

Jane P.

AUSTRALIA DAY

a play by

JONATHAN BIGGINS



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This edition published in 2015 by DSPress:
a division of David Spicer Productions - www.davidspicer.com.au

ISBN 978-0-9943473-0-5

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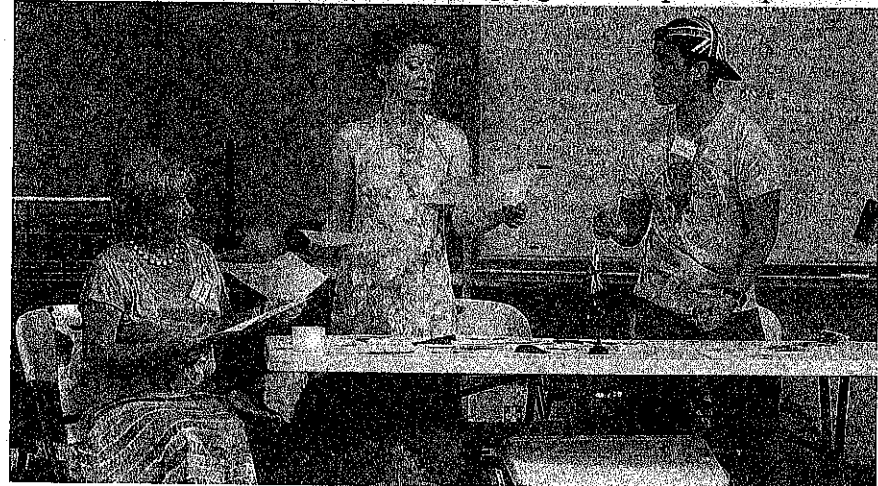
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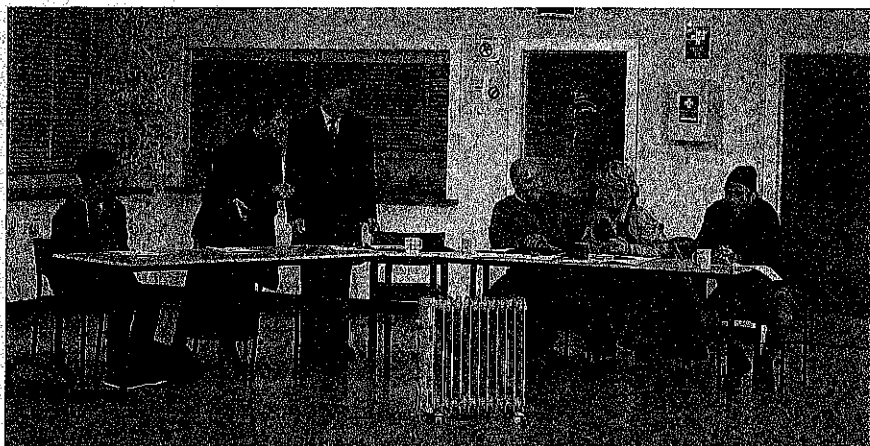
AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote *Australia Day* after several tours of duty as an Australia Day Ambassador in regional NSW. Initially sceptical about the celebration of the national day, my experiences showed me another side as the warmth, dedication and quiet patriotic pride of the organising committees and the towns they served taught me the value of uniting communities to remember what is good about being an Australian – or, more importantly, of becoming one, for the citizenship ceremony formed the emotional heart of the day's proceedings.

And it was a surprisingly moving ceremony because these were people who were eager to become Australians – they appreciated the values and opportunities that the rest of us either take for granted or exploit with the lip-service of platitudes. When did we become a nation of whingers? Why is there now a disconnect between our rancorous civic discourse and the effort that I saw in the often thankless work the committees did to engender some sort of pride and gratitude in an increasingly graceless public sphere?

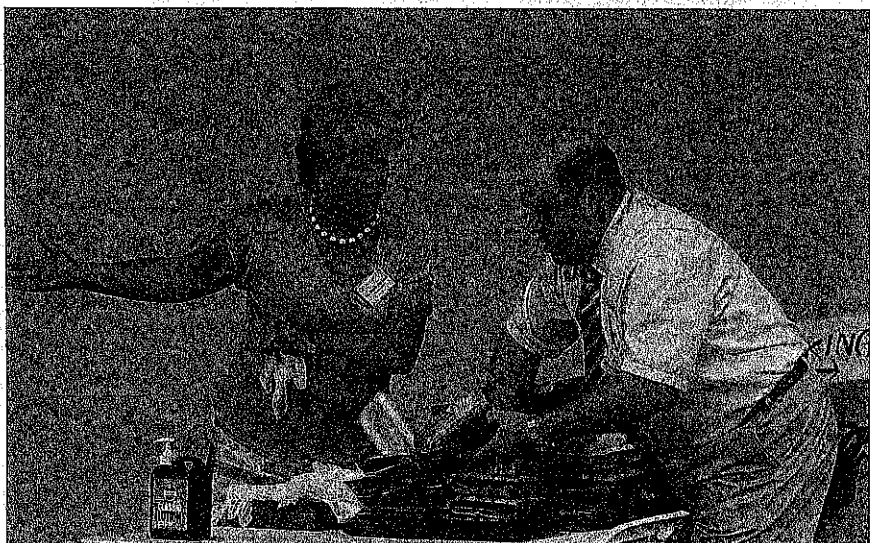


Valerie Bader, Alison Whyte and Kaeng Chan in *Australia Day*, 2012.



Kaeng Chan, Alison Whyte, Geoff Morrell, David James, Valerie Bader and Peter Kowitz in *Australia Day*, 2012.

Many of their communities are being confronted by change on multiple fronts. Tree-changers on hobby farms bring their radical green ideas while, in stark contrast, Coles and Woolies crush independence and the internet, connecting everybody yet no-one, makes it a lot easier for us to buy things from Walmart. How much



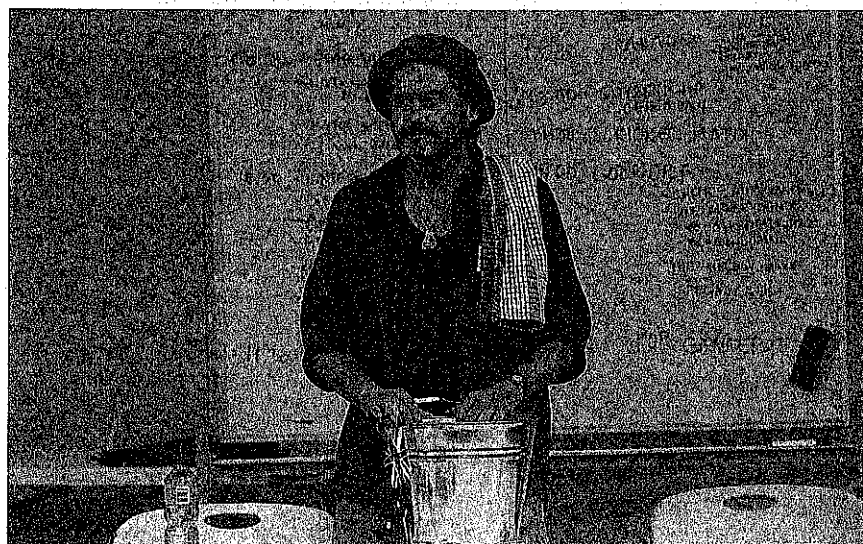
Valerie Bader and David James in *Australia Day*, 2012.

longer can regional Australia hold fast as the source of our national identity – because let's face it, our cities are about as uniquely Australian as Auckland.

Hopefully for as long as the Australia Day organising committee can find the strength to coordinate the sausage sizzle, the damper bake and the SES display. For as long as the deputy mayor is willing to hand out native shrubs to welcome new Australians while we take a moment to rediscover the self-effacing tolerance that made this country worthwhile in the first place.

Just a few notes on playing style - the play is a comedy but don't try to make it funny, it works best played for real as slightly heightened naturalism. The characters are types, not caricatures. If budgetary constraints make two sets difficult, the second act can be set in the same scout hall, appropriately dressed for the big day. Coriole is a fictional town but references to real places can be altered to suit the production's locality.

Jonathan Biggins



Peter Kowitz in *Australia Day*, 2012.

THE CHARACTERS

BRIAN HARRIGAN. 45-plus, Mayor of Coriole Shire and preselection candidate for the Liberal Party. Chair of the Australia Day Organising Committee. Small business owner, Rotarian.

ROBERT WILSON. 45-plus, Deputy Mayor of Coriole Shire and loyal Deputy Chair of the Committee.

MAREE BUCKNELL (pronounced Mah-ree). 60-plus, President of the local Country Womens Association. Long-serving committee member.

WALLY STEWART. 55-plus, local builder and small scale developer. Long-serving committee member.

HELEN MCINNES. 35-plus, local Greens councillor, a relatively new arrival to the shire from the state capital. New to the committee.

CHESTER LEE. 25-plus, newly arrived Australian-born Vietnamese primary school teacher. Very new to the committee.

THE SETTING

The play is set in a fictional town - this version is set in NSW. Geographical references may be altered to suit local productions.

AUSTRALIA DAY was originally commissioned by Sydney Theatre Company and first produced at the Playhouse, Arts Centre Melbourne, in a co-production between MTC and STC on 21st April 2012. Photos: © Jeff Busby

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The Coriole scout hall. Robert is setting up tables and chairs for the committee meeting, distributing papers etc. Brian enters.

Brian: (*shivering*) Jesus wept.

Robert: Evening Brian.

Brian: Cold enough for you?

Robert: Lowest July maximum for eighteen years, apparently.

Brian: So much for climate change. I thought it was supposed to get hotter.

Robert: It is. But just because it's colder doesn't mean it's not getting hotter.

Brian: Makes sense.

Robert: You have to look at the trend.

Brian: Spare me the lecture - Weather Doesn't Equal Climate.

Robert: Eventually it does.

Brian: I think we've just got short memories. The weather changes but we forget it was exactly the same thirty years ago.

Robert: You mean they do make summers like they used to?

Brian: Don't you remember - school milk in the playground at boiling point? Turned me off the stuff for life. Still, it's bloody freezing tonight. What's the bet we get a few no-shows.

Robert: I've had an apology from Graham.

Brian: Again? Has he ever turned up for a meeting?

Robert: He made it to the council dinner to thank the committee for all our hard work.

Brian: I don't know why we just can't ditch him and get someone who's going to pull their weight.

Robert: He's the head of the Chamber of Commerce, Brian. He keeps the sponsors onside.

Brian: He doesn't give us a damn cent. Come on, he charges wholesale plus ten for the bread rolls, we've got to have that bloody O'Connor Bakery banner that's the size of a bus outside the sausage sizzle - and then he goes on about community spirit and the national day. Give me a break.

Robert: I'd let it go, Brian. It's a small town, it's not worth the grief.

Brian: What is these days? It's all in the too bloody hard basket.

Robert: What's eating you?

Brian: Oh, nothing. Just another meeting with the pre-selection panel today. A couple more hoops to jump through. Jesus, you'd think I was applying for a bloody sainthood.

Robert: It's a federal seat Brian.

Brian: Oh, don't worry, some bloke from Sydney was there, head office, just making sure that the "grass-roots, democratic process" was running exactly along the lines they had in mind - all hands off, of course. And I'm thinking, well, what else do you want me to do? I mean, what's gonna swing this - is it a group massage and happy endings all round?

Robert: They've got to get it right.

Brian: Never worried them in the past. That's why this place has always been run by the bloody National Party. Like that fuckin' idiot we've got now.

Robert: Well, if anyone can take it back for us, Brian, it's you.

Brian: Thank you, Robert. Very kind. I feel much better now.

Robert: You're welcome.

Brian: Oh - I've been meaning to ask you. You know your internet service provider - I mean, not yours specifically but any of them... do they keep some sort of record of every site you've gone to?

Robert: Not yet, as far as I know.

Brian: Not that I've been doing anything under the counter but, you know, I don't know what the kids have been looking at and I don't want something suddenly blowing up in my face...

Robert: No. Your... kids haven't been looking at anything on the council computers, have they?

Brian: *(pause)* Possibly. If they've been sick off school and I've had to take them in, That... might've happened.

Robert: I'll check for you.

Brian: How far back does council keep a record?

Robert: Five years.

Brian: Shit.

Wally enters

Wally: Fuck me sideways, it's cold.

Robert: And good evening to you Wally.

Brian Coldest July day in sixteen years, I'm told.

Robert: Eighteen.

Wally: So much for global fuckin' warming, eh?

Robert: The urn's boiled. Have a cup of tea.

Wally: Got anything stronger?

Robert: We're in a scout hall, Wally.

Wally: I'm only talking about a nip. Half these kids are on smack.

Robert: Half the kids are cubs.

Wally: Your drug hooligan gets younger every day, Robert. How are you, Brian?

Brian: Can't complain. No-one'd listen.

Wally: Yeah, right. Are those taps in yet?

Brian: I checked with Stephen - next week, earliest.

Wally: Bloody hell, where are they coming from?

Brian: I think he said they were Italian.

Wally: That'd be right. Every bastard you do a bathroom for these days has got to have designer taps. Fuckin' architects. What's wrong with Caroma?

Brian: People've got more choice. They want a certain look.

Wally: And you seriously think they should buy a set of bath taps that's gonna cost more than a second-hand car?

Brian: I don't choose them, Wally, I just sell them.

Wally: I mean, just your bloody shower drain - your fuckin' grille thing - that can cost two hundred bucks! Those Italians have got it worked out, haven't they?

Robert: Must be the Mafia.

Wally: Oh shit yeah. They'd have a hand in it.

Robert: Yes, they'd split it up between the families. You can have prostitution; we'll have bath and shower sets.

Wally: You'd be surprised, Robert. Anything that turns a buck, your Mafia's in there. I saw this thing on the History Channel last night, just after "The Nazis in Colour". It was about garbage collection in Naples - that's all Mafia.

Robert: We could try that here Brian. Local mayor creatively outsourcing council services.

Brian: Can't see it getting past the Greens.

Robert: I don't know. How carbon neutral are the Mafia?

Wally: Speaking of greens, is that cold-arsed bitch coming tonight?

Brian: If you're referring to Councillor McInnes, Wally, yes she is.

Wally: Funny you knew who I was talking about.

Brian: It's a committee of eight. I don't have to be Sherlock Holmes.

Wally: What she want to barge in here for? We know how to organise Australia Day. What's the bet she'll want a smoking

Re-write
→ ceremony and everyone wearing sorry t-shirts. *(insert rewrite)*

Brian: Just pull it back a bit, Wally, can you? Between you and me - it's a little bit edgy in council at the moment, we don't want to rock the boat too much with our new green friends.

Wally: Friends? Brian, you're standing for pre-selection for the fuckin Liberal Party!

Brian: It's a new paradigm Wally.

Wally: A new what?

Brian: The goal posts are shifting.

Wally: It's the same fuckin' ball, isn't it? It's the same idea: you kick goals. Or is that out the window as well?

Brian: And the goal is two feet wide and it swaps ends every five minutes. If you want to score, you have to compromise.

Wally: Bullshit. You start letting the fuckin greens run the agenda and this town's down the shithole, mate. They had Canberra sewn up for years - they're fuckin' mad. Look at what happened with the sub-division out at Preston's Creek. Whole thing ground to a halt for six months because of some fuckin' endangered frog. And the frog - if you could find one - was the size of a bloody five cent piece!

Robert: Biodiversity. It's actually quite important.

Wally: Then put the frogs in a tank with a bit of fuckin lettuce and send in the bulldozers.

Brian: You should have your own talkback show, Wally. You're a natural.

Maree arrives

Maree: Sorry I'm late. The traffic! That new roundabout they're building at Preston's Creek, absolute standstill.

Wally: Probably waiting for the frog to hop home.

Maree: I mean, really. Where have all these cars come from? I was in town last Thursday, I had to go round the block twice to get a park. In winter!

Brian: People don't just come here for the beach, Maree.

Robert: Growing town, growing problem, I'm afraid.

Wally: Don't give Brian any ideas, he'll put in bloody parking meters.

Robert: They've already got them in Duxborough Head. Two dollars an hour.

Maree: Two dollars an hour!

Wally: Shit! I've had hookers cheaper than that.

Maree: Wally!

Wally: Only joking, Maree. I've never paid for it in my life.

Maree: Well there's not much sense in paying yourself, is there?

Wally: Ooh! Right below the belt. Where I like it.

Brian: God, it's like watching re-runs of "Are You Being Served".

Robert: Maybe we should make a start. We've got a quorum.

Brian: No, I'd rather wait for Helen.

Maree: Helen?

Robert: Councillor McInnes.

Maree: Oh yes, I met her at the library during Seniors Week. New to the district, isn't she?

Brian: She's been here for nearly two years.

Maree: So new.

Robert: Moved up from Melbourne.

Wally: That'd be right.

Brian: She's replacing Clem on the committee.

Robert: Did you ever find out why he pulled out?

Brian: It's a bit delicate...

Maree: Bladder's like a rusted bucket.

Robert: I'm assuming that's not the medical term.

Maree: She's not going to want to change everything, is she?

Brian: A bit of new blood wouldn't hurt.

Chester enters, uncertain.

Robert: Can we help you?

Chester: Hope so. I'm looking for the meeting about Australia Day?

Robert: You've found it.

Chester: Right. I'm the school liason... person.

Brian: What's happened to Andrew?

Chester: He's got an in-service course. In Armidale. So I drew the short straw.

Wally: Short straw?

Chester: You know - volunteering is compulsory.

Brian: Sorry, I didn't get your name?

Chester: Chester.

Wally: Chester?

Chester: As in drawers. Chester drawers. That's not my real name. Well, Chester's real. But my surname's Lee.

Maree: You any relation to Darrell?

Chester: No.

Brian: Well, come and join us. I'm Brian Harrigan, chair of the committee...

Chester: Good to meet you Brian.

Brian: This is Robert Wilson, he's my deputy, both here and on council.

Chester: G'day Bob.

Robert: Robert.

Chester: Bobert. Sorry - Robert.

Brian: Maree Bucknell, President of the local CWA.

Chester: CWA? Is that a supermarket?

Maree: Country Women's Association.

Chester: Right. Oh - I saw you guys on Masterchef! Outdoor challenge. They were making lamingtons and shit.

Wally: And you could only tell which was which from the coconut.

Brian: And this is Wally Stewart.

Chester: How you going?

Wally: Chester - funny name for one of you lot. Never met an Asian called Chester.

Chester: I've never met anyone called Chester. I've met one or two Wallies though.

Robert: Are you new to the district, Chester?

Chester: Yeah. Only been here a couple of months. Got a transfer from Newcastle. Year six teacher.

Wally: Bit young, aren't you?

Chester: We're like policemen. Get younger every year.

Maree: I think you teach my great-niece Sherridan.

Chester: Would that be the Sherridan with two 'r's?

Maire: Yes, dreadful name for a child but her sister's worse off. She's Bethakny with a silent 'k'. Sherridan was up at our place, for a "sleepover" - her mother's got relationship problems, not that it's my place to say anything on that particular score but blood will out - and she mentioned she had a new teacher. Said he was a Ch...

Awkward pause

Chester: Nice bloke, I trust.

Maree: I'm terribly sorry but... we don't have many Chinese in Coriole - there's the restaurant at the RSL, of course, and the Thai place that's just opened, not that they're...

Chester: Relax Maree, I'm not Chinese - I'm an ABV.

Maree: A what?

Chester: Australian Born Vietnamese. Son of a boat person.

Brian: Done a lot for this country. Hard workers.

Chester: Aren't they? My Dad was a doctor back home. Got here and worked in the casualty department at Canterbury hospital. As a cleaner. No, it's a joke. He worked as a doctor - Canterbury Hospital will take anyone.

Robert: Brian, I think we should get started.

Brian: Give her a few more minutes.

Helen arrives

Helen: Sorry, sorry everyone.

Robert: Speak of the devil.

Brian: Ah, Helen. Glad you could join us.

Helen: Couldn't start the car.

Wally: Shoulda bought a car with an engine in it.

Helen: It's a hybrid, Wally. It has two. But for some reason it still needs a battery to start the batt -look, I don't know, it's sorted out now and I'm sorry I'm late.

Chester: G'day - I'm Chester.

Maree: School liason.

Helen: Good to meet you, Chester.

Brian: I take it you know Wally?

Helen: We've crossed paths at the planning sub-committee meetings, yes.

Wally: Oh yeah, Helen and I are great mates.

Brian: And this is Maree.

Maree: We met at the library during Seniors Week. You opened the access ramp.

Helen: Gosh - you've got a good memory.

Maree: Well it's not every day you go to the opening of an access ramp. How are you settling in?

Helen: I'm starting to almost feel like a local.

Maree: Give it another thirty years.

Helen: So they tell me. Finally bought a place.

Maree: Yes, I heard. No offence but you paid too much for it. And you get the full afternoon sun on that side, I can't take that sort of heat.

Robert: Good for your solar hot water.

Wally: Which we're all subsidising.

Helen: I don't have solar, Wally. I have gas.

Chester: You can get pills for that.

Maree: Still, it's not a bad spot if you don't mind trees.

Helen: I like trees.

Maree: Can't stand the leaves and the mess myself.

Brian: Can we get started? Or is there some other aspect of Councillor McInnes' private life you'd like to explore?

Maree: I was only asking.

Helen: It's okay Brian. In Richmond I hardly knew my neighbours but I'm getting used to the attention.

Robert: It's community.

Helen: Exactly.

Brian: Alright. I declare this meeting open at 7.42.

Chester: Could I just ask a question before we start - Andrew didn't really say much about what I'm supposed to do.

Brian: Well, we're the committee that organises the Coriole Shire celebrations for Australia Day.

Chester: And that's January 25th, isn't it?

Robert: 26th. 25th is Anzac Day.

Chester: 25th of January?

Wally: Jesus, what do they teach in schools these days?

Chester: Wally, I'm kidding. I know Anzac Day's in October.

Maree: It's in March, isn't it?

Wally: It's in fuckin' April!

Chester: Joke, Wally.

Helen: Do we have a brief or some kind of mission statement?

Brian: Not as such, it's more of a, well, a traditional arrangement.

Maree: Pretty much the same every year.

Wally: Can't see any reason to change it.

Robert: We have it out on the sports oval. Citizenship ceremony, sausage sizzle, the SES volunteers.

Brian: Fire authority brings a truck down.

Robert: The scouts and guides do a march past.

Maree: We had a man in a Tiger Moth one year. What happened to him?

Brian: Insurance won't cover it.

Wally: What - they worried he's gonna fly into the marquee?

Robert: I think he lost a wheel doing a loop the loop down in Ballinderry. Could've hit someone.

Maree: What was he doing down there?

Robert: Oh, the Premier was opening a wetlands interactive experience or something.

Helen: Pity it didn't hit him.

Brian: Anyway, we have entertainment throughout the afternoon - police band, local dance academy, combined schools choir - which is where you'll come in of course, Chester...

Robert: And then we finish at about four o'clock with a pop concert for the young people.

Chester: Bet that goes off. How do you get the choir to show up during school holidays?

Maree: It's not a very big choir.

Brian: We pay them.

Robert: No cash - it's McDonalds vouchers.

Helen: I know I'm the new kid on the block here but is that sending the right message?

Wally: Nothing wrong with giving kids a bit of pride in their country.

Helen: Sure - but bribing them with junk food...

Wally: What - you think they're going to turn up for carrot sticks and sultanas?

Helen: Why not something like a book voucher?

Brian: We have a sponsor's agreement.

Robert: And they do have a healthy options menu.

Wally: Kids? As if.

Maree: I don't like their buns. The seeds get stuck in my plate.

Helen: I think we need to look at the whole question of who we take money from.

Wally: Jesus, we haven't even started the meeting yet.

Brian: Thank you, Wally. Helen, I hear your concerns and I suggest we put this discussion into business arising. Let's get back on agenda and start with Item 1: Apologies.

Wally: Let me guess: Graham.

Robert: No prizes there.

Wally: That's a shame. I was hoping for a book voucher.

Blackout. Telephone answering message (read by Maree) is heard.

V/O: Hello, you've reached the office of the Coriole Shire Australia Day Committee, helping to celebrate our national day. Please leave your name, number and one of our celebration operatives will contact you shortly. If you're ringing about the Bindi Irwin colouring competition, yes, the animal is a bilbie, not an Eastern Spotted quoll as printed on the sheets.

Lights up - the committee have swapped a few places and are wearing summer clothes - it's now September

Brian: Item five, Robert?

Robert: Two quotes for marquee hire...

Wally: What happened to Andersons?

Robert: He's not doing equipment hire any more.

Wally: You putting your hand up, Brian?

Brian: No, we don't carry anything big enough. We're not Bunnings.

Maree: I heard they're setting up a new store at Prestons Creek.

Brian: Well, there's an application in at council.

Wally: Shit - that's gonna hurt, isn't it?

Brian: Competition's good for business.

Wally: Bunnings isn't competition, Brian. They're napalm.

Brian: Well, council will decide in due time. Not that I'll be voting, of course.

Helen: Fairly obvious conflict of interest, I'd have thought.

Brian: Indeed.

Wally: You'll be in Canberra anyway.

Brian: That's not settled yet. And anyway, I've spent a lifetime building the business, Wally. I'm not going to just let it go.

Helen: We'll judge the application on its merits.

Brian: I'm sure you will.

Robert: We had a message left on the hotline suggesting a taekwon do display.

Maree: Steve Claughton?

Robert: Who else? To add to the kick-boxing display by the Steve Claughton Academy of Martial Arts.

Helen: What exactly does that have to do with Australia Day?

Wally: It's a community club.

Maree: But it's always the same half dozen blokes and that girl with the glasses. You know, with one lens taped up.

Robert: I think that's to fix a squint.

Maree: Well it's not working, she's had it taped for years. Why you'd let a child with glasses do kick-boxing is beyond me.

Helen: To build her confidence, to say: Girls can do anything.

Wally: I'll tell you one thing she can't do and that's kick box. They had the stretcher to her last year.

Chester: It must be hard to judge distance with one eye.

Helen: I say good on her for trying.

Wally: Thank Christ she's not doing the clay pigeon shooting.

Chester: What's that got to do with Australia Day?

Wally: Nothing. They do it down behind the tip on a Saturday.

Chester: The Steve Claughton Academy of Shooting?

Wally: Nah, Ted Gibson runs it.

Maria: And you'd be mad to join in with the way he drinks. It was worse when he was doing the archery, any time after lunch he couldn't hit a...

Brian: Can we please move on?

Robert: Yes we can.

Helen: I've been thinking about the hotline.

Robert: I don't know that hot's the right word. We don't get many messages.

Helen: Exactly. I was thinking we should do a website.

Brian: Not sure we've got the money for that.

Helen: No, I can do it - nothing fancy but it'll get us online.

Wally: For what?

Helen: Feedback, information, contact list, I don't know. Maybe we could run an online story competition for school kids - what Australia Day means to them, or they could imagine how the indigenous people felt when they saw the ships...

Wally: Here we go.

Chester: We could put a link to Wally on Youtube.

Helen: It'd cut down our paper footprint.

Maree: What's our paper footprint?

Wally: It's the same as our carbon footprint except you can wrap up bullshit in it.

Chester: We could have a Facebook page for friends of the Coriole Shire Organising Committee.

Robert: (*drily*) Do you think the servers could handle the hits?

Helen: I think the whole social media thing is something we should look into - this is how kids communicate, they don't read newspapers, they don't watch tv. It's all on the web.

Brian: Look, Helen, it's a great idea but you know what it's like at the council. As soon as you say the word IT, your budget's through the roof.

Robert: IT is two words.

Brian: What?

Robert: Information technology.

Helen: But we can do this for nothing. I've got the software- we could get the kids from the high school involved.

Chester: We could set up a twitter account.

Maree: A what?

Chester: Oh, come on, Maree. Twitter - it's an app...

Maree: A what?

Robert: A software programme for your phone.

Maree: Well that clears that up.

Chester: You can send messages to any group of people.

Wally: Can't you send them an email?

Helen: This is short - it's only up to 140 letters.

Maree: What's the point of that?

Chester: It lets them know what you're doing. Straightaway, you know, it's instant.

Helen: For example, Maree - you could tweet "Meeting discussing new direction in marketing for greater community awareness".

Maree: Why on earth would I want to?

Helen: That was just an example.

Wally: It's a load of rubbish.

Robert: Got to move with the times, Wally.

Wally: Oh shit yeah - I can just see the first fleet coming into

Botany Bay and Arthur Philip gettin' out the twitter: "Place is
 blackfellas → a shithole and chock full of abo's, but gee, we've come this far,
 might as well make a go of it."

Helen: I would appreciate it, Wally, if you could not use offensive language.

Wally: What - shithole?

Helen: No. Abo's: blackfellas

Wally: Sorry Helen, I was just abbreviating it to get in under 140 letters.

Awkward pause

Chester: So are we going with Twitter? It's free.

Brian: Does anyone have any objection to being on twitter?

Wally: Complete waste of time.

Brian: Personally, Wally, I agree but we can't stand in the way of progress.

Maree: You call that progress? Half the world knowing your business..

Helen: That's the whole point.

Maree: In my day I had a pen pal. But -

Chester: Please don't say "these kids today".

Maire: I was going to say she moved to Queensland and I never got her address. And don't patronise me.

Chester: Sorry Maree.

Helen's phone rings - she searches for it

Helen: Sorry, I forgot to turn it off. Didn't think I'd get reception in here.

Robert: You normally don't.

Wally: Bloody Telstra. Should never have privatised it.

Helen: There you go Wally - something we do agree on. (*Helen recognises the caller ID*) Sorry, I'm going to have to take this. (*She moves away to take the call*)

Wally: National broadband network? A phone that works'd be a fuckin' start.

Helen: Hello sweetheart? It's in the fridge. The blue container.

That's right. Don't try to use the microwave, get Mrs. D to do it for you.

Maree: That's her son.

Chester: Jesus. Do you know what he's wearing?

Helen: I won't be too long. Okay. Love you. Bye.

Helen hangs up and comes back to the table

Sorry about that.

Brian: No problem. Jack all right?

Helen: Jackson. Fine, he just gets a bit nervous. Actually, while

I've got this out, does anyone mind if I record the meeting?

Brian: I think we'd rather keep our discussions confidential.

Helen: It helps me remember.

Robert: I'd've hoped my minutes were an accurate record.

Helen: Absolutely, but...

Chester: Do we get minutes?

Robert: If you read your email.

Brian: Wally?

Wally: (*shrugs*) I've got nothing to hide.

Maree: Just don't let me hear it. Maddison made a Christmas video last year, it was awful - I sounded like the Freak from Prisoner.

Brian: Well, in the spirit of democracy I declare my objections over-ruled. Councillor McInnes may record proceedings.

Helen sets the voice memo, puts her phone on the table

Maree: Amazing what you can do with a phone these days.

Robert: Apparently you can talk to people on them as well.

Helen: So are we having a website?
 Brian: If you're prepared to put something together...
 Robert: No cost.
 Brian: ...we could trial a website. Item six. The sausage sizzle.
 Wally: What about it?
 Brian: Councillor McInnes has a few queries.
 Wally: Now there's a surprise.
 Helen: I was just thinking that a sausage sizzle is a bit monocultural.
 Wally: Mono-what?
 Helen: Are we reflecting the cultural diversity of the shire...
 Wally: What's more Australian than snags on a barbecue? You think in China on Chairman bloody Mao Day they serve up pavlova?
 Helen: This is a country of many cultures, Wally, we should be serving kosher food, vegetarian, Asian...
 Maree: *(to Chester)* Would you like us to do some satay sticks?
 Robert: We can't serve satay, there's the issue of nut allergies.
 Brian: Fried rice?
 Chester: Why does everyone look at me as soon as we start talking about minorities? No offence, Maree, but you're the endangered species.
 Maree: What do you mean?
 Chester: Well they weren't smuggling boat loads of CWA ladies onto Christmas Island, were they? Helen's right - even in Coriole the demographic is changing.
 Wally: And if the demographic doesn't like a sausage they can piss off home.
 Robert: Might I suggest a variety of sausages to reflect our cultural diversity..

Helen: No hang on a minute Robert, this is about way more than the sausages. I want you to tell me, Wally, exactly what kind of Australia we are celebrating.
 Wally: Oh, don't start banging on about invasion day again...
 Helen: No, no - what sort of country?
 Wally: I'll tell you this - it's a country not run by do-gooder hairshirts like you.
 Brian: Not yet.
 Helen gives him a look
 Helen: Answer the question.
 Wally: So what are you - the green Gestapo?
 Helen: Just answer the question.
 Wally: Alright, I'll tell you what sort of country I'm celebrating: it's a country that's not run by bloody do-gooder hair-shirts like you.
 Wally: It's a country that my father went to New Guinea to fight for because he thought it was worth three years in the shit to keep it safe from the Japs-
 Helen: I'm talking about the present Wally -
 Wally: - it's a country with a history and a tradition where you help out a neighbour, where you can count on a mate..
 Helen: And why does this sound like an editorial from the Daily Telegraph?
 Wally: Oh yeah, you've got your smart comebacks. You sit down there in Melbourne and watch Tony fucking Jones and some bunch of pricks talking about a country they wouldn't recognise if they fell over it. Well here's a news flash, Helen: things are a bit different out here and we don't appreciate some bloody blow-in from the city talking down their nose at us.

Helen: I'm not talking down my nose, Wally, I'm just trying to point out that Australia is changing and one day Coriole is going to have to catch up.

Maree: Maybe we don't want to catch up.

Wally: Exactly, Maree. You know, maybe we like it just the way it is.

Helen: We can't keep living in the past. In the council chambers, we've still got a picture of the Queen!

Wally: She's the head of state, for crying out loud.

Brian: Oh, don't start him on the republic. Some of us have got homes to go to.

Helen: *(to Wally)* And what -you're going to swear undying allegiance to Kate and Wills?

Wally: Well I'd rather them than President Dick Smith or Ita Buttrose.

Helen: It's like we're still living in the 1950's.

Maree: As someone who was alive in the 1950s, Helen, I can tell you even Coriole has moved on. We had to watch the Melbourne Olympics in black and white through the window of Nock and Kirby's. Everyone's got a colour TV now. And they're flat.

Helen: And that's a great leap forward Maree, I'm not denying it, but I'm simply suggesting we widen our horizons and try to reflect an Australia that's had one or two changes beyond the introduction of colour TV.

Maree: It was only an example.

Helen: I know Maree, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... oh God, why am I always the one who has to apologise? I just... look, just forget it. Just do the sausages, do the tomato sauce, on the white bread rolls with the onions for anyone who likes something a bit exotic...

Brian: No, no, come on. We can widen our horizons. We could have... wholemeal rolls.

Helen: Perfect! Problem solved.

Awkward pause

Robert: Is now a good time to talk about gas bottles?

Brian: I think now is a good time for a cup of tea.

Maree: Lovely. I've brought some scones.

Chester: And I've bought some raspberry and pistachio macarons.

Robert: Really?

Chester: That's what it said on the packet. My Year Six kids made them. Bit on the firm side but they should be alright.

They start to leave

Maree: I don't think we had macarons at school in my day.

Chester: Did you have slates? Or had paper been invented by then?

Maree: Your lot invented paper, didn't you?

Chester: That was the Chinese. Slightly different country.

Vietnam's more like their New Zealand, only hotter.

Brian: Robert - could I have a word?

Robert: Sure.

Brian waits until they leave

Brian: This Bunnings proposal...

Robert: It's big. 3000 square metres. That's a lot of hardware.

Brian: It's gonna kill me.

Robert: Oh, come on Brian, your customers are loyal.

Brian: Not when they can buy two hammers from Shanghai for six bucks. Bunnings'll have the parking, they're just off the exit ramp - I can't compete with that.

Robert: But what does it matter - you'll be in the House of Reps.

Brian: That's not a done deal - I haven't even got the preselection in the bag, let alone the seat. There's some new candidate from Braeworth, and she's a lawyer, part Taiwanese.

Robert: Ticks a few boxes.

Brian: And what's the bet she's fond of ticking the odd box herself - that's the way it's going, cover the minorities. I mean, what has this country come to when you're a white bloke in small business, a Rotarian and you still can't get a job in the Liberal Party? And the fucking Greens are breathing down our necks - if they preference Labor and our vote's split with the independent, we're gone. I need this Robert, I've still got two kids to get through school - the fees! Jesus! It'd be cheaper to put 'em up in the Hilton.

Robert: Send them local.

Brian: You think Jane's going to come at that?

Robert: You and I went to the local school.

Brian: Yeah, but she wants our kids to have a better class of drug dealer. And fuck it, Robert, I've built this business from the ground up. Stephen's managing on the weekends and I want him to take over the lot. Or what's left.

Robert: The shop's doing alright, isn't it?

Brian: Have you any idea how it's been in retail for the past three years? It makes selling encyclopaedias door-to-door look like a smart career move. But if Bunnings gets a foothold, I'll have fond memories of this as the boom time.

Robert: Well what are you suggesting? You can't vote it down.

Brian: Of course I can't. I'll have to abstain.

Robert: Shame we all can't.

Brian: Oh no. You can't abstain...

Maree and Chester enter with tea

Chester: The milk's not off, there are no lumps. See?

Maree: Smelt off.

Chester: No, someone's just left something in the fridge without Glad Wrap.

Maree: That'd be Mrs Mangos. She brought in a meatloaf two weeks ago for the Probis meeting, no-one's touched it since. I never trust Greeks with hygiene.

Brian: Any sign of the others?

Chester: Having a frank and fearless discussion about carbon pricing. Wally's a big fan.

Brian: I don't want to be here all night. I've got a meeting with Apex, trying to rally a bit of support.

Maree: I think you'll make a lovely member, Brian.

Brian: Thank you Maree - pity you're not one of the preselection committee.

He goes to the door and shouts down the corridor

Brian: Wally! Helen! Can you get a wriggle on?

Maree: Did you want a tea, Robert?

Robert: No, thanks. I'm fine.

Helen and Wally enter

Chester: Convinced yet, Wally?

Wally: Any price on carbon was not gonna do a fuckin' thing except send the country broke.

Helen: That's simply not true, Wally, the carbon tax did not...

Brian: Can we save it for Meet the Press? I'd like to move on. I suggest we defer further debate on the sausage sizzle, perhaps Councillor McInnes can get back to us with a report on sausage varieties in light of our previous discussion. Item seven. Our Australia Day ambassador.

Chester: Our what?

Robert: We're sent an ambassador..

Chester: From overseas?

Robert: No, they're prominent Australians who go to communities to give a speech, welcome the new citizens, that sort of thing.

Wally: Who've we got this year?

Brian: (*reading*) Professor Denise Fitzgerald.

Wally: Who?

Brian: She's a paediatrician, apparently, specialising in childhood immunity.

Wally: Jesus Christ. Can't we have someone we've heard of? Someone anyone's heard of?

Helen: She's obviously doing important work.

Wally: So's the bloody customs department but who wants one of them?

Maree: One year Duxborough Head had Gary Sweet.

Chester: Who?

Robert: Beningalee got Les Murray.

Chester: The poet?

Robert: No, the soccer bloke from SBS.

Wally: Why can't we get someone like Mike Hussey?

Robert: For a start, he's from West Australia.

Wally: Brett Lee, then. And he's multi-cultural, Helen. He does Bollywood.

Helen: Why does it have to be a footballer?

Wally: He's a bloody cricketer.

Maree: Could we have Jackie Weaver?

Brian: Bit out of our league now, I'm afraid.

Helen: I don't think we need a celebrity. The whole point is that it's an Australian who's contributed something worthwhile, isn't it?

Wally: You see, there, there is exactly the trouble with you lot - you're bloody experts at telling people what's good for 'em but you haven't got a damn clue what they actually want.

Brian: Well we can't change it now.

Wally: Why not? Tell 'em we want someone better.

Brian: I don't think that's a good idea.

Wally: Sorry Brian, this isn't the bloody council. It's a democracy and I say we take a vote on it.

Brian: And I say we don't.

Wally: Jesus mate, that sort of attitude isn't gonna do you any favours in the party room.

Helen: I say we vote.

Wally: Shit - she agrees with me.

Brian: Alright. Have it your way. Those in favour of requesting an alternative Australia Day ambassador?

Wally: (*raising his hand*) Someone half decent.

Maree: (*raising her hand*) Someone from "Home and Away".

Brian: Chester?

Chester: (*raising his hand*) I'd like a prominent economist, preferably from a non-English speaking background or a lesbian.

Brian: Helen?

Helen: I'm more than happy with the ambassador we've got.

Brian: And Robert?

Robert: I don't think we need to change.

Wally: Up to you Brian. Lock it up or bring it home. But just remember who your friends are.

Brian considers

Brian: Well, in the light of conflicting interests and opposing views, I shall show the type of leadership that made this country great: I'll abstain.

Blackout. Another telephone message read by Maree.

V/O: Hello, you've reached the office of the Coriole Shire Australia Day Committee, helping to celebrate our national day. Why not interface with our website at www-dot-corioleshire-dot-nsw-dot-gov-dot-au-forwardslash-corioleaustraliaday-

underscore-organisingcommittee. That's one word c-o-r-i-o-l-e-a-u-s *(fade)*

Robert is packing up, Helen is looking at her laptop. Chester and Brian are leaving

Maree: Night everybody!

ALL: Night!

Maree and Wally's voices are heard off stage as they are leaving.

Brian: Sorry to love you and leave you but I've got to get to the Lions Club meeting. Press the flesh.

Chester: Can I bludge a lift?

Brian: I didn't know you were in the Lions.

Chester: I don't even know what they are. My car's out of rego. I want a lift home.

Brian: That's in the opposite direction!

Chester: Come on - I might vote for you.

Brian: I know you don't mean that but at this stage I'm desperate. Can you two lock up when you go?

Robert: Sure. Night Brian. Night Chester.

Helen: Night.

Chester: Later. *(he goes)*

Helen: Hey - we've got a message on the feedback page. "Australia Day for Australians. Fuck off towel heads. We crew here - you flew here." Charming.

Robert: Put yourself on the net, you're instantly a target for a few nutters.

Helen: Try being in the Greens.

Robert: I take it you're not new to this game.

Helen: Oh, no. I've sat on quite a few committees. That's the one drawback of believing in democracy: you've got to be democratic.

Robert: Hardly sounds like the party of the open political process.

Helen: There's open and there's leaving yourself wide open.

Robert: I don't mean to be rude but I can't really figure out why you're here.

Helen: In Coriole?

Robert: On a committee for Australia Day.

Helen: I'm Australian.

Robert: But I know what you think of us...

Helen: Robert...

Robert: You think we're old-fashioned, out of touch, that it's all Captain Cook and flag tattoos.

Helen: That's unfair.

Robert: Is it?

Helen: Okay, there are things I'd like to change. I want to see this as a debate about who we are, who we want to be.

Robert: We're not all hicks, you know.

Helen: I do know. But the hicks are winning.

Robert: People like Wally?

Helen: You said it, not me.

Robert: They don't see it like that.

Helen: I know. That's why they're yelling even louder.

Robert: So now you want your turn to hijack the agenda.

Helen: If we don't do something - right now - to change the way we run this planet, let alone this country, there's not going to be an agenda. For anyone.

Robert: That's all a bit Green propaganda, isn't it?

Helen: You think so?

Robert: Probably not.

Helen: No, I didn't pick you for a denialist.

Robert: I think we're all in a state of denial. We're like children who won't acknowledge a problem because it overwhelms them. But I don't see what we can do about it.

Helen: Stop pretending it'll go away for a start.

Robert: And how is organising a multicultural sausage sizzle going to tackle the great moral challenge of our time?

Helen: Oh - so the cynic only comes out after nine o'clock?

Robert: You've got to admit it's a bit of a leap.

Helen: I stood for the Greens in Melbourne. Federally. Complete waste of time.

Robert: They won a seat.

Helen: Inner city - enough bleeding hearts and people pissed off with the Labor Party to carry the day.

Robert: And you call me a cynic.

Helen: Anything outside Port Melbourne and you can forget it - even though we get more votes than the National Party. Democracy in action! But I've got a theory - ten marginal seats swing it either way. So it's places like here that we have to win the hearts and minds.

Robert: You really think you're going to change Wally's mind?

Helen: Well, I don't think he's got a heart and I'd say what's left of the mind is long made up. But Maree? Maybe.

Brian enters

Brian: Robert, I was hoping you were still here. Oh, Helen - not interrupting anything, am I?

Helen: Robert and I were just discussing politics.

Brian: (*wary*) Council politics?

Helen: No, the big wide world beyond Coriole Shire.

Brian: Didn't realise there was one!

Robert: What happened to the Lions meeting?

Brian: Cancelled due to lack of interest, I got a text on route. So the night is young. I've got a bottle of the council's finest cab sav going begging. Anyone up for a glass?

Helen: In a scout hall?

Brian: I won't tell the ethics committee if you don't. Unless you need to get home.

Robert: Jackson be alright?

Helen: Ten minutes. He'll be fine.

Brian: Must be tough. I'm sorry...

Helen: You don't have to be. We get by.

Robert pours wine

Robert: It'll have to be mugs, I'm afraid.

Brian: Kids. I had Emily on the phone this afternoon, end of the world because her lecturer will only give her two weeks extension...

Robert: Two weeks!

Helen: Extensions were as rare as hen's teeth when I was at uni.

Brian: Yeah, well now they pay fees so the faculty's not so keen to fail them.

Helen: (*sips her wine*) Whoo... that's got a... a certain something.

Robert: Yes, it's a new local vineyard. Just started bottling.

Helen: Perhaps they should stop.

Robert: Come now, got to support our local businesses.

Brian: Maybe I could resell it as paint thinner.

Helen: Stripper, more like. Did you study, Brian?

Brian: I did two years of engineering, dropped out. Had my 60's experience driving a combi round New Zealand. Of course it was 1978 in the rest of the world.

Helen: Sex and drugs and rock'n'roll.

Brian: Not much of any of them, I'm afraid. One memorable night in Palmerston North but that secret goes with me to the grave.

Helen: What brought you back?

Brian: My father wanted me to take over the shop.

Robert: Inherit the family empire.

Brian: It was dying on its feet. Took me ten years to turn the place round.

Helen: So why do you want to leave it now?

Brian: Because I know how hard it is to run a small business and I don't think the mob in Canberra - and I include your lot in that Helen, no apologies, the tail wagging the dog -

Helen: I hardly think...

Brian: Yes, no offence, the minority tail - I don't think they could manage a paper round. You can't just keep digging a hole in Western Australia and hope the money makes its way to the rest of us.

Helen: I couldn't agree with you more.

Brian: Ah - but the difference is I don't want to get rid of mining altogether.

Robert: We'd be bankrupt without it.

Brian: Exactly.

Helen: That's bullshit - more people work in cafes than down the mines.

Robert: But we're not exporting lattes and blueberry muffins to China.

Brian: And all I'm saying is you can't have a country where everyone's a miner or a barista buying everything from amazon.com.

Helen: Don't tell me you don't believe in the free market?

Brian: Yes I do, one hundred and ten percent. I say back off...

Robert: You can't have a hundred and ten percent.

Brian: Jesus, Robert, you are such a pedant, I tell you, you should have worked for Radio National. What I'm saying is you back off and let people get on with their lives. A free market doesn't have to be a global one - people didn't ask for that, it was just handed to them fait accompli.

Helen: I don't know that the party's going to welcome your radical ideas on the flow of capital, Brian.

Brian: Oh, come on, Helen, you're in local government. You know it's about community. No one builds a community when they fly in and fly out. It's about roads and schools, boring things like drains that actually work, substations, people you recognise and know who you are.

Helen: And I thought it was about boat people and private schools.

Brian: That was just politics in opposition.

Helen: Oh, really?

Robert: You've got to make noise.

Brian: Not everyone has the luxury of the moral high ground, some of us actually have to make decisions.

Helen: Then could someone do us a favour and start making the right ones?

Brian: Look, I know what you think of us...

Helen: Have you and Robert been conspiring?

Brian: What makes you say that?

Helen: It was just that he said the same thing ten minutes ago.

Robert: Did I? Oh yes.

Brian: But I think we Liberals have got a handle on the values that made this country work. Why do people want to come here? To make something of themselves; they've been doing it for over two hundred years. That's what we're celebrating.

Helen: And what about the people who were already here?

Brian: Different subject altogether. I don't buy into the black armband debate. I said sorry. But you tell me this: how do they keep their culture alive? They celebrate their myths and legends. I don't see why we can't.

Helen: Well, that's an interesting and convenient take on two hundred years of virtual genocide but I'm afraid my rebuttal

will have to wait for another day. Gentlemen, I bid you goodnight.

Robert: Night Helen.

Helen: Thanks for the... wine.

Brian: I'll give your compliments to the vigneron. Good night.

Robert: Safe home.

Helen goes - a silence until she's gone

Brian: You know, for a sandal-wearing fruitcake, she's not all bad.

Robert: Surprisingly approachable. But I don't know that I'd want to be in her bad books.

Brian: No. No one holds a grudge better than the socially aware.

Robert: You wanted to talk to me about something?

Brian: Oh. Yeah. It was, well - look, it was just a word about the Bunnings proposal.

Robert: I don't think we can delay the vote much longer. It's been quite a few months.

Brian: No, it'll have to be done at the next meeting. But I was thinking... I know I can't vote against it...

Robert: No, you can't.

Brian: *(beat)* But you can.

Robert: I don't know that we should be having this conversation.

Brian: Oh, come on Robert. This is Bunnings! The death eaters!

All I'm asking is one tiny favour.

Robert: Brian, influencing a councillor is a serious offence.

Brian: I'm influencing a friend, Robert.

Robert: But this could get us both sacked.

Brian: Bullshit.

Robert: There are protocols...

Brian: And you think I'm gonna ring up and tell them?

Robert: Brian, I swore an oath...

Brian: You, Les and Christine are all on my ticket - you wouldn't even be on the council if it wasn't for me. If I get the seat, the mayor is yours, we've had that discussion.

Robert: I don't really want...

Brian: And anyway, who's going to know? Come on, for Christ's sake, I MC-ed your daughter's twenty-first.

Robert: And I value your friendship but don't you think it'll look a bit strange when I vote down a proposal that's going to bring jobs into the area? Come on, what grounds could I possibly object?

Brian: Over-development.

Robert: Of vacant scrub next to a freeway?

Brian: Inappropriate land-usage.

Robert: It's zoned light industrial. Even Helen can't argue with that.

Brian: Helen's not going to vote for it - there's an endangered frog on the site.

Robert: That was over a kilometre away.

Brian: Maybe it's moved. Or I'll go out and buy some. Look, the frog doesn't matter - Helen won't vote for this because the Greens never vote for anything sensible.

Robert: So now you're saying it's sensible?

Brian: If I didn't own the only hardware store in town I'd think it was a fucking brilliant idea.

Robert: What about Les and Christine? Have you spoken to them?

Brian: They'll go with you. I vacate the chair, you get the mayor's deciding vote on top of your own.

Robert: I don't like this Brian.

Brian: I'm not asking you to like it Robert, I'm asking you as a mate.

Robert: And you think that makes it easier?

Brian: Well that's what we do in this country, isn't it? Look out for your mates?

Helen returns

Helen: Sorry - forgot my phone. The joys of getting older. Night.

She goes

Brian: Night. *(beat)* At least say you'll think about it.

Robert: I'm not making any promises.

Brian: Absolutely.

Robert: By the way, I checked the council computers for you.

Brian: And?

Robert: They're clean. Now.

Brian: It was all research.

Robert: I look forward to the Phd.

Blackout. Another telephone message read by Maree

V/O: Hello. You've reached the access point for Australia Day in Coriole. Why not celebrate our national day in the national dress that reflects your ethnic or migratory experience? To speak to a volunteer, press one. To listen to this menu again, press two. Or you can just stay on the line to speak to a volunteer.

The final meeting before the day. It's stinking hot. There's a whiteboard.

Brian: John Howard?

Reading from the local paper

Robert: That's what it says here.

Brian: The John Howard, the former prime minister, is coming here on Australia Day?

Robert: Well, not here specifically, it says the district...

Brian: Bullshit, Robert, he's coming here.

Maree: Why would John Howard be coming here?

Brian: To check me out, Maree, why do you think?

Wally: Testing out the candidates?

Brian: Exactly.

Helen: Hang on Brian, it doesn't say he's coming to Coriole, surely we would have heard something...

Brian: Oh, no, they're too clever for that, they don't give you any warning. They swoop in like magpies...

Maree: I don't think John Howard could swoop in like a magpie.

Wally: He'd have guards.

Chester: I saw him once in the frozen foods at Coles in North Sydney - he didn't have any guards. Except Jeanette.

Maree: Will she be coming too?

Brian: Probably. To see how I appeal to the women voters.

Helen: She's not a woman, she's a robot.

Wally: There's one for the sisterhood.

Maree: A former first lady in Coriole.

Robert: That'll give the CWA something to think about.

Maree: They don't need to know about it. I'll be baking her something myself.

Chester: Maree, there's no guarantee she's coming and even if they did, so what? John Howard's an ordinary citizen like anyone else.

Helen: Who committed us to a war we shouldn't be fighting...

Wally: Look, just for once could you show some respect? This is the second-longest serving Prime Minister we're talking about here - I bet if it was Bob Brown and his husband you'd be planting trees and cooking the tofu burgers yourself.

Helen: There is no way as a member of this committee that I will officially welcome John Howard to our ceremony. The man is a war criminal -

Wally: Jesus!

Helen: - Not to mention the children overboard.

Wally: Do you people ever move on?

Robert: Why don't we all calm down - Chester's right. No-one's said he's coming here.

Brian: Oh yes he is. And we'd better start planning.

Helen: Brian, the day is about more than your preselection.

Brian: Really? Well, I can tell you there's a panel sitting in Liberal Party head office who are thinking otherwise. Oh Jesus, what are we going to do about the toilet facilities?

Chester: The toilets?

Brian: Can you imagine Jeanette Howard, the former first lady, using the Portaloos?

Chester: I don't think I want to try.

Brian: What state is the toilet block in down there? Could we paint it?

Robert: By Saturday? I don't think so.

Wally: I could bring the caravan down. Put a reserved sign on it.

Brian: When was the last time you used it?

Wally: Did a run up to the Sunshine Coast in - what - 2010?

Maree: Well I hope you've changed the sheets.

Wally: She's not gonna want a lie-down as well.

Helen: Can we stop right there. If John Howard and his wife choose to come here as private citizens to celebrate Australia Day, that's their prerogative. It's a free country. But they've got to take us as they find us. They don't need a caravan.

Robert: I think Helen's right, Brian.

Chester: We've got a sausage sizzle and old people singing - what's not to like?

Helen: But I will not shake his hand.

Wally: What makes you think he'd want to shake yours?

Brian: *(to Helen)* Alright. You've made your point. We'll welcome him like anyone else who happens to have held the highest

office in the country for thirteen highly successful years. *(aside to Wally)* Could you give the van a bit of a sweep out?

Helen: Brian.

Brian: Okay, okay. Moving on. Can we double-check we've got everything.

Robert: The marquee's up, they're putting the staging up today, the PA goes in Friday, rain permitting.

Wally: Rain? It's thirty-six degrees!

Maree: Awful, isn't it?

Robert: There's a change and thunderstorms forecast for Saturday.

Maree: Thank God.

Brian: No, Maree, rain is the last thing we want.

Robert: It's not due until the afternoon.

Brian: Might be an idea to start the cricket match earlier.

Wally: Twenty-twenty? That's not a cricket match, that's tip and run. Why can't we play fifty overs?

Brian: Seeing the scouts had us all out for 18 in the 9th last year, Wally, it's a moot point.

Maree: Maybe John Howard could have a bat.

Robert: I think his best form's behind him, Maree.

Brian: Mind you, I should move up the order, just in case he can't hang around. Show him my sweep shot. Could we get that fat kid to trundle down a few sitters?

Helen: More importantly, Mister Chairman, maybe we should move the concert forward.

Brian: Yes. Right. Have we got a running time for it yet?

Robert: I've asked them all to keep it short but you know what they're like once they get a captive audience.

Wally: What's in it?

Robert: We start with the national anthem.

Maree: Who's singing it?

Robert: Same girl as last year.
 Wally: Let's hope she's learned the words by now.
 Robert: Then Brian's remarks...
 Helen: After the welcome to country.
 Brian: Of course.
 Robert: Then a speech from the local member.
 Brian: He's not coming.
 Robert: What?
 Brian: Soon as I was shortlisted for preselection, he pulled out.
 He's going to do Duxborough and Blaxland Point instead.
 Robert: Well, thanks for letting me know.
 Brian: Sorry Robert.
 Wally: Good riddance, I say.
 Chester: What about the citizenship ceremony?
 Maree: We could ask John Howard.
 Robert: Don't start that up again.
 Brian: I'll have to do it. As mayor. With our ambassador.
 Wally: Who did we end up getting?
 Robert: Warren Cootes.
 Wally: Who?
 Robert: You'll be pleased to know he's a sportsman, Wally.
 Wally: Never heard of him.
 Robert: Competed in the Commonwealth Games in Auckland. The
 20k walk.
 Wally: Oh, for fuck's sake!
 Robert: He came twelfth.
 Brian: Can we get back to the concert?
 Robert: Next we've got the school choir and wind ensemble.
 Chester, d'you know what they're doing?

Chester: Yes I do. (*pulls out list*) They are doing Hedwig's Theme
 from Harry Potter, and Funky Town - but I wouldn't print that
 in the programme, let the audience try and guess.
 Robert: Then the June-Renee School of Dance - Marie?
 Marie: Yes, they're doing a tap routine to All That Jazz and the
 senior girls are presenting - hang on, I've written it down -
 Gondwana: Spirit of the Dreaming.
 Chester: Interesting.
 Helen: Has anyone seen it?
 Maree: I've watched the rehearsals. Sherridan's in it. I haven't
 seen the costumes yet.
 Helen: It hardly sounds appropriate.
 Wally: How do you know if you haven't seen it?
 Helen: Well, for a start, I don't think they have any indigenous
 students...
 Maree: There's an Indian lass.
 Helen: ...so I think we might be treading on cultural sensitivities.
 Maree: They've been working on it for months. It's for some of
 the larger girls who can't move quite as well.
 Chester: It just keeps getting better.
 Brian: I don't think we can interfere at this late stage.
 Wally: Why would we want to? What happened to freedom of
 expression?
 Helen: Wally, we have a responsibility. We can't present material
 that offends social groups.
 Wally: You're not saying you want to censor it, are you Helen?
 Helen: Not at all... but we wouldn't want a black and white
 minstrel show up there.
 Robert: I'm sure it's done with respect.
 Maree: If I was an Aborigine, I wouldn't be offended.
 Wally: And how many are going to be watching?

Helen: It's the principle.

Chester: I'd be more worried about what they're going to do to All That Jazz.

Brian: I take your point Helen but with only two days to go, there's not a lot we can do. *(to Robert)* Next?

Robert: The Melody Makers, our seniors concert group.

Chester: What are they going to sing? Fuck the Police?

Maree: Language.

Robert: A selection from Fiddler on the Roof.

Wally: Jeez, I hope we don't offend the Palestinians.

Brian: How long does that go on for?

Robert: Hopefully not very long because it always takes them twice the time to get on and off stage. And we finish with an item TBA from the group called Special Kids Can Be Creative Too.

Maree: Don't say a word, Wally.

Wally: Wouldn't dream of it.

Brian: So we're looking at about forty-five minutes all up.

Wally: Your mungo really knows how to entertain.

Helen: I'm sorry?

Wally: I said your mungo really knows how to entertain.

Helen: Alright, that's it, that is too far. You withdraw that remark and you apologise, right now.

Wally: For what? It was a compliment.

Chester: Oh come on, Wally.

Helen: I can take your racism, your misogyny.

Wally: My what?

Helen: ...and your narrow bloody-minded bigotry but when you start attacking kids with special needs, then you have crossed the line.

Wally: I got nothing against the kids. It's the people who want to parade them that give me the shits.

Helen: Parade them?

Wally: Sticking them up on stage like some PC freak show.

Helen: *(icily)* My son will be performing.

Wally: And have you asked him if he wants to shuffle about in front of people feeling sorry for him?

Robert: For God's sake Wally!

Helen: My son does not need you - or anyone - to feel sorry for him.

Wally: Then why ask us to?

Helen: Mister Chairman - are you going to do something about this?

Brian: Apologise Wally.

Wally: Last time I looked it was a free country, Brian.

Helen: And that's your excuse, is it? That gives you the right to say whatever cruel joke comes into your head?

Wally: Look, I didn't know your kid was retarded...

Helen: He is not retarded!

Wally: Alright - challenged, special, alternative, whatever the word of the bloody month is but who are you doing this for? For him? Or is it for us? So we can all go "Oh, aren't they brave, look - some of them can even almost sing in tune" and then everybody stand up and cheers and all the time they're thinking "Thank fucking Christ my kid's not a retard" and you can sit there and try to fool yourself that the poor bastard's got any sort of chance of living a normal fucking life.

Brian: Wally...

Wally: No, Brian, I will not apologise.

Brian: Then please just sit down.

Helen: No, I think he should leave.

Wally: Why should I?

Helen: Brian!

Wally: For having an opinion?

Brian: Wally, this is not acceptable...

Helen: Mister Chairman, I demand that you expel him.

Brian: Helen, it's not that simple.

Wally: Save your breath, Brian. I'm going. And for the minutes,

Mr Chairman, Wally left the meeting at six fucking thirty.

Wally leaves. A stunned silence.

Chester: What was that about?

Helen: The man is insane.

Brian: No he's not.

Helen: Brian, he is out of control.

Brian: He's been on this committee for fifteen years.

Helen: Oh come on, I know he's a friend of yours but as chairman..

Brian: Helen, it's not that easy. Wally has issues...

Helen: That's putting it mildly!

Maree: Helen, you have to understand - Wally's son...

Robert: Maree, I don't think this is the time.

Helen: What about his son...

Maree: He was a spastic. I know they don't call it that these days...

Chester: It's cerebral palsy.

Maree: That's it.

Helen: That is no excuse for his behaviour.

Maree: Of course not but...

Helen: He of all people should understand what it's like. Raising a child, especially an older child...

Maree: His boy was killed.

Pause

Chester: How?

Brian: He was burned to death on a school camp.

Maree: A gas heater set the cabin on fire. He was trapped but the others - the normal kids...

Robert: Maree...

Maree: She knows what I mean, Robert. The others got out.

Helen: I... I'm sorry for his loss, of course, but how does that give him the right to take it out on my son?

Robert: It doesn't.

Maree: He's taking it out on himself.

Brian: Nothing is black and white, Helen.

Helen: Spare me the morals lecture, Brian.

Brian: I'm just trying to...

Helen: If it wasn't my son, it'd be somebody else.

Maree: But it does explain...

Helen: Okay, bad things happen - to all of us. But if we just turn around and try to break the next vulnerable person out of resentment, out of anger, then what hope is there for any of us?

Maree: What hope is there for Wally?

Helen: Frankly, Maree, I don't know that I care anymore.

Maree: I don't think that's true.

Pause

Helen: Maybe you're right. But I don't want to live in a world where the dog with the loudest bark runs the pack. And I am trying to find another way. Now, I know you all laugh at me...

Robert: Helen, we don't laugh...

Helen: Robert, you all do. Ooh, here comes Helen in her electric car, out to get land rights for the aboriginal lesbian whales! Christ, I read it in every newspaper, I hear it every day on the radio, from those bitter little men who are so filled with hate they can't even have a civil conversation. And you know

something? Every single day it gets harder and harder to stop myself from saying: Well, fuck you too.

Brian: We're not all like that Helen.

Helen: Then why aren't you doing something to stop it, Brian?

When is someone on your side of the political fence going to say this... this assault on common decency has gone far enough?

Brian: There are extremists on every side.

Helen: We weren't the ones shouting ditch the bitch.

Brian: That's not a fair thing to say.

Helen: I know! I know it's not a fair thing to say - that's my point!

I mean, do you have any idea of how hard it is to always say what's fair? Do you reckon I really think graffiti's artistic? Do you think I don't get into a cab driven by a guy in a turban and don't, for one split second, think oh my God, I hope he knows how to read the road signs? But I don't say it.

Maree: What's this got to do with Wally?

Helen: It's about respect. It's about knowing when to keep your mouth shut.

Maree: Alright, people like Wally can't. But he's still a person like anyone else.

Helen: Well, until he considers the damage he does, he is not a person like me.

Pause

Robert: I don't think now is a good time to talk about gas bottles. But I'm afraid we have to.

Brian: Oh shit, I said we'd pick them up tonight. We're going to need two cars.

Robert: You and me then.

Robert starts packing up

Brian: I don't think there's much point continuing here.

Helen: Brian, I'm sorry.

Brian: Not at all.

Helen: The committee...

Brian: We'd pretty much covered everything. Except the unexpected VIPs. The last thing I bloody need.

Chester: The concert?

Brian: We'll leave it where it is.

Helen: Freak show and all.

Brian: Helen, none of us believe that.

Helen: Then tell Wally.

Brian: He'll turn up on Saturday. Tail between his legs. This is not the first time.

Helen: Don't let him get away with it again.

Brian: I don't know what else I can do. At least he's not drinking as much.

Robert: You need a lift Maree?

Maree: No, it's cooled down a bit. I'll walk.

Chester: I'll lock up.

Brian: Okay. See you all on Saturday at 6.

Chester: AM? In the holidays!

Brian: Teachers. You don't know the meaning of hard work - that was a joke.

Chester: And it's hilarious. Don't forget your sunblock.

Brian and Robert leave. Chester begins locking up

Helen: Australia Day, hey? So much to celebrate.

Maree: I think there is. We're alive, aren't we?

Helen: Sometimes it's hard to tell.

Maree: Go home and have a drink. You'd have organic wine, wouldn't you?

Helen gives her a look

Helen: Et tu, Maree?

Maree: What?

Helen: Julius Caesar.

Maree: That's right. We did that at school. I was Marc Antony.

Helen: See you on Saturday.

Maree goes then turns at the door.

Maree: We haven't got the knives out, Helen. Night, Chester.

Chester: Night.

She goes

Chester: Old Maree's a piece of work, isn't she?

Helen: (*drily*) She's a brick.

Chester: In my country we have a saying: "The wise hen keeps laying eggs."

Helen: And what does that mean?

Chester: No idea, I just made it up. At a time like this, it's the sort of thing ethnics are supposed to say.

Helen: Do you joke about everything?

Chester: Either that or keep my head down. Only way to stay sane.

Helen: It must be difficult for you too.

Chester: What do you mean?

Helen: Having an Asian face up here.

Chester: I've never considered being myself a problem.

Helen: I'm sorry, I didn't mean...

Chester: We're all tribes, Helen. I'm no different. You can see it in the classroom. To a kindie kid, everyone's pretty much the same; they're either their size or bigger. That's it. By Year Six they've got it all sussed out - who's different, who's weaker, who's the funny one. It's never going to be one happy family again, no matter how many harmony days we have.

Helen: I don't buy that.

Chester: I'm not saying the tribes can't get along. That's what I have to teach them. To compromise, to tolerate, to see there's not always a right or wrong.

Helen: So no moral absolutes in Mr Lee's classroom.

Chester: Not my job.

Helen: Well I think that is my job. I mean, look at Brian, he just sat there defending Wally...

Chester: Wally's tribe are spooked. Things are changing too fast. And Brian's tribe can't afford to lose them.

Helen: But if we can't draw a line in the sand, however faint, then we shouldn't be in politics.

Chester: That's why you'll never be running the place. First you've got to kick some sand in the other guy's face.

Helen's phone rings

Helen: Sorry, I've got to take this.

Chester: I'll wait outside.

He goes

Helen: Hello? Mrs Denning? Right. No, it's just that he's... he has to have the blue towel, it's the towel he... yes, it's either in the linen cupboard or on the line... no, he'll calm down when he's got it... I'm on my way now. OK. Bye.

Helen fumbles with phone

Helen: Oh shit, what button is that? Stupid phone. No - home page, not voice memo...

She's hit the voice memo replay. Brian and Robert's conversation can be heard.

Robert: I don't know that we should be having this conversation.

Brian: Oh, come on Robert. This is Bunnings! The death eaters! All I'm asking is one tiny favour.

Robert: Brian, influencing a councillor is a serious offence.

Brian: I'm influencing a friend, Robert.

Robert: But this could get us both sacked.

Brian: Bullshit.

Robert: There are protocols...

Brian: And you think I'm gonna ring up and tell them?

Robert: Brian, I swore an oath...

Helen hits the stop button. She thinks.

Blackout - end of Act One

ACT TWO

The interior of the marquee in the sports field - or it can still be the scout hall, made ready for the big day. This is command HQ for the proceedings. Early morning. A whiteboard of the day's schedule. Amid the chairs, folding tables, garbage bins etc, Brian and Robert are unpacking a pallet of potted plants.

Brian: Is this the best they've got?

Robert: It's what they've given us.

Brian: We're welcoming new citizens with a native plant, a symbol of Australia, that'll be dead before they've taken the oath.

Robert examines a plant

Robert: This isn't a native, it's a crepe myrtle.

Brian: Where are they from?

Robert: China.

Brian: Everything's from fucking China. What's that one?

Robert: Eastern river gum. That is a native.

Brian: And it grows up to two hundred feet tall! Some of the people getting these live in units. Bloody hell - why send us this load of rubbish?

Robert: Beggars can't be choosers.

Brian: The nursery's a sponsor, Robert. You'd think they'd have a bit of pride.

Robert: Things are tight, people aren't spending.

Brian: No bloody wonder if this is what's on offer.

Robert: By the way, I checked the first aid kit. Someone's been through it again. All we've got left is Panadol and a tourniquet. So we can handle a headache or a snakebite. Probably not both.

Brian: Aren't the St John's ambulance coming?

Robert: If they can spare someone. It's the heatwave. Same with the fire authority, they can't guarantee us a truck for the parade because a grass fire's taken off out near Morton.

Brian: Wonder if I should get out there.

Robert: What for?

Brian: I'm potentially the local candidate, Robert...

Robert: It's a grass fire.

Brian: Anything threatened?

Robert: Yes - grass.

Brian: Maybe I'd better stay here, be on hand when the Howards turn up.

Robert: They're not coming.

Brian: You don't know that.

Robert: Head office told us they knew nothing about it.

Brian: Of course they're going to say that.

Robert: Either way, I'd say welcoming new citizens - with or without the Howards - is a better photo opportunity than beating the ground with a wet sack.

Brian: That depends on what sort of citizens they are.

Robert: There aren't any Muslims, if that's what you mean.

Brian: That is not what I mean, Robert. *(pause)* Any sub-continentals?

Robert: It's three New Zealanders, two English women, a family from Wales and a Fijian.

Brian: Told you we were multi-cultural.

Robert: Yes, we'll be having a mardi gras next.

Brian: Anything else I should know?

Robert: No-one's seen Wally since Thursday night.

Brian: He's supposed to be bringing the barbecues.

Robert: Maureen rang to say he hasn't been home. Probably gone up to his sister's place but she's not answering.

Brian: Really knows how to push a friendship, doesn't he?

Robert: You're still calling it that?

Brian: Look, I know he was out of line with Helen but, come on, the bloke's been through a lot.

Robert: That was over twenty years ago.

Brian: He lost a packet on the Prestons Creek delays. Bulldozers just sitting there while that bloke from the zoo was looking for the frog. He's hardly going to be Helen's best friend after that.

Robert: What do we do if he doesn't turn up?

Brian: Don't worry, he'll be here. Anyway he's not the only member of the Apex Club. Greg can pick up the barbecues, the Ute's outside.

Maree arrives

Maree: Oh my Lord, it's going to be a stinker.

Brian: You're bright and early Maree.

Maree: Well, I haven't had a wink of sleep, it's this humidity. So I thought what's the point of staying in bed - I was dripping by the time I'd reached the toot. Thank God we're not doing colonial costumes this year. Not with my chafing.

Robert: Have you got the sausages?

Maree: There's three hundred of them with Brett in the car outside. Couldn't fit another one in my fridge, I had the burgers next door with Esme.

Robert: And the ice?

Maree: Ice? I wasn't getting ice.

Robert: I've got the eskies, you were bringing the ice.

Maree: First I've heard of it.

Robert: Where are we going to put the sausages?

Maree: In the eskies.

Robert: What's the point without ice?

Maree: Well half of them are frozen anyway because the fridge was playing up. And they're not going back in there because

I've got three pavlovas and a trifle plus all the Frosty Fruits.

Brian: I'll get Chester to swing by the BP and pick up a few bags.

Robert: He'd better make it quick, they'll run out.

Brian rings Chester on the mobile

Maree: Any word from Wally?

Robert: Nothing.

Maree: I just hope he's not drinking.

Brian: It's gone to bloody voice-mail. G'day Chester, it's Brian, it's about a quarter to six. Look, can you pick up half a dozen bags of ice on your way and don't forget... *(to the others)* who's doing the onions?

Maree: Helen.

Brian: Margarine?

Robert: Chester. I've got the sauces.

Brian: *(to the phone)* Don't forget the margarine. See you - sooner rather than later if that's not too much trouble. *(he hangs up)*

Robert: I still say it would have been easier if one person had actioned all the sizzle logistics.

Brian: That was Helen's idea. Share the responsibility.

Robert: Let's hope Graham turns up with the rolls.

Brian: His banner's been up since Thursday, he'll be here.

Maree: Those snags aren't going to unpack themselves.

Robert: Let's get them in then.

Robert and Maree go. Brian makes another call.

Brian: G'day, it's Brian Harrigan here... Yes, Mayor Harrigan, yes... Just wanted to know if the seven o'clock from Sydney's on schedule... Cancelled? What time's the next one?... Eleven - Jesus, that's cutting it fine... No, it's just that we're expecting a

VIP... right, yeah, okay, we'll have someone there to pick him up. Thank you. Bye. *(Hangs up)* Shit.

Robert enters laden

Robert: Problem?

Brian: They've cancelled Warren Cootes' flight. Next one doesn't get in till eleven so we're going to have push the citizenship ceremony back.

Robert: Should've brought him up last night.

Brian: There was no budget for accommodation and he wasn't keen on a billet with Maree.

Robert: His loss. Going to be tight with the weather.

Brian: Why can't anything run smoothly in this bloody country? Bet this never happens in Singapore.

Robert: I googled him, you know, Warren Cootes. Didn't come twelfth at all. Broke his stride and was disqualified on a protest from Pakistan.

Brian: Don't tell Wally.

Wally has entered from the other side

Wally: Don't tell Wally what?

Brian: Wally, mate, you made it.

Wally: Said I'd be here, didn't I?

Robert: You got the barbecues?

Wally: On the truck. Where'd you want them - same as last year?

Brian: Yeah. Outside the small marquee.

Wally nods and goes. Robert and Brian exchange a look

Brian: And happy Australia Day to you, Wally.

Robert goes to get the next load as Maree comes in laden

Maree: Helen had them sorted out but now I'm completely confused, I can't tell which is the beef and which is the lamb and fennel. The supermarket said the pork ones were kosher but that sounds a bit suss to me.

Brian: Aren't they labelled?

Maree: Didn't bring my glasses.

Robert re-enters with the last of the sausages as Brian reads the labels

Brian: Best before 24th of the 1st.

Maree: Ignore that, they only do it to make you buy more.

Brian: These are nut and tofu. Can anyone tell me the point of a tofu sausage.

Robert: I told Helen no nuts - if we get someone with an anaphalactic shock...

Brian: We'll do the Heimlich manoeuvre. You two sort these out, I've got the portaloos arriving at 6.15.

Brian goes

Robert: Maree, none of these are frozen.

Maree: Well they've been in the car for nearly an hour. We had Sherriden up to us again last night so Brett had to get her to June Renee for rehearsal - and Bridie's out of Spirit of the Dreaming, she's got glandular fever.

Robert: Have they got a replacement?

Maree: I'm doing it.

Robert: You're joking.

Maree: Why not? I'm not that old. Bridie's got two left feet and one leg shorter than the other so I can't be any worse. She just stands up the back anyway and I know her part, God knows I've watched it enough times.

Robert: I just don't want you breaking a hip. We've only got panadol.

Chester enters with ice

Chester: Happy Australia Day!

Maree: Happy Australia Day.

Robert: It still feels a bit odd saying that - it's not like it's Christmas.

Chester: It's even better. You don't have to buy presents.

Maree: You were quick.

Chester: What?

Maree: Getting the ice.

Chester: I was always getting the ice. Helen sent me three emails last night about getting the ice. And a text message.

Robert: Where's the margarine?

Chester: Fuck.

Maree: The IGA opens at eight.

Robert: It's a public holiday.

Chester: But it's a Saturday.

Robert: It's Australia Day, the public holiday falls on the same day.

Chester: What, you mean we don't get a day off? How un-Australian is that?

Robert: And you're already on holidays

Chester: Two words Robert: in lieu.

Robert: Talk to the Teacher's Federation. They practically run the country as it is.

Maree: Try the BP.

Robert: And none of that nut spread.

Helen enters

Helen: Sorry I'm late.

Robert: For once I don't think you are.

Maree: Morning Helen.

Chester: *(waving a small flag)* Happy Australia Day!

Maree: Happy Australia Day!

Helen: Do we have to say that? When did that start?

Chester: Come on - where's your pride?

Maree: You have to wear your name badge.

Helen: Halfway out the door I realised I hadn't even looked at the colouring-in competition, let alone judged it.

Chester: Easy. If they haven't gone outside the lines, they win.

Helen: Where's the creativity in that? What about colour and expression?

Chester: Helen, you're not judging the Archibald. Trust me, I've handled a lot of colouring-in. It doesn't matter if the Bilby is bright purple, as long as they don't go outside the lines.

They look through the colouring-in entries

Helen: Well on that criteria it doesn't look like anyone's a winner. Couldn't we give them all a prize?

Chester: Nah, we've tried that. Doesn't give the kids self-esteem, just raises a generation of pushy little pricks who think the world owes them a living. In my day...

Helen: And when was that, Chester - yesterday?

Chester: ...Ha ha, you never got a sticker saying how wonderful you were. No-one was given a certificate for being cheerful and attentive. You had to work.

Maree: That's what your people do, isn't it? Study.

Chester: 24 hours a day, Maree. I stayed awake for the whole of Year Twelve.

Robert: We need the margarine.

Chester: On my way, Lord Vader.

Robert: And Helen - where are the onions?

Helen: Oh shit.

Maree: I don't think the BP do onions.

Chester: They're a petrol station - what is wrong with them!

Helen: I left them at home.

Robert: Democracy in action, total balls-up.

Helen: I'll go back and get them.

Chester: I could swing by for you.

Helen: No, it'll throw Jackson. I'll go.

Chester: Couldn't pick up the margarine then, could you?

Helen: Fine.

Chester: No Nutlex.

Helen: I still say we shouldn't even be serving margarine, the stuff is made in a laboratory.

Robert: People have dairy allergies.

Maree: If you're allergic to it, don't eat it.

Helen: Exactly.

Robert: Not that simple, Maree. As part of the council's public liability insurance we have to safeguard consumers...

Maree: It's a sausage sizzle, Robert!

Robert: Not any more, it's not. It's a legal minefield.

Helen makes to go

Chester: Hang on - colouring competition?

Helen: Oh God. *(Helen looks at the entries and then points at one)*
That one.

Chester: She's gone over the line a bit there...

Helen: Shut up. You can pick second and third.

She goes - Chester looks at the entries

Chester: Excellent. Now which one was mine...

Helen stops

Helen: I don't have the car. I rode my bike.

Chester: I thought the helmet was a bit over-cautious. Come on, we'll take mine. Or you could dink me.

Helen: Chester, it's barely six in the morning. Could you take it down a gear?

Chester: Sorry. Sorry. It's the national day - I'm pumped.

They go. Wally enters from the side flap

Wally: Any sign of Brian?

Maree: Here's a bad penny.

Wally: I need the gas bottles.

Robert: Next to the marquee.

Maree: You just missed Helen.

Wally: Good.

Maree: Now look, Wally, you and I have been friends for a long time..

Wally: This sounds ominous.

Maree: ...and I know it's been tough but I think you went too far.

Wally: That's your opinion. You're entitled to it.

Maree: You're not drinking, are you?

Wally: No, I'm not bloody drinking. I'm a grown man, Maree and I don't need you lot running round like a bunch of fuckin nursemaids.

Robert: Wally, we're your mates.

Wally: And a mate knows when to back off.

Robert: All you have to do...

Wally: I said back off.

Maree: No, Wally, this time I am not backing off. I know you don't like the woman but that does not mean you can treat her like that.

Wally: And what about the way she treats me? You lost sleep over that? Alright, yes, I'm a man, I know I'm bloody useless; okay, thank-you, yes we've got the point. And I'm white, sorry about that, not a lot I can do about my parents but last time I looked most of the bloody country were white as well but oh no, that's gotta make me a racist and Jesus, I drive a car so I must be killing the planet.

Robert: She wasn't saying that.

Wally: As far as Helen's concerned I'm one of those dinosaurs who need to be told in no uncertain terms that their time is up -

that's how the dinosaurs died out, they were fuckin' nagged to death!

Maree: You don't get even by going after her son.

Wally: I know. Alright? I know. You happy now?

Robert: We're not the ones you should be telling.

Wally: Don't even ask me, Robert. That woman and I live on different planets, I'm not talking about Venus and bloody Mars, I'm talking about fuckin' Pluto.

Maree: But you live in the same town.

Wally: Is it the same town, Maree? Sometimes I look and I can't even recognise it. Who are all these people? Why have they got to come here?

Maree: They've got to go somewhere.

Wally: Then they can go somewhere else.

Robert: And who's going to buy the houses you build?

Wally: I'm happy to build houses for people I can have a beer with, who'll give me the time of day. I don't care if they're brown and vote fuckin' Green - as long as they have a go, as long as they say I live in Australia and I'm gonna make some sort of effort to be a bloody Australian. Local pool table, local rules.

Maree: Most people are trying to fit in.

Wally: But the rest aren't trying hard enough. And all of a sudden I'm the bad guy.

Robert: Everything's shifting, Wally. We can't stop it.

Wally: Doesn't mean I have to like it.

Brian enters oblivious to what's been going on.

Brian: The bogs are set up - if you need a slash, Robert, I'd get in early. Sorry Maree, I'd forgotten you were here.

Maree: That's alright Brian. I'll sit tight, if you don't mind. Wouldn't go in one of those things if you paid me.

Brian: Wally - I didn't see the caravan.
 Wally: It's behind the SES tent. Bit more private.
 Brian: Well done.
 Wally: Just don't let the Seniors Choir anywhere near it, the holding tank's not big enough.
 Brian: Lock it. How we moving with those barbecues?
 Wally: Just got to connect the bottles.
 Brian: Any sign of Helen or Chester?
 Robert: They've gone to get onions and margarine.
 Brian: I told her we should've had one person... Are we set for the twenty-one gun salute?
 Robert: The nine gun salute. Kids just don't join the cadets any more.
 Maree: Could they fire twice?
 Wally: Still three short.
 Brian: Doesn't matter, it's a bit of noise. But can we make sure everyone's firing blanks this year?
 Robert: I've got two-way radios. So we can keep in touch during the day.
 Brian: Crikey, this is getting a bit sophisticated.
 Robert: They're SES surplus, a bit old but they still do the job.
Robert hands out the two-ways
 Wally: How do they work?
 Robert: Switch on - switch off
 Maree: Where?
 Robert: There Maree. The switch with on and off written on it.
 Maree: Do I really need this?
 Robert: If we want to contact you in a hurry.
 Maree: Can't you twitter me or whatever it is? Or even walk to the next tent, that's where I'll be.

Brian: Too easy, Maree. All mod cons here. Brian to Robert, you read me? Over.
 Maree: He's standing next to you.
 Brian: Go to the other side of the tent. *(Robert moves away)* Brian to Robert, over.
 Maree: He can still hear you.
Brian switches channels- Maree's radio comes to life
 Brian: Brian to Maree.
 Maree: Oh my God - now what do I do with it?
 Robert: Speak.
 Maree: Maree to Brian.
 Brian: You have to say over.
 Maree: Why?
 Brian: So I know you've stopped talking.
 Maree: You can see me.
 Brian: But I won't be able to when you're in the next tent.
 Maree: Where will you be?
 Brian: I could be anywhere.
 Maree: What if I leave the tent - will it still work?
 Brian: Yes, Maree, it's a radio, it works everywhere.
 Wally: Jesus.
 Maree: Maree to Brian. Over.
 Brian: Yes Maree. Over.
Pause
 Maree: Nothing to report here. Over.
 Wally: These'll be about as much use as frangers in a convent.
 Maree: I'm getting the hang of this. Maree to Wally. Over.
 Wallie's radio starts up. Pause.
 Wally: What?
 Maree: Are you over?
 Wally: I'm over this. Over.

Maree: Say sorry to Helen, you big galoot. Over.

Wally: You're breaking up.

Maree: I said apologise.

Pause - Wally looks at them

Wally: Alright, I'll bloody apologise. As long as you never speak to me on this thing again. Over and fuckin' out.

Blackout. The school band playing intro to national anthem.

Lights up on Brian and Helen - an ambulance siren wails.

Brian: That'll be the end of the kick-boxing display then. How we looking...

Brian goes to the whiteboard of events

Brian: Flag raising and first national anthem, done. Welcome to country, done.

Helen: Shame we couldn't do the smoking ceremony.

Brian: Total fire ban, I'm afraid. Don't know what the aborigines did in the ancient times. Bit embarrassing if you're saying hello to the relatives and the whole place goes up in flames. No wonder they moved about so much. Vintage car rally - under way. I never thought a Datsun 180B would be a vintage car but there you go. No sign of the Howards but the SES display - under way.

Helen: Brian, there's something we need to talk about.

Brian: Long as it's brief. Fire truck - cancelled. Girl guides...

Helen: It's about the Bunnings proposal.

Brian tenses

Brian: ...under way with face painting in the small marquee. Yes, shame it went down. Something about flood risk, Robert said.

Helen: From a creek that only runs every ten years.

Brian: And the frog, wasn't it?

Helen: Yes. I'm not sorry the application failed, it was environmentally unsustainable, but it seemed... odd... that Robert led the charge against it.

Brian: Robert's a bit of a greenie, you know - always preaching about climate change.

Helen: You didn't lean on him, did you?

Brian: Absolutely not - and I resent the insinuation.

Helen: Brian, I'm giving you a chance to be honest here.

Brian: I'm not sure just what you're suggesting Helen but if you think I was anything less than one hundred and ten percent...

Helen: Did you hear me? I'm giving you the chance.

Brian: The Bunnings rejection was completely above board.

Helen: I've got you and Robert on tape.

Brian: What?

Helen: Well, it's not tape strictly speaking..

Brian: What are you talking about?

Helen: On my phone. I was recording the meeting and I forgot my phone. It picked up your conversation with Robert.

Brian: So we had a conversation. That's what friends do.

Helen: You weren't chatting about the weather. You specifically requested he vote down the application. Which he did.

Brian: Robert is his own man, he votes according to the information presented on its merits.

Helen: You also discussed your cosy little arrangement about the mayoral succession.

Brian: You can't prove that.

Helen: Brian - did you miss something? I've got it recorded.

Brian: I don't believe you.

Helen: Do you want me to play it? Here - over the PA?

Brian: No! *(Pause)* Helen, I was asking a friend for a favour - Bunnings'd blow my business out of the water, everything I've worked for the last thirty years.

Helen: I know.

Brian: Okay, it was the wrong thing to do but you voted against it as well.

Helen: For the right reasons.

Brian: And what was so wrong about mine? This is a small community, we can't compete against these people. Who's going to go down next when Harvey Norman wants to come into town - how's the newsagent going to compete against Officeworks if they set up shop? I'm the local mayor, I fight for local people.

Helen: And you think you're fit to be the local member?

Brian: So is that what this is about? My preselection.

Helen: You think there's much chance of that if this gets out?

Brian: And what do you gain out of that? A free kick to the ALP and a bit of publicity for the green candidate - she's got buckley's and you know it.

Helen: I don't care about your preselection.

Brian: Then why are you doing this? You want some hold over me if I get to Canberra?

Helen: Not at all. I want to be the mayor.

Brian: What?

Helen: I want to be mayor when you move on.

Brian: But you haven't got the support. You've got one independent on side, no-one on my ticket's going to vote for you...

Helen: They will if you tell them to.

Brian: You've got to be kidding.

Helen: You've done it once, surely you can do it again.

Brian: But that means Robert won't be mayor.

Helen: Exactly.

Brian: I can't do that to Robert. He's one of my oldest friends - I mc-ed his daughter's twenty-first.

Helen: I've got Robert recorded too.

Brian: Well, aren't you the snake in the grass: Miss Moral High Ground getting down and dirty.

Helen: I'm not the one who influenced a councillor.

Brian: What the hell do you think you're doing now?

Helen: I'm not recording this conversation. It'd be my word against the word of someone up on corruption charges.

Brian: Jesus, what happened to principles? If you can't trust the fucking Greens to play by the rules...

Helen: I am playing by the rules, Brian. Your rules.

Brian: So you want me to turn my back on a mate, engineer you to be mayor and in return I get to keep the preselection.

Helen: That's about it.

Brian: And all that stuff about ethics and honest government you bang on about, all of a sudden that's nothing but words. Talk about your hypocrite!

Helen: You made the mistake Brian; I'm simply exploiting it. It's nothing personal.

Brian: Of course it's fucking personal!

Helen: No, it's not. As conservatives go, I don't think you'll make a bad federal member. But I want to change attitudes here. And when I do, I'll be ready to take you on. And win.

Brian: Christ, you've got it all planned, haven't you?

Helen: The world's running out of time...

Brian: Oh, don't start with the bloody doomsday scenario.

Helen: We can't make you believe it, so now we'll have to push you out of the way.

Brian: Then why don't you just run for parliament yourself?

Helen: Now? I'd never win. But at least I can start making a difference.

Brian's radio comes on.

Robert: Robert to Brian.

Brian presses his talk button

Brian: What do you want?

Robert: Where are you? The parade starts in five minutes. Over.

Brian: Fuck!

Robert: Brian, watch the language on the radio...

Brian: What?

Robert: Over.

Brian: I'll be there!

Robert: Did you say over?

Brian: No.

Robert: Over.

Brian: Shut-up.

Brian switches off

Brian: So why now? Why today - of all days - do you dump this on me?

Helen: It was something your mate said on Thursday night.

Brian: Bloody Wally!

Helen: He said: who are you doing it for?

Brian: That was about your son.

Helen: Exactly. That's who I'm doing this for. My son can't afford for me to wait any longer.

Brian: Couldn't he wait till Monday?

Helen: What's the point of having power if you're not prepared to use it?

Brian: And what if I say: fuck you - take this to the commission and you'll be finished in this town.

Helen: I'm not going down that road, Brian. Takes far too long.

Trial by media, much more effective.

Brian: What?

Helen: News Limited picks up an anonymous tip...

Brian: You think they'd listen to an anonymous tip.

Helen: Brian, it's News Limited. They'll listen to anyone.

Brian: I can't do it.

Helen: Okay, I'll ring them.

Brian: Don't! How long have I got?

Helen: Till the end of the day. Think of it as practice for Canberra.

Robert comes in

Robert: Brian, the parade!

Brian: I'm coming.

Robert: The robes?

Brian: Shit.

Brian puts on the mayoral robes. Robert adjusts the chains.

Helen: The trappings of office.

Robert: Nothing wrong with a bit of tradition.

Helen: Frills and all. You look like Peter Slipper.

Brian: Don't put me and that fucking Judas in the same basket!

Robert: Can you ease up on the fruity language, Brian? There are scouts in the honour guard.

Brian: Nothing but a self-serving turncoat...

Robert: Keep Still!

Brian: ...who did anything to feather his own nest.

Helen: But you'd have to say, all this - relic of the past, isn't it?

Robert: It's heritage. We don't have to always throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Helen: True enough. Don't you think, Brian?

Blackout

Brian's voice over the PA, brass band music in background.

Brian: And this march past of the Coriole Bay Surf Lifesaving nippers brings our parade to a close. Here they go... Still going... Quite a march on those little legs. Still moving slowly through the presentation area... didn't realise there'd be quite so many of them... still going...

Brian and Chester enter - Brian taking off the mayoral robes

Brian: What do you mean he wasn't there?

Chester: Warren Cootes wasn't there.

Brian: You checked the whole terminal?

Chester: Brian, it's a very small plane. Believe me, he wasn't on it.

Brian: And no sign of the Howards?

Chester: Not unless they're hiding in Wally's caravan.

Robert: Hang on - I've just got a text from Warren. He's had to cancel, done a hamstring.

Chester: More than he ever did at the Commonwealth Games.

Brian: Oh, well thanks for telling us. Fuck it.

Robert: Brian, take it easy.

Brian: Who's going to do the speech on Australian values for the new citizens?

Chester: Why not you?

Brian: I'm covering the local angle.

Robert: Helen?

Brian: Values? You gotta be kidding me. What about you - you're a new Australian.

Chester: I was born here! Jesus, I thought all that shit died with "Kingswood Country".

Brian: Couldn't you put something together, I don't know, something about helping your mates in a bushfire...

Chester: We didn't have many bushfires in Lakemba.

Brian: Use your imagination. Common values, one big melting pot...

Robert: That's America.

Brian: Same difference. A nation of immigrants, many peoples living under one flag, bonded together by the rule of law...

Chester: Just get up and say that.

Brian: They're just the bullet points they sent up from Sydney. I haven't got time to flesh it out. One of the portaloos has backed up...

Robert: Another's down as well. Smells like midday in Mumbai next to the girl guides.

Brian: What have these people been eating?

A distant rumble of thunder

Chester: Is that thunder?

Brian: Oh shit. That's all we need. The fuckin' cricket match! I'll have to pad up if I'm going in first drop.

Robert: It's a still a fair way off.

Brian: Let's get on with this thing. I'll put in something about Galipolli. Chester, go and make sure the applicants are sitting near the front.

Chester goes

Brian: And water the native plants! *(to Robert)* Have we got the pledge?

Robert: Something went wrong with the laminator but you can still read it.

Brian: Which one mentions God?

Robert: They're on either side.

Brian: I'd better get that right, don't want a repeat of last year with the Hindu.

Robert goes to leave

Brian: Actually, Robert, I need to talk to you about something. I've had a call from head office. They're a bit worried about the preference split.

During the scene, Brian changes into his cricketing whites

Robert: What do you mean?

Brian: They're trying to work out some way to stitch up the Greens preferences.

Robert: The Greens are never going to preference the Liberal party.

Brian: We've got to give it a shot - you know how tight things are in this seat. So we're up against the incumbent, the Greens, the ALP - Now, there's no way Labor are going to preference me but if we swap with the Nats, I get first from the Greens and second from the independent I might - and I say might - just scrape over the line.

Robert: So what's that got to do with me?

Brian: Head office think we might swing it if we put Helen in as mayor.

Robert: You've got to be kidding.

Brian: I was as shocked as you are, Robert. They know you're the next in line - well, not officially, obviously, this was an ad hoc agreement, you know as well as I do there's nothing in writing and technically we can't hold to anything...

Robert: I know - but giving the council to the Greens? What sort of crazy idea is that?

Brian: That's what I said. But then I thought about it - we're not giving the council to them, we're just putting Helen in as mayor. How long's she going to last? Next local elections, you run - in your own right, not on my ticket any more, you know, let's not forget how you got there in the first place - you sweep in to power, she's back as a rump and bitching about every step forward we try to make.

Robert: I don't care about running - you said...

Brian: I'm not the one calling the shots here, Robert. This hasn't come from me, this has come from head office.

Robert: But I'm not a member of the Liberal Party.

Brian: You're on our side, broadly speaking. You want to see me in parliament.

Robert: Of course, but getting into bed with the Greens is insane.

Brian: Oh, come on, you're a bit of a greenie yourself.

Robert: No I'm not.

Brian: You believe in climate change.

Robert: Well, yes, but I don't believe in the tooth fairy.

Brian: Compromise, Robert. The art of war, bend like the reed.

Robert: You promised, Brian...

Brian: I know.

Robert: You promised that nothing would really be any different.

Brian: Robert, my hands are tied. I haven't got any swing with head office; I'm not even on my P-plates.

Robert: How long have you known about this?

Brian: Call came through yesterday.

Robert: Yesterday?

Brian: Yep.

Robert: Jesus!

Brian: I know.

Robert: I'm not happy about this.

Brian: Neither am I, Robert. But believe me: I am literally only doing what I'm told.

The school band begins vaguely recognisable version of the national anthem.

Brian: Shit - that's the national anthem. At least I think it is. We'd better get out there.

Robert: Robes.

Brian: Pressure's getting to me.

Puts on robes - they're a bit short

Brian: We've got to get new robes - these were made for the fuckin' mayor of Munchkin City.

Robert: Good thing Helen's not so tall, then.

Brian: Now, now Robert. Sarcasm doesn't help anyone. Not that she'd wear them anyway. Probably hold meetings in the nude. No hidden agendas there.

Robert laughs in spite of himself.

Brian: You see? Clouds? Silver linings. But remember Robert - Helen knows nothing about this. Leave it with me.

He puts them on and they leave. The band finishes and Brian's following speech is heard in the background on the PA.

Brian: And thank you to the Coriole Public School band for that... heartfelt... rendition of our national anthem, it's musical embodiment of the spirit and pride of Australia as we welcome our newest citizens. It's a spirit and pride that was forged in the crucible of Galipolli, although of course today is about more than the Anzac tradition.

Because now we turn our attention to a ceremony that is at the heart of our celebrations today, when we welcome new arrivals. So, proceeding in alphabetical order, I'd like to ask Mr Winston Apatakalopha to join me on the dais to take the pledge of allegiance..

Wally enters the marquee looking for something amongst the equipment. Helen enters.

Helen: You after something, Wally?

Wally: Sawdust bucket. A kid's thrown up near the SES, all over the tarpaulin display.

Helen: Do you need a hand?

Wally: She'll be right. If you see Brian, he's gonna have to get the porta-loo bloke back with the pump, it's getting worse.

Helen: Is that the smell?

Wally: Yeah, something's giving people the shits. *(Beat)* Folks get the shits pretty easily these days.

Helen says nothing

Wally: Come on, give us a break. This is hard enough already. Last Thursday night...

Helen: Wally...

Wally: Can you just hold it, I want to get it over with. I might have gone too far..

Helen: If you're wanting to apologise...

Wally: I know you don't like me... And let me tell you it doesn't worry me 'cos I'm not that keen on you either. But I went too far going after your kid.

Helen: Thank you.

Wally: You're welcome.

Helen: And I didn't know about your son.

Wally: They told you about Shane?

Helen: Yes. And I'm sorry.

Wally: What for? You didn't know him.

Helen: I'm sorry for your loss. To lose a son - I can't imagine...

Wally: If I were you, I wouldn't try.

Helen: Maree said he was disabled.

Wally: Maree says a lot.

Helen: I know what it's like to be a carer.

Beat

Wally: He was a spastic kid, cerebral palsy, whatever they call it.

Helen: Severe?

Wally: Pretty bad.

Helen: There are degrees of disability.

Wally: Oh, he was the full 360. Five weeks premature - not that that was it - but he had a fall when he a few weeks old. Off the bath table. He was that bloody small you couldn't get a decent grip, you know, without thinking you were going to hurt him. Blood on the brain and that was it.

Helen: Just like that?

Wally: Yeah. Fuckin' cruel, isn't it? Ten seconds - a lifetime.

Helen: But he went to school...

Wally: Oh yeah, he was a smart little bugger. Probably made it worse for him, knowing that much. They didn't have any special schools up here of course, he just went local. Tried to make life as normal as we could...

Helen: You have to.

Wally: And that's what did for him. He couldn't climb out a window.

Helen: Wally, a fire could kill anyone.

Wally: But this one didn't. It just killed him.

Helen: Accidents happen anywhere, it could've happened at home..

Wally: Then I could've helped him.

Helen: We can't keep the world out.

Wally: We can knock off the edges.

Helen: I know Jackson... struggles... but I have no idea what he's capable of.

Wally: And you reckon he does?

Helen: No - but I want him to find out.

Wally: Not every kid in a wheelchair's gonna climb a fuckin' mountain.

Helen: But what if they can? You have to let them try.

Wally: So they kept telling me.

Chester enters wearing a Peter Allen-style Australian flag

shirt.

Wally: Jesus Christ - what have you come as?

Chester: I'm introducing the choir. Thought I'd dress for the part.

Wally: You're not going all Penny Wong on us, are you?

Chester: Wally, I'm not gay, I'm flamboyant.

Wally: Well, you're a fuckin' braver man than I am. Try wearing that in Cronulla.

Wally leaves with the sawdust bucket.

Chester: You alright?

Helen: Fine. Wally apologised.

Chester: Yeah? You know, underneath all that stuff, Wally's not a bad bloke.

Helen: Yes he is. He's a xenophobic fascist.

Chester: Well, yes, but apart from that he's alright. Come on - he said sorry.

Helen: I know he did. Doesn't mean I'm going to forgive him.

Chester: Why not?

Helen: Because he was right.

Chester: No he wasn't.

Helen: Yes he was. *(beat)* And it's been hard for me to admit to myself... After Thursday night I went home and I asked Jackson if he really wanted to be in the concert and he said no.

Chester: I don't blame him. You seen the people he's working with? They're worse than the choir.

Helen: Chester, not everything is a joke. I put Jackson up there... I wanted him to be up there because I wanted him to be creative, I wanted him to be able to express himself in a way that maybe, maybe he couldn't... and... I forgot to stop to ask him if that's what he wanted.

Chester: Every parent lives through their kids. That's why they have them.

Helen: But Jackson can't live the life I want for him. And I know that's the wrong thing to say, it's a terrible thing to say and it's a kick in the guts when it takes some Neanderthal like Wally to point it out.

Chester: Helen, not every kid, not even the... different ones... has to be extraordinary. It's like a national obsession, every parent you meet thinks their kid is gifted and talented. They've all got to do drama or be in the school band, or do calculus in Year 3.

Helen: But the potential...

Chester: Usually isn't there. We're benchmarking kids from the age of four. It's like everything else; you've got to put it on a website and compare it to something else. Ooh - look at the NAPLAN, my child is the next Einstein and his school only got sixty percent in the spelling! Quick, let's move him to a better place!

Helen: It's not a crime to want the best for your child.

Chester: But where are we setting the bar? Why does anyone need to matriculate if they're going to be a plumber?

Helen: Jackson's never going to be a plumber.

Chester: But don't make it harder for him than it already is. No-one's allowed to be ordinary any more. Do you know that's why my family came here? We just wanted the chance to be ordinary. This used to be a very ordinary country.

Helen: Believe me, it still is.

Thunder

Chester: Getting closer.

Helen: Whole concert might be a wash-out. Not just Jackson.

Chester: Look, if Jackson doesn't want to play the bongoes and feel the rhythm, it's not the end of the world. I'm practically tone-deaf but it hasn't stopped me from being fabulous.

Helen: Are you sure you're not gay?

Chester: That's what Wally said when he slept with me. Joke - God, that's a terrible mental image.

Maree enters dressed for Spirit of the Dreaming

Chester: And that's even worse! What the hell have you come as?

Maree: I'm Numbat Dreaming.

Chester: No wonder they're endangered.

Helen: Maree, what are you doing?

Maree: I'm standing in for Bridie, she's got glandular fever. Tell you the truth, I'm not feeling that woop myself - anyone else got a bit of a gyp tummy?

Chester: No offence, Maree, but it's gotta be a few years since you wore a stretch fabric.

Maree: And what's that supposed to mean?

Chester: It's not your most flattering garment, is it?

Maree: You can talk - you look like Pauline Hanson's illegitimate son.

Chester: At least I've kept my thighs a state secret.

Helen: And this is the way we show respect to the indigenous people?

Chester: Could be worse - she's not blacked up.

Maree: Brittney is.

Helen: God almighty!

Maree: We're showing respect - we're celebrating their cultural beliefs.

Helen: They should be the ones celebrating their cultural beliefs, not the June Renee School of Dance.

Maree: But we don't have any aboriginal students.

Helen: Then why not pick something more appropriate?

Maree: Because you would've said we were being too white and middle-class.

Helen: I don't think I'd be using the word class.

Maree: And Blackfellas sing country and western music - that's not their culture but you don't complain about them doing it.

Helen: They don't put on white make-up, Maree. They don't try to look like Dolly Parton.

Chester: You can't get bras that size in the Woomera.

Helen: Oh come on Chester, surely you can see this is not on.

Chester: What's such a big deal? At least they're acknowledging the aboriginal nation. Alright, they're not calling it Invasion Day but they've probably put a bit more thought into it than any politician who gets up and pays lip-service to the traditional owners.

Helen: That is unfair.

Chester: I didn't see you picketing Miss Saigon.

Helen: They used Vietnamese actors.

Chester: Not the production I saw in Port Macquarie.

Maree: My great-niece was in that. She played a prostitute. Not much of a stretch, I'm afraid to say.

Helen: I think I'm going insane.

Maree: What's the harm in it? There's not going to be any aborigines watching anyway, they don't live around here.

Helen: And you wonder why.

Maree: Lighten up.

Helen: And that'll solve everything, will it? You're living in the dirt in the Northern Territory, unemployed and half blind but, hey, lighten up!

~~Maree: It wouldn't hurt. And half the ones you see whingeing on the TV look whiter than I am. They only do it for the pension.~~

Chester: I'd quit while you're ahead, Maree.

Thunder

Chester: See? Rain god's getting angry.

Maree: Thought it was my stomach. Excuse me a minute.

Maree leaves

Helen: I feel like I'm banging my head against a brick wall. I thought you of all people would see my point.

Chester: What point?

Helen: Difference. The need for a little respect.

Chester: You want me to identify as a victim? Sorry, Helen, I don't do it.

Helen: You can joke your way out of it. But what about the people who can't, the Afghans, the Indians...

Chester: No-one's making them come here.

Helen: I cannot believe you said that.

Chester: What, you can't believe I might be a racist because I'm a different race? How racist is that? And please don't tell me about the bloody Indians - they invented the caste system, for Christ's sake.

Helen: What is happening to this country?

Chester: Oh it's fucking it up, just like it always has. We're still looking for someone who's different to whinge about, same as the rest of the world.

Helen: Racism is a cancer.

Chester: And it's incurable. It's how you live with it that makes the difference.

Helen: You don't live with it, you fight it.

Robert enters

Robert: Has anyone seen the sawdust bucket? Two of the New Zealanders have just thrown up over their native plants.

Helen: Wally's taken it. A kid was sick on the tarpaulins.

Robert: We're going to need those, that storm's fifteen minutes away at the most.

Chester: Should I start the concert?

Robert: ASAP - what on earth are you wearing?

Chester: Wait till you see Maree.

Robert: The day's turning into an absolute disaster. I think we've got an outbreak of food poisoning on our hands.

Chester: Food poisoning? From what?

Helen: Couldn't be the sausage sizzle, could it?

Robert: Well I can't think of anything else. Unless the girl guides have slipped something into the brownies.

Chester: Don't curious scouts normally do that?

Robert: The chocolate brownies. Have either of you eaten a sausage?

Helen: No.

Chester: I had the nut-free satays.

Maree enters

Maree: False alarm. You've no idea how hard it is to get out of a cat suit in a hurry.

Robert: Maree - did you have a sausage?

Maree: From the sizzle? Yes.

Robert: What sort?

Maree: Wally said it was a lamb and rosemary.

Helen: I didn't order any lamb and rosemary.

Maree: Well, they could've got mixed up. I just brought the ones you ordered and a few extra I had in the freezer.

Helen: How long have you had them?

Maree: I don't know - since Christmas, maybe.

Helen: They won't have gone off that quickly.

Maree: Or the Christmas before that.

Robert: Oh Jesus.

Maree: I can't think of everything. I'm only a volunteer!

Helen: It's alright, Maree, calm down, it's not your fault.

Robert: Yes it is!

Helen: We don't even know if it's the sausages making people sick.

Chester: Bags not collecting samples.

Robert: Can you just go and start the concert. You're not helping.

Chester: Yes, Captain Picard.

Chester goes as Brian enters, He starts padding up

Brian: For God's sake, start the concert.

Chester: I'm going, alright?

Brian: It's going to piss down in about twenty minutes.

Robert: What are you padding up for?

Brian: It's called leadership, Robert. In a time of crisis you carry on as normal. Well, all I can say is we're bloody lucky Warren Cootes wasn't there to see that debacle. The family from Wales couldn't even read the oath after the Kiwis had finished hurling all over it. Thank God it was laminated. What the hell is going on?

Helen: Food poisoning.

Robert: We think it might have been the sausage sizzle.

Brian: Are we covered for food poisoning?

Robert: They'd have to prove it.

Maree: Chester's volunteered to collect samples.

Brian: Jesus, Maree, what have you come as?

Maree: A slap in the face to our indigenous people, apparently.

Helen: Marie, I wasn't having a go at you personally.

Maree: Well, I'd hate to be here when you did.

Thunder

Brian: Look, it's all academic - at this rate we'll be lucky to get through the school choir.

The school band begins to play faintly recognisable version of Funky Town

Robert: We should've gone with the wet weather contingency.

Brian: We haven't got one.

Maree: So there's not much point in me staying in this, then.

Brian: No, Maree. The Spirit of Gondwana's back in the dreamtime.

Maree: The girls'll be disappointed.

Brian: They can save it for Seniors Week.

Helen: Haven't the old people suffered enough?

Maree: Oh very funny.

Helen: Hey, Maree, lighten up.

Maree: Ha ha.

Maree leaves

Helen: Wally said something about pumping the portaloos..

Brian: They'll be floating away in half an hour, and Robert - can you tell the CWA to get the damper oven under cover?

Robert: Right. And the pop concert?

Brian: Gone to God, I'm afraid. So much for John Howard. I told you he wouldn't show.

Robert: What?

Brian: Ten bucks says he's gone to Braeworth to back the Taiwanese woman. He had a lot of Asians in Bennelong, he's their kind of bloke. Bastard.

Thunder as Robert leaves

Brian: Take a brolly!

Helen: Have you spoken to Robert yet?

Brian: Jesus, Helen, we're in the middle of a complete meltdown - can you cut me some slack?

Helen: I want an answer, Brian.

Brian: What's the bloody urgency, Surely one day won't make a difference.

Helen: One day's made a big difference - this day. If I had any doubts, they're well and truly gone.

Brian: What bee's in your bonnet now?

Helen: You don't get it, do you? You all run this day like it's your own private club. You run the whole town like some sort of gated community. Nothing ever changes.

Brian: That is not true. You think it's easy getting this town to move forward? We only stopped playing God Save the Queen five years ago.

The band starts the national anthem

Brian: Oh, for fuck's sake, why are they doing the national anthem again? I think we've heard it enough.

Helen: You don't want to move, Brian. None of you do. This is middle Australia at its xenophobic best.

Brian: That's just hot air. These people aren't monsters, they get in the polling booth, they do the right thing.

Helen: But you're not asking them to do the right thing anymore. Where's the restraint? When Malcolm Fraser starts looking like Mahatma Ghandi we're in serious trouble.

Brian: Oh for Christ's sake, don't start banging on about boat people.

Thunder and rain begins to fall.

Brian: Shit, here it comes. There goes the fucking cricket match. Can you pause the Socialism 1.01 lecture for a minute? Some of us have got more important things to worry about. *(Brian gets on the radio)* Brian to Robert. Over.

Robert: Receiving you. Over.

Brian: You'd better get the vintage cars moving - we don't want them getting bogged. Over.

Robert: Copy that. Over.

Brian: And tell the scouts to stop digging latrines. Last thing we need is them backing up as well.

Robert: Over and out.

Brian: Whatever. *(to Helen)* You keep telling me the world has changed. And you're right. Decent people are struggling...

Helen: What - to keep two cars on the road?

Brian: They're struggling -

Helen: To pay for private schools?

Brian: - to give their kids a better life than they had.

Helen: Brian, we had - we have - a great life! We never lived through a depression or a world war. How much better do we want it to be?

Brian: Well, excuse me, I don't see what's wrong with hanging on to what I've earned the bloody hard way. And I'm going to Canberra to stop this country going backwards or being sold off to the highest bidder.

Helen: Then if you want to get to Canberra, you'd better speak to Robert.

Brian: I already have. Alright?

Helen: What did you say?

Brian: I spun him a line about head office wanting the Greens preferences.

Helen: As if that's going to happen.

Brian: It was the best I could think of. You didn't exactly give me much time to prepare.

Helen: And what did he say?

Brian: He'll do it.

Helen: He'll hand over the mayor.

Brian: Well, he didn't say it in so many words but he's Robert, of course he'll do it. He'll do it for a friend.

Helen: The Roberts of this world usually do.

Brian: So I've done what you wanted - stabbed a mate in the back. You happy?

Helen: Don't turn this on me - you put the knife in when you forced him to vote down the Bunnings proposal.

Brian: I didn't force him - he had a choice.

Helen: So did you.

Brian: With your gun at my head.

Helen: Isn't that what the Liberal Party stands for? Freedom of choice?

Brian: At least we stand for something. You promise you'll wipe the recording?

Helen: Promise... non-core promise. Who knows?

Brian: Fuck me!

Helen: We're not all hippies sitting in trees playing pan-pipes anymore. Of course I'll wipe the recording.

Brian: Gee thanks.

The band keeps playing.

Brian: Christ, they're like the dance band on the Titanic.

Robert appears in the tent flap, soaked.

Brian: Robert - looking a bit of a drowned rat there, mate. D'you get the cars moving?

Robert: You left your radio on.

Brian: Sorry?

Robert: The radio. You have to press the switch again to turn it off.

Brian: I don't get you.

Robert: Your radio was on.

Helen: Oh, Jesus - he heard us.

Brian: What?

Helen: He heard us. Through the radio.

Brian: Oh shit.

Robert: That's what the Roberts of this world do.

Helen: Robert, I didn't mean for you to...

Brian: Jesus, mate, I know this might have sounded bad but Helen made me do it...

Helen: What?

Brian: ...she's got a recording of you volunteering to vote down the Bunnings...

Helen: Volunteering?

Brian: Alright, but if I didn't hand over...

Robert: I know. She put you in a difficult situation. Just like you did to me, Brian.

Brian: Oh, come on, that was a bit different.

Robert: And I was helping out a mate. But that's what we do in this country, isn't it? Help out our mates.

Helen: Robert, it was nothing personal... but you could've stopped it. You didn't have to agree to do it.

Robert: You're right - I should've had the guts to say no.

Brian: So technically, there's no difference between us.

Robert: I think there's one big difference. I didn't ask for any of this.

Helen: What are you going to do?

Robert: Do?

Helen: Well, you're going to do something. Is it going to be the corruption commission, the local council...

Robert: I'm not going to do anything.

Helen: Then what do you want?

Robert: I don't want anything.

Helen: There's got to be something in it...

Robert: All I want is for everything to go back to the way it was.

Brian: Not a problem. We just pretend that none of this happened.

Helen: No, we don't - what about the recording? Jesus, Brian, it's our word against Robert's, he's got no proof.

Brian: She's got a point, mate.

Robert: I've got a witness. Wally heard every word.

Helen: Wally?

Robert: He was helping me with the tarpaulins.

Wally appears

Helen: Oh, shit.

Wally: Believe me, Helen, I'm not enjoying this.

Brian: What difference does it make? Helen's still got the recording.

Robert: So what? She can't use it now without incriminating herself.

Brian: So we're sweet - I still run for preselection, Robert gets the mayor..

Robert: I said everything back the way it was, Brian. You're the mayor.

Brian: For now.

Robert: For as long as I say.

Brian: But my preselection..

Robert: You withdraw.

Brian: And how do I explain that?

Robert: Tell them it's for family reasons. Everyone else does.

Brian: Why would you want me to do that?

Robert: Because I don't want to be the mayor. I've never wanted to be the mayor.

Brian: You could have bloody told me!

Robert: You never bloody asked. I was perfectly happy being the deputy, being on this committee, helping out with Rotary.

Brian: Robert, we've all got to move on...

Robert: I don't want to move on, Brian - I just want to stop and stand still for five bloody minutes. Why does everything have to change all the time?

Brian: It's called progress.

Robert: No, it's not. Progress is when things get better. And you know what the irony is? I would've voted against the Bunnings proposal anyway. I don't want them here - we've already got a hardware store, why do we want another one?

Wally: Competition.

Robert: It's bullshit, Wally. What! Coles or Woolworths? Go and talk to a dairy farmer about competition!

Wally: Jesus, Robert, you sound like you're in the fuckin' communist party!

Robert: I'm not in any party, Wally. I just want to be left alone. I just want to watch the news at seven o'clock instead of twenty-four hours a day. I just want one company to sell me electricity - and only sell it to me once!

Brian: SMS alert, Robert: we live in a global economy...

Robert: No, we don't. We live here. And I'm sick of having to talk to someone in Calcutta about why my broadband just got cut off for the third fucking time.

Helen: Sticking your head in the sand won't change a thing.

Robert: I never wanted it to change in the first place!

Helen: You can't ignore...

Robert: And I don't want to hear any more lectures from you, Helen. You're the biggest disappointment of the lot. So much for keeping the bastards honest.

Helen: I'm not here to keep the bastards honest, I'm here to get rid of them.

Robert: Then do it. *(offers her his phone)* Come on. Do it. Ring up the ABC and let's all go down together.

Helen doesn't move

Robert: You can't, can you? Not quite ready to make the noble sacrifice. You're not changing the game - you're just getting better at it.

Brian: It's politics, mate. What do you expect?

Robert: I don't expect anything much anymore Brian. And maybe if everybody else could just stand back, shut up and get on with the job in hand, we might have a national day worth celebrating.

Pause

Brian: Robert... mate... I'm truly sorry about this. You're one of my oldest friends - I...

Robert: Mc-ed my daughter's twenty-first. I know. She didn't want you to; I made her do it.

Brian: Well thanks for telling me!

Robert: Nothing personal. Now if you'll excuse me, I have fifteen wet seniors to put on a minibus.

Robert leaves. Comes back with dignity

Robert: And this time I'll take an umbrella.

He leaves. Silence

Wally: I'll start packing up the barbecue then. Or do you want me to leave it for forensics?

Brian: Pack it up and burn it, Wally. Leave no trace.

Wally leaves

Helen: And this is the part where I'm supposed to say sorry.

Brian: For what? Ruining my life? No, you were right. This was my fault. I couldn't read a bloke I've known for forty years.

Helen: Maybe I shouldn't have taken advantage...

Brian: Helen - you're in local politics. Small beer, I know, but it still gets you drunk. You had to go there. You nearly pulled it off.

Helen: You would've done the same.

Brian: Course I would have. Robert, on the other hand, wouldn't. That's why he'll never get anywhere.

Helen: But he won.

Beat

Brian: Minor point but a telling one.

Helen: I was doing it for a reason...

Brian: Everyone in this game does it for a reason.

Helen: But the how became a lot more important than the why.

Brian: Only way to get anything done.

Helen: Then how are any of us different?

Brian: Maybe we're not.

Chester enters - the colours in his shirt have run in the rain

Chester: Last time I buy a shirt made in Korea.

Brian: Ah, Chester. Grab yourself a beer, I think we've earned it.

Maree enters

Maree: Sorry, Brian, I had to use the caravan. Emergency. I'll need to tell Wally...

Wally has entered

Wally: Tell Wally what?

Maree: The van - I had to... tummy's a bit off...

Wally: Do we need to send in a canary?

Brian: Beer, Wally?

Chester: Where's Robert?

Wally: He... *(he catches Helen's eye)* he's getting the seniors on the bus.

Chester: *(sensing the mood)* Have we missed something?

Brian: Oh, not a lot. Helen and I were just about to have a debrief of the day's events. Let's see - we've had food poisoning, the biggest storm this side of Cyclone Yarsi, the ambassador's a no-show, our newest citizen takes the pledge of allegiance and promptly throws up, my political career is in tatters...

Chester: What?

Brian: Long story... The shitters back up, I lose my oldest friend and the seniors musical group is probably going down with pneumonia as we speak.

Maree: Your citizen speech was lovely...

Brian: Thank you Maree, but let's be honest: all things considered, I think It's fair to say this may not be the most successful Australia Day we've ever had. Still, could be worse.

The tent roof above Brian's head breaks and he is drenched with water.

Blackout

Alternate ending if still in the scout hall or the water drop proves too difficult

Robert re-enters

Robert: Brian - the Howards have arrived.

Blackout

THE END