

Scene 1

At rise: There is complete darkness. Presently the groaning, ominous strains of an air raid siren are heard. Low and haunting at first, soon building to an ear-piercing shrill wail that continues at the same high pitch for approximately 30 seconds, before fading down. As the siren fades out, the sound of a radio announcer's voice is heard in the darkness. His voice is calm but authoritative; his words delivered in a mannered and composed style.

ANNOUNCER

This is the Wartime Broadcasting Service. This country has been attacked with nuclear weapons. Communications have been severely disrupted, and the number of casualties and the extent of the damage are not yet known. We shall bring you further information as soon as possible. Meanwhile, stay tuned to this wavelength, stay calm and stay in your own homes.

Remember there is nothing to be gained by trying to get away. By leaving your homes you could be exposing yourselves to greater danger.

If you leave, you may find yourself without food, without water, without accommodation and without protection. Radioactive fall-out, which follows a nuclear explosion, is many times more dangerous if you are directly exposed to it in the open. Roofs and walls offer substantial protection. The safest place is indoors.

The message that the immediate danger has passed will be given by the sirens and repeated on this wavelength. Make sure that the gas and all fuel supplies are turned off and that all fires are extinguished.

Water must be rationed, and used only for essential drinking and cooking purposes. It must not be used for flushing lavatories. Ration your food supply: it may have to last for 14 days or more.

Do not, in any circumstances, go outside the house. Radioactive fall-out can kill. You cannot see it or feel it, but it is there. If you go outside, you will bring danger to your family and you may die. Stay in your fall-out room until you are told it is safe to come out or you hear the "all clear" on the sirens.

ANNOUNCER (Cont'd)

We shall repeat this broadcast in two hours' time. Stay tuned to this wavelength, but switch your radios off now to save your batteries until we come on the air again. That is the end of this broadcast.*

After a few moments more of darkness, a spotlight appears on the PRIVATE SECRETARY, who is standing downstage C.

PRIVATE SECRETARY

Well, that's more or less it, Prime Minister. There is a somewhat longer version that they're still fine tuning with the chaps over at the BBC, but that's the gist of it. You, yourself, of course, along with other key personnel from government, the armed forces and various scientific institutions – as well as oneself, one hopes – would already have been evacuated to an underground government control centre the location of which I'm afraid not even you are privy to – nor would you be even when there.

(beat)

That said, no matter how successful the evacuation and relocation of the core of government to a secret location might be, there'd be little point in keeping you all alive if there were no one left to govern. A complete decimation of the population would render you, with all due respect, Prime Minister, irrelevant. You'd be Bonaparte on Elba. Consequently, the main thrust of the Wartime Broadcast is to convince people to stay indoors away from the fall-out. The part about roofs and walls offering substantial protection may be a little overstated, as I'm told even a well-built structure will only afford something in the range of 20 to 40 per cent protection, since radiation rays are quite capable of penetrating roofs. Furthermore, General Kirkman has informed us that anyone within a 30 mile radius of a blast impact, particularly those caught downwind, would almost certainly perish, and anyone within a 50 mile radius would develop radiation sickness of considerable severity.

(beat)

So, as you see, in the aftermath of a worse-case scenario, the size of your new constituency would depend heavily upon the number of blasts inflicted on the country and our ability to keep those who do survive the initial onslaught inside their homes for a minimum of 14 days – that being our best estimate for the length of time needed for radioactive particles to decompose sufficiently.

(beat)

There is also talk of stockpiling a large cache of light entertainment programming, to be broadcast to the country in the event of international tensions, or indeed an attack, with the intention of assuaging the stress and strain of the populace at such a time – though frankly, judging by the amount of mindless drivel that's passed

PRIVATE SECRETARY (Cont'd)

off as entertainment on the radio these days, I would imagine the benefits of such a scheme to be minimal at best, and may even run the risk of dragging the nation's morale down to still lower depths. But that, of course, is simply a personal observation.

(beat)

So ponder on what you've heard and let me know if you have any thoughts on edits or additions. I'd replay it to refresh your memory of the main points, but I've a strong suspicion that you're more concerned with breakfast than bombs at this precise moment in time, so I shall leave you to it.

(beat)

That is all. Good morning, Prime Minister.

The spotlight on the PRIVATE SECRETARY fades down to BLACK.

Scene 2

The lights come up to reveal MAM and DA sitting at a kitchen table finishing dinner. DA has his head buried in a newspaper that is placed next to his plate on the table. MAM finishes her meal and places her knife and fork on the plate.

MAM

Ya'll fall into that damn paper if ya lean in much closer.

DA

Hmm?

(beat)

MAM

I said there's more if ya want it.

(without looking up)
Eh? No, no, this is plenty.

DA

(pause)

How was work?

MAM

(still not looking up)
Same.

DA

MA takes a sip from her teacup and stares off into the distance. After a few moments she's struck by a sudden realisation.

Eh, I almost forgot. We got a letter today.

MAM

That's nice.

DA

Don't ya wanna know who from?

MAM

'Course.

DA

From the lad. Come int afternoon post. I'll fetch it an read it ya.

MAM

MAM stands and crosses to a sideboard to fetch the letter, straightening her apron as she does so.

(still not looking up)
Mm.

DA

MAM

(studying the envelope)
He's a good lad is Ronnie. Good as they come.

DA

When he wants.

MAM sits back down at the table
and unfolds the letter.

MAM

He's a good lad an that's all there is to it. There's not many that'd take time to put pen to paper for the sake o' their mam an da.

DA

Aye, ya probably right.

MAM

I am right, no probably bout it. Now, d'ya think ya can manage to pull yer head out o' that paper for a minute an listen to his words?

DA

Aye.

(realising what she said and finally looking up)

Ooh, I'm sorry love. It's this bloody Cup Final, int it? Got me dead obsessed, it as. Taken me over.

(pushing the paper away)

It's like a bloody disease.

MAM

He's got lovely handwritin, he has.

DA

Daft, too, seein as I already the outcome.

MAM

How can ya know outcome if it ant played?

DA

'Cause Blackpool'll muck it up again, wint they? Just like last time, an time before that. Bound to happen.

MAM

Well, they'll have to do their best what wi' the Queen watchin.

DA
The Queen?

MAM
Aye, she's gonna be there watchin it.

DA
Nah way. Ya must o' got that wrong.

MAM
I read it. Were int paper. Same one ya've had yer head buried in all evenin.

DA
(in wonder)
Ee neva! The Queen of England at a football match. Hard to credit.

MAM
It's what they said. Mixin in wi' rest of us.

DA
Whatever next?

MAM
Makes ya wonder.

DA
Her sittin up there, yellin at top of her lungs along wi' crowd.

MAM
Well, I don't know that she'll be doin that, love.

DA
No...praps not.

MAM
But ya can bet they'll all be playin their hearts out an keepin that obsession o'
yours goin a sight longer, I wouldn't wonder.

DA
Ya gotta point there, love.
(reaching back for the paper)
Hey, I wonder if Matthews is gonna be makin a-

MAM

(brandishing the letter)
Have ya forgotten ya bairn, Mr. Maddison?

DA

Ah! Ya see? See what it's done to me? An you just gone an made it a sight worse, I reckon.

MAM

Wish I'd never told ya. Now, enough o' ya banter an listen to Ronnie a minute, will ya?

(holding the letter before her)
Are ya listenin'?

DA

All ears, pet.

MAM

(after clearing her throat)
“Dear Mam an Da, just a word or two to let ya know I'm okay an doin fine. Well, praps not fine, bored outta me head is more like it. RAF Ballykelly int all it's cracked up to be. Better than bein stationed in Korea, I don't doubt, but Northern Ireland's so bloody borin. Nothin ever happens. It just rains non stop, an on top o' that, the food's shite. What I wouldn't give for some o' your pease puddin an ham right now.”

(with pride)
Hear that?

(continuing)
“On a brighter note, I get to escape it all for a few days. Me an some o' the lads are travellin down to Wiltshire to some government medical facility where they're workin on some cure for the common cold. They posted ads at base askin for volunteers to go down an have a few tests done. So I signed on for it. Fifteen shillins and three days leave they're givin us! What a lark! Who wouldn't risk a runny nose for fifteen shillins? An maybe I'll use the leave to pop back an see ya. Might not be worth it, as I'd probably have to leave again as soon as I got there, but we'll see. Well, that's all for now. More than a word or two, at least. Love to the both o' ya. Ronnie.”

MAM carefully folds the letter and puts in back in the envelope.

DA

That's me boy.

MAM

So...looks like we might be havin a visitor soon.

DA

He said he'll *see*, love. Don't start getting yer hopes up for nothin.

MAM

There's hope 'til there's no hope, that's what me mam always used to say.

DA

Oh aye. Not the most profound thing I've ever heard, it must be said.

MAM

Just keepin optimistic, is all.

DA

Well then, ya go ahead an do that.

DA takes a final swig from his teacup and leans back in his chair.

DA

Bloody marvellous, int it? The Americans are blowin up hydrogen bombs int Pacific, there's a war still goin on in Korea, the Russian's are up to heaven only knows what, an what do our lot do? Look for cold remedies. I mean, I ask ya? It's a wonder to me how we ever survived Hitler.

MAM

It's important, Da. It's important work.

DA

What's important bout that?

MAM

Just 'cause it don't involve killin people, don't make it less important. In fact, I think it makes it more important. Bout time they started usin their heads for the benefit.

DA

Aye, well if the brains o' Britain pull this off, an the Russians do decide to start bombin us, it'll be a comfort to know we can face annihilation wi' a clear sinus.

MAM

I think it's excitin. Think of it – our Ronnie could be part o' summat that changes people's lives all over the world. He could be part of history.

DA

Or he could be part o' some great big waste o' taxpayer's money. Still, for fifteen shillins an a bit o' leave, why should he care? If they're gonna fritter the country's money away I'd just as soon see the lad get some of it.

MAM

An a trip home.

DA

Maybe.

MAM

(with a knowing smile)

Aye...maybe.

DA

(getting up from the table)

Right then...I'll be int back garden if ya need me. Wanna have bit more of a go 'fore it starts gettin dark.

MAM

Back to ya secret project, are ya?

DA

That's right, love – back to me secret project.

MAM

I wish ya'd let on what it is ya get up to down there.

DA

Well, if I did that it wouldn't be a secret, now would it?

MAM

Praps not, but who says I like secrets?

DA

I do – ya love em. An don't get any ideas bout goin down there an sneakin a deeks while I'm at work neither.

MAM

Ya know, other women might start to gettin a bit suspicious. Other women might start to thinkin ya was meetin someone else down there every night in some sort o' secret rendezvous.

DA

Is that right? Good thing I'm not married to other women then, int it?

MAM

Aye, lucky you.

DA

An the only rendezvous I'm havin is wi' a big pile o' dirt.

MAM

As long as that's all it is.

DA

Yes, pet.

MAM

An put a coat on, too. It might be April's end already but there's still a chill in the air at night.

DA

(pulling on his coat)

Aye, well if I catch cold I'll know who to turn to now, won't I?

MAM

Ah, go on, ya daft bugger.

DA exits. MAM stands and picks the letter up from the table, examining the envelope for a moment.

MAM

Well done, lad.

(kisses the envelope and proudly holds it to her chest)

Makin history.

The lights fade to BLACK.

(*Use of the "Four Minute Warning Script" granted by kind permission of the BBC)