

WEBBER'S FORMAL WEAR HIRE

DEPARTMENT

ONE-ACT DUOLOGUE

By Christopher Owen

CHARACTERS: OLD JACK AND HARRY SIDE BY SIDE IN A PUB.

JACK: You all right, Harry?

HARRY: I have to say no better, no worse, thank you, Jack.

JACK: Harry's, he's got his bad knees, eh? Isn't that so, Harry?

HARRY: I got bad knees. No truer word.

JACK: Harry and me, we used to work in Webber and Son Gentlemen's Formal Wear Hire, floor assistants, eh?

HARRY: That's it, - Jack and me.

JACK: What happened to Webber and Son Formal Wear Hire - at Johansen Perry as it had come to be - it was beyond belief - eh, Harry?

HARRY: It was tragic that, what happened to Webbers, Jack, to Formal Wear Hire. Jack and me, we worked in the formal wear hire department, Webber and Son, West End of London Branch, for a total of 63 years – Jack 32, me 31. Eh?

JACK: Monday the 23rd of June, 1973. That's a day we'll never forget.
Monday 23rd of June 1973. A terrible, terrible day. Harold Wilson out of office – Edward Heath in. The unions going mad. Terrible.

HARRY: The country was in a mess, wasn't it, Jack?

JACK: A mess – that's it. The Unions. NUM. The miners, the trains, and the rest of them – bringing the Country to her knees. Inflation, it was over 8%. The Arabs, they holding onto the oil.

HARRY: The Arabs, they got us by the goolies, Jack.

JACK: You're right, Harry. Harry's right. Monday the 23rd of June, 1973. Six months earlier – it was the previous January - Sammy Webber, he sold out to a company by the name of Johansen Perry. Johansen Perry took over, they brought in new working contracts - reduced basic pay, increased commission.

HARRY: They got rid of Edmund Roy, didn't they, Jack?

JACK: They got rid of Edmund Roy. Edmund Roy, our colleague in the formal wear hire department, him, like the rest of us, in his smart navy blue suit. Edmund Roy, he wore a navy blue suit and a navy blue tie same as the rest of us, only, unlike the rest of us, Edmund Roy, his tie had a red dot on it.

HARRY: He liked to stand out from the crowd, didn't he, Jack?

JACK: He did. He was a little fella, he was, eh? – Edmund Roy. 5 foot 2 inches. Very dapper.

HARRY: Edmund Roy, his chest 36, extra short arm, waist 30, halve it 15, inside leg 29.

JACK: As I say, compact.

HARRY: The waist measurement, it was halved, wasn't it, Jack? Eh?

JACK: As we well know, Harry.

HARRY: That's how it was, formal wear hire, Webber and Son. The waist measurement was halved. It was meant as a courtesy. Eh? It was the tradition. The gentleman comes in. You take the waist measurement for the trousers, it reads 44, you halve it. 22, you say. You go into the store room - you go to trouser drawer, waist 22, inside leg, 33. It was a show of respect. So as to not cause any offence or upset to the gentleman vis-a-vis his waist measurement. Edmund Roy, he was chest 36, extra short arm, waist 30, halve it 15, inside leg 29. The inside leg, eh? Taking the inside leg measurement, that was an art in itself, eh? No doubt about it.

JACK: Harry, he likes to tell about the inside leg, don't you, eh?

HARRY: Old Mr Davids, Benjamin Davids, he taught Jack and me when we first started at Webbers.

JACK: Here we go.

HARRY: This was back in the early 60's. Eh? The inside leg - that was something Benjamin Davids was most particular about. The taking of the inside leg measurement. He says to me, when I first come to Webbers, he says, 'Taking of the inside leg measurement is a delicate matter, Mr Kent,' he says, 'You hold one end of the tape measure, you hand the gentleman the other end. You say to the gentleman "I'd be greatly obliged to you, sir, if you'd be kind enough to hold this end of the tape measure up into your V, sir, thank you very much."' You take the end you got hold of, Mr Kent, lad,' Benjamin Davids says, 'You take it down inside the gent's leg to the top of his shoe, you read the measurement. "Inside leg 33, or whatever, sir," you say. Benjamin Davids, he tells me 'You never, never, never, Mr Kent, stick your hand up into a gentleman's V.'

JACK: A gentleman's V is his own business.

HARRY: Mr Davids, he told the both of us, eh?

JACK: That's it.

HARRY: 'A gentleman's V is out of bounds, Mr Kent. You don't never not go there - never, not even,' he says, 'should the gentleman in question indicate a desire for you to do so. And there are those, Mr Kent,' he says to me, me then in my 20's, 'as you will readily find out, who might well quite fancy you sticking your grubby little hand up into his V. But you don't. Not never no how.

JACK: He was a gentlemen was Benjamin Davids.

HARRY: He was one of the old school. He'd been with the firm since the thirties. It was him who taught Jack Metcalf and me, the both of us, the art and craft of taking a gentleman's measurements. Eh, Jack?

JACK: That's it. Eh?

THEY DRINK.

JACK: Edmund Roy, he was a breath of fresh air, he was. Johansen Perry came, they gave him, Edmund Roy, the push. They get rid of Fred Robinson, Fred Robinson, him in his slippers in reception.

HARRY: Old Fred Robinson, all those years he's on his feet all day 9 to 5.30 Monday to Friday, every third Saturday morning in the month. It's like me with my knees, only Fred Robinson, he gets the bunions. They're the size of a walnut. Walnuts. Sammy Webber comes down from Sales on the first floor – this is in the late sixties - he brings down a pair of black leather slippers, makes a present of them to Fred. Tells him to wear them. He sits him out behind the desk in reception. Make yourself comfy, he says.

JACK: That was Sammy Webber.

HARRY: Sammy Webber, he gives Fred Robinson the pair of slippers, Johansen Perry comes in, they give him the boot. That was Johansen Perry. Eh?

JACK: They get rid of Fred. They stick Alec Garfield - down from accounts on the second – put him in reception, on the tannoy speaker system, calling staff to reception when the gentlemen come in, like Fred used to do. Alec, as I well and truly recall, making a balls up of it, wasn't he?

HARRY: He was well and truly bugging it up.

JACK: Him calling us to see to a gentleman who we were already fitting up. No idea. Him put in there on the tannoy till the Company put in a new department manager, who, we were told - eh, Harry? – who we were told was coming in that same day - Monday 23rd of June 1973.

HARRY: Monday 23rd of June 1973.

JACK: Fred Robinson, Edmund Roy gone, we were left with Harry and me, with Vince Pettit and Teddy Harris. We had to make the best of it. We'd got to try to keep to the old principles, that was it. Keep the flag flying.

HARRY: A steady hand in the midst of a perfect storm, that's Jack Metcalf.

JACK: Things would settle down, as I remember saying. Little did we know.

HARRY: Little did we know, Jack. Tell them, Jack.

JACK: Cheers.

HARRY: Cheers.

JACK: It was the afternoon of Monday the 23rd of June 1973.

HARRY: The afternoon of Monday the 23rd of June 1973.

JACK: Vince Pettit, he was out at Ladbrokes placing a bet.

HARRY: Vince Pettit, he was a great man.

JACK: Vince Pettit, he joined Webbers two years after Harry and I started.

HARRY: He was a big fellow, Vince was. 6 foot 4. Half Irish on his mother's side. 6 foot 4. 22 stone. His chest 52, long arm, waist 46, halve it 23 - inside leg 34.

JACK: He was voted the best tipped member of staff, Webber and Son Formal Wear Hire, known to man. Vince, he couldn't miss. He'd lean on his gentlemen. Eh, Harry? He'd have them in the corner by the cash tills, the gentleman with his Webber and Son outfit case - the blue case with the yellow band - all ready to take his leave, him paying his bill, Vince, he's angling for a handsome tip, he's telling the gentleman about his four daughters. He didn't have any daughters. Did he? Eh?

HARRY: He didn't have any daughters, Jack.

JACK: That didn't stop him telling his gent who he was leaning on about them. He says to them: 'Oh, sir,' he'd say, 'the cost of the four daughters of mine – (HARRY JOINS IN): want this – clothes, books, education. Love them all four of them as I do, sir, (JACK WITHOUT HARRY): they'll force me into bankruptcy they will,' he tells his gentlemen. He had the gentlemen in the palm of his hand.

A BRIEF PAUSE.

JACK: As we were saying, eh? – that morning –

HARRY: Monday the 23rd of June 1973

JACK: - Vince Pettit, he was over at Ladbrokes. Teddy Harris, he was going bananas, wasn't he, Harry, as he was wont to be going since Johansen Perry came in and reduced the salaries, put the emphasis so to speak on commission.

HARRY: Teddy couldn't handle it.

JACK: He couldn't. He was desperate. Teddy Harris, he had ideas above his station in life, eh? He sent his kids to private. Private schooling, and him on basic salary plus commission, Webber and Son, formal wear hire, thank you very much. His wife, Jennifer Harris, it was her we reckoned who was behind it.

HARRY: It was her who wore the trousers in that marriage, Jack.

JACK: He and his wife had this house down in Orpington. Orpington, Kent. They had this mortgage hanging over them. Right. That's it. Teddy, he worked evenings and weekends, Petrol Station. He was feeling the pinch, like the rest of us. Like the rest of the Country, like Edward Heath, Teddy, he'd got financial problems.

HARRY: They were desperate men. They were clutching at straws, Edward Heath and Teddy Harris.

JACK: Vince used to take the piss out of him. Eh, Harry? Teddy rushing here, rushing there, trying to get through as many gentlemen as he could – earn the commission – Vince, he'd be calling out after him, 'watch out, here come speedy Gonzales', calling out 'how's the kids, Teddy?' 'Don't wear yourself out, Teddy - your missus has all that housework for you to do when you get home before you go out to the petrol station.' 'You keep your hands off my customers, Teddy Harris,' he shouted at him, 'you keep your fucking hands off my customers or I'll have your bollocks off you, chum.'

HARRY: He told him, didn't he, Jack?

JACK: He did. Terrible, that – how it turned out.

HARRY: It was tragic, eh, Jack?

JACK: The unions bringing the country to her knees, as they were.

HARRY: It was that fella, Mick McGaffey, Scottish NUM – Young Arthur Scargill – dyed in the wool commies, eh?

JACK: That's it, Harry. I was fitting up my Mr Penrose with a set of Greys, morning tails, for the Derby - very nice – very smart – he says to me as how the British communist party were being financed by communist Russia, he tells me - eh, Harry? He tells me - had it on good authority, he said - the Russian Embassy in London, every month, they arrange for thousands of pounds to be secretly delivered to the British communist party headquarters in a large brown leather hold-all.

HARRY: They delivered it to the British communist party in a large brown holdall.

A BRIEF PAUSE

JACK: Teddy Harris, that Monday afternoon about 3 o'clock, he comes in from reception with Mr Simmons, eh, Harry. Mr Simmons, one of Vince's regular gentlemen.

HARRY: That wasn't wise of Teddy at all, was it? Eh, Jack? That was a terrible business. Eh?

JACK: Never a truer word.

A BRIEF PAUSE.

HARRY: The American Just Departed, Jack.

JACK: Vince again, eh?

HARRY: The American Just Departed – a little drama, one of a number, eh? – the means by which it was intended staff at Webber and Son formal wear hire might up the gratuity stakes, encourage the gentlemen to cough up somewhat more generously than they might otherwise feel disposed to do.

JACK: AJP - The American Just Departed.

HARRY: My gentleman is paying the bill, he's about to fish out the gratuity, Vince, he comes over from his fitting room, the store room wherever. 'Oh, Mr Kent,' he calls, 'Such a busy afternoon – forgive me. I forgot. I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir,' he says to my gentleman. 'Mr Kent,' he says to me, 'the gentleman who you just fitted up, the American, Mr Kent, he said as how he's very sorry not to have seen you before he had to go, but (JACK JOINS IN): he asked me to thank you very much and to give you this 3 pounds as a mark of appreciation for all your help and excellent service, Mr Kent.' 'Oh, that's very nice of him,' (HARRY ONLY): I say, 'I must have done him well, it's usually 1 pound he gives me. Much obliged, thank you, Mr Kent.' 'Not at all,' Vince says. 'Sorry to have interrupted your business in hand, sir,' he says to my gentleman. And off he goes to the store room wherever.

JACK: That was The American Just Departed – created by Vince Pettit and Edmund Roy him with the red dot on his tie back in the 1960's.

HARRY: Jack, he worked the floor, as we spoke of it, eh? Jack, he'd bring a gentleman's attention to the state of my knees whenever he felt that in doing so he could engage the gentleman's sympathy towards me, and so encourage him to up my tip, cough up something extra, so to speak, eh?

JACK: Harry, he's got bad knees, that's it, eh, Harry?

HARRY: I got bad knees – As Jack here tells the gentlemen coming in. On my feet, formal wear hire, Webber and Son, West End branch for 31 years, Monday to Friday 9 till 5, every third Saturday morning in the month, my knees, they threw in the towel. Eh?

JACK: That's it. Yes.

HARRY: They waved the white flag.

JACK: He has to go to my physio, St Mary's Hospital every second Wednesday in the month.

HARRY: My physio she says to me, Harry, she says, your knees are on their last legs, she says.

JACK: She's a nice young woman is my physio. A blonde. Big tits. It's nice having a physio with big tits, eh, Harry?

HARRY: Big tits don't go amiss, Jack. Not when you got knees such as mine. Jack he'd take the opportunity, whenever he could, to tell the gentlemen about my knees and, as I say, thereby encourage generosity, eh? Jack and Vince, they'd make out I'd done my back in, eh? They'd call over to my gentleman as he's about to pay his bill, 'I trust Mr Kent here has been looking after you, sir, as is always expected of him. Despite the fall he had back home last Thursday.' 'The fall?' the gentleman says

to me. 'We won't talk about it, sir,' I say, putting on a brave face. That's it. Eh?

JACK: That's about it, Harry. Right.

A PAUSE WHILE THEY DRINK.

JACK: Mr Jimmy and his male punters used to come in. Eh? Mr Jimmy, he used to come in from time to time with his male clients. He comes in, pays us – Vince, Harry and me – a small rental. He's in and out 10, 15 minutes at the outmost.

HARRY: If it wasn't us, it'd have been someone else, eh, Jack?

JACK: You can't change human nature, Harry.

HARRY: The archetypal demands of the libido.

JACK: Mr Jimmy and a client comes in – he goes into fitting room 1, Harry's fitting room. Mr Jimmy and his male client leave – Harry, before entering with one of his gentlemen, it was his habit - eh, Harry? - he'd get the disinfectant spray from behind the cash register, spray the fitting room, give it a good spray.

HARRY: Violets, oak moss, sandalwood and sea musk warmed with sunny notes of tangerine and orange blossom. You want a fitting room nice and clean for your gentlemen. Hygiene, eh? Health and Safety.

JACK: That's Harry for you. Fastidious.

THEY DRINK.

JACK: I've got my gentleman - Mr Penrose, as I recall - dressed and ready to make up the bill, Mr Jimmy and his male client is in fitting room 1, Teddy's got Vince's regular Mr Simmonds in fitting room 5, there's this call on the tannoy – it's calling Harry to reception – a gentleman arrived. Only – it's isn't Alec calling, no. The voice of the tannoy calling for Harry is that of a woman.

HARRY: A woman.

JACK: A woman in gentlemen's formal wear hire, Johansen Perry, formerly Webber and Son, London's West End branch. They'd put a woman in reception. You can imagine. Eh? The shock.

HARRY: The horror.

JACK: We're struck dumb. A woman.

HARRY: A woman in gentlemen's formal wear hire. She was calling me to go to reception, wasn't she, Jack?

JACK: That's it. Harry goes off to reception – he comes back – the woman out there in reception, she goes by the name of Mrs Freshwater.

HARRY: She's the new Department Manager - who we've been expecting.

JACK: The gentlemen in the fitting area with their trousers down about their ankles and a woman, a Mrs Freshwater, is lurking about in reception. We don't want anything to do with her. No. I'm not taking any responsibility for my actions.

HARRY: She was a big woman, wasn't she, Jack? Mrs Freshwater.

JACK: She was.

HARRY: She was powerful looking, she was. She was all of 13 stone. At a rough estimate: her chest 40, regular arm, waist 38 – halve it, 19 – inside leg 32. Chest 40, cup double D stroke G – the cup not being a thing Jack and me have the appropriate professional expertise by what to make an accurate estimate.

JACK: Neither of us, that's for certain, Harry.

HARRY: Jack and me being in the gentlemen's formal wear hire, us not having no experience of the ladies' formal wear. Mrs Freshwater's chest: 50 - her cup, however you look at it, substantial. Her length of arm regular, the waist 38 – halve it, 19. Inside leg, at a guess, 32. Speaking conservatively, I have to say there was a great deal Mrs Freshwater, Jack. She was big. And she had a handbag. Eh, Jack?

JACK: A handbag. Vince, as far as he's concerned this woman arriving on the scene, this was war. He made that quite clear. He was fitting up a gentlemen in fitting room 3, as I recall, eh?

HARRY: Mr Barton.

JACK: Mr Barton. A snooty bugger. Very full of his own importance. Mr Barton he's a suitable case for The Dry Cleaners in Villiers Street, Vince says to Harry and me. Never mind about the woman, Mrs Freshwater, she's not going to stand in Vince's way – he makes that very clear, eh?

HARRY: The Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street.

JACK: I'm not letting no fucking woman putting me off, Jack Metcalf, he says. This fucking lot Johansen Perry can stick a fucking woman in – that's up to them – I'm doing The Dry Cleaners in Villiers Street.

HARRY: The Dry Cleaners in Villiers Street, it was Vince Pettit's speciality, it was, wasn't it, Jack? His tour de force. Vince's major role.

JACK: One of smartest and remarkable bit of fund-raising you're ever liked to see. Too true.

HARRY: You witness Vince Pettit executing The Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street, you were watching a star on the stage of a West End of London theatre. John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, young Albert Finney, Sir Donald Wolfit, not one of them could have performed The Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street not no better than Vince Pettit. He took your breath away. He was stunning.

JACK: A gentleman comes in, doesn't he, Harry? He's a fellow who thinks too much of himself and too little of the rest of us – he's a challenge. The Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street. Eh? Vince measures him, he comes back to the store room, fishes out a morning coat what you'd

not wish on your worst enemy. Too small – shabby - a mess. He takes it back to his gentleman, has him try it on - the gentleman is not happy - Mr Vince Pettit is not at all happy. ‘Oh, my God, sir,’ he says.

HARRY: The usual routine, eh, Jack - the usual patter, eh?

JACK: ‘Oh my God, sir,’ he says, like this was the worst bleeding coat he’d ever had dealings with, eh? – that’s it, Harry - ‘It’s not right, sir’, he says. ‘We’ve had such a run on the greys, the morning coats, sir, there isn’t nothing left, not that I’d ask you to wear, sir. Not you, sir. I couldn’t do it.’

HARRY: We’d heard him enough – knew it as well as he did – the patter, it was a set piece, it was, eh?

JACK: (HARRY FROM TIME TO TIME SPEAKING THE WORDS UNDER JACK): ‘I’m sorry, sir,’ he says, ‘I am not letting you out of these premises not wearing that coat or none like it. I wouldn’t sleep, sir’, he says. ‘You could try Moss Bros or Lipman’s, sir, Lipman’s in the Charing Cross Road, but I hear they’re in the same pickle as what we are, sir. They’ve had the same sort of run on the greys, the morning coats as we have, sir.’ Vince Pettit there with the gentleman in his fitting room, his fitting room 3, he sighs deep, tears in his eyes. Sudden thought. ‘There is one possible solution, sir,’ he says, leaning on the gent, all theatrical and intimate, ‘The firm’s dry cleaning premises in Villiers Street, sir,’ Vince says, ‘Mr Williamson, him and me are good friends, he owes me a favour. Give me five minutes, sir, just five minutes, if you have the time, I’ll run, run, sir, down to the firm’s dry cleaning premises

in Villiers Street, slip Mr Williamson a couple of quid, a couple of quid, if that's all right with you, sir, get him to hand over one of the morning coats, the greys outfit that has come in only this morning and has, as is the custom here, been sent down to Mr Williamson for cleaning, sir. (It was the same old patter.) Now, sir, if I do this, and I would very much like to do this for you, sir, we can't have you or no one saying nothing about it to management – cos it's against management rules, sir – and if they find out I'm favouring one customer such as your good self over and above any other, Mr Pettit here,' he says, leaning into the gent, his eyes narrowed with meaning –

HARRY: - he was a star.

JACK: - 'Mr Pettit here,' he says, 'is likely to be handed his cards, if you take my meaning.' Anyhow, the outcome of this is the gentleman slips our Vince a couple of quid and agrees to wait for five minutes while the good chap buggers off to Mr Williamson, Dry Cleaners, Villiers Street. Which, to the best of the knowledge of any of us in formal wear hire, has never been known to exist either in formal wear hire or nowhere – so as to come up with the smartest greys outfit, morning coat, mankind has ever had the pleasure of wearing. That's it. 'I'll just pop off, down to Villiers Street, get you the outfit you well and truly deserve, sir – best money can buy. I'll be back soon as I can possibly make it. As the Bard wrote, sir: I'll put a girdle round about the earth in 40 minutes.

HARRY: Puck - The Midsummers Night's dream.

JACK: Fucking Puck.

HARRY: That was part one, eh, Jack?

JACK: Vince, he was a genius. He comes back into the store room, he says to me, he says to whichever one or another of us is present, 'Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street Part 1,' he says. 'Time for a nice cuppa tea.' This was about 3.30. Time for tea. On goes the kettle.

HARRY: Jack's was in charge of the kettle. Vince settles down with a ciggy – Senior Service no 6.

JACK: You couldn't do that nowadays. Not with all these laws. You can't do anything now. Eh?

A BRIEF PAUSE.

JACK: We're in there, the store room, all of us, me, Harry, Vince – Vince - Teddy. As I say, it's afternoon tea time. Nice cuppa, biscuit - Garibaldi. The woman comes in. The Mrs Freshwater woman into the store room, gentlemen's formal wear hire, Johansen Perry, formerly Webber and Son, London's West End Branch.

HARRY: The woman comes in, Mrs Freshwater.

JACK: The woman comes in. Oh, she says, 'Good afternoon. I'm Mrs Freshwater. Department Manager.' She's got a list in her hands. She's reading out our names. One by one. Like it's the school register. 'Mr Kent?' 'Yes, here.' Up goes Harry's hand. (HARRY PUTS HIS HAND UP) That's it. It wasn't anything we could do about it.

HARRY: We're in a trance. Eh?

JACK: Harry here, he forgot to put his hand down, eh, Harry?

HARRY: I forget to out my hand down.

JACK: Had to have his attention brought to it. 'Put your hand down now, Mr Kent,' Mrs Freshwater, the new Department Manager says to him. 'As you know,' she says – 'you may put your hand down now, Mr Kent,' she says – put it down now, Harry –(HARRY PUTS HIS HAND DOWN) 'as you will know,' she says, 'the management are bringing in a number of changes, this with the intention of modernising the department's procedures, of widening our customer base.'

HARRY: They were bringing the department up to date.

JACK: Over the following weekend the cash registers in the fitting area were to be removed, she told us. From that coming Monday all payments by the customers were to be made to her at the cash register in reception. This, it was intended, would speed things up and increase productivity. Security cameras, she told us there - Harry with his hand up - had that past weekend been installed throughout the premises - in reception, the fitting area, and there in the store room. She said if we'd care to look about us, we might see if we could spot them. She informed us an engineer was coming later in the day, eh? The cameras were to be operable before the end of the afternoon. I'll never forget it. She told us cameras were now the standard practise in retail.

HARRY: In combating theft, she said. Eh?

JACK: With a view to creating a welcoming relaxed atmosphere for the customers and the staff, and again in keeping with modern practice, music was to be played during opening hours - the music relayed from speakers which, as with the security cameras, she said, as some of us may have already observed, over the previous weekend, had been installed in the store room and in all areas of the department.

HARRY: I spotted the speaker, eh, Jack? We were all looking weren't we? Eh? Looking about. I was the first to spot a speaker. Mrs Freshwater, she congratulated me. 'Well, done, Mr Kent,' she said. Didn't she, Jack? There were two of them – the speakers, eh? Weren't there, Jack?

JACK: Two - yes.

HARRY: We were looking here and there up in the ceiling, top of the walls, below the ceiling – she was encouraging us – 'you're getting warmer,' she said. Warmer. Then I see it. The second one. 'Well done again,' she says. 'Three cheers for Harry Kent,' Vince says. 'Hip hip horray. Hip hip horray, hip hip horray.'

JACK: Mrs Freshwater, she tells us, she won't keep us from our work any longer. 'I know you're busy,' she said. 'You know you're not allowed smoke in the store room,' she said to Vince. 'Thank you for your time,' she said. Off she went. Cameras. Security cameras everywhere. Dear God. Dear God in Heaven. The cash registers taken away. How were we to secure the gratuities when the gentlemen were paying up to her out there in reception? It was the beginning of the end, it was.

HARRY: It was the end of the bloody world.

JACK: You can say that again.

HARRY: It was the end of the bloody world.

JACK: Teddy Harris – it was a set back for him. Vince said the cash registers removed, Teddy, he was going to have to take on a newspaper round on top of everything, eh? Teddy wasn't happy. None of us were. Cameras, cash registers – bloody music. The gentlemen didn't want music. We'd never had music. Never.

HARRY: Perry Como.

JACK: What?

HARRY: Perry Como. That's what Mrs Freshwater was playing, was coming over on the speakers – Perry Como. Him and Andy Williams. 'And I love you so, if people ask me how, how I've lived till now, I tell them I don't know.'

JACK: Vince, he picked out a Greys outfit – smart outfit – 'right,' he says, The Dry Cleaners in Villiers Street Part Two. I'm getting 3 quid out of this gentleman, if it kills me, he said. He returned to his Mr Barton in fitting room 3. We've seen him, eh, Harry?

HARRY: He was a star, he was.

JACK: That's it.

HARRY: There was none could touch him.

JACK: He opens the door to the fitting room, he's all out of breath, barely able to hold himself up from the exertion, hangs onto the side of the door frame –

BOTH JACK AND HARRY: 'Sorry to have kept you so long, sir,' -

JACK: - he says to his gentleman, Vince himself hardly able to get the words out on account of the breathlessness, 'Mr Williamson, he not there, sir, on his holidays, quite forgot, his assistant there, Mr Dixon, not an easy fellow, sir, took a bit of persuading if you know what I mean - had to give him an extra quid, sir. Got a lovely outfit, morning coat here, sir,' Vince says, 'Just newly cleaned, sir, almost brand new.'

JACK AND HARRY (TOGETHER): 'If you'd be good enough to try it on for me, sir, thank you.' The morning coat, whole outfit, fits the gentleman like a glove, perfect.

HARRY: The gentleman, he's pleased as punch, he is.

JACK: He is. He settles his bill, pays Vince the 3 quid he is supposed to have handed over to Mr Dixon in Villiers Street, tips Vince a further 2 quid for all the hard work on the gentleman's behalf 'and thank you very much, Mr Pettit,' says the gentleman. 'And thank you very much indeed, sir,' says Vince. Vince, he's made 5 quid. 5 quid.

HARRY: A fiver. A fiver, it meant a great deal in the 70's.

JACK: It did, Harry. The Dry Cleaners in Villiers Street. Forget your Ibsen, your Shakespeare, your Harold Pinters, The Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street can rightfully be claimed the greatest drama to be witnessed anywhere and in any theatre in London's West End.

HARRY: Forget John Gielgud, forget Laurence Olivier, Sir Donald Wolfit, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, forget Albert Finney, Vince Pettit in The Dry Cleaners In Villiers Street was, in his day, unsurpassable. A star.

JACK: Top of the bill.

A BRIEF PAUSE.

JACK: Vince comes out of the fitting room. Teddy's on his way to the store room for an outfit for one of his gentlemen. Vince he collars him.

HARRY: He'd found out, become cognisant of that fact that Teddy had been fitting up one of his regulars, hadn't he?

JACK: He bangs him against the wall, knees him in the bollocks, beats the hell out him. You don't fucking fit up my regulars, he told him.

HARRY: You didn't cross Vince Pettit, not in those days.

JACK: He's beating the hell out of him, he's telling Teddy as how Steve Carter, who was with us till about a year before, how Steve Carter fucked Teddy's wife Julia – this was during Sammy Webbers Farewell Party.

HARRY: We heard him, shouting, eh, Jack?

JACK: He fucked her - Steve Carter and Teddy's wife Julia Harris back of morning tails rack 38 long arm.

HARRY: They were on top of trousers drawers waist: 44 – halve it: 22 – inside leg: 33.

JACK: The next thing is – Vince is given his cards. Eh? Given the push. Tell them, Harry – tell them.

HARRY: I go to reception to collect the gentleman, don't I? - only it's one of Vince's regulars. I say, 'the gentleman is one of Mr Pettit's regulars, Mrs Freshwater,' I say. 'No, no,' she says. 'Mr Pettit,' she says, 'is no longer with us. He's been dismissed on charges of embezzlement.'

JACK: Embezzlement. No. The odd scam. Maybe the odd overpaid bill – nothing more than that.

HARRY: She said he'd had his fingers in the till in a big way.

JACK: Of course Teddy made out he wasn't surprised.

HARRY: He said as how that property Vince had in Spain, it was not one apartment, it's two. He says as how Vince told him so at Sammy Webbers Farewell Party - Vince with a good deal of Guinness inside him.

JACK: Vince, he came down from the office on the 2nd. I'm leaving, he says. He'd worked there for 27 years, he said, he hadn't worked his bollocks off for Webbers then Johansen Perry to have them accuse him of embezzlement - fingers in till. We couldn't believe it. Eh, Harry? We tried to tell him, didn't we? For God's sake. The place, it wouldn't be the same without him, would it?

HARRY: It would be the same.

JACK: Webbers, Johansen Perry without Vince Pettit – the gentlemen coming in, they weren't going to like it.

HARRY: Vince, he wasn't having none of it.

JACK: He wasn't.

HARRY: He was leaving.

JACK: That was that. Eh? He went over to the trouser drawers –

HARRY: Trouser drawers waist 50 - halve it 25, inside leg 29, eh?

JACK: He fished out a brown leather holdall.

HARRY: Brown leather holdall. Like what Jack's gentleman Mr Penrose spoke of. Russian Embassy – financing the British Communist Party.

JACK: Vince Pettit was a patriot. He was British to the core. He hated the unions.

HARRY: He said so himself often enough, that's true.

JACK: Him and that brown leather holdall. It was enough to break your heart. Monday afternoon, 23rd, July, 1973. That woman Mrs Freshwater, her and her handbag, laying down the law - the changes, cash registers, security cameras, fucking muzac – Perry Como, Andy Williams – Teddy with a broken jaw. Vince - Vince Pettit sacked.

HARRY: He fucked off with the brown leather holdall. He went to live in Spain. So we heard.

JACK: He never came back – we never see him again. Teddy comes into the store room, he tells me as how Harry is leaving – Harry had given in his notice. Alec Garfield in Accounts had told him – Alec, no doubt, having got it from Personnel.

HARRY: I'm sorry about that, Jack.

JACK: I not know, did I? I wasn't told about Harry leaving, was I? No.

HARRY: I'm sorry, Jack. Only I was going to tell you, I hadn't wanted to upset you.

JACK: He'd got a job, 3 ½ days a week, menswear sales, at Austin Reeds.

HARRY: It was my knees. My physio, she'd told me, if I didn't slow down, I'd have no more knees no more to complain about.

JACK: The Freshwater woman, the cash registers, cameras – the fucking music. Vince sacked. My wife – Janice – she dying, three weeks before, wasn't it? Right.

HARRY: Sorry about that, Jack. Jack's wife, she'd got cancer.

JACK: That's it. Right. Harry Kent leaving. Fucking off to Austin Reed. That fucking woman comes in and everything goes kaput.

A PAUSE WHILE THEY DRINK.

JACK: We said we'd have a meal together – you remember, Harry? – I said come over, my house, I'll cook us up something. We'd get together over a bit of dinner. Only we haven't – have we, eh?

HARRY: We meet for a drink most evenings. Still meet for a drink, Jack.

JACK: That's it. Harry saying he was leaving that day, Monday afternoon 23rd June 1973 – I tell you – I thought that was the last straw. Nothing worse could happen.

HARRY: Only it wasn't the last straw was it? Eh?

JACK: No, it wasn't. The world turned on its head all between half two and half five on a Monday afternoon – all in 3 hours, Harry – 3 hours. I went back to the store room to select an outfit for a gentleman just come in, there was Teddy, he was throwing a tea mug at the tannoy speaker, at Mrs Freshwater, her on the tannoy speaker.

HARRY: It was Jack's mug he was throwing, wasn't it, Jack?

JACK: That mug was given to me on my birthday by Fred Robinson, him with the bunions and the slippers.

HARRY: Jack threw Teddy's mug at Mrs Freshwater on the tannoy speaker.

JACK: That's it.

HARRY: I threw my own mug at Mrs Freshwater on the tannoy speaker, didn't I, eh, Jack?

JACK: Only he missed, didn't he?

HARRY: I missed.

JACK: We're back with the gentlemen, fitting them up nicely, the music Perry Como, Andy Williams - I'm saying to my gentleman – what was his name? – Deaken? - as how staff and gentlemen were signing a petition to present to management, Johansen Perry requesting the removal of Mrs Freshwater. My gentleman – Mr Deaken - he says – as how he's read in The Times that morning as how Johansen Perry were selling up –

the premises, the building was going to be made into a supermarket.
Webber and Son West End Branch was to become a supermarket.

HARRY: A supermarket.

JACK: A fucking woman comes in, takes over as Department Manager,
and, before you can say Jack Robinson, we're pulled down and made into
a fucking supermarket.

THEY HEAR MUSIC COMING FROM THE PREMISES IN WHICH
THEY ARE RELATING THIS STORY. THEY RECOGNIZE THE
SONG. THEY JOIN IN. AND AFTER A WHILE, THE SONG
CONTINUING, THEY EACH PUT ON THEIR OUTSIDE COATS,
THEIR HATS, AND EXIT AND LEAVE THE BUILDING.

JACK: You hear what I hear, Harry?

HARRY: Perry Como – if I'm not mistaken. That woman, she was
always playing that one.

JACK AND HARRY JOIN IN THE SONG.

JACK: Time to make a move, Harry. Eh?

HARRY: Home we go then, eh, Jack?

JACK: That's it. Knees all right?

HARRY: I reckon they'll make it.

JACK: On we go. That's it. Coats. Your hat. Right. Here we are, my old salt. There. Nice coat, Harry.

HARRY: It's lasted.

JACK: They knew how to make coats then – when you bought this, eh? Right. (HELPING HARRY ON WITH THE COAT): On we go. That's it.

HARRY: Much obliged, Jack.

JACK: Nice and comfy. Eh? (PLAYING THE PART): 'Fit's you well, sir. Always a pleasure to serve you, sir.' Eh?

HARRY: (PLAYING THE PART): 'The Unions, as you say, sir, bringing the country to its knees. That Mr McGahey.'

JACK: (PUTTING ON HIS OWN COAT): That's it. Eh?

THEY START JOINING IN WITH THE SONG THEY CAN HEAR.

JACK PUTS THE HAT ON HARRY'S HEAD.

JACK: Here we go. No hurry. One step after another. That's it.

HARRY: Here we go.

JACK: Say goodnight, Harry.

HARRY: Goodnight, Harry.

THEY EXIT.

END