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6 LONELY OYSTERS

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## 6 LONELY OYSTERS

cast:

Johnson

Nicholas

Seng Onn

[ENTER SENG ONN. SMOKE AND DRAMA. DRUMS AND CYMBOLS]

SENG

I have been sent on a Quest. By the authority of the Heavens, I am in search of... the Shining Pearl.

[*percussion*]

SENG

Only when the Shining Pearl is restored to its rightful place in the Seventh Heaven will affairs return to normal... on Earth.

[ENTER JOHNSON. STYLISED FIGHT BETWEEN SENG AND JOHNSON]

JOHN

Fool! You cannot hope to defeat me!

SENG

Of course the usual villains are out to get the pearl, for their own nefarious purposes!

JOHN

Surrender now! Or if you will not—prepare to lose not only this competition, but also... Your life!

[*Smoke curls on stage*]

SENG

[*starting to weaken*] There's something wrong—I can't defeat him—I can't breathe—I can't—understand—what he's saying...

JOHN

[*More smoke appears as he speaks*] And once I have the Pearl in my Power... there will be no Point in you foolish mortals trying to breathe... at all... ever

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again!

*[fight sequence]*

NICK

Of course, mythology has it that the Quest for the Shining Pearl of the Stubborn Oyster was held to be a myth... even by myth-makers...

*[NICK moves aside to avoid the other two who are still fighting and staggering around. He watches them for a bit before continuing]*

NICK

We have little information as to precisely what sort of pearl the Shining Pearl is supposed to have been... let alone what kind of oyster it was supposed to have come from... but legend has it that the six lonely oysters would have to be found before the Shining Pearl might be recovered...

*[JOHN exits laughing, with a flourish of his swords]*

*[SENG ONN crawls out, coughing, passing NICHOLAS, who watches him go, hugging a small black bag closer to himself]*

NICK

*[watching SENG ONN crawling]*

The haze is getting worse every day, but it doesn't seem to stop Singaporeans from exercising!

*[pause]* These people are crazy. Mad. A bit... unbalanced. It would be healthier for them to stay at home with a cigarette. But no, they want to go and run around on Benjamin Sheares Bridge instead!

And they try to tell me that I'm the one who's crazy?

*[clutches bag affectionately to himself]* It's all right, Dad. Don't worry. It's all right. We're out of that awful place now.

I'll take care of you from now on, Dad.

*[NICHOLAS walks off with bag]*

SENG

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I told you to watch him! How could you let him just walk out of here like that!

JOHN

Sorry lah Boss. But you know, so many people coming in and out...

SENG

There were no visitors today. There was no one coming In. Only he went Out.

JOHN

But then he looks so normal, sometimes difficult to say lah...

*[SENG ONN gives JOHNSON a long, exasperated, up and down look]*

SENG

I suppose he looks as normal as you do.

Did you look inside all the cupboards?

JOHN

Sure. Looked already. Cupboards, drawers, waste-paper basket...

SENG

Well, find somewhere else to look, then. Find him! Go, go, go! Now, now, Now!

*[Exit JOHN]*

SENG

That's all I need. My big retirement party in two months time and the little fool has to run away now. If Tommy Koh comes for my party he's not going to say, "Good job, nice work!", Tommy Koh is going to give me that look "What's this I hear about this missing boy?" Why couldn't he just hang himself like all the others do?

No... no. I don't mean that.

*[walks forward, into the `past']*

I knew Nicky as a little boy, you know. He's not just another patient to me... in fact, he's my brother's only—

NICK

Uncle! Uncle Seng Onn! Are you coming on the boat with Daddy and me?

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SENG

Yes, Nicky, that's why I'm here. Do you think it's safe, though? The weather looks a bit...

NICK

If my Daddy says it's safe, of course it's safe! Come on, Uncle Seng Onn! Let's get on the boat.

[*JOHN comes on as old seaman*]

JOHN

[*Cantonese*] I told him better don't go out today. Wind very big. Sea waves also very big.

SENG

[*calling*] Are you sure it's safe, Beng? Maybe today isn't such a good idea—

NICK

My Daddy said, tell your Uncle Seng Onn to come on and don't be such a ber-luddy—

SENG

I heard him, all right? I heard him... Whoaaa—

[*Waves are heard. The jetty rocks dangerously beneath them. SENG ONN grabs NICHOLAS and drags him to safety. JOHNSON, after a mammoth struggle, surfaces from the wreckage of the boat and shakes his head to SENG ONN*]

NICK

My Daddy... what's happened to my Daddy!

SENG

Nicky, listen to me. I want you to be very brave...

NICK

What's that?

[*JOHNSON has taken a large shell fish out of his pocket. As NICHOLAS stares at it, JOHNSON hands it to him*]

JOHN

Nothing else left. Sorry.

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NICK

That's when my Daddy changed into an oyster. It's all right, Daddy. Don't be scared. I will look after you until you think it's safe enough to come back...

[puts oyster into black bag]

SENG

I never saw my brother again. And little Nicky? He was never the same after that. He just withdrew... right into his shell.

NICK

Lonely... lonely... lonely...

Lonely... safe... protected... protected by--?

SENG

Lonely... so lonely...

Protecting... hidden responsibilities...

Protecting responsibility...

Protecting...

Hiding...

NICK

Protected From...

Safe...

Lonely...

[SENG ONN sits down]

SENG ONN

My brother isn't really dead, you know. I've seen him. Since he supposedly drowned. People don't believe me. They laugh at me and say that I'm always seeing things that aren't there.

[He pours an imaginary drink out of an imaginary decanter. Lifts the imaginary glass `cheers' to the audience. Then puts glass down]

SENG

Good crystal [*He taps his fingernail against it. We all hear the `ping'*]

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He was always irresponsible, my brother. I mean look, now... who's looking after his son? I'm the one who has to. While he's off pretending to be dead... Sometimes he comes in here and sits down... over there by the window. He doesn't say much. Just sits there. We never did talk much. We got along all right. Just never talked much...

But I haven't seen much of him since Elizabeth died.

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth wasn't really pretty, you know. But she was... sweet. She had a sweet face. I thought that she wore too much make-up... too much lipstick. But she had a sweet face... and long hair. Long, long hair. Beautiful long hair. We used to have awful fights. Elizabeth was very jealous. Not that she had anything to be jealous of... I never—would never have—[*shakes his head*]. If we went out together and if I just said 'hello' to a colleague, a female colleague, from the office, by the time we got home, her face would be all black. She would scream and throw things at me. I would pretend I was deaf and couldn't hear her. I remember watching her lips, as she shouted, thinking how could such awful sounds come out of such a beautiful mouth...

The neighbours would call the police. Probably thought I was beating her up or something. [*small laugh*]

And yet... and yet she was the one who started seeing somebody else. She was the one. I--I just had nothing to say...

NICK

He's going on about it again.

JOHN

Come on. Snap out of it. Come on.

SENG

I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to them. Out there.

NICK

We've been through all this before. There's nobody out there. You're supposed to be resting. Next he'll be going on about how hard he works to run this place again. It's your turn to call him 'Uncle'. I'm tired of doing that.

SENG

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Can't you see them? Over there... all of them!

JOHN

Yes, of course we can see them...

NICK

We can? You too?

JOHN

Of course we can. And they're all green with two horns each, aren't they?  
Come on, let me give you a little injection. This won't hurt...

SENG

I gave her an oyster once, you know. Elizabeth. To keep until I could afford to  
give her pearls. At first she said it was so romantic. But then...

She threw it at me. The next time we had a fight. She threw it at me and  
called me a cheapskate.

After that she refused to talk to me any more.

You have to talk to me!

Talk to me!

JOHN

Hold him still.

SENG

Open your mouth and talk to me!

NICK

Come on, easy does it.

SENG

NO! You can't shut me out like this!

*[SENG ONN lets loose a roar of rage and starts attacking an imaginary oyster  
with savage force]*

SENG

How dare you! How! Dare! You!

*[SENG ONN continues struggle. NICHOLAS tries to stop him and SENG ONN*

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*turns on him instead, choking him. They both freeze as JOHNSON plays referee]*

JOHN

Lonely... alone in this corner, we have...  
And alone, in this corner...

SENG

Too much lipstick. She laughed at me. She said that I didn't have any idea...  
any idea at all... what a woman...

*[JOHNSON primes the injection syringe]*

NICK

*[choked voice]* Hurry up

SENG

I told her to go to hell... lipstick all over her mouth... she jumped. I didn't think  
she would really jump... lipstick... all over the pavement. Wet, sticky, red... too  
much lipstick.

Why did you always wear too much lipstick!

*[SENG ONN starts throwing NICHOLAS around physically]*

JOHN

This is a warning. Please stop right now.

SENG

You want her to come out of her shell? You have to Break through to her...

*[SENG ONN throws NICHOLAS so that he lands at JOHNSON's feet.  
JOHNSON bends over the huddled body]*

JOHN

This does not look good.

SENG

I'm almost there. If you'll renew the research grant for just one more year I can  
almost guarantee you that--

JOHN

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That is what you said ten months ago.

SENG

And I'm that much closer!

JOHN

Closer? [*looking down at the still body, nudging it cautiously with his foot*] I think the subject of your research is dead. I don't know How you are going to explain this to the Sentosa Underwater World. This creature was only on loan, you know.

SENG

All right, then. Six months. Just six months more.

JOHN

I still don't understand what exactly you hope to...

SENG

I intend [*dramatic build up*] Once and for all, to expose, the true nature of the oyster!

[*thunderous rumblings as we are transplanted under the sea*]

SENG

I've decided that I like being alone. I can get tired at my own pace. I can get bored and frustrated whenever I want to. I can be as neurotic as I want to be. And I have the perfect excuse.

Loneliness is highly underrated.

You should try it some time. Stop worrying about how others see you--look at her [*points to JOHNSON*] alone up there in the clouds... free. Floating. Disembodied...

NICK

But a body is important. Isn't it?

What is body image to an oyster?

A soft, vulnerable heart enclosed in a hard, protective shell. Knowing that you have a protective shell, but that your needing it only proves that you are vulnerable.

Take the oyster as a symbol of the human heart.

JOHN

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Clouds aren't lonely. There are so many of them up there. That guy Wordsworth got it all wrong. Clouds have lots of company. And they've got things to do, places to go. It's us oysters down here that are lonely. Even when you are surrounded by other oysters, each one of you is still alone, trapped within your shells...

Why doesn't anybody write poetry about us oysters?

*[all three strike pose]*

ALL

Surely nothing can be moister  
Than the tears of a lonely oyster

SENG

Body image develops through social contact and a sensitive interpretation of the feedback from such interactions

NICK

You could say, we're all alone in this together.

Lonely people often want others and situations to change, without being aware that they can, and should, begin by changing themselves.

SENG

I think I would be happy if only once in a while he could look up from his dinner and notice that I am sitting here at the table, too.

JOHN

I can't stop eating once I'm at the table. If I do she'll think that I don't like the food. And then there will be another fuss. It's much easier to just go on eating non-stop.

SENG

Conversation? He doesn't make conversation... he just eats!

JOHN

You want conversation?

SENG

What's wrong? Why are you stopping? Don't you like the melon soup? I don't understand you. Every day since we were married, you liked the melon soup.

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Now suddenly you don't like it any more. I give up!

JOHN

I'm eating it, look. I like it. I like it!

NICK

People are psychologically isolated.

These are the people who put on big, bright facades to distract others from wondering what's really going on inside.

*[NICK puts on brilliant smile to greet JOHNSON, but to JOHNSON's surprise, moves on past him without speaking]*

NICK

And then there are those who use filters to distance themselves from experiences in the real world. We oysters, like to think of it as practising filter-feeding...

*[SENG ONN has walked across to NICK]*

NICK

What are you doing here? I thought you said that you wanted to be left alone?

SENG

*[JOHNSON enacts what SENNG ONN is describing]* All my life. All my adult life, let's say. I would hate the people who didn't seem to believe me, believe what I told them.

I'd hate them for it--but at the same time, they would still be the people I'd most want to get in with. I would either go on trying, or try to put them down to prove to myself--and show the world--that they weren't so wonderful, anyway. But I'd go on trying.

And if any people accepted me and seemed to like me, then I would despise them--for being taken in by me. Despise them for being stupid enough to be taken in by me.

I do want to be alone. To stop having to make such an effort all the time. But I think, maybe, I would rather be alone with somebody than alone-alone.

NICK

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Loneliness--probably the best known and most easily recognised signs and symptoms of loneliness are: depression and inadequacy; shyness and lack of self confidence; shame and guilt; lack of a well-defined, realistic self image, and a vocabulary that keeps you down.

Come over here a moment, will you?

*[JOHNSON obediently walks over to NICK]*

NICK

Please to observe carefully.

*[to JOHNSON]* Alone

JOHNSON

Unloved. Unwanted

NICK

Independence

JOHNSON

Loneliness. Desertion

NICK

Privacy

JOHNSON

Isolation. Abandonment

NICK

All that I've ever wanted is to be like everybody else--to be normal.

SENG

Don't you know that what a great many 'normal' people like me really want to be special in some way? Like you are? You should go ahead and allow yourself to explore and enjoy what you are and what you can become!

NICK

But... consciously making yourself be something that you're not. That doesn't seem to be very right.

*[JOHNSON has joined them, unnoticed by them]*

JOHNSON

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Who says loneliness is not normal?

Some abnormal person, obviously.

It is from learning to live with the irritation of grit, coating the grit with your own allowances, that the pearl is finally formed...

NICK

But you can't deliberately go out and look for things to irritate you, can you?

*[looking between them]* Can you?

Maybe...

SENG

How do you plant a pearl? Does it matter whether it is cultivated or not? Does it matter to the oyster? Does what a pearl is Worth matter to the oyster?

JOHNSON

To the oyster? Does it matter? Does what matter?

*[pause]* Does anything matter?

[The three simulate oysters on stage. JOHN just opening, bubbling and shutting. He is your standard decorative fishtank oyster. Seng Onn, the 'true' oyster (in the Indian Ocean/HDB flats) and Nick the pearl oyster, the valuable oyster. Fibrillating cillia, fingers and toes. Alternating]

NICK

An oyster--such as I am--is very personification of the miracle of design... Observe how my two shells... one convex, the other concave... are joined at the crux by an elastic ligament...

*[SENG ONN starts to struggle to open his shell]*

NICK

The oyster feeds by drawing in water... with graceful movements of my fibrillating cillia. I draw sea-water inward by means of wave-like motions and filter out delectable morsels... Ummmm... . Two to three gallons of water may pass through the oyster in an hour. Minute organic particles, filtered from the water, serve as food...

Of course, food that it doesn't like, it spits out!

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[*JOHNSON releases a big bubble*]

SENG

[*after a struggle to open his shell*] I am the True Oyster, famous as a luxury aphrodisiac... the *Calciumnatis Oysteratis Edibilis*... also known as the C.O.E. I have two shells. Two valves. The valves are held together at their narrow end by an elastic ligament. There is a large central muscle that closes the valve against the pull of the ligament.

One valve is always busy sucking in water that feeds me... while the other remains firmly attached to some solid strata... a rock on the sea-bed... a sunken ship... or the side of a high rise building with appropriate strata title...

[*JOHNSON releases another big bubble*]

NICK

Some oysters are special... both by virtue of what they Are... and by virtue of what they can [*pause*] Do...

Consider... this grain of sand...

Once this grain of sand is lodged inside the shell of an oyster, the slight irritation the oyster feels stimulates secretions... mysterious secretions that coat the grain of sand until... a pearl is formed.

[*produces pearl*] The pearl.

SENG

Pearls are formed in oysters by the accumulation of calcium-containing material around a solid piece of foreign matter that has become lodged inside the shell. Nothing mysterious about that.

NICK

By the way, pearls formed in edible oysters are lustreless and have no value. Unlike...

[*caresses pearl*]

SENG

As a powerful aphrodisiac... for Real Men... a really big C.O.E. has no comparison.

There was once a man who ate 2 dozen oysters...

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He told The New Paper that only 4 of them didn't work!

*[Behind, JOHNSON holds up a garish Chinese advertisement for a seafood restaurant featuring oyster omelette, and then another, advertising 'cultured' pearls. Tacky looking ads.]*

NICK

The only problem with producing beautiful pearls is the number of people who try to take them away from you.

No--don't take away my pearl!

The oyster doesn't want to give up its pearl... not only because the pearl is so beautiful... but because in the process of giving up the pearl... the oyster... dies.

SENG

Being eaten alive isn't something that oysters look forward to very much either. On the whole, the oyster doesn't like being disturbed. That is why, when there are strangers around... the oyster will clam up... *[clams up]*

NICK

The next time you see a really beautiful pearl... think of the oyster... the dead oyster, that gave its life to producing it... *[also clams up]*

*[JOHNSON produces a bubble, and closes]*

JOHN

There's really nobody as truly lonely as the fat boy in the corner of the playground.

Even if he wanted to join in the games, nobody wanted to have him on their team.

The only time anybody paid any attention to him was when they wanted to make fun of him.

*[pause]*

Even after he grew up and became a teacher, that humiliation never left him... never left me...

*[pause]*

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I used to be paranoid about my weight. When I was younger. While I was growing up. The other children would tease me about being fat. Luckily that was in the days before all this fitness business became such a big thing, so it was only the other children who were teasing me and making fun of me.

And if any of the teachers or any of their parents heard them, then they would scold them and tell them not to be rude.

And it wasn't always bad. Sometimes people would come and pinch my cheeks and tell me that I looked so cute and chubby-chubby. And then they would give me ten cents to buy kacang...

But nowadays, the students are all so smart-aleck and so know-it-all...

SENG

Teacher! Teacher!

JOHN

I'm busy, wait. What was I saying?

SENG

*[insistently]* Teacher! Teacher! Just now I saw Jen Wei buy Two pratas in the canteen!

*[SENG ONN points offstage, addressing JOHNSON eagerly]*

*[JOHNSON stares at SENNG ONN for a long moment]*

JOHN

Tell me, why is that any of your business?

ENG

But Teacher, Jen Wei is not supposed to eat two pratas because he is an Obese Student!

JOHN

You never mind what other people are eating. You go and play and mind your own business!

SENG

But Teacher, it is for Jen Wei's own good that we are all supposed to help him to--

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JOHN

Never mind! You've told me, all right. Now go on and leave Jen Wei alone!

SENG

But Teacher, we are all supposed to help Jen Wei keep fit, otherwise the percentage of obese students in the school will go up and then our school may lose our health and fitness ranking!

JOHN

All right, all right! I heard you already. Thank you for informing on your friend! Now go away and... and go jogging or go and do some pull-ups or something!

*[SENG ONN goes off, giving JOHNSON sullen looks]*

JOHN

That *[nodding in SENNG ONN's direction]* is the kind of boy who will go far in this society. The further the better, where I'm concerned. He'll probably end up in Western Australia. *[pause]*

As I was saying, there's really nobody so truly lonely as the fat boy in the corner of the playground.

Even when you try to join in the games, nobody wants to have you around.

*[pause]*

Even after you grow up and become a teacher, that humiliation never leaves you...

I never realised how lucky I was when all that I had to worry about was my weight.

In those days I believed that if only I could get thin, people would like me. And through more effort than I thought I possessed, I managed to lose some weight. Quite a lot of weight, actually. *[looks at himself]* Actually I still feel fat. I still find that people look at me in a funny way. But I eased up on the dieting after my mother started pushing Karen Carpenter-anorexia articles under my door and trying to get me to see a psychiatrist...

Besides, by then I had other problems. If it wasn't my weight, then what was

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it? What was it, what is it about me that makes me feel so--so-- [*gestures  
futilely, unable to find a word*]

Do I have bad breath? [*holds up his palm and blows*] It's so hard to tell, isn't  
it? Do I have [*loud whisper*] B.O.? Yellow teeth? Damp armpits? Sagging  
tummy? Flabby abdominals? Thinning hair?

[NICK comes in, in his doctor persona]

NICK

Your problem is—

JOHN

Tell me, Doctor. I can take it. Hit me with it. Don't spare me. Let me know the  
worst...

NICK

As far as I can see, you've been watching too much TV. Soap Operas,  
American sitcoms, but especially--Sellavision.

Your problem is your information-seeking side leads you to believe that you  
are suffering from every one of the currently popular health problems  
featured... but your cynical side refuses to let you believe in any of the cures  
advertised.

JOHN

In the old days, doctors wouldn't tell you the whole story because they were  
afraid that you couldn't take it. These days, doctors don't give you the whole  
story because they can't be bothered.

NICK

I wasn't born this hard and cynical, you know. I spent years cultivating this  
image. And I am going to tell you why, not that anybody's interested in  
knowing...

SENG

I'm one of the few people I know who's not afraid to admit that I'm lonely. I  
admit it, why not? What have I got to lose? Reputation? Friends? The only  
problem is, there never seems to be anybody around for me to admit it to...

NICK

Of course, it's such a common, blasé explanation, I'm sure that you're all

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bored before you've even started listening to me...

SENG

But I suppose if there had been anyone around to listen to my problem, then it wouldn't have been a problem any more, would it?

NICK

I had a love once, too. That's right. I did. You can laugh if you feel so inclined. I won't hear you.

I can't hear you while I'm in character. But yes. It's true. I, too... I once had a love of my own.

SENG

Then someone suggested to me, why don't you get a dog?

JOHN

*[JOHNSON has been falling asleep during the preceeding section, but he wakes up with a jump ]* A... dog.

SENG

A dog. You know, Woof, Woof?

JOHN

A dog.

SENG

Once upon a time, there was a guy who was lonely and decided to get a dog. Man's best friend, right?

And right away, he felt the change, the difference in the way that people were treating him. When he went out with the dog, people started smiling at him; talking to the dog; making smiling faces at the dog and so on... it was nice.

NICK

It was more than nice, it was wonderful! Nice dog! Nice dog!

JOHN

Woof! Woof!

SENG

One day, a woman said 'What a pretty dog!' and sat down next to him on the breakwater at East Coast Parkway... they talked. Mostly about the dog.

JOHN

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WRoof? [*Pleased, whines for attention, wants ears scratched*]  
Woof! Woof! [*happy*]

NICK

[*very shyly, more to his toes than to her*] I think he likes you.

SENG

Or rather, she did most of the talking. She talked and talked. To him, to the dog. He was too shy, too awkward, to really answer her, but he sat looking at her and he thought he had never been so happy.

She was beautiful, he thought. With a musical voice, bright eyes and smooth hairless legs. To cut a long story short, they even talked about getting married.

NICK

You really think that we could? I mean--think that we Should?

SENG

But then it didn't work out.

Now they aren't seeing each other any more.

And the dog is living with her now. The dog is much happier with her. Much, much happier with her...

NICK

I thought that letting her keep the dog might make it easier for me to go on seeing her...

[*NICK watches as SENG ONN goes over to imaginary woman, pats JOHNSON the dog...*]

NICK

She's married to someone else now. They both take the dog out for walks. My dog. [*pause*] What used to be my dog. [*gives a forlorn little wave to the dog*]

[*Lights up on the Audience*]

JOHN

Woof woof woof... [*Stretching*] Wah, Siong!

NICK

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Ovidia? Ovidia, are you back there--I'm sorry, but I really, really don't think that this is working... I don't get the internal motivation for the dog. I think that in this situation a *Cat* might be a bit more realistic, a Dog wouldn't just leave his master like that... but then of course, you can't take a cat for walks, can you?

JOHN

*[still doing stretches & practice moves, as he continues to do throughout this section]* Excuse me—

NICK

Sorry...

SENG

I'm really getting sore all over...

JOHN

At least you didn't have to crawl around being a dog.

NICK

*[wiping his ear]* Well, You didn't have to be such a Wet dog. And you could have been a *Smaller* dog. Why are you moving around like that?

JOHN

This is supposed to be Movement Theatre. Why Aren't you moving around?

NICK

I've *been* moving. This is the interval.

SENG

*[taking off shoes]* Yah, this is the interval.

JOHN

I thought Paul said we weren't going to have an interval? One and a half hours, no interval?

Can't you see the people are still out there?

*[NICHOLAS and SENG ONN look out at audience then at each other. They smile bright, artificial smiles. Speak the next two sections without moving their lips]*

SENG

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Well, the lights are still on...

NICK

So we can See that the audience is still here...

*[NICHOLAS darts off stage. SENG ONN looks around him desperately and decides to join JOHNSON's wayang sequence, using his shoes and improvising the sounds as the lights dim]*

SENG

You may as well surrender No-o-o-o-w!

JOHN

*[Pausing, holding himself aloof, he spits defiance at SENG ONN]* Foolish Hope! If anyone is to surrender, it should be You! I have already found the location of the first two oysters! What are you doing besides following my trail?

SENG & JOHNSON

Chang! *[pause]* Chang-Chang-Chang-Chang

Dub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub

Dub-dubdub; Dub-dubdub; Dub-dubdub...

*[Enter NICHOLAS]*

NICK

*[sings, a la Karen Carpenter]*

After all this time of being alone

You would think by now, I should be used to it—

NICK

I was thirteen years old when I started modelling. My mother ran a boutique. I used to go down there after school. There was nobody at home. It was my mother's `friends' who first suggested that she let them use me for photographic modelling. This was right after the divorce. I think I actually enjoyed the attention... for a while. There were times then when I saw my mother looking at me as though she was wondering who I was... or what she was going to do with me. Anyway, her friends had my hair cut, painted up my

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face, told me how to sit, how to stand, how to look sexy for the cameras... I didn't really like doing it, but I didn't think I had a choice. They all told me how lucky I was that people liked my `Look'. What look? I was just trying hard not to blink, not to make anybody angry...

Complete strangers used to come up to me and tell me how beautiful I was. I found some of them--especially the older men--a bit frightening. They would laugh and say `Give Uncle a kiss'. They seemed to think that because I was--beautiful--I would also be... [*pushes away a bad memory*]

The nuns at school... they just assumed I was loose and immoral and a bad influence. Stupid old maids. The `good' girls wouldn't play with me. The `bad' girls... (those who had long fingernails and smoked cigarettes in the toilet?) they thought I was just pretending not to understand. But I wasn't all that worldly... I didn't understand a lot of things...

I remember... it was just before Christmas... they had draped a whole room in white lace, wound me up in metres and metres of white lace... that's when I got my first period... suddenly there was blood, blood on everything. I thought I was dying. I had no idea--nobody had ever told me anything--all the people there started laughing. What was so funny. One woman came up and slapped me on both cheeks. To make my face red, she said. So you won't have bad luck. And the photographer kept saying `Marvellous! Wonderful! Sensational!' And he just kept shooting. He just kept on shooting... [*pulls herself away from this memory with an effort*]

[*sings softly*] Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer

Had a very shiny nose

And if you ever saw it,

You would even say it glowed

All of the other reindeer.

Used to laugh and call him names

They never let poor Rudolph

Join in any reindeer games.

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JOHN

I saw those photographs. They were sensational. So vivid, so striking...

NICK

I never liked Christmas as a child. I never had Christmas as a... `Child'. I was always working.

JOHN

I believe the photographer won a couple of awards at the Calban International, for those pictures. He called the series `Metamorphosis: Blood and Lace'. Critics raved about the impact, the structure, the innocence, the beauty, the blood...

NICK

I imagined everybody who saw me was thinking, that's the girl who was in those photographs.

JOHN

She was a wonderful actress, that little girl. The expression on her face... as though she was really so--[*shakes his head, impressed*]

NICK

I wanted to die. I was so alone.

And I felt that the whole rest of the world... everyone I knew... and everyone I didn't know, had seen those pictures. And were laughing at me.

JOHN

I thought you were so beautiful... so beautiful!

So beautiful...

After that, I went to every fashion show I heard she was appearing in!

[*Model sequence, choreographed to Lonely Girl*]

[*NICK alone, front centre. Magazine projections.*]

NICK

People say that I'm beautiful.

I really don't know. I used to look at myself in the mirror, trying to see what it is that other people see in me... [*turns mirror over*]

I don't like my face. I don't like my body. I don't like other people looking at

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me...

[*SENG ONN and JOHNSON peer around magazine projections. Catching sight of them, NICK smiles brilliantly*]

JOHN

She's so gorgeous!

SENG

She's such a snob!

JOHN

She's got such style! Such hair! Such a... such a... such a...

SENG

She's probably had implants.

JOHN

But maybe... deep down inside... she's lonely too... Just looking to find One Man she can trust...

SENG

She's probably Lesbian.

NICK

[*still smiling*] Staring at me. Following me with their eyes. Saying things about me... But I know how to behave... I know the right way to move and smile and pose for an audience... I can fool them anytime...  
I just find it harder to fool myself.

JOHN

Isn't she so beautiful?

SENG

I think she looks stuck-up.

NICK

Think about the loneliness of a beautiful woman who knows that all the other women are envious of her... and that all other men want only One Thing from her... not to mention some women who might want some of that one thing too...

SENG

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Bad example for our youth.

NICK

Without even talking to me, they pass judgement on me.

A bitchy man can be a lot more hurtful than a bitchy woman; take it from someone who's been there and knows.

JOHN

I remember her as a beautiful young girl. We were in the same Chinese tuition group; twice a week in a house in Ross Avenue. Mrs Chow was supposed to be one of the best Chinese teachers around. She was very particular about the students she took.

SENG

I had seen photographs of her, of course. In magazines and things. Long before I ever saw her in person. I knew what she was like before I ever met her. So I couldn't be taken in.

JOHN

When I told my friends in school that I was having Chinese tuition with Angelica Tang, they all said,

SENG

Don't bluff!

JOHN

Of course they didn't believe me.

I didn't believe it myself.

But it was her. It was.

I kept a magazine with her photograph in it locked in my desk drawer. She was so beautiful. I never told her that, of course. She wouldn't have liked it...

NICK

I didn't like my pictures. I always thought I was ugly.

SENG

Whose picture is this that you're hiding here?

JOHN

Gimme that! Gimme that!

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NICK

I never had much trouble with boys.

The other girls were the ones who kept their distance. Of course, some boys could be difficult too...

*[SENG ONN wolf whistles. He is ignored]*

JOHN

Even in that shapeless school uniform she looked beautiful. So beautiful.

NICK

I couldn't talk to anybody. People didn't trust me. After all, I was Maddeline Tang's daughter. My mother didn't exactly have a reputation in the business for being sweet-tempered.

SENG

She isn't very good in Chinese, is she?

JOHN

Chinese?

SENG

That's why we're here, isn't it? To study Chinese?

*[SENG ONN stares at NICHOLAS who turns away and pretends to ignore them]*

JOHN

She never talked very much. In fact, she seemed to be quite shy.

I suppose it wasn't her fault that she wasn't so good in her schoolwork. After all, she can't have had much time to spend on it... with her modelling and her social life and everything...

SENG

Maybe she's just stupid. All body no brain.

NICK

I was only thirteen years old.

Don't you think it's unfair? But who could I have said anything to...

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My mother?

*[NICHOLAS laughs through JOHNSON's next speech, verging into hysteria until he is crying]*

JOHN

Looking back, I'd say she had a kind of kinetic confidence. A smooth, animal grace. It was in the way she sat, in the way she walked and talked, in the way she turned her head to look for a pen... in the way that she always paused and looked around before she answered a question; as though she was looking to make sure that all of us were listening before she spoke... nothing ever startled her or upset her. She was so perfect...

NICK

I felt as though I was always being watched, being judged. And I never what anyone was expecting out of me.

JOHN

Before the year end exams, she asked me to lend her my Chinese essay book. Of course I lent it to her.

SENG

She's just using you.

JOHN

Later I found out that she had sent the whole thing to be photo-copied. And not only that. After she photocopied my Chinese essays, she went and lost my Chinese essay book...

SENG

You're such a sucker.

NICK

He didn't seem to hear me when I told him that I was sorry. When I told him how sorry I was...

*[looks at JOHN]* He didn't really seem to mind at all.

I remember thinking then that he was the kind of man I would like to marry when I grew up...

Maybe if I married someone like that I would stand a better chance of staying

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happy than my mother had...

Because, you know, I've always meant to get married. It was only a question of `When' and `To Who'.

*[Ends with 3 silhouettes on stage. Then half darkness.*

*In this darkness, `Lonely' the word repeated with JOHNSON, Seng Onn and Nicholas walking and calling, calling, calling]*

SENG

The stupid cat is always running away. I myself would say good riddance. But my son gets so upset. All he likes to do is eat, and play with the stupid cat.  
Lonely! Lonely! Lonely!

*[Exit SENG ONN and NICHOLAS, still calling]*

JOHN

I never had many friends in school.

The other children made fun of me because I was fat. And because I was better at my school work than them. Sometimes I would fail on purpose, because I thought that that would make them like me better. But they just said,

SENG

Serve you right!

NICK

Next time better don't be so stuck up!

*[They laugh and exit]*

JOHN

At least I had my cat. But then some of the children were allergic to me. Because of the cat fur. Especially this one girl...

*[He turns and looks. Silhouette of very fat girl behind him. Then as she comes forward, lights come up to show a slim, beautiful girl wearing a coat that made her look deceptively fat]*

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*[Watching her, JOHNSON kicks away the imaginary cat. There is an angry Meeorw! and a yell from SENG ONN as it lands on him]*

JOHN

Er Hi!

NICK

Hello...

SENG

*[coming on, carrying `cat' by tail]* All right. Who threw this cat at me?

*[Cat escapes, cat chasing sequence]*

*[NICK sneezing violently all the while. JOHNSON hurries him off]*

SENG

*[disapprovingly, seeing only JOHNSON]* Table? *[brightening up]* For two? Of course!

*[while JOHNSON and NICHOLAS are examining the buffet]* Lonely people don't go to buffets. It's difficult to go to a buffet alone and not look as though you're trying to eat enough to keep you going for the rest of your life... or the rest of the week, at least. And sometimes when you get back to your seat, somebody has pinched the magazine you brought with you so that you could look as though you were a busy visitor on a business trip.

But sometimes, two lonely people get together and go to the buffet together...

JOHN

Loneliness. People know what it's like. They know it. They've faced it. They don't like it.

NICK

It's boring. It's passé. It's been Done.

JOHN

Try the oysters. People say that they're really good here. They say that they're so fresh, you can actually see them moving if you--

*[Then NICHOLAS sees the oyster half-shells on the buffet table, drops his*

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*plate and screams,]*

NICK

Daddy! Daddy, Daddy, Daddy...

JOHN

*[weeping loudly too]* I never wanted to be happy either!

SENG

All this drama-drama going on here. Must be filming SBC English Drama Serial... *[catches sight of JOHNSON and gapes]* Say, aren't you that guy from Master of Sea... I saw you in Episode what-was-it... you are the policeman, right!

JOHN

No lah, no...

SENG

It's you, right! You are that-that-that-who-is-it one! Investigating that-that-that what is it one!

NICK

Does this happen to you a lot?

JOHN

This is the first time.

SENG

Eh! *[nudge nudge]* Can get for me Margaret Chan's autograph or not?

NICK

Oh, just squash him under you foot, as you would, a cockroach!

*[JOHNSON advances on NICHOLAS as music begins, then goes into body-building competition]*

*[music increases in volume. Body-building sequence begins... work out, poses, unspoken competition...]*

*[After other two leave, SENG ONN drops his pose with relief]*

SENG

*[looking at retreating figures]* Some people are so competitive. Think that they are so tough. Huh! They don't know what 'tough' is!

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I come to the gym six nights a week. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I work my Upper Body... biceps, triceps, lats, abs, pecs, shoulders, chest... Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, I work my legs and lower back... calves, thighs, glutes, hamstrings... [a few exercises] I take this seriously. The other guys, I don't know what they come here for. Inside the gym also must carry handphone! Occupy the machines only.

JOHN [*handphone*]

Hey, where the hell are you?

NICK [*handphone*]

Where the hell are You?

JOHN [*handphone*]

You said to meet you at the gym, what!

NICK [*handphone*]

And you said can, so what happened!

JOHN [*handphone*]

I'm here! At the gym!

NICK [*handphone*]

Don't bullshit me.

JOHN [*handphone*]

Goh's Gym what you said!

NICK [*handphone*]

That's where I am. But all I can see is this big guy doing lifting...

JOHN [*handphone*]

I can see him! I can see him!

NICK [*handphone*]

But where are...

[*JOHNSON and NICHOLAS look around SENG ONN and catch sight of each other. They start towards each other, cutting in front of SENG ONN, who growls at them. They retreat hastily.*]

NICK [*handphone*]

Tell you what... I'll call you when I'm done.

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JOHN [*handphone*]

Or I will call you.

[*Exit NICHOLAS and JOHNSON*]

SENG

And all the girls who come here only use the step-machines... while they watch me doing my serious work-out. Of course I don't pay any attention to them. I don't even notice that they're there...

But I know that they watch me. Because... when I check my form and posture in the mirrors... I can watch them watching me... watching... my body...

Every morning I go for a run. I run ten times around the track. After my workout here I go down to the pool. I do sixty laps of the pool every night. Twenty backstroke, twenty butterfly, twenty freestyle...

What else is there to do? Go and sit in some pub somewhere? Paying money to breath in other people's cigarette smoke and put unhealthy things inside your body?

Sitting alone wondering whether anyone you know will talk to you...

Wondering whether you dare to talk to anyone...

I thought, in a pub, you can just sit down, make friends... but I only ever talked to two people. One of them was drunk, and the other one wanted to sell me insurance. Everybody else was sitting in groups. Talking to people in their own groups. Having fun within their own little groups.

NICK

These people are so deadly boring. They're even more boring out of the office than they are in the office.

JOHN

I don't like to drink. And I think that I am going deaf from the loud music. But my boss likes to come here. Better to be deaf with a job than not deaf with no job, right?

NICK

Hey, Drink up, drink up, drink up. Gan Bei!

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JOHN

Hah? What?

NICK

Cheers!

JOHN

Oh right. Cheers, Boss!

SENG

That's why I prefer to come to the gym. It's better than sitting alone at a bar or sitting alone at home. Or sitting alone in the office... I mean--I'm here for my health. Working out makes me feel good. It makes me look good.

Or I go running. When you are running alone, nobody thinks:

JOHN

Look at that guy sitting by himself. Must be a jerk with no friends...

SENG

No. When you're out running, working out, getting out, getting in shape, people only say:

NICK

I wish I had his muscles on me...

*[JOHNSON looks at him strangely]*

NICK

No. I mean--I wish I had his body on my body...

No—I mean...

SENG

Never mind.

It is always better to exhaust yourself from doing too much, because then, you don't have the time or the energy to be lonely.

But then you can't really call me lonely, can you? Here at the gym, I've got other people around me all the time. And I'm doing things, achieving things, enjoying myself, all the time... all the time...

*[SENG ONN looks around him. Everybody else has gone home. He picks up*

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*his towel and puts it around his neck.]*

SENG

Locking up already?

*[The echo coming back slurs into Lonely... Lonely... Lonely... he leaves]*

*[SENG ONN goes home. He passes JOHNSON who flops down in front of the TV and switches it on with his remote control.]*

Advertisement 1:

*[NICHOLAS and SENG ONN enter and get into a lift together]*

SENG

Oh no! The shadow of a stain!

NICK

The shadow of a stain! *[Both shriek]*

SENG

My ordinary powder will never get This out!

NICK

Maybe you should try... *[hefts out enormous package]* New Liquid Dynamo!

SENG

New Liquid Dynamo?

NICK

Just take one capful of new liquid Dynamo... and rub it gently on the stain...

SENG

Oh No! The shadow of a shadow of a stain!

NICK

*[taken aback]* Where? Well--take one cupful of new liquid Dynamo and rub it Hard on the stain...

SENG

Oh No! The shadow of a shadow of a shadow of a stain!

NICK

*[crossly]* Where! Hmmm. Well, just take one bucketful *[lifts bucket with a bit of*

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*difficulty*]... one bucketful of new liquid Dynamo and rub it Viciously on the stain...

SENG

The shadow of a shadow of a shadow--

NICK

And you throw the whole thing in the washing machine.

SENG

*[Going around in the washing machine]* Gao mang ah! Gao mang ah!

*[NICK pulls SENNG out]*

NICK

And see? The stain's all gone. Good as new.

SENG

*[Cough cough choke choke]*

NICK

What's that?

SENG

No more ordinary powders for me...

NICK & SENNG

New Liquid Dynamo!

SENG

What's that?

NICK

Ribena. My mother says that it is good for me.

SENG

Can I have some?

NICK

No.

*[NICHOLAS and SENNG ONN notice JOHNSON not watching them]*

NICK

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Is he watching some *cheem* Channel 12 programme or just another one of those action-action dramas?

SENG

Neither. He's just waiting... waiting for the 10.30 news... waiting for more than the news... this man is in love with... Diana Koh.

NICK

Every night, for years, he's watched her read the news on Channel Five.

SENG

Every night, because he knows she will be there, he is there, ready and waiting for her...

JOHN

She's not stupidly, brassily aggressive like some women. She is calm, composed, gentle...

She has a nice smile, she never wears too much lipstick...

NICK

Every night, eagerly, he listens for any inflections, any hidden meanings that might lurk within her words. Does she seem tired? Sad? Happy?

Every night, he waits for the final credits to roll, to find out whether her outfit tonight was sponsored by Takashimaya or Tangs Studio.

JOHN

She's up to date on all the latest news; in Singapore, in the region... in the rest of the world. Unlike most women around here, she understands political situations, she keeps in touch with scientific developments, yet she never loses touch with the human angle... tree planting day for example... tree planting day...

Sometimes I turn the sound off and just look at her...

SENG

Don't your conversations get just a little one-sided sometimes?

JOHN

Not as one-sided as conversations with *You* can get!

NICK

I suppose, if it gets a bit much for you, you can always use the volume control.

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That's something most of us have to do without when it comes to talking to women!

SENG

But she never hears You! She never hears Your point of view, or whether you agree with what she's saying, or that you've had a bad day, or that you've just tied up a big deal...

JOHN

Look. When was the last time you had a real live woman listen to you say anything with any attention, huh?

Or never mind the last time. Have you *Ever* had a real live woman listen to you with any kind of sincere attention?

[SENG ONN sits aside, thinking]

NICK

You see, if only women learnt how to listen to us properly, we would all have less problems.

[FEMALE VOICE OVER: *If only you guys learnt how to communicate properly, listening to you wouldn't be such a major challenge!*]

SENG

[looking around] The problem is, the modern woman seems to prefer to be heard and not seen...

NICK

No. The real problem is really that people don't know how to listen to other people when they are talking about something--

JOHN

[overlapping] And then, suddenly, without any warning at all, out of the blue, in the middle of September, Diana Koh Wasn't There. She just Wasn't There!

She wasn't there on Tuesday night.

I thought, No. This can't be happening. Nothing like this has ever happened before... she'll be back tomorrow night, like nothing happened.

[pause]

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She wasn't there on Wednesday night.

[*pause*]

She wasn't there on Thursday night... Friday! Saturday! Sunday!

Diana! Diana! Diana! Where are you? When are you coming back... Are you coming back?

Diana! How could you Do this to Me!

[*JOHNSON weeps desperately*]

NICK

Just one problem of having a one-sided relationship with someone. You never know when they're going on leave.

SENG

Not necessarily restricted to one-sided relationships with people on TV, by the way.

I've heard of people who've had their real-life relationships disappear over night.

NICK

I've heard of people who've had their husbands or wives disappear over night.

SENG

Well, I've heard of people who've--

JOHN

What are you two going on and on about?

NICK

We're just trying to make you feel better.

JOHN

Nothing can make me feel better. Nothing. I don't want to feel better. I want her back. My life is shattered. All day I used to look forward to ten-thirty in the evening. No matter how bad things were, no matter how unreasonable, no matter how stressful, I could tell myself, at ten-thirty She will be here. With her calm, steady voice and her calm, steady gaze, she'll put my life back into perspective. She will calm every crisis. She will soothe my soul. But now... what do I have to look forward to at ten-thirty--

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NICK

Duncan Watt?

JOHN

Huh!

SENG

Hey, wait a minute... what's wrong with Duncan Watt!?

*[JOHNSON sits motionless as NICHOLAS and SENG ONN walk pass him and each other, saying cordially and conversationally, but with polite barriers very much in place... Lonely? Lonely! Lonely-lonely-lonely (small social parting laugh) Lonely... Lonely... they exit]*

JOHN

How can you be lonely for somebody you were never with?

*[In broken tones]*

When I lost the only person I could have loved, I did what an article in the LIFE! section of the Straits Times suggested. I planted a tree to remember her by.

NICK

What happened?

JOHN

The tree died.

For a long time I couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. Then... one morning, after not being able to sleep all night... I switched on the TV at six am... you know, Six AM in the Morning... I thought, at least can watch Sellavision... and there she was! I thought I was imagining things! How could it be! But there she was! Back on my set again! Diana! She's come back to me! *[build up to song begins]*

NICK

*[Who has been listening to somebody offstage]* You've seen her *Where?* Doing *What?* At Six am? Am as in, in the morning?

NICK

Apparently people watch AM TV for all sorts of reasons. You've just heard one

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more.

SENG

He sets the alarm for 5am. Just to make sure that he doesn't miss a single minute...

NICK

And sometimes, he stays awake all night, just to make sure that he hears the alarm when it goes off—

*[Song: Oh Please stay by me, Diana]*

*[On TV]*

SENG

Good Morning.

Today sees the launch of the new Anti-Loneliness Campaign; the first joint venture campaign to be conducted by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Let's see what they have in store for us over the next couple of months...

*[Interviews with spokesmen from the different ministries...]*

SENG

Mr Tan, why is the Ministry of Health focusing on loneliness this year? Wouldn't you say that Singaporeans today are facing more serious health threats... AIDS, for example?

JOHN

Well, you see... loneliness is a very major mental health issue. It is what we call the Silent Epidemic. Lonely old people die in hospitals and hospices. Without family to visit them. Without family to pay their bills. This is a strain on the taxpayers resources.

Lonely children tend not to do so well in school. They tend to keep to themselves and become social delinquents... they take up Smoking and Vandalism.

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SENG

So... by addressing the problem of loneliness, you are really addressing the...  
er, the Smoking problem?

JOHN

Well, you see... we must attack the root cause.

SENG

*[same fixed smile]* Well, that's marvellous. Thank you... and now...

JOHN

As for people with AIDS, in most cases, we must conclude that these patients  
have come in close contact with at least one other person...

SENG

Er... Yes...

JOHN

So they cannot be considered seriously lonely.

SENG

Thank you. And now--would you like to tell us how the Ministry of Culture  
came to be a part of this year's Anti-Loneliness Campaign?

NICK

We will be encouraging the expression of the experience of Loneliness in  
difference forms... in dance! In drama! In Art! In Architecture!

SENG

In... Architecture?

NICK

Are you denying Architecture a place in the Arts?

SENG

Oh! No, no, no, no, no... In fact, every time I walk past a block of HDB flats, I  
can't help thinking to myself, this is so Mondrian...

NICK

*[not listening]* And besides, everybody knows that... True Artists are always  
lonely...

SENG

*[out of the side of mouth. Still smiling]* Cut...

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NICK

True Artists are always searching for someone... anyone... who will understand...

SENG

*[Still out of side of mouth, but louder]* Cut!

NICK

Who will Try to understand... the torturous isolation within their souls...

SENG

Get me back to the studio! Oh... I'm back.

And here with me is Mr Tan from the Ministry of Education.

JOHN

*[gazing at her, star-struck]* Hello, Diana.

SENG

I suppose you have a lot of things planned?

JOHN

Oh, no-no-no!

SENG

But the Anti-Loneliness Campaign? The schools, the junior colleges...

JOHN

Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes...

SENG

*[smiling]* Er... `yes'?

JOHN

Many activities will be planned.

SENG

Such as? For example?

JOHN

To help students...

*[SENG nods encouragingly]*

JOHN

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learn to...

Communicate

SENG

I see. And what else will—

JOHN

So that they will be less lonely...

SENG

I see. Well, thank you very much.

There we heard from

JOHN

when they grow up.

*[They watch each other. SENG wondering if JOHN has more to add. JOHN just watching SENG]*

SENG

That's all?

JOHN

Yes.

SENG

I see. Right. Thank you very much. Now on the on the line we have Mr Frederick Gopinathan from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs...

Mr Gopinathan? This is AM Singapore. Would you like to tell us something about the Anti-Loneliness campaign launched today that your ministry is going to be part of? How is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs going to be involved in this?

NICK

Our target will be mainly those Singaporeans posted overseas. Whether for work, for studies, or for any other reasons at the moment not yet disclosed by our colleagues over at the Ministry of Defence.

SENG

I see.

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NICK

One thing we must state categorically right at the start.

SENG

I'm not sure what you--

NICK

We are not here to try to solve anybody's problem!

SENG

But I thought that--

NICK

We must accept that problems have always existed, and will always exist. We must all learn to handle our problems. To live with them...

SENG

I see. You will be helping people to adjust to living with loneliness?

JOHN

Excuse me.

NICK

Not now. I'm busy.

JOHN

It's very important.

SENG

Young man, you can't just--

NICK

We've already discussed this!

SENG

What have you discussed?

NICK

He wants to get married.

SENG

But that's good, isn't it? Then he won't be lonely any more.

JOHN

Thank You! Thank you! I don't know who you are, but Bless You, Bless you!

For saying that!

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NICK

He wants to marry his Filipina maid.

SENG

What?

NICK

His mother's Filipina maid.

SENG

I think it's time for us to go to a commercial break.

JOHN

But listen, you don't know her...

You don't know her...

*[SENG gestures for people to come and drag JOHNSON off stage]*

SENG

You are saying that there are things with more serious repercussions than loneliness.

NICK

Precisely. And you must remember that we are a very small country. We have been doing well so far, but we must not upset the balance!

You're a Singaporean overseas? You're feeling lonely?

Well, learn to live with it! For your information, there are Singaporeans Living In Singapore, who are just as lonely!

*[NICK goes off]*

JOHN

She knows always knows everything about everything that's happening everywhere...

NICK

Except that she doesn't know that you exist!

JOHN

Look--it's better than nothing. Didn't you ever have an imaginary friend?

NICK

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Sometimes I think that all my friends have been imaginary. [*Turns and trips over piece of invisible furniture*]

SENG

All heroes are lonely. All quests are undertaken alone. Even if you have companions they are only more aspects of yourself.

NICK

You get no pearls from a lonely oyster

JOHN

I once knew a man who believed that people who die alone turn into oysters.

[*flute music comes in from offstage, NICHOLAS comes on with flute, carrying black bag*]

NICK

My father didn't really leave me. He had no choice. He was taken away. Changed... completely changed.

SENG

I didn't want to be a father that my son would not be proud of. I would rather that he had a father figure to remember... that he *could* be proud of. In the meantime, I would always be near him... making sure that no harm came to him...

JOHN

The proof grows more and more conclusive that loneliness and insanity are both hereditary; possibly carried on different configurations of the same gene.

[*switches into Chinese Opera*] You! You may as well give up now. I know what you have concealed in that bag! You have... the Shining Pearl!

I could sense its aura from the moment I came to this place!

SENG

I will not allow you to take from this child what is most precious to him!

NICK

But don't you see? I don't Have the Shining Pearl...

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*[plays flute, drawing other two out]*

NICK

Within each one of us, the Shining Pearl glows forth as we cherish the idea of perfection within this imperfect world...

When we smooth over the hard edges and harsh surfaces of our daily lives with the soothing balm of patience, of perseverance, of love...

Creating something that will be of everlasting value...

*[NICK continues playing flute through following section]*

JOHN

We are trying to form something of value, what. Trying to unite, trying to call the people to action, trying to form coalitions and political parties and GRCs...

*[Flute music stops abruptly]*

SENG

If only you spend less time with the 'People' more time with your family, it would be better for you!

JOHN

I must put the needs of the people first. *[takes spectacle frames out of bag, puts them on and becomes statistician]*

In almost all case surveyed; single people, whether male, female, widowed, divorced, or unmarried, have been observed to die more frequently than married people.

SENG

A person can die once only what. What do you mean by 'die more frequently'!

JOHN

For instance, statistics show that unmarried people die of cancer more often than married people.

SENG

Maybe married people die of boredom before they get a chance to die of cancer.

JOHN

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For instance, consider this. Widowed Japanese men between the ages of 20 and 24 have a death rate 31.23 times higher than married Japanese males of similar age!

SENG

You don't say.

JOHN

Yes! It appears that loneliness can be even more hazardous to your health than smoking.

*[SENG ONN walks away to other side of the stage]*

NICK

*[the impartial observor]* Just because you are married does automatically mean that you are not lonely.

In fact, I think that a person can actually get a lot more lonely in a marriage than out of one.

SENG

*[browbeating JOHNSON through this and following speech; first as `husband' then as `child']* Of course, when you are married then there is this somebody there all the time. Or most of the time. Too much of the time. But very often, all that it means is that you have got somebody else's socks to pick up; you have got to wash his bits of hair out of the sink after he has shaved himself in the morning and you have got to make sure that there is something to feed him for dinner. And then you will have all the obligational functions to attend, dressed in a certain way that will be acceptable to the people who he is working with, because you are not there as yourself... you are there as His Wife.

NICK

*[still the impartial observer]* Children get lonely too. And lonely children get used to the habit of loneliness and grow up to be lonely adults...

*[SENG ONN as anxious housewife-mother]*

*[JOHNSON huddles up as the lonely child]*

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SENG

I know I should be paying more attention to the children... but I don't even know what to do about myself, how can I plan for them what should they be doing? When they don't eat, I tell them to eat more. When they are eating, I tell them to cut down, don't eat so much. Food is expensive today and you don't want to get too fat or you will get into trouble in school for going against government policy. I wash their clothes for them. I do the ironing for them. I remind their father to give them pocket money. What else can I do? I can't understand all the things that they are learning in school now. And yet, everybody says that the influences on them now, where their schoolwork is concerned, is so important!

JOHN

My mother worried about me so much that sometimes I was afraid she would be disappointed if there Wasn't something wrong with me.  
Sometimes I think back and I don't really believe that I was lonely because I was fat. In fact, I think that maybe I was fat so that I would have an excuse for being lonely...

NICK

Some people build up such strong shells of good impressions around themselves that to a casual observer like you or me... they don't look lonely at all.  
But they are.  
Because, inside that intricately-formed, calcium-rich shell--hidden, protected, preserved, isolated--there beats the heart of a lonely oyster...

SENG

Involved in rituals, occupied by ceremonies...

JOHN

To keep alive, to keep the water flowing by, to keep the time passing...

NICK

Eating to survive is a ritual.

*[Their movements lead into the wheeling of shopping carts]*

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*[The three of them meet in the supermarket, beneath a sign that reads:  
**Oysters! Special Offer:]***

JOHN

One of the easiest places to recognise a lonely man is in the supermarket: he is the one who is shopping alone.

NICK

He is the one who's shopping alone and looks as though he knows what he is doing. He buys instant noodles, microwave meals, canned ready-to-heat soups...

SENG

Actually I happen to be a very good cook, so all these generalizations are not very accurate.

Hmmm a can of Asparagus soup... Szechuan stir-fry ready-pack... frozen Apricot Danish... and a tin of cashew nuts to go with that before-dinner drink. It's very important not to let go of these little civilised rituals. And besides, I like cashew nuts.

JOHN

Once you're part of a legitimate double unit, the woman's usually the one who does the food shopping... and the cooking...

NICK

No wonder you're still single!

SENG

Do you know what the secret is? No matter what I defrost for dinner, I always added a fine dusting of paprika... makes all the difference. Welcome to the world of fine dining.

NICK

The problem with spending too much time in the supermarket aisles is that after a while, the people there begin to look familiar to you, in a surreal sort of way. As though you once knew them... in a previous life... You look familiar...

SENG

Of course we've met. You ran your trolley into mine in Aisle 7, between the

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barbecue hot shots and the kitty litter. Excuse me.

NICK

No... I wasn't talking to—

JOHN

You were talking to me. And I... I heard you. Of course I heard you. I am the one who's always been the closest to you, who's always been the tenderest spot in your heart...

SENG

Wait! Don't believe everything that some stranger says to you in the middle of the supermarket. Just because Supermarket Shopping is the top of the list of Singaporeans favourite recreational activities with their families doesn't mean that it's Safe...

Have you ever thought about what kind of subliminal messages they are broadcasting at us over under cover of that soundtrack?

JOHN

You don't remember me?

NICK

You can't be... no, no, no... you can't be... but you Are, aren't you? You are! Spot! My long-lost dog! Spot!

SENG

Spot? Did you say, `Spot'?

JOHN

Woof?

*[joyful three-way reunion]*

SENG

Spot! But I haven't seen you since you--since she—

NICK

Good dog, Spot! Good dog!

SENG

Wait... I can just barely manage to accept the fact that this is my long-lost best

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friend, Spot. But then who are you? How do you know my dog?

NICK

I am the child of the woman you never married... the son that you never had...

SENG

And what's that you have in your bag?

NICK

Just some baggage from the past. Never mind. May I call you `Dad'?

SENG

I love happy endings...

NICK

I love cashew nuts...

JOHN

Unfortunately, this is one of the happy reunion scenes that will never be... because of the cruel, heartless and meaningless laws forbidding animals like *Moi* from supermarkets.

JOHN

You don't remember me?

NICK

You can't be... no, no, no... you can't be...

No. I suppose you're no...

*[NICK turns and walks away]*

SENG

You can tell a lonely man by the slump in his shoulders. In pseudo-confidence in his manner. You know his confidence is pseudo because there's always that certain trembling in his lips that are too ready and yet too uncertain to smile--because there's always that thickness in his throat...

*[NICK, standing nearby, clears his throat self-consciously]*

SENG

Because there's always a certain, too-carefully-dressed air about him. A man who's got somebody to go home to, whom he's gone home to before, whom

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he's been Welcomed home by before, never quite achieves the same tense level of perfect polish...

JOHN

Look at him. [*of SENG*] Standing there judging people. Just because he's got a cart full of raw vegetables and raw fruits and tofu and soya supplement and no cholesterol rice cakes.

He thinks that somehow that makes him superior to people like me, who've only got—

[*NICK's cart bumps into his*]

JOHN

Hey!

NICK

[*Looking into JOHNSON's trolley*] Dogfood! You've got a cart full of dog food! Sorry. My fault. Are you all right? You've got a lot of dogs at home, have you? Or just one very hungry one!

JOHN

No dogs.

NICK

I suppose your cats eat dog food, do they?

JOHN

No cats.

[*SENG has been pushing his trolley closer*]

NICK

Then why... You're not going to... you don't...

JOHN

[*not looking at NICK*] When I come to a supermarket I have this compulsion to buy food. That I will eat when I get home. So when this happens, I fill up my cart with dog food. Then when I get home I won't eat it. Or if I do eat it, at least it's good for me. [*shrugs*] I mean, if it keeps the dogs healthy...

NICK

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I'm sorry. Of course it's none of my business.

SENG

For someone who doesn't want to get involved you get in the way a lot, don't you?

NICK

Me? I do? You're talking to me?

SENG

I know you. The wimp from the gym. I've seen you there, haven't I?

NICK

No! I mean... Yes! If you say so... I mean, what do you want me to say?

SENG

Say nothing. Just stay out of my way. It's difficult enough focusing on maintaining my physique without all you weedy little fellows interrupting!

JOHN

Wait a minute.

SENG

[*gestures `Me`?*]

JOHN

You cannot just talk to people like that one.

SENG

[*gestures `Oh`?*]

NICK

Hey, it's all right.

JOHN

No. It's not all right.

SENG

No. It's not all right. Just because I'm not willing to settle for the same level of miserable mediocrity that the rest of you live your miserable lives under, you resent me and point your titchy little fingers at me... well, Tough. Unlike you, I am not lonely. I am merely Alone. By choice.

And by the way, wimp, you left this behind.

[*SENG tosses bag to NICHOLAS*]

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NICK

My bag!

[*JOHNSON draws his sword. Go into final Chinese Opera sequence*]

JOHN

So. My search has come to an end.

SENG

It has? We'll see about--Hey! There's asparagus soup all over my sword!

JOHN

My search has come to an end. And now I have found the object of my quest,  
I must destroy it!

NICK

Hey, wait a minute. There's no pearl in this bag, you know... only a bunch of  
old shells... look!

JOHN

You stupid mortals have no idea what power lies within you--

SENG

[*still struggling with sword*] Call him fat once, just once, three or four hundred  
years ago, and the man holds a grudge all this time!

NICK

Wait, wait, can't we talk about this reasonably? Rationally? No you can't have  
the bag--I've already shown you there's nothing in it!

JOHN

He who resists will be destroyed! He who yields will be crushed.

NICK

What would you do, given a choice like that?

SENG

[*finally getting his sword out*] Ah!

Ahhhhhh-- [*they fight*]

NICK

Stop--wait! Wait! Stop--

SENG

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Don't stop us now--I'm winning...

[*JOHNSON manages to pin SENG ONN down*]

SENG

All right, let's listen to what this man wants to say to us, all right?

JOHN

He who hesitates will be--

NICK

What is it that you're both after? You talk about the Shining Pearl... what Shining Pearl? Where is it? What is it?

JOHN

Fight first. Talk later.

NICK

No. Seriously. Wait. Just one moment more. Then you two can go on killing each other. Look, I know that we don't exactly have a lot in common. But you're the only people on stage with me right now and hey--I need you guys around.

SENG

We are surrounded by unseen forces of good and evil, doing battle for supremacy even as we speak!

JOHN

[*bringing his sword down on SENG ONN*] Hiiiya---

NICK

[*reaching out and taking his sword*] Stop.

JOHN

[*To SENG ONN*] Did you see that? Did you see what he did?

NICK

Listen to me. Whether you know it or not, we are all after the same thing.

SENG

Not really what--what he wants to do is destroy the--

NICK

Even if we try to go about it in different ways, in the end the unspoken goal is

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the same. You don't even know what the Pearl is, and yet you are searching for it. Why? You don't know what the Pearl is and yet you are out to destroy it. Why?

JOHN

Destroy. Yes, destroy! Destroy it!

NICK

The surest way for you to destroy the Shining Pearl would be for you to take this [*taking sword*] and run it through your body.

And [*To SENG ONN*] the best way for you to find the Pearl... is by doing... the same.

[*Both SENG ONN and JOHNSON stand aside, watching NICHOLAS*]

NICK

Because the death of the oyster destroys the Pearl... but at the same time, only the death of the oyster can bring forth the Pearl in all its splendour.

[*Light change*]

JOHN

Six lonely oysters, very much alive

One hitched on an octopus, and then there were five

SENG

Five lonely oysters, caught sight of a distant shore

An oyster-drill de-gutted one, and then there were four

NICK

Four lonely oysters, free in the sea

One got trapped in a fishing net and then there were three

JOHN

Three lonely oysters, feeling rather blue

One stopped fibrillating and starved to death... and then there were two.

SENG

Two lonely oysters, decided to have some fun

One went off to make oyster-lets, and then there was one.

NICK

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One lonely oyster. Swallowed grit in the stormy sea. [*great discomfort... pearl!*]  
If you know the girl who wears its pearl... Take a moment, to remember... Me.

ALL

Remember the lonely oyster

THE END

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