

2-4-1 & 1-4-2

Two short plays for one person and one short play for two people
by Robert Iles

1M, 1F

Robert Iles

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2-4-1 & 1-4-2

Three short plays that can be performed by two people, a man in his late seventies and a younger woman.

These were not written as companion pieces but were produced over a period of time and just seemed somehow to “fit”. They can be performed individually, together, by different people or by the same people.

South Harrow

One-person play for an older male (the Policeman in it can be a Policewoman or can be ignored) which was originally produced for the Urban Scrawl project (<http://www.urbanscrawl.org.uk/>) the only required set is a table and chair, no required props. Running time around 10 minutes

The Case of the Dog

Another take on the urban myth that is a dog in a suitcase for one female actor. Originally performed at a new writing evening at the Blakehay Theatre. No set or prop requirement. Running time around 8 minutes.

Visitors Book

A duologue for one female and one much older male actor. Running time under 15 minutes. No specific required set or props.

SOUTH HARROW
PICCADILLY LINE - ZONE 5

A very short play for the Urban Scrawl Project

by

Robert Iles

ACT I

SCENE 1

TERRY: LATE 70S, LONDONER, SLOW RATHER THAN RETARDED, IN A WORLD OF HIS OWN. SOFTLY SPOKEN UNLESS UPSET.

POLICEMAN: ANY AGE

THE ACTION TAKES PLACE IN THE INTERVIEW ROOM OF A POLICE STATION.

TERRY: My sister Vanessa, well, I call her Nussy, she doesn't like that, says it's childish, "time for tea Nussy", "wash behind your ears Nussy", says I should have grown out of it seventy years ago. But it's not that, no, she doesn't know, it's Nussy as in Loch. Loch Nussy. Nussy's a big monster, like my sister. (LAUGH) Not that I've seen it, I haven't actually been there, the line only goes to Cockfosters and it's further than that, so I haven't been. I haven't been to Cockfosters either, too far, far too far, Vanessa doesn't live there so why would I go. I did go to Uxbridge once and saw the M40.

(PAUSE)

My sister Vanessa, lives in North Ealing, she has a small flat there all on her own, like me, but I have a house, Mum and Dad's house, she moved out when we were younger, when Mum and Dad were still not talking to each other, then they died but she didn't move back, she stayed in her little flat. Alone. And she left me alone in Mum and Dad's house, my house I suppose but I still sleep in my room, not the big one, I don't use the big rooms, they get so messy.

Vanessa, I don't call her Nussy to her face now, she used to come and help me keep the house clean, once a week she'd come and tidy it up, tidy me up. "You must wash up Terry" she'd say "and keep yourself clean". "Don't leave your dirty plates lying around, open the curtains, let some light and air in". I told you she was a monster. Then she got ill and stopped coming and the house got out of hand and I stopped going in the big rooms and now I go and visit her once a week. That's where I was going. She'll be worrying about me.

(PAUSE)

It is one thousand, two hundred and forty seven steps from my front door to the South Harrow south-bound platform where I catch the train to North Ealing. In the dry. When it is wet or raining it is one thousand, six hundred and fifteen steps; you can't stride out when it's slippery. It would probably be more in snow and ice but I don't go out in snow and ice so I don't know.

I can count the steps because Vanessa taught me. She taught me so I could go and see her. I could always count to one hundred but that was only just enough to get me to the post box on the corner, "ninety seven, ninety eight, post the letter, turn around, one, two, ...". I never had a letter to post but I enjoyed the walk. Then Vanessa taught me more and more counting till I could get to the station; one thousand, two hundred and forty seven. On the train it's five stops, that's easy, then it's a long way to Vanessa's little flat and I wouldn't be able to make it but I always stop at the baker's to get us a gingerbread man each. "You all right Terry" they say, "Here's your gingerbread men". It's hard to concentrate when people talk to you like that. That makes it six hundred and three steps to the baker's and nine hundred and eighty four from the baker's to Vanessa's door carrying the gingerbread men. I can do those counts easily, even in the rain when it's more.

(PAUSE)

We watch TV and we talk, sometimes, and we have tea and the gingerbread men and then I come home. I have to stop at the baker's even though it's closed otherwise I wouldn't be able to count it right. They don't mind, they're usually there clearing up and they wave at me through the window.

(PAUSE)

You didn't ask me about Vanessa did you. Vanessa could answer your questions, she can remember things and tell you how things happened and what's what and why's why but she didn't see him did she so she can't tell you. She doesn't go out much now, she doesn't walk and she has a bag on her leg for her stuff, her poo, and she says it's much easier to just stay in bed 'cause she's tired all the time. The nurse says that she should get up and go

out, but she likes being in bed and watching TV and having me visit. Then the nurse says she should move back in with me "such a big house and you all on your own" but she doesn't like the house and I don't like change, except at the baker's when I pay for the gingerbread men and they give me the change and I check it before leaving like the sign says. I'm good at that change.

Once a week I go and look after her. I didn't get to Vanessa's today, it's all wrong and messed up. I will have to go tomorrow, which is *not* "routine". Not routine at all. I like my routine undisturbed, Vanessa understands. Not sure that Nussy does.

You asked about him. I didn't get to Vanessa's because the train wouldn't go because of him. I didn't know him, there are loads of people I don't know, loads and loads, he was one of them. Does that help?

I got to the platform as usual, one thousand, two hundred and forty seven steps, and I sat down on the bench, I often do that as sometimes I have to wait a while for the right train. The trains come regularly but they're not all the right one, the first one wasn't, the driver had a beard. I couldn't ride on a train driven by a man with a beard. I'm not fussy or anything but a bearded driver is wrong somehow. They might forget what they were doing because they were playing with their beard and then they might crash. Beards are dangerous. On a driver. And those numbers on the side of the carriages, I don't like ones with a three or an eight in them. My bench is near where the trains are coming in to the station where they're still travelling quite fast, that way I get to see all the carriage numbers before it stops.

Then he came, George, and sat down on my bench too. He didn't tell me his name was George, but he looked like a George to me so that's what I called him. George. (BEAT) Stranger George.

Mostly when I talk to people who sit on my bench they move away. Mostly. George didn't. He didn't say hello and he didn't move away, he just sat there, staring, still, on the other end of my bench. So I explained to him about the trains and the beards and the threes and eights and squeaky doors which are also bad. I always explain, if I

get the chance, because otherwise people think you're a bit funny if you don't get on the train, people think all the trains are the same until I explain to them about the beards and things. And I think George understood because when the next train had an eight in the carriage number neither of us got on.

(PAUSE)

And then we waited for the next train while I told George about Vanessa and the baker and my Mum and Dad and then the train came along and George just got up and ran in front of it. (PAUSE) I don't know why he did that. It was the right train and so when it stopped I got on, everyone else was getting off and the doors didn't close and the train wouldn't start and the guard came and told me to get off but I told him I had to see Vanessa and she was waiting and he told me I had to come here and talk to you and I couldn't count the steps and I haven't bought the cakes and Vanessa will be waiting ...

POLICEMAN: Thank you sir, I'll get someone to take you home.

TERRY: I need to go ...

THE CASE OF THE DOG

by

Robert Iles

JENNY: I've known Sally for ages, Donkey's years whatever that actually means, do donkeys really have their own years? No idea. Anyway, we met working on a now defunct local rag down in Surrey. What a team. Sally the cub, kitten I suppose, reporter breaking stories of heroic children and outsized vegetables and me, the so called researcher back at the office making sure all the facts were right and all the kids in the school plays got a name check and every proud mother bought a 10 by 8. Much hilarity, many plans, no idea.

JENNY: That was a long time ago and before Sally could move on to bigger and better things the rag folded. In fairness, neither she nor I were personally responsible for the collapse, it was simply that the paper was, well, rubbish. It always amused me, we spend good time and money turing rags into newsprint and running it through hugely expensive printers and all we ended up with was another rag!

JENNY: Trouble was, instead of moving to a new paper Sally fell into a whirlwind romance and gave up all thoughts of journalism, fame and by-lines. Her rapid obsession resulted in a hasty marriage, domestic violence, abandonment, even speedier divorce and a dead end job as receptionist of a small rural hotel that had most definitely seen better days. La dee dah and heh ho.

JENNY: What a waste. Still, at least there were no kids.

JENNY: As for me, well, life took a somewhat funnier turn. The experience of staying behind and watching all the stories come in equipped me to know what interested editors and what sold. So I took this experience, a lively interest in trivia and the ability to lie through my back teeth and started writing and syndicating content to a few local, small circulation papers which led, finally, to a couple of nationals.

JENNY: Not that I'm boasting. Far from it really, actually I do everything under various pen names to avoid being found out, after all, my experience hadn't exactly equipped me to become a great, or even mediocre Journalist. Rather, in a bizarre and considerably more lucrative way, it had taught me how to exploit the ... the, well, I suppose put crudely, the arse end of the newspaper industry.

JENNY: So it was that I became a multi-talented writer specialising in advice columns, gardening tips, horoscopes and self-help guides. Money for old rope really, 'old' in the sense that very little of it was either new or original material, I simply reworked old columns that others had produced. Well, with the exception of horoscopes, that was a trully specialised task using a programme taken from a PC Advisor cover disk and "doctoring" each entry to make it a bit more interesting, oh, and take out anything negative, I mean, no one wants an Ides of March message with their morning latte do they.

JENNY: The advice column is basically a set of simple questions and stock replies, composites of the crass demands for absolute answers that all agony aunts receive. It all depends on which paper I'm selling to so the answer to "my son is gay what should I do" can be "love him anyway", or, "he'll grow out of it,don't indulge him" or even advice on chemical castration if we're more towards the Daily Mail end of the spectrum.

JENNY: But the easiest is self help, which in my opinion stands for "help yourself to my money". I can literally supply newspapers with a year of columns in advance, they basically write themselves, I've hundreds put by already, Christmas cracker mottos to help people through the day and allow them to feel that they have some influence over how happy they'll be. My agent keeps telling me to publish a book, or do a tour, there really is quite an appetite for this trite stuff apparently.

JENNY: Sally was a bit taken aback when I started, I mean, she was supposed to be the professional and I was the office stooge yet I was the one with the deals and she was the one without a decent job and with the roving eyed husband, destined not so long after to become her ex. I never really liked Bill, he never really liked me, bit of a shame really as I fancied the pants off him. Ah well, plenty more fish in the sea as at least one of my less imaginative self help lines goes.

JENNY: Anyway, in her divorce, which was set in train not that long after the honeymoon on account of him returning from Florida and rushing off to his long term bit on the side in Esher, well, in the divorce, she got the flat and its content, he got the car and she got the dog. Samson, Border Collie, well, so she said, borderline maniac if you ask me. Daft name for a dog anyway. Used to belong to her mother apparently but became their family pet when she was sent to a nursing home in Rhyl. Nice lady, her mum not the dog, used to make me supper sometimes when we'd been working late.

JENNY: Then a week ago, Sal got this call to say her mother had taken a turn, not for the better you understand, and she should come immediately. To Sal that meant walk out of the flat, on to a train and head off ... no packing, no planning, no thought and no dog sitter. Typical of her, rush in first, panic later!

JENNY: So, part way to the Welsh border she suddenly remembers Samson and, in somewhat of a tizz, gives me a call. I work from home and for strange historical reasons lost in the midst of time, I have a key to her flat so I guess I was her obvious choice for the role of Good Samaritan, if, that is, you ignore the fact that I'm not a dog person. I mean I'm really not. In fact the whole world of pet ownership has always left me somewhat cold. Still, that's what friends are for and in fairness I had known Samson since his puppyhood even if he and I had always been on growling rather than friendly terms.

JENNY: Long story short. I agreed to pop over a couple of times, let him out, check food and water, turn on the radio, apparently he's a Radio 4 listener, and generally see he was ok. How hard could it be, I rationalised, he's ancient. Of course, my advice to anyone writing in would have been *not to own your friends problems*, but what's the point of good advice if you actually take it!

JENNY: Having been goaded into action by Sally's call I headed straight out to go to her flat which is about 20 minutes away on the tube, returning only to fetch her key, which I had forgotten, not an auspicious start.

JENNY: The next thing I forgot, which was almost a disaster, was that Sally, being a nervous soul and living on a somewhat dubious estate, sets her alarm religiously. I remembered, of course, once the door was open and the beeping had started, or rather, once it had changed to that "I'm really worried now and am about to scream" pitch. The code, of course, was 2512, Christmas day, I told you she set it religiously.

JENNY: The flurry of getting in prevented me from noticing immediately that Samson had not given me his normal snarl ... fortunately for me he's been getting too old to actually bother getting up and coming over so a single bark has become a more standard welcome.

JENNY: I was further delayed by the bags of shopping dumped in the hall, she really had left in a hurry so I took them to the kitchen to put them away. There under the table was Samson, daft old dog. I put the shopping away and checked on Samson again.

JENNY: Dead old dog I soon realised.

JENNY: Nightmare

JENNY: You might think that being an agony aunt would give me some innate ability to cope with problems, No hope, I fell apart. Not, you understand because the dog had died but because I would have to sort it out and, worse still, tell Sally. It wasn't my fault of course but how would she see it?

JENNY: What do you do with a dead dog? I decided that it was beyond me and I would need to get it to a vet and have them handle it till Sal got back and decided to cremate, freeze, bury or stuff him. I couldn't tell her now, not with her mother the way she was. Where to find a vet, I didn't know this area but remembered regularly passing a big one near my home.

JENNY: Needs must, etc, so I decided to get the dog to the vet, leave it in their capable hands and go home for a drink. A very large drink. Probably several. I hunted around and found a suitcase into which I man-handled Samson's corpse, wrapped in a blanket. Then I washed. A lot. Dead dog is not my favourite perfume and, despite telling myself repeatedly that I didn't smell, I felt that a good scrubbing was definitely in order.

JENNY: And so, locking up the flat, I headed off, dragging the dog case behind me. It wasn't until I was on the tube, having failed to bring enough cash for a taxi, that the stupidity of my plan really hit me, a fact made considerably worse when I remembered that the escalators were undergoing repairs. Great I thought .. all I need now is to be stopped by the transport police doing a random case check!

JENNY: After the short journey I found myself standing at the bottom of the stationary escalator, staring up and wishing that Samson had been a pekinese, or just still alive! I'm not a great fan of human nature but I must have looked trully pathetic as a rather nice (by which I mean hot!) man came and asked if he could give me a hand.

JENNY: Avoiding some of the possible answers that flitted through my head I muttered "yes please", at which he smiled and manfully started hauling the luggage up the stairs while I followed behind trying hard not to be caught watching his rather tight bum. After a few steps, while he still had some breathe left, he joked about "did I have a dead body in there", somewhat flumoxed, I came up with a pretty stupid, but maintainable, lie. "Just moving flats" I said, "trying to get some stuff over, this is my computer and monitor, you know, and all those heavy technical bits" ... "oh" he puffed, "great".

JENNY: When we reached the top I stopped to get something from my bag, I was sure he wouldn't want payment but I felt I owed him at least the price of a beer, and perhaps my phone number. But when I looked up, he was gone. Bugged off. "That bastard's stolen my comp..." I shouted, momentarily caught up in my own lie. Fortunately, being late evening in London no one took a blind bit of notice ... what a git.

JENNY: I hope he tries to sell it quickly, without opening it, to someone with a very large stick and no sense of humour.

JENNY: No idea what I'm going to say to Sally.

JENNY: The Dog it was What Died.

CURTAIN

VISITORS BOOK

by

Robert Iles

ACT I

SCENE 1

TAPLOW, AN OLD MAN, IS SAT IN A CHAIR. NURSE, A YOUNG WOMAN, HAS A STOOL, OR A DESK. SHE IS NOT IN THE SAME PLACE BUT NEITHER PLACE IS DISTINCTLY IDENTIFYABLE.

TOGETHER: When I was young

NURSE: If you'd told me I'd be wiping the noses and bums of a bunch of aged strangers for a living, I'd have topped myself. Or joined the circus ...

TAPLOW: I was a nurse in a home caring for the old like me. Well, that's not strictly true, I was a warden in an institution that locked away the inconvenient ...

NURSE: Actually I quite fancied the circus. I'd read a book called "Memoires of a Sword Swallower" and it seemed like an exciting life. Only an aversion to pain, heights, elephants and clowns plus my inexplicable sawdust allergy kept me from pursuing my dream ...

TAPLOW: Same difference really, still locked in and cared for by strangers. The wallpaper has improved and we have a telly now even if the remote control has had its batteries removed

NURSE: I do do magic tricks. For the patients. well, those with 'old-timers' anyway. I get them to pick a card, put it back in the pack and then leave the pack on the table, 15 minutes later I draw the top card with a flourish and tell them it was theirs ... they can't remember so they always agree. Whatever the card was.

TAPLOW: Still get treated like we're all senile, or children, too stupid to understand anything any more.

TOGETHER: It passes the time.

NURSE: 'Alzheimers', one of what I call the 'Impedimena Comedia', the jokes that Doctors play. Sufferers can no more remember 'Alzheimers' than spell 'dyslexia'. As for those poor people with celt-palettes, hair lips, sibbilance and stutters they don't stand a chance now do they ...

TAPLOW: Not sure if we were worse then or not, the system used to think it was doing its best, but the staff were cruel, now it seems like its the other way around

NURSE: To be honest we don't so much care for them as herd them, keep them quiet and buff them up a bit when their relatives come to visit. Those that have relatives. Those that have relatives who visit.

TAPLOW: I shouldn't be here. I should be at home. Mind you, that's a bit like claiming "I'm innocent" in prison. Same difference. Did I already say that?

NURSE: I remember a Mr Taplow, nice old guy, not as doo-lally as the rest at first, in here because he lost confidence at home

TAPLOW: I was mugged. In the street. By some young girl. Pushed over and robbed, took my Father's watch chain. Wearing that chain made me feel smart, my son said it made me look stupid, made me a victim. It was that girl who made me a victim, not my chain.

NURSE: Got himself robbed, ended up in here. His son sold the house before he could recover enough to go home. Plonker.

TAPLOW: My son said I couldn't care for myself anymore, put me here. I don't think my daughter would have but she lives in Canada, works for, well, I was never really sure what either of my kids did to be honest. Just know that they always seem busy.

NURSE: His son used to visit. Once a week at first, then fortnightly, used to bleat that he was "carrying the family", that his dad was "bleeding away the inheritance". You could see it in his eyes, he didn't want to be here.

TAPLOW: I had been finding living alone difficult, though damned if I was going to admit it to my son. I was forgetting things, losing things, going out and not remembering why. Not all the time, just enough to scare me.

NURSE: The longer he stayed, the worse Mr Taplow got. I've seen it before, the memory is like a muscle, if you don't exercise it it fails.

TAPLOW: When you're young you live in the moment, its like standing on the top of a mountain you can see clearly from the far distance to the details of every pebble at your feet. I don't remember there being any bad summers when I was young, there must have been. I just don't remember.

NURSE: After a few months Taplow was noticeably worse, he seemed to barely remember his son when he came.

TAPLOW: As time passes, its like we walk down the mountain and out towards the plains. As you look back you can see where you stood, see the path you took and the things you passed on the way - but the details have gone. You don't mind at the time, the path is still too interesting, it crosses other peoples', there's plenty to look at, you enjoy the journey. And still you walk on until the shape of the mountian starts to smooth out, get confused, till you can no longer quite be sure where it was you stood when the view was so clear. The shape looks familiar, you can remember what standing on it felt like, but you no longer feel a part of it.

NURSE: Some of the old ones, the men, I give them a bit of a flash now and then. Its the exhibitionist, the circus performer in me perhaps. Nothing too much, some thigh, bit of cleavage, gives them a smile, or a heart attack, either way they're easier to deal with. Funny thing is they're often smiling long after they forget why.

TAPLOW: Eventually, the mountain melts into the straight, featureless line of the horizon and we can no longer even point to where the mountain wast. We cross fewer peoples' paths, there is only a flat, featureless horizon ahead ...

NURSE: One day, Taplow's son turned up with this woman he said was his sister back from Canada. Very odd, she seemed rather young to me and their relationship was strange at best, mind you, I had taken against the son anyway so I might have been biased. Taplow sort of recognised her, a bit it seemed, that was nice for him.

TAPLOW: Travelling with someone lets you keep sight of the mountain for longer, you remember for each other, point out places, re-tell the stories of the sights that you saw and the places that you walked. After my wife died I had no one to share stories with, no one remembering the things I remembered. (PAUSE) My daughter came back from Canada, I do remember that.

NURSE: The good thing was his daughter visited at least three times a week. We'd had his son put together a memory box for him, old photos, theatre programmes, anything that might spark a memory. Mind you, at times it seemed like his daughter needed it as much as him ...

TAPLOW: We used to sit and go through the box. Young people laugh at the old for telling the same stories time and again, but it's how we keep the memories from fading, repainting the picture with the retelling even if we don't quite get it right, even if we make new mountains out of partly remembered places. Like the axe in the Tower that beheaded Anne Boleyn, it had three new heads and two new handles, but it's still the same axe - (SINGS) "with her head tucked underneath her arm" (LAUGHS). If I change the details of a memory, it's still a memory isn't it?

NURSE: Meanwhile the son stopped coming at all. Well, not quite true, he'd turn up once a month, cadge afternoon tea, flick through the visitors book checking on his sister, then leave having barely spoken with his father at all. My dislike of him grew in leaps and bounds ...

NURSE: This went on for three, no I tell a lie, nearer four months then suddenly, one afternoon, no warning, this woman turns up asking to see Taplow saying she's his daughter from Canada popping in en route to a conference in Germany.

NURSE: There we are, blocking her entrance, threatening to call the police when who should turn up but his daughter.

NURSE: All of a sudden the other patients turned up in the dayroom, some had barely left their beds in a year but they suddenly found the energy to come down and grab the best chair they could. Real life made soap opera, or visa versa.

NURSE: Bit of a rumpus and a stand off ... finally this new woman flashes her passport and demands to see identity from the girl. Shock horror, it turns out the new visitor actually was his daughter after all and the girl who had been visiting wasn't even related. Explained a lot ... not looking like the pictures in the memory box, having trouble remembering old holidays and aunts and uncles. We'd always blamed Taplow for being the confused one.

TAPLOW: Two daughters? I was sure I didn't have two daughters. One son, one daughter. One of each. Surely that's not the sort of thing you forget.

NURSE: The low-life of a son had hired this girl from an agency, "Guilt Offsetting" they called it, like "Carbon Offsetting" but alleviating the guilt of not caring for your senile relatives rather than that for driving a luxury car! Flamin cheek of the people.

TAPLOW: I told my daughter to leave, I told the home to bar my son and I told the girl to keep the watch chain which I'd noticed she always wore round her neck ... it was that I'd recognised, not her. She hadn't recognised me at all.

NURSE: Time passed, seasons changed, "diagnosis murder" became "escape to the country". He died a few months later, seemed happier those last weeks than at any time since he'd been brought in.

TAPLOW: We talked, my new daughter and I, we shared memories, not real ones, made up ones, happy memories, what's the difference, memories are all in the mind, like imagination. Does it really matter? When someone says they've "seen something", does that only mean that they were there? Can't it mean they saw it in a mirror, or a photo, or on TV or just in their mind?

NURSE: That girl visited him every day till the end. She and I were the only ones at his funeral, the daughter and bastard son never bothered.

TAPLOW: Finally, the road before and behind is lost. You are lost. The journey ends.

NURSE:

I'm stopping, leaving this job, I'm going to stay at home to look after my dad. I'm not a bad person, it was a bad system. You know some people have "locked in syndrome"? Well, we had a "locked in policy". Not explicit, not in the brochure, just minimising hassle and staffing costs. Who knows, I might start my own "Guilt Offsetting" company, screw those heartless sons and daughters, it might do some good, raise a smile or two.

CURTAIN