

THE STARTLING TRUTHS OF OLD WORLD SPARROWS


By FIONA EVANS

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1 x 45' Wire, Radio 3

CHARACTERS

RHODA..... Sydney Wade
STAN..... Daniel Kerr
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RHODA'S BEDROOM. MORNING.

RHODA IS IN BED

RHODA

(Quietly like a prayer) Please God, don't let it happen today or tomorrow, don't let it happen in front of my children, or Faye, or Millie or William. Please God, don't let this unexploded bomb go off.

FX: RHODA STIRS IN BED.

My daughter asked me the other day, 'What's the best thing about getting old?' I said 'nothing,' she said 'nothing?' I said 'nothing.' There's not one good thing about getting old, and I'm 80 tomorrow!

STAN'S KITCHEN. DAY.

STAN IS LOCKING AND UNLOCKING THE DOOR IN THE KITCHEN, RATTLING THE WINDOWS – CHECKING THEY'RE LOCKED.

STAN

I used to do this every night... but now I do it through the day as well. Windows, doors, everything's locked...you don't want to chance it - somebody breaking in - with just me and the wife here... and with me as old as I am... I've got a cricket bat, in the hallway and Oh and I'd use it. I might be 80, but I'd take them on. To protect the wife. I'm not frightened of any man. A lot of women I'm frightened of (LAUGHS).

RON'S LIVING ROOM. DAY.

RON

I knew it was going to be a bad day when the carer got me out of the wrong side of bed. She was new. Kept calling me Tom. I said 'it's Ron.' My memory's shot, but I can still remember my own name.

Normally I wouldn't say anything, I'm careful about offending them. I'm reliant on them aren't I, because of the stroke.

I can't walk. I live on my own and my worst fear is if they didn't turn up. I'd just be stuck here in this chair forever.

RHODA'S BEDROOM. DAY

RHODA

My daughters and my grand-daughter want to celebrate. I mean what's to celebrate? When you get to 80 you're on the last lap aren't you? Yes, I'm lucky that my bones are old, I'm lucky but then again I'm pissed off - I'd rather be 60. I feel quite envious when I look at younger people. And I get upset when I see my great-grandchildren, Millie and William, who are 7 and 3... and I think I'm not going to know them for very much longer.

FX – RHODA GETS UP AND OPENS THE CURTAINS

Oh hell. It's snowed! I won't be able to get my paper now. And what about the party? My girls and everyone are travelling up from all over the country... I hate them driving in the snow. Please God protect them on the roads, please let them be alright. Please don't let it burst today, tomorrow.....

I've got an aneurism in my aorta, and my heart surgeon thinks it would be very unwise to operate. The surgery would take 11 hours and he doesn't think that I would survive, so that is sickening, really sickening.

If it pops – that's it. I could be dead in three minutes.

RON'S LIVING ROOM. DAY.

RON

They're not the same carers all the time. It's a different one that comes lunchtime from the one that came at breakfast.

She left in a hurry this morning. Got an important phone call or something. Left me here, sitting looking out of the window. Not in my usual position facing the TV. Mind wouldn't make much difference if she had, because she forgot to switch it on.

STAN'S KITCHEN. DAY

HE'S MAKING CUP OF TEA

The wife, Lily, she's my second wife, she's had two strokes you know, she can't speak, can't read, write, knit she can't do anything like that, and it gets to her, but if you love your wife, you married for better or worse didn't you?

DOG BARKS.

Angel, we bought her at Christmas, hence the name, she's ten. Oh I couldn't live without her. I couldn't...

DOG BARKS.

Oh I can hear somebody. (HE STRAINS TO LISTEN).

RHODA:

I've got this terrible, terrible fear that I've had all my life – and never ever, ever has it gone away – that when I die I would be shoved in a drawer, in a cold storage drawer in a morgue and I would wake up.

And that absolutely terrifies me. (MUMBLES TO HERSELF) Come on Rhoda, go make yourself a coffee.

STAN:

She makes out she's a guard dog, but she'd probably roll over and get her tummy tickled.

STARTS TO MAKE HIMSELF A CUP OF TEA

Me grandmother always said, it's the living you've got to be scared of not the dead.

I lost me first wife. I was a lorry driver by trade but this chap, he heard iz singing. And he says 'You've got a fantastic voice Mr Boyd, would you like a job?' Mario Lanza, he was my idol.

September 19...1975. I was singing at this big club, the Piccadilly, I went down a storm, 'You'll Never Walk Alone,' it brought the house down. And well, then I found out, they told me - she'd been killed - in a car accident, the first wife. Tore my world apart. I never sang a note after that, not one note.

And then I met Lily.

THERE'S AN ALMIGHTY BANG – AT POSSIBLY THE UPSTAIRS WINDOW

What the? What the hell was that? The wife's asleep.

HE UNLOCKS THE BACK DOOR AND GOES OUTSIDE –

Oi!!

RON:

I used to love playing in the snow. And when it turned to ice we'd make slides and skid on it. I always liked being outside. But now every day the same routine, different carers.

STAN:

Kids. Snowballs. They can't half move.

HE GOES BACK INSIDE – LOCKS THE DOOR. UNLOCKS IT AND LOCKS IT.

Still, better us than the old fella in the bungalow. Poor sod, can't do anything for himself. This type of thing would bother him, you know, pray on his mind.

RHODA'S HALLWAY. DAY.

WE HEAR RHODA WALKING DOWN STAIRS.

You don't have to go to work, that's a good thing about being 80. I do feel a bit proud. I'm looking forward to having all the family come and see me – God willing, if this snow stops. I can remember being quite upset when I was 50. You think 'oh my God, I'm getting old' and you're not. You're not old at 50, you're not old at 60, you're not really old at 70.

And now - there's so many things I can't do.

(GOES INTO THE LIVING ROOM)

This aneurism's over 6cm's. A ticking time-bomb. What's going to happen when it bursts? Where's the blood going to go? How am I going to feel? Is it quick? It never goes away. It's a damn nuisance.

Everything will go on and that'll be the end of it. I just won't exist anymore.

STAN'S KITCHEN. DAY.

LILY KNOCKS ON THE FLOOR FROM THE BEDROOM.

(SHOUTS UP) Aye, I'll put the kettle on. She's laid up with the flu. It's usually her waiting on me.

I'm supposed to take it easy. You see I've had seven heart attacks. They're horrible... you'd just think someone had their fingers in between your ribs, and they're pulling your chest apart, and it's horrific. And you think you're gonna go you know.

I've had the triple bypass. I went to the doctor, and there's a big screen, and you're lying there and he says 'you'll feel a little tingling, don't worry about it, it's nothing, watch the screen, see the black ink... there, you've got three blocked arteries, one two, three.' They wouldn't put stents in, too dodgy, there was so much damage, the doctor told iz, 'If I bust that vein you've gone.

RHODA:

FX RHODA OPENS THE LIVING ROOM CURTAINS.

Oh, look at him. On the fence waiting for me. Good morning, sparrow. He's never scared. When I feed them, he's the only one that comes really close. They rely on me, especially in the winter.... Oh dear, I've woken up in a funny mood.

FX - RHODA OPENS CIGARETTE BOX.

Oh great!

SCREWS UP BOX.

FX RHODA RINGS DAWN.

Hello, hello Dawn - are you there? It's Rhoda. I'm really stuck. I've not got any cigarettes and just wondered... if you'd pop to the shop. It's laid so heavy. I was hoping I might catch you. I've run out completely. Alright then bye love. Ring me as soon as you get this.

HANGS UP.

She won't be long. She's a very good neighbour – maybe she's gone to check on old Ron. I shouldn't moan – he hardly ever gets out.

I hope they're not driving in this. Look at it. It must be a foot high. They're always babies, your children, no matter what age. You feel frightened something's going to happen to them.

When I die, I want the funeral directors to pick me up and take me down to their....their little room, where you lie on a bed with your head on a pillow. My daughter died and she was in this room and she was laid on the bed, a cover over her. I want it to be the same.

STAN:

See this lump just next to me collar, that's a defibrillator in a pacemaker. There's only twenty eight people in the country got these.

... I said 'doctor, just out of curiosity,' because I like to know what's going off you know, I said 'if I had a really bad heart attack, would that defibrillator kick start me heart again?' 'Oh, don't get it mixed up with God Mr Boyd'. He said 'no it won't.'

I said 'what does it cost for one of these?' he said 'this machine you've got in here is twenty five thousand pounds. I says 'You're joking,' he says, 'No I'm not.'

When you die, they take it out and wash it, sterilise it or whatever and they put it in someone else.

FX HEARS A NOISE OUTSIDE –

What was that? Is it those bairns again? I was working down the pit at their age. Did you hear that?

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. DAY

My daughter, Carol died nearly five years ago of motor neurone disease. And it's not just the grief that's hard, you have the guilt to deal with. And the guilt, that doesn't ever go away. I spent my 76TH birthday with Carol we were all sat round the bed and I'm celebrating an age that she would never reach. It was awful. She was only 47, and I was enjoying opening presents.

I spent the last night with her and you don't know, of course you don't know... But sitting with a daughter that's dying... you know motor neurone's terrible they're quite normal, they're not in any pain, they're sitting up and they're having a drink, and they're smoking, and they're watching TV. And sometimes you can't believe that you're going to lose them. She wasn't feeling well that day. I should've shown more tenderness, ... been more upset. Asked why she didn't feel very well. What was wrong. But I didn't. Been there since 2 o'clock and it was half past 9 and the only chair in the room that I had to sit on was a dining-room chair... I was so tired and I was just dying to go home.

Michael, my grandson, rang me the next morning at quarter past 5 to tell me his mum wasn't very well. It sounds awful now – but I was pleased, pleased they'd phoned me. I couldn't wait to get up there to give her a hug.

My son-in-law picked me up and he didn't say anything. And it's 5 minutes away, maybe less in a car. And when I saw the ambulance, I couldn't believe it. I said to my son-in-law 'what's the ambulance doing?' And then he said 'I think Carol's had a cardiac arrest'. I met the ambulance man coming out and he said

‘Are you– Who are you?’ and I said ‘I’m her mum’. And he said ‘I’m sorry she’s gone’.

For a mother to lose a child, it’s the worst thing that can happen to you. When that child dies... Life is never, ever the same. Ever.

RON’S LIVING ROOM

RON

PHONE RINGS.

Oh no! The stupid girl didn’t give me the phone. She’s supposed to give me the phone, it’s for emergencies. She just left. Nowt you can do about it now Ron, just have to sit and wait ‘til they come at dinner time.

It’s just personality isn’t it? Some are very good. Some do the bare minimum. It’s as simple as that. Like Mick is very, very good. John, you have to be careful what you say, because he thinks you’re being funny.

No good standing on dignity. I just accept what I’m given and that’s it.

RHODA’S LIVING ROOM. DAY.

RHODA

RHODA’S ON THE PHONE, LEAVING A MESSAGE...

Faye darling, it’s nan. When you get this message can you call me? It’s snowed really heavily here and I’ve checked the weather forecast and it’s an Amber Warning. I can’t get hold of your aunts. I don’t want you all driving over here in bad weather. It doesn’t matter about the party tomorrow. Alright, darling, call me.

RON:

You should see the state of my legs; scabs and bruises where they've wheeled me to the bed and caught me knees on the frame, or bashed into the door. I wouldn't say they're rough. It's just a facet of life they're not so used to. I never argue because I'm afraid of them saying, 'well sod it then, I won't come anymore.'

Just stare out of the window Ron and sit it out. Maybe watch the sparrows. Black little darts in all this white.

RHODA:

(PACING)

You see when you lose a child. You know it can happen again. Oh what's wrong with me this morning? I've got a funny feeling, a dread. A terrible...

Oh god, I hope they're not driving, I hope I didn't distract them, it only takes a split second, I'd never forgive myself... It's going to be me, I won't see 80. I know I won't. I know it. Oh stop it Rhoda! Stop it! , it's because you can't get out, and you need a cigarette.

(STARTS TO PACE AGAIN) Oh God, oh God, oh dear God – to say I'm not religious – I do a lot of praying to a man called God. Come on deep breaths. (HER BREATH IS QUITE HEAVY)

Carol was very spiritual. She'd talked to a Catholic priest who'd visited one of her patients. And he told her that hell was on earth, with all the terrible things that God couldn't do anything about, and heaven was a place that was full of peace and love. And that's what Carol believed.

(BREATHING OUT AND COUNTING) Oh, come on Rhoda..... 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...

RON'S LIVING ROOM. DAY

RON

Mick said I'd got an invite through the door, an 80th. I don't even know a Rhoda. I can say "Hello" to neighbours but that's all. Well, Stan – he's alright. I can't have a conversation with him because I don't have anything to talk about. I've got more in common with his little dog.

I'm a prisoner now. I lead a life of nothing.

That snow's getting deep. The carer's gonna need a set of skis to get through that. I don't like not having my phone.

STAN'S KITCHEN. DAY.

DOG WHINES.

STAN

What's the matter baby? Do you want to go out? She doesn't like the snow, especially when it's deep. With her being so small. Poor thing...

STAN UNLOCKS AND OPENS THE BACK DOOR

Her belly gets wet. Go on, go out for a wee.

KIDS LAUGHING. A WHEELY BIN IS KICKED OVER. THE KIDS CALL HIM NAMES
STAN GOES OUTSIDE. SHOUTING AFTER THEM.

KIDS RUN OFF.

Oi! What do you think you're doing? Oi... Don't you come near my house again, do you hear me?

Bloody snow! Can't run in this can I?

What shall I do? I'll clear the path. That way I can run after 'em next time.

RHODA'S HALL. DAY.

RHODA

Where the hell is Dawn with my ciggies? (OPENS FRONT DOOR)

(THE KIDS ARE RUNNING FROM STAN'S CHANTING DISTANTLY)

Look at that snow. That must be what 2ft. Oh hello sparrow, wait a minute, wait a minute.

GOES INTO KITCHEN – SHE STARTS TO GET BREAD OUT, CUTTING AND WETTING IT.

I know this sounds stupid, but they're like part of my family since Carol died, I didn't bother with them before. She only lived round the corner, so I'd see her most days. But now I feed them every day. Bread's fine if you soften it, cut into chunks, wet it with some warm water.

You know I remember my mum feeding me a chocolate bar at 2 o'clock in the morning. I was 8, and she was a single mum and she had a night job at a dance hall at the Mecca in Leeds where she worked behind a kiosk. (LEAVES THE KITCHEN INTO THE HALL- OPENS FRONT DOOR) You see there he is, my sparrow. (THROWS THE BREAD ONTO THE LAWN)

That's it. Soon as I shut the door all the others will swoop down, like the Hitchcock film.

SHUTS DOOR.

RON'S LIVING ROOM. DAY.

RON

They're late, usually here by one. One thirty at the very latest. And I can't ring anybody because the damn phone is at the other side of the room. What am I going to do? I'm hungry. Good job I don't need the loo. They just take my trousers down. The worst part is doing a poo and fitting it into the times they're here. And the carers are mostly women and don't want to put me on

the toilet. They say, 'Oh, wait until the next carer comes.' Or wait till somebody comes to lift you into bed when it's bedtime.

Often, after they're left, that's when I want to go... I tried once and I fell over and there I stayed until I could get somebody to come.

I don't do those things anymore. Well I can't because I haven't got the strength to move. And now I haven't even got my phone!

I'd like to have just one carer that you got to know, but that's not possible... Maybe they haven't turned up because of the macaroni? I mean she asked me what I thought, I wasn't rude, just said I'd rather not have it again.

I don't live. I just exist... I don't want to go in a home. Where's my dinner? Where are they?

RHODA'S LIVING . DAY.

RHODA'S STIRRING A COFFEE

RHODA

I feel like the walls are closing in. Not being able to get out, you know. I keep thinking about my mum for some reason. I was 10 when she died, and we were very, very, very poor... And my Grandma did her best... but she never kissed me or cuddled me. That was because her daughter had gotten pregnant and wasn't married, and she was terrified that I'd bring the same shame on her.

My mum was in the hospital about a month before she died, she had TB, and she was begging my grandma to see us. Grandma asked the ward sister if we could just stand in the doorway and wave to mum and the sister got quite cross saying, 'No. No children allowed. How dare you bring them in here?' And it must've been awful for my mum knowing that we were just outside the door and she couldn't see us.

She was in the hospital for about a month before she died. It was a Sunday...

and my grandma said 'you'll have to see to him because I'm visiting mama.' My brother was 5 and I was 10, and I made fairy buns and jam and treacle

sandwiches, and when she came back I was telling Terry off for something, and my grandma came in and she sat in the chair at the end of the table and I went, 'How's mama?' and she went 'She's died'. And I didn't answer her. And when I look back she must have hated me – no wonder she couldn't love me. I didn't say anything, I just started clearing the plates away, and getting Terry ready for bed. And when I put him to bed she said had I told him, and I said 'no,' and she said, 'Well tell him first thing in the morning.' And I went to bed, and next morning I said 'come and sit on my knee,' and he laughed but he jumped up. And I said 'Mama's gone to heaven with the angels' and he went, 'Ohh'. ...

I can remember the funeral. A woman from the church came and said 'the children can come to my house and stay with me until the funeral service is over.' And she was a really old – I mean to me she looked about a 100 to me, an old lady in a long black dress and a big black hat. And we drove to this horrible, big, dark house, and we sat on a settee. And we just sat holding hands for what seemed like hours and hours. And when we got home all these Uncles and Aunts, we'd never met before– stood in the sitting room talking to grandma and they completely ignored me and Terry, they never even turned round and said hello. They were talking about their children. I can remember one of them saying, 'Oh, she loves dancing, she's always dancing.' And they were laughing, on the day of me mum's funeral.

I think these panic attacks started after my mum died. I've had funny turns for the last 70 odd years.

STAN'S GARDEN. DAY.

STAN IS MOVING SNOW WITH A SNOW SHOVEL, HE'S VERY OUT OF BREATH

STAN

Well if I don't do it no one else will.

I love being out in the garden in the summer, heaven, just sitting you know, watching the birds. Rhoda, across the road, she's mad about the birds. Talks to

them. Has names for them. I'm sure I heard her call one of 'em Carol the other day! Each to their own. Live and let live that's my motto.

DIGS ON A BIT

And if those lads come back... I'm ready for 'em now.

PHONE RINGS

Bugger! The wife's having a nap.

STAN RUSHES, AS FAST HE CAN, TO THE PHONE AND ANSWERS IT.

Hello... Yes, speaking... what do you mean? Well nothing much, just shovelling a bit of snow... the dog wouldn't go out see, so I... OK, OK, yes, nurse. Yes. Yes. I will. Ok. Bye.

PUTS PHONE DOWN

Big brother. Well sister. That big box with the green light, on the floor. That's a monitor and it's hooked up to the hospital. And everywhere I go I'm monitored. Apparently I'm over doing it. I've got to relax for the rest of the day. Relax! The boxing's on later. Me heart'll be going ten to the dozen...

LETTER BOX OPENS AND SLAMS SHUT, DOORBELL RINGS REPEATEDLY...

Who the hell's that...?

Alright. Alright I'm coming.

RHODA'S KITCHEN. DAY.

RHODA STRUGLES TO GET THE TOP OFF A BOTTLE OF POP.

RHODA

Thanks God, thanks a lot! Thanks for inventing plastic bottles I can't open!

SHE THROWS THE BOTTLE DOWN IN FRUSTRATION.

I've got arthritis in my hands, my knees, and my back. Over the past 10 years my body's gone to pot! When I was 70, I used to cycle to Wetherby. Cycle! I can hardly walk now.

What if I can't get to the hospital on Monday? I go every month. I've got fluid behind my eyes, and I have, erm, a hypodermic needle in each eye, which is very unpleasant and very sore. I dread going, but I know I'm lucky to have it because if it wasn't available I would be blind in a few months. So it's worth the pain and it's worth the fear.

It's not good. The loneliness is not good. It's ok if somebody's coming to see you or you're going out. It's when you get up and you know that you're not going to see anybody all day long.

I do feel sorry for that old man Ron.

STAN'S FRONT DOOR TO LIVING ROOM

STAN

There was nobody there, do they think they're being funny? Relax the hospital said said, sit down and relax. How can I relax when I've got kids pestering me? When I was younger. I'd take on anyone, no fear.

I was the eldest of four lads, see, me mother kept iz off school to do the housework and that.

She used to come back in from the pub, and put soot on her cheeks, so me dad, who'd been working late, he'd think she'd been doing the housework. When it was me.

There was one Friday night... me mam had got a bit too much to drink and she come in and she broke the brush shank over my back. I was only 13. I hadn't cleaned up properly or something... and her sister Nancy, comes in and she was dead scared of... coz my mam was a nasty woman, me mam never hit you with her hand you know, she'd punch you with her fist. So Nancy runs to the bottom of the road, where me grandma lived and she said 'Mother, she's killin' our little Stan.' So me grandmother comes up, she got a hold of me, thumped me mother, knocked her out cold and I lived with me Grandma after that.

Everyone knew me grandmother, she was a money lender. She must have been thirty stone, and I had to put her stockings on for her. I could only get them up to her knee, they wouldn't go... coz with her legs being as big, so we had to twist them and tie a knot in them to keep them there. ...And she had a whalebone corset.

Well, the lace was dead long and I had to start at the top, pulling, and she'd say... 'tighter Stan' and I had to work me way to the bottom, and then when I got to the bottom I had to lean back, ...I was younger then, I could lift me leg up. In the pit of her back, pull her and I mean really pull coz there was a lot of fat, and she used to say (DEEP BREATH) 'come on Stan keep going. And every time she was breathing in I'd pull, pull, pull, 'that's it Stan,' tie it, up.

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. DAY.

RHODA

I know I'm so very lucky to have a family that care for me. I don't know what I'd do without my daughters. They take me to the hospital, and come home and Hoover the whole house, and I hate it, hate they have to do it all for me. And I've got a granddaughter that I adore, Faye. I think I love her so much because she's lost her mum and I feel so protective about her and... I don't really want anything to happen to me 'til she's got a baby of her own, because when you've got a baby of your own – you're baby's the most important thing in your life. And she will miss me, but she'll cope because her child's there. Please God let them be alright in this snow. Can you imagine – they have an accident because they're travelling to my birthday?

RON'S LIVING ROOM. DAY

RON

HE SHIFTS ON CHAIR AND THE BLANKET FALLS.

Damn blanket.

HE STRAINS TO BEND AND PICK IT UP, BUT CAN'T REACH.

Oh... no chance.

Arrh well, with a bit of luck I'll freeze to death! You hear stories don't you of people who've been drunk and walked home, got lost or whatever and just got so tired and curled up and gone to sleep – in the morning, frozen solid.

Me and Joan, we were married just a few years short of 25 I think. I was very much in love with Joan.

It's terrible, but I can't even remember what she died of...

Once you die, I think you just disappear. I neither believe or disbelieve in God, I'm agnostic. Who knows about heaven and hell, all I can tell you is that I'm already in purgatory. And I'm cold and I'm hungry, and where the hell are they? What am I going to do?

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. DAY

RHODA

I didn't have a happy marriage and it's bloody awful because the person I was married to was a good man and I loved him but I wasn't in love with him. And because of the unhappiness, I began to drink and it's a very slippery slope. You'll end up drinking a whole bottle of whisky a day. And you'll have to cope with being an alcoholic. But 27 years ago I went into a detox clinic and you do go through a nightmare, but I've never had a drink since.

I'm not sure about my funeral, I've got this idea that – rather than have all my family sat, really fed up in a church that I've never visited – I thought that if they just send me to the crematorium, there's a Salvation Army chaplain that I really like and he could say a few words over me before they push me into the furnace... I don't know. I'd like 'That's Life' played by Frank Sinatra. I love it, I just love it. It's just so true, it's so true of my life.

STAN'S LIVING ROOM. LATE AFTERNOON.

FX CRACKLE AS LIGHTS FLICKER ON AND OFF

The light's flickering like a fire. The wife hates out like that. She thinks it's a ghost. I say rubbish, it's dodgy electrics that's what it is.

LIGHTS CRACKLE AGAIN AND THE DOG STARTS WHINING.

Don't you start. That's all I need, a psychic dog. Mind the wife reckons they're sensitive to the spirits.

I'm a great believer in... you know when you're born, your life is mapped out for you. I'll tell you about that... We were at a wedding reception, me and the first wife at this club or whatever, where you get the food, and there was a clairvoyant in there and he was going around. Anyways, he went up to my brother's wife, Mary, and said 'would you like...?' and she said 'no, no, no, no.' But he touched Mary on the shoulder, and he looked over at the other side of the room there was my wife, and he says to Mary, 'do you know that lady there?' and he says 'she's going to get killed in a car accident.' Honest. True. That is the gospel. And I never knew this until 12 years ago. That's when they told me.

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM

RHODA

Maybe I'm being punished. Maybe that's why I've got an aneurism and this eye trouble. Maybe that's why I'm going to be alone on my birthday, with no cigarettes, in a tomb of snow.

RHODA IS GETTING SHORT OF BREATH, SHE'S STARTING TO HAVE A PANIC ATTACK OVER...

What if they've had an accident, what if... I couldn't bear to lose them...

FX – RHODA FUMBLES THROUGH CDS.

Where is he? Where's Frank? Where's me Frank cd?... (SINGING) That's life, that's what all the people say... dah dah dah dah dah dee dah dah dah...

FX SOUND OF RAKING THROUGH A BIN.

The sky's grey – looks so gloomy

RON'S LIVING ROOM. LATE AFTERNOON.

RON

CLOCK CHIMES SEVEN

It's dark, it's freezing, I'm starving hungry and I'm dying for the loo...

I can't do anything. Can't even write... write my own name.

They didn't come at lunch, they didn't come at 3. They're not coming at tea are they?

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

RHODA

It's dark now, they always phone in bad weather.

RON'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

RON

I'm so cold. And these trousers are damp. It'll be the snow. They can't get through because of the snow? That's no excuse. The Russian's don't let a bit of snow stop them.

I know, I went to Leningrad through work. I was an Engineer for gas turbines. Head of department, I had to give a paper or something to a Russian society. I remember walking through snow drifts to get on an old propeller plane. I

thought my time's up. It was like flying in the arc. My younger self wouldn't recognise me now.

Maybe it's a good thing that we don't know where life is going to lead us.

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

RHODA IS LEAVING A MESSAGE FOR LOU

Lou I'm worried sick, if you don't call back in the next ten minutes I'll be calling round the hospital, or the police.

HANGS UP

RON'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

RON

SOUND OF CAR PULLING UP.

(HOPEFUL) Is this them? Have they... Is this... Hello... hello... help! Help! In here. Over here. (CRUSHED) Nobody can see me.

STAN'S KITCHEN. NIGHT.

STAN

THE KETTLE IS ON.

I went through hell, I did, after the first wife died. I did, I did, but I got through it, and then I met Lily - and we've got a great life.

KETTLE CUTS OUT, ALL THE ELECTRICITY GOES OFF.

Bloody hell, what oh... shit. I knew those electrics were dodgy. Divn't panic son. Think. Where did I put that bloody torch...?

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

LIGHTS HAVE GONE OUT

RHODA

I can't see. Oh no, please God, no. Not my sight, not my eyes... I can't be... not like... the morgue... I can't see! The moon! I can see the moon. ... I need help! Please heart stop pounding, stop, count to... one, two, three, phone, where's the bloody phone!

RHODA SCRAMBLES IN THE DARK FOR THE PHONE.

STAN'S KITCHEN. NIGHT.

STAN

HE STANDS ON THE DOG, IT YELPS.

Sorry Angel, sorry baby, come here.

I hope the wife doesn't wake up in this, she'll have a bloody heart attack. Oh god, I don't want her falling down the stairs. It's in here somewhere.

FX STAN FIND MATCHES, FUMBLES AND STRIKES ONE.

Arh that's better..., there it is.

RHODA'S KITCHEN. NIGHT

RHODA

(SHORT OF BREATH— SHE PICKS UP THE PHONE)

Dead... it's dead... I charged it earlier didn't I. Oh God. Please God, not today, I can't be phoneless, not with the snow... I need ... stop thumping, heart please ... it's gonna burst... I know... ambulance, I need an... please God, someone, anyone, help... I don't want to die alone.

STAN'S HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

STAN IS CREEPING DOWN THE LAST FEW STAIRS WITH THE TORCH

STAN

(WHISPERED) She's still asleep. Thank God. I hope they get it sorted before she wakes up. The dark doesn't bother me. Years down the pit.

DOG STARTS YELPING.

Don't be daft Angel, there's nobody there.

DOG BARKS

Shush Angel.

SOMEONE IS TRYING TO GET IN THE BACK DOOR. DOG BARKS AGAIN.

(CALLS OUT) What? Who is it?

NO REPLY.

I said who is it?

DOOR HANDLE IS STILL BEING TRIED.

Where's the phone?

STAN SCRAMBLES FOR THE PHONE IN THE LIVING ROOM IN THE DARKNESS,
TRIES TO DIAL 999

Oh God! The phone's off... where's me bat?

DOG WHIMPERS ...

It's alright everything's going to be alright. I'll look after you. You and Lily'll be fine. I promise. (SURPRESSING NERVES) I wouldn't try anything. I've got a dog. And a cricket bat. (LOW, TO SELF) Where's the bloody bat? It's out there! It's out there!

SOMEONE'S KICKING AT THE BACK DOOR IN THE KITCHEN. BACKDOOR
WINDOW SMASHES.

(Whispers) Oh God....

RHODA'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

FX EXAGGERATED/HEIGHTENED GASPING FOR BREATH OVER...

RHODA

(AS THOUGH LOOKING AT HERSELF V/O) I'm on my knees, slumped by the armchair. I'm struggling to catch my breath, grasping at my chest. And I look so very old, so very frightened. And I'm praying, 'If this is it... please look after my children, don't let them die in the snow, keep them safe, let them find love. Give Faye her baby.'

And I can hear someone calling my name... and I'm bathed in light... and fear turns to relief... I see this vision of loveliness... reaching out to me... and I'm happy, because... she's...she's...

RON'S LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

RON

The street lights have gone out. Takes me back to when I was a kid. Blackouts. The Blitz. Always hungry. I remember walking home and the shrapnel falling from the anti-aircraft fire like raindrops on the roofs... I'm so tired... maybe I should just close my eyes. (GOES TO SLEEP)

FX. A DOOR OPENS

SUPPORT WORKER: Ron? Ron are you OK?

COMMUNITY CENTRE. NIGHT.

FX 'THAT'S LIFE' BY FRANK SINATRA PLAYS. IS IT RHODA'S FUNERAL?

RHODA

I want this playing at my funeral, not my birthday!

FX LAUGHTER ALL ROUND

Thank you all for being here tonight. I'm so glad that you made it, I'm so glad that I made it!

FX MORE LAUGHTER

80 eh? Who'da thought. Thanks Faye, I want to kiss you. I want to get up and kiss each and every one of you. Because I am so lucky. And you might not realise it, but you're lucky too. And I'm not going to rabble on. I'd just like to give you one bit of advice, and this will probably make people sick, but... oh... life is so short, and it goes so quickly - try not to waste it, try to enjoy each day, and whatever comes up that's not nice, just think, well I'm alive and it will pass, it will pass. That's life. That is life.

GUESTS CLAP

FX – MUSIC - THAT'S LIFE – FRANK SINATRA