

BREATH – SC 2.

Ross is at centre stage. He is tied to a chair and blindfolded, lathered with sweat, breathing hard. He pauses to gather breath. He hears the music. It is now coming from a record player. The record has the crackle and pop of well-worn vinyl.

When Ross speaks he does so with the urgency and eloquence of someone whose reaction to stress is a sort of calming verbosity, but he is also trying to work out if he is being monitored.

ROSS: The past is another country which does not understand the sensation of being watched. *(long pause, listens)* I know - I've been there. Back when I was a kid, surveillance was pervy on the girl next door with your old man's binoculars. *(pause)* And we still complained about the tyranny of distance, not to mention the proximity to Asia. No one within shouting distance that could speak the Queen's English - except New Zealand. *(pause)* And then there's the cultural cringe. That still around? It's supposed to be dead, but I reckon if Osama bin Laden walked through customs with 3 ton of TNT strapped to his nightie we'd ask him how he liked Australia so far. *(pause)* So you all know who we are now. And you know where we live. *(pause)* So what do you think of us so far?

He is trying to escape. He is using the noise of the music to mask the sound of his chair clattering as he bounces towards a window. He's expending a lot of energy, but not getting far.

The music gets stuck in a groove.

ROSS: For fuck's sake...

He pauses to listen. Then he continues his journey.

Lucy enters. She is dressed in black from head to toe, with her face hidden under a balaclava. She puts a gun barrel against his temple.

LUCY: Where you going?

The gun barrel is nothing but a piece of pipe, but it does the job.

ROSS: Nowhere. Exercise.

LUCY: Stay where you are.

She goes to the record player, fixes the problem.

ROSS: I need a piss.

LUCY: Later.

She turns the volume up and begins to leave the room.

ROSS: I need a piss, I said!

LUCY: And I said, later!

He is too knackered to try going further.

ROSS: I'm ready to negotiate. Whatever your demands are, we can come to an arrangement. *(pause)* Hello? You there? *(long pause)* Let me outline my position to you.

LUCY: Position?

ROSS: My fucking position! *(pause)* Sorry. *(pause)* When I said I was willing to negotiate, what I meant was - the government will be willing to negotiate. You understand the difference between a backbencher and minister - yes?

LUCY: Yes.

ROSS: I, the Hon. James William Ross, MHR, am a back-fucking-bencher, if you'll pardon the unparliamentary language. If you're seeking information you should have abducted a minister. I don't know anything that you couldn't have got from the newspaper.

LUCY: We don't want any information. We have enough information.

ROSS: Then you should also be aware that I am not valuable.

LUCY: Valuable?

ROSS: They won't pay through the nose to stop you cutting my throat. It's in my interest for you to know that. If you bluff they'll call you. If I were a small child or a footballer they would pay up, but I'm negotiable.

LUCY: We won't kill you if you co-operate.

ROSS: I don't want my throat slit. I don't want my head cut off. That's the slaughter du jour, yes? Is there something on it in scripture?

LUCY: Scripture?

ROSS: I don't want it - I'm begging you! *(long pause - he recovers some composure)* Sorry, I know I shouldn't beg. I've seen the movies - only the weak and the morally bereft beg. And the savages always admire courage.

LUCY: If you co-operate we won't kill you.

ROSS: We've said all along that we won't negotiate with terrorists. You might have heard us say that. But those words themselves are a bargaining position. Just tell me what you want, and we can proceed from there. How about it?

Lucy pauses for a time, exits.

ROSS: You there? *(pause)* No. Apparently you're not there.

He begins to fall into despair, and to weep. But he's made of sterner stuff than that. He pulls himself together and starts to contemplate escape. He doesn't know whether or not he is being observed.

ROSS: The seventies - now there was a golden age for terrorism: the red brigades, Black September, Bader-Meinhoff, the Croatians, flared trousers, Abba - you name it. The Ananda Marga - remember them? What the hell were they on about anyway? They blew up a garbage truck in Sydney. Why would anyone do that? Everyone else was hijacking planes - here in this country we blew up fucking garbage trucks. *(pause)* Those were better times, so we're told. What do you think? *(pause)* We've lost our innocence - so they tell us. What, again? How many times can we lose our fucking innocence? You'd think we were a nation suffering from serial virginity. *(long pause)* At this point I should once again apologise for the saltiness of my tongue. This is no doubt a sign of the continuing decay of western values. It no doubt indicates the rise to hegemony of the truly post-modern infidel. *(pause)* If you don't believe in something you're liable to believe in anything. I don't understand the younger generation - pardon the cliché. My oldest can't decide between doing law at Melbourne or gangsta rap down the local 7-eleven. Down with American imperialism, yo, motherfucker. You get the picture? *(pause)* These days they want it all. And they get it - my oldest will no doubt do a major in gangsta rap at the North Ringwood university of Tafe, or something. He will make no positive contribution to society whatsoever, but that won't be to his disadvantage. Fuck the system and pass me my degree, he'll say. Fuck the system, he'll say, but let me do it from the inside where it's safe and warm.

Time passes, the music dies away. Ross falls asleep.

Lucy enters. She is still masked. She has food and water. She doesn't want to wake him, so she sits and waits.

He awakens, perhaps hours or perhaps minutes later. He is confused, disoriented, but doesn't take long to pick up his chain of thought. He doesn't know that Lucy is in the room.

ROSS: It's a question of values, isn't it. Basic values. The curse of relativism has come back to bite us on the arse. You're the curse - or rather we suffer the curse and you bring the retribution. We squabble over the relative literary merits of the blasphemers while you sharpen the knives of ultimate judgement. There's a lot to be said for the simple approach. I'm not saying I advocate violence. What I am saying is that those with a certain simplistic and reductionist approach to problem solving begin in a position of advantage.

He begins to despair again at the thought of his impending death.

ROSS: *(continuing)* Is there anybody listening to me? *(pause)* Would it help if I begged on behalf of my family? *(pause)* All I ask is that you do not record my execution. *(pause)* I can't bear the thought that my only contribution to posterity could be a skillfully edited snuff-movie on the channel 9 news. *(pause)* You are nemesis. You are the avenging angel. What do they call it in your culture? Why me? Why am I to be the one who pays for the sins of my culture's decline? Are you listening to me?! I don't want to be the chosen one!

Lucy gets up, goes to him.

ROSS: *(continuing)* Who's that?

LUCY: Water.

She gives him a drink.

ROSS: Thank you - you're very kind. Apologies if I said the wrong thing. Not sure what I said - sorry. Words are bullets. Everyone in parliament has a deeply held fear that one day they will lose control and say something. This anxiety is not our fault - it's a flaw in the system. Democracy is the slow accretion of nutrient-free utterance. No wonder you despise us. Did I say anything - anything at all?

LUCY: No.

She sits. She picks up her knitting basket, knits.

ROSS: Many of my constituents are muslim. Have I mentioned that? I'd go so far as to call many of them my friends. I feel their pain - your pain. *(pause)* I occupy a marginal seat. No jews, as far as I know. A few hindus perhaps, but not a significant number. If there's anyone else you don't like, I assure you I don't have them in my electorate. I've been putting pressure on the council to approve the mosque development, but they claim it's a planning issue. They approved the christian revival centre on the basis that parking is less of a problem on a sunday. *(pause)* I'm sorry, but is this helpful? I'm in a marginal seat - I require a good deal of sensitivity and a grasp of social mathematics. Are you a constituent? Are your family constituents? If so, I can help you. *(pause)* What's the clicking sound I hear? Are you making a bomb? Oh christ... Where the hell does it say you should make bombs?

She stops knitting. A very long, tense silence.

ROSS: You won't find anything in this country to justify martyrdom. What would you do - blow up the ABC? Soft-cocks make soft targets, but where's the salvation in that? *(pause)* The muslims all vote for me - Lebanese, Turks, Indonesians. They send me deputations about asylum-seekers, and I listen. But they hate terrorists - they welcome our tough stance on terror. It's what they left their own countries to escape. I'm happy to take the time to be photographed in fish and chip shops and taxis. My marginalised constituents welcome my publicly inclusive style. They definitely prefer me glad-handing in broad daylight as opposed to ASIO sniffing around at all hours of the night. Do you follow? There are safe political methodologies to be considered before a more punitive approach.

Lucy goes to the window, looks out. She looks at her watch. She is growing anxious.

ROSS: *(continuing)* I believe there is a place for religion in decision making.
(pause) I'll tell you what I know. I've signed the official secrets act, but I don't believe it expects a man in my position to stay silent under torture. I haven't had the training. Are you listening? *(pause)* I have enormous respect for Islam. Whatever you do with me, I want you to know - I have enormous respect. I know you believe that all the infidel peoples are ripe for conversion. We christians used to believe that too, but we went soft. I understand your position - you just need to be aware of the process of negotiation. Please...

Pause.

LUCY: We're not muslims.

ROSS: What did you say?

LUCY: We're not muslims.

Long pause.

ROSS: Are you sure?

LUCY: Yes, I'm sure.

He slumps in his chair, loses consciousness.