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HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY

By Steve Lambert

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SARAH, female, late 30s

JACK, male, late 30s

KATE, female, late 30s

DAISY, female, late teens

PETUNIA, female, late teens

DOLPHIN, male

PHOTOGRAPHER, either gender

Petunia and/or Daisy could be male (changing their names to Peter and David).

SCENE 1

(A kitchen in a house in the 19th century. It has a stove, which has a pan and two bowls on it, and a table with an empty bottle on it. SARAH stands at the table cutting two slices from a piece of bread. She puts a slice on each of two plates on the table. JACK enters in workman's clothes. Sarah turns to embrace and kiss him.)

SARAH: Hello, my love.

JACK: Hello, my dearest.

(Sarah examines her hand where she has touched his clothes.)

SARAH: What's this on your clothes? Oh my goodness!

JACK: It's nothing.

SARAH: But it's blood. Jack, what on earth has happened?

JACK: Don't worry, Sarah. It's not mine, it's someone else's.

SARAH: Thank goodness. But whose?

JACK: Fred. Fred Arkwright.

SARAH: Oh my goodness.

JACK: One of the lathes took his thumb off. The stump was squirting like a fountain. We all got showered.

SARAH: But that's awful. How is poor Fred now?

JACK: Well we managed to stop the bleeding. One of the lads put a piece of tubing over the stump where his thumb was and fed it back into an artery in his arm. Mind you, that's not a permanent solution.

SARAH: Oh, Jack. That's just terrible. Poor Fred.

JACK: Yes, I'm afraid he had to take the rest of the day off. He'll be back tomorrow though. Can't afford to lose any more wages.

SARAH: It's a harsh life sometimes, isn't it, Jack?

JACK: Aye, it is Sarah. Sometimes it's only our love for the Good Lord and each other that keeps us going.

(Sarah hugs him.)

SARAH: Well, we have got each other, haven't we, my darling?

JACK: And the Good Lord.

SARAH: Yes. Him too – I suppose.

JACK: What's that supposed to mean?

SARAH: Well, he's very busy, has to look after everyone in the world.

JACK: In the empire at least.

SARAH: He can't keep his eye on all of us all the time. Otherwise, how would that accident have happened to Fred?

JACK: There are accidents every day, my dear. That doesn't mean God isn't watching over each and every one of us all the time.

SARAH: All the time?

JACK: Of course, my dear. He is all-seeing and all-knowing.

SARAH: He's certainly got a lot on his plate.

(She picks up one of the plates for a moment.)

Unlike us.

JACK: But the thing is, Sarah, if God intervened every time something bad was about to happen, life would be meaningless. We'd have no say.

SARAH: We don't have much say now, Jack.

JACK: Well, what's done is done. As you said, we have each other, and the children.

(Sarah makes a gesture of concealed anguish.)

Where are the children, my dear?

SARAH: I've been meaning to tell you. I finally managed to catch that rat.

JACK: Really?

SARAH: It was hiding in the coal scuttle. I managed to clobber it with one of little Peter's leg braces.

JACK: Our poor little lad. I'm glad those callipers have finally been of use to someone else, God rest his soul. I couldn't bear to sell them for scrap.

SARAH: Anyway, that rat's scratching won't keep us awake half the night ever again.

JACK: That's a relief. What have you done with it, anyway?

SARAH: It's on the stove.

JACK: *(Sniffs:)* I thought I could smell something delicious.

SARAH: And I found a carrot, onion and a potato in the street when I was washing our clothes in the river.

JACK: What a feast.

SARAH: Two potatoes, in fact. But one was crawling with maggots, so I'll save it for tomorrow so we'll have some meat.

JACK: God's certainly smiled on us today.

SARAH: Yes, dear. You know, when I was down by the river, washing our bedding, there was this couple across the way, sitting on a bench. Dressed to the nines they were, obviously rich. Without a care in the world, you'd think. And yet there they were arguing with each other, and talking about something called "their relationship." What's a relationship, Jack?

JACK: It's something rich folk have. Not people like us. We haven't got time.

SARAH: It all sounded quite interesting, what bit of it I could understand. But they did seem to be creating problems for themselves and making mountains out of molehills.

JACK: Some people, no matter how well-off they are, can always create troubles.

SARAH: She was saying something about feeling "hemmed in."

JACK: Perhaps she were having problems with her under-garments.

SARAH: And "needing more space."

JACK: We could certainly do with some more space. Especially since the landlord lowered our ceiling to create another storey.

SARAH: And then he said something like perhaps they should start "seeing other people." What did he mean by that?

JACK: Making new friends, perhaps.

SARAH: I don't think that's what he meant, Jack. It all sounded a bit distasteful to me. A bit Continental.

JACK: I wouldn't worry about it, my dear. I'm sure they've got enough time to sort themselves out. Unlike us. We just plough on and get on with it.

SARAH: We do, Jack.

JACK: I do an honest day's work and help save a colleague from a near-fatal accident. And I come home to a loving wife who's killed a rat and prepared a delicious meal. And look forward to embracing my strangely-absent children. Where are Dotty and Daisy, dear?

SARAH: I'm afraid I've some bad news, Jack. Daisy's run away from home.

JACK: Run away from home? What d'you mean?

SARAH: One of the neighbours saw her walking down the street with a bundle tied to the end of a stick. I thought they only did that in stories.

JACK: Why didn't this neighbour stop her?

SARAH: I don't know, Jack. I don't know what's happening to community spirit, this day and age.

JACK: It's not that bad round here, Sarah. At least you can still safely leave your back door open. Pity we can't afford one.

SARAH: And she left this note, Jack. At least, I assume it's a note. Could you read it to us, Jack?

(Jack opens the note and tries to read it: he can't. He picks up the empty bottle and looks at the note through that.)

JACK: "Dear Mother and Father."

SARAH: That's nice. That's a nice start. Go on.

JACK: "I am sorry to be the cause of such sorrow to you, especially so soon after poor little Peter, my dear brother, was gathered into God's embrace while trying to fish in the river."

SARAH: Our poor little lad.

JACK: God rest his soul. "But I am afraid, my dear parents, that selling matches and shoe blacking on the street is not the life for me. I have a dream, and I believe it would be sinful not to follow its call. I remember, Mother, you singing to me as a little girl the hymn All Things Bright and Beautiful, with the verse that ran:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high and lowly,
And order'd their estate.

I'm afraid I do not believe those sentiments. I believe God put us on this paradise humankind has despoiled so we could make the best use of our talents and set our souls free. He made us beautiful and good so that we could pursue happiness. So that is what I am going to do. I am going to be happy. And that is why I have run off to join a physical theatre company."

(Jack puts down the note and the milk bottle. His shoulders slump in despair.)

Oh Sarah. I do believe my heart is broken in two.

SARAH: You said it was broken in two when poor Peter passed away.

JACK: Then those broken pieces have been broken again. My heart now lies in four. It is beyond endurance.

SARAH: Nothing is beyond endurance, my husband. Although I do wish you'd never taught that girl to read.

JACK: Education is the only way for people like us to escape our misery.

SARAH: She grew up so fast. That's what happens when children are put to work.

JACK: Hard to believe she's only nine.

SARAH: But I do believe Daisy will find what she's looking for and will look after herself. She will send us money when she is able, I'm sure.

JACK: Otherwise we'll have to take in lodgers again. Although I'm not sure where we'd put them.

SARAH: There is the wardrobe, Jack. It's very spacious, I'm sure it could be converted. And I've heard there are those in this overcrowded metropolis who have mastered the art of sleeping standing up.

JACK: God does send us a great deal to try us.

SARAH: Don't harp on about God, my love. We don't need God's help to face the future.

JACK: That's blasphemy, Sarah.

SARAH: Was God there when Peter lost his footing by the river, having removed his leg braces to relieve their constant chafing? Was God there when his tiny, emaciated form slipped below the polluted waters, only to emerge lifeless miles downstream, steered to the riverbank by a passing school of dolphins? No, God was not there, Jack. And I don't believe he is there now, wherever Peter is. But I do believe, Jack, I do believe he is in some form of paradise somewhere. Because if this is all there is to our miserable, tragedy-ridden existence, then God help us all.

JACK: You're upset, my dear. You don't know what you're saying.

SARAH: What I'm saying is I believe in heaven but I do not believe there is a supreme being there to rule over us. I believe our departed souls exist in a democratic collective. Having been relieved of the burden of earthly suffering—in a world in which little children with rickets are hammered into the ground by rich folk and used as croquet hoops—there is no greed or envy in the afterlife, because we are all equally without our earthly belongings. So then we can achieve a true happiness that is beyond us in our present, almost comically unfortunate existence.

JACK: Sarah, I've never heard you talk this way before. In fact, I've never heard anyone talk this way. Have you been smoking opium again?

SARAH: No, Jack, my words are not the result of narcotically-induced delirium. I know I'm not supposed to have such thoughts, being a mere wife and mother, a downtrodden wretch crawling like an insect under the merciless eye of our so-called Lord. But I am much more than that, Jack.

JACK: I know you are, my dearest. And I love you. I love you very much.

SARAH: And I love you too, Jack.

(They embrace.)

JACK: And we are happy, aren't we, Sarah? Despite our troubles, we are still happy.

SARAH: Yes, Jack. Yes we are. Deep down. Very very very deep down.

JACK: We may have lost Peter, but I hope he is happy somewhere and waiting for us to join him one day in paradise.

SARAH: Yes, Jack.

JACK: And Daisy may have gone too, but I hope she can find her own happiness in the unpredictable world of live entertainment.

SARAH: Me too, Jack. Me too.

JACK: And we still have our little Dotty to comfort us. Where is Dotty, Sarah?

SARAH: I'll come to that in a minute. But first we shall eat. That rat will be overdone.

JACK: May I have half the tail, Sarah?

SARAH: No, Jack, you may not have half of such a delicacy. You can have all of it.

(Sarah goes to the stove and dishes some food from a pot into two bowls. She takes the bowls over to the table.)

We are happy, Jack. We have a wonderful daughter still living—

JACK: Two wonderful daughters, love.

SARAH: Of course, dear. Slip of the tongue. And lovely memories of our little lad. But we live in such harsh circumstances in this room, with its sinking ceiling and ever encroaching party wall. I want us to be more than happy, Jack. I want us to be happy happy.

JACK: Here's to happy happiness, my dear.

SARAH: To happy happiness.

(Jack picks up the rat's tail in his bowl.)

I like to think that one day, when the world is a less cruel place ruled by social justice—

JACK: Only a matter of time.

SARAH: —a family will live here and find the happy happiness that we, in our ordinary, singular happiness, were unable to experience. To happy happiness.

JACK: To happy happiness.

(Jack takes a bite of the rat's tail.)

Does that taste funny to you?

(He holds the tail out to Sarah, who takes a bite of it and chews. Jack starts to choke. Sarah tries to help him.)

SARAH: Jack? Jack!

(Sarah starts to choke. Jack and Sarah simultaneously die. The lights go down.)

SCENE 2

(The lights come up on the same room in the present day. KATE cooks at the stove. The table has an open bottle of white wine and three glasses on it, plus a pair of pliers. Under the table is a bomb with the word "BOMB" on it. DAISY and PETUNIA enter. Petunia carries a small watering can. Daisy carries a bucket with a lid on it.)

KATE: Hello Petunia. Hello Daisy.

DAISY: Hello Mum.

PETUNIA: Hi Mum.

(Petunia fills the watering can from the tap. Daisy puts her bucket on the floor.)

KATE: What's that strange odour? Smells like fish.

(Daisy and Petunia share a knowing smile.)

DAISY: Whatever you're cooking smells heavenly, Mum.

KATE: Thank you, darling. It's all vegetables from our allotment.

PETUNIA: That's brilliant. I must admit, I've not eaten that healthily today. I put mayonnaise on my salad sandwiches.

DAISY: And someone at school offered me some sort of potato-based snack, which bore an image of the face of suffragette Emily Wilding Davison. It seemed rude to say no.

KATE: A little of what you fancy does you good. It's important not to deny yourself little treats. Otherwise you give them power over you, and they may consume you entirely.

DAISY: Actually, Mum, we were wondering if we could bring a guest to dinner.

KATE: Really? I suppose there's enough to go round.

DAISY: Don't worry. He's brought his own food.

(Kate gestures to the bucket.)

KATE: What? In that?

DAISY: He's not vegetarian like us, that's all. Is that all right?

PETUNIA: He's a pescetarian.

KATE: Really? Well I hope he's not that type who claims to be a vegetarian that eats fish. That contributes to the belief in some people that we vegetarians all eat fish. Which we don't.

DAISY: No, Mum, we don't. But don't worry, he's not that sort of pescetarian.

PETUNIA: He eats fish entirely for dietary reasons.

DAISY: And it's a cultural thing.

PETUNIA: He doesn't expect us all to follow his lifestyle.

DAISY: In fact, he's very interested in our way of life. Which is why we invited him along.

PETUNIA: Can you hear something ticking?

KATE: I expect it's the cooker. I don't understand all the controls. I wish the landlord hadn't taken out that lovely, old stove before we moved in.

PETUNIA: He's probably sold it for a fortune.

DAISY: So may we invite him in?

KATE: Your guest? You mean he's waiting outside?

DAISY: Yes, Mum. We didn't want to appear presumptuous. After all, it has been some time since there was a man in the house.

KATE: That's true, darling. Hardly a moment goes past when I don't think about your poor father. But I can't keep living in the past. Life goes on and we're very lucky to be alive and healthy. And we all have each other, don't we?

PETUNIA: Yes Mum, we all have each other.

(The three of them hug.)

KATE: Those fish do smell rather strong. Not an unpleasant smell, though. They're fresh, are they?

DAISY: Yes. I got them from the fishmongers just as they were closing.

KATE: I don't know how to cook them.

DAISY: Don't worry. He eats them raw.

KATE: Raw? Is he Japanese?

DAISY: No Mum. He originates from the North Atlantic.

KATE: North Atlantic? That's a bit vague. Well you must bring him in.

(Daisy leaves.)

PETUNIA: Are we going to start the decorating this weekend?

KATE: Yes. I've got all the paint and paper. I must admit I'm a little tired. I've had quite a busy week.

PETUNIA: I know. Why don't me and Daisy start first thing tomorrow while you have a lie-in?

KATE: Really? That's very kind. But you've had a busy week too, darling. Goodness me, I almost forgot. You got your exam results today, didn't you?

PETUNIA: Yes.

KATE: It completely slipped my mind.

PETUNIA: You've had a lot to think about.

KATE: Even so, forgetting such an important thing. A key stage in your life. Unforgiveable. What sort of mother am I?

PETUNIA: You're the best mother anyone could wish for.

KATE: That's true. Thank you, darling.

(Petunia takes a sheet of paper out of her pocket and hands it to Kate.)

PETUNIA: Here they are.

KATE: I can barely look. My hands are shaking.

(Kate reads the results. She hugs Petunia.)

Oh darling, that's absolutely wonderful.

PETUNIA: Thanks, Mum.

KATE: All your hard work has been justly rewarded.

PETUNIA: I'm pleased too.

KATE: Pleased? You should be thrilled. Wait till I tell your fa—

(Kate looks sadly away for a moment. Petunia puts her arm round her.)

Look at me, getting all tearful on your big day, spoiling your happiness.

PETUNIA: I am happy, Mum.

KATE: And I am, too.

PETUNIA: I miss him as well. Daisy, too. We think about him every day.

KATE: I know.

PETUNIA: Sometimes I feel his presence, like he's watching over us.

(She looks up then holds her results up to the ceiling.)

Here, Dad. Look how I did.

(Kate laughs and Petunia smiles.)

KATE: Oh darling, you're so clever. *(Beat.)* Wait a minute. Let me see those results again.

(Kate takes the sheet of paper from Petunia.)

Where's your philosophy result?

PETUNIA: Ah.

KATE: It's, it's not here.

PETUNIA: Mum—

KATE: Has something gone wrong?

PETUNIA: I can explain.

KATE: Did you fail? Didn't you actually sit the exam? Did you miss it, is that it? Have you been truanting? You can tell me, I'll stand by you. Have you turned to petty crime? Petunia, are you on drugs?

PETUNIA: Mum, I'm not on drugs. Nothing's the matter. Of course I sat the exam.

KATE: Thank goodness.

PETUNIA: No, the thing with the philosophy is the exam board hasn't been able to give me a grade yet.

KATE: Why on earth not?

PETUNIA: I seem to have single-handedly exposed some flaw in the marking scheme. You see, the first mark they came up with for me was a hundred and seven per cent.

KATE: A hundred and seven per cent? That's impossible.

PETUNIA: So they marked it again. And this time they came up with...

KATE: Yes?

PETUNIA: A hundred and nine per cent.

KATE: Goodness gracious. What on earth's going on?

PETUNIA: It seems some of my answers went beyond what is thought possible to achieve in an exam situation. Apparently, it's caused quite a stir in academic circles.

KATE: Heavens. What on earth are they going to do?

PETUNIA: They're not sure. It's beyond the exam board's capabilities. They're going to have to go higher up.

KATE: Higher up to who?

PETUNIA: There's only one person they can go to, apparently. There's only one person believed able to solve this apparent paradox.

KATE: And who's that, darling?

PETUNIA: Apparently, it's me.

KATE: Good Lord. I'm beside myself with maternal pride.

PETUNIA: I've got to write a paper explaining how it is possible to have achieved the seemingly impossible. Of course, this also strays into mathematical territory. But as I got the highest possible mark in that, I should be OK. I'm hoping to dash the paper off this weekend. I'll still have time to do the decorating, though.

DAISY (OFF): Sorry to interrupt you being the star of the show, but could you help me bring in our guest?

PETUNIA: Of course. Coming, my dear sister.

(Petunia exits. Kate returns to her cooking. Petunia and Daisy wheel a DOLPHIN in on an upright trolley. The Dolphin is strapped in for support and stands on its tail.)

DAISY: Howard, this is my mother. Mum, say hello to Howard.

KATE: Howard?

DOLPHIN: *(In dolphin language:)* Click-click.

DAISY: That's dolphin for "Howard."

(Petunia picks up the watering can and pours some water onto the Dolphin. She continues to do this sporadically throughout the scene.)

DOLPHIN: Click-click-click-click.

DAISY: That's dolphin for "ah that's better."

DOLPHIN: Click.

DAISY: Sorry. "Ah that's much better."

DOLPHIN: Click-click.

DAISY: You're welcome. Howard's been teaching me dolphin language for a while now. I'm getting quite good. Though it'd be nice to have a textbook so I can learn when he's not around. He likes to go for the occasional jaunt out into the Atlantic, causing mischief in the shipping lanes and amorously pursuing young surfers.

PETUNIA: Perhaps you could write a textbook.

KATE: I think that's a very good idea.

DAISY: I'll get cracking this weekend. I'm sure I can fit it in around the wallpapering. Howard, why don't you say hello to my mum properly?

(The Dolphin holds out a flipper. Kate shakes it.)

DOLPHIN: Click-click-click-click.

DAISY: "How do you do?"

DOLPHIN: Click-click-click-click-click.

DAISY: He says you have lovely hands.

KATE: Ooh, thank you. My skin is so much smoother since we got the dishwasher. And how are you, Howard?

(The Dolphin waggles his flipper.)

DAISY: "So-so."

DOLPHIN: Click-click-click-click-click-click-click-click.

DAISY: He says he thinks he ate some dodgy mackerel.

KATE: Oh dear. Will he be able to eat this evening?

DAISY: He's got to. A dolphin has to consume between four and nine per cent of his or her body weight in fish each day.

DOLPHIN: Click-click-click-click.

DAISY: Howard reckons he's only managed three per cent so far.

KATE: Well, it's a pleasure to have you here. I hope you'll be comfortable. We haven't really got the right facilities.

PETUNIA: Can Howard stay the night?

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