

Getting Better?

The room is dark. Bell (Isabel) and Doug McCubbin are in bed.

Bell Doug? (no answer) Douggie. Time to get up love.

Doug (broadly, humorously) Mmmmm.

Bell Five o'clock. Broad daylight.

Doug Five o'fuckin a.m.

Bell Put the jug on darling, so I can make some tea.

Doug What's that song? Only five minutes more, only five minutes more in your arms.

Bell You've got to get that truck on the road.

Doug No rush. I loaded up last night.

Bell Douggie ...

Doug Give us a break, Bell.

Bell (solemnly) Douglas Alexander McCubbin, it's time you were on the road!

Doug (emerging from the bed like a rhino from a river) I'm awake! My brain's functioning ... after a fashion. Breakfast, wife! Steak and eggs, to make me strong!

Bell (getting up too) Corn flakes, then fruit. That'll get you to Tizzie's. You'll feel like steak then.

Doug My bloody oath I will. (looking around) We're out of corn flakes.

Bell There's a new box in the cupboard. I showed you last night.

Doug (slightly penitent) I believe you did.

Bell Pour some for me.

Doug (humorously) Pour your own! You don't get waited on at this time of day!

Bell Neither do you. I've got a day's work to do.

Doug We call it a day's work, why do we start in the dark?

Bell Because that's the way you like it.

Doug You're right again, bugger it. As usual. As always!

Bell When was I ever wrong?

Doug When you married me, you silly dill!

Bell (tenderly, though raucously) If that was my only mistake ...

Doug Yes?

Bell ... it was the biggest I ever made!

Doug Was it a good one?

Bell Yes, bugger it, it was!

They laugh, full of love and energy. They start their breakfast, still in the dark.

Doug (unexpectedly) I think I'll put it off.

Bell You will not.

Doug (worried) I'm not at my peak this morning.

Bell Who is at five o'clock? Half an hour on the road and you'll be fine.

Doug Mmmmm. (He bangs his spoon in the bowl and stands up suddenly.) Righty-oh! Tizzie's Roadside, here we come. Where's me fuckin keys?

Bell You could try that pocket in your shorts.
Doug Creature of habit, that's me. See you tonight, lover
 mine!
Bell Safe trip, Douggie. (He leaves, we hear the roar of an
 engine, then he's gone.) Right, let's get this house in
 order! Mustn't wake the kids. All right, the laundry!
 Here we go!

The day brightens as the morning passes. We see a boy and a girl getting themselves corn flakes and fruit, then grabbing their school bags and kissing their mother before they ride off to school. We see a clothes line billowing with washing as Bell does a couple of loads. We see her examining a pair of pajamas.

Bell That's blood, surely? Surely not. How would he get
 blood on his pajamas? (She notices that there is a
 man who has come to speak to her.) Yes?
Bob Good morning Mrs McCubbin.
Bell Good morning. What can we do for you?
Bob Is your husband around?
Bell He's taken the fruit to market. He'll be back tonight.
 Anything I can do?
Bob I'm wondering if your husband's got any work he'd
 like done.
Bell I doubt it. He's a fireball of energy. But he'll need
 a rest tonight. Why don't you come round this time
 tomorrow, you can speak to him then.
Bob Thanks, I will.

She goes back to her washing. He watches her a moment before he goes.

Bell Blood. That shouldn't be there. I'll speak to Douggie
 tonight.

There is a pause, then Douggie returns.

Doug Pour me a glass of beer, love. Pour yourself one. Get
 a couple more lined up, the first won't hit the sides.
 (Bell pours two glasses. Doug drinks, reflectively.)
 Just what I needed. Been a long day.

Bell You been bleeding, love?

Doug Only a little bit. Hardly worth talking about. Get a
 bit of that beer inside you.

Bell You're off to the doctor. I want to hear what
 Trembath's got to say.

Doug Bloody old Trembo. Biggest Nervous Nellie this side
 of the black stump.

Bell He'll put you into hospital for tests. No, no, no, don't
 start complaining. It's got to be done.

Doug Doctors and nurses, fair dinkum. They'd knock you
 out with anaesthetic to cut your bloody toenails!

Bell Good job they've got the anaesthetic. People would
 be yelling with pain.

Doug (assertively) Not me!!!

Bell Any of us. All of us.

Doug Not me!!!

Bell I made the appointment.

Doug You what?
Bell Half past eleven tomorrow. At his surgery, not the hospital, if that makes you feel any better.
Doug Isabel McCubbin, you've taken a very serious step!
Bell Now don't start telling me I was wrong. Tell me what Trembath says, when you've seen him.
Doug Tests! You know what they're bloody like. They want to poke things into you, twist'em around, pull'em out and look at'em. Bit o'blood here, bit o'shit there, what else do they think a man's made of? (She's silent.) Eh? Tell me that?
Bell Half past eleven.
Doctor Trembath enters and sits at one side of the stage. Bell leaves.
Doug Well, what did you find?
Trebath Nothing yet, and that's not good.
Doug How do you mean, not good? Sounds bloody good to me!
Trebath I'm going to book you in for a series of tests.
Doug Tests? What else have you been doing?
Trebath They'll want you in the night before. I've booked you in for Sunday next. That okay?
Doug What choice have I got?
Trebath Buckley's ...
Doug (suddenly afraid) And none?
Trebath Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We try to act on knowledge, not on fear.

Doug I've never had a moment of fear in my life.
Trebath Let's hope things stay that way.
A hospital bed appears on the other side of the stage. Trembath points Doug in that direction. As he moves, he sheds his clothes and gets into a knee-length linen blouse that ties up at the back. As he gets into the bed, Bell appears.
Doug Look what they're doing to me, Bell!
Bell They've got to do it, Doug.
Doug Who's gonna take the fruit to market? Who's going to spray those trees? Who was that fella that wanted a job?
Bell Oh yes. He could be handy, right now. (Bob appears.) Mister ... ?
Bob Call me Bob. Bobby if you like.
Bell Well, Mister Bob, we've got some work for you after all. Quite a lot in fact. My husband's been ordered to bed for a day or so ...
Bob Nothing too bad, I hope.
Bell We certainly hope not. But we've got trees to spray, and fruit to get to market ...
Bob I can spray. I can drive a truck.
Doug He sounds like the man. Grab him, Bell!
Bell You hear what my husband says. Tomorrow all right for you?
Bob signals his agreement, and leaves.
Doug Kids okay, darling?

Bell They're at Mum's. They know it's only a day or two.

Doug That's the right thing to tell'em.

Bell He's worried. (to Doug) They were playing Scrabble when I left. You don't need to worry yourself about them.

Doug Not just yet, anyhow. But if these people want to keep me in here for more tests ... you know what they're like ...

Bell I'll bring the kids to see you if you've got to stay in longer. They won't like it, but they'll have to do it.

Doug Thanks, darling.

He turns on one side, away from her, away from the audience. Bell watches with concern.)

Bell I've lost him. It's only a matter of time. Who'll save me now?

As she leaves, the stage grows darker.

Doug (still turned away) I've been weak for ages, but the bleeding's new. What's the cause of that? Two little kids and Bell. Trembo's got to pull a few tricks. They can cut away the sick parts. You can't need everything you've got inside you. We'll chuck the bits we don't want to the crows! (He thinks.) Bell's so strong. I wouldn't have faced this but she made me. I thought she depended on me but I depend on her. Let's hope that bloke's a good driver.

We see Bell and Bob on the other side of the stage.

Bob It's loaded, Missus. I'll be off at five, back tomorrow night.

Bell You've got a list. Names and places. Shouldn't be any problem.

Bob Everything's under control. (He leaves.)

Bell Everything but me. (The truck engine starts with a roar; Bell gives the driver a wave.) When everything's going smoothly, we don't ask who's carrying the load. We do whatever it's our turn to do, and don't think about it. I'm not sure I'm ready to think as hard as I'm going to do now.

Doctor Trembath comes on to see Doug.

Doug What's the verdict?

Trembath There's a growth.

Doug That means you're passing sentence?

Trembath Too soon to ask that question.

Doug Not too soon for me mate. I need to know.

Trembath We need to open you up and have a look.

Doug (groans) Oooooooooohhh ...

Trembath You'll be out to it. You won't know a thing.

Doug How soon will you know?

Trembath Tests take a day or two to process. I'll get a specialist to have a look.

Doug How long?

Trembath We'll be quick. We're not used to wasting time.

Doug It's my time we're talking about. Such as it is.
Trembath Tomorrow morning at nine. They'll get you ready an
hour before.
Doug Seeya doc. (to himself) Another sleep before I
know.

Doug's side of the stage darkens. On the other side, we see Bell at home.

Bell It made me feel alive to know he was on the road.
(She gets up and goes to a window.) I know every
inch of that road but he knows it better. If Duggie
dies, who'll know it then? (looking out) When
Duggie was out there, he was an extension of myself.
I loved him for being strong. He loved me for being
strong in other ways. What makes us strong, what
makes us weak? Maybe he'll have a remission, and
come home for a while. He's already weak, he'll
never be the same. (She hears an engine.) There he
is, no, it's Bob. Same but ever so different. (She looks
at her watch.) Must have driven faster than Doug!
That'd take some doing!

Bob (outside) Evening Mrs McCubbin! How'm I going
for time?

Bell You must have driven like crazy. You're ten minutes
earlier than Duggie would've been.

Bob Ten minutes? Doesn't give you time to do much. I'll
do better next time!

Bell You take it easy. Everything go all right?

Bob (appearing) Everything was fine. (handing her a list)
I've written the prices. Should be OK I think. You
moved my car?

Bell I put it in the shade for the heat of the day. You didn't
think of that.

Bob In a hurry to get on the road.

Bell Leave it in the carport next time. Plenty of room.

Bob That's real good of you. Thanks.

Bell (affectionately) Mustn't keep you. I'm sure your
family's waiting.

Bob Kids expected me to bring something, so I did.

Bell Your wife expecting too?

Bob No. She knows me too well to expect much.

Bell Good night then.

He leaves. Bell's side of the stage darkens.

Doug (on his own) Bell's coming today. What's she going
to do when they move me? (Bell comes to her
husband, tenderly, and with concern.) How's it look,
darling? They telling you anything they aren't telling
me?

Bell Very little. Trembo's worried.

Doug I can tell that.

Bell He thinks what we don't know won't hurt us.

Doug He's trying to stop me worrying. Trouble is, it makes
me worry more.

Bell There's not much he can do about that. We're all
worriers.

Doug Fear and hope. I swing from one to the other. I'm like one of those whirligigs at the show. I want to get my feet on the ground, but they won't let me out of bed. 'You're not ready to walk yet, Mr McCubbin', they tell me. I say, 'When'm I bloody gonna be ready?' and they turn on the charm. (mockingly) 'The moment we can take you for a stroll, we will!'

Bell (laughing) Keep fighting, Doug. That's the way I love you!

Doug Do you remember our first argument?

Bell Which one was that?

Doug About getting in to the Bendigo show?

Bell (amused) Don't remind me!

Doug Don't make a scene, you said to me. Don't make a scene. I told you that making a scene was the best way to sort something out. People ought to make scenes!

Bell (teasing) Some people have been making scenes ever since.

Doug (amused, and admitting) All their lives, actually.

Bell Making a scene won't do us any good in here.

Doug No. (pulling his bedding down a little) Have a look.

Bell It's dark under the skin. I don't like the look of that.

Doug How do you think I feel about it?

Bell Worried.

Doug Afraid. What did I tell you – fear and hope. One look down here and I'm afraid. The nurse wanted to push me round the wards the other day. Instead of a walk, she said. I told her to stuff it. I don't want everyone looking at me, feeling sorry. Leave me where I am, I said. So here I stayed! That fella any good with the truck? Spraying the trees?

Bell Who? Oh Bob, yes he's all right. He's good actually. He's doing the job. I can manage the farm.

Doug Kids?

Bell They talk about you a lot ...

Doug When's dad coming home?

Bell They ask that all the time. But they're getting on well at school. They stay overnight at Mum's when I'm down here with you.

Enter Doctor Trembath.

Doug Trembo! What's the news?

Trembath The specialist wants to open you up. See what he can take out and what he's got to leave.

Bell He might have to leave something?

Trembath That's what he thinks. He needs to get closer to see.

Doug When's this going to happen?

Trembath Day after tomorrow, early. You'll be awake by lunchtime, taking a look at the world again.

Doug How's it going to look?

Trembath That's something we'll have to wait and see. (He leaves.)

Doug What's prompting them to do this?
 Bell Ignorance and curiosity, that's what they've got ...
 Doug ... instead of hope ... and fear.

He slumps. Bell embraces him. He turns over eventually; she leaves. When we see her next, it's in among the fruit trees of her property.

Bob Morning Mrs McCubbin.
 Bell Bell.
 Bob Pardon?
 Bell This time next year I won't be Mrs McCubbin. I'd better get myself used to it.
 Bob Bad as that, is it?
 Bell Yes it's as bad as that. What I'm in is called the pits. I must be pretty near the bottom by now.
 Bob You could walk with me to the top of the hill.
 Bell I think I might.

They go off. As soon as they are out of sight we hear music telling us that Bell's forceful, insistent urge to live is pushing its way into her consciousness after all the caring for her husband.

Doug Bell!
 Trembath She's up the country, Doug. Running the farm.
 Doug What are you doing here?
 Trembath I'm on exchange. I've got a locum in charge for a few weeks. It's called gaining experience.
 Doug Experience? I could do without that.

Trembath They say it teaches us. I'd say it frightens, half the time.
 Doug Something's made you human, you old bastard.
 Trembath Caring for others, I think.
 Doug Am I gonna die?
 Trembath Don't put me on the spot, Doug. We're doing our best.
 Doug So am I. (dying) I could tell from the way you all tippy-toe around me. I said to myself, if I had a hope, they wouldn't be going on like this.
 Trembath If it gets too painful we'll give you morphia.
 Doug (protesting) I won't know a thing!
 Trembath That's right.
 Doug I won't be dead and I won't know what's going on! What sort of state is that?
 Trembath It's called 'unconscious'.
 Doug That the best you can offer?
 Trembath You got any alternatives?
 Doug Course I haven't. That's why I look to you!
 Trembath People think it's fine to do good in this world, but you can't do good unless someone's in trouble.
 Doug So I'm needed after all!
 Trembath We need you and you need us.
 Doug (rolling over) When's Bell going to be down again?
 Trembath Soon, I expect.

The scene moves to the fruit trees again.

Bob I'm laying the pipes at a different angle. Make better use of the water. (He points to the top of the hill.)

Bell You'd better show me.

They walk off among the trees and we hear again the hard-driving sexual impulses running between them. After a minute or so, Bell reappears.

Bell I suppose it's disgraceful, but I have to stay alive. (We hear the roar of the truck.) Fruit's still getting to market. Kids are flourishing. I don't know whether Mum knows what's happening or not. I couldn't get far without her. When Duggie dies, Bob goes too. Strange? I've got to do something shameful to keep myself going. My honour rests on dishonour, who'd have thought I'd find myself where I am? I can only fight death with the blood in my veins, and it tells me ... (We hear the forceful sexual music again.) It tells me that to keep Duggie alive I have to keep myself alive. Very strange. Here's Mum, and the kids, what are they doing here?

Enter Bell's mother, Nancy, and the two children.

Nancy I thought we'd find you here. The trees are doing well!

Bell It's been a wonderful season, in every way but one.

Nancy How's he doing?

Bell I'll go down next week. When they tell me to stay down, I'll let you know.

Nancy You said Trembo's down there in the same hospital?

Bell Not sure what that's about. Experience, he says.

Nancy 'Experience'; it's a word that could mean anything.

Bell Words mean nothing. I don't have any faith in words.

Nancy It's a wonder you've got faith in anything after what's happened.

Bell Life has to go on. I'm clinging to it.

Nancy Cling hard, darling. Something's being taken from you, so cling hard to what's left!

Bell You're my mother! I got whatever I got from you!

Nancy (to the children) Home now darlings. We'll get some dinner on for mum!

Nancy and the children leave. Doug's bed reappears on the other side of the stage.

Doug (looking at his body) So bloody bruised. I think it's getting better, but I can't tell. (Bell appears.) Have a look, love. What do you think?

Bell What's Trembo say?

Doug Trembo says they'll knock me out when I can't stand it.

Bell When's that going to be?

Doug Not for a long time. I'm getting better. Have a look.

Bell (glancing) Hard to tell. I'm not an expert.

Doug I'm not an expert either, or maybe I am by now. Experience teaches, or so they say.

Bell I suppose it does, but I don't know what we learn from it.

Doug Well said, wife. I'm buggered if I know.

Bell Well, that makes two of us that don't know much ...

Doug ... but only one of us that's buggered. Keep the farm going when I'm gone, love.

Bell I'll keep it going. I'd rather die than give up on that!

Doug Well said, wife. How's that fella going, is he a good worker?

Bell He's a bull at a gate, just like you. Drives the truck even faster.

Doug Mad!

Bell I think so. But he hasn't had any prangs.

Doug Leave him to it, then. Kids?

Bell They're missing you.

Doug I'm missing them. I want to say goodbye.

Bell That'll be hard.

Doug When you're in my spot, there's nothing very easy, I can tell you.

Bell Admitting and not admitting. The business of keeping things going means we don't always face what's happening.

Doug Well, I'd like to see 'em if you think it's fair on them.

Bell (ready to leave) Thanks darling. Let me see if I can work out a way.

Trembath comes to the left of the stage, Bob to the right.

Trembath He doesn't need to suffer. When he's got too much pain, we'll put him out to it. We'll let him wake to say goodbye.

Bob I'm ready to leave my family, but Bell's not letting me do that. She's using me. The minute he dies, she starts again. I'll be as dead as Douggie, for her.

Bell appears, and walks to the top of the hill of fruit trees with her lover of convenience. The sexual music tells us of the force driving the two of them together. Then we see Doug again, in his hospital bed.

Doug Trembo! Here, quick! (A nurse and the doctor rush in.) I felt this stab of pain. Christ! The worst I've had, by far. What was it? Have a look!

Trembath Where? Did you move beforehand?

Doug How could I bloody move? If I twiddle my thumb I get a talking to.

Trembath Mmmmm. We'll give you an injection, I think, to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Doug That's what medicine's all about! Sticking stuff into me. How about fixing me, fuckya!

Trembath How about it? Don't you think we'd fix you if we could?

Doug Would you fix me if you could? Hard to say ...

Trembath Give us your arm. (He gives Doug an injection and his patient goes quiet. Enter Bell.) He complained of pain. I put him to sleep.

Bell That's the stage we're at?

Trembath It is.

Bell It's time I went home and made some arrangements.

Trembath He's made a will?

Bell Yes.

Trembath He'll want to see his children.

Bell He'll have to say goodbye through me.

Trembath That's hard.

Bell I've got to get them through this too, as well as me.

Trembath I've grown very fond of him. He's stronger than any normal man.

Bell That's why it's gone on so long.

Trembath It's in its last stages now.

Bell Every stage is replaced by the one that comes after. I've got to get myself and my kids through this. I can't help Duggie now.

Trembath Neither can I, I'm afraid.

He leaves. Bell kisses her husband, then she leaves too. The scene changes to the top of the hill. Nancy is there, with the children.

Nancy Mummy's up here. I think she's talking to Bob. About the irrigation, I suppose. (She looks around.) What a beautiful day! Are you going to be a farmer, Bill? (The boy looks around, but doesn't say anything.) Are you going to marry a farmer, Trace?

Tracey I might let a farmer work for me!

Nancy (amused) That's the way, if you can manage it. (She sees Bob.) Is Bell up there, Bob?

Bob (none too pleased) She's right behind me, taking her time. It's her property, after all.

Nancy thinks about his reaction. He disappears sullenly, discarded.

Nancy Got a bee in his bonnet, that one. What did you say to him?

Bell I said, Duggie's near the end, and when he goes, I'm making a fresh start.

Nancy How's that going to affect him?

Bell It means he'll be looking for a job.

Nancy I thought you might keep him on. He's been useful enough.

Bell Useful, yes, but everything's going to change. Very soon. I'll go down to see Doug tomorrow, then I'll be bringing him home.

Nancy (uncertain) Bringing him home?

Bell Bringing him home. It's time, I think, that he came back where he belongs. Don't you think so too?

Nancy I see what you mean ...

Bell (referring sourly to Bob) That's good. Not everybody does.

Nancy You're going down tomorrow?

Bell On the train. Don't worry about me driving.

Nancy Coming back?

Bell With Duggie.

Nancy The children know?

Bell No. I'll explain to them that they won't see him.
He'll be in a box.

Nancy Oh.

Bell (firmly) That, as they say, is how it is.

She crosses the stage to be ready for when the nurses push Douggie's bed in front of her. Trembath comes with them.

Trembath He'll surface in a minute. He's been under sedation.

Bell Come on Douggie. We're bringing you into the world ... (She makes a huge effort, then shouts.) ... one last time!

Trembath He'll be vague for a while. It'll take him time to know what's what.

Doug Mmmmm.

Bell Tell yourself it's five o'clock on a cold black morning, and you've got a long way to go.

Doug Big day ahead of me?

Bell Biggest of them all.

Doug Except getting married. That's the biggest day of all.

Bell I think it is.

Doug One becomes two. Two become one. It's all very mysterious. It's all very simple.

Bell The simplest things are the hardest to understand.

Doug The hardest things are the simplest to understand.
You accept them or you don't.

Bell You and I, my love, have no choice.

Doug It's Buckley's, for you ...

Bell (not wishing to say 'none') ... and no alternative for you.

Doug Kids okay?

Bell Good as can be,

Doug Billy going to be a farmer?

Bell I think he will, but he doesn't know yet. I'm not pushing. I'm good for a few years.

Doug You're my continuity. Trace?

Bell Says she'll marry a farmer. That means she wants to boss her husband, whoever he is. (They laugh.)

Doug Poor bastard! (They laugh again.)

Bell Anything you want to tell me?

Doug All the things you know. I don't need to say'em.

Bell I needed to see you one more time.

Doug It's been good, Bell. I never wished for more. I never thought I deserved what I got when I ... (He means 'when I got you'.)

Bell I'll take that as said. (She looks about her.) Strange! I wanted to see where you were going, and I couldn't see a thing.

Doug There's nothing there to see. Trembo shoves a needle in me, and out I go. He's done it before. I'll give him a whistle in a minute. (Trembath enters, in white.)
Hold me love, I think that's all I need.

As Doug and Bell embrace, the hospital scenery disappears and is replaced by the trees of the family property that Doug and Bell have managed. It's a sunny day and the trees look healthy.

Doug We never quarrelled, did we love?

Bell No more than once a day.

Doug They say love's blind. I say it's amazing. Come on doc, put me out to it. I'm taking up good people's time.

The doctor gives him his final injection, then leaves quickly. At the edge of the stage we can see him taking off his white gown and replacing it with a black one, with a hood. Bell holds her husband's hand, considering him, then straightens as she hears the doctor's voice, as death.

Trembath Douglas Alexander McCubbin!

Two nurses push the bed off the stage, following the disappearing figure who's called him. Bell looks around, realising that she's back on the property she and her late husband have worked so hard for so long. Her mother appears, with the children.

Bell Douglas Alexander McCubbin, you're on the road.
 (turning) And he won't be coming back, Mother!
 Mother! He won't be coming back!

Nancy and the children embrace her. She fondles them but looks around her at the trees as if she is seeing her husband there, somewhere, one last time.