



The Merry Widows

By Cenarth Fox

Playwright of

The Real Sherlock Holmes, Scrubbers, Moving On and Aunt Georgy

This is a preview script. The complete script is available from Fox Plays.

Congratulations to Encore for a wonderful, heartwarming, thought-provoking and beautiful production of *The Merry Widows*, this under the direction of the playwright Cenarth Fox. Great writing, superb casting and beautifully nuanced delivery gave us an inside seat in the lives of *The Merry Widows*. The sadness, the joy, the laughter and pain and with a twist in the tail, it's a mystery again. Go, go, go, 'tis a wonderful show. **Marie Ryan 96.5 Inner FM**

The Merry Widows was another evening of great entertainment. The play is very funny yet very thought provoking. Cenarth Fox does it again when he leaves you with a surprise ending when all is revealed; a great evening of entertainment. **Brian Amos 98.1 Eastern FM**

Under the direction of the playwright, the cast had the audience totally involved right from the start. The final moments were deeply moving and I wasn't the only one with tears in my eyes when the lights went up! Congratulations to Cenarth, his wonderful band of Merry Widows, the hardworking crew and to Encore Theatre for an excellent evening's entertainment. **Joan Krutli Golden Days FM**

Cenarth Fox has written a story that touched, profoundly at times, on the suffering and longing, the loneliness, the loyalty and the isolation of a group of older women. There was a lot of laughter also. **Encore Theatre Company**





The Merry Widows

A comedy by Cenarth Fox

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With the changes in medical science today, people are living longer. But married couples do not always pass away at the same or at even approximately the same time. This means many people become a widow or widower and often for long periods of time. Sometimes society neglects these new singles. Some elderly widowed folk are shut-ins and lonely. This play introduces a group of widows and shows how each is coping with life without their husband.

Can you be a widow and still enjoy a great quality of life?

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The Merry Widows 3

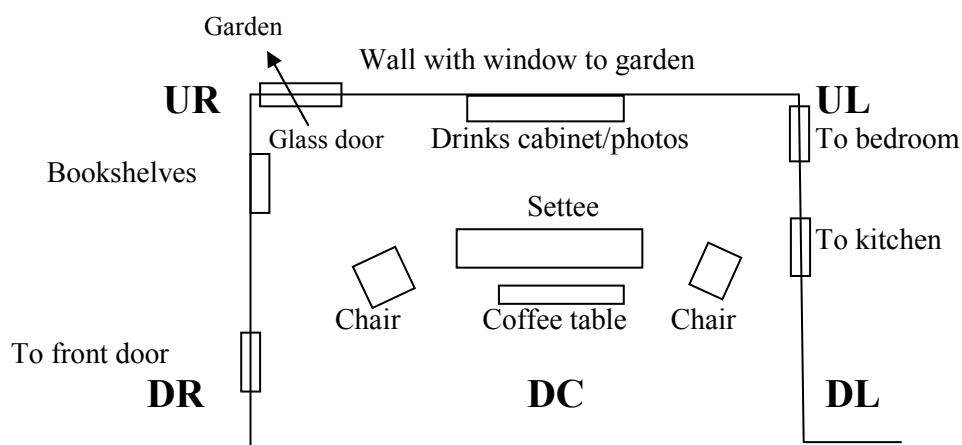
Synopsis

Four mature-aged widows live in the same group of units. They have become friends and meet once a week for coffee. Kate is 'normal', Siobhan's a social butterfly, Ruby has her late hubby's ashes with her in a carry bag and Joan knows little of the real world having been a 'shut-in' for the last twenty odd years. These mismatched widows share secrets, sorrows and sins helping one another as their past helps them face their future.

But then a new widow arrives. She's different, mysterious and striking and has a secret - or two. She's also on a mission that could destroy the merry band. Will it?

Setting

Only one set which is the lounge or sitting-room of Kate's ground floor unit. It is tastefully furnished and decorated. The diagram below is a suggested set only and groups may wish to design their own. There is a coffee table in front of the settee at C and small tables beside each chair. If the settee is a three-seater lounge than all five women can be seated on the two chairs and the settee. If a two-seater then Siobhan can sit on the arm of one of the chairs. Kate is keen on fresh flowers so many plastic blooms can fill the spaces.



The Merry Widows 4

CHARACTERS

Kate

Mature years, polite, beautifully dressed, helpful, has been a widow for several years but is keen to keep active and reads, attends concerts and the theatre, has a son and a grandson

Ruby

Eccentric without knowing the meaning of the word, mature years, full of life and carries on as if her husband, Ernie, is still alive, wears unusual clothes and talks about anything

Joan

Quiet, mature years, needs coaxing, shy and ignorant of many things, conservative old fashioned dressing, has daughters and grandchildren, has lived a secluded life for decades but has intelligence and wit to surprise

Siobhan

Action woman, mature years, lively, modern dresser [too modern], hectic social life, has several children from three deceased husbands and many [she doesn't know exactly how many] grandchildren

Phillipa

Known as Pip, young, two generations younger than some or all of the others, striking appearance with classy clothes and jewellery, trappings of wealth, mysterious, tough exterior

Mrs Schmidt

Cleaner, 30ish, insubordinate nature, has English as a second language, can trace branches of her family tree back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to Czarist Russia

The four older women have only been meeting as a group once a week for a month or two. They know each other reasonably well without having any serious intimacy. This somewhat restricted knowledge of one another is where the play begins and their knowledge and appreciation of one another grows as the play develops and is heightened once Pip enters the situation.

The Merry Widows 5

Act One, Scene 1

[Curtain up on KATE'S loungeroom. The set is seemingly empty as KATE is behind the sofa out of sight. Once the scene has been established, KATE speaks while hidden]

KATE Bugger! That's red wine. *[She rises and heads to fetch book UR]* How did I miss that? Probably too late now anyway. *[She flicks through book]* Coffee stains ... Sauce stains ... Wine stains ... white wine ... ah, red wine. *[Reading]* "Remove when stain is wet." Damn. *[Snaps book shut, replaces it and calls]* Mrs Schmidt?

FX *Doorbell sounds*

SCHM'T *[Appears at kitchen door with cleaning cloth]* I am cleaner; not maid. *[She disappears]*

KATE There's a stain on the carpet. *[Gives up on SCHMIDT. Calling to front door as she returns to behind settee]* It's open, come on in. *[KATE is hidden]*

RUBY *[From offstage, talking to her husband]* You know Kate. We come here every week. *[Enters carrying shopping bag]* Now where would you like to sit? *[Looking around then moves DL]* How about your usual spot? *[Takes urn from bag places it on side table beside chair DL]* Out you come. This is the best place to see and hear everything.

KATE *[Head appears above back of sofa]* Good morning, Ruby.

RUBY *[Frightened, turns]* Oh god. I wish you wouldn't do that.

KATE Sorry. Morning Ern. What are you like on stains?

RUBY *[Patting or indicating urn]* You gave us a terrible fright.

KATE I think it's red wine. *[Disappears behind settee]*

RUBY *[To her husband]* I won't be long, dear. Just ... relax. *[Joins KATE behind settee. Apart from ERN in the urn, the stage is empty]*

KATE I'm afraid it's gone dry.

RUBY Ern's very good with stains. *[Head appears as she addresses husband]* Ern?

KATE *[Head appears]* Let's not bother him now. *[They look at one another. RUBY nods. Both heads disappear]*

RUBY What about your cleaning lady?

FX *Doorbell sounds*

KATE Good idea. *[Head appears, calling]* Mrs Schmidt?

SCHM'T *[Appears at kitchen door with toilet brush]* I tell you. I clean, I no answer door. *[Exits]*

KATE No, I ... *[Frustrated, calling to front door]* It's open, come on in. *[Head disappears]*

RUBY *[Head up calling to door]* The three of us are in here. *[Head disappears]*

JOAN *[Enters with several shopping bags which are awkward to carry. She places them DR speaking as she does so, not looking at empty room]* Good morning, ladies. Sorry I'm late but I've just come from the library and the shops and you won't believe what I've just discovered. It's amazing.

[Looks up to see empty stage] Oh. *[Sees Ern/urn and waves to him/it]* Good morning, Ern. Are you well?

KATE *[From behind settee]* It's lipstick.

JOAN *[JOAN looks around]* Lipstick?

RUBY *[From behind settee]* It's definitely lipstick.

KATE *[From behind settee]* How did lipstick get down here?

SCHM'T *[At kitchen doorway, indicating empty container]* You run out carpet clean. *[Exits]*

The Merry Widows 6

- JOAN** *[Recovering]* Oh, good morning, Mrs Schmidt. *[Looking in her bags]*
I have some carpet cleaner. You're welcome to use mine.
- KATE** *[Standing and moving out followed by RUBY]* Morning Joan.
- JOAN** *[Still searching]* Oh, good morning. It's in here somewhere.
- RUBY** *[Moving to chair]* Morning Joanie. *[Telling KATE]* Liquid soap and warm water'll do the trick.
- JOAN** *[Finds and offers her supply]* You can use *my* carpet cleaner.
- RUBY** *[Sitting next to hubby]* Not for lipstick; tell her, Ern.
- KATE** *[To JOAN]* Thanks, Joan. We'll get Mrs Schmidt to fix it. Have a seat.
- JOAN** But Mrs Schmidt said ...
[KATE sits. JOAN shrugs, puts object back and sits]
- RUBY** Ernie's a walking encyclopedia when it comes to stains.
- KATE** Perhaps these days he's more like a 'sitting encyclopedia'. *[Calling]* Mrs Schmidt?
- SCHM'T** *[At door]* I foreign, not deaf.
- KATE** Sorry. Look there's a stain behind the settee.
- RUBY** It's lipstick.
- KATE** Although it might be red wine.
- SCHM'T** It vegetable and on my list.
- OTHERS** Vegetable?
- SCHM'T** And you tell me to say when your pink rose is *[sic]* open to popping. *[Exits]*
- KATE** *[Stands, excited]* Oh my roses. *[Exiting to garden]* Come on ladies, these you must see. *[Exits]*
- JOAN** *[Excited, exiting]* I love pink roses but mine aren't out yet. *[Exits]*
- RUBY** *[To hubby]* I'll just be out in the garden, Ern. Sing out if you need me.
[Pats container and exits]
- SCHM'T** *[SCHMIDT enters with cloth and some sort of spray container. She stops. Moves to container of ashes]* Ernie like bath? *[She gives it a quick spray and wipe then moves to behind settee talking to herself]* Only one more lunatic coming.
- FX** *Doorbell sounds*
- SCHM'T** Speak of the *dumb* bell. *[Drops behind settee]*
- S'BHAN** *[Calling from offstage, sing song style]* Hell-o? Anyone ho-me?
- SCHM'T** *[Mimicks SIOBHAN'S sing song pattern]* Oh ye-s. Come in if you be stu-pid.
- S'BHAN** *[Closer but still offstage]* Now close your eyes. I've got a big, big surprise. *[Sing song]* Are you read-y?
- SCHM'T** *[Playing the game]* Oh ye-s, we read-y.
- S'BHAN** Here I co-me. *[Enters wearing 'bold' outfit and strikes dramatic pose]*
Da-dah! *[Is facing front but as there is no response, she looks around and disappointed/annoyed, drops her pose]* Aw ... where are ya, girls?
- SCHM'T** *[From behind settee]* I am right.
- S'BHAN** *[Looking around]* What?
- SCHM'T** *[Head appears]* It is beetroot.
- S'BHAN** *[Disappointed]* Oh it's you. What's beetroot?

The Merry Widows 7

- SCHM'T** *[They stare at each other]* Same colour your face.
[Drops behind settee to clean]
- S'BHAN** *[Simmering]* Listen, sister, I've had enough of your lip. Hey! I'm talkin' to you.
- SCHM'T** *[Head appears]* Your friends look at pretty things. *[Waves in general direction]* They go. *[Drops behind settee]*
- S'BHAN** *[SIOBHAN heads UL to bedroom]* What, look at clothes? *[Heading to bedroom]* Kate? Girls? You in here? *[Exits]*
[TRIO enters and sits. Joan carries a single pink rose]
- JOAN** I'd love a cutting, Kate if you can spare one.
- KATE** Of course.
- RUBY** Ern knows everything about pruning roses. I'll get him started this weekend.
- KATE** *[Looking at watch]* Siobhan's late. I hope she's all right.
- SCHM'T** *[From behind settee]* Try bed chamber. *[TRIO react. SCHMIDT's head appears above settee. Rising]* And say bye-bye beetroot. *[Exits to kitchen]*
- TRIO** *[Surprised]* Beetroot?
- RUBY** How could she know that?
- KATE** That woman knows everything.
- S'BHAN** *[Enters ... just]* There you are. *[Steps back inside bedroom]* No, don't look, *don't* turn around. *[TRIO turn faces towards front]* And close your eyes. I've got a big surprise.
- RUBY** Not again.
- S'BHAN** *[Starts coming down]* Now you can only look when I say ... no peeking ... an-d ... *[Strikes dramatic pose]* open! *[TRIO turn/look]* My latest *[French accent]* ensemble. *[Does a twirl]* Stunning or what?
- KATE** I think it's probably 'or what'.
- S'BHAN** *[Ignores the comments]* Jason bought it for me.
- JOAN** Is he blind?
- S'BHAN** *[Sits, excited]* He's 41, looks 31 and performs like he's 21.
- RUBY** What is he, a seal?
- S'BHAN** I tell you, girls, at our age, life is for living.
- JOAN** I agree.
- S'BHAN** None of this bingo and baking ... *[Stops, pleasantly surprised]* Well, good for you, Joanie.
- JOAN** *[Excited]* And speaking of living, I've got some fantastic news.
- S'BHAN** *[Wants to believe it]* You've met a man?
- JOAN** *[Ignores SIOBHAN]* Today, for the first time in twenty-two years, *[Proud]* I went to the library.
- S'BHAN** *[Deflated]* Whoopee!
- KATE** *[Pleased for JOAN]* Well done you.
- JOAN** And you'll never guess what I discovered.
- S'BHAN** Books?
- JOAN** *[Excited]* They have television sets which *aren't* television sets. *[She can't believe it]* Oh don't tell me I've discovered something you girls don't know about.
[Pause. What is she on about?]

The Merry Widows 8

- RUBY** You mean computers.
- JOAN** *[Still excited]* Yes. *[OTHERS unimpressed]* They're amazing. And you can watch thousands of channels on the Wild Web World. *[sic]*
- S'BHAN** *[Under her breath, realizes]* Beam me up, Scotty.
- JOAN** *[The penny drops]* I've done it again, haven't I?
- KATE** Joan, darling, computers are not exactly new.
- JOAN** *[Deflated]* It's something else I've missed out on.
- RUBY** Ern's been using a computer for ages. I can't get him off it.
- JOAN** *[Crestfallen]* I keep discovering what's been around forever.
- KATE** Don't worry. It's just one more thing to explain. I'll tell you all about them after coffee.
- S'BHAN** Joan, you can't *not* know about computers. Even if you *were* stuck at home with a dying husband, ...
- JOAN** *[Sharp]* He wasn't dying.
- S'BHAN** Well with a sick husband ...
- JOAN** *[Sharper]* He wasn't sick. His body was perfectly healthy; it was just his mind.
- S'BHAN** But TV and newspapers are filled with ...
- JOAN** *[Defensive, almost angry]* I didn't have time for television. I was watching him constantly. I was his fulltime, never-ending carer.
- KATE** Easy Joan.
- JOAN** *[Angry]* Have you ever had a husband who became a child? Well?
- S'BHAN** I had one who liked me dressing up as a schoolgirl.
- JOAN** Your idea of sacrifice is to give up sex for twenty-four hours.
- S'BHAN** Oh I couldn't last that long.
- JOAN** Some people devote their life to caring for others. I signed the contract, Siobhan, for better or for worse'.
- RUBY** Just back off, Siobhan. You've even upset Ern.
- S'BHAN** Well pardon me for breathing.
[Hops up to admire knick knacks or painting]
- JOAN** *[Genuine query]* So computers are definitely not new?
- KATE** I've got a portable one in my bedroom. We'll go surfing together.
- JOAN** *[Even more confused]* Surfing?
- KATE** I'll explain it all later.
[JOAN smiles but is depressed because of her ignorance. SIOBHAN returns to her seat]
- S'BHAN** *[Excited again]* Now, getting back to my love life, ... *[OTHERS groan, react. SIOBHAN annoyed]* What?
- RUBY** Siobhan, we are not interested.
- S'BHAN** Of course you are; you have to be. Well at least you have to be curious when someone as old as I am is still performing the old horizontal dancing - frequently.
- JOAN** Could we talk about something else - please?
- RUBY** Ern loves dancing and he still sweeps me off my feet. Not in public mind, just alone, the two of us, at home with the radio.

The Merry Widows 9

- FX** *Music to dance to*
- RUBY** *[Sighs. Picks up urn and holds it a la dance partner]* Some Saturday nights, I turn down the lights, put on one of his favourite songs and we *[Does small twirl]* dance around the lounge. It's wonderful. It helps to keep our marriage alive.
[Pause. Touching memory. RUBY kisses then replaces urn and sits. MUSIC fades]
- S'BHAN** Does he ever step on your toes?
[SIOBHAN's remarks are usually ignored. KATE often speaks up to change the subject]
- KATE** I know some widows who hear a certain piece of music and immediately think of their husband. But for me it's not music; it's football. I always check the scores and if his team wins, I smile and think, Lawrence would like that.
- JOAN** I like Lawrence; it's a really ... manly name.
- RUBY** Ern has a friend called Lawrence. *[Who was that friend?]* I think he came from Arabia.
[Pause]
- S'BHAN** Y'know Kate, that's the first time I've ever heard you mention your husband's name. How come you never talk about him?
- KATE** *[Pensive]* Well, as you know, Siobhan, some topics can be difficult.
- S'BHAN** *[Stick beaky]* Is that difficult 'sad' or difficult 'painful'?
- JOAN** Siobhan, don't be so nosy.
- RUBY** *[At SIOBHAN]* Just because you love talking about your two husbands, doesn't mean
- S'BHAN** *Three.* I told you, I had three.
[OTHERS still surprised, shocked]
- KATE** I thought you said, 'two'.
- S'BHAN** And sprinters, the lot of 'em. Give me a marathon man any day. That's why I've switched to the toy boys. They're like that little battery bunny. *[Imitates bunny]* All night long.
[OTHERS are unhappy about SIOBHAN'S intimate exploits]
- JOAN** And *all* your husbands are dead?
- S'BHAN** God I hope so ... I buried them. *[SIOBHAN thinks that's funny]*
- RUBY** You must have endured a lot of grief.
- S'BHAN** *[Pseudo serious]* I still do. I feel terrible knowing that I ... I killed them.
- OTHERS** *[Stunned]* What?
- JOAN** *[Misunderstands, sincere]* Oh I understand. With my poor John, I often thought about a mercy killing.
- S'BHAN** Mind you it was their fault; typical middle-aged men, all grumpy and no humpy. I said to each of 'em, I said, "Listen Buster, you promised to *love*, honour and obey so cut this, 'I've got a headache, honey' and start performing." *[OTHERS in disbelief]* Well how was I to know they all had a dicky ticker?
- KATE** *[Standing]* I think it's time for coffee.
- S'BHAN** On one death certificate the doctor wrote 'heart failure', even though it should clearly have read 'shagged out'. *[More cringes from OTHERS]*
- KATE** And Mrs Schmidt has baked something delicious. *[Exiting to kitchen]* Just talk noisily among yourselves.

The *Merry Widows* 10

[EXITS. The following dialogue reverts to a lower volume level as KATE is being discussed]

- S'BHAN** Have you two ever noticed ...
- RUBY** *[Wagging finger]* Ah, ah, ah. *[Points to urn]*
- S'BHAN** Sorry. Have you *three* ever noticed the lack of photos in here? Look around. Not a snap to be seen.
- JOAN** *[Pointing]* There are photos over there.
- S'BHAN** The son and grandson, yes, but none of Lawrence of Arabia.
- RUBY** They're probably in her bedroom.
- S'BHAN** Nothing. I've just had a look. *[OTHERS shocked]*
- JOAN** What were you doing in her bedroom?
- S'BHAN** I was powdering my nose.
- RUBY** And having a sticky-beak.
- JOAN** We're guests in her home, we're supposed to be her friends.
- S'BHAN** Well how can we help Kate if we don't know her problems?
- RUBY** She may not *have* a problem.
- JOAN** Exactly.
- RUBY** To an outsider, she's probably the only 'normal' one amongst us.
- S'BHAN** Whoa, whoa, whoa. Did you just use the word, 'normal'?
- RUBY** Oh come on, alongside we three, Kate *is* normal.
- JOAN** Are you saying I'm not normal?
- RUBY** Joan, sweetie, you're in a time warp, I've got Ern in an urn in m'handbag and Siobhan here's the President of Pensioner Nymphomaniacs. I reckon that makes 'no-photos Kate' dead set ordinary.
- S'BHAN** *[Almost stunned certainly surprised]* Ruby, I'm shocked.
- RUBY** Y'see 'normal' is subjective. Beauty's in the eye of the beholder.
- S'BHAN** Will you stop using big words.
- JOAN** I consider myself normal.
- RUBY** Me too. I was happily married to the man I loved for forty *[50/60]* years and when he died, putting him in the ground was like admitting our marriage was over. I didn't want that. So having his ashes with me means our marriage lives on. Where I go, he goes. I chat to him and we share everything. Now to me, that's 'normal'.
- JOAN** I think that's beautiful.
- S'BHAN** And I guess he doesn't talk back.
- RUBY** We all have our foibles, Siobhan, we all handle life in our own way, and maybe Kate has *her* method too.
- JOAN** Well if Kate did have an unhappy marriage, she's now a very well-adjusted woman.
- S'BHAN** I'm still going to ask her.
- JOAN** *[Threatens in a polite way]* Don't you dare.
- RUBY** *[Threatens in a polite way]* You do and I'll have Ern deal with you.
- S'BHAN** *[Thinks about it]* Hmmm. A bloke once told me I could bring the dead back to life but in Ern's case, I reckon even *I'd* struggle.

The Merry Widows 11

[KATE enters with tray on which are four cups with coffee plus a plate with small cakes or biscuits. Those wanting milk pour it from a small jug]

KATE Here we are, ladies, freshly brewed coffee. *[OTHERS help as coffee is poured]*

JOAN *[Stands and helps]* Let me do something, Kate.

KATE Help yourself, girls. We're all 'mother' here.

RUBY We should thank Mrs Schmidt for her wonderful baking.

KATE She's gone but I'll pass on your thanks. Oh and would you believe it, she's left her purse. Remind me I put it in the pantry behind the soups.

JOAN Where did you find her?

KATE Actually she found me. She put a note under my door saying, *[Speaks a la Schmidt]* "Very hard verker to clean your apitment".

JOAN Apitment?

KATE Her English is terrible but boy can she cook and clean.

S'BHAN If I had a cleaner I'd employ a man and make him vac in his shorts.

RUBY *[Fed up]* Oh f'pity's sake, Siobhan, give it a rest.

JOAN Yes, we're not all sex-mad.

S'BHAN Which is good; less competition means more men for me.

KATE *[Peacemaker]* Now girls, remember why we're here; four widows, living alone, supporting one other and enjoying some old-fashioned friendship.

S'BHAN And sharing our secrets ... *[Looking at KATE]* all of them.

JOAN *[Warning shot]* Siobhan.

S'BHAN Kate, I wanted to ask you a question.

RUBY *[Almost a growl as she threatens SIOBHAN]* Oh dear, Ern is very unhappy.

KATE Well before you do, Siobhan, I've got something to say. I've wanted to get this off my chest ever since we started our coffee mornings. I really enjoy these get-togethers and especially your company. *[OTHERS touched]* You girls never judge. You've been coming here for months now and must have noticed I don't have a single photo of my late husband anywhere.

S'BHAN Really? *[Looking around]* I hadn't noticed.

KATE And yet you've never asked why. Thank you for being so polite, *[To SIOBHAN]* especially you, Siobhan.

S'BHAN *[Forced smile]* Well, actually

KATE The one thing I love about our group is that we can talk openly to friends who listen and care.

JOAN *You're the best listener, Kate. [OTHERS agree]*

RUBY You ignore all our foibles.

KATE *[Smiles]* Thank you but today, I'd like to share a secret.

[Silence. KATE is not usually so serious. Pause. This is difficult for KATE]

RUBY *[Gentle probing]* Was your marriage unhappy?

KATE *[This is tough for KATE, because [a] it brings back unhappy memories and [b] she's essentially a private person. She nods]* I was one of those women who stayed in a loveless marriage because of a child. And when my son grew up and left I stayed with my husband because I was afraid of being alone.

S'BHAN You and a million others.

The Merry Widows 12

- JOAN** That's nothing to be ashamed of. *[OTHERS agree]*
- KATE** You see I married a womanizer, a man who was addicted to sex.
- S'BHAN** *[Intrigued]* Really? *[Changes to polite]* I mean he sounds very interesting.
- KATE** Lawrence adored women and saw them as prey to be hunted. Mind you, he never flaunted his conquests and I turned a blind eye to his cheating; more fool me.
- RUBY** *[Upset]* No. Why do women who are treated badly blame themselves?
- KATE** One day I was fed up looking at his smiling face so I removed all his photos. I felt good, I'd buried the past and was really looking forward to the rest of my life when I made a terrible mistake. My son noticed the missing photos and instead of lying about having them reframed or something, I told him the truth.
- JOAN** *[She's guessed the truth]* And he sided with his father.
- KATE** Lawrence was charming, the consummate actor. Our son adored him and refused to believe anything bad about his father. *[Upset]* My son called me a liar. He's stopped speaking to me and now, *[Chokes]* and now my darling grandson is forbidden to visit. *[KATE cries quietly]*
- RUBY** There, there my love; none of that.
- KATE** *[Still crying]* I miss him so much. He's my only grandson, my little ray of sunshine.
- JOAN** What's his name?
- KATE** *[Struggles]* Michael. I call him Mikey. *[Pause. Recovering]* I've wanted to tell you girls about this ever since we first met and I'm so glad I have. I feel better already. Do you understand?
- OTHERS** *[All three are sympathetic]* Of course ... yes, we do ... *[etc.]*
- RUBY** A trouble shared, Kate ...
- KATE** *[Recovering]* Now, Siobhan, forgive me. *[Dabbing her eyes]* You wanted to ask me something?
- S'BHAN** *[Shaking head, holds up hand]* No, nothing; it's not important.
- JOAN** I'm the opposite of you, Kate. I've got photos of my husband in every room ... oh except the loo. And lots of the photos are his B.A. ones.
- S'BHAN** *[Plays guessing game]* Ah, British Airways? Bachelor of Arts? *[Pleased with her joke]* Bloody Awful?
- JOAN** Before Alzheimer's.
- S'BHAN** *[Her form of apology]* You do know I've been clinically diagnosed. I have *Foot in Mouth Disease*.
- JOAN** He was the best husband ever. He used to hide presents in odd places. I'd find perfume in my undies drawer, chocolates in the laundry and hand cream in a shoe. He never ceased to surprise me with his love and affection.
- KATE** I wish I'd met him. *[OTHERS agree]*
- JOAN** But when his brain got sick he just ... changed. This gentle man, this lovely, compassionate man became a child, a lost and frightened little boy.
- KATE** How sad.

The *Merry Widows* 13

- JOAN** He'd stare at me and say, [*Mimics him*] "What's your name?" and "What are doing in my house?" Then he was sure I was his mother. [*Mimics him*] "Mum," he'd cry. "Mummy." It was a nightmare.
- RUBY** You poor thing. [*OTHERS sympathetic*]
- JOAN** At first he could feed himself but when he got worse, I had to dress and undress him, wash him, supervise his medication and in the end, even change his nappies. [*OTHERS sigh, shake their heads*]
- S'BHAN** Why didn't you put him in care?
- JOAN** Because he was my responsibility; [*Pause, settles a little*] because I *wanted* to care for him. My daughters begged me to sign the papers but it just didn't seem right. I was his full-time carer for twenty-two years. [*OTHERS shake heads, react*]
- KATE** You sacrificed your life to care for your husband.
- JOAN** [*Nods. Pause as magnitude of JOAN's commitment sinks in. She chokes, can't speak*]
- S'BHAN** You know you saved the government a bloody fortune. [*JOAN nods. She still can't speak*]
- RUBY** I'm not sure I could do that. [*To Ern*] Sorry Ern, but I'm just not that strong.
- JOAN** [*Recovering*] People said, "Just take it a day at a time". I took it an *hour* at a time. I'd talk to myself. "Come on, Joan, just another seventeen minutes." And when that hall clock chimed, I'd give myself a pat on the back and get stuck in for the next hour.
- KATE** What about your own health?
- JOAN** Oh don't go there. My stress levels were sky-high, my blood pressure took off, but, here I am, I survived.
- S'BHAN** Well done you.
- KATE** Well God spare any of us from losing our marbles.
- S'BHAN** It's too late for me.
- JOAN** I couldn't take him anywhere. If I did he'd just wander off, steal toys from children or pee in the street.
- S'BHAN** That's not unusual. [*OTHERS look at her*] My second husband was normal and he did that all the time.
- KATE** [*Taking charge*] Right, enough, we're supposed to be *merry* widows; time for some happy memories. What about ... when our husband's proposed? Come on, Joan, tell us about John's proposal. [*OTHERS react*]
- JOAN** [*Pleased to be taken out of her sadness*] Thank you, Kate; and sorry, ladies, for being such a misery guts.
- OTHERS** *No!*
- RUBY** Remember our rule - no regrets and ...
- TUTTI** ... no apologies.
- JOAN** Well my marriage proposal really was a happy time.
- S'BHAN** So was mine but how long have we got? With three husbands I had three proposals.
- RUBY** I had five. [*OTHERS react*]

The *Merry Widows* 14

- S'BHAN** *[Doesn't like being upstaged]* Five?
- RUBY** Before I met Ern there was Bernard, Alphonse and Clive and Ern proposed twice before I finally agreed.
- KATE** Ruby, you dark horse.
- S'BHAN** *[Not to be outdone]* Well excuse me but if we're going to count rejected proposals, I'm well into double figures. And if you want *indecent* proposals, we could be here till Christmas.
[RUBY falls back into the past. She could hop up to perform or be lit by a spot]
- RUBY** I'll never forget Ern's second proposal.
- S'BHAN** What happened to his first?
- OTHERS** Shhh.
- FX** *Romantic music plays*
Lighting changes
- RUBY** We'd been to the pictures. Back then it was a lovely old cinema with a beautiful sweeping staircase; now it's a barbeque supermarket. The film was some sappy romance where the stars had this lingering kiss at the end. Ern walked me home from the tram stop. I'd said 'no' to him when I was younger and was worried he wouldn't ask again. We stopped outside the front gate and the front curtains twitched as Mum was on patrol. The street light became our moon when Ern took me in arms and said, "You're *my* beautiful movie star. Will you ride off into the sunset with me?"
- OTHERS** *[Sigh]* Ahhh.
- FX** *Music fades*
- RUBY** *[Lights come up]* And we did. *[RUBY herself again and the mood is lighter]* And tonight, like every night since he died, I'll put his favourite cardigan next to my pillow so I can smell him just before I fall asleep. *[Pats urn and talks to it]* And tonight, my darling, I'll read you another chapter of that new murder mystery.
- KATE** That is so lovely.
- RUBY** People say loneliness is a problem for many widowed folk but not for me. Every morning when I wake, there's Ern right beside me.
- S'BHAN** Well it's not as if he's got anywhere to go.
- RUBY** *[Indicating urn]* And we're still together today.
- KATE** That's beautiful.
- JOAN** John was my only boyfriend.
- S'BHAN** Well I've woken up beside some blokes ... *[At JOAN]* *only* boyfriend?
- JOAN** I had one boyfriend, one proposal and one husband.
LIGHTING CHANGES
- JOAN** *[JOAN is sitting at a table in an imaginary restaurant]* He took me to this expensive restaurant.
- FX** *Hubbub of diners begins*

The *Merry Widows* 15

JOAN The waiters, décor and tablecloths, everything was beautiful and the food superb. We'd just finished our dessert when a man appeared and handed me a pink rose [*She is handed the pink rose she brought from the garden*] with a note saying, 'To the most beautiful girl in the world'. Then another man appeared this time playing the violin.

FX *Add solo violin music*

JOAN I was so dazzled with all this attention, I suddenly noticed John kneeling beside me with an engagement ring. I vaguely remember him saying 'marry me' but two things I definitely remember - me saying 'Yes' and everyone in the restaurant clapping.

OTHERS [*Clapping*] Ahhhh.

FX *Music fades*

[Lights return to normal, JOAN back to normal]

JOAN Sometimes it's those happy memories that keep us going.

RUBY What about you, Kate?

KATE [*Pause*] Yes, I agree, happy memories *are* great.

RUBY But?

KATE It's funny how we remember things from times long past. We forget what we had for breakfast this morning but have vivid memories of events that happened fifty years ago.

RUBY This sounds mysterious.

KATE I was working in London when I first met Lawrence, the high-flying, polo-playing, dashing young stockbroker. He whisked me off to Sweden for a romantic weekend but on the flight he managed to collect the phone number of some Scandanavian stewardess.

JOAN Love is blind.

KATE I can see it now but not then.

S'BHAN But what about his proposal?

[Lights dim and concentrate on KATE]

KATE Ah, now *that* was in Paris.

OTHERS [*Impressed*] Paris!

FX *Parisian piano-accordion music is heard*

KATE It was a perfect balmy evening as we wandered by the Seine with a million stars above, and beneath the Eiffel Tower he said he'd never loved anyone till he met me, and he'd give me the world if only I'd say 'yes' and marry him.

FX *Music fades*

LIGHTING returns to normal

RUBY Who could refuse that?

KATE To be fair he *did* give me the world - but he always kept his girlfriends.

S'BHAN I had a kind of Parisian marriage proposal.

[OTHERS intrigued]

JOAN [*Almost scoffing*] You, in gay Patee?

The Merry Widows 16

S'BHAN There was one of those miniature models of the Eiffel Tower in our motel room in Moe. *[Or other out of the way country town]* We were in bed at the time and he said, *[Mimics 'gentleman']* "What about it, Babe?" I thought he meant the business when in fact he meant 'let's get hitched'.

RUBY *[Sarcastic]* I think that's the most romantic proposal I've ever heard. *[Mimics rough beau]* "What about it, Babe?" *[OTHERS laugh]*

JOAN And did you?

S'BHAN What?

JOAN Get hitched?

S'BHAN *[Thinking]* Y'know, I can't remember.

RUBY Well what number hubby was he?

S'BHAN *[Again thinking, shaking head]* I don't think I actually married that one.

KATE *[Suddenly remembers, in a tizz]* Oh girls, girls, news, I have news. I forgot all about it.

OTHERS *[Excited]* What? ... Tell us ... *[etc.]*

KATE *[Big announcement]* We have a new widow.

OTHERS *[React]* Who? ... Since when? ... A new widow? *[etc.]*

KATE The vacant unit at the back has been let. I bumped into Mr. Miller and the new tenant is a woman who's just been widowed.

JOAN Poor old soul.

KATE I hope you don't mind but I slipped a note under the door inviting her to drop in ... today.

OTHERS *[They are not sure]* Today?

JOAN Do we need any more members?

S'BHAN Members? We're not a bloody club.

RUBY Well Ern's not all that keen on crowds. Too many widows might upset him.

S'BHAN Just stick him behind the sofa; he'll never know.

KATE I thought we experienced widows might be good for her.

JOAN Yes, you're right. And we could give her our initiation test.

OTHERS *[Happy reaction]* Oh yes ... good idea ... great ... *[etc.]*

JOAN I'll never forget that first coffee morning; I was so nervous.

KATE We all were.

RUBY And someone suggested we introduce ourselves.

S'BHAN Only it turned into an AA meeting.

RUBY *[Hopping up and acting out what happened, Clears throat]* Hello. My name's Ruby.

OTHERS Hello Ruby.

RUBY And I'm a widow.

OTHERS *[Kind reaction]* Ahhh.

S'BHAN Who hasn't had sex for a decade.
[Gales of laughter]

RUBY *[Sitting, correcting the story]* I didn't say that.

S'BHAN You didn't have to. *[More laughter]*

KATE I remember how Siobhan had us in fits talking about how her husbands died.

The Merry Widows 17

S'BHAN All lies of course.
JOAN But it sure broke the ice. And we thought you were deadly serious.
KATE Husband number one was digging ...
S'BHAN Two.
KATE Sorry. Husband number *two* was digging carrots in the garden for your tea when he had a massive heart attack and dropped dead.
JOAN Amongst ...
OTHERS ... the carrots.
RUBY We were so shocked. We seriously wanted to know what you did.
S'BHAN And I told you. I opened a tin of beans.
[All four laugh heartily]
KATE But that story about you going to see that fortune-teller
JOAN Oh yes and the fortune-teller told you *[Spooky voice]* some terrible news.
RUBY *[As fortune-teller]* You are about to become a widow.
S'BHAN And I got really upset and said, "But will I be found guilty?"
[All four laugh heartily]
FX *Door bell rings*
[Sudden mood change, minor panic]
KATE That'll be her, the new widow.
JOAN What's her name?
KATE *[Moving towards offstage door]* I have no idea. I know nothing about her.
S'BHAN I bet she's fat.
KATE *[Stops to reprimand her]* Siobhan, please do not insult her. Please.
S'BHAN All right.
[KATE exits. Next three lines spoken softly]
S'BHAN I bet she wears bloomers and smells of baby powder.
JOAN I pray she's not a dim-wit like me.
RUBY I just hope Ern likes her.
[Slight pause as tension builds]
KATE *[Enters to announce]* Ladies, I'd like you to meet our new widow, Phillipa.
[KATE steps upstage. Pause. PHILLIPA enters]
FX *Saxophone music plays*
[PHILLIPA is younger than the others by about two generations, wears striking fashionable clothes, her hair and makeup are classy and she wears sunglasses. OTHERS are gobsmacked]
PIP Hi. I'm Pip. *[Removes sunglasses]*
S'BHAN *[Drooling, hops up indicating her seat to PIP]* Hi, I'm Siobhan. Have a seat.
PIP *[PIP sits]* Thanks.
S'BHAN *[In awe]* And I love your ... everything.
[PIP smiles. They all sit. SIOBHAN moves to settee or arm of settee]
JOAN Hello, I'm Joan.
PIP Hi Joan.
RUBY I'm Ruby.
PIP Hi Ruby.
RUBY And *[Indicating]* this is Ern.
PIP *[Shrugs - what the heck?]* Hi urn.

The Merry Widows 18

- KATE** We've just had coffee, would you like some?
- PIP** Thanks, ah ...
- KATE** Kate.
- PIP** Kate, sorry, I'm hopeless with names. Thanks, Kate but I've had two skinny lattes already today.
- S'BHAN** *[Almost fawning]* Oh I just love a linny skatte.*[sic]* *[OTHERS look at SIOBHAN]* What?
- JOAN** We're so sorry to hear of your recent loss. *[OTHERS agree]* It was recent?
- PIP** You're very kind. Yes, quite recent. *[OTHERS sigh, nod]* And thank you for inviting me to your group. I gather you're all widows.
- OTHERS** *[Speaking at once]* We are ... All of us ... Yes.
[The gentle probing continues]
- KATE** Now I hope you won't mind me saying this, Phillipa, but ...
- PIP** Pip, please, call me Pip.
- KATE** Well, Pip, I think we were expecting someone a little more ... senior.
[Agreement and smiles from OTHERS]
- PIP** *[Smiling]* Wearing bloomers and smelling of baby powder.
[OTHERS amused, SIOBHAN laughs loudest]
- S'BHAN** *[Laughing to hide her embarrassment]* Yes.
- PIP** Not quite. I guess I'm more chemise and Chanel.
- S'BHAN** *[Loves it]* Oh I love the feeling.
- RUBY** So was your late husband a youngish man?
- PIP** No, he wasn't. Actually he was old enough to be my father ... and quite wealthy
- S'BHAN** God bless the sugar daddies.
- PIP** But now he's dead and here I am, like each of you, a widow.
- KATE** Well if you ever want a shoulder to cry on or someone to listen to your troubles, you've got four seasoned widows right here.
- OTHERS** That's true ... yes indeed ... feel free. *[etc].*
- PIP** You're very kind.
[Pause. They're busting to know and she ain't talking]
- JOAN** Well, I'll go first. My advice, Pip, is to keep busy. When I was first widowed I set myself a task and that took my mind off ... well, you know.
- PIP** Oh I've done just that. I've started a really important quest.
[Pause. OTHERS are expecting PIP to keep talking but she doesn't]
- RUBY** I found things very hard at first. I became quite angry with Ern. *[Annoyed]* How dare he up and leave me. *[Patting/indicating urn]* Ah, Ern's in the urn. But now we've got a new relationship and everything's hunky-dory.
- PIP** Cool. *[Commenting on urn]* But I'm afraid I'd find it very hard to have my late husband's ashes anywhere near me.
[Whoa. Another inflammatory statement and again with no qualification]
- KATE** *[Pause]* I'm sorry to hear you're so unhappy.
- PIP** Well yes, I was unhappy but the real reason for avoiding the urn would be confusion. You see my husband's first name was Ashley and everyone called him Ash.
- RUBY** *[Realises]* Oh my god. Ash's ashes. That's worse than Ern's urn.

The Merry Widows 19

- S'BHAN** Ash's ashes. *[Starts laughing]* Holy smoke, where's Ash?
[The OTHERS are unsure but when PIP smiles revealing her dry sense of humour, everyone joins in the joke. Laughter builds as each new quip is made. Various characters could repeat the tag line as they laugh]
- PIP** It could have been worse. His mother's maiden name was Tray.
- JOAN** *[Gets it]* Ash Tray! *[More laughter]*
- PIP** And she was once engaged to a guy called George Felt.
- JOAN** *[Gets it]* Ash Felt! *[More laughter]*
- S'BHAN** And when he was old and gone to seed he'd be called Pot.
[Pause. Everyone is thinking. PIP is first]
- PIP** *[Humouring them]* Oh, Pot Ash! *[Laughter all round]*
- JOAN** Or, or if he had a fiery temper he'd be Volcanic.
[Pause. Muttering. "Volcanic"]
- KATE** *[First to get it]* Volcanic Ash! *[More laughter]*
[The laughter should be choreographed to build in intensity with each new pun. The regular widows haven't laughed like this for ages and so PIP is immediately a welcome visitor. The laughter creates a relaxed and friendly mood]
- PIP** You ladies obviously haven't lost your sense of humour.
- RUBY** *[Recovering]* Oh my goodness; even Ern thinks it's funny.
- JOAN** We haven't laughed like that since I don't know when.
- S'BHAN** Since I dated that guy with the stapled comb-over. *[She demonstrates]* He used to do that elephant impression where he'd pull out his pockets and ...
- RUBY** Yes, thank you, Siobhan. We have a guest, remember?
- KATE** So now we know your late husband Ashley was elderly and rich. But what we don't know ... you don't mind us asking I hope?
- PIP** No, fire away. "Gossip is nature's telephone."
- S'BHAN** I like that.
- KATE** I wondered how your late husband became so wealthy.
- PIP** *[Shrugs]* Oh that's easy. He robbed banks.
[Dead silence. Another show-stopper statement]
- KATE** Actually, *my* husband did that; he was a stockbroker.
[OTHERS laugh embarrassingly]
- JOAN** And my brother-in-law was a lawyer so he was *definitely* a crook.
[More agreement and subdued laughter from OTHERS]
- PIP** No, when I say, 'robbed banks', I mean as in bank robberies.
- RUBY** *[Amazed]* As in *real* criminals?
- PIP** As in sawn-off shotgun, hands in the air and give us your effing money.
[OTHERS stunned]
- S'BHAN** *[Impressed]* Awesome.
- JOAN** *[Genuinely ignorant]* I've never heard of effing money.
- PIP** And just like a husband with a mistress, the wife is the last to know. I thought he was out playing golf. Next thing the cops were kicking in the door and pointing guns at everyone.
[Stunned silence. This was not expected]
- KATE** *[Polite]* Well, that sounds more interesting than our tea and cucumber sandwiches.

The Merry Widows 20

- RUBY** I don't think any of us can top that.
- S'BHAN** I can. I once went out with a bloke who mistook Viagra for blue smarties and ...
- JOAN** *[Covering - again]* What an unusual life you've led, Pip.
- KATE** That's true.
[Awkward pause]
- S'BHAN** *[Enthusiastic]* So, what's it like being a gangster's moll?
- KATE** *[Reprimanding SIOBHAN]* Siobhan!
- RUBY** *[Polite]* Please forgive our friend's blunt language.
- S'BHAN** Go on; as my old Mum [Mom] used to say, "If you can't say something nice about someone, say something awful".
[OTHERS despair at SIOBHAN's boldness]
- PIP** Not so racy I'm afraid. My husband planned the raids but never took part. Then before the trial, he met a hitman and, as they say, he bought one.
- JOAN** *[Has no idea]* Bought one what?
- S'BHAN** *[Impressed]* You mean he was rubbed out?
- PIP** Yes, he was bumped off.
- RUBY** *[Shocked]* You mean, murdered?
[PIP nods and the OTHERS are momentarily stunned]
- KATE** Perhaps that was a blessing in disguise. I mean, you not having to endure the trial.
- PIP** You're right. And while the lack of trial publicity helped me get over the shock of my husband's secret life, his estate is now a mess. The court has frozen the assets leaving me with next to nothing.
- JOAN** You poor thing.
- S'BHAN** *[Excited]* You could still make a fortune. Sell your story - 'I was married to Mr Big'.
- KATE** *[Exasperated]* Oh really, Siobhan.
- PIP** *[Definite]* Please, I do not want publicity.
- RUBY** Good for you.
- PIP** I never took my husband's name, I'm ashamed of his criminal past and all I want is privacy and the chance to rebuild my life. *[Suddenly worried]* You ladies won't tell the press about me?
- OTHERS** Of course not ... never ... no way. *[etc.]*
- S'BHAN** What's it worth? *[OTHERS stare daggers at SIOBHAN who backs down]* Only kidding.
[Big grin. Pause. It's hard to know what to say next]
- JOAN** *[Cool]* So will you be staying long; here, in your unit I mean?
- PIP** That depends.
[Another cryptic reply. Pause]
- KATE** Pip, if I may offer some advice. You seem to be reluctant to ... tell us things. We don't want to be nosy ...
- S'BHAN** Yes we do.
- RUBY** We tend to tell more not less and that's how we help one another. It builds trust and understanding.

The Merry Widows 21

- PIP** I'm sorry. It's just that right now my life is pretty tough. On top of my husband's frozen estate, I've got a worried mother caring for her sick and elderly parents.
[Reaction from OTHERS. They know that scene well]
- KATE** Oh we've all travelled down *that* road. *[OTHERS agree]*
- PIP** My grandfather's pretty frail and struggling because my grandma's got dementia and ...
[OTHERS react]
- JOAN** Oh, been there and done that.
- S'BHAN** And got the tee-shirt.
- RUBY** We can help with everything from Alzheimer's to ashes.
- PIP** Thank you. You're all very kind.
- KATE** So on top of your financial woes, you have elderly grandparents with major health issues.
- PIP** Yes ... except they're not really my grandparents.
[Another pause]
- RUBY** You've done it again; you never finish the story.
- PIP** *[Struggling]* That's because this one's ... complicated.
- S'BHAN** You want complicated? Check out my love life.
- KATE** She's right. We're very good at complicated. *[OTHERS agree]*
- PIP** *[Looks at them then agrees]* Okay, but I did warn you. *[Pause]* My maternal grandparents are really my adoptive grandparents who adopted my mother when she was a baby. My Mum has never met her real parents. She's wanted to track them down for years but struggled as a single parent. So, without telling my Mum, I'm on a quest to find her birth parents, my birth grandparents.
- JOAN** Good luck. Some relatives don't want to be found. They start a new family and choose to forget their past.
- RUBY** And there are privacy laws which make it even more difficult.
- PIP** Tell me about it. The adoption laws are pretty strict but I may have a lead on my birth grandfather.
- KATE** Is he still alive?
- PIP** No and he didn't marry my birth grandmother. But he did marry and if I can find his wife, my step grandmother, the one who married my birth grandfather ...
- JOAN** Who's dead?
- PIP** Yes. If I can find the woman who married my birth grandfather, she might be able to tell my mother about her birth father.
- S'BHAN** I'm confused.
- RUBY** Sounds like a needle in a haystack.
- KATE** So your step grandparents are alive and so is a woman who married your birth grandfather but who is not your birth grandmother?
- PIP** I did say it was complicated.
- S'BHAN** This makes my love life look simple.

The Merry Widows 22

- PIP** I've hired a private detective who found some leads. My Mum turns forty-one
[This age may need to be adjusted up or down] next month and would love to trace her
stepmother who may, just *may* live in this area.
[Whoa, bombshell. Sudden tension]
- JOAN** Here? You mean right here?
- PIP** It's just a vague lead.
- RUBY** How vague is vague?
- PIP** If only I could find that widow.
- S'BHAN** Do you know she's a widow?
- PIP** I'm sure my step-grandmother is now a widow. She might be able to tell me
something, nothing or ... everything.
*[Pause. There's been a real shift in atmosphere. Who is Pip? Is she genuine? Does she think
her step-grandmother really lives in this area? Could she possibly already know? And is her
step-grandmother sitting in Kate's unit?]*
- FX** *Mobile phone rings in PIP'S bag*
[Reaction from OTHERS]
- S'BHAN** Not mine.
- JOAN** I only discovered them last week.
- RUBY** Ern's is switched off during the day.
- KATE** Must be you, Pip.
- PIP** *[Taking ringing phone from bag/purse]* Oh it is mine. I'm so sorry.
[She switches off ringing but looks at caller ID]
- FX** *Phone stops ringing*
- PIP** It's my private detective. *[Standing and moving upstage to the sliding glass door UR]* He
may have some news.
*[PIP has her back to the OTHERS and speaks into her phone. OTHERS don't look at her but
hang on her every word]* Hello? ... I'm fine. Any news? ... Really? ... And you're
sure of the location? ... Okay, thanks. Bye. *[She ends call, turns and puts away phone.
Coming down]* That was my ...
- OTHERS** *[They finish her sentence]* ... private detective.
- PIP** *[Smiles]* I have a new lead on my step-grandmother. It's getting serious so I'd
better be going. But look it's been lovely meeting you all. I hope we can stay in
touch. Bye. *[Starts to exit]*
- KATE** *[Following PIP]* I'll show you out. *[Exits after PIP]*
- OTHERS** Bye ... goodbye.
[Remaining widows look at one another and strain to hear conversation offstage]
- S'BHAN** Well I'll be ...
- JOAN** *[Holds up hand]* Shhh.
- S'BHAN** *[Mimes]* What?
[Pause. Silence continues. Finally KATE enters but walks through the room]
- RUBY** Has she gone?
- KATE** Gone but not forgotten.
*[KATE exits into her bedroom and disappears for a few moments. The OTHERS are unsure
about what's going on. They look at one another. Some shoulder shrugs]*
- JOAN** *[Calls]* Kate? Are you all right?

The Merry Widows 23

[JOAN puts coffee things on tray]

RUBY That woman has upset Ern.

S'BHAN Nice outfit though. Wish I'd married a bank robber.

RUBY And look how he ended up.

KATE *[Enters with small portable computer and sits with it on her lap]* Let's run a check on the widow, Phillipa.

[RUBY and SIOBHAN move around KATE who types. JOAN puts cups on tray]

JOAN Is that a portable computer? *[JOAN picks up tray and exits to kitchen]*

KATE *[Typing]* "Accused ... bank ... robber ... murdered ... before ... trial."

RUBY You're not saying she's lying?

S'BHAN She couldn't be lying, she had a Gucci watch.

KATE Here we go. *[Reading screen]* "Accused bank robber mastermind, Mr Ashley ..."

RUBY *[Pointing at screen]* That's him; Ash's ashes.

KATE *[Still reading]* "... died of gunshot wounds the day before his trial was to begin."

RUBY She was telling the truth.

[When ready, JOAN returns from kitchen]

KATE But not *all* the truth. *[Closes computer]* What was young Phillipa not telling us? I reckon our new widow knows the law and knows she can't approach us directly.

RUBY Us?

S'BHAN What are you talking about?

KATE Perhaps the bank robber's widow is a lot smarter than we think.

JOAN *[Catches the mood]* Yes, I got a strange feeling when she started talking about her birth grandparents.

KATE *[Big statement]* A possibility, ladies, is that Phillipa believes her grandfather is one of our dead husbands.

OTHERS *[Stunned]* What?

KATE She knows the law which provides privacy in some adoption situations. So unless we agree to talk to her, she's stuck.

S'BHAN Whoa, whoa, whoa. One of our husbands is her grandfather?

KATE It's a possibility.

S'BHAN But how? Where's your evidence?

RUBY She was very believable. Her criminal husband, her adoptive grandparents being ill; it all made us feel sorry for her.

S'BHAN That's not evidence.

JOAN She teased out every story. She forced us to ask questions.

RUBY She told us things we could easily verify.

S'BHAN So? How does marrying a criminal who gets murdered and having a frozen will relate to her moving next door to spy on us?

RUBY 'Truth is stranger than fiction' is what Ern used to say.

S'BHAN *[Indicating urn]* Appropriate coming from a talking container.

KATE Our Phillipa's smart. She didn't approach us, we approached her. She's got a plan and she's waiting for one of us to admit we're her step-grandmother.

JOAN Well I'm sorry but how could I possibly be her step-grandmother?

S'BHAN Oh Joanie, get real. Years ago, your old man played away.

The Merry Widows 24

- JOAN** *[Genuine innocence]* But John hated football.
- RUBY** Ladies, I've got to admit *I'm* confused so Ern must be dead-set bewildered.
- S'BHAN** Well if it's true, it's straightforward. And I'd remember if I'd ever had it off with Pip's father?
- KATE** *[Annoyed]* Grandfather! Pip's grandfather.
- S'BHAN** *[Confused]* Okay, him as well.
- RUBY** So if you're correct Kate, one of our deceased husbands is Pip's dear ol' grandpappy.
[Reaction from OTHERS]
- JOAN** *[Unhappy]* I'm sorry, Kate, but you're wrong.
- RUBY** Yes, totally wrong.
- S'BHAN** *[Upset]* Now hang on, this is not fair. I'm three times more likely to be her step-grannie than you lot.
- JOAN** I simply refuse to believe John could have ever done such a thing.
- S'BHAN** He did it with you.
- JOAN** *[Disgusted]* Oh please.
- KATE** Stop it; all of you. Can't you see this is just what that woman wants? We turn on one another until one of us cracks.
- JOAN** *[Upset]* That evil young woman is suggesting my husband was unfaithful.
- RUBY** *[Equally upset]* It's outrageous. *[Indicating]* Ern is a gentleman.
- S'BHAN** *[Realises sadly]* I think I might need a different defence.
- KATE** There's one way to be sure.
- JOAN** I'm sure already.
- KATE** Go back forty-one years and nine months and see if it's possible our husbands could have fathered Phillipa's mother.
- RUBY** No. I refuse to play her grubby little game.
- KATE** Go home, look for old letters, diaries, photo albums, anything - and work out where your hubby was on or around that date. If we can prove our husbands had no chance to cheat, she'll fail. *[Pause. OTHERS look at one another]* Well, has anyone got a better idea?
- JOAN** And what if we *can't* prove it? What if I can't find anything which proves my husband was never involved?
- KATE** *[Pause]* We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.
- S'BHAN** But what if I *can* prove it? What if I find something which proves one of my husbands was Pip's grandfather? What then, hey?
[Pause. They are confused]
- RUBY** I think I'd rather not know. If I found out Ern had cheated on me, I think I'd do something terrible.
- S'BHAN** Bit hard to kill him now.
- KATE** Look, I might be completely wrong. But sometimes you get a hunch, a feeling that something's wrong and this is one of those times. *[Pause]* Okay, if you want to forget the whole thing, just ... forget it.
[OTHERS mumble but decide to leave. They collect their things]

The *Merry Widows* 25

- RUBY** Come on, Ern. We need to have a serious chat about you being a naughty boy forty-one years ago.
- JOAN** *[Gathering parcels]* I've just discovered computers and mobile phones and now I'm supposed to discover if my John was a philanderer.
- S'BHAN** I can't remember which husband I was married to then.
- KATE** *[Following them to the door]* Go home, ladies. Have a ferret through those shoe boxes of old stuff. We've all got them.
- OTHERS** Oh yes ... I have ... It'll take ages. *[etc.]*
- KATE** Let's show this newcomer she's barking up the wrong tree. Facts, ladies, gather those facts.
[They natter as they exit. After short pause KATE returns and moves to coffee table. She picks up portable computer, pauses thinking then shakes her head and exits to her bedroom for a quick change. Lights fade as she exits. BLACKOUT]

Act 1 Scene 2

- FX** *Some eerie music plays*
[Midnight that night. Dim lighting comes up. Pause. Glass door UR starts to move. Slowly it is slid a bit; then some more. A torch/flashlight is shone from outside. He or she is dressed in black. The intruder is the same size and build as PIP. The intruder could be played by a stagehand. Carefully the intruder creeps into the room. The light is shone around the room. The intruder moves upstage to the cabinet with drawers and searches. The light is placed in the mouth of the intruder. Then in a drawer, the intruder discovers what they are looking for. A photo is removed from its frame but in the process the frame is dropped. The intruder freezes but no sound is heard. With photo in hand the intruder tip-toesto the kitchen and exits. Pause. Then a crash as a can falls to the floor. Suddenly the intruder hastily exits the kitchen, runs across room and heads for the sliding door and exits. The kitchen noise is loud enough to wake KATE who is asleep in the next room. A light comes on in the bedroom.]
- KATE** *[Calling from offstage, nervous]* Hello? Is someone there? Hello?
[KATE enters wearing pyjamas, slippers and a dressing-gown]
- KATE** *[Worried]* Is that you Mrs. Schmidt?
[KATE flicks a light switch. Soft lighting comes up but is still dim. KATE moves upstage, crosses to and locks window/door then goes to where stolen items were located. KATE discovers what is missing. She picks dropped photo frame]
Oh Lawrence, what have you done this time?
- FX** *Increase eerie music*
[Lights fade to black]

End of Act 1

Interval

The Merry Widows 26

Act Two, Scene 1

[Lights up on previous scene only a few seconds later. No-one can be seen in the room. It's midnight and KATE is on her knees behind the sofa. It's still a dimly lit room]

KATE Bugger! There's even glass down here.

[Her head appears. She starts to exit to kitchen] I should've called the police ...

FX *Quiet door knocking*

KATE *[About turns and heads to front door]* ... instead of my pals. *[Speaking softly offstage]*
Come in, come in.

JOAN *[Enters carrying hot water bottle]* We didn't ring the door bell because it's so late.

[The four widows enter. They are all in night attire, pyjamas/nightie, dressing-gown, slippers and maybe headgear. SIOBHAN'S snazzy hairstyle has gone. RUBY carries urn and Ern's cardigan. SIOBHAN has sleek dressing-gown and pyjamas]

KATE There's no need to whisper. And please, have a seat.

[KATE turns up dimmer - LIGHTING increases - and they sit]

RUBY I've brought Ern's cardigan. It keeps him warm at night.

[Ern and his cardigan are placed on a table]

S'BHAN What's going on?

KATE It's all true, I've definitely had a break-in.

[Buzz from OTHERS]

JOAN You must have been frightened.

RUBY Joan said they woke you up.

S'BHAN This is just so weird. I'm never out after midnight without a man.

JOAN But who broke in and how?

RUBY And did they take anything?

KATE I was asleep, heard a noise and came out just as the intruder left through that door. *[Gasps, reaction]*

RUBY They could have attacked you. Did you see him?

KATE Or her.

JOAN Her?

KATE No and my cash and jewellery weren't touched.

S'BHAN *[Surprised]* They took nothing?

KATE Oh they took something all right - photos.

S'BHAN Ah, the *hidden* photos?

RUBY Lawrence of Arabia?

KATE *[Nodding]* The one and only, Rudolf Valentino.

JOAN I thought his name was Lawrence.

S'BHAN Hey, they weren't compromising pix by any chance?

RUBY But who would want to steal photos? Not your son?

JOAN *[Gets it]* Of course, Phillipa. No, that's too much of a co-incidence.

KATE *[Scoffs]* Ha.

RUBY You don't *really* think it was Pip?

KATE Or her private detective.

S'BHAN So Lawrence is Phillipa's grandfather. Why am I not surprised?

The Merry Widows 27

- RUBY** Oh have some sympathy, Siobhan.
- S'BHAN** *[Contrite]* Sorry.
[Pause. Silence]
- KATE** Ladies, I think it's time I spilt the beans. *[Pause. They settle]* You know my late husband was a serial adulterer. You know I hid his photos and now, after we meet a young widow looking for her birth grandfather, my unit is burgled and the only thing stolen are photos of the fast and loose Lothario.
- JOAN** I'm sorry Kate; it certainly points to Phillipa being interested in Lawrence.
- S'BHAN** But how did she break in? There are no signs of a forced entry.
- KATE** Remember when she took that phone call? Where did she stand?
- RUBY** *[Remembers]* By the sliding door.
- S'BHAN** *[Realises]* That's when she unlocked it.
- KATE** That phone call with her private detective was probably pre-arranged.
- JOAN** Have you called the police?
- KATE** The police can't help us *or* Phillipa; no-one can. But now we know who broke in, what was taken and why, I'm fine.
- RUBY** So you believe Lawrence is Pip's grandfather?
- KATE** *[Shrugs]* Who else?
- S'BHAN** And you don't mind?
- KATE** Mind? I'm way beyond being hurt by Lawrence's sleazy behaviour but sadly, for Pip's sake, all I can tell her is that her sweet old grandpa was a professional womanizer.
- JOAN** You could tell Pip about your good times.
- KATE** What good times? The secretive phone calls, another woman's perfume in his hair, the lipstick on his clothes or, the pathetic excuses about working late?
- S'BHAN** What about his romantic proposal in Paris?
- KATE** *[Scoffs]* Ha.
- RUBY** What about your son and grandson? They're both related to Pip.
- JOAN** And Pip and her mother are your late husband's blood relatives.
- KATE** *[Angry]* What, so because my son and grandson, my own flesh and blood have deserted me, I should make do with the offspring of my two-timing husband?
[OTHERS react. They are sorry. Pause]
- JOAN** Sorry, Kate. I wasn't thinking.
- KATE** Where does it say you have to love your relatives by marriage? I'm humiliated by my husband and my reward is to embrace the bastards he sired. How is that fair? *[Pause]* Well?
- RUBY** It's not fair; of course it isn't.
- S'BHAN** Who needs enemies when you've got family?
[Pause. Sombre moment]
- KATE** *[Making a fresh start]* You girls are my best friends. You're my family now.
- RUBY** So what will you do about Pip?
- KATE** Nothing.
- JOAN** But what if she confronts you with her facts and your photos?
- KATE** She won't. To do so she'd be admitting one, possibly two illegal acts.

The Merry Widows 28

S'BHAN Pip's just like her old man, a bloody crook.

KATE Ladies, I'm sorry to drag you out at such a late hour but at least now we can forget all about Pip and her boring, old step-grandmother.

JOAN You're a lot of things, Kate but boring ain't one of them.
[OTHERS agree. Pause]

RUBY Actually I quite like being up late. Ern and I are normally in bed by ten.

S'BHAN *[Scoffs]* This isn't late. This is when I come alive.

KATE *[Stretching, yawning]* Well it's late for me. And it's time we were all back in the land of Nod.
[OTHERS agree and start to make a move]

RUBY Make sure your windows and doors are locked; all of you.

OTHERS *[Agree]* Good idea ... I always do ... Thanks. *[etc]*

JOAN *[Stops]* So Kate, how did you go with your check on Lawrence?
[OTHERS stop in staggered formation]

KATE Sorry?

JOAN The husband check; you asked us to go through old letters and diaries to see what our husbands were doing forty-one years and nine months ago.

RUBY I did.

S'BHAN Me too.

KATE *[Defensive]* Well, in my case it wasn't necessary.
[OTHERS react]

JOAN Not necessary?

KATE I told you. Lawrence was a repeat offender. He had form.

RUBY But did you check on his whereabouts?

KATE No because it's obviously him.

JOAN We can't accuse Lawrence without the evidence.

KATE *[Peeved]* Joan.

JOAN I did the right thing. I checked on John.

KATE Well good for you. But John's in the clear and Lawrence is our man.

JOAN No.

KATE No?

JOAN John's *not* in the clear. There was a gap.

KATE A gap? What do you mean, a gap?

JOAN John had opportunity and motive.

KATE Joan, for god's sake.

RUBY Me too.

KATE You too what?

RUBY *[Whispers, covers urn]* Ern could easily have done it.

KATE *[Her incredulity is rising]* Now stop this, both of you - right now.

S'BHAN Well I found heaps of gaps.

KATE *[Not you as well]* Siobhan!

S'BHAN I definitely have two husbands in the frame and, at a pinch, even the third could've done it.

KATE *[Almost spare]* Ladies, this is ridiculous.

The Merry Widows 29

- JOAN** I double-checked and my late husband could be Pip's grandfather.
[Shock from the OTHERS]
- KATE** *[Struggling]* This is a joke, right?
- JOAN** Do I look like I'm joking?
- RUBY** *[Picking up cardigan and covering urn]* I need to do this. *[Ern/urn is hidden]* It will be too much of a shock for Ern to hear what I'm about to say.
- KATE** Tell me I'm dreaming.
- RUBY** I've found clear evidence that Ern may well be Pip's grandfather.
- JOAN** *[Finger pointing]* My evidence is better than yours.
- RUBY** *[Gives as good as she gets]* No it's not.
- KATE** Ladies, ladies, please, have you gone mad?
- S'BHAN** Yes, settle down, girls.
- KATE** Thank you, Siobhan.
- S'BHAN** You're both wrong because *I'm* definitely Pip's step-grandmother.
[OTHERS react]
- KATE** This *is* insane.
- JOAN** *[Sitting]* Put the kettle on Kate. We're in for a long night.
[All VISITORS sit]
- KATE** But a few hours ago your husbands were as pure as the driven snow.
- S'BHAN** Not mine.
- KATE** Now you're claiming they're Don Juans and were in like Flynn.
- S'BHAN** Ah, *there's* a man I could fancy; the Hobart hunk.
- RUBY** Tea, please.
- KATE** *[Shaking head exits to kitchen]* You lot have been drinking. You're now the *sherry* widows. *[Exits]*
[The three widows go into a huddle or council of war]
- JOAN** Kate has done the wrong thing. She was the one who suggested we check on our husbands. Why hasn't she?
- RUBY** Exactly.
- JOAN** And it's wrong to assume. It might be that Lawrence never even met Pip's grandmother.
- RUBY** Quite possibly.
- S'BHAN** But hang on. Your husbands were incapable of cheating. I'm sure you both said they were pillars of the community.
- JOAN** They were. *[Proud]* John was a verger in the church.
- RUBY** *[Proud]* And Ern was a Worshipful Master in the Lodge.
- S'BHAN** There you are. Anglicans and Masons; both Mister Goody Two-Shoes. Kate and I were married to ratbags. *We're* the ones with the cheating spouses.
- KATE** *[Enters and sits]* The kettle's on. Now let's put a stop to all this lunacy.
- JOAN** It's not lunacy. I did some research. When Phillipa's mother was born, my sister was having a baby, interstate. I stayed with her for three weeks and came home exhausted. I was desperate for sleep. John said he had something important to tell me and I told him it could wait. The next day I asked and he said it didn't matter.
- KATE** So? That proves nothing.

The Merry Widows 30

- S'BHAN** It's called circumcised evidence.
- KATE** Circumstantial.
- S'BHAN** I prefer circumcised.
- RUBY** Well I too went back forty-one years and nine months and discovered that Ern won promotion then and went away for two month's training.
- KATE** And?
- S'BHAN** *[Taps nose with finger]* Oh come on, husband on business trip - say no more.
- KATE** I can't believe you girls would even consider your loving husbands *looked* at another woman, let alone fathered a child.
- JOAN** You told us to check.
- RUBY** Which is what we did.
- KATE** I wanted you to find evidence that proved your husbands *couldn't* be Pip's grandfather; not that they *could* be.
- S'BHAN** Exactly. You're talking rubbish, ladies.
- KATE** Thank you, Siobhan.
- S'BHAN** You can forget about John and Ern because I've got two, possibly *three* horny hubbies who are dead set guilty as charged.
- KATE** *[Furious she's been taken in]* Bloody hell, Siobhan; this is nonsense.
- JOAN** *[At SIOBHAN]* You're just saying that because you want to be friends with the trendy Phillipa.
- RUBY** *[Likewise on the attack]* You just want to be buddies with a criminal's wife.
- S'BHAN** *[Fighting back]* And you're both jealous because I chose husbands who *could* put it about.
- [For an instant it looks like JOAN and RUBY are going to fight SIOBHAN]*
- KATE** *[Furious]* Right, that's it. Stop now; all of you! Just listen to yourselves. You're well-mannered, respectable widows fighting over whose late husband was the best adulterer.
- S'BHAN** *[At KATE]* Well you started it.
- KATE** *Me?*
- S'BHAN** You're the one prattling on about the dashing Lawrence and his harem.
- KATE** I wasn't proud of that. I wasn't boasting.
- JOAN** And then, conveniently, someone supposedly breaks in and steals his photos.
- KATE** *Conveniently? Supposedly?*
- RUBY** How do we know you aren't covering up some scandalous secret?
- KATE** I *was* covering up some scandalous secret; my husband the rat. I was so ashamed I removed all his photos and for weeks told no-one. That was my secret. And I was the one who invited Pip to our meetings. What, so I could prove my husband *is* her grandfather? Please, give me a break.
- JOAN** So why not carry out a search on Lawrence like we did on our husbands?
- KATE** Because Phillipa and I already know the truth. Lawrence is her grandfather and she wants me to admit it. Well I won't.
- RUBY** But if you didn't check, how can you be sure?

The Merry Widows 31

- KATE** How many more times? Lawrence was a serial Casanova, Phillipa's moved to be close to me and now she's stolen his photos. I reckon that's enough for an educated guess. So, any *more* questions?
- OTHERS** [*Quieter*] No ... sorry ... nothing.
- KATE** And if you don't mind, I'd like you all to leave. [*Pause*] Now, please.
[*Pause. Awkward moment. Nobody makes a move*] Come on. Siobhan.
- S'BHAN** I can't.
- KATE** [*Slow anger burn begins*] Can't? It's easy. [*Performs the words*] Stand, turn, [*Points at door*] walk.
- S'BHAN** No, I mean it's bad luck to be the first to leave a party.
- KATE** [*Almost losing it*] This isn't a party.
- S'BHAN** It could be if we got some fellahs.
[*KATE frustrated but the OTHERS are in no hurry*]
- KATE** Siobhan!
- JOAN** Actually I'm not in the least bit sleepy.
- KATE** [*Getting annoyed now*] Oh Joan!
- RUBY** And Ern hasn't had his cocoa yet.
- KATE** [*Loses control*] Ruby, he can't drink cocoa or any damn drink, because he's bloody well dead!
[*Whoa. This is a climactic statement. Silence. Long pause. Shock is in the room*]
- JOAN** [*Softly*] That, dear Kate, was uncalled for.
- S'BHAN** [*Pointing at KATE*] Hey! [*Pause*] O.T.T.
- KATE** [*Regrets her behaviour, is under stress, moves to RUBY*] My god, what am I saying? I am so sorry, Ruby, please forgive me.
- RUBY** It's not *me* who's upset. [*RUBY picks up urn*]
- KATE** I really, really apologise.
- RUBY** [*Holding urn to KATE*] Tell *him*.
[*KATE takes the urn and RUBY sits and the others watch KATE'S apology*]
- KATE** [*To the urn*] Ern ...
- RUBY** That's Ern with an E.
- KATE** Of course. [*Back to urn*] Ern, I apologise for my disgraceful behaviour. It was totally uncalled for and I'm deeply sorry for being so rude. Please, please forgive me.
- RUBY** [*Smiling at urn*] There you are, Ern. He never bears a grudge. [*Urn is re-seated*]
- S'BHAN** [*Rarely genuinely kind*] Y'know I envy you, Ruby. I don't think I could ever love a man the way you do.
- RUBY** [*Pleased*] Thank you, Siobhan. Of course the key is in finding the right chap.
- S'BHAN** [*Instantly flat*] Thanks; I asked for that.
- RUBY** I reckon a good marriage is like your favourite pair of socks.
- S'BHAN** What, smelly and full of holes?
- RUBY** Comfortable, lovely to touch and a little bit special in winter.
- JOAN** What I envy, Ruby, is the way you keep your marriage going even after your husband has died. That takes a very special woman.

The Merry Widows 32

- KATE** Joan, you kept your marriage going for years even when your husband was a total stranger. *That* takes a very special woman.
- RUBY** Whereas you, Kate, you kept your marriage going while your husband turned adultery into an art form and *that* takes a long-suffering woman.
- KATE** Stupidity more like.
[Pause]
- S'BHAN** Doesn't anyone want to comment on me and my marriages?
- JOAN** We'd love to, Siobhan but we have to home by Christmas.
[Smiles, sighs, they are in a reflective mood]
- S'BHAN** I think the least you could say was that ... I was special.
- RUBY** I think the least we could say is that you were *on* special.
- S'BHAN** I was a time and motion woman. When the motion stopped, it was time to move on.
[Pause]
- KATE** Did anyone have a mother who gave them a pep talk before their marriage?
- OTHERS** Mine did ... oh yes ... what a talk.
- S'BHAN** Bit useless in my case. I knew more than she did.
- KATE** But my mother never mentioned the odds on becoming a widow.
- JOAN** You're right. And I never gave it a thought when I was young.
- KATE** Whereas we all know that today there are heaps more widows than widowers.
- S'BHAN** It's unfair. We've got fewer to choose from and more to compete with.
- JOAN** Did you know that in the 1940s there were as many widows as widowers? Today for every widower there are four widows and the gap is widening.
- S'BHAN** And most of the widowers are cactus which is why I'm into toy boys.
- JOAN** Being on my own doesn't worry me and I'm not afraid of dying but old age;
[Shudders] that gives me the willies.
- RUBY** I'm the same. Ern is great company but he's useless when I kneel and can't get up. *[Indicating buzzer which is on chain around her neck]* That's why I wear this buzzer.
- KATE** I've got one of those but why bother? I've got no family to buzz.
- JOAN** We could buzz one another. *[KATE smiles and nods]*
- RUBY** Ern's got plenty of time. You could buzz him.
- KATE** Thank you, Ruby; thanks Ern.
- JOAN** You know I'm amazed at today's modern gadgets. Can you believe my daughter wants to put a buzzer on my fridge so if I don't open the door after eight hours, she gets a warning signal?
- S'BHAN** I'd like a buzzer to tell me it's time I had sex.
- JOAN** You can even have a buzzer which sounds if you visit the loo but don't come out after a certain time.
- KATE** What happens if you doze off?
- S'BHAN** You know you can set up a web cam so your family can check on you. Of course with me, the footage'd end up on YouTube.
- KATE** Well at least we all have grandkids who can keep an eye on us in our dotage.
[Sad] I just hope one day my grandson will come and visit me.

The Merry Widows 33

OTHERS *[Words of encouragement]* He will ... one day ... of course he will.

JOAN My grandchildren live interstate so I only see them occasionally.

RUBY Our grandkids love to visit and when they've gone, I tell Ern all about their adventures.

KATE What about you Siobhan? How many grandchildren have you got?

S'BHAN *[Pause]* I'm not sure.
[OTHERS react]

KATE Come on, you must know.

S'BHAN It's complicated.

JOAN Just tell us their names and we'll keep score.

S'BHAN Well with hubby number one I had two boys and my first son has two kids.

RUBY That's two grandchildren.

S'BHAN My second son had one child with his first wife then married someone with four kids of her own.

JOAN That's three grand kids and four *step*-grand kids.

S'BHAN Then with my second husband I had a daughter and she married a bloke with two kids from a previous marriage; then they had a child then they adopted a kid from overseas. How many is that?

RUBY Not sure.

KATE Too many.

S'BHAN Then with husband number three ...

JOAN Is that your kettle?
[Everyone stops and listens]

KATE No.

S'BHAN With husband number three ...

JOAN Well I definitely heard something.

S'BHAN I haven't finished listing my grandkids.
[Whispering starts from here]

KATE Shhh. *[Pause]* There is a sound; there's someone outside.
[Controlled panic]

RUBY It's Pip coming back.

JOAN Or her private detective.

KATE They're in the garden. *[Looking at garden]* Quick, hide.
[They duck down behind/beside settee/chairs]

S'BHAN It could be Pip's bank robber pals come to bump off any witnesses.
[OTHERS react]

KATE *[Starts crawling/creeping towards switch]* Stay still and be quiet.
[KATE reaches switch and kills light. The room is darker. Dialogue continues as whispers]

JOAN We should call the police.

KATE No. Let's catch her in the act.

RUBY We should arm ourselves.

JOAN With what?

RUBY I've got Ern.

S'BHAN Oh great. Intruder sprinkled with dead husband.

The Merry Widows 34

JOAN I could empty my hot-water bottle on her.
KATE I'll check the door. *[Crawls/creeps to sliding door UR]*
S'BHAN *[Sending up the situation]* I spy with my little eye ...
RUBY Widows are supposed to be in bed by ten.
KATE *[By the door]* It's still locked. *[Peers outside]* And there's no-one outside.
JOAN Well I'm sure I heard something.
RUBY Ow.
JOAN *[Hears sound]* There. What's that?
RUBY My arthritis.
KATE Someone's at the front door.
JOAN At this time of the night?
S'BHAN If it's a bloke, he should be at my place.
KATE I'll investigate. *[Creeping to door exit DR]* Don't move and don't speak.
[KATE exits to front door. Pause as they wait and wonder]
JOAN I'm actually enjoying this. We should do it more often.
S'BHAN You need to get out more.
RUBY We should all be home in bed.
KATE *[Comes racing back in mild panic]* Quick, she's got a key.
[KATE heads to light switch by bedroom]
OTHERS What?
JOAN How did she get a key?
RUBY Who is it?
KATE It's Pip. She's coming. Hide.
[All four WIDOWS scramble to new hiding positions by chairs, settee or lights]
S'BHAN What are we going to do?
KATE No idea. Just follow my lead.
BLACKOUT
FX *Spooky music*
[The stage is seemingly empty and in darkness. Pause. Torch light shines from offstage via entrance DR. It's the same light we saw at the end of Act 1. Light shines around the room. WIDOWS are hard to see in the darkness. Intruder creeps into room and heads towards kitchen. Wait until intruder is almost at kitchen door]
KATE Hello Pip.
PIP *[Stifled scream]*
[KATE hits switch and night lighting comes up - LIGHTING brightens - all four widows stand and threaten]
WIDOWS *[Stunned; on cue as one]* Mrs. Schmidt!
SCHM'T Oh mein goodness.
[Her torch goes out and OTHERS move closer]
KATE *[Surprised, she was sure it was PIP]* What are you doing here at this time of night?
SCHM'T I very sorry. I leave purse in kitchen.
KATE Yes, I know. I left a message on your machine.
SCHM'T It have passport. I fly in five hours home. My mother she sick.
[OTHERS concerned]
KATE Oh dear. I hope it's not too bad. I'll get your purse. *[Exits to kitchen]*

The Merry Widows 35

SCHM'T Sank you. My phone not work so I need to arrive here.
S'BHAN You were very lucky, sister. We were about to clobber you.
SCHM'T Clobber?
JOAN Come and sit down.
SCHM'T Sank you. I standing.
RUBY We thought you were someone else?
SCHM'T Somevun else? At dis time ov night?
S'BHAN *[Intimate]* Look, just between you and me, this is a seniors' sleepover and we're expecting a geriatric male stripper.
KATE *[Enters with purse]* Here's your purse.
SCHM'T Oh sank you. I look low and high, then remember.
[Pause]
KATE So you won't be able to clean next week?
SCHM'T Sorry, no. I country tonight leave.
KATE An emergency.
SCHM'T Ja. *[Starts to exit]* Okay, I going. *[Indicates purse]* Sank you. Goodbye.
OTHERS Goodbye ... Good luck ... Bye.
[SCHMIDT starts to exit and is about to disappear]
KATE *[Calls]* Ah, Mrs. Schmidt. *[SCHMIDT stops]* This is going to sound silly.
SCHM'T Please, I am being late.
KATE I wondered if you could do me a favour?
SCHM'T *[Pause]* A favour? Well, okay.
KATE Will you give my best to Pip?
[OTHERS stunned. SCHMIDT is still at the DR exit. Pause]
RUBY Pip?
KATE Yes, Phillipa.
[SCHMIDT stares at the WIDOWS]
SCHM'T *[Doesn't understand]* Best to Peep? *[sic]*
KATE Well you *are* her private detective.
OTHERS *[Gasp]* What?
S'BHAN *[Stunned]* Her private detective?
SCHM'T I no understand.
KATE Oh I think you do. In fact I'm sure you do.
[Electric atmosphere. What is going on? Pause then SCHMIDT suddenly moves into the room as she quickly removes glasses, hat and wig and throws them on the floor/settee/chair speaking all the time. She speaks now in her normal voice]
PIP I always work alone. There never was a private detective.
[WIDOWS stunned, even KATE. RUBY and JOAN collapse and sit]
JOAN *[Can't believe it]* You!
S'BHAN Well bugger me.
[PIP continues throwing garments and things onto sofa/chair undressing and speaking as she goes. This is a major change in character. PIP has padding over her normal clothes under her coat. Off comes the padding]
KATE And all this; this charade of cleaning lady and trendy young widow, all just to find a dead grandfather?

The Merry Widows 36

PIP Well I had to be sure and you and the law weren't going to help.

S'BHAN *[Examines padding]* Nice padding. *[Indicates bust]* Got any for up here?

KATE Shut up, Siobhan.

RUBY Look, Ern and I have no idea what's going on here, but I'd like to say this is the best fun we've had in ages.

JOAN Hear, hear.

KATE *[Turns on her friends. Sarcastic]* Well thank you very much, my good and trusted friends. *[Pointing at PIP]* This woman lied her way into my home and life, broke the law, wants to trash my privacy and drag up my unhappy past, and you find it amusing.

RUBY No, Kate ...

JOAN Sorry, Kate.

KATE What right has she got to do that to me? To any of us?
[Pause. WIDOWS ashamed]

PIP *[Quiet]* I have no right.

KATE *[Angry, pointing at PIP]* You, you hold your tongue. I'll deal with you later and trust me, one very real option involves calling the police.

S'BHAN Steady on, Kate.

JOAN She only wanted to find her family.

RUBY And she *is* a widow.

KATE I don't believe I'm hearing this. She's the one in the wrong and you're taking her side.

RUBY Just give her a chance to speak.

KATE Why? What chance did she give me?

JOAN I say let her speak and then, if you want to call the police, well, go ahead.

S'BHAN She's not going anywhere and there's at least one possible benefit.

KATE Benefit?

S'BHAN Pip's mother might know something about low-life Lawrence.

KATE I already know about low-life Lawrence. I don't want to re-visit his sordid past.
[Pointing at PIP] This woman is the equivalent of a journalist hacking my emails. For all we know she may work for some sleazy tabloid.

PIP I don't. I really am just looking for my family.

KATE Her behaviour is illegal but worse, it's cruel. She has violated my emotions.

JOAN *[Worried about KATE]* Steady on old girl.

KATE The laws protecting people's privacy exist for a reason yet madam Trendy here doesn't give a fig for other people's feelings. She's like a lot of people today; what's in it for me?
[Pause]

JOAN I think we've got your point, Kate.

KATE *[Is snapping at everyone]* Have you? Really?

RUBY I have. And if Ern were alive, I'm sure he'd agree.
[OTHERS, not KATE, turn and look at RUBY. They are in shock]

The Merry Widows 37

- KATE** *[Ploughs on]* People are so damn selfish today ... and ... *[Needs verification. To RUBY]* What did you say?
- RUBY** I said, “if Ern were alive, I’m sure he’d agree”.
- KATE** But Ern *is* alive.
- RUBY** I think we all know that’s not true.
- S’BHAN** *[Amazed]* My god.
- KATE** *[Wind has gone from her sails]* What’s brought this on?
- RUBY** If Joan can accept modern technology, if you can forgive Pip and if Siobhan can give up sex, then ...
- S’BHAN** Hang on, I never said that.
- RUBY** Looking at Pip and the trouble she’s gone through to find her grandfather makes me think that while the past is important, it’s the present we should enjoy. It’s time I scattered Ern’s ashes and got on with the rest of my life.
[JOAN and SIOBHAN go to and congratulate RUBY]
- OTHERS** Well done, you ... good girl ... Good for you, Rube.
[Mood change. Older WIDOWS happier, content. Things seem to have been resolved]
- RUBY** *[To PIP]* So thanks Pip for helping me move on with my life and start living in the present.
- KATE** *[Back to angry]* Thanks Pip?
- PIP** *[Contrite]* I’m glad I could help. *[To KATE]* And I’m truly sorry for any upset ...
- KATE** Don’t start. Don’t you dare start that ‘sorry’ routine.
- S’BHAN** Come on, Kate. You’ve got to admire her determination.
- JOAN** Tell her the truth, Kate. She deserves to know about her grandfather.
- KATE** *[Pause. Then at PIP]* Is that what you want? If I tell you all about your ‘wonderful’ grandpa, the man who fathered then abandoned your mother, who cheated and lied his way through my loveless marriage, will you go away and leave me alone?
- PIP** *[Pause. OTHERS hang on the reply]* No.
[OTHERS react]
- KATE** Why you ungrateful little ...
- PIP** *[Speaks over their protests]* No, because Lawrence is not my grandfather.
[Instant silence]
- OTHERS** *[Shocked]* What ... not your grandfather ... then who?
- KATE** *[Can’t believe it]* Not your grandfather? But you said ...
[Older WIDOWS resort to their former attitudes. Next three speeches almost on top of one another]
- JOAN** I told you my John was the one.
- RUBY** *[At her husband]* Ern, how could you?
- S’BHAN** *[To PIP, arms outstretched]* Pippa, come to Grandma.
[PIP moves away from the advancing SIOBHAN]
- KATE** *[Slow burn anger at PIP]* You put me through all this knowing Lawrence is *not* your grandfather?
- PIP** None of your late husbands is my grandfather.
- WIDOWS** What?

The *Merry Widows* 38

Preview script ends. Complete script available from Fox Plays.

The end

