

## Scene 1

*A company reception with desk and a large company logo behind, a few seats for waiting left, a water dispenser stage right. Behind the desk is a young man reading a Health & Safety booklet and sniggering. Den enters.*

Den What are you doing behind reception? You don't have the two outstanding features necessary for that job.

Mark Hello you old git – how are you?

Den In the pink as usual. Have you ever known me any different?

Mark I'm – just temporary until the new girl has been through the induction process.

Den New girl? What happened to Tracey?

Mark Up the duff.

Den When?

Mark About eight months ago. She's now on maternity leave.

Den Shame! I was going to turn my charms loose upon her, but obviously somebody got there before me – if you'll pardon the expression.

Mark I'm bloody glad to see the back of her!

Den Why? She was alright.

Mark Oh not lately mate. You'd have thought she was the only person to drop a sprog. It didn't matter what you were talking about she'd turn it around to breast pads or ultrasounds. Most of the time she was in the bog throwing up. No – I have to say she wasn't much fun any more.

Den Bloody hell mate! It sounds terrible. Oh – what we blokes have to go through!

Mark Yeah it's just as well we blokes are on an even keel to keep B & E in profit.

Den And all without a word of complaint.

Mark And are we appreciated?

Den No – the women get it all their own way. Rubbish! *He throws the booklet into the bin)*

Mark Anyway, to more important matters, what are you doing here? I haven't seen you here for months.

Den I'm here to see the high and mighty Lucille, Goddess of the Packing Universe.

Mark Why - what have you done?

Den Nothing – just being my usual, brilliant self.

Mark I think I ought to warn you she's in sacking mode.

Den No – not me old drinking buddy.

Mark She got rid of most of Loose Packing Design last week – including your old drinking buddy Monkey Brown.

Den Old Monkey? But he's been here since he was on the tit.

Mark Well she sent him off in about three minutes flat. She even had somebody clearing out his desk while he was waiting to see her, so I shouldn't be too cocky if I were you.

Den Don't worry on my account mate, for the third year running I'm top salesman. She'd do better to cut her throat than to sack me.

Mark That may be true, but what about the guy that comes second to you – breathing down your neck as you might say.

Den Second? Second? You must be joking! If you imagine that I'd won the 2.30 at Epsom, Turner, who comes second, would perhaps win the 3.00! Anyway, to more interesting things. What's this new receptionist like?

Mark I only saw her for a few seconds before Mr. Personality Bypass Montgomery whisked her off.

Den Oh the poor girl – fancy being confronted by Malformed Monty on your first day.

Mark Speak of the devil..... (*Montgomery and Claire enter. He stops short when he sees Den.*)

Den Come on Monty – I won't eat you but I know you've always been overawed by my presence.

Monty I might have known you'd turn up. How are you Dennis?

Den Not as well as you by the looks of it. Come on then introduce me.

Monty I suppose I shall have to. Claire this is Dennis – one of our salesmen.

Den Ignore him Claire. I'm not just *one* of the salesmen – I am *the* salesman of this year and all years – apart from being the most attractive man in B & E both here and abroad. You'll vouch for that won't you Mark?

Mark How can I do any other?

Monty You're as bad as he is.

Den But you love us both don't you Mont?

Monty Will you both please leave.

Den Oh I'm sorry – I'd hate to be in your way. I've got to go and see Saint Lucille anyway, but I'll be seeing you later Claire.

Monty I wouldn't bank on it Dennis. Lucille's in a sacking mood – keeps talking about rationalisation and streamlining.

Den Ah – don't you worry about me – I'm streamlined enough. See you in the pub at lunch-time Mark?

Mark Sure thing – about 12.30.

Den I'll get one in for you. Bye-bye Claire. Mont – do you think your Open University course on stand-up comedy is money well spent? (*He exits sniggering*)

Monty Thank you Mark – you can return to your usual duties now.

Mark Thank you Montgomery – I shall be back at my post in nano-seconds as ordered.  
By the way Claire, I'm Mark – a person of no consequence – Mr. Ordinary you might say. Chances are you'll never notice me again. I shall go – like a flash of light (*He exits and immediately returns*) I am gone!

Monty Take no notice of him – I think he could be retarded – and avoid Dennis as if he were a leper. He will come to no good at all in my opinion. Now, to business. This is your work-station, the computerised telephone system is simplicity itself. There is a card in this drawer explaining the operation. Most calls here go straight through to the person concerned so you won't get many coming through the switchboard.

Claire Where do Mark and Dennis work?

Monty Remember the big office with all the partitions? Mark is in number 42 by the vending machine.

Claire And Dennis?

Monty Thankfully you won't have to worry about him – he's mostly on the road or working from home. His visits here are mercifully infrequent, which is just as well because he's a bad influence on the more immature employees like Mark. It would really be better if he stayed away from here completely.

Claire I thought he was quite nice.

Monty A common mistake on the first meeting, but you'll learn. Now - a few rules and regs. This desk must never be left unattended, you must never accept parcels, no-one is seen without an appointment, you will have a list of expected visitors on your desk each morning. If you have to leave the desk for - any - er - reason or if you have any security problems with a visitor dial 9 on your phone and Security will come and assist you or take over whilst you have a - er - comfort break shall we call it. Any other problems - ring 123 - that will be me - and I shall come down and sort it out. Any questions?

Claire No - I think I can manage now thank you.

Monty It's a pleasure - and my job of course. Oh by the way I shall give you a booklet on Health & Safety in the Workplace. Now make sure you read it carefully because I shall be asking you questions on it. It might seem a little school-masterish, but I take my job very seriously and I have to know that you have studied the procedures properly. I would give you a copy now but I had to order some more. They keep disappearing from my cupboard. I suppose people will steal anything nowadays. Welcome to B & E International. *(He exits)*

Claire Thank you. *(She sits down and starts looking around. An aggressive looking*

*woman and a timid looking man enter. He is carrying files and a briefcase).*

Mrs P We're late!

Claire I see.

Mrs P Should have been here at 10.30.

Claire Right.

Mrs P Well?

Claire Well what?

Mrs P Ring Mark and tell him we're here.

Claire Could you give me your name please?

Mrs P My God! We've been coming here once a week for the past two years and you don't know our names?

Mr. P I don't think this is the same girl dear.

Mrs P Don't interrupt me! How many times must I tell you? Don't interrupt me!

Mr. P Pearson & Associates. John and Sheila Pearson. I think you'll find we're on your list.

Mrs P It's his fault we're late. He's got a weak bladder, we had to stop twice on the way.

Claire Ah yes – Pearson & Associates to see Mark Fellows – 129. *(She dials)*

Mr. P Don't go shouting my personal details to the world.

Mrs P Oh stop being so sensitive.

Claire *(On the phone)* Hello – Pearson & Associates to see you. Thank you. *(She puts receiver down)*. He'll be down to see you in a moment. Would you like to take a seat?

Mr P I'll just nip along the corridor if you don't mind. I know where it is. *(He exits)*

Mrs P There he goes again – he's like a dog – can't pass a lamp-post. Are you married?

Claire No.

Mrs P Well don't that's my advice. It's been the ruin of me. Where is that Mark?

Claire I'm sure he's coming as quickly as he can.

Mrs P Yes – I'm sure he is. *(She sits and starts looking agitatedly through a brochure.*

*Mark enters)*

Mark Ah Sheila – how nice to see you – where's John?

Mrs P Where do you think? The doctors says it's stress. Stress! Rubbish! How on earth can he be stressed? What is there in his life that could cause him stress I ask you that?

Mark I can't imagine – can you Claire?

Claire No.

Mrs P If there's any stress about – I'm the one who has it. *(Mr. P returns)* Oh here he comes – let's have a look at you. Yes not too bad – sometimes he dribbles you know.

Mr. P Sheila! Please!

Mrs P Well don't stand there – let's get on!

Mark Did the marvellous Monty give you a Health & Safety booklet?

Claire No he said he'd drop one in when the new order arrives. He seems to think somebody's stealing them. I can't imagine who or why.

Mark No neither can I. They just keep falling into the waste bin – not that I know anything about it of course.

Claire No of course not.

Mark That's just what I've heard. It's as well the government give them away free.

Mrs P *(walking off)* Mark – come on – we haven't got all day.

Mark I thought they had all day – every day. See you later Claire. *(He exits crossing with two girls entering)*

Jackie Oh hello – are you the new Receptionist? I'm Jackie and this is Yas.

Yas It's Yasmine really, but I hate it, so everyone calls me Yas.

Claire I'm Claire.

Jackie You're taking over from Tracey during her maternity leave? Huh – not that she'll be back.

Yas No she only just managed when they had a new kitten so goodness knows what she'll be like with a baby. My sister's got four. She's brilliant she is – she could....

Jackie Are we going for a fag or not?

Yas Sorry – we're going outside to indulge in our filthy habit – and we might have a fag as well. Shan't be long. *(They exit).*

Claire Yes – see you soon. *(They return)*

Jackie Are you a slave to nicotine?

Claire No – I packed up years' ago.

Jackie I try – but I'm so weak.

Yas Me too – but my sister's so strong. She gave up without any patches or chewing gum....

Jackie Yes – yes – come on..... *(they exit)* and can't you shut up about your sister.....  
*(they pass a man who is walking very quickly)*

Will Right – get your coat – let's get you home. *(Claire doesn't move)* Did you hear what I said? I'm talking to you Claire – playing dumb won't help you.  
*(He goes around the desk and starts to man-handle her)*

Claire Stop it! Stop it Will! If you don't I shall call Security.

Will Don't be childish – you're acting like a spoilt, little girl. *(He grabs her again)*  
Don't be so ridiculous and come home now.

Claire Right! I warned you. *(She pulls away from him and dials 9)* I have a visitor here who is being violent. Thank you. *(She puts the receiver down)* He'll be here in one minute.

Will Now you're just being stupid. I think you're having a nervous breakdown. I'll book you an appointment at the doctor's. Now come on and stop being a silly girl.  
*(He gets hold of her arm again.)*

Claire You're hurting my arm – now leave me alone – you – you pig!

Will Pig? Pig? How dare you call me a pig! (*He raises an arm as if to strike her. Ted a small, bespectacled, Security Man enters.*)

Ted Take your hands off that girl – now!

Will Oh dear – is this your knight in shining armour? I'm so scared – not! (*He laughs.*)

Ted I said – let her go.

Will (*Still laughing*) ... or what?

Ted Well now – let me see – I can give you some pain or I could break a bone or two  
– I think that should be enough.

Will (*Not quite so sure of himself now*) What makes you think you can hurt me?

Ted Well you see young man – I don't think I can hurt you – I know I can!

Will (*Letting go of Claire*) How do you know?

Ted Well during my twenty years in the SAS the one thing I had a natural talent for was causing pain and hospitalising people and once or twice of course – the ultimate.....

Will The ultimate?

Ted We called it “elimination” in the SAS.

Will Now look here – there's no need for all this aggression. This is a simple domestic argument.

Ted It didn't look simple to me. What's your name young lady?

Will Claire.

Ted Was I talking to you?

Will I was just saying.....

Ted Well don't! What are you doing here Claire?

Claire I'm the new Receptionist – replacing Tracey.

Will The important fact here is that she's my wife.

Ted (*Making a sudden movement towards Will – who flinches back*) I told you to

be quiet, I won't tell you again. Is this man your husband?

Claire No.

Will Well – as good as..... (*Ted gives him a fierce look*)

Claire We've lived together for about a year – but I moved out this morning.

Ted That's good enough for me. You're an employee and he's an intruder with no right to be here. Get out you!

Will But... but...

Ted No buts – I shall tell you one more time and then.... Well let's just say you're going to be sorry. Get out! (*He starts to advance towards Will*).

Will Alright! Alright! I'm going but I shall wait outside for you when you've finished.  
You'll be sorry you've shown me up like this. This is not finished!

Ted Out! (*Will exits*).

Claire Thanks er – um –

Ted Oh Ted – Ted Windsor – Edward really – that's why my mates call me the Duke.

Claire Why do they call you that?

Ted Prince Edward – you know – him that abdicated.

Claire Oh yes – with that Mrs Simpson. I can't imagine why anybody would give up the throne for that nebbly looking woman. She looked like the Wicked Witch of the West.  
Still there's no accounting for taste. I'm very grateful to you Ted.

Ted That's alright. All in a day's work.

Claire It's handy you being an ex-SAS man. It gives me a lot of confidence.

Ted Ah – yes – about being in the SAS – I stretched the truth a bit.

Claire Weren't you in the SAS then?

Ted Not exactly.

Claire What were you in then?

Ted Well I was in uniform a couple of years' ago – I was a Traffic Warden.

It's not the same I know but it can have its dangerous moments.

Claire I'm sure it can. Weren't you taking a terrible risk? Will might have called your bluff.

Ted No chance! He's a bully. There's always a coward underneath a bully. Well not always – but mostly.

Claire Well I shall have to face him when I leave shan't I?

Ted Not necessarily. I can let you out the back fire door. It comes about between Marks & Sparks and Boots.

Claire Oh I always wondered what that little alley was for – now I know.

Ted You'd be amazed if I told you. Mind you – I suppose he'll catch up with you at home.

Claire He won't – I'm not going home. I'm staying with my sister.

Ted But doesn't he know where your sister lives?

Claire No – she moved a couple of weeks' ago. Mind you he so self-centred I shouldn't think he knew where she lived before. He didn't even like me talking to her on the phone. I had to ring her from a call box. He used to check all the phone bills and he went mad if he found out I'd rung my family more than once a month.

Ted Is he violent?

Claire Well in a way. When my mother was ill and I rang her every day he tore the bill to bits. Then he got a new pair of my high-heeled shoes that I particularly liked, broke off the heels and threw them in the bin!

Ted He sounds like a loony to me! Why do you stay with him?

Claire That's a good question. He can be sweet and kind and gentle and he's always been generous. It's just that he's been getting more and more possessive of late and he's starting to frighten me. I've been thinking of leaving him for about two months and now I've done it.

Ted Good for you. Well I'd better get on I suppose.

Claire Thanks again.

Ted Any time. (*He exits. Jackie and Yas return laughing*)

Yas You'll never believe it but a bloke just came out of here doing his nut, kicking the walls, mumbling under his breath.

Jackie Not that much under his breath. I heard him – it was a bit fruity. Such words shouldn't sully my innocent ears.

Yas Innocent? You must be joking! Did he come in here?

Claire No.

Yas You want to watch out for his sort – he's not all there.

Jackie Any weirdos come in here – you call for Ted.

Yas Yes – God knows what he'd do – but he's better than nothing.

Jackie Just about.

Yas Here come on – we'd better get back or Smelly Helly will be on to us. See you later Claire.

Jackie Yeah – pretty regularly. (*They exit laughing*)

Claire See you soon. (*Lucille and Den enter very briskly*)

Lucille (*To Claire*) Who are you? What are you doing here? Where's the one that's normally here? This place is going to pot! Why isn't Security doing something about this? Ted? Ted Windsor!

Claire I'm the temporary....

Lucille Be quiet! You have no right to be here!

Den This is Claire – the new Receptionist.

Lucille Well what happened to you know – what's her name?

Claire She's on maternity....

Lucille Be quiet – I'm talking to Dennis. I turn my back for one moment here and there's chaos!

Den Tracey's on maternity leave.

Lucille Is she pregnant then?

Den Well that is the general consensus in the medical world.

Lucille I thought she was getting fat. I told her so – told her to get more exercise. She looked at me a bit odd. So who are you then?

Claire Claire Taylor.

Lucille Birth sign?

Claire Pardon?

Lucille Birth sign! *(To Den)* Is she a bit dim? *(To Claire)* You were born I suppose. Your birth sign!

Claire Oh I'm Scorpio.

Lucille Has the world gone mad? A Scorpio on Reception. In the Stores perhaps but not on Reception. You don't let Scorpions loose on the public. What sign do you think I am?

Claire I've no idea.

Lucille Well guess.

Claire I've never been interested in that sort of thing.

Lucille Guess!

Claire Cancer?

Lucille Cancer? Did she say Cancer? Do I look like a Cancer?

Claire Virgo?

Lucille Virgo? Do I look like a Virgo? Guess again!

Claire Taurus? *(Lucille tuts)* Capricorn? *(Lucille snorts)*

Lucille I'm Aries! Aries – a natural leader. Hitler was Aries. You're hopeless. I didn't interview you for this job did I? It must have been when I was on holiday. As soon as my back is turned.

Claire I'm only temporary.

Lucille You can bet your sweet bum you are. (*Claire is near to tears*) You're not going to blub are you? What is the matter with girls today? Right in the middle of a perfectly reasonable conversation they start to blub! (*To Den*) I can't understand it can you?

Den No – not at all.

Claire I'm sorry – I've had a rather emotional time today.

Lucille Ah – I'm with you now. A man is it?

Claire Yes.

Lucille Hah I thought so. Shag 'em and leave 'em – that's what I do. Now pull yourself together. We have to support each other – Girl Power! (*To Den*) What are you hanging about for?

Den I'm waiting for Mark. I'm going out to lunch with him.

Lucille Mark? Oh yes – is he a shirt lifter?

Den What Mark?

Lucille Yes – never had a girl has he? I thought he batted for the other side – not that it makes any difference as long as he does his job. I just like to keep up to date with these things you know. Well done Claire – keep up the good work. (*She exits*)

Den I think you must have gathered that was Lucille – our esteemed MD.

Claire Is she – er – you know....

Den Mad? Yes absolutely but this branch makes more profit than any other two branches put together. The Board knows she's barking but it's the bottom line that counts. They bow down to Lord Profit.

Claire Why do they call her Saint Lucille? Who would have given her that nickname?

Den She did! She says that when she goes she ought to be canonised on account of the blameless life she's led.

Claire She terrifies me.

Den You're not alone there – but you'll get used to her. Do your job and you won't

have to worry about her but I'm afraid you'll have to put up with her manic moods.

*(A man comes in and speaks to Claire so quietly that he cannot be heard).*

Claire You want to see Mr. Percival? *(He nods. Claire looks on the list).* You're not on the list I'm afraid and no-one is seen without an appointment. That's right isn't it Den?

Den I'm afraid so. You'll have to ring for an appointment. I don't know a Mr. Percival.  
*(The man whispers again to Claire)*

Claire Well I suppose so. Can he wait?

Den If he likes. *(The man goes and sits down. Mark enters with Mr. & Mrs Pearson)*

Mark Well thank you both. I think that was a very useful meeting.

Mr. P Yes so do I.

Mrs P You said nothing.

Mr. P I know, but it was still a useful meeting. We'll put the figures and the quote together and see you again tomorrow Mark.

Mrs P Will we? Will we? You've got a lot to say for yourself now haven't you? We'll put the figures and the quote together and see you again tomorrow Mark.

Mr. P That's what I said.

Mrs P Yes you've always been master of the blooming obvious. Do you need to go before we leave?

Mr. P No thank you.

Mrs P Well I don't want to get halfway home and have to stop.

Mr. P I said I'm alright – I know when I have to go now can we leave it at that please?

Mrs P Yes. Yes we can leave it at that. Pardon me for speaking.

Mark *(Ushering them both out)* Thank you both. I'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye.  
*(They exit bickering)*

Den *(Laughing)* Useful meeting eh? Not!

Mark Oh don't rub it in. They drive me mad. I could do it all over the phone but they insist on face to face. (*Gesturing towards the seated man*) Who's he?

Claire He's waiting to see Mr. Percival. (*The man gets up and whispers to Claire*). No this isn't Mr. Percival.

Mark I don't think I know any Mr. Percival.

Claire He insists on waiting – does it matter?

Mark I don't suppose so. This place is so full of nutters who's going to notice one more.  
How are you managing Claire?

Den She's in shock - she's just met Saint Lucille.

Mark My God! Do you need counselling?