

# *A Fitzroy Romance*

*By Kieran Carroll*

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

*A playreading of A Fitzroy Romance was held on Saturday March 13 2010 at the La Mama Courthouse in Melbourne. The readers were Josh Fatcher and Hannah Williams.*

*In May 2010, the play was shortlisted for the 2010 National Script Workshop run by Playwriting Australia.*

*In May 2011, the play had a two week season at the La Mama Courthouse, Melbourne. In September 2011, the play was shortlisted for the 2013 Old Fitzroy Theatre, Sydney mainstage season*

## **CHARACTERS**

### **BEN**

Age:

Employment: Shop assistant at *Dick Smiths*

### **BRON**

Age: 23

Employment: Waitress at *The Spaghetti Tree*.

## **TIME**

1997

## ACT 1

### SCENE 1

*Your Woman by Whitetown plays as Ben and Bron enter. Music stops. They hold hands with their backs to the audience. Voiceover.*

BEN & BRON: We broke the cold together. We put some dance into a suburban street. We let the moon fall across our shoulders as an Easter glittered more than we ever could have imagined.

*Ben and Bron face the audience and are seated.*

BEN: It was 1997.

BRON: Vaguely known to one another.

BEN: A quick hello once or twice before.

BRON: A pat of a shoulder -

BEN: A stare -

BRON: A wish to start a conversation.

BEN: A walk past one another -

BRON: Then another -

BEN: Then another. I noticed what she drank. Cider then beer then cider then beer.

BRON: I wondered if he might be going out with someone else whenever I saw him.

BEN: We kept seeing each other at the same bands. One night, we were watching *Regurgitator*. We found ourselves up the back. I was looking away from her most of the time. Kind of nervous. We wanted to get closer to the stage. We were so into it.

BRON: I remember being amongst all these people, not being able to see very well. He went to move forward, and I just, I can't explain it... I just grabbed his hand and we moved closer, him leading me to like four rows from the front.

*They rush towards the back of the stage.*

BEN: We went outside after the gig.

BRON: Down Rose St, behind the pub.

BEN: It felt great kissing, feeling her back, up against a wall of graffiti, the sky orange and grey.

BRON: I liked kissing him but then I started worrying, thinking my friends would think I'm lost. Then I thought about another beer. Even, for a moment, thought I better get back to the pub to buy the Regurgitator CD.

BEN: It was a big all-nighter that finished at *The Tankerville* and us taking the first Belgrave train back to –

BRON: Blackburn –

BEN: Nunawading. Couldn't believe the suburb next door thing. She was the one. (*Bron turns and goes to vomit*) She was the one for sure.

*They speak as if in separate rooms.*

BEN: I cook under the griller the whole time: chops, sausages, chips with deli coleslaws, corn kernels and *Edgell* tin beetroot. Always *Edgell*. It's a family thing. Easy. For breakfast, when I can stomach it, well, *Weet-Bix* never break the bank.

BRON: He doesn't know what a pan and oil is. And he can't use a lighter. Some odd phobia.

BEN: I never remember toilet paper or anything to do with cleaning.

BRON: He loves second-hand record shops. When I go with him, I always notice so many bald, middle-aged men. A few weeks ago, we saw a film about *The Who* at *The Astor*. (*The Who play loudly*) I think I was the only woman there. It didn't help that I've got no interest in *The Who* whatsoever but just went along to be with him.

BEN: A girlfriend who likes *The Who*! Unbelievable! (*The Who stop. Pause*) Lately, we've been talking about taking off to Europe but we're pretty bad at saving. Nah that's not right. It's only... me.

BRON: I'd love to go overseas one day to work or study.

BEN: Geez I wouldn't mind the Greek Islands for a couple of weeks just soaking it all up.

BRON: He gets on alright with my friends, even tolerates the really opinionated ones.

BEN: She's got a couple of hot friends as well, not that I'd cheat. They've got lots of opinions, but that's alright, 'cause I'm not very opinionated myself and it's easy just drinking while they do all the yakking.

BEN & BRON: (*Tipsily, facing one another again*): Long, long nights where we ignore time.

*The Fauves song Everybody's Getting A Three Piece Together plays.*

BEN: Nights down at *The Punters Club* where we'd turn to the white hands of the revolving Carlton Draught public bar clock and see it was already ten to three.

BRON: Time moves more quickly in a crowded pub after midnight than it does anywhere else in the world. (*Music stops*)

BEN: What's that saying: 'Couples that drink together -

BRON: Couples that drink together -

BEN: Stay together. (*Pause. They separate.*) I reckon I've been badly dehydrated for about a year. I reckon I vomit once a week or three times a month. Friends of mine are developing what I've called Empress belly or Punters Club paunch. Beer, salt and vinegar chips and \$2 kebab Mondays. When did you last eat a piece of fruit Dave?

BRON: I've started wearing sunglasses on morning tram rides to hide the hangovers.

BEN: We've got a few friends in bands.

BRON: One of my best friends is best friends with the drummer in *Magic Dirt*. He might have left though.

BEN: I like this band called *The Fat Thing* from Ballarat who get into all this fire-breathing stuff and swords down their throats.

BRON: Ben's not really into it but I like some of the moodier, slower stuff like *Sandro* and *The Paradise Motel*.

BEN: But the funniest band around are *The Magic Christians* with their stilts and masks and how they scream obscenities in Bulgarian & Latvian.

BEN & BRON (*Facing one another*): Lately, though, we've been happy to just discover other stuff together in crowded rooms full of strangers.

*They separate again.*

BRON: I wait tables in Bourke St at *The Spaghetti Tree*.

BEN: I work behind the counter at *Dick Smiths* in Chadstone, part of the largest shopping centre in the southern hemisphere. One time I got Bron to meet me outside work at five o'clock 'cause we had to go to dinner with my parents. The one time. She turned up at like 7.30 'cause she'd been drinking at the *Punters*, watching *The Blackeyed Susans* sound-check.

BRON: He's never owned a bed, only a mattress that was dragged around for way too long. I was pretty glad to see it go into the hard rubbish.

BEN: She's got this really comfortable high old bed and a couple of fantastic doonas.

*Joining together again*

BRON: We leave the pub arm in arm, push into laneways up against fences, hold each other's faces with smoke ring winter breath...say I love you.

BEN: I love you. (*Long pause*) Finding this place got really stressful. We wanted to be north of the river. There was Northcote - but it will never be Fitzroy. And Thornbury's just too far out. I got really badly lost trying to get to a party there one night and told myself never again.

BRON: Neither of us knew anyone in Richmond or Brunswick.

BEN: East Melbourne was a joke cost wise.

BRON: We saw a couple of shithouse places in Abbotsford.

BEN: There was one in Collingwood I didn't mind. It had a courtyard I saw as my own little beer garden.

BRON: But eventually we found this: Westgarth St, just off Brunswick,

BEN: Two minutes walk to The Punters -

BRON: Two and a half minutes to the Evelyn -

BEN: Three minutes to that cheap pie shop.

BRON: Spring 1997.

BEN: 1997.

BEN & BRON: 1997 sounds so...sci-fi!

BRON: I've started eating at the *Vegie Bar* as a semi-vegetarian, like 80% vego, and getting a bit mad with him for leaving sausage fat under the grill. (*Moving back to him*) I'm in love (*Moving away*) with this British band *The Verve*. *Bittersweet Symphony*. Richard Ashcroft...oooh. Those cheekbones! (*Pause*) We've just bought a tumble dryer together. Well it was a 65-35 split. It's been really wet.

BEN: For about three days, we had a pregnancy going on but it was fine. Don't know what I would have done.

BRON: Having children younger seems to be coming back. It's not a mistake for everyone. Look, strollers on Brunswick St! Sometimes, I wonder about staying at home on thundery afternoons, knitting a stripey beanie or a pair of yellow mittens.

BEN: My two best mates who are both bald have become serious alcoholics. I got drunk on absinthe in Prahran. I blow \$200. The rent.

BRON: I'm like this (*Long death stare*)... for two and a half days. But we made up with a long walk into the Exhibition Gardens to meet the possums.

BEN: There's this thing called email. A friend of mine's started using it. I don't know how it works. He said he contacted somebody in Germany and it only took eight seconds for this message to go through to the other side of the world.

BRON: We've started going to the *Vic Market* -

BEN: A couple of times straight from the *Public Bar* across the road. A couple of big nights when we remembered how...couples that stay together, drink together -

BRON: No, no other way around! Couples that drink together, stay together!

BEN: Do you remember vomiting chips behind those seal fur coats?

*Bron departs for a drink. She puts on Bittersweet Symphony and begins to dance slowly around the stage.*

BEN: It was really hot that weekend when we went down to Maddy's house in Balnarring. Bron played *The Verve* really loud all weekend. As soon as she'd get back from the beach, she'd knock over glass after glass of white wine and dance around the house. She said it was the happiest she'd ever felt. Things seemed really great. They were great. Late on the Saturday night I'd kind of passed out on the couch and she'd decided to take a walk, nowhere in particular, just because she was a bit pissed probably. She said she wanted to be out with the stars and cicadas. Richard Ashcroft was in her head. He was always in her head.

*Bron continues to dance but is motionless when interjecting Ben's speech with various medical expressions.*

BRON: Sever the nerve tract -

BEN: She was walking along by the side of the road. Singing. Singing loudly for sure. Neither of us ever saw any traffic on that road. It was a freaky thing -

BRON: Lesion of the spinal cord -

BEN: She didn't see...or didn't notice...you would have thought she...I mean how could she not hear something or sense something or notice headlights coming up behind her? The driver said he tooted. How could the driver not see -

BRON: Thirty-one pairs of spinal nerves: eight cervical, twelve thoracic -

BEN: The car was speeding but luckily managed to slow down a bit on impact. It skidded a bit off the edge of the road and knocked her.

Later, they said the fact he was able to slow down a bit saved her. Turned out, her spinal cord wasn't completely severed -

BRON: Five lumbar, five sacral, one coccygeal –

*Bron falls and lays on the ground.*

BEN: The guy who did it didn't drive off. He was pissed himself, like .09, panicking and alone, but he called an ambulance from the general store phone box which wasn't too far away. The ambos got there pretty quickly considering. Her Dad drove me to the Frankston hospital next morning, a red sky following us along. Beach weather.

*Blackout.*

*Ben plays guitar on the couch. Bron enters in a wheelchair.*

BRON: Go on Ben. Go out. It's a Saturday night. Go out. Don't stay in because of me. It's better...

BEN: There's nothing on anyway.

BRON: I can see. I can hear. I can talk. I keep telling myself things will get better. *(Pause)* The world hasn't completely shut down. Time moves so slowly, in the afternoons especially. Sometimes when I'm waiting for you to come home from work, I feel...but I'm not going back home to be the crippled daughter shuffling between the suburbs and rehab. It's much closer to the hospital from here anyway. *(Pause)* Are you listening? *(Pause)* They'll stop ringing you know.

BEN: Who?

BRON: My friends.

BEN: No they won't.

BRON: They'll only be able to handle it for so long, the obligation. A visit will become a phone call, will become a vague 'we must catch up'. Who'd want to come around here anyway? The fuckin' house is a mess. Ants all over the place. Spiders. You never clean up. The noise of the trams is driving me crazy. And if I have to put up much longer with all the drilling going on from those new apartments, I swear, I'm gonna strangle someone. We're living in a hole.

BEN: Look, just take it easy. Don't worry about that for now. Drop it, hey. How about I go out to the bottle shop?

BRON: Yeah sure. Maybe you could stop in for some potato cakes as well. That dodgy shop will do. That's one thing I can't work out about Fitzroy. No good fish'n'chip shops anywhere. Blackburn's got it all over Fitzroy in that way.

BEN: And Nunawading. I don't get it. I really don't.

BRON: And Ben, ask for plenty of vinegar. They're always stingy with it. You have to ask. They never throw it on unless you ask right before they're wrapping it all up. And don't worry if they give you a dirty look like it's costing them a fortune!

*He moves towards her.*

BEN: I've never met anyone so serious about vinegar.

*He kisses her forehead. They freeze. Voiceover.*

BEN & BRON: That night we shared our bed. We needed to keep feeling some warmth through morning windows, to go outside and not worry about a coat, to raise our faces to the sun and breathe in. We needed to breathe in more deeply than we ever had.

*Blackout*

## SCENE 2

*Bron is talking to her parents. Ben is talking to his friends at the pub.*

BRON: Mum, Dad, you don't need to come around every second day. I don't want or need you to do everything for me. I'm appreciative, really. I know you care heaps but there are things I can do myself. Really. I need to try. Even at rehab they're saying it's a good idea. I'm getting lots of advice from everyone about moving on, work options, even getting a degree blah blah blah. I know everyone means well but then...I wake up in the middle of the night...

BEN: Boys it's like this. My parents think it's too much to take on. Her parents want her to move home. We're not winning either way there. *(Pause)* Ah I'll have one more then I better go. Nah I'd like

to, but I won't, nah I'm right...alright, maybe I'll go and ring now and say I'll be back later. Yeah, a couple more hours won't hurt.

BEN: (*On public phone to his friends as Bron answers*): Yeah, yeah, here get a jug.

BRON (*Picking up phone*): Hello. Hello.

BEN: Bron, it's me. If it's cool, I might stay out for a bit longer. Just have a couple more quiet ones.

BRON: But I've been alone all day. Can't you...

BEN: Won't be for long. Just catching up with a few people I haven't seen for ages.

BRON: This isn't like you Ben.

BEN: Look I won't be home that late okay. Promise. Look, um, someone else needs the phone. I better go. I'll see you later on.

*Ben enters drunkenly the next morning.*

BRON: You haven't been to bed, have you? Must have been a big one.

BEN: Yeah it was. Really funny.

BRON: I tried reading, watching TV. I put the radio on. All this talkback: nightshift workers, the mentally ill, lonely and elderly people. It was so depressing...were you...I mean are you...

BEN: Am I what?

BRON: With other girls, last night, were you with other girls?

BEN: It was just drinking.

BRON: I need your support Ben.

BEN: I give it to you every day.

BRON: Not last night.

BEN: C'mon come and lie down.

BRON: No.

BEN: Bron, I'm going to bed. C'mon. Just lay off.

BRON: As soon as you close that door and go out on your own, the relief must be...

BEN (*Suddenly agitated*): Ah, we don't even know each other very well.

BRON: You fuckin' cunt.

*Ben goes and grabs his acoustic guitar. He takes the wheelchair from her and sits in it himself. He thrashes out Blur's Song 2, screaming the lyrics her way.*

BRON (*Yelling*): Stop it, stop it. You fucking madman! You fucking madman!

*He stops. Puts the guitar back on its stand.*

BEN: Sorry. I'm sorry. It's too much sometimes. It's too much. I can't...

BRON: You get sick of me, don't you? You are sick of me.

*Long pause*

You want to leave, don't you? C'mon, speak up. You want to leave. You want it to be over...don't you?

*Long Pause*

BEN: I don't know. You'll get better care at home instead of them running over here the whole time. Maybe I can still do something, I don't know...visit you there, take you out.

BRON: Visit...like I'm your grandmother.

BEN: Look there's no guarantee we'd even be together...all our friends have broken up in the last year. No-one's still together. It's probably only the fuckin' accident...

*Ben walks out, pushing a bunch of records off the couch.*

*Bron is on the phone to a friend. Ben is on another phone behind her.*

BRON: It's been like six weeks. We haven't spoken one word. He just kind of walked. I'm back with Mum and Dad. Christ, can you believe someone can just disappear like that? (*Pause*) Can you come

around for a visit tonight? *(Pause)* Oh right, well maybe tomorrow. When you can. When you can.

BEN: Oh hi, is that Fiona? Right, hi Deidre...um, I was wondering if Fiona was there...oh right. Well, can you leave a message and say that Ben, Ben Ashton called? I was just wondering if she'd like to go out for a drink. She knows me well. She knows you well. Oh, she's a lesbian now. Oh right, ah, well, maybe the three of us could go out for a drink. Sorry, I didn't mean that how it sounded. *(Gets hung up on)*

BRON *(On telephone)*: Alright Maddy, what time, what time's good for you? 9 o'clock. Yeah, that's good. Really good. Thanks Maddy, thanks a lot. You sure you don't mind, you know with the chair. Maybe we should have a couple of quiet ones here first to... maybe, bring a Valium as well.

BEN *(On telephone)*: Oh hi, Mrs Stewart. It's Ben Ashton here. I was a friend of Melanie's. We were in that Friday night church youth group together, years ago. I was wondering if I could get Melanie's phone number off you. I thought I might give her a call. *(Pause)* Oh right. What's she doing there? College, really, a scholarship, water polo, water polo, really, oh that's great, she must have really... buffed up! *(Pause)* Oh she's on the email. Oh right, email, oh great. You know how to use that, do you? *(Pause)* Well, that's, that's, ah, really helpful I suppose. You're pretty modern Mrs Stewart. Know more about it than me. Yes my parents are fine...

BRON: *(Drunkenly outside pub)*: It's like I've got little church bells in my head. Haven't felt this for ages. Yeah get me another *Strongbow*. I'd love a smoke too. C'mon, we'll go down *The Public Bar* and see *The Sea Scouts*. Let's do it. There's only one step to get over to get in. The bouncer will remember me anyway.

BEN: *(Very drunkenly)*: Not even three bucks left for a hot-dog. Fuckin' hell, I swear I had three fifties at the start of the night. Why do I even go out? -

BRON: But you know when you've been that hung-over and then you start to feel kind of good and you have a shower and can stomach some food -

*Ben is vomiting. He then begins to urinate. A police siren can be heard.*

BEN: Oh fuck no, is that the pigs?

*Ben is nabbed and handcuffed.*

BRON (*On the phone*): How did I get his phone number? Oh that's right. He was kind of nice looking actually. Great fringe. Older I think. Maybe I should call him tomorrow. No, I'll give it a couple of days. (*Pause*) What am I thinking? He probably doesn't want to hang out with somebody in...he was just drunk as well.

BEN (*In a police van*): A night in a police lock-up. Fucking hell. I lived in a nice place on Westgarth St. I had a cute girlfriend. Now I'm couch surfing. I can't control my money. The bald friends are waking me every second night as they stumble around pissing in their trousers. *The Magic Christians* want a manager but they only make like \$11.50 a gig. There's no future swearing in Bulgarian!

BRON: (*On the phone*): Hi, um, is that Alex? Alex, hi, I'm Bron, we met at *The Punters* on Saturday. (*Pause*) Oh you're going on tour. What's your band called? Postcards from Oslo. Really, you're in PFO. Oh, right, right, I've seen you, yeah... you play bass right? (*Pause*) So you're going all over the place? Right. (*Pause*). You want to have a drink tonight?

BEN (*Flicking through a Punters Club Form Guide*): Maybe I'll go to *The Punters*. Who's on? My Sister Blew Out All The Candles with the guy from Postcards From Oslo solo. That sounds fucking dire. I'd rather another night in the lock up.

BRON: Um, yeah sure, it's only Tuesday, oh what am I saying, I'd love to come out (*Pause*) at *The Punters*? Yeah, what time? (*Pause*) No, you don't have to put me on the door. (*Pause*) What are they called?

BEN: Oh what the hell, there might be a few people around.

BRON: My Sister Blew Out All The Candles, great name, oh right, they're Hangs up) friends of yours from Canberra. Great, right, um, yeah, I'll see you down there then. Bye, bye Alex. (*Hangs up*)

BEN: What have I got in the bank? Like \$21 I think. That'll do. I'll see if I can squeeze \$40 out of the ATM.

*Music plays. Bron is enjoying herself at the pub, nodding to the music and enjoying a beer. Ben appears in a corner. Music fades and he moves over to her.*

- BEN: Bron, hi.
- BRON: You hate this sort of stuff. You were always saying how wimpy it is and why don't they go off and listen to a bit of Pete Townsend.
- BEN: Yeah, fuckin' private school wimps from Camberwell and Hawthorn whose Daddies pay for their amps and guitars. I mean, look at all that gear up there. You think they're buying that on AusStudy? The Magic Christians do rehearsals with one amp between the six of them at the Girl Guides hall in Box Hill and they're tonnes better. *(Pause)* Sorry. It's good you're getting out though.
- BRON: Well, I'm friend's now with Alex, the bass player in PFO. He invited me.
- BEN: That clown with the stripey cardigan who does a show on PBS.
- BRON: You'd love your own radio show Ben. *(Pause)* He's really nice and thoughtful, and kind.
- BEN: He'll never call you again.
- BRON: Ben, it's been good not seeing you.
- BEN: I just thought I'd come over and say g'day, but I may as well get going, last train.
- BRON: Go on, run away again. Look at yourself. You leave me, go silent for six weeks. You feel sorry for yourself because you're all alone. You're probably broke and you're at a gig you hate. You're probably trying to pick up as well for all I know.
- BEN: That's bullshit.
- BRON: Then what the hell are you doing at *The Punters* on a Tuesday night standing in a corner on your own?
- BEN: Look Bron, you're just, you're just, fuck, you're just putting on a brave face. You know, that, that you could still do something, even though your legs don't work.

BRON (*Reaches out to grab him*): You'll regret saying that. (*Pause*) Listen Ben, you leaving me has made me so much... I'm starting to see the good in things again. And I'm starting to see them because you're not around moping about how hard everything is. (*Pause*) I was having a fuckin' great time five minutes ago. There's nothing more to say. Leave me alone.

*Ben is speechless. Bron turns from him and then gestures across the room asking for a drink. She nods her head with a hopeful smile but tears begin to appear. She turns back around.*

BRON: Just go, go, go away from me. Forever. Creep.

BEN: Bron, oh fuck, look, that's good news and all that. (*Pause*) Look I'll go. I'll see you soon. I'm gonna walk up to Parliament. Fuck, didn't mean to upset you so much.

*Blackout*

### SCENE 3

*Darkness. Silence. Voiceover.*

BRON: Alex, hold on, hold on, that's a bit awkward, yeah, that's better. I wasn't expecting this Alex, but I'm fine. I like it. Just be a bit careful, okay? I just can't um...will you really send me a postcard from Oslo? Alex...

*Lights go up on Bron who looks happy and dreamy back at home. Ben appears.*

BEN: Your Mum let me in. I'm sorry about the wheelchair boyfriend stuff. You're right. I've been drinking heaps. You know how I get. I came around to apologize.

BRON: Apologize.

BEN: I'm really sorry for what I said. (*Pause*) I thought I could make it up to you, say next week. Maybe we can go out for dinner first. Mexican or Thai. My shout.

BRON: Ben, don't be, don't be...I can't. I've started sort of seeing Alex now.

BEN: What, the radio tosser from Acupuncture in Carnegie?

BRON: Postcards From Oslo. Ben, look, I'll call you, okay. I'll call. When I'm ready. Let's just leave it there.

BEN: Alright, alright. I just thought I'd ask and try...

BRON: Thanks for coming over to apologize.

*Ben moves towards her and gives her a kiss on the cheek. He departs. Bron goes over to the phone. Ben begins searching the paper for somewhere to live.*

BRON (*On the phone*): Maddy, Maddy, I just got a postcard from Alex. He's in Brisbane. Apparently the tour's being going so well. (*Pause*) No, they haven't really been hanging out with Blur - yet. Alex reckons Blur don't hang out with their supports much although he said Damon Albarn came up and asked him if he knew where a really top quality vegetarian restaurant was. Anyway, better go. Sorry, sorry. Mum's about to take me to rehab then we're going shopping. I'm probably fitter than I've ever been! How weird is that. I better go.

*Bron puts phone down.*

BEN: One bedroom, Brunswick, \$155 a week, you've got to be fuckin' kidding. West Brunswick as well. \$95 Richmond. Must be kind of a boarding house. Share list - wanted: one male to share with three environmentally-in-touch vegans. Must be into yoga, ambient music and self-sufficiency, \$79.75c per week, no bond, room small, non-drinkers essential. Gee, that sounds like a barrel of laughs. Julius, that was my soy sausage! Fuckin' hell. Why don't those fuckers just move to India and be done with it?

*Ben makes a call to Bron who is back at home after the rehab.*

BEN: Bron. It's me.

BRON: Ben, don't call. I wish you wouldn't. I said...

BEN: Just give me a minute. I thought I could take you to the zoo.

BRON: What -

BEN: Well you were always going on about seeing the giraffes and pandas and how we'd never get around to it. Well, I thought I could take you. Anyway, so how about it, the zoo I mean?

BRON: I'll have to think about it. Oh I don't know. I really don't.

BEN: Look, we don't have to do it straight away, like give it some time, like in a couple of weeks? Say Sunday week?

BRON: Not for very long though. Just a couple of hours. That's all.

BEN: Great. I'll call you before that about the time and, um, Bron, Bron, I've been looking for a new place as well, on my own.

BRON: Yeah. Look I better go. I don't mean to be rude but I'm, um, going out soon and I've gotta make a couple more calls.

BEN: Right, right, no worries. See you then.

*Blackout*

#### SCENE 4

*Ben enters Bron's place. He is extremely hungover. Bron is wearing sunglasses.*

BEN: Hi.

BRON: How you going?

BEN: I'm really sorry. I just threw up all over your neighbour's rose bushes.

BRON: We don't like those neighbours on that side much anyway. Ben, I don't think I'm up for going to the zoo. I'm not feeling too good.

BEN: Big night for you as well, was it? What happened? I've been seeing bloody posters for Physiotherapy In Doncaster everywhere. No shortage of money for the publicity machine either.

BRON: Let's not mention them. Do you want a coffee? I'll make it. (*Begins preparing coffee*) I don't really want to talk about it, but, well...I went out with Alex and he was a bit cool and kind of distant, a bit up himself after the *Blur* tour. I asked him what was going on and he got all nervous. He really crammed up. Finally, he told me how he's fallen in love with this Chinese architecture student in Adelaide and how he thought we shouldn't see each other anymore because now it's so 'emotionally complicated'. I should have known something would happen on tour with *Blur*. I knew there'd be girls everywhere. Anyway, he ended up leaving

and I hung out with Maddy and we drank way too much; shots of I don't know what by the end. Are you sure you actually want this coffee?

BEN: I don't think I could stomach it. Wouldn't mind a proper lie down though.

BRON In the other room? My parents' couch. The new one they've just paid thousands for.

BEN: Well yeah. Eyed it off last time I was here. Looks great. Geez, I'm kind of glad you're hungover too and you don't care if we give the zoo a miss. Kind of like the old days.

BRON: The plans we'd make but didn't get around to. Again. *(Pause)* I wouldn't mind a proper lie down as well I think. I could probably give those rose bushes a second hammering! Always helps. Chuckin' I mean.

BEN: Do you want a hand or something so you can lie down yourself?

BRON: No, I want my legs. *(Pause)* That'd be good.

*That night. The Supergrass song 'Pumping On Your Stereo' plays loudly. Bron and Ben are sitting with pots of beer at one of their old haunts. They have to shout at one another to be heard.*

BEN: The old sayings are coming back to us tonight.

BRON: Couples that drink together -

BEN: Stay together.

BRON: Eight pots in and the past speeds away.

BEN: \$1 pots.

BRON: Bottom of the barrel for sure but you forget. *(Pause)* Ben, I want to move back to Fitzroy so badly.

BEN: Well, I've been looking but I can't really find anything. *(Pause)* Some days I'm keener about it than others. The absinthe drinkers haven't been too bad the last week or so. Another pot?

BRON: Yeah maybe get four while you're up there. And how about some peanuts as well, or salt and vinegar chips?

BEN: Jesus Christ, some things don't change.

BRON: Why don't we just get a jug?

*Bron notices the video for Bittersweet Symphony starting as Ben moves back towards her.*

BRON: There he is. My man. Richard Ashcroft. I just melt every time I look at him. Look at him. He's just so sexy. He just means business. Oh those lips.

*They sing the lyrics together, moving around one another.*

BEN & BRON: *'Cause it's a Bittersweet Symphony – that's life.  
Try to make ends meet  
You're a slave to the money then you die.  
I'll take you down the only road I've ever been down.  
You know the one that takes you to the places  
where all the things we get.*

*The drinking continues. They flirt with each other.*

BRON: I suppose we should kinda go. I don't want to but...

BEN: What about some pizza? Half-semi-vegetarian, half-meat lovers special with anchovies.

BRON: Cut it out. That's way too complicated! Ben, come over here and bring your chair!

*Ben moves his chair towards her. They pause then kiss.*

*Pause*

BRON: What are we going to do?

BEN: I don't know. What do you wanna do?

BRON: A lot of stuff's going through my head. You leaving. Then the Alex thing. Then this. Now, tonight. It's nuts. All this is nuts.

BEN: I haven't got a clue about anything at the moment. I really haven't. Let's not make any big decisions. Let's just go slowly.

BRON: Alright. Ben, Ben, bring your chair closer, closer! That's better. Give me another kiss.

*Ben gets up, leans down and gives her a longer kiss. Total Control by The Motels plays. Ben and Bron move back to her parents' place. Ben gives Bron champagne and blindfolds her. Their movements are clumsy but hilarious to them as they try not to make too much noise. He takes the blindfold off but tells her to keep her eyes closed. He undresses to his underpants, puts a flower in his mouth, jumps on the couch and poses. She opens her eyes. He then carries her to the couch. They lie down with him on top.*

*Blackout*

BRON: Oh yes. This is like how we used to play.

BEN: You're goin' great.

BRON: Will this fit?

BEN: We'll see, 'cause baby, I'm telling you. I'm gonna score higher than I ever have before!

*A Scrabble game has commenced on the couch.*

BEN: I can't believe you're putting me through this, this morning.

BRON: VERBATIM was the word of your Scrabble career.

BEN: Thank God it's Saturday. I would have been a mess going to work. *(Ben begins to get dressed)* Chadstone shopping centre has to be the No 1 worst place in the world with a hangover.

BRON: I'll make some toast in a sec. We've got Vegemite. That'll help. When are you going flat hunting again?

BEN: I'm not sure, maybe next weekend. I'll have to look again in the paper.

BRON: Could I tag along? Just to have a bit of a look as well. See what's out there.

*Pause*

BEN *(Suddenly unenthusiastic)*: Yeah sure, but look, everything will probably be too much. It's getting the bond again that's the killer as

well. I'm still not doing that well with money. I mean, I'm a bit better, but maybe I should leave things as they are just a bit longer.

BRON: Ben, we'd just be looking you know, and if there's something...

BEN: Hey, there is something...

BRON: What?

BEN: Don't know if I can tell you.

BRON: C'mon.

BEN: I meant to tell you. Bit embarrassed though. I sold the tumble dryer we bought in *Trading Post*. Here's your share.

BRON: Is that it?

BEN: Yeah, there must have been a lot of tumble dryers in that week.

BRON: What did you need the money for?

BEN: To help pay a couple of fines. Not buying a ticket on the train. The costs were rising 'cause I hadn't payed them.

BRON: Ben, that tumble dryer was ours. It was 65-35. Remember? Anyway, I'm not worrying about it now. Mum's got a spare dryer if we ever needed it.

BEN: You mean if we ever lived together again, if we got a new place?

BRON: I mean you're looking and it's really expensive on your own and I want to try and be independent again, away from here, and...

BEN: Wait a sec. Hold on a minute. Um, we're not really even sure if we're a couple at the moment. Is that right? That's right, isn't it? I mean, I know what happened last night but... we were pretty drunk. We're not really sure what's happening yet, are we?

Look, ah, I know you don't want to live with your parents forever but I don't reckon I could handle -

BRON: Hey, hey, wait, wait, wait, wait a sec. I think we're pretty close to being a couple again, don't you? You've even been saying things are like the old days. All last night. I need you to be strong Ben. Not just for me but for yourself. I don't need you to run...

BEN: I just don't think that moving in again, together, you know, straight away like next week or something is...look, it's alright going out and getting pissed and having a good time but living together is...

BRON: Ben, listen for a minute. Listen, if we do it, there's no need to feel scared of anything. The worst part is over. I was needy before and I was really reliant on you. God who wouldn't be? I couldn't help it. I was in a really bad way and you cracked up and you thought trying to push me and everything away and starting again on your own was the solution. But listen, it's never going to be that bad for us ever again. It's going to get easier and eventually it will be back to normal.

BEN: I know I can't stay on that couch forever. My neck each morning. Like a truck's run over it. And yesterday I went to the fridge to get some milk for the cereal. Poured it over and it just came out in three fat blobs. It was four months past the use-by-date. Can't handle it anymore with them. They don't know what a supermarket is. You always remembered the milk. Low fat, full cream, soy. You always remembered them all. We never ran out. Alright, maybe next Saturday. We'll just have a look and see what's out there. Just a look. Maybe get that friend of yours, Maddy, to drive us. Tell her I'll put in for petrol and buy her a six-pack.

BRON: Alright. Let's not talk about it anymore until then.

BEN: Look what's just fallen into place. HUMMINGBIRD. Eleven letters, not even concentrating.

*Blackout.*

## SCENE 5

*Voiceover.*

BEN & BRON: We lit a match for ourselves again. We re-imagined the city in fresh colours. Candle wax on the bath. The Carlton Draught *Punters* clock calling us home again. Another *Regurgitator* gig. Our naivety was broken. Nights passed under clear stars in the

outer east but we longed for Fitzroy pollution, a band rehearsal coming out of a shop-front.

*Ben and Bron are house hunting. They see something they both like.*

- BEN: I like it. Only one bedroom though.
- BRON: It's so cute. Look at that balcony and the courtyard and the lounge is such a great size with plenty of light. It'll get so much morning sun. It won't be depressing in winter at all.
- BEN: And the bathroom's good. I tested the shower. No problems, even a nice bath. But it's pretty expensive for just one bedroom. Anyway, I think we'd need more than one bedroom. *(Pause)* We really would.
- BRON: C'mon Ben. You've said things like that all afternoon. How this wouldn't work and that wouldn't work and that's too expensive and that's not in the right position. One bedroom means one bed. One bedroom means commitment.
- BEN: I just think if we're going to do it, two bedrooms is a better idea. Just to have options or if someone wants to stay over.
- BRON: What have you been thinking about over the last week? About us? Fuckin' hell, how hard do I have to try with you? How much...
- BEN: Bron, look, I can commit to you. I really can. I will. I promise I will. But look, there's a couple more we can see before we decide anything today anyway. Don't push me. Let's just stay cool about it all. Take it slowly like I keep saying.
- BRON: I'm not pushing you. I just want a couple of truthful answers.
- BEN: You're pushing me. You're not going to get anywhere if you get mad about this.
- BRON: Oh shut the fuck up, will you? You can't handle being alone. You really can't. You need a girlfriend. You're the type of guy that always needs a girlfriend. But because of the chair, you can't make up your mind whether you want me or not. Suddenly you see extra work for yourself and you're stupidly thinking about a few good things that came with being single; a couple of nights out with your mates.

BEN: You're not listening/Just not listening. *(These two lines are spoken and repeated by Ben over Bron's following four lines.)*

BRON: Ben, I don't need it. I don't need your indecision. Can you finally understand that? You walked out on me once and it really hurt. Can't you see that? Can't you understand I've never been in love with anyone else?

*You're not listening/Just not listening. (These two lines are spoken and repeated by Bron over Ben's following nine lines.)*

BEN: Wait, Bron, just a sec, give me a chance on this. I just don't know. I miss you when I don't see you but then I think I can't trust myself, that I'm too immature to be in a live-in...it's too early for all that stuff we did like buy tumble dryers. I don't care about it and I can't pretend any longer that I do. If the towels are wet, the fuckin' towels are wet. Wait for the sun to come out. *(Pause)* Look, just, can't we, um, can't we just see each other for a bit longer first, go out again and have a good time and then see in like a few months... what's the rush?

BRON: What's the rush? You're not listening, just not listening, are you? Maybe the rush is because we're not eighteen anymore. Don't you feel you need to do more with life than roll up hung-over at *Dick Smiths*? We could make this work better second time around. Get better with our money. Save for things. Go somewhere, study, change the idea of us doing dead end jobs or just jobs to pay for the weekend's drinking. It's been lots of fun doing it that way but if we keep doing it...by the time we're thirty, we'll both be pretty unhappy. And also, the answer isn't trying to do everything alone Ben. For either of us. Wheelchair or not. The answer is trying together.

*Long Pause*

BEN: Let's not look anymore today...I'm sorry. I know...what you're saying is right. It makes sense. I know we're not stupid. Just give me a bit of time. Please.

*Long Pause*

BRON: Maddy's still outside in the car. You owe her some petrol money alright. And the six-pack. Alright. There's nothing more to say. There really isn't. Sometimes I think I was born a fuckin' fool. I'll just walk back to the real-estate agent and get the key deposit back.

BEN: Bron, wait a sec. Just one thing I want to say. I know you think it's probably the wheelchair that's making me unsure about everything. It's not, not at all. Please believe me on that at least.

*Bron leaves.*

*Later that evening, 'Common People' by Pulp plays at the pub. Bron is drinking alone. To her amazement, she starts to feel movement in her toes for the first time.*

*Ben grabs his backpack and puts on his jacket. He is standing out in the cold with the backpack over his shoulder. He goes to a phone. He makes a call to Bron who is back at home.*

BEN: Bron -

BRON: Ben, Ben, I can't believe you haven't called. I've been trying to call you...Ben, Ben, where are you? Where are you?

BEN: I'm in Albury...at a roadhouse.

BRON: Pardon.

BEN: I'm in Albury. I'm on a bus. I bought a ticket to...

BRON: To where?

BEN: Byron Bay. Yeah Byron. I don't know why. I just thought going away to the beach might ah...

*Long Pause*

BRON: So how long do you think you're going to be gone?

BEN: Not sure. A few weeks. *(Pause)* Maybe a few months. *(Pause)* I don't think it would be longer than...longer than six. I quit *Dick Smiths* as well.

BRON: And you couldn't come around and see me to tell me all of this. I can't believe it. I wish I'd never met you. I wish I'd never fallen in love with you ever. No-one is ever going to hurt me again like you're hurting me now. And like the second time in, what is it, two and a half months. What am I to you? Am I just some sort of doormat you wipe your feet on? Somebody whose clothes you can get off then...

BEN: Look I'll write and I'll call all the time. I promise. It's for the best. It really is. I'll get my head sorted out and when I come back...ah, I just can't make a decision straight away. I've never been able to. You knew this about me from day one. Um, ah, fuck, the bus is about to go in a minute. Look, I'll try to call you again from the next stop. Shit, that'll be like the middle of the night, like 3am or something. Should I call again tonight? Should I?

BRON: I don't ever want to hear from you again. Or see you. You're so cruel Ben, so cruel and you're a coward. I hate you. I hate you more now than I've ever hated anybody. I hate you.

BEN: Listen, I'd only let you down if we got back together and if we moved into a new place. I don't trust myself. I...Bron, it's not like everything you think...it's not about wanting other girls or the wheelchair thing anymore. It's not that. I can handle that. I really can. I've said that before. How many times do I have to say it?

BRON: The doctor said I'll soon get feeling back in my legs, and my ankles, and my feet. My toes are already wriggling. That's what I wanted to tell you so much. It's going to happen. And you'll hate yourself for what you've done because I'll make a success of my life even though you've walked out. You watch. You just watch. I'll walk well again soon. Then I'll run. I'll run really fast. It's going to happen. I'll be able to dance like crazy again, dance all night.

BEN: That's great, really great. (*Long pause*) I'm running out of coins anyway. Do you want me to call again later? Or should I call tomorrow? I'll call later...in like four hours from...shit I don't know where...or definitely in the morning. Is that a good idea? Bron, Bron...is that a good idea?

*Bron puts the phone down and wheels away from it leaving Ben hanging on the phone unaware she is no longer on the other end of the line. She starts to cry but resiliently goes over to her make up bag and starts putting on lipstick and playing with her hair while looking at herself in the mirror.*

BEN: I'll call when I get up there, whatever you think. Whatever's good for you... I don't want...just not the fuckin' silence, say something, fuckin' hell, Bron, say something, Bron, (*Screaming*) Bron, Bron...ah fuck it. Bron, Bron...

*Ben takes off his backpack and is out of time. He watches her now and what she does next.*

*Bron continues to apply her make up. She picks up a dress and places it over herself. Bron goes to the record player and puts on Bittersweet Symphony. The song begins. Then, she wheels to the couch and sits down. With the aid of the wheelchair and the side of the couch, she attempts to move. She raises herself, hoping for balance. The opening lines of the play repeat.*

*Voiceover.*

BEN & BRON:

We broke the cold together. We put some dance into a suburban street. We let the moon fall across our shoulders as an Easter glittered more than we ever could have imagined.

*Bron rises slowly from the couch, holds the wheelchair and then gains her balance to stand alone. There is hesitancy but strength as she stands for the first time and pushes the chair away.*

*Blackout.*

**The End**

