

HONEY I'M HOME

A short play in three acts by Brook A. Bond

Posted on BrookBondTeabox.com

Dramatis Personae

IRENE: A housewife in her forties, with a face that's built for frowning. Plastic NHS spectacles in a sickly tortoiseshell brown frame her round face, magnifying dewy eyes. A modest peach housedress clings to a rounded frame honed by decades of cycling between failed fad diets. The outfit is topped with a yellowed oilcloth apron, any pattern it may have once had faded by repeated washes.

ARTHUR: Irene's husband. A working man in the latter end of his forties, with the waistline to show for it. Greying hair clings for dear life to his head, slicked back as if windswept and matching the hue of his neatly-tailored suit. All of this clashes with the peculiar gammon pink of his complexion, which seems to flare into a life of its own when he grows impassioned.

VICTOR: The child of the aforementioned characters. A pre-teen boy still struggling through his awkward, gangly phase. Though his mousy hair is often lovingly combed by his mother, an odd cowlick sticks up on the back of his head. His pinstriped school blazer is a both oversized and overzealously starched, emphasising his gawkiness. His shorts fail to conceal perpetually skinned knees.

When? The late 1950's; the peak of domestic stuffiness.

Where? The kitchen of a modest, lower middle-class home in the London suburbs.

ACT I

It is morning in the kitchen, and pale light streams in through the blinds. IRENE stands to the left of stage at a cooker, fretting over a hissing pan of bacon and fried bread. From pride of place on a table to the right of stage, the radio gives a low murmur; the morning news, tinged by static. IRENE hums tunelessly as she works.

ARTHUR plods onto the scene from stage right, dressed ready for work. He turns off the radio as he passes it, causing IRENE to visibly stiffen as she turns to face him. He sits down at the dining table, placing a briefcase on its surface, giving an upward nod as a silent cue to his wife.

IRENE empties the contents of the pan onto a plate. She grabs a knife and fork from the worktop, before hastily putting the plate on the table. The plate lands with a clunk; perhaps a touch more aggressive than she intended.

ARTHUR: What's that about, huh?

Arthur spears a slice of bacon with his fork, before taking the knife in his other hand and noisily sawing off a morsel. He takes a bite, and then frowns.

ARTHUR: Old gristle. Like chewing a pig's ear.

IRENE: It's Friday's. I'm going to Wyatts today.

ARTHUR chews messily.

ARTHUR: *(Between mouthfuls)* Good god, no. Not Wyatts. Those... Those sausages with the little green flecks in em'. Can't be having that. Don't go to Wyatts.

IRENE: Herbs. Sage an' onion. Quite nice.

ARTHUR: Grey. Anaemic. Bloody slug meat.

The sound of little feet thundering down the stairs is heard from offstage. IRENE rolls her eyes. She produces a box of cornflakes from the cupboard, and pours some into a bowl.

IRENE: We had them for stuffing on Easter.

ARTHUR: Slug meat. You'd think we were still on the coupons.

VICTOR enters from stage right, partially ready for school, but sans blazer. His shirt collar sticks out haphazardly.

VICTOR: Mother! Have you seen my Meccano Y?

IRENE: Your what, dear?

VICTOR: It's shaped like a Y. All metal. I want it to make a slingshot.

IRENE: Where did you last have it? Retrace your steps.

VICTOR: If I knew where it was, I wouldn't be asking! Ugh!

VICTOR storms off.

ARTHUR: Tuition's due on the eighteenth, fat lot of good it's doing.

IRENE: It was your idea.

ARTHUR: Pah! Common sense. Sooner throw him to the dogs than leave him to a secondary modern.

IRENE heads for the back door as VICTOR returns, now wearing his blazer and brandishing his Meccano piece like a sword. Noticing that his mother's back is turned as she picks up the milk from the doorstep, VICTOR reaches a hand into the cornflake box, stuffing a handful of them into his mouth.

VICTOR: *(Spraying cornflakes everywhere)* It was in my pocket!

ARTHUR: That's our Einstein.

IRENE: Sit down, dear.

VICTOR sits down as IRENE pours milk into his cornflake bowl. VICTOR pouts as he is presented with his breakfast. IRENE returns to the counter, placing the greasy frying pan in the sink to soak.

VICTOR: Just cornflakes?! Father has bacon! Mother!

ARTHUR: I have a job!

VICTOR: But...

ARTHUR: But nothing! Do you know something? Thanks to me, there will be a Smiths & Sons mattress in every shop in London before the end of this quarter. I'm a working man, son. And soon, you will be. When you are, your wife will make you bacon. Isn't that right, Irene?

IRENE turns to face them.

IRENE: Huh?

ARTHUR: That Vic's woman will make him bacon.

IRENE: *(She sighs)* Yes, dear.

VICTOR: I have a woman. Mother is a woman.

ARTHUR: She's *my* woman! And the bacon isn't even good, anyway. Pig's ears. Slug meat sausages.

VICTOR: Ewww!

IRENE returns to her washing up. ARTHUR eats the last of his breakfast.

ARTHUR: Look at the time! Time you were off, my boy!

VICTOR: But...

ARTHUR: But nothing. Four hundred quid a year for that school, now go!

VICTOR briefly disappears off stage right, quickly returning with a heavy school satchel. He rushes to his mother, patting her on the back and disturbing her from her washing up.

IRENE turns to face him. VICTOR fidgets impatiently.

VICTOR: Mother!

IRENE brushes VICTOR's blazer with her hand.

IRENE: Look at you! You didn't even finish them, and you're covered in cornflake crumbs!

VICTOR: I've got games today. Rounders.

IRENE: Put your blazer on a hanger when you get changed. It'll get creased.

VICTOR: I don't wanna play rounders, I'm not good at it. Paul throws the ball too hard, and I can't hit it, and sir says... Mother, write me a note. I can stay in the library if I have a note.

ARTHUR: No, Vic! She won't. It's good for you!

IRENE unties VICTOR'S tie and straightens it out. She puts it round his neck and reties it, but he pays no attention.

VICTOR: If I do good in games, will you buy me a Beano?

ARTHUR: You're joking! School fees are due next week.

VICTOR: But!

ARTHUR: Get a paper round. I had a paper round.

VICTOR sighs. He hitches up the satchel so it rests comfortably on his shoulder, and heads for stage left.

IRENE: Have a...

VICTOR leaves.

IRENE: *(She sighs)* Good day...

ARTHUR rises from the table and heads over to his wife. He places a hand under her chin and lifts her head, scrutinising her face.

ARTHUR: Don't pout, dear. It gives you wrinkles.

IRENE: Do you begrudge it? The money?

ARTHUR: No. You're looking very pink. Puffy. We should get you to the doctor. Increase the dose of your pills.

IRENE: You don't seem happy with him. Victor. Nothing he does is right.

ARTHUR removes his hand from IRENE'S face. He turns briefly, picking up a pill bottle from the counter.

ARTHUR: *(He gives a short, sharp laugh)* Oh, my little duck! You girls have it so easy! What you must understand is that you were born with your destiny prepared for you, and you didn't have to do a thing. Us men have to find ours. Really struggle for it. But he will, in time. He has me for a father after all. Let me gripe in the meantime, huh?

ARTHUR unscrews the pill bottle, tipping one pill into the palm of his hand.

IRENE: But!

ARTHUR taps IRENE on the nose, his attempted playfulness causing her to draw back in discomfort.

ARTHUR: No! Stop worrying your pretty head and take your medicine.

ARTHUR drops the pill into IRENE'S waiting hand. IRENE closes her hand around it defensively.

IRENE: I was thinking. The pills, they... They make me feel strange. My heart goes fast, and I'm all clammy and...

ARTHUR: Nonsense. I shan't hear of it! You can't go off em', doctor's orders. And besides, don't you remember what happened last time? You were so tired you could scarcely get out of bed! Me and Vic' had to eat at the chippy every night for a week, and neither of us had our laundry done.

IRENE: I'm not... I'm not well, Arthur.

ARTHUR: You'll go off em' when the doctor says you'll go off em'. And he won't, I'm sure.

ARTHUR grabs her hand and parts her fingers. He takes the pill and pushes it into IRENE'S mouth. She resists only briefly, and then concedes.

ARTHUR: Now swallow.

IRENE: *(She gulps softly)* There.

ARTHUR: Open up, let me see. It's not in your cheek, is it?

ARTHUR takes IRENE'S face in his hands once more. She hesitantly opens her mouth, and he scrutinises it for a moment. Satisfied, ARTHUR pushes her chin to shut her mouth.

ARTHUR: Right. Good girl.

IRENE: You know I wouldn't. Don't you?

ARTHUR: Oh ho-hoh.

IRENE: *(She frowns indignantly)* You know I wouldn't! Not now that I...

ARTHUR: I know you. You are full of tricks.

ARTHUR walks over to the table and picks up his briefcase.

ARTHUR: About time I was off. You be good, now. And you have to leave dinner a bit tonight. Maybe for an hour or so? Busy time at work, I'll be late.

IRENE: Again?

ARTHUR: *(He gives her a mocking pout)* I can't help it, turtle dove. I's to be dotted. T's to be crossed. That sort of thing.

IRENE: *(She sighs)* Fine.

ARTHUR kisses IRENE on the cheek before leaving on stage left. IRENE pauses for a second, waiting for him to be out of sight before producing a handkerchief from her apron pocket and fiercely scrubbing at the spot that he kissed. She stands stock still, teeth buried in her bottom lip.

ACT II

It is midday in the kitchen. IRENE stumbles onto stage from stage left, gripping a paper shopping bag marked with the words "S.C WYATT." She puts the shopping bag on the counter and turns, eyes widening in surprise as she seems to notice the audience. She smiles apprehensively as she runs a nervous hand through her hair, dislodging a couple of curls.

IRENE: I went to Wyatt's.

IRENE unpacks the contents of the bag, putting the grocery items in place in the cupboards and fridge.

IRENE: I like Wyatt's, and *He* doesn't need to know. There's a girl at the counter on some days. A woman, rather. Very modern.

IRENE takes the empty bag in her hand, turning it so the logo is facing her. She stares at it for a second, before crinkling it up. She holds the wad of paper in both hands.

IRENE: It's fine, he won't know. And I do like to talk. She's a nice girl, I think. But she calls me miss. Gosh, I haven't been a miss in... Uh. She thinks I'm an old maid.

I'd like to think if I was born maybe... Fifteen, twenty years later, then that could've been me. You get to talk to lots of interesting people, and there's a stool to sit on if you don't like to be on your feet all day.

IRENE puts the paper wad on the counter. She looks at it, almost guiltily.

IRENE: But I don't know if I could... be on my own... in the world. There's the mortgage and the utilities and a million tiny things, and I don't think all that worry would be good for me. *He* handles all that.

But that doesn't mean I couldn't! Y'know, if I had to. I... *He* thinks I'm so stupid. That all women are stupid. *He*... Arthur I mean, he never used to treat me like that. That's why I think that...

It's stupid. I'll shut up now. I've got work to get done.

IRENE leaves through stage right for just a moment, turning the radio on as she passes. The low, indistinct drone of a radio talk show fills the stage, laden with static. She returns with a flimsy fold-out ironing board and a basket of laundry. She places the laundry basket on the floor, before struggling to unfold the ironing board, cursing a little under her breath.

She then leaves for a second time, returning quickly with a heavy electric iron. Its long, curly cable drapes along the floor as she carries it. She places it upright on the ironing board, plugging it into a plug socket on the kitchen counter.

IRENE: It takes a long time to heat up, this one. The cable's all frayed in places. I've asked *Him* for a new one, but he won't cause' of all the school fees and such. He doesn't care as long as it's all done and packed up by the time he gets home. And if it isn't. Well...

IRENE hovers her hand in front of the hot surface of the iron. Satisfied that it is warm enough, she pulls a white work shirt from the basket and places it on the ironing board.

She seems to notice something on the shirt. She lifts it off the board and holds it up to the light. There is a red mark on the collar.

IRENE: Look at that! Didn't even come out in the wash!

She holds the shirt close to her face and looks at it.

IRENE: Not the first time. *He* says it's red pen. Well, I say that they don't make pens in that red. That's lipstick red. Immodest red.

But why would he? I make his breakfast. I make his dinner. I wash his shirts and mop his floors and...

Her fists close around the shirt, bunching it up. She takes a deep breath and places the shirt back down on the ironing board. She begins ironing the shirt.

IRENE: And I went to his office Christmas do' last year. Watched him with the other wives from the corner, all gin blossomed and wobbly. And Bidy Thompson pulled me aside; Bidy Thompson, her little Paul is friends with my Victor; she pulled me aside and she said... She said to be careful. To watch out for him. I tell you, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me! The... Uh... Typing pool girls. He's been being a bit... untoward.

But...

But why? Why me? What have I done for him to... To... To do that?! I've done every single thing he's ever wanted! I don't understand!

IRENE pushes the iron just a little too hard on the shirt. A hiss is heard. She flinches. She puts the iron aside and lifts the shirt. There is a brown, iron-shaped burn on the chest of the shirt.

IRENE: *(She mouths curses under her breath before speaking)* It was stained anyway. I'll hide it. He doesn't even know what shirts he has, I put them all in the wardrobe!

She scrunches the shirt up into a ball and puts it back into the laundry basket. She pulls out more items of clothing and irons them as she talks, folding them up on the end of the ironing board when she is finished.

IRENE: I think... I think I should just come out and say it. I don't think *He* is the man I married. I know people say that, but I mean... Literally. *He* is not my Arthur.

You don't understand cause' things were so good to begin with. We were so young when we met, and he was so... So sweet. When the summer came we'd get the Brighton Belle to the seaside, and we'd stroll for so long that it felt like forever. I felt... I felt so good then. So

at ease. We didn't even need to talk that much. I could just stand in his presence and just... bask in him.

But now? I don't know, I just... He's gone rotten and I can't stand it! I sometimes think... Think what a stupid woman I've been, cause now I'm stuck with him. Only not him him.... *Him*.

There's a television program that Victor used to watch. Quater... Quater something. Where some Martians had come to Earth and... And they changed people. Made them like them, to spy or... And they looked like the person, and talked like the person, but... But they were all wrong on the inside. Marked.

And Victor was afraid of it, but I just felt... I dunno. Electric. Vindicated. Like I was seeing and understanding some bigger picture for the first time. And I thought. I just... I just thought that if I don't do anything about it then this will just be the rest of my life.

I don't want to be an old woman at the end of all my days having lived like this, slave to a man whose had everything good about him hollowed out.

But I can't tell anyone! Not him, definitely. Not Victor. Not the doctor, cause' he'll put me on more of those pills and I can't say no!

She takes the pile of folded laundry and places it back in the basket. She then unplugs the iron, propping it upright on the board to cool.

IRENE: Those darn pills. I've been on one sorta pill or another since Victor was born. I wish I'd never... Had that episode

He was born on V.E Day, that's why he's a Victor and not a Richard like we were planning. And we got out of hospital quite quick on the next day cause' it all went well. But... I dunno.

I was just looking at him, so pink and small in his Moses basket, and I just felt panic wash over me. Like... Like we weren't safe here, in this house. I just took him and went. Down the street.

And it all went blank for a while then. When I came to I was at my mother's house, just... hollering and hammering on the door. And I was barefoot, but my mother's house is a mile away. Was. She's died since. And she let me in and I just... Fell into her arms and cried and cried, and I didn't know why.

Arthur called the police. Had a huge fit. Said I'd kidnapped my own damn baby. They got me and took me to the station, but then they let me go again. *He* got me to the doctors and I got some pills. Downers, they were. To take every day.

But they made me a bit too down, so then I got some uppers.

IRENE fetches her pill bottle from the counter. She scrutinises its label.

IRENE: These little pink ones. Brand new, they were. State of the art. And dangerous, potentially. *He* watches me take em', cause if you take too many they'll do you in and there's nothing they can do to save you.

 But I don't think they're helping me. I used to do crochet. Make all the little frilly lace doilies for the table. But they make my hands shake too much. And I go clammy, all hot and cold. *He* says it's just my time for *that*, but there's no way.

 And I want to stop taking them but he won't let me. One time I just started spitting them into the bin once he'd left, but after a week I got so weak and tired that I couldn't get any work done. I had to come clean.

 I have this awful creeping feeling that... That deep down Arthur and Victor and that doctor don't want me to get better. They just want me to be quiet and take it. Take all this.

IRENE sighs. She twists open her pill bottle and pours a single pink pill into the palm of her hand.

IRENE: To think, that a tiny thing could cause such trouble.

IRENE pinches the pill between her fingers. The two halves of the capsule separate, emptying their contents onto the floor.

IRENE: Well... Look at that.

ACT III

It is afternoon in the kitchen. The ironing board is packed away, and IRENE is cooking a stew at the stove. The radio hums quietly. The kettle finishes boiling on the stove, giving a shrill whistle.

ARTHUR enters from stage left, struggling with his heavy briefcase. He thumps the briefcase down on the floor and sits down at the table, not saying a word to his wife.

IRENE eyes him from across the room, a hesitant tension in the way she holds herself.

ARTHUR: What?

IRENE: Tea?

ARTHUR: *(Grumbles indistinctly)* Yes, whatever.

IRENE heads to the kettle to make tea. She uses her body to block the kettle from ARTHUR'S view, but he is paying no attention. IRENE opens her pill bottle, splitting several pills and emptying their powder into the mug. She places the empty capsules in her apron pocket.

Finally, IRENE finishes making the tea. She places it on the table, and ARTHUR takes a sip. He pulls a face, and sips again.

ARTHUR: Uugh. Did you scald this? It's...

IRENE: Teabags. No loose leaf left at the shop.

ARTHUR: Urgh! Floor scrapings. Pig's ears and floor scrapings, that's what we get in this bloody house!

IRENE: Arthur...

ARTHUR: I work like a dog and this is what I get.

ARTHUR takes a deep sip of his tea. He frowns.

ARTHUR: It's... Salty? Did... Did you put salt in my tea?

IRENE: Cheap teabags, Arthur. Scalded. All they bloody had.

ARTHUR: You witch! You put salt in my tea!

IRENE: I didn't!

ARTHUR quickly stands up from his chair. He wipes his forehead with his hand.

ARTHUR: I've had a long day. I feel a bit... I'm going to bed.

IRENE: You do that!

ARTHUR: And you bring my dinner up on a tray when it's ready.

ARTHUR leaves.

IRENE stands alone in the kitchen. She pulls her arms close to her body and stares into the middle distance.

IRENE: *(She whispers)* Oh god...

VICTOR enters from stage left. He stops as he sees his mother, his face twisting into a worried look.

VICTOR: Mother?

IRENE doesn't move.

IRENE: How was school?

VICTOR: Are you feeling alright?

IRENE turns to her son. She forces her expression to soften.

IRENE: Do you want to go to the park?

VICTOR: What?

IRENE: Let's go to the park.

VICTOR: What about Father?

IRENE: He's had a long day, Vic. He's not feeling okay.

VICTOR: Oh.

IRENE: I'll buy you ice cream. And a comic.

VICTOR seems to perk up. His concern leaves him.

VICTOR: Really? But Father said...

IRENE: Shhh. He won't be troubling us anymore.

VICTOR: Okay, I just need to grab my...

IRENE grabs VICTOR'S arm.

IRENE: No! We need to go! Now!

IRENE leads VICTOR offstage. The empty stage echoes with the hum of the radio. From far away, the sound of ARTHUR moaning in pain can be heard.

Finally, the curtains close.

THE END.