THE DAILY LIFE OF A DEAD MAN

A play by Hélio Jorge Cordeiro

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Characters:

Ethel
Larita
Preacher
Man in a woman’s bathrobe
George
Policeman
WE OPEN ONTO A MIDDLE CLASS APPARTMENT ROOM IN LONDON, EALING. THERE ARE VARIOUS DOORS IN THE ROOM. ONE LEADS TO THE BATHROOM, ANOTHER TO THE BEDROOM AND ANOTHER TO THE KITCHEN. THERE IS ALSO A WINDOW, FRAMED BY A PATTERED CURTAIN, OF DUBIOUS TASTE, BY WHICH THE DAYLIGHT ENTERS. The interior of the room is decorated with furniture IN various styles, NONE OF IT in very good taste. This is the apartment where Ethel and George smith live. she IS NEARING fifty, he IS around 65 years of age. ETHEL AND GEORGE ARE A TYPICAL LONDON COUPLE.

Ethel is talking on the telephone. George comes out of the bathroom, indiscreetly putting on A BATHROBE.

ETHEL

...That's right, dear, I always did my best to make our marriage work...(covering the mouthpiece and speaking to George) George, that bathrobe I bought for you looks great on you (returning to the phone) no, I was talking about George’s dressing gown...it’s lovely. I gave it to him for his birthday...it was a real bargain! Don’t you remember the one he had last year? There was even a queue, remember? Yes, there...George loved the present...of course, dear, Ethel here knows how to make her husband happy...of course...I have my rewards...what’s that, dear? He always has the last word...that’s right, it has to be, otherwise...of course...George knows about things...what has he asked for that I haven’t run out and done? Ahhh..I do. I do, yes! What’s marriage for, my dear? Eh? You’re joking! You never...never? (whispering) not even once? One little time? (to the audience) Where was this woman in the 1970s?! (returning to the telephone) anyway...I’ll have to get myself ready...that’s great...right! See you then, bye!

ETHEL HANGS UP THE TELEPHONE AND CHECKS A TELEPHONE NUMBER IN HER NOTEBOOK. GEORGE COMES OUT OF THE BEDROOM, NOW DRESSED. HE GOES OVER TO THE TABLE AND BEGINS EATING HIS BREAKFAST.
ETHEL DIALS A NUMBER, BUT THE LINE IS ENGAGED. SHE TRIES AGAIN. ENGAGED AGAIN. SHE IS GETTING IMPATIENT.

ETHEL
I don’t believe it! These telephones are always engaged!!!(to the audience) these people can hang onto the phone for ages talking rubbish! George, there’s a melon in the fridge...I forgot to put it out on the table. Sorry.

GEORGE IS ABOUT TO SAY SOMETHING, BUT ETHEL INTERRUPTS HIM.

ETHEL (CONT.)
No! No! George, don’t cut the melon into pieces, I’ve had enough melon...just cut a slice for yourself, ok? (regretful) I wanted to buy paw-paw...but they all looked so mangy...That reminds me, I passed by the fish market yesterday and bought some fish...I thought we could have fish tonight. How about it?

GEORGE IS ABOUT TO REPLY BUT ETHEL ONCE AGAIN INTERRUPTS HIM.

ETHEL
Don’t worry, it’ll be with potatoes...Larita can prepare it when she arrives. You just leave it to her.

ETHEL GETS UP, GIVING UP TRYING TO MAKE THE PHONE CALL, BUT SHE HAS HARDLY LIFTED HERSELF OFF THE SOFA WHEN THE PHONE RINGS. SHE SITS BACK DOWN AND ANSWERS THE PHONE. MEANWHILE, GEORGE EATS HIS BREAKFAST.

ETHEL
Hello? Yes...George? Who’s calling? (to George, covering the receiver) its from the office! It’s Walter...(returning) just a moment...

GEORGE GETS UP TO ANSWER BUT ETHEL, WITH A GESTURE, ORDERS HIM TO SIT DOWN.

ETHEL
Hello, Walter...he can’t come to the phone at the moment...I’ll see to it myself. I can take care of the matter, my dear. Go on. Hmmm, hummm. OK, I know...But he sent it off before the holidays. How? How do I know? George isn’t like most men I know out there. Aahh...George knows
everything, my dear! Besides, I’m still the one who sleeps with him...but let’s get to the subject...I’ll get one...(getting up) just a second...

MARGARIDA LEAVES THE PHONE OFF THE HOOK AND GOES OVER TO THE BUFFET TABLE TO GET A PEN AND PAPER. SHE RETURNS AND REMEMBERS TO FEED A SMALL FISH THAT IS IN AN AQUARIUM. SHE TAKES A FAIRLY LARGE POT. ETHEL POURES A HANDFUL OF FEED INTO THE TANK, TURNING THE WATER CLOUDY.

ETHEL
(to the audience) This is the fifth fish George has bought this month...they don’t last long, poor things!

ETHEL RETURNS TO THE TELEPHONE. SHE SITS DOWN AND BEGINS TAKING NOTES.

ETHEL
Fire away, Walter...Yes,yes,yes. Is that all? OK, bye!

ETHEL CHECKS WHAT SHE HAS NOTED DOWN ON THE PAPER. SHE GETS UP AND GOES OVER TO THE TABLE WHERE GEORGE IS EATING. GEORGE HOLDS OUT HIS HAND TO TAKE THE PAPER, BUT ETHEL WALKS RIGHT PAST HIM. WITH A GESTURE, SHE MOVES GEORGE’S HAND AWAY, GOING DIRECTLY TO THE BEDROOM.

ETHEL (OFF)
You just leave it in my capable hands...(proudly) I’ll deal with this myself. Don’t you worry, my dear.

SECONDS LATER, SHE RETURNS, PUTTING ON ANOTHER BLOUSE, WHICH IS STILL OPEN, REVEALING HER BRA.

ETHEL
With me it’s a different kettle of fish, it’ll all be fixed in ten minutes...Don’t worry, darling, I’ll do it for you...

ETHEL BEGINS BUTTONING UP HER BLOUSE
ETHEL
(remembering) Do you remember the time we went to see that house in Brighton? Remember?

GEORGE IS GLANCING AT HIS NEWSPAPER. HE LOOKS UP TO SAY SOMETHING, BUT ETHEL CUTS HIM OFF.

ETHEL
No, let me speak, it least this once? OK? Of course you remember. That estate agent didn't take his eyes off me remember? What a nosy bugger! I didn’t even let on I knew...the bloke was really uncouth. (to the audience) A little short arse of a man (measuring with her hand) he was no higher than this... a little barrel on two legs. Hair...he didn’t even know what it was any more...to say nothing (begins to laugh without stopping). Ha...ha (feeling that she is going to choke) Gorblimey! I remember his trousers...(trying not laugh) sorry, I can’t help myself when I remember that guy’s trousers...a red check pattern all over them...My God! And the flares! No, no, flares is an understatement...those were more like ship’s sails! And to top it all off, the swine was wearing a blazer that was almost pink...George, you’ve no idea how disgusted I was by him! Yes, he was disgusting...especially when we were leaving and he wanted to kiss my hand...”You look like Mrs. Thatcher...“ Aaarrrgh! I don’t even like to think about it...

SHE PUTS SOMETHING INTO HER BAG, WHICH IS ON ONE OF THE ARMCHAIRS.

ETHEL (CONT.)
Oh it was awful, he knew we were going to the house that summer and he took the opportunity to go there just so he could see me in a bikini...just imagine! What a cheek!...(imitating) “George, Sir, you know I am always concerned for the well-being of my clients...I have come to see how you and your family are getting on in the new house...”The filthy bugger didn’t take his eyes of my backside...(imitating once again) "because if you’re not satisfied I’ll arrange another one right away! By the way, have you already been in the sea?...How could he? The bloke convinced you to take us swimming, to see whether we liked the place or not, remember?...(smiling), Ah, I suppose you remember that!...And the guy’s trousers?...they were so big on him that when he pulled his belt he had to take care not to strangle himself! (smiling) Aaaargh, I can’t stand it!...

AT THE TABLE, GEORGE DOESN’T SAY A WORD, JUST SMILES A WRY SMILE IN THE CORNER OF HIS MOUTH.
ETHEL PUTS THE FINISHING TOUCHES TO HER HAIR, LOOKING AT HER REFLECTION IN A MIRROR, WHICH IS HANGING ON THE WALL. SHE TOUCHES UP HER LIPSTICK. MEANWHILE, GEORGE FINISHES HIS BREAKFAST WITHOUT LOOKING UP FROM THE NEWSPAPER.

ETHEL
Bye the way, George! Don’t forget to tell Larita to defrost the fish for dinner and cook it with potatoes...With potatoes, you hear?

GEORGE IS ABOUT TO SAY SOMETHING BUT...

ETHEL
(interrupting) Oh, and please don’t smoke while I’m out!

SILENCE. GEORGE GETS UP, CARRYING INTO THE KITCHEN THE BREAKFAST THINGS THAT ARE LYING ON THE TABLE.

ETHEL LEAVES, BANGING THE DOOR BEHIND HER.

GEORGE TAKES A PACKET OF CIGARETTES FROM BEHIND THE TELEVISION. HE TAKES ONE OUT AND GOES OVER TO THE DOOR TO MAKE SURE ETHEL HAS GONE, BUT SURPRISINGLY, SHE COMES BACK IN, OPENING THE DOOR AND ALMOST HITTING GEORGE’S FACE. HE ALMOST SWALLOWS THE CIGARETTE. GEORGE CHOKES.

ETHEL
Look, don’t forget to feed your fish over there (pointing) otherwise the poor thing’ll die! (smelling cigarettes) as for that cigarette, you can have one only!...Just one!

GEORGE JUST GIVES ETHEL A WRY SMILE. SHE GOES OUT. GEORGE WATCHES HER GOING DOWN THE CORRIDOR. HE CLOSES THE DOOR AND TAKES OUT ANOTHER CIGARETTE. CALMLY, GEORGE LIGHTS THE CIGARETTE WITHOUT ANY PROBLEMS.
GEORGE GOES TO ONE OF THOSE "GRANDDAD" CHAIRS, WHICH, TO ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES, IS HIS THRONE. GEORGE BEGINS TO READ THE NEWSPAPER. HE TAKES A FINAL DRAG OF HIS CIGARETTE AND THROWS THE STUB OUT OF THE WINDOW. GEORGE RETURNS HIS ATTENTION TO HIS NEWSPAPER. SECONDS LATER, WE HEAR...

MAN’S VOICE (OFF)
Bloody Bastard!!! Stick that cigarette up your arse!!!

THE STAGE DARKENS

TIME

THE STAGE LIGHTS UP

THE LIGHT COMING IN FROM THE WINDOW HAS ALREADY CHANGED ITS POSITION, SHOWING THAT IT IS LATER IN THE DAY.

NOW GEORGE IS SITTING WITH THE JOURNAL RESTING ON HIS LAP. IT IS SPREAD OPEN. HIS GAZE IS FIXED ON THE TEXT. HE IS UNMOVING. A SOUND US HEARD IN THE KEYHOLE. THE DOOR OPENS. ETHEL ARRIVES RUBBING HER FEET. HER SHOES SEEM TO BE HURTING. SHE GOES DIRECTLY TO THE KITCHEN.

ETHEL
Larita? Laaarrriita?! Where’s that woman got to?

ETHEL RETURNS TO THE KITCHEN AND GOES DIRECTLY TO THE BEDROOM.

ETHEL (OFF)

Larita?!...

ETHEL COMES BACK OUT OF THE BEDROOM AND GOES TO THE KITCHEN.
ETHEL (OFF)
The woman made something for lunch then sent herself home...Oh no! She hasn’t even defrosted the fish for dinner...And where’s the lunch, George? (to the audience) I can’t rely on him...never could rely on him...(to George, ironically) isn’t that right, dear?...It’s always been like that...when I think of it, well almost always...from time to time he praises the cooking (remembering) Ah, George, I met Arthur Osgood. That guy we met in Brighton, remember? He spent the summer holidays there at the same time as us.

ETHEL COMES OUT OF THE KITCHEN TO SPEAK

ETHEL CONT.)
That bloke who worked as an engineer with the London Underground... he was with his wife...What was her name again?...I never could remember her name...She was a real bore! She never left her poor husband alone...wherever the poor bloke went she followed him... (laughing at the memory) I can’t bear it... (more laughter) he went to the toilet in the restaurant and she was there, looking on...right outside the door of the men’s W.C... (laughing) Between you and me, I think she wanted to go in...what a daft woman...she stuck to him like glue!

ETHEL RETURNS TO THE KITCHEN

ETHEL (OFF)
He sent you his regards...he asked if we were going to Brighton this year...I said we might, it depends on Lucy. I told him that if our daughter decides to spend her holidays in England, we would go up North to visit your family, but if she doesn’t come, then we’ll go down to Brighton. (remembering) Ah, George...I’ll put the fish out to defrost, and the potatoes I’ll leave for later, ok? And don’t ask me if I’m going out again, because I am...

ETHEL GOES OUT OF THE KITCHEN. SHE LEAVES HER APRON ON ONE OF THE CHAIRS THAT ARE AROUND THE SIX-SEATER TABLE...

ETHEL
I think six potatoes should be enough...(wiggling her bottom) I’ve got lose a few pounds, dear...

ETHEL GOES TO THE BEDROOM AGAIN

ETHEL (OFF)
Speaking of weight, you sister needs to lose a few stone. She’s enormous...I’ve never seen anything like it...Sheila was a slim woman once...when she got married, she went all to pot...If I don’t take care, I’ll end up just like her!...Don’t think you’d have a pretty little thing, if I didn’t look after myself...you’d have a...No, I won’t even
say it...I know what you were going to say...But what I’m saying is true. If Sheila had a bit more self-esteem she would be much better...in fact, thinking about it, I think it got worse when she found out she couldn’t have children...That’s what it was, poor Sheila...

ETHEL RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM IN JUST HER KNICKERS AND BRA. SHE GOES TO THE KITCHEN AND RETURNS HOLDING A TOWEL. SHE STOPS TO SPEAK TO GEORGE.

ETHEL
Poor Sheila. Only she can know how it feels...Forgive me for saying, but Bill didn’t know how to help her...Now, if he had been Charlie, my brother, then things would have been different...Charlie knows how to deal with these things. He’s no psychologist or anything...He’s the right bloke, my brother, isn’t that right?

ETHEL GOES TO THE BATHROOM

ETHEL (OFF)
Now don’t you go calling my brother crazy, you hear, George?

GEORGE DOESN’T UTTER A WORD.

WE HEAR THE SOUND OF THE ELECTRIC SHOWER AND THE WATER RUNNING.

ETHEL (OFF)
We need to do some redecorating...I can’t stand looking at these tiles any more. I can’t even remember what colour they used to be when we first bought this apartment...

THE SOUND OF THE ELECTRIC SHOWER AND RUNNING WATER STOP.

ETHEL COMES OUT OF THE BATHROOM, WRAPPED IN A TOWEL AND BRUSHING HER WET HAIR.

ETHEL
We could get some of those tiles I saw in House and Gardens. They weren’t too expensive...

ETHEL GOES TO THE BEDROOM

ETHEL (CONT.OFF)
We could get these changed before Lucy comes...She’ll love them...We could talk to that cousin of Larita’s...he’s a
bricklayer, isn’t he?...Or is it a plumber? I forget now...When she comes back tomorrow I must remember to ask her...He could give us a nice price...(to the audience) mind you, it seems that these people, the more you know them, the more they want to bleed you dry...(to George) remember that plumber your friend from the office recommended to us, who said he was well-known and everything?...The blighter charged us double what he charged him!...Shameless! I was so annoyed I almost asked your friend if he hadn’t got some money for himself out of the deal...Okay, okay, don’t you don’t have to say anything...Of course I thought better of it...I didn’t want get you into trouble with your friend, I’m not mad...just a little over the top, maybe.

ETHEL COMES OUT OF THE BEDROOM, NOW DRESSED. SHE GOES TO THE MIRROR AND FINISHES GETTING HERSELF READY. SHE TAKES THE APRON AND CARRIES IT INTO THE KITCHEN.

THE TELEPHONE RINGS.

I’ll get it!

ETHEL (OFF)

ETHEL RETURNS AND SITS DOWN TO ANSWER THE TELEPHONE.

ETHEL

Hello? Oh, it’s you Silvia...How are you, dear. Me? I’m alright...More going than coming, or going and coming, coming and going (laughing). It’s better that way, don’t you agree? I know...You’re not supposed to tell me...What? No! I don’t believe it, my God, was it really?!

ETHEL TURNS HER BACK TOWARDS GEORGE SO THAT HE CAN’T LISTEN (AS IF HE COULD LISTEN TO ANYTHING). SHE LOWERS THE TONE OF HER VOICE.

ETHEL (CONT.)

Come on, out with it! (a look of surprise) my God! Was it really? And she, how is she? I can imagine...She must be suffering horrors! No? Why not? But wasn’t she...And then? It can’t be! She liked it? (looking at the public) but what a cow! Hmm...well, I suppose it depends (looking at George) God help me! I don’t even want to think about it...I know...I’ve already thought about that several times...You too? (laughter) I think we all imagined something like happening to us, haven’t we? I know...I know...It’s better if it stays a fantasy! Eh?...It’s just as well...Better that way, rather her than me, with those blokes...What? Because...Oh, I don’t know why...It’s different with
Americans... In fact, I’d prefer a Frenchman. Eh? You think so?... those are just stories... Which? Ahhh... My God! You’ve got a taste for anything, haven’t you? Oh, by the way, Lucy doesn’t come until next month... No, don’t worry... Yes, OK... OK... See you soon then. Bye! (hanging up the telephone) Gosh, that woman goes around telling everyone!

ETHEL, AFTER REPLACING THE TELEPHONE, GETS UP AND GOES DIRECTLY TO THE BEDROOM.

TIME

ETHEL RETURNS CARRYING HER BAG. SHE OPENS IT TO CHECK IF SHE HAS WHAT SHE NEEDS.

ETHEL

George, I’m going to have to pay more money...

ETHEL GOES TO THE DRAWER OF THE BUFFET TABLE, TAKES OUT A MAN’S WALLET AND PULLS OUT SOME NOTES. SHE PUTS BACK THE WALLET AND CLOSES THE DRAWER.

ETHEL, IN PASSING, ONCE AGAIN FEEDS THE FISH. SHE TAKES THE POT THAT IS ON THE BUFFET TABLE AND TIPS AN EXAGGERATED AMOUNT OF FEED INTO THE AQUARIUM, ONCE AGAIN CLOUDING THE WATER IN THE TANK.

ETHEL

(to George) I don’t know where you buy these beasts, George. They don’t last long!

ETHEL TAKES OUT THE MONEY, COUNTS THE NOTES AND PLACES THEM IN HER HANDBAG.

ETHEL

You kill yourself working all your life and then what do they do with you? Even after you retire, those sods still want to bleed you dry... (to the audience) The worst thing is one of these days, there won’t be anyone left worth voting for...

ETHEL FIXES HER CLOTHES AND GOES TO THE MIRROR. SHE CHECKS ALL IS IN ORDER. ETHEL STOPS AND
Ponders on the subject
she is talking about.

Ethel
You know, George...When we were kids we never heard our parents talking about crisis...Yeah...Its just as well we managed to save a little something...Well, not so much save as know how to do business...

Ethel goes towards the door. As she is leaving, she stops once more, now with her back to the audience. She adjusts her socks, which have two fair-sized holes in them that she doesn’t even notice.

Ethel
If it wasn’t for that piece of land my parents left me, we wouldn’t be able to send Lucy to study in that private university, isn’t that right? (turning to George)
Right...I’m off. No, don’t complain! I won’t be long! I’ll be back soon, Bye!

She finally goes out, closing the door behind her. George remains inert, “reading” his newspaper. The light coming in the window becomes orange-coloured, indicating that the afternoon is almost over.

Dark stage

Time

The stage lights up

A sound is heard of a key in the door. It is Larita, the part-time Portuguese cook/cleaner. She is a woman of about the same age as Ethel. She enters, putting the keys in her bag, which she places on the table. She sits down and begins to talk in a heavy Portuguese accent.

Larita
Hi, Mr George. Aren’t you going to tell me off...I can explain, don’t worry. I didn’t come this morning because I
decided I’m not going to work here any more with you...No sir...It wasn’t an easy decision! Me and Pereira decided to get away from this madness here in London. We couldn’t stand living in this city any more...You can’t imagine what its like living in a place like where we live...Every bleeding day there’s some trouble, houses broken into, violence in the streets, muggings. You never feel safe even in your own home, never mind walking in the streets.

LARITA LOOKS AS THOUGH SHE IS ABOUT TO CRY. SHE TAKES A HANDKERCHIEF OUT OF HER BAG

LARITA (CONT.) I know what Mrs Smith is going to say: (imitating) “Larita is a big cretin. A real ungrateful sod...(shutting her mouth) a bloody!” But I know that you, Mr George, you’re a very understanding person and you understand my situation. Look, just to show I’m not a bad person, I spoke with a cousin of Pereira’s who lives just off the Portobello Road. Her husband died and she’s in a bloody awful situation. It’s just as well she hasn’t got any kids. She could come and work for you, in my place. What do you think? Don’t say anything, I know, I know. It’s Ethel who makes the decisions. Look, Mr George, I’ve come to collect my money...just the two hundred...I’m not including those two Sundays when Mrs Smith called me to help in the kitchen, but if you want to give me a little something... (standing up) Mr George?

LARITA FINDS IT STRANGE THAT GEORGE IS NOT RESPONDING TO HER QUESTIONS. CAUTIOUSLY, SHE GOES OVER TO WHERE IS SITTING “READING” HIS NEWSPAPER.

LARITA Mr George? Can you hear me? (to the audience) Do you think he’s asleep?...

LARITA TUGS AT THE NEWSPAPER TO SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING BEHIND IT, BUT GEORGE’S GRIP REMAINS TIGHT ON THE NEWSPAPER, WHICH SPRINGS BACK AS THOUGH THERE WERE A STEEL SPRING HOLDING IT. LARITA IS PARALYSED.

LARITA (to the audience) He’s frozen...He’s dea...Aaaaahh!… LARITA IS STUNNED. SHE TRIES TO GET OVER THE
SHOCK. SHE SITS BACK DOWN.

LARITA
Oh, my God! The man’s stone cold dead. Kicked the bucket...(nervously) What should I do? What am I going to do? I know, I’m going to wet myself!

LARITA RUNS TO THE BATHROOM. THE SOUND OF URINATING IS HEARD, THEN THE FLUSHING OF THE TOILET.

SECONDS LATER, LARITA RETURNS TO THE LIVING ROOM. SHE APPROACHES GEORGE, TERRIFIED.

LARITA
My God! Mr George is dead, dead...I’ve got to do something! But what? What? Oh my God!...(looking upwards) Help me What should I do?

LARITA PACES TO AND FRO NERVOUSLY

LARITA
I’ll phone the hospital!...No, the police, that’s it!...Just tell them Mr George is dead and that’s it. They’ll come and get him...No, what if they ask questions? Like those films on TV? Oh, my God! They could arrest me, thinking I killed poor Mr George!...Calm down, Larita, calm down...Now, let me see...

LARITA GOES OVER TO THE TELEPHONE. SHE SITS DOWN, PICKS UP THE TELEPHONE DIRECTORY WHICH IS NEXT TO THE TELEPHONE, TOGETHER WITH SOME OLD MAGAZINES, AND BEGINS TO LOOK IT UP, NERVOUSLY.

FINALLY, LARITA FINDS THE NUMBER OF THE POLICE. SHE BEGINS TO DIAL THE NUMBER.

LARITA
Come on, come on! Somebody answer! Ah...hello? Is that the police? This is...

LARITA COVERS THE MOUTHPIECE OF THE TELEPHONE AND DISGUISES HER VOICE, IMITATING A MIXTURE OF GERMAN AND CHINESE, WITHOUT LOSING
HER PORTUGUESE ACCENT ONE BIT.

LARITA (CONT.)

From apartment 450...Where is it? What do you mean, where? Aahhh! Oakfield Gardens...That's right, it's near...Look, a man's kicked the bucket...What? My name?...What do you mean, my name?...I can't say. Because I can't...You wouldn't understand it anyway. I'm a foreigner...Can't you hear my accent?...What? From Portugal? What is this? I've just told you I'm a for-eign-er. FOREIGNER!!! What? What did he die of? (looking towards the audience and covering the mouthpiece) This is too much! They expect me to know everything! (returning to the telephone) Look here, my son, I'm poor and I never had a chance to learn much, alright? I just want to say that there's a dead body here and you should come and get him before the bugger starts to stink!!! (hanging up the telephone and standing up) I'd better get out of here now before they come...(still numb with shock) I've got to get rid of the fingerprints. How do they do it? Hmm????(remembering) Ahhh...

LARITA GOES TO THE KITCHEN. SECONDS LATER SHE RETURNS WITH A CLOTH. SHE BEGINS TO WIPE AWAY ANY POSSIBLE FINGERPRINTS. THEN SHE REMEMBERS SOMETHING IS MISSING AND RETURNS TO THE KITCHEN. NEXT, SHE RETURNS WITH SOME DETERGENT, WHICH SHE POURS ONTO THE CLOTH, THEN CONTINUES WIping.

LARITA

That's better, much safer. (noticing that the cloth is very dirty) Blimey, who cleans this furniture? Now then, where else did I leave fingerprints? Ahhh, the door (going to the door and cleaning it) right, I don't think I left any more. I 'd better get going now! Better put this cloth back in the kitchen!

LARITA GOES TO THE KITCHEN TO LEAVE THE CLOTH. SECONDS LATER, SHE RETURNS, PICKS UP HER BAG FROM THE TABLE AND WALKS OVER TO GEORGE

LARITA

That's it, Mr George. Rather you than me. Right, forget about the money...I don't think I’ll have time to wait for either Mrs Smith or the police...(holding out her hand to shake his) oops! (laughing nervously) Sorry, I forgot...Have a good...(trying to remember) a good what? A good... (finding the right word) rest!! Rest in Peace, George!
LARITA GOES TO THE DOOR. SHE IS ABOUT TO LEAVE, BUT REMEMBERS SOMETHING AND RETURNS TO THE BUFFET TABLE. LARITA TAKES THE POT OF FISH FOOD THAT IS ON TOP OF THE TABLE. SHE THROWS IN ANOTHER LARGE PORTION OF FEED FOR THE FISH, BUT SUDDENLY SHE NOTICES SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED TO THEM. SHE SLIPS HER HAND INSIDE AND PULLS OUT A DEAD FISH. LARITA PLACES THE FISH BACK IN THE AQUARIUM AND CARRIES IT TO THE KITCHEN. WE HEAR THE SOUND OF RUNNING WATER. SECONDS LATER, SHE RETURNS WITH THE AQUARIUM, CONTAINING CLEAN WATER, BUT WITHOUT ANY FISH IN IT.

LARITA
I don't know why they people keep buying the things! They don't manage to live very long, poor things!

LARITA PLACES THE AQUARIUM BACK ON TOP OF THE TABLE AND GOES TOWARDS THE DOOR. SHE OPENS IT, TURNING THE KNOB. SHE TAKES THE KEYS TO THE APPARTMENT FROM INSIDE HER BAG AND PLACES THEM IN THE LOCK FROM THE INSIDE. SHE GOES OUT, CLOSING THE DOOR. SECONDS LATER, SHE REMEMBERS TO CLEAN THE DOORKNOB AND RETURNS. LARITA THEN CLOSES THE DOOR ONCE AGAIN.

TIME

SOMEONE KNOCKS INSISTENTLY ON THE DOOR. SILENCE. MORE KNOCKING.

ONCE AGAIN THE DOOR OPENS AND A MAN ENTERS WEARING A WOMAN’S BATHROBE WITH A TOWEL WRAPPED AROUND HIS HEAD. HE IS EXTREMELY NERVOUS. HE APPEARS TO BE
RUNNING AWAY FROM SOMETHING OR SOMEONE. HE CLOSES THE DOOR IMMEDIATELY AND MOVES AWAY FROM IT.

MAN IN WOMAN’S BATHROBE
My God...Help me, Mrs Smith (out of breath, looking towards the door) Oh Jesus, save me. Help me... (turning in George’s direction) oh Mr Smith...I didn’t notice you were there...if you were an ANACONDA you’d eat me whole! You can’t imagine what happened to me... (looking towards the door and George). He wanted to beat me, Mr Smith. (indignant) Imagine beating a poor defenceless creature like me. I spend years and years sacrificing myself, and working like a dog just to make that miserable sod happy. Don’t say anything Mr Smith. I know its all my fault. We bestow our favours here, there and everywhere, and this is the result. Well done me. If I were younger I’d jump from one lover to the next and wouldn’t give a damn!...Happy is the man, Mr Smith, who knows how to look after your Ethel...(looking worriedly towards the door, going towards it and listening to see if there is anyone on the other side) I think he’s gone, Mr Smith! But he’ll be back, I’m not one to be thrown away lightly (turning round and glancing up) nobody bites the hand that feeds them, do they?! (reflecting) Sometimes you have to though...otherwise, you’d be a doormat, wouldn’t you? (he opens the door, looks cautiously along the corridor and returns) good, thanks very much, Mr Smith and all the best to Mrs Smith (looks again along the corridor and leaves) " ADIEAU, MON CHÉRIE"!

HE LEAVES THE DOOR AJAR.

SECONDS LATER, A BALD MAN WITH A SMALL MOUSTACHE ENTERS CAUTIOUSLY. ALTHOUGH HE IS ALREADY INSIDE THE APARTMENT, HE KNOCKS ON THE DOOR. HE IS DRESSED LIKE THE OLD-TIME PROTESTANT PREACHERS. HE IS CARRYING A BIBLE UNDER HIS ARM AND A BAG WITH HANDLES.

PREACHER
Hello everyone. I’m coming in...I’m inside (looks around and finally spots George) Oh, you’re here, brother... (looking upwards) Hallelujah Lord! (sitting down) May I sit down? I’m sitting down, hallelujah brother! You can’t imagine how much we struggle to bring you the word...I walk and walk and walk carrying the good news of the Lord! Hallelujah. It is good to be received in a house whose doors are always open...The doors of the Lord’s house are always open to receive our brothers who are going to the depths of hell... (interrupting and standing up) Save him Lord! Hallelujah! (turning towards George) Do you mind if I get a drink of water from the kitchen, brother? Of course you don’t, do you brother? (he
heads towards the kitchen) I’ll take no answer to mean yes. Hallelujah!

WE HEAR HIM OPENING AND CLOSING DRAWERS AND CLATTERING CUPS AND CUTLERY. THE PREACHER RETURNS, SUSPICIOUS. HE GOES OVER TO AQUARIUM WHERE THE FISH USED TO BE.

PREACHER
Don’t worry, one day this will be full of fish, brother. Just believe on the Lord, Hallelujah!

HE GOES TO OPEN ONE OF THE DRAWERS OF THE BUFFET TABLE WHEN HE HEARS A POLICE SIREN. THE PREACHER CHANGES HIS MIND AND TURNS QUICKLY TO LEAVE, BUT THE BAG HE IS CARRYING IS RATHER HEAVY AND HE DROPS IT ON THE FLOOR, MAKING A TREMENDOUS NOISE.

PREACHER
The voice of the Lord is full of mysteries. Hallelujah! Stay close to the Lord, brother. Hallelujah!

THE PREACHER CREEPS OUT FURTIVELY. HE STILL HAS TIME TO PICK UP A BIBLE, WHICH IS LYING ON THE TABLE, AND PUT IT INSIDE THE BAG.

PREACHER
The tithe, brother, the tithe!

THE PREACHER LEAVES IN A HURRY.

BEFORE LONG, ETHEL ARRIVES. SHE FINDS THE DOOR OPEN. SHE IS CARRYING SOME BAGS OF SHOPPING

ETHEL
Eh, did I leave the door open?! Hello, George. I was talking to myself. It’s been a while since this house was busy...Nobody’s been to visit us...I need to have more visitors, dear...Ah, I bought a few things we needed...Don’t you go complaining that I spent too much...
AT THAT MOMENT THE DOORBELL RINGS

ETHEL

Who could that be? We’re not expecting anybody...Ahhh, I know. (excited) What if it’s her? My God, paying a surprise visit. Eh, George? What if it’s Lucy?

ETHEL GOES TO THE DOOR TO ANSWER IT.

SHE SWINGS THE DOOR OPEN, TRYING TO SURPRISE WHOEVER IS TRYING TO SURPRISE HER.

ETHEL

Aha! Got you!

ETHEL IS HERSELF SURPRISED. IT IS NOT WHO SHE THOUGHT IT WAS. A SHORT MAN IS STANDING IN FRONT OF HER, ALSO STARTLED BY THE RECEPTION.

ETHEL

Oh, My God! Who are you! (recovering her composure) How can I help you?

THE MAN LOOKS AT HER, SUSPICIOUS. THE LITTLE MAN IS HOLDING A MOBILE PHONE IN HIS HAND. HE DECIDES TO INTRODUCE HIMSELF, SHOWING HIS POLICE IDENTITY.

ETHEL

No, don’t tell me! If there’s some problem, it must be on the fifth floor (confiding in him) that queer and his lover...that one upstairs is too much! Shameless. We’ve already spoken to the resident’s manager but he hasn’t done anything about it yet...He’s a relative of the queer!! (closing the door) Go on up there.

ETHEL IS RETURNING TO THE CENTRE OF THE LIVING ROOM WHEN, ONCE AGAIN, THE DOORBELL RINGS.

ETHEL

Oh no, not again!

SHE RETURNS TO THE DOOR AND OPENS IT. THE MAN IS STILL THERE.
ETHEL
(pointing upwards) Didn’t I tell you it’s on the fifth floor...

THE MAN LOOKS AT HER SUSPICIOUSLY.

POLICEMAN
Forgive me, madam, but we’ve had a telephone call from this apartment (checking the number on the door) 450, alleging that someone is dead...

ETHEL
Dead! What do you mean, dead?

POLICEMAN
Dead, madam...D-e (thinking) how do you spell dead? I’m sorry, Madam, but I have to check out the allegations. I’ll need to have a look inside...(on the mobile phone) Yes, right now? I know, I know...

ETHEL
My God! That’s all I need...Now they’re playing hoaxes, George. Let me take care of this! (to the policeman) why not, come and see with your own eyes...Come on in.

THE MAN ENTERS, CAUTIOUSLY. HE IMMEDIATELY NOTICES GEORGE’S PRESENCE IN THE APPARTMENT. HE GREET HIM.

POLICEMAN
Evening!

SILENCE

ETHEL
You’re mistaken. There’s no dead person in here. You know we walk unprotected in the streets while the police are here investigating some stupid allegation. It’s some kind of stupid hoax.

THE POLICEMAN BEGINS TO SNOOP AROUND THE ROOM AND HEADS TOWARDS THE BEDROOM.

ETHEL
No...Not my bedroom, no, please! Hey, officer...

ETHEL IS OUTRAGED BY THE POLICEMAN’S INTERFERENCE.

SHE DECIDES TO FOLLOW HIM.
ETHEL (OFF)
This is all I need...The police coming here inside the house and snooping around...

POLICE (OFF)
Madam, I’m only doing my duty. I have to carry out my investigations, hoax or no hoax...Do you know anyone from Portugal?

THE POLICEMAN RETURNS WITH ETHEL HOT ON HIS HEELS. HE GOES TO THE BATHROOM AND SHEfollows him.

ETHEL (OFF)
But this is absurd, officer! You know, we’re the ones who pay your salary...This interference is absurd...Can’t you see that this is a complete waste of time?

THE POLICEMAN RETURNS AND LOOKS AROUND THE ROOM. HE LOOKS WITH INTEREST AT THE HEADLINE OF THE NEWSPAPER THAT GEORGE IS “READING”.

POLICEMAN
(talking on the mobile phone while reading the newspaper)
Chief, did you know they aren’t going to spend any funds on culture? (removing the mobile phone from his ear as though the Deputy has yelled) OK chief (to the public) he’s got a nephew who works in the theatre, (returning to the mobile phone) I’m carrying out my investigations...Nothing so far.

THE POLICEMAN LOOKS TOWARDS THE BUFFET TABLE WHERE THE AQUARIUM IS. HE NOTICES THERE ARE NO FISH INSIDE.

POLICEMAN
Do you by any chance have a cat in the apartment?

WHILE THE POLICEMAN IS READING THE LABEL ON A POT OF FISH FEED, ETHEL DOESN’T LEAVE HIS SIDE. SHE DOESN’T NOTICE THAT THERE AREN’T ANY FISH IN THE AQUARIUM.

ETHEL
Why? Do you like animals as well? Did you know they have a very short life?

MECHANICALLY, WITHOUT PAYING ANY ATTENTION, SHE
TAKES THE POT FROM THE POLICEMAN AND THROWS MORE FOOD INTO THE AQUARIUM, WHILE THE POLICEMAN GOES TO LOOK BEHIND THE CURTAIN THAT IS HANGING BY THE WINDOW.

ETHEL
Did you know crime is increasing every day in London? And unemployment? Above all, the health conditions are atrocious, to say nothing of education...And we are voting, and voting and revolting!

WHILE ETHEL IS TALKING, THE POLICEMAN LOOKS AT THE NEWSPAPER THAT GEORGE IS READING. HE BUMPS AGAINST GEORGE’S SHOULDER, WHICH IS IN FRONT OF HIM. IT IS AS HARD AS ROCK. GEORGE FALLS TO THE GROUND WITHOUT RELEASING HIS GRIP ON THE NEWSPAPER. THE POLICEMAN IS STUNNED FOR A FEW MOMENTS. SECONDS LATER HE RECOVERS HIMSELF.

POLICEMAN
(into the mobile phone) Holy shit! Chief! Just look what I’ve found here!

THE POLICEMAN BENDS DOWN TO LOOK AT GEORGE WHERE HE HAS FALLEN ONTO THE FLOOR. THE ARMCHAIR IS BLOCKING ETHEL’S VIEW SO THAT SHE CANNOT SEE HER FALLEN HUSBAND.

ETHEL
George. Oh, George! (to herself) Where has that man got to? Just when I need him, he disappears...George!

ETHEL LOOKS AROUND HER FOR GEORGE.

POLICEMAN
Madam...Madam!

ETHEL SEEMS NOT TO HAVE HEARD HIM.

POLICEMAN
Fucking Hell! Madam!
ETHEL FINALLY HEARS THE POLICEMAN.

ETHEL
What is it! What do you want? Aren’t you wasting enough of our time already?

THE POLICEMAN MOTIONS WITH HIS INDEX FINGER, BECKONING HER OVER TO WHERE GEORGE IS LYING.

POLICEMAN
Madam, is this your husband?

ETHEL
Who? George? Uh-huh! Why?

POLICEMAN
Because this gentleman here has popped his clogs, Madam...

(into the mobile phone) The allegation was correct, Chief...

ETHEL
What do you mean popped his clogs?

POLICEMAN
Kicked the bucket. Dead as a doornail...He’s dead, Madam!

(into the mobile phone) The guy’s dead, Chief.

SUSPECTING SOMETHING IS AMISS, ETHEL GOES OVER TO THE POLICEMAN, TURNING TO LOOK AT GEORGE WHO IS TENSE, GRIPPING THE NEWSPAPER.

ETHEL
This joke is in very bad taste (to the policeman) and you, officer, talking on the mobile phone the whole time...

POLICEMAN
So what, Madam? A football coach can train his team with a mobile phone (with distain) Why shouldn’t I?

ETHEL
(imitating the policeman’s distain) Because we’re the ones who pay the bill...(to George) Come on man, stop this nonsense. Get up! (startled) George! What kind of joke is this, George? (to the policeman) You two are in this together...This is some kind of Joke, isn’t it? (thoughtful) Let me see now...It’s not the first of April, or my birthday...

POLICEMAN
Madam...

ETHEL PAYS NO ATTENTION TO THE POLICEMAN TALKING
ETHEL
Maybe some publicity stunt...

POLICEMAN
Hey, Madam, Listen!

ETHEL
No, no, I know, it’s “Candid Camera”, that’s what it is. (turning to the policeman) You’re from the TV (turning to the audience, searching for a supposed TV camera) Hey, where do I speak? Over here? Or there? Where’s the camera?

POLICEMAN
Hey, Madam! (holding her by the arm) Will you stop? Your hus-band is dead!!! Do you understand me? (into the mobile phone) What? I’m telling Madam here that her husband has popped his clogs.

ETHEL IS PARALYZED, JUST LIKE GEORGE HIMSELF.

POLICEMAN
That’s right, Madam. Your husband is dead!

ETHEL WALKS AWAY LIKE A ZOMBIE, STUNNED. SHE DOESN’T KNOW WHICH WAY TO WALK. SHE DECIDES TO GO OVER TO THE BUFFET TABLE WHERE THE AQUARIUM IS. ETHEL TAKES THE POT, OPENS THE LID AND POURS ALL THE CONTENTS INTO THE AQUARIUM. From the other side of the room, the policeman observes everything.

POLICEMAN
(whispering into the mobile phone) Chief, this woman is acting very strangely. She’s putting feed into an aquarium, which doesn’t have any fish in it...I know, there could be, but even if there was, the poor bugger wouldn’t have survived!

ETHEL STANDS STARING AT THE AQUARIUM, PARALYZED.

POLICEMAN
(into the mobile phone) I’ll go and talk to her. You’d better send the hearse!

THE POLICEMAN GOES OVER TO ETHEL. HE TRIES TO BE CORDIAL WITH HER.
POLICEMAN
Madam, I would like you to come with me to the police
station to answer a few questions...

ETHEL JOLTS, AS THOUGH
SHE HAS SUDDENLY RECEIVED
AN INJECTION OF
ADRENALIN. SHE BEGINS TO
GET IMPATIENT, PACING TO
AND FRO.

ETHEL
It’s not possible...It’s not possible! This can’t be true...
(screaming) George! George! You bastard!

THE POLICEMAN IS STARTLED
BY ETHEL’S REACTION

ETHEL (CONT.)
George, George...how could you do this to me, you sod? How
could you go and die, just like that, eh? You didn’t say
anything, not even one word...All this time, you never let
me speak...George...

THE POLICEMAN OBSERVES
ETHEL WITH A CERTAIN
IMPATIENCE.

ETHEL
(to the policeman) It’s been 26 years...26! A lifetime! Can
you imagine that? Now this is the final straw... Would you
like some tea? I’ll get a piece of cake that I’ve just
bought it’s delicious. The bread isn’t what it used to be,
though.

THE POLICEMAN DECIDES TO
SIT DOWN ON THE SOFA AND
CONTINUES TO LISTEN TO
HER WHILE SHE GOES TO
FETCH THE TEA AND CAKE
FROM THE KITCHEN.

ETHEL (OFF)
Are you married, officer? No, no need to answer, I know. You
must try this cake...

ETHEL RETURNS WITH THE
TEA AND CAKE AND HANDS IT
TO THE POLICEMAN, WHO
BEGINNS TO EAT, HALF-
HEARTEDLY.

ETHEL
(turning towards George) George here only likes chocolate
éclairs, whereas our daughter, Lucy, only likes caramel
pudding...
A SIREN IS HEARD. THE POLICEMAN STANDS UP.

ETHEL
Did you know, officer, that they cut the funds for culture? And any day now they’re going to cut...

POLICEMAN
(interrupting) I know, I know Madam. Let’s go, before this conversation gets you into more trouble...come on!

THE POLICE TAKES ETHEL BY THE ARM AND COURTEOUSLY LEADS HER TOWARDS THE DOOR. THE TWO GO OUT, CLOSING THE DOOR BEHIND THEM.

THE CURTAINS CLOSE