

The drawing room of MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH. There is a table, downstage, at the centre of which sits MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH. To her left, wearing a dour expression, sits her son, CUTHBERT, and to her right, her uncomfortable-looking guest, TRISTRAM. Atop the Table is a tea service and plates of various cakes and pastries.

At rise, MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH is proffering the teapot, beaming with confidence.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

May I refresh your cup, Tristram?

TRISTRAM

Y-yes, that would be most welcome, Mrs, er...M-Mrs...I-I-I'm so terribly sorry, I...I seem to have forgotten your name.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(As she pours the tea.)

It's Pennington-South, darling. And it's not really mine, anyway; it's my husband's. I was simply tacked on when we married.

TRISTRAM

I...I'm so sorry, Mrs. Pennington-South. An-and what a...a beautiful name it is.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Oh, darling, you don't have to pretend – we all know it's perfectly ghastly. It sounds like some dreary little by-election in the bowels of Surrey...which, come to think of it, is a remarkably apt definition of my husband. Do help yourself to milk and sugar.

(MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH continues to pour more tea for CUTHBERT and herself, during which CUTHBERT emits a very audible sigh of frustration. Pause.)

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Well, now...isn't this lovely. This is turning into a truly lovely day, don't you think?

TRISTRAM

Oh yes, it's-it's...it's quite lovely.

CUTHBERT

(In a surly tone.)

It's obscene.

(There is a moment of awkward silence as both TRISTRAM and MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH look to CUTHBERT in surprise. Suddenly MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH erupts into peal of high-pitched laughter.)

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Oh, Cuthbert, you *are* wicked!

(Turning to TRISTRAM.)

You'll have to forgive my son, Tristram, he has a rather...robust sense of humour. He gets it from me, of course – his father has all the sense of humour of a boiled potato. But then, in his line of work I don't suppose there's much call for a quick wit or an amusing turn of phrase.

TRISTRAM

What does your husband, um...well...do, Mrs. Pennington-South?

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(Distractedly.)

Hmm? Oh, he, uh...it's, um...I don't know. Isn't that odd? Business, I think.

TRISTRAM

I say, how jolly exciting!

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Not nearly as exciting as what my Cuthbert does.

(Turning to CUTHBERT, expectantly.)

Is it, Cuthbert?

(Beat.)

Well go on; tell him!

CUTHBERT

(With a steely look.)

It's not something I wish to discuss, Mother.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Oh honestly, darling, you are hopeless.

(To TRISTRAM.)

Modest to a fault, as you can see. And so shy in front of male company. I'm afraid it's you that's going to have to take the reins in any future... relations you may have, Tristram.

CUTHBERT

(Guardedly.)

Mother.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

I'm sometimes convinced that if he didn't have his mum-mums giving him a little nudge once in a while, he'd simply shrivel up and disappear altogether.

CUTHBERT

(As an aside.)

God, if only!

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

What my shrinking violet of a son is too coy to tell you is that he is a fashion model.

CUTHBERT

(Forcefully.)

Mother, I am *not* a fashion model and I do wish that you would stop telling people that!

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Of course, he studied marine anthropology – or something in that vein – but, as it turns out, it's the fashion world that's been beating down his door, all desperate to capitalise on his dazzling good looks.

(With a knowing smile.)

And who can blame them – right, Tristram?

CUTHBERT

Since I am now forced to explain myself, I should tell you...err...

TRISTRAM

Tristram!

CUTHBERT

Thank you – Tristram – that my "fashion career" consists of a couple of print ads for a discount clothing chain that appeared in one or two of the local newspapers. I have a friend who works for one of the lesser ad agencies, and it was entirely at his prompting. I only agreed because it seemed like a quick way to make some easy money to pay off a few bills, and I regret it deeply. What I *am* is the proud holder of a PhD in Egyptology.

(Rather awkwardly.)

It's just that there's...not much call for it at the moment.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(Consolingly.)

Never mind, my sweet. And who cares about a silly old PhD when you have the looks of a matinee idol? Don't you think so, Tristram?

CUTHBERT

Mother, will you please stop trying to make...Tristram...feel like a member of my fan club! And will you *please* stop talking to me in that way.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(Consolingly.)

In what way, darling?

CUTHBERT

As if...as if I were developmentally handicapped!

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(Indifferent.)

Do you work, Tristram?

TRISTRAM

As a matter of fact, I-I-

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

No, wait! Don't tell me! Give me your hands.

(As she wrests his hands from his lap.)

A person's most intimate details can be revealed simply by examining the framework of their hands, did you know that, Tristram?

(TRISTRAM nods in the negative. MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH studies his palms.)

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Oh! Oh, how beautiful! Yes, yes, of course!

(Looking up at him.)

You're a poet! I knew it! I knew it the moment I first saw you.

(Looking back at his hands. Sorrowfully.)

Oh...Oh, but you poor creature. You poor lonely boy; you're a lost soul, aren't you? And you're looking for a...a great big love.

(Looking up at him again.)

It's all here – as plain as day.

(MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH wrenches his hands across the table toward CUTHBERT, causing TRISTRAM to wince somewhat.)

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

Look, Cuthbert, do you see?

CUTHBERT

(Impassively.)

I think you're hurting him.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(Releasing his hands from her grip.)

It must be *so* rewarding to be able to jot down a few stanzas on a whim or a fancy. I'm *green* with envy. Are you published?

TRISTRAM

Er, well, a-actually, no, I-I'm not. I'm not a...a poet at all...actually. I'm-I'm an undergraduate.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(With exaggerated enthusiasm.)

Oh *are* you? How absolutely thrilling! Cuthbert, did you hear that?

CUTHBERT

He's approximately five feet away from me, Mother. I'd have to be acutely deaf not to have, wouldn't you say?

(Turning to TRISTRAM.)

No offense, Tristram.

TRISTRAM

(Quickly.)

Oh, none taken!

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

That's not what I meant, Cuthbert, and you know perfectly well it wasn't. I was merely attempting to draw you into the conversation. For some reason I had the strange feeling that you weren't, well...quite with us.

CUTHBERT

(Bluntly.)

I'm not.

MRS. PENNINGTON-SOUTH

(Undeterred.)

Oh, but isn't it absurd; here we all are and I don't believe I've even told you how I met young Tristram here, have I, Cuthbert? It was at W.H. Smith. He was leafing through a book of male nudes.