

Where the Mushrooms Grow

SCENE 1

Lights up on a dim and musty living room. There is winged arm chair and a small occasional table next to it with a large potted plant sitting on it. There is also a small round dining table with two hard-backed wooden chairs at it and a wooden hat stand.

Estella is found on her hands and knees searching for something on the floor. She is wearing a long tatty floral dress, a poorly-knitted cardigan and carpet slippers. She runs her hands down the back of the arm chair cushions.

ESTELLA: *(Feeling something)* What's this?

Estella removes, what appears to be, a half-eaten pork chop from down the side of the chair cushions.

ESTELLA: Oh no. *(Calling off)* Mother! Mother, are you there? Come through here. I'm in the parlour.

Enter Mother, hobbling. She is wearing a nightdress, dressing gown and Wellington boots. She has a walking stick, a handbag and a vacant expression.

ESTELLA: What is this?

MOTHER: *(Eyes widening gleefully)* Chop.

ESTELLA: I found it down the back of the chair.

MOTHER: *(Smiling)* Chop.

ESTELLA: What would Nessie say? You'll be in trouble. If I hadn't found it, it could have started to smell.

MOTHER: *(Taking the meat from Estella)* Chop.

Mother begins to nibble at the chop.

ESTELLA: Mother, it's covered in fluff! Shall I run it under the cold tap for you?

Mother sits in the armchair and continues to gnaw at the bone.

ESTELLA: You'd best eat it quickly. She'll be home soon. She finished work at one today.

MOTHER: Sausage.

ESTELLA: She's getting off the bus in town so she can call at Mr Beechworth's shop. But he shuts at two o'clock on Saturdays so she'll be walking home as we speak. *(Pause as she moves to look out of the window)* I wonder if she took her umbrella this morning, those clouds are threatening to rain. If it thunders, I shall have to hide under the stairs. With the mushrooms.

MOTHER: Sirloin.

ESTELLA: You're not having anything else. You'll spoil your dinner.

MOTHER: Sirloin. Rump . . . Sausage.

ESTELLA: (*Distractedly*) Do you remember Mr Beechworth's son? He had lovely eyes. Well, one was lovely. The right one, I think. The left one was squint. Do you remember? I always thought he was looking at someone over my shoulder. (*Sadly*) Someone prettier than me. (*Beat*) I liked his moustache. And he had little tufts of hair coming out of his nose. One hair was longer than the others. Do you remember? It curled back on itself. It must have tickled. If I had married him, I would have taken a pair of nail scissors while he slept and snipped it off. I wouldn't have thrown it away though. No, I would have kept it in a locket, around my neck. (*Pause*) He went away they say. I never saw him again.

MOTHER: Sausage.

Estella gets on her hands and knees again.

ESTELLA: One more look under the table.

Estella searches momentarily, suddenly lifts her head as if hearing something.

ESTELLA: Was that thunder? Did you hear it? A distant rumble of thunder. I thought I heard it. I shall have to hide where the mushrooms grow. (*As if answering someone*) It's all very well for you but you're not scared. I will remain under this table. Until I'm sure. (*Thoughtfully*) Do you think Aunt Lavinia will visit this year? I like her. She smells of Turkish Delight. And her clothes are lovely. She has lovely clothes. Green clothes, green is her favourite colour. Brandy is her favourite drink. Brandy and dry ginger. A Horse's Neck, Nessie calls it. But Aunt Lavinia says it's not a Horse's Neck without the bitters. You've got to have the bitters.

The doorbell rings.

ESTELLA: Whoever can that be at the door?

MOTHER: Black pudding.

ESTELLA: Shall I answer it? Nessie might be angry with me. It could be someone dangerous.

MOTHER: Liver and onions.

ESTELLA: It might be a vicious axe-wielding maniac. (*Beat*) Or an Avon lady.

The doorbell rings again.

ESTELLA: I think I'll answer it. After all, I expect most axe-wielding maniacs are busy watching football matches on Saturday afternoons. (*Beat*) Or out shopping with their mothers at Somerfield.

Estella exits to answer the door. Mother finished chewing on the bone and shoves it down the side of the chair cushion. Enter Estella, hesitantly followed by Jeremy. He is wearing slacks, a t-shirt and a windcheater jacket.

JEREMY: I don't want to intrude.

ESTELLA: No bother, no bother at all. Please come in. This is Mother.

JEREMY: Good afternoon.

ESTELLA: (*To Mother*) This man . . . (*Turning to Jeremy*) I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.

JEREMY: Blanchard . . . er . . . Jeremy . . . Blanchard. Jeremy.

ESTELLA: Mr Blanchard is . . .

JEREMY: Please, call me Jeremy.

ESTELLA: I like that name.

JEREMY: Oh. Thanks.

ESTELLA: I'm Estella Gribble. Like dribble but with a 'g'. When I was a baby, Mother used to say "don't dribble little Gribble". Didn't you, Mother? (*To Mother*) Jeremy is looking for his dog.

MOTHER: Faggot.

JEREMY: I beg your pardon?

MOTHER: Faggot.

ESTELLA: (*To Jeremy*) She wants her dinner. (*To Mother*) It's not dinner time yet, Mother.

JEREMY: I don't want to keep you. I just wondered if either of you had seen my dog.

ESTELLA: Would you like some tea?

JEREMY: No . . . No thank you. I won't stay. I'm trying to find my dog.

ESTELLA: (*To Mother*) He's looking for his dog.

JEREMY: (*Taking a snapshot from his pocket*) She's a German Shepherd.

ESTELLA: (*Confused*) A German Shepherd? What about your dog?

JEREMY: That is my dog. (*Offering the photo*) Look.

ESTELLA: She's from Germany?

JEREMY: She's a German Shepherd. That's her breed.

ESTELLA: (*Taking the photo*) She's very big. Big as a donkey. You could make a fortune at the seaside.

JEREMY: Seaside?

ESTELLA: Giving rides to little children up and down the beach.

JEREMY: Oh, I see. Yes. Have you seen her?

ESTELLA: (*Looking at the photo*) Very handsome. Does she bite?

JEREMY: No. She's as soft as grease. My wife's very upset . . . well, we both are.

ESTELLA: What is your dog called?

JEREMY: Her name's Brandy. Have you seen her?

ESTELLA: Brandy? That's what Aunt Lavinia likes to drink. *(To Mother)* Isn't it, Mother?

MOTHER: Steak and kidney.

ESTELLA: Her favourite drink is a Horse's Neck. Have you ever had a Horse's Neck?

JEREMY: Can't say I have.

ESTELLA: Neither have I but, then again, I don't drink alcohol. Do you drink alcohol, Jeremy?

JEREMY: Yeah. Well, a bit. One or two at the weekend.

ESTELLA: Then you must try a Horse's Neck. It's brandy and dry ginger and bitters. You've got to have the bitters. I'll make you one.

JEREMY: No, thank you. Nothing for me. I really must be going. Do you think you may have seen my dog at all? Maybe caught a glimpse of her in your garden?

ESTELLA: *(Looking at the photo)* I caught a glimpse of something in the garden the other night. Two days ago.

JEREMY: She went missing on Wednesday so it could have been her.

ESTELLA: I don't think it was. I think it was a fox. Or a hedgehog.

JEREMY: There's a bit of a difference.

ESTELLA: I don't think it was Brandy. I'm sure it wasn't.

JEREMY: Perhaps your mother has seen her.

ESTELLA: *(Showing Mother the photo)* Have you seen Jeremy's dog?

MOTHER: *(Glancing at the photo)* Meatballs.

ESTELLA: She hasn't seen her.

Mother moves very closely in towards Jeremy and stares intently at his face.

MOTHER: Tongue sandwich.

JEREMY: No, thanks.

ESTELLA: Mother, have you watered in the greenhouse today? The cucumbers were looking very thirsty this morning.

Mother begins to hobble off, muttering to herself.

MOTHER: *(Adlibbed)* Sirloin. Kidneys. Meat and potato pie . . .

Mother exits.

JEREMY: Well, I'll be off then.

ESTELLA: Don't go. My sister will be home shortly. She may have seen Brandy. Stay and have a cup of tea then you can check with her. She finished work at one so she'll be on her way home. She works in the dispensary at the hospital.

JEREMY: (*Looking at his watch*) Erm, well . . .

ESTELLA: Please stay. It's so lovely to have a visitor.

JEREMY: (*Reluctantly*) Okay.

ESTELLA: You're staying?

JEREMY: I'll stay for a few minutes so I can speak to your sister.

ESTELLA: Sit down and I'll make you some tea.

Estella ushers Jeremy towards to armchair.

JEREMY: (*Sitting down*) I didn't realise this place was here actually.

ESTELLA: We've always been here.

JEREMY: What I mean is, I don't often find myself on the edge of town and your house is a bit off the beaten track, isn't it? I only realised there was a house when I saw the sign, nestled in amongst the ivy on your gatepost.

ESTELLA: At the end of the driveway?

JEREMY: That's the one.

ESTELLA: It's still there?

JEREMY: Yes. (*Beat*) You've got a long drive. Didn't think it was going to end. (*Pause*) Interesting house name, Honeystone Nook.

ESTELLA: It's on account of the colour of the stones used to build the cottage.

JEREMY: It's nice. Bit different. (*Pause*) It's funny how you can live in a town all your life and not know a place is there.

ESTELLA: You live in town?

JEREMY: Yes. Close to the centre. With my wife.

Estella refers to the photo still in her hand.

ESTELLA: Is she the one with your dog in this picture?

JEREMY: Yes, that's right. Alison.

ESTELLA: (*Annoyed*) She's very pretty.

JEREMY: She looks a bit startled in that photograph. We were at our nephew's fourth birthday party and someone popped a balloon just as the shot was taken.

ESTELLA: How long have you been married?

JEREMY: Three years.

ESTELLA: Did she have a big wedding dress? Was it white?

JEREMY: Yes, ivory.

ESTELLA: (*Disapprovingly*) Oh.

JEREMY: It was very big. With a long train.

ESTELLA: I'm going to get married.

JEREMY: Congratulations.

ESTELLA: My dress is going to be pure white. With a long train and a veil. And tiny Lily of the Valley flowers embroidered in lace.

JEREMY: Sounds very nice.

ESTELLA: My sister is going to be my maid of honour. And we're going to have bouquets of white roses.

JEREMY: Perfect.

ESTELLA: The honeymoon's not been booked yet. Would you recommend anywhere?

JEREMY: Well, we had a week in Malta.

ESTELLA: Oh no. We shan't be going abroad. I have very sensitive skin, you see. I burn easily, then peel like paint on a bathroom ceiling. I burnt my arms last July, after some intensive weeding of the borders, and I was shedding skin for weeks afterwards. It was like confetti.

JEREMY: Oh dear.

ESTELLA: Did you have confetti at your wedding or did you stick with tradition and have rice?

JEREMY: Neither. The vicar was very insistent.

ESTELLA: I think I shall have flower petals. Much more romantic.

JEREMY: So, when's the big day?

ESTELLA: When I've met the right man.

JEREMY: Oh. (*Beat*) You're not with anyone then?

ESTELLA: Not at the moment.

There is a moment of awkward silence as Estella stares at Jeremy intently. Jeremy shifts in his seat uncomfortably.

ESTELLA: (*As if answering someone*) You can't say that.

JEREMY: I didn't speak.

ESTELLA: No, I won't.

Jeremy looks around to see who Estella is talking to.

ESTELLA: I will not tell him.

JEREMY: (*Baffled*) Tell who what?

ESTELLA: Katie thinks you're very handsome.

JEREMY: Who's Katie?

ESTELLA: My philodendron.

JEREMY: Your what?

ESTELLA: (*Picking up the houseplant*) My philodendron. Isn't she a big one?

JEREMY: Very impressive.

ESTELLA: She's been watching you ever since you came in.

JEREMY: Has she? Right, okay. (*Standing*) Do you know what? I really think I should be going now. Time's pressing and I must find Brandy.

ESTELLA: But you haven't had your tea.

JEREMY: You haven't made any yet.

ESTELLA: (*Offering the plant to Jeremy*) Here Jeremy, hold her. She likes being held.

JEREMY: (*Reluctantly taking the plant*) Okay.

ESTELLA: She likes you. Do you like her?

JEREMY: She's alright. As plants go. I've never really been one for gardening.

ESTELLA: My family have always been keen gardeners. When he was alive, my father, Leonard Gribble, was very green fingered. He could bring a poinsettia back from the brink and he never had a poor crop of mushrooms. Every year, without fail, his marrows were a sight to be seen.

JEREMY: What was his secret?

ESTELLA: Fresh horse manure, the purest rain water and romantic poetry. He could often be heard reciting *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as he stood, leaning on his spade, by the compost heap. I'll put the kettle on.

Exit Estella. Jeremy sighs to himself. He sits back down in the armchair. He looks furtively around the room. Mother enters, unseen by Jeremy. She stands and stares at him while he looks at the philodendron resting on his lap.

MOTHER: (*Suddenly*) Steak and kidney.

JEREMY: (*Shocked*) Oh Good God! I didn't know you were there. You made me jump.

Mother drags a wooden chair from the table and sits very close to Jeremy, staring unflinchingly. Jeremy becomes increasingly uncomfortable as Mother refuses to speak as he tries to keep the conversation going.

JEREMY: Did you get all your watering done? (*Pause*) Have you just got the one greenhouse? (*Pause*) Your daughter was saying your husband liked gardening? She was telling me about his marrows. (*Pause*) Did he grow lots of veg? I expect he used to grow all sorts.

Mother looks down at the philodendron on Jeremy's knee.

JEREMY: I was just getting to know Katie. She likes being held apparently. She seems happy enough. Is she happy? (*To the plant*) Have you had enough now? Do you want to go back on the table?

The absurdity of the situation suddenly dawns on Jeremy.

JEREMY: This is ridiculous. What am I doing here?

Jeremy stands, putting the philodendron back on the table. Enter Estella.

ESTELLA: Jeremy, what are you doing?

JEREMY: It's time for me to go.

ESTELLA: Your tea's nearly ready.

JEREMY: (*Firmly*) I'm sorry. I've got stuff to do.

ESTELLA: (*Referring to Mother*) What has she said to you? (*To Mother*) What have you said to him?

JEREMY: She hasn't said anything. Well, only steak and kidney.

ESTELLA: (*To Mother*) You're always upsetting my friends. Why can't I have any friends?

MOTHER: Crackling.

JEREMY: I must go.

ESTELLA: But what if my sister has seen your dog? You need to ask my sister. She's very observant.

JEREMY: I can't wait here all afternoon. When will your sister be home?

Enter Ernestine. She is wearing a white dispensary coat.

ERNESTINE: I'm home.

There is a momentary pause as if no-one knows what to say. Ernestine eyes Jeremy suspiciously.

MOTHER: (*Breaking the silence*) Giblets.

ERNESTINE: What is this man doing in my house?

ESTELLA: He's looking for Brandy.

ERNESTINE: There's an off licence on the corner of George Street. I'll see you out.

JEREMY: Brandy's my dog. We looking for our dog . . . my wife and I.

ESTELLA: She's German.

ERNESTINE: Your wife's German?

JEREMY: No, my dog.

ERNESTINE: Your dog is German?

JEREMY: A German Shepherd. *(Beat)* My wife is English.

ESTELLA: She's as big as a donkey. *(Showing the photo to Ernestine)* Look. She could give children rides on her back.

ERNESTINE: *(Taking the photo)* Strong woman, is she?

JEREMY: The dog. She means the dog.

ERNESTINE: Oh.

ESTELLA: Rides at the seaside. Up and down the beach. Up and down.

ERNESTINE: Your dog is not in our house.

JEREMY: I know.

ERNESTINE: Then why are you stood in our parlour?

ESTELLA: He was having some tea while he waited for you. I thought you'd like to speak to him . . . about the dog.

ERNESTINE: Then, where is it?

ESTELLA: She's gone missing.

ERNESTINE: The tea!

ESTELLA: It's brewing.

ERNESTINE: Bring it through.

Exit Estella.