

WHAT NOW

Cast:

Woman – 30's to 60's

Man – 30's to 60's

Setting:

The playing area is bare except for a table and two chairs on one side of the stage and another table and two chairs on the other side

Props:

None

(Books, cups, glasses, mobile telephone are all mimed)

The Woman enters stage left and stands with her back to the audience. She studies the books on the shelves in front of her. She takes down a book, looks at the back cover blurb and opens it.

The Man enters stage right and stands a few feet to the left of the woman. He, too, takes down a book, looks at the back cover blurb and then opens it.

The Woman replaces her book on the shelf and takes down another. The Man does the same.

After a moment, the Man returns his book to the shelf and then walks behind the Woman and takes up a position a few feet to the right of her. He takes down another book and opens it.

The Woman replaces one book, moves closer to the Man and takes down another. She does this a second and a third time. The Woman is now standing as close as she can to the Man.

Woman *(not looking at the Man)* Eurydice Bone? Have you read her?

The Man looks at her, puzzled and surprised.

Eurydice Bone. The self-help guru. She wrote ... What was it called? *(turning to him)* Oh. I do beg your pardon. I thought you were my husband.

Man *(pleasantly)* I'm sorry to disappoint you.

Woman *(partly to herself)* How embarrassing. Although it could have been worse. I might have leant on you. Or nuzzled you. Or called you by a pet name.

Man Yes, I can see that might have been embarrassing.

Woman As it is, I didn't. *(beat)* And, no. You didn't.

Man Didn't ... ?

Woman Disappoint me. *(explanatory)* By not being my husband. Although I am fond of him.

Man That explains why you were standing so close to me.

Woman Was I standing close to you?

Man Very close for a stranger. Very close for a wife. Wives don't normally stand so close to their husbands.

Woman Don't they? Oh, dear! Was I invading your personal space?

Man Please don't worry. I was happy to share it with you. *(looking round)* Where is your husband?

Woman In the history section, I expect.

Man He's an historian?

Woman No. Why should he be? But he reads history. And biography. Everyone reads biography, don't they?

Man Does he read fiction?

Woman He doesn't believe in fiction. It irritates him. And — naturally — he despises this sort of thing. (*indicating the shelves behind her*) 'Mind, body, spirit.' He thinks it's ridiculous.

Man Not an admirer of Eurydice Brown then?

Woman How clever of you almost to remember her name.

Beat.

Man Forgive me but you don't look like a woman who frequents the self-help shelves.

Woman (*reading sign above the shelves*) I'm not. How about you? Are you a devotee of the self-help genre?

Man I'm buying a book for my fiancée.

Woman Your fiancée?

Man Marina. She's Swiss and a great believer in self-improvement.

Woman I'm surprised you're engaged.

Man Are you?

Woman You have the look of a married man. What are you buying for Marina?

Man I wrote in down on a piece of paper but ...

Woman You've lost the piece of paper?

Man Yes.

Woman Give Maria a call.

Man 'Marina.' I can't. She goes to the gym on Saturday mornings.

Woman Every Saturday?

Man And Sunday mornings, too.

Woman No lying-in-bed-time then?

Man Marina doesn't want to waste a minute of her life.

Woman Is she very sinewy?

Man Marina's body is a temple.

Woman At which you worship?

Man At which I prostrate myself daily.

Woman But not on Saturday mornings.

Man Nor Sundays.

Woman Marina's right. Life has to be worked at. I should find a gym.

Man You want to be worshipped?

Woman I want to be sinewy.

Man Would your husband like that?

Woman I must ask him.

Man *(looking round)* Where is the history section?

Woman By the coffee-shop.

Man Would you like a cup of coffee? *(indicating table and chairs on one side of the stage)* Or maybe a glass of wine? *(indicating table and chairs on the other side)*

Woman I'm afraid my husband —

Man You're afraid of your husband?

Woman He might not approve.

Man Of our having coffee together?

Woman Of a sinewy wife.

Man Maria's actually quite plump.

Woman That's how I picture the Swiss. But your fiancée's name is 'Marina'.

Man Maria's her second cousin.

Woman How confusing.

Man It would be but we seldom see her. A skinny latté?

Woman A double espresso. Let's sit here.

The Woman takes a seat at the table stage right while the Man exits stage left.

The Man re-enters with two cups of coffee which he places on the table.

Dale Carnegie. 'How to Win Friends & Influence People.' That was the first 'self-help' book. Did you know that the 'and' in the title is an ampersand.

Man You're wrong.

Woman That's not how to make friends and —

Man The first 'self-help' book was by Samuel Smiles. First published in 1859.

Woman What was it called?

Man 'Self-Help.'

Woman Really?

Man An Englishman visiting the Khedive's palace in Egypt was struck by the legends written on the walls and asked where they were from. The Khedive replied: They are quotations from Smeelis' book 'Self-Help'. You must know Smeelis. His texts are better than those from the Koran!

Woman That can't be true.

Man It can't be, but it is.

Woman (*accusatory*) You're drinking a cappuccino.

Man I always do.

Woman Isn't that unadventurous?

Man When it comes to coffee, I'm not looking for adventure.

Woman And when it comes to other things?

Man Other things are different.

Woman That, I think you'll find, is a self-evident truth. Other things are, by their very nature, different. (*beat*) 'The Road Less Traveled.' That's another classic in the field. Although, Robert Frost's poem was in fact called 'The Road Not Taken' ...

Man (*reciting*) 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.'

Woman (*accusatory*) You've rehearsed that! I insist we go back to the fork in the path.

Beat.

No, I won't have a coffee, but I will have a glass of wine.

*The Woman crosses the playing area and sits at the table stage left.
The Man follows carrying two glasses of wine.*

Man There we are. Pleasantly chilled.

Beat.

Woman I feel we've met before. Do you have any distinguishing features?

Man None I can show you in a coffee shop. Sorry. A wine bar.

Woman Describe them to me.

Man I'd prefer to show them to you.

Woman Don't forget that I'm a married woman.

Man I'm sorry. I had.

Woman For a moment, so had I.

Man Tell me about your husband.

Woman Hector? He's very, very rich.

Man How did he make his money?

Woman He's a banker. And an arms dealer.

Man I thought you said he was an historian.

Woman You said he was an historian.

Man I can't have done. I don't know the man.

Woman Much safer that you don't. Arms dealers aren't normally nice people.

Man Isn't Hector an exception?

Woman Not at all. He's an archetypal arms dealer. And a pretty typical banker, too.

Man Do you love him?

Woman Answering that would lead us down a blind alley.

Man Is that such a bad thing?

Woman You're the one who'd have to find a way out of it.

Man Excuse me. My mobile. (*takes mobile from pocket*) It's Maria.

Woman I really would expect you to remember the name of your fiancée.

Man (*listening to and speaking on his mobile*) Yes. / Yes. / Yes. / Oh, I see. / I see. / I see. (*replaces mobile in his pocket*) Marina was my fiancée's name.

Woman She's changed her name?

Man She was my fiancée. She's leaving me for her personal trainer.

Woman That's shocking. Truly terrible. An unforgiveable cliché.

Man I've remembered the name of Marina's book: 'How to Manage the Monotony of Monogamy.'

Woman But you weren't married.

Man Marina wanted to be prepared.

Woman Well, you won't need it now. Why don't I take it?

Man Being married to an arms dealer can't be monotonous.

Woman Being married to a banker is. (*pointing into the audience*) Look. There he is. Do you think you should hide?

Man Do you think I should? (*searching the audience*) Tell me. Is he the squat, square man with a brown leather jacket and a bulge in his pocket?

Woman No.

Man Is he the distinguished-looking gentleman wearing a three-piece suit and a regimental tie?

Woman No.

Man Which one is he then?

Woman The dribbling old wreckage in the wheelchair.

Man He doesn't look like an arms dealer.

Woman He isn't. I had to put you off the scent. (*suddenly bursts into tears*) I'm so terribly frightened.

Man Didn't you say you weren't afraid of your husband?

Woman He's very, very rich.

Man Yes. You did say that.

Woman I'm frightened someone will get hold of him. His housekeeper. His masseuse. His nurse. (*wails*) Soon he'll be gone and I'm so terribly, terribly frightened that he'll change the provisions of his will.

Man (*comforting*) Please don't upset yourself? Wait. Who's that pushing his wheelchair? Oh, dear. Yes. It's Maria. She and your husband seem remarkably chummy.

Woman What's that in her hand?

Man (*peering*) A legal document of some kind?

Woman A will! It's his will. I must stop them visiting a solicitor. Should I run after them?

Man No point, I'm afraid. Marina may be plump but she's astonishingly fit.

Woman The gym?

Man The gym.

Pause.

Woman Well. What can I say? Goodbye, I suppose.

Man Goodbye. Wait! You've forgotten your book.

Woman It isn't mine. I didn't pay for it.

Man Shall I put it back on the shelf?

Woman Make sure it goes in the right place. The books are arranged alphabetically by author.

Man (*reading spine*) Eurydice Brown.

Woman Bone. Eurydice Bone.

Man Absurd name!

Woman Absurdity's no bad thing.

Man If it doesn't go on too long.

Woman Which this hasn't.

Man }
 } (*facing the audience*) Has it?
Woman }

Man }
 } (*facing each other*) Maybe it has.
Woman }

Beat.

The Man and the Woman exit left and right.

Lights down.

THE END