

Holding the Centre

by Joy Hinckley



The action takes place in a small Community Centre. Time: The present.

Essential elements are two desks and chairs, a sofa and footstool, and an area representing a kitchenette, with a fridge. Over to one side, “outside”, is a park bench. Lighting can alter to indicate active area.

Characters

Joanne Community Centre Manager

Mel Community Centre Administrator

Fiona (“Fifi”) Community Centre volunteer. (*Note: this role is written to be an accessible one, able to be played by a young woman with an intellectual disability if wished.*)

Beanie An elderly homeless woman

Please address requests to perform to Hinckley_joy@hotmail.com

There is a royalty fee of \$15 per performance for paying audiences.

Beanie sits quietly on the bench. **Mel** and **Joanne** are in the office getting ready for their day.

Lights up. **Mel** is at her desk. **Joanne** is at the kitchen benchtop, brandishing a piece of paper towel, crossly wiping up a spill. She looks into the sink.

Joanne What grubs! How many times?! I mean seriously, what do you have to do? What?

Mel swivels chair around to look.

Mel Everything all right, Jo?

Joanne Joanne, please.

Mel Everything all right, Joanne?

Joanne *(indicating sink area with a sweeping gesture)* This.

Mel This...

Joanne gestures for **Mel** to come over. She does. **Mel** looks into sink where **Joanne** is indicating.

Joanne Somebody has left a soggy teabag on the sink. A filthy, lazy person. Was it you?

Mel No.

Joanne This cannot go unchallenged.

Mel It's a teabag Joanne.

Joanne You see, Melissa, this is where you and I differ. You see a teabag. I see the insidious edge of a particularly pernicious wedge. Zero tolerance, Melissa! It's the only option. Once you turn a blind eye to teabags, the way is free and clear for all out anarchy and chaos to be let loose. Dirty mugs. Milk not put back in the fridge. Bacteria covered Chux wipes. Disease. Conflict. The demise of civil society as we know it.

Mel Yeah?

Joanne Absolutely. *(grimacing, picks up the teabag, and holding her other hand underneath to catch any drips in the paper towel, puts it in the bin)* This teabag, Mel, is indicative of a society that's lost its moral compass. *(An appeal to reason.)* When time proves me correct and the utter collapse of civilisation is upon us, and everything is swept away, what will you do?

Mel Hope that an only slightly used teabag is still hanging around?

Joanne You can scoff now. Mark my words. Mark my words, Melissa. *(She sweeps out of the room.)*

Mel *(Unruffled)* Will do. Thanks, Joanne.

Mel goes back to her desk. Picks up tea mug from the upstage side of computer, where it has been invisible to audience so far, toasts the departed figure of **Joanne**, and drinks.

Mel (To herself.) Poor Joanne. I would have got round to it eventually. Probably.

Joanne strides back into tea room with a pre-blue-tacked hand-written sign in thick black marker pen. It reads DO NOT LEAVE TEA BAGS IN OR ON THE SINK!! CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELF!!! with a frowny emoji. She sticks the sign above the sink, unsticks and straightens it, and goes back to her desk. This action gives her some satisfaction and a renewed if misguided optimism that things can improve.

Mel starts opening some mail while the above is happening. She scans the contents and puts the letters in one or another random looking piles on her desk. One piece of mail gives her pause.

Mel Urgh.

Joanne What?

Mel Bank statement. Our situation is looking a bit dire.

Joanne I know. Our funding is never enough. The Centre can't afford to keep operating properly at this rate. It's not like we waste money or anything.

Fiona (Fifi) enters, passing through the park on her way to the Centre. She is carrying an old portable music player, and a sandwich bag. She waves a greeting to Beanie, and hands her the sandwich as she passes. She continues on her way and enters the Centre.) Hey Mel. Hey Joanne. (**Joanne** waves, distracted. **Fiona** gives Mel a quick hug.) Boss ladies, can we replace this crappy old player?

Joanne and Mel No.

Mel We're very low on money, Fifi. Lucky you don't cost us anything or you'd be out.

Fiona Best Community Centre vollie ever! Are you joining in the karaoke today?

Joanne You ask this every time, Fiona. No, I don't do karaoke.

Mel Me neither.

Fiona I can't understand why you would miss something that would make you happy.

Joanne Mm. (as Fiona starts to go) Ah – Fiona? Can you please not do "I Will Survive"? Just for this once?

Fiona No "I Will Survive"? I'm an oppressed minority!

Joanne (Wryly) No doubt.

Fiona flounces out with the player, not really annoyed, just enjoying a chance to be dramatic.

Mel Would it kill you to listen to "I Will Survive" once a week?

Joanne Yes.

Mel Or call her Fifi like she prefers?

Joanne I'm sorry, I can't bring myself to do it. Fifi is a name for a poodle.

Joanne leans over Mel's desk and starts to riffle through the disorderly heaps of papers.

Joanne Melissa, this desk is a pig's midden.

Mel *(laughs)* "Pig's midden?" Where do you get these expressions?

Joanne Go on, laugh. The fact remains, your desk is not only so dreadful to look at that it reflects badly on the Centre, but there is no system! How on earth do you find anything?

Mel What exactly is it you're looking for?

Joanne That grant application form that came the other week. I was planning to apply for it, remember, but I've been so flat out I hadn't got around to it. I'd better get onto it now. We've got to find that extra funding from somewhere soon.

Mel Why didn't you just ask? *(reaches into a seemingly random pile and pulls out the form)*
There you go.

Joanne flips through the form's pages.

Joanne How many pages is this?

Mel Fourteen. Not just tick'n'flick, either.

Joanne Kill me now. When's the deadline?

Mel *(scans form)* Oh.

Joanne Oh?

Mel The deadline is today.

Joanne That's it then. We've got so much on today! No grant. Damn!

Mel No, we can do it. I've made it easier for you. See, when you said we should apply I filled a lot of it out. There's just a few bits I didn't know the answers to.

Joanne Great. Leave it with me. But can you please take on everything else till I get this done? Starting with going to buy some milk. Oh, and biscuits. I don't know where they keep disappearing to. Although I do have my suspicions *(She doesn't suspect Mel. Clearly someone else)*.

Mel Don't look at me. Strictly rationed to one a day. *(picks up handbag and exits)*

Joanne leafs through form, scanning the questions.

Joanne Oh good, not too many blank spaces at all. She may not be the tidiest person on the planet but she does have her uses.

Joanne settles in to work, putting on a pair of headphones so she can concentrate. She starts to read the questions, thinking about what to say and writing on the form. She refers to her computer or printed documents from time to time.

During the above action, **Beanie's** hand, encased in a disgusting old sock as though it was a puppet, appears, and "looks around". There being no reaction, the sock turns towards the offstage holder and nods. **Beanie's** head appears, and looks around. She tiptoes in and across to the fridge. Opening the fridge as carefully as possible, she takes out a packet of Choc Wheaten biscuits, and with the puppet hand empties it out, stuffing the biscuits in her pockets with the other hand. Makes to leave, then reconsiders and takes one biscuit from her pocket (using the sock) and puts it back into the packet, which she then returns to the fridge.

She goes to tiptoe out again, meeting **Fiona**, who has seen the last part of this action, on her way in. **Fiona** goes to speak, but **Beanie** lifts a finger to the puppet's lips, makes a shushing motion with her own lips, and winks. **Fiona** gives a thumbs-up. **Beanie** exits and goes to sit on her bench outside. **Fiona** puts the kettle on.

Joanne *(looking up)* Is it coffee time?

Fiona Yep. You having one?

Joanne *(sighs)* May as well. Might liven me up enough to get through this application.

Fiona puts out another cup. **Joanne** goes to the fridge and takes out and opens the biscuit packet.

Joanne *(an ominous tone)* Fiona. Do you know what happened to all of my biscuits?

Fiona *(Nervously - Joanne is not someone to mess with where her Choc Wheatens are involved)* No?

Joanne *(Imitating the upward inflection)* No? That doesn't sound very definite.

Fiona *(Definitely)* No.

Joanne That does sound more definite but it's too late, I already don't believe you. What happened to the biscuits, Fiona?

Fiona can't prevent herself from glancing in the direction of the door.

Joanne *(looking towards door)* Give me a hint. Would the biscuits now be sitting on a bench under the big tree in the park next door? In a certain homeless pocket?

Joanne can tell by the look on Fiona's face that she's correct. She goes to the door and calls.

Joanne Beanie – could you come here for a moment please?

After a moment **Beanie** enters.

Beanie You called?

Joanne Beanie. *(quickly throws an old crochet rug on the sofa and indicating to Beanie that she should sit)* Take a seat.

Beanie sits, all innocence.

Fiona It wasn't me. She read my mind. I think she might be an alien actually.

Joanne Beanie. Did you, or did you not, remove all but one out of a packet of Choc Wheatens from the fridge?

Beanie I did not.

Joanne So you are denying that you removed biscuits, which did not belong to you, from the fridge?

Beanie Yep.

Joanne I'm calling the police. Fiona, make sure she doesn't escape.

Fiona Wait! If Beanie tells the truth, can you please not call the police?

Joanne Why shouldn't I?

Mel enters.

Mel Hello, what's going on here? Looks like the Spanish Inquisition.

Joanne I have reason to believe, as I suspected all along, that this is our biscuit thief. What do you think, is this a police matter? It is happening on an annoyingly regular basis.

Mel Let's not, eh?

Joanne Because?

Mel Because...um...consider it training. Training in acquiring the correct moral compass. A lesson in honesty for Beanie here. Think of the payoff down the track. The small things that contribute to the building of a civil society.

Joanne *(Sighs)* Fine. *(To Beanie.)* The truth this time please. Melissa and Fiona have come out in support of you here. Don't let them down. Did you or did you not steal almost an entire packet of Choc Wheatens from this fridge?

Beanie *(In all seriousness)* I never touched no biscuits, Choc Wheatens or otherwise.

Joanne *(On autopilot)* ANY biscuits.

Mel Please, Beanie. You won't get into trouble if you tell the truth. Will she, Joanne?

Joanne *(Reluctantly)* Not this time. Tell the truth for once, Beanie. Moral fibre! Come now, it's time to come clean, turn over a new leaf.

Beanie I deny absolutely any biscuit nicking, from this fridge or anywhere else.

Joanne See? What did I tell you? Incapable of being honest. I'm calling the police.

Beanie Whoa. Whoa. Wait up there. I didn't say I don't have the biscuits. It was Mr Odorous that done it. He gave them to me.

Joanne Who is Mr Odorous?

Beanie *(Taking hand out of pocket with the sock puppet on it and making it talk)* "Hello, Joanne, I'm Mr Odorous, but you can call me Mal."

Mel *(grins)* Malodorous.

Joanne *(Gives an "Aurgh" of frustration)*

Beanie Anyway, it's a Community Centre. I thought they were community biscuits.

Joanne They had a post-it note stuck on them saying "Joanne's Biscuits Hands Off".

Beanie There was that, yes.

Joanne I give up. You win. Melissa, did you get Choc Wheatens?

Mel Um...no, Ginger Nuts.

Joanne Ginger Nuts. Who buys Ginger Nuts?! I'm getting my emergency Choc Wheatens out of the safe and they'd better not go missing this time. *(Exits.)*

Beanie *(calling after her)* Got any Tim Tams in there?

Mel *(admiringly)* You're a shocker.

Beanie Thanks.

Mel *(taking biscuits from bag)* Want a Ginger Nut?

Fiona and Beanie Ginger Nuts?! Oh, all right.

Mel Beanie, you really shouldn't eat quite so many biscuits. We do have bread and fruit here, you know.

Beanie *(A bit whiny)* But biscuits make the pain go away for a bit.

Fiona Pain?

Beanie They stop me from being too ... depressed.

Mel You could get some proper anti-depression medication. *(Beanie shakes her head dismissively.)* I take it, there's no shame in it.

Beanie Nah, not me.

Mel These meds make it possible for me to have this job.

Beanie You say that like it's a good thing. *(She takes another biscuit and leaves, encountering Joanne on the way out.)*

Fiona *(To Mel)* I like Beanie, she's cheeky.

Joanne *(to Mel and Fiona)* Don't encourage her. You're not doing her any favours. I don't know why she needs so many biscuits anyway.

Mel They increase her functionality. Like websites.

Joanne What?

Mel You know, 'The use of cookies enables us to perform better.'

Joanne That's not funny. Oh all right, it is a bit funny. *(She goes to the kitchen benchtop, picks up her coffee and takes the last of the old Choc Wheatens)*

Fiona Ummm...I wouldn't eat that if I was you. *(Takes the biscuit from Joanne)* Mr Odorous had his mouth on it. *(Exits)*

Joanne Ugh! *(Takes one of the new biscuits and goes back to work on the form.)*

The lights lower on the office and brighten on the bench. During the following, Mel and Joanne continue to work quietly at their desks.

Fiona *(Goes across to Beanie and sits next to her.)* Beanie, can I ask you something? Is it because you're a homeless person that you're depressed and have to eat biscuits?

Beanie Am I depressed because I'm homeless? Sure. But I'm also homeless because I'm depressed. *(Makes a circular motion with hand)* It's – complicated, Fifi.

Fiona Why don't you have a home?

Beanie Don't want one.

Fiona Now you're not making any sense. Home is lovely thing to have. Nice, comfortable. Home is where people look after each other and love them. Even my sister loves me – although she does do this with her eyes at me sometimes *(demonstrates rolling eyes face)*.

Beanie Doesn't sound like any home I ever had.

Fiona That's sad. Didn't you have a mum and dad?

Beanie Well I didn't get found under a cabbage.

Fiona What?

Beanie I had a mum. Must've had a dad too, but he shot through when I was a baby.

Fiona What did he shoot through? Did you get hurt?

Beanie Sorry love. 'Shot through' just means he left us.

Fiona You got some funny ways of saying things. What about your mum?

Beanie Mum was OK but useless. I suppose she loved me in her own way. Useter get drunk and forget to feed me. I never got a bath. I had headlice all the time. Scratch, scratch, scratch (*demonstrates*).

Fiona Headlice?

Beanie Bitey insects. They live in hair. They breed and start jumping across to other people.

Fiona looks horrified and moves away slightly.

Beanie I don't think there are any in residence right now. (*Gives an experimental scratch.*) Nope. Blood's too toxic to appeal to 'em these days. Where was I? Mum thought it might be a good idea to get married again. Get a man to support us. Roger. Vicious bastard. Always yelling at us. Knocked us about. I got out of there when I was thirteen.

Fiona I think you need an extra biscuit, Beanie. (*Hands her the Choc Wheaten*)

Beanie (*Holds it out*) Oh, beautiful. A work of art. (*A bit of impromptu poetry*) A biscuit and a cuppa tea, this lovely bench, enough for me.

Fiona (*Laughing*) Biscuits *do* make you happy, don't they Beanie?

Beanie (*Through a mouthful of biscuit*) They say they're bad for me but yeah, they do. They make – (*She breaks off. It's a tough subject for her. Mr Odorous comes out of the pocket and 'speaks'*) Biscuits, Fifi, biscuits make it easier for Beanie to think about her shitty childhood. Eh Beanie? Like being on the streets at thirteen, when being cold and hungry and frightened is still better than being at home.

Fiona (*To the sock*) So Beanie's been homeless ever since then!?

Beanie Nah. She stopped turning up for school because the kids gave her hell for being dirty and ragged and itchy. So the government rounded her up and made her a Ward of the State.

Fiona You lost me after 'The government'.

Beanie Ward of the State means the government takes over the job of caring for you. In theory anyway. (*Mr Odorous is put down*) Care's a pretty loose word for what I got at the State Home. That 'Home' was even worse than the last one. Roger might have bashed me but at least he didn't —

Fiona gives a questioning look as Beanie breaks off.

Beanie Let's just say I was made to grow up a lot quicker than I should've. It left its marks on me, Fifi. Could never seem to get my act together after that. Lost jobs because I couldn't control my temper. Lost relationships because I never believed I deserved 'em and set

about stupidly proving it every time. *(Thinks. Then, mostly to herself)* I don't think I ever had anybody really love me.

Fiona *(Embraces Beanie)* I love you.

Beanie *(Touched)* Thanks, love. *(After hesitating, Beanie tentatively and stiffly hugs back)*

They stay in the hug silently for a moment.

Fiona Beanie.

Beanie Yes, love?

Fiona You smell terrible.

Beanie sighs and goes to move away. **Fiona** holds her tighter. After a moment, **Beanie** relaxes into the hug, as the lights lower on the bench and come up on the office. Exit **Fiona**.

Joanne There. Form all filled out. I should really go through and read all this now, make sure it's as strong as possible.

Mel There's no time, Joanne. Look, if it doesn't get through we're no worse off than if we hadn't sent it at all. But it HAS to go right now. We've got a bunch of stuff to do, including cleaning up after the kiddies craft workshop before the writers' group gets here. They leave a mess every time. You think I run a pig's midden. I don't know how you can manage to make so much detritus turning old socks into puppets.

Joanne *(Takes form to Mel)* You're right. Can you scan the form and email it off?

Mel No worries.

Joanne No worries... *(laughs feebly)* I wish!

Lights dim. Exit Mel and Joanne.

Lights up on Beanie, who is still thinking about the past. Mr Odorous takes a biscuit out and offers it to a despondent Beanie. She contemplates it and shakes her head.

Beanie Nah. Enough is enough.

Mr Odorous hangs his head a little then retreats to the pocket. Lights dim. Beanie exits.

Incidental segue music to indicate passage of time.

Lights up on office. It is a week later. Joanne is at her desk checking emails. Mel is at hers, reading a report and making notes. Fiona enters via the park, hands Beanie a sandwich bag, then enters the office with the music player.

Fiona Hey Mel, hey Joanne.

Joanne Is it karaoke day again already? That week went fast.

Fiona Yep. (*Sings*) "Once I was afraid –" (*Joanne looks pained. Fifi grins.*) Oops, sorry, forgot. (*She goes to the sink area, puts her lunch in the fridge then puts on the kettle*)

Joanne Oh, we've got an email about the grant application. We're on the shortlist, and they want to come and visit and be shown around the centre and given an idea of what goes on here. Wow Melissa, your application writing skills are terrific!

Mel looks up.

Mel Oh, fantastic!

Joanne (*reading the email further and looking mystified*) Melissa, when you were helpfully filling out the application form, could any of your responses be described in any way as 'creative writing'?

Mel Um.

Joanne Because there's one bit here I don't quite get. (*Reads aloud*) 'We look forward to meeting your new Patron if possible, and discussing future directions for the Centre with her'. Patron? Would you care to speak to this – revelation?

Mel Well, there was a question asking what other recent measures the Centre has taken to attract community support and funding.

Joanne Uh huh.

Mel So...I told them we recently appointed a Patron.

Joanne You told them we have a Patron.

Mel looks abashed.

Mel I – made one up? I didn't think it would a problem. I didn't think they'd expect to meet her.

Joanne It's a problem, Melissa.

Mel Well, it *is* a good idea, maybe we could get somebody before their visit?

Joanne it may well be a good idea, but listen to this: 'We appreciate that it's short notice, but we will be in your area this afternoon to visit another organisation which has applied, and if we could pop in then it would be great.' We simply have to see them this afternoon or the other lot will beat us to the funding!

Mel Well — maybe one of the board members can ...pretend?

Joanne (*Dubiously*) One of *our* board members.

Mel Yes?

Fiona comes back into main part of office and looks from one to the other.

Fiona Hello. Sad face sad face. What's wrong?

Joanne Melissa has invented an important person to represent us, and now the people handing out grant money want to meet her. So now we are going to have to get somebody to pretend to be that person.

Fiona Don't look at me. Unless you want me to have a karaoke session with them.

Mel Look, the board are all wonderful people. There's Claire –

Joanne Claire is a lovely lady, and wants the best for the centre. But that often gets expressed in complaining how everything isn't being done right and was better in the old days. That leads to reminiscences about the old days. Once she's on a roll you know how hard it is to get a word in edgeways.

Mel Well what about Won?

Joanne Again, Won is fabulous. But she's really shy with people she doesn't know. And really self-conscious about her English. So that only leaves Barry. Who's a man, and you've already told them it's a woman called (*refers to email*) Judith Goldworthy.

Fiona Barry does wear a skirt.

Joanne That's not quite the same thing.

Mel Do you think he wears a skirt as a political statement or what?

Fiona He just loves it and he thinks he looks brilliant in it. And he likes to "Let the breeze up there".

Mel How do you know?

Fiona I asked him.

Mel You can't just come straight out and ask people things like that.

Fiona I can.

Joanne Girls – let's focus! Melissa, we need to find somebody who is here a lot, knows the Centre well, is available today, and is a smooth-talking persuader.

At that moment Mr Odorous pokes his head in.

Beanie (*funny voice from outside, not visible except for the "puppet"*) Biiiscuiits. Biiscuits. Mmm. Need biscuits. (*puppet "looks around"*)

*Fiona goes to the fridge, takes out the biscuit packet, puts one in the puppet's mouth. Meanwhile, **Mel and Joanne** look at each other. The puppet disappears from view with the biscuit. **Fiona** claps and laughs delightedly.*

Joanne Absolutely not. Do not even think it.

Mel You reckon?

Joanne It would be a debacle. Think about it. She's a complete loose cannon. Crazy as a coconut. Not to mention the fact that she smells like the tip on a hot day.

The sock puppet "peers" in.

Beanie (off) Cuppa teeea.

Joanne looks up in frustration.

Joanne Beanie! We're trying to concentrate here!

Beanie's head pops in.

Beanie (sounding sincerely contrite) Sorry, Joanne. I was just trying to add a bright spot to your day. And I was so desperate for a nice cup of tea.

Joanne relents.

Joanne Fiona, could you put the kettle on for a cup of tea, please?

Beanie Yesss! My charm and advanced wheedling powers triumph yet again. Thanks Fifi love. (Comes into the office and goes to sit on the sofa. **Joanne** intercepts her with the old blanket. **Beanie** sits and makes herself comfortable. Mr Odorous speaks) So what's the big problem you're concentrating on? Anything Beanie here can assist you with?

Mel Well now you mention it –

Joanne NO.

Beanie Hello. This is a bit interesting. What's up and why the outsize NO?

Mel looks at Joanne. Joanne sits back and folds her arms. Beanie and Fiona look on.

Mel We should tell her at least. See what she thinks.

Beanie You definitely should now, yes.

Joanne We applied for a grant last week. To improve our chances of looking grant-worthy, Melissa ...invented a Patron.

Mel Called Judith Goldworthy.

Joanne Now they want to come here this very afternoon to check out the centre and meet –

Mel Ms Goldworthy herself. That's right. Today. And we don't know who we can get to do it.

Beanie Sure. I'll do it.

Joanne What?

Beanie I'll act the Patron bit.

Joanne Look, that's a lovely thought, Beanie, but with all due respect, I don't think —

Beanie Don't forget, I've had more experience with government people than most. How about Truancy Officer: *(officious voice)* "You need to be responsible for your own learning if you want to survive in the world." Oh really. I learned how to use a can opener when I was two so that I could survive in the world when nobody remembered to feed me.

The others stare.

Joanne Do that again.

Beanie The Truancy Officer? Or maybe you'd prefer the Magistrate? *(Deep, snooty and ponderous male voice)* Shoplifting. Public nuisance. Vandalism. *(Rhetorically)* Did no-one ever teach you how to behave like a decent human being?" What do you reckon, you old fart. Nobody taught me how to be a human being of any description. Or anything else for that matter.
Maybe Kindly Church Lady? *(Patronisingly bourgeois)* There you are dear, a nice toiletry pack. Clean yourself up a bit.

Mel I reckon we go for it. We WILL have to clean her up a bit. No offence, Beanie.

Beanie None taken.

Joanne Right, well. *(Thinks)* Oh what the hell. It's not like we have any other choices. You do your best to get her shipshape and I'll nip over the road to the op shop and find an outfit.

Mel Aye aye, captain. *(She pulls off Beanie's beanie with her extended arm and holds it between her thumb and forefinger.)* The hair is going to be a problem.

Fiona I'll get the drama group costume box. We've got wigs in there. *(To Beanie, sternly.)* But there'd better not be any headlights in it when it comes back.

Joanne What — oh never mind. *(She goes to get her handbag.)*

Mel *(to Beanie)* Come on, then, let's get you turned into Lady Muck.

Fiona I thought muck was dirt.

Mel It is, but — oh never mind. Come on.

Fiona Why does everybody keep saying that!?! *(Mutters)* Oh, never mind.

Joanne What's your shoe size? *(Beanie shrugs)*

Mel Pop your feet up on this stool and we'll get those rancid old boots and socks off and have a look.

Beanie complies, and **Mel** and **Fiona** gingerly remove a boot each, and **Fiona** carries them outside. **Mel** pulls down the long men's socks Beanie is wearing, and gasps. Beanie has a huge ulcer on her leg.

Mel Beanie, your leg looks terrible. We need to get you to a doctor.

Beanie No! No doctor.

Mel Beanie, it's really bad. You really need to get it seen to.

Beanie Don't hassle me!

Joanne enters and sees the leg.

Joanne That's a really bad ulceration. You can't just ignore it. It must be horribly painful.

Fiona Beanie, you need to be in the hospital. Your leg is making me feel spewy.

Beanie Stop ganging up on me! I won't, OK? I just won't. No doctors, no hospitals, no social bloody workers.

Joanne But —

Beanie *(to Joanne)* Just leave it! Not going to hospital! You don't understand! *(She puts her legs down and makes to get up and leave.)*

Joanne looks at the others, who shrug.

Joanne Oh for god's sake. Beanie, stop. Mel, bring the first aid kit. Fiona, get out the biscuit packet and stand over there where she can see it. Put your leg back up, Beanie.

Beanie goes to object.

Joanne Ut! *(a cutting-off noise and gesture)* No leg, no biscuit. *(Fiona waves the biscuits.)* Ever.

Beanie looks rebellious.

Joanne. Ever. E-V-E-R. Not. One. Biscuit.

Beanie *(putting leg up on box)* Bully.

Joanne That's right. Somebody's got to be. This looks infected. You don't want it to go black and gangrenous, 'cos then your leg'll have to be sawn off completely.

Fifi Like on the cigarette packet. Oh my god. Now I AM spewy. I'll have to sit down. I'm going to set up for karaoke. *(She takes the music player and exits)*

Meanwhile, Mel has entered with the first aid kit and is looking for things needed to clean and bind the leg.

Mel *(To Beanie)* Come through to the bathroom and let's do this properly. *(To Joanne)* We'll be all right here, Joanne. You go and get the outfit. Better bring pants.

They exit. Lights dim. Short segue music.

Lights up. It is later that afternoon. There is a sound of a group of people conversing offstage. Joanne and Fiona enter. Fiona has some dirty plates, etc. Joanne goes over to the fridge and takes out a platter of sandwiches or finger food.

Joanne I'll take this one through and try to distract Claire, she's starting to get a bit much and she's only up to the 1960s.

Fiona How do you think we're going?

Joanne Miraculously, we seem to be doing well. The grant people actually look like they're having a good time. I think I have a stomach ulcer, and I have no fingernails left, but apart from that, yeah. *(She takes out a cake on a plate.)*

Fiona takes the pile of dirty dishes to the sink, then goes and sits in Joanne's chair. Exhales, then starts to silently imitate Joanne at work at her desk. Giggles.

Beanie enters and trudges wearily to the sofa. She is transformed, in a wig, smart pants and silky shirt. She doesn't immediately notice Fiona. She sighs with exhaustion and, after glancing back offstage to where the others are, pulls off the wig, giving her head a satisfying scratch all over. After a moment, she holds the wig like a puppet, stuffing part of it between thumb and forefinger to make a mouth. The wig animates, and regards her alertly. **Beanie** addresses the wig. **Fiona** watches.

Beanie Well, Wiggie, I think we did pretty well back there. *(Educated voice)* "Oh yes, The Centre is SUCH a valuable asset to the community."

Beanie *(as Wig)* We were magnificent, 'Ms Goldworthy'. You must be feeling pretty good right now.

Beanie *(a single breath of a laugh)* I suppose.

Fiona Beanie. You look so tired. Are you alright?

Beanie Oh hello, Fifi love. I am. So very tired, actually.

Fiona Have a rest, Beanie. You've done enough. You were amazing.

Beanie *(as Wig)* Yes, have a rest, Beanie. You deserve it. You deserve it after...after everything *('everything' includes the whole tough life)*. We'll have a nice biscuit later, eh?

Beanie Thanks Fifi. Thanks Wiggie. I could use a rest. *(She sighs again, and rests her head against Wiggie, grimacing as she does and holding her chest with a strangled cry. Beanie's head slumps forward onto her breast. The hand holding Wiggie drops to her side.)*

Fiona, shocked, leaps to her feet and rushes to Beanie's side.

Fiona Beanie! What's up? Are you sick? *(Realising Beanie is unresponsive)* Beanie? *(She sits beside Beanie, touches her shoulder. Beanie does not respond. Panicking.)* Beanie?

Fiona runs to the door and calls.

Fiona Joanne! Jo!

Joanne *(Enters, replying in a loud whisper, glancing back out)* No need to yell, Fiona! Can't whatever it is wait?

Fiona No, it's Beanie! Something's wrong with Beanie!

Joanne goes to Beanie and sits beside her.

Joanne Beanie? *(She feels for Beanie's pulse)* Beanie, no.

Mel enters, upbeat.

Mel Beanie, that was fabulous. I don't know if we'll get the grant or not, but it was worth it to see you in action. *(She takes in the scene)*

Joanne Beanie's – gone, Mel.

Fiona Gone? You mean –

Joanne nods. Mel and Fiona sit on the sofa. They all lean in towards Beanie's quiet form. Lights dim. They exit.

[Alternatively, Beanie can 'die' behind the sofa, and stay there until the end, to avoid having her get up and exit.]

Incidental segue music.

Lights up on bench. It is two weeks later. The women enter. Joanne holds a plaque. Mel has an electric screwdriver and screws (or glue, or peel-and-stick). Fiona is wearing Beanie's beanie and holding a packet of biscuits with Mr Odorous.

Joanne *(Looking at the plaque, fretting a bit)* I wish we'd known what her actual name was. "Beanie" seems hardly dignified.

Mel She would never tell us her name. Maybe she thought she was maintaining her dignity in her own way. Maybe her real name was one she didn't want to remember.

Fifi Or it was something funny like Beanie Zucchini...Tahini...

Joanne *(Butts in, holding up plaque)* Righto, then let's put this up.

Mel and Joanne mount the plaque on the bench back rest. Mel sits on the bench and gives the plaque a little polish.

Fifi *(Reads plaque)* BEANIE "A biscuit and a cuppa tea, this lovely bench, enough for me." *(She cries and puts her hand to the beanie.)* I don't want Beanie to be gone forever. *(She sits on the bench.)*

Joanne *(Sitting on bench and putting arm around Fifi)* You going to be ok for volunteering today? Your Karaoke fans missed you last Friday. Claire was a terrible substitute, to be honest. She wouldn't let them do any songs she didn't recognise, which meant the playlist went as far as 1967. If I never have to hear "Feelin' Groovy" again it will be fine by me.

Fifi I'm good. I just needed a little sadness break. I'd better have a biscuit.

Mel and Joanne reach for the packet themselves. They eat.

Mel Better not get used to this particular mode of therapy.

Fifi I know. I'm giving them up, I swear.

Beat.

Joanne Time to get back to work.

They head slowly back to the office. Fiona starts scratching her head through the beanie.

Joanne Fiona, you're scratching! It's that damn beanie. I told you it might have lice.

Fifi *(Still scratching)* It's OK, I washed it.

Mel Oh, that won't kill them. They just hold their breaths. *(Demonstrates)*

Joanne *(horrified, to Mel)* I hope you're just teasing.

Mel *(Grins)* I am.

Fifi *(Whipping off the beanie and waving it at Joanne)* So am I! Gotcha! **(Mel and Fifi high five.)**

Joanne *(Rolling her eyes)* That's not very respectful at this sad time.

Mel It's exactly the kind of joke Beanie would have loved.

Joanne True, true.

Joanne and Mel settle at their desks. **Fiona** puts the kettle on.

Joanne Melissa, could you check that pile of mail please. It's getting to be –

Mel I know, a pig's midden. Sorry. It's been an eventful few weeks.

Mel picks up the pile of mail and is sorting through it during the following conversation.

Joanne Fiona, are you singing today?

Fifi Yep. Can I do *I Will Survive*?

Joanne *(A struggle)* Of course. Today. And I've got to look for yet more funding sources. Getting the grant was great but it won't go far. The Centre's facilities are so decrepit we'll have Health and Safety shutting us down if we don't get some work done soon. Why do we constantly have to struggle to stay afloat? It's so short sighted. I can't even.

Fifi Can't even what?

Joanne Just. Can't. Even.

Fiona Allrightyy.

Mel has opened an envelope that has caught her interest and scanned the contents.

Mel Jo?

Joanne Joanne please.

Mel Sorry. It's just – Here, read this.

Joanne *(Scanning the letter and saying bits aloud)* “Coburn and Small, Solicitors... Pecuniary bequest...estate of Berenice Beesley... *(opens eyes wide)* sum of forty-two thousand dollars to The Park Community Centre...the benefactor left the enclosed message. *(She reads the enclosed scruffy piece of hand-written paper)* ‘This is reparations from the government for abuse while I was in institutional care. I never touched it, no amount of money could replace the life I lost. You gave me biscuits and made me tea. The Centre gave me a place to be, where I could just be...Beanie.’”*(Quietly)* At least we have a name to remember her by now.

Mel Leave it at Beanie I reckon. *(Joanne nods)*

Fiona *(wistfully)* Oh Beanie. *(perks up)* \$42,000!

Joanne You were right, Mel.

Mel *(Looks at her suspiciously)* Oh?

Joanne You said Beanie could be our Patron. Turns out, she was after all. \$42,000.

Mel Thanks Beanie, we can do a lot with that.

Fiona *(Holding up the music player)* Can we replace this music player?

Joanne Yes we can *(smiles)* Fifi, yes we can.

The women cheer and embrace. Lights down.

