ALAN  
Later, Jack. I promise.  
(to Mitch)  
Who's here?

MITCH  
The Grim Reaper.

13 INT.KITCHEN.DAY

Filming is underway with a live studio audience present and engaged. Alan enters as the family sit and eat breakfast.

ALAN  
Jackie, shut off that video game.  
They're a waste of time.

JACK  
Opposed to what?

Kevin enters wearing a suit and tie.

KEVIN  
Buenos dias, muchachos.

ALAN  
Kevin, how d'you even get in here?

Kevin holds up a set of keys.

KEVIN  
I took the liberty of making myself a copy.

ALAN  
Yeah, you took the liberty alright.

MARY

What are you all dressed up for?

KEVIN

I got a job interview.

Alan nearly chokes on his cereal.

MARY

Really? What for?

KEVIN

It's for that new law firm. You know, the ones advertising on the television? Mills and Gray?

ALAN

Law firm? Doing what?

KEVIN

Well to be a lawyer. What else?

ALAN

Don't you need, like, a law degree for that?

KEVIN

I don't think so?

Alan sighs, gets up from the table.

ALAN

Yeah, well good luck with that.

Alan leaves the scene. Off-camera, he catches sight of a woman dressed in a sharp power suit watching from the side. It's ALICE.

Alan looks to Mitch, standing behind the camera. He nods to confirm Alan's fears.

14 INT.OFFICE.DAY

Alan and Mitch sit together on one side of the desk with Alice on the other.

ALICE

So thank-you for your seeing me. I'm sure you know already but my name is Alice. I'm the new Chief Commissioning Officer--

ALAN

--The pleasure is all ours, Alice. You know, my late Mother, her name was Alice.

ALICE

Oh really?

ALAN

Well her middle name. *Allison* actually. But it-- is your name short for Allison?

ALICE

No. Just Alice.

ALAN

(to Mitch)

Do you know any Alice's?

MITCH

Uhm, can't say that I do, no.

ALICE

Well look, I'll cut to the chase. I've been hired with the very clear objective of making the channel more profitable. I realise that your backgrounds are more in creativity and the arts and mine is strictly in business, so I apologise in advance for my candidness.

ALAN

Can I just stop you for a second? I just want you to take off your Chief Commissioning Officer hat for one minute. Have you seen our show?

ALICE

I've done my research, yes.

ALAN

And what's your honest appraisal?

ALICE

I don't think that's relevant.

ALAN

OK, I'll come at it from another angle. What TV do you watch in your

downtime?

ALICE  
Typically, I don't.

ALAN  
If you had to say.

ALICE  
I guess, if pushed, I'd say I like  
period pieces.

ALAN  
Awful. Listen. Again, with respect.  
There are three people sat around this  
desk. And only two of us know comedy.  
OK? No offence.

ALICE  
None taken. But--

ALAN  
--I just think that's important  
context, don't you?

ALICE  
What I'm interested in are the  
numbers.

ALAN  
Right, the numbers. So, viewing  
figures. The more people who watch,  
the more revenue we bring in and  
slowly we become a slave to the  
advertisers, right? I get it. Let me  
ask you, whatever happened to making  
something that's just a bit of fun?  
You watch it, you laugh, you forget  
about it, you go your fuck wife, your  
husband, whoever, and you tune in next  
week. What's wrong with that?

ALICE  
What the problem with that, Alan, is  
that people aren't tuning in next  
week. Bluntly, what we need from our  
shows is either strong commercial  
value or at least some kind of  
artistic credibility. You have  
neither.

ALAN

Oh you want to talk to me about  
artistic credibility now?

Alan, nods, seething inside. He turns to Mitch.

ALAN (CONT'D)

Feel free to chime in at some point.

Mitch raises his eyebrows, puffs his cheeks.

15 INT.BACKSTAGE.DAY

Alan and Mitch debrief.

ALAN

Well, you were fuckin' useless.

MITCH

The fuck was I supposed to say?!  
Besides, I could barely get a word in  
even if I'd wanted to.

ALAN

Yeah, well I felt obligated to say  
something, so--

MITCH

--Listen, Al, in this business, I  
suggest you choose your enemies a  
little more wisely. As far as this  
season goes, we're safe. Too much time  
and money has already been invested  
into it. That gives us three months,  
eleven more episodes to lay down a  
marker. Everything else is out of our  
control already.

ALAN

C'mon! It's already too late. The  
writing's pretty much done. The pre-  
production's pretty much done--

MITCH

--Either way, I suggest being a little  
more tactful. If we have any hope,  
whasoever, you need to choose your  
words a little more strategically, OK?

Alan huffs.



MITCH (CONT'D)

OK?

ALAN

OK. Fine. Yes.

MITCH

Alright. I'll see you tomorrow.

16 INT.LIVING ROOM.NIGHT

Alan enters. Mary, Annie, Jack are sat watching television.  
Alan sits down. Annie gets up to leave.

ALAN

Hey, where are you going? I walk in,  
you walk out. Sit down a minute. I've  
got something I need to tell you guys.

Annie reluctantly sits back down.

ALAN (CONT'D)

I've just been in a meeting. I met the  
channel's new Chief Commissioning  
Officer. It's looking pretty likely  
that this is going to be our last  
season.

MARY

Oh, Alan! Oh, God!

ANNIE

Oh, God? More like thank God.

ALAN

What?

ANNIE

Trust me, this is a blessing.

MARY

How do you figure?

ANNIE

Oh please! Mum, all my life, all  
you've ever told me is how you dreamt  
of being a singer, or a dramatic  
actress. Or just about anything other  
than be stuck in some timewarp-of-a-  
sitcom.

MARY

Yeah and my priorities changed. I had responsibility. I had a family to raise, mouths to feed.

ANNIE

Well I don't intend to accidentally get pregnant at nineteen, so.

MARY

How dare you? Do you have any idea of the sacrifices that your Father and I have made? Or any idea of how fortunate you are compared to--

ANNIE

--How fortunate I am?! What, constantly living under the lens? Having zero privacy and no say? Having everybody criticise everything that I dedicate my life towards? All day, all night, nothing but negativity.

ALAN

What negativity? Everybody? Who's everybody?

ANNIE

Dad, climb out of your bubble for five minutes. Sorry but read a review or two. See what people say about the show on social media.

ALAN

*Oh, social media! 'Ooh, look at me! I'm depressed! I'm full of self-loathing! I'll send a tweet!'*

ANNIE

Dad, like it or not, they are our audience! You guys are impossible!

Annie storms off.

ALAN

Annie!

MARY

Let her go. She's being a brat.

17 INT.BACKSTAGE.NIGHT

Alan takes extravagant jackets and hats off a heavy-duty clothes rack and tries them on in front of a full-length mirror. His face suggests he's not convinced.

18 INT.LIVING ROOM.NIGHT

Alan sits alone going through a script with a pen and a highlighter.

He grabs a nearby laptop. We see a CLOSE UP of his screen as he types in "At Home With The Cartwrights" into a search engine. It doesn't take long for him to not like what he sees.

He can't take anymore. He closes the laptop over and his eyes are drawn to the far corner of the bleachers where he sees Kevin, sitting among the mass of empty seats drinking beer.

19 INT.BLEACHERS.NIGHT

Alan joins Kevin, taking a seat beside him.

ALAN  
How's it going?

Kevin nods.

ALAN (CONT'D)  
You're a man of few words, aren't you Kev?

KEVIN  
I choose my words carefully.

ALAN  
Well in that case, maybe you could offer me some advice. I feel like I'm spiraling out of control here. Looks like the show's being put out to pasture. Don't even know whether Mary gives a fuck. Annie thinks the whole thing is beneath her. And Jack. Well, he's OK, I guess. Apart from he's into magic. Isn't it always weird kids who are into magic? I dunno. What do I do? Where do I go from here?

KEVIN  
You know, you're really ugly.

ALAN

What?

KEVIN

I'm just looking at you. You're really ugly, aren't you? And the worst part is that you could be quite handsome too.

ALAN

Jesus, why do I even bother talking to you?

KEVIN

I never asked you to.

ALAN

I'm nothing but nice to you too, Kev.

KEVIN

No, you're not.

ALAN

Excuse me?

KEVIN

You're not nice. You talk to me because it's a distraction. You ask for advice, but you don't even listen. You never once ask me about me. You lecture, you vent. You never converse. I'm a sounding board, nothing more.

ALAN

Saying I'm ugly isn't advice.

KEVIN

You start with you. That's my advice. You're ugly because you've given up and you don't care. It reflects in your appearance and it reflects in your manner. How are you supposed to look after a family if you can't look after yourself?

ALAN

Oh, right, that old chestnut. I can look after myself, and my family just fine, thank you very much.

KEVIN

Oh yeah? Do you diet? Eat well? Do you take vitamins? I've never seen you eat a fruit or a vegetable.

ALAN

I took Propecia for a time, but I read it killed your boners.

KEVIN

Do you exercise?

ALAN

No.

KEVIN

Do you meditate? Or read? Or do anything to better yourself mentally?

ALAN

No.

KEVIN

You got a skincare routine?

ALAN

No.

KEVIN

And your wife.

ALAN

What about her?

KEVIN

When you have sex. Do you make sure she's had an orgasm before you finish?

No answer.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Yeah. That's what I figured.

Kevin swigs the remains of his beer. Alan ponders.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

You know what the most pathetic thing is? I'm jealous of you.

ALAN

Of me?

KEVIN

You've got a wife, kids. You're the star of your own TV show, regardless of whatever people think of it. And you take it all for granted.

Alan ponders. Kevin reaches behind him, grabs a blanket, a pillow.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Now, if you don't mind, I'm gonna get some shut-eye.

ALAN

Goodnight, Kev.

ACT III

20 INT.ANNIE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Annie is up texting on her phone. She, like Alan and Mary, has a room divider to provide privacy. Alan knocks on it.

ALAN (O.S.)  
Mind if I come in?

ANNIE  
Sure.

Alan enters, carrying a script. He sits on the edge of the bed.

ALAN  
I hear you went for an audition?

ANNIE  
Yeah. But I didn't get the part.

ALAN  
Look, whatever path you choose to take, I'm not going to stand in your way. You do know that, don't you?

ANNIE  
Yeah, I know.

ALAN  
How long have you felt this way about the show?

ANNIE  
Dad, don't listen to me. I was angry, frustrated, I said some things--

ALAN  
--No, no. I want to listen. I want you to help me.

ANNIE  
Help you?

ALAN  
Yeah. You can start with this.

Alan throws the script onto the bed.

ALAN

It's our next episode. Tell me what you like, tell me what you hate.

ANNIE

Dad--

ALAN

The channel wants to target a younger demographic. So you've got a better idea than I do, right?

Annie takes the script, begins to leaf through it.

ALAN

When I first got this show, it was the most exciting day of my life.

Alan stops in his tracks.

ALAN (CONT'D)

You know, apart from the days that you and Jack were born obviously.

Annie laughs.

ALAN

First season, from writing it to filming it to when it aired, was like a dream, a blur. It flew by. I didn't even have time to appreciate it. Then, over time, it kind of took on a life of its own. The first Christmas Special we did. You remember it?

ANNIE

Of course.

ALAN

Six point eight million people watched it. Six point eight million! I'm not saying it was high culture. Or anything genre-defying. But six point eight million people sat around their televisions, bellies full of turkey. And they watched it. And they laughed. Or at least I hope so! When I heard that number, I couldn't even wrap my head around it. Ever since then, I've been like a junkie chasing that high, you know?



Annie chuckles, nods her head.

ANNIE

Is Mum mad at me?

ALAN

A little bit, I think. But she won't be forever.

ANNIE

Does she hate me?

ALAN

No. Not even a little bit.

ANNIE

Do you hate me?

ALAN

Me? Yeah. I can't stand you. You get right on my bastard tits.

Annie laughs.

ALAN (CONT'D)

Me and your Mum on your side, you know. We're not the enemy. And if this is going to be the last of whatever this is, why don't we at least take some pride in it? Make it as best we can?

Annie nods.

21 INT.JACK'S BEDROOM.NIGHT

Jack is up practicing cards.

ALAN

Hey, you should be asleep.

JACK

OK, but I still haven't shown you this magic trick.

ALAN

Oh right. Yeah.

JACK

It's really good. You'll like it.

ALAN  
OK, I believe you.

Jack holds out a box of coins.

JACK  
Pick any coin. It's better if you  
choose. That way you know there's no  
tampering.

Alan laughs. He takes a coin.

JACK (CONT'D)  
OK. So hold it like this.

Jack makes a fist. Alan copies, clasping the coin.

JACK (CONT'D)  
This bit might hurt.

Jack, full force, slaps Alan's hand.

ALAN  
Ow! Jeez.

JACK  
Sorry. It's part of the magic. OK. Now  
open your hand.

Alan opens his hand. The coin rests on his palm.

ALAN  
What, was it supposed to disappear?

JACK  
Look at the other side.

Alan holds up the coin, which now has heads on both sides.  
Lost for words, Alan laughs.

ALAN  
What?! How? How did you do that?

JACK  
Magic.

ALAN  
No, no, no. You gotta tell me. How?

JACK  
Magic.

Alan checks other coins in the box.

ALAN

That's insanity is what it is. You do realise I'm going to be up all night now, wondering how you did this?

Alan laughs, ruffles Jack's hair, holds up the coin.

ALAN (CONT'D)

Can I keep this, or--?

Jack nods.

ALAN (CONT'D)

Alright. Goodnight Houdini.

22 INT.ALAN AND MARY'S BEDROOM.NIGHT

Alan enters. An angry Mary sits on the edge of the bed removing her makeup.

She looks up as Alan approaches. Alan begins to bob his head to an imaginary beat. He stands over Mary and begins to sway from side-to-side.

MARY

What's this?

He thrusts his hips in her direction, breaking her steely exterior. A smile.

Alan holds out his hand. An offer. She accepts. He holds Mary close and together they begin to dance.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END