

GENDER FLUID

by

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## Characters

Alan	(late teens/early twenties)
Beatrice	(late teens/early twenties)
Edward	(late teens/early twenties)
Sergeant	(any age)
Private Priestley	(twenty-one)
Louise	(early thirties)

## SCENE 1

**(The Strand Underground Station<sup>1</sup>, London in 1914. Beatrice, dressed in paint splattered dungarees, and Alan stand on the platform. Beatrice is reading a literary magazine called "The Egoist". Some announcements play over the tannoy)**

TANNOY ANNOUCEMENT 1: Women have a much better time than men in this world; there are far more things forbidden to them.<sup>2</sup>

TANNOY ANNOUCEMENT 2: By the next war, the message will have got through. There will never be another war.<sup>3</sup>

TANNOY ANNOUCEMENT 3: Things will always be forbidden to women.

TANNOY ANNOUCEMENT 4: There will always be wars.

ALAN: **(Working class/east end accent)** Could you hear any of that?

BEATRICE: **(Working class/east end accent)** Not very well. Something about the trains being delayed.

ALAN: Thought we'd been waiting for ages.

**(Beatrice returns to reading her magazine. Alan desperately tries to think of something to say, to keep the conversation going)**

Never seen a woman in dungarees before.

BEATRICE : You'll see a lot more soon.

**(Alan looks surprised)**

Women will soon be doing all the jobs men used to do.

ALAN: Cos of the war?

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<sup>1</sup> The Strand was renamed The Aldwych in 1915.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Hill.

BEATRICE: Yeah.

ALAN: It won't last long.

BEATRICE: That's all right then.

ALAN: What's your job?

BEATRICE: I paint underground stations.

ALAN: This one could do with a fresh coat of paint.

BEATRICE: **(Trying to read her magazine)** Doing it next week.  
Before they bring the pictures.

ALAN: What pictures?

BEATRICE: The pictures from the National Gallery. They're gonna store them on one of the disused platforms. 'Til the war ends.

ALAN: Why?

BEATRICE: So they don't get bombed!

ALAN: Not much chance of that...

BEATRICE: You sure? London's the main target. People are so scared of getting bombed they come down here at night to shelter!

ALAN: It's just an excuse.

BEATRICE: For what?

ALAN: Canoodling.

BEATRICE: Canoodling!

ALAN: Yeah.

BEATRICE: You think people come down here at night to canoodle **(beat)** not 'cos they're scared of being bombed or burnt to death by the Zeppelins!?

ALAN: Yeah.

BEATRICE: **(Sighing)** The Government agree with you...

ALAN: **(Pleased with himself)** Do they?

BEATRICE: They think sheltering on The Tube at night will encourage "improper and immoral behaviour by the working classes" **(Alan looks confused)** They think it will encourage canoodling.

ALAN: What were you before you painted stations?

BEATRICE: A kitchen maid.

ALAN: You don't sound like a kitchen maid.

BEATRICE: Meaning kitchen maids are stupid?

ALAN: I didn't mean that. You like painting stations?

BEATRICE: I love it. I hated being a kitchen maid.

ALAN: You one of those suffragettes?

BEATRICE: Trying to be one.

ALAN: You seem more like a man than a woman in those dungarees...

BEATRICE: I can assure you I'm all woman! It's just that some days I feel more like a man. Other days more like a woman. I can't really explain it properly. Maybe that's what being a suffragette is all about...

ALAN: I thought it was about hurting horses and smashing up pictures that people like looking at!

BEATRICE: They're protests. To get attention!

ALAN: There must be other stuff you can do? That sort of thing doesn't make you popular.

BEATRICE: We're not trying to be popular. We're trying to achieve things!

ALAN: I don't think it's working...

BEATRICE: We do other stuff. My friend did the census protest. That was a peaceful protest! She spent all night away from home on census night...

ALAN: Can't see the point...

BEATRICE: She walked around Trafalgar Square at midnight with all the other suffragettes...

ALAN: Waste of time.

BEATRICE: You wouldn't understand. There were concerts, shows and poetry readings. All organised and performed by women!

ALAN: I wouldn't want to see a show put on by a woman!

BEATRICE: A vegetarian restaurant in Covent Garden stayed open all night so the women could eat! My friend said it was amazing. She said it was the best thing she'd ever done!

ALAN: **(Scornful)** A vegetarian restaurant!

BEATRICE: We've stopped all the protests while the war is on.

ALAN: Pleased to hear it. You don't want to be force fed.

BEATRICE: You know about that?

ALAN: Read it in the paper.

BEATRICE: They're doing terrible things to suffragettes in prison. Men are doing terrible things to women!

ALAN: I've not done anything...

BEATRICE: **(Calming down)** I didn't say you had **(smiling ruefully)** but until men's attitudes change nothing will ever change...

ALAN: My Dad wouldn't like talk like that...

BEATRICE: I'm glad you're not your Dad!

ALAN: I'm glad you've stopped the protests.

BEATRICE: If we support our country during the war, they've got to give us the vote.

ALAN: What you reading?

BEATRICE: The Egoist. They're serialising "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man".

ALAN: Never heard of it. Is it a good read?

BEATRICE: Very good.

ALAN: Is it a penny dreadful?

BEATRICE: A lot of people say it's dreadful. I like it though. It'll cost a lot more than a penny, if it ever gets published as a book.

ALAN: How much you reckon it'll cost?

BEATRICE: Four or five shillings.

ALAN: For a novel! That outrageous!! What's it about?

BEATRICE: It's about a young man in Ireland who challenges all the things he's been brought up to believe in.

ALAN: Who wrote it?

BEATRICE: Someone called James Joyce. I think he'll be famous one day.

ALAN: No chance with a plot like that!

BEATRICE: What's your name?

ALAN: Alan.

BEATRICE: I'm Beatrice.

ALAN: Nice name.

BEATRICE: What's your job, Alan?

ALAN: Tailor's apprentice. Not for much longer though. I'm off to fight. I volunteered.

BEATRICE: Why?

ALAN: Everyone's doing it.

BEATRICE: You're mad...

ALAN: Mad to want to fight for my country?!

BEATRICE: What's your country ever done for you?

ALAN: You can't say things like that!

BEATRICE: I just did...

**(As Alan is speaking a train arrives. The noise of the train prevents Beatrice from hearing what Alan said)**

ALAN: Could I call on you one day?

BEATRICE: What did you say?

ALAN: Nothing. Nothing...

BEATRICE: This your train?

ALAN: Next one's mine.

BEATRICE: **(Getting on train)** Nice to have met you Alan.  
**(Beatrice waves to Alan as her train leaves)**

## SCENE 2

**(A pub in London in 1914. Alan and his mate Edward sit drinking pints of beer. They are both a bit drunk)**

EDWARD: **(Working class/east end accent) (Looking at his pint)**  
It's my right. Not just *my* right. It's the right of every working man in this country to have his daily pint. Not just one pint, *several* daily pints. We can't let DORA take that away!

ALAN: Bloody price increases. This pint cost me a fortune.

EDWARD: Bloody Government.

ALAN: Bloody Asquith.

EDWARD: He's trying to change the drinking culture of the British working man!

ALAN: My Dad says he won't survive the war. Says he's not a "war leader".

EDWARD: Anyone who cuts pub opening hours and gets the beer watered down deserves to get kicked out. This beer is rubbish. It used to be a really nice pint. **(Sighs)** Want another?

ALAN: DORA says we can't buy rounds. We've got to buy our own beer.

EDWARD: Ruddy DORA. Forgotten what it stands for...

ALAN: Defence of the Realm Act.

EDWARD: Ruddy Defence of the Realm Act. It's an attack on the rights of the working man, disguised as something to help the war effort.

ALAN: Careful what you say. Don't say anything in public that can be construed as undermining the war effort.

EDWARD: Get you! "Construed", "Undermining". That's posh talk for an east end boy.

ALAN: It's Beatrice's fault. She talks like that.

EDWARD: **(Surprised)** You still seeing that station painter?

ALAN: Yeah.

EDWARD: Didn't think you two would last.

ALAN: Why not?

EDWARD: She's not your type.

ALAN: Meaning?

EDWARD: She's too strong-willed for you.

ALAN: She says pubs are evil...

EDWARD: Evil?

ALAN: She says men get drunk in pubs then go home and beat up their wives...

EDWARD: You need to stop seeing that one!

ALAN: **(Looking around the pub)** She may have a point! **(Beat)** Can I ask you something? I need some advice. About Beatrice.

EDWARD: About you know what?

ALAN: No. Not about that! About where to take her out.

EDWARD: Thought you'd already taken her out.

ALAN: We've been for a couple of walks to Regent's Park and I've taken her to an art gallery. She likes that sort of thing. I've called at her house. Her mother's got very old fashioned views about courting.

EDWARD: Courting! This is Nineteen Fourteen! People go on dates these days. You don't call on women anymore! You take them out on dates!

ALAN: I know. I know what I *should* be doing. Where would you take her if it was you taking her out?

EDWARD: From what you've said about Beatrice. I'd take her to a dancehall. She sounds like she'd love that.

ALAN: She probably would. Don't you think that might be a bit too... too... much on a first proper date?

EDWARD: Where are you thinking of going?

ALAN: A teashop?

EDWARD: You've got a lot to learn. Take her to see a moving picture.

ALAN: The cinema?

EDWARD: Take her to the Angel Picture Palace. Get her in the back row and Bob's your uncle!

ALAN: I could. Actually that's a really good idea. Not the back row though...

EDWARD: Your choice.

**(There is a brief pause whilst Alan and Edward sup their pints of beer)**

ALAN: **(Pointing at a newspaper on the table)** Did you read about that speech that American woman gave yesterday?

EDWARD: What American woman?

ALAN: The one all the fuss is about. **(Looking at paper to find name)** Margaret Sanger. She's over here giving speeches. It says she's a socialist, a feminist and an atheist! My mother calls her "the she-devil". I can't believe what she says in public. **(Reading aloud from newspaper)** "The basis of feminism is a woman's right to be an unmarried mother". My mother will go mad if she reads that!

EDWARD: Times are changing.

ALAN: Really?

EDWARD: The war's changing things. Changing the way people think. They're fed up with the church and the government telling them how to behave. More people are starting to think that it's all right to have sex for fun - not just to have babies.

ALAN: You can't say "sex" in public...

EDWARD: I can and I did. This is Nineteen Fourteen. Things are changing. Women are changing. I'm all for it.

ALAN: Never saw you as a women's rights supporter...

EDWARD: I'm all for women's rights if it brings in birth control!

ALAN: How does "birth control" work?

EDWARD: I don't know. But it means women aren't scared about getting pregnant.

ALAN: That's good?

EDWARD: Of course it is! Think about it...

ALAN: Guess it would be...

EDWARD: We need the suffragettes to win.

ALAN: So all women can use birth control?

EDWARD: Yeah.

ALAN: Let's drink to that.

**(They raise their glasses in a toast)**

EDWARD: Here's to the women's movement.

ALAN: And birth control!

**(Brief pause whilst Alan and Edward sit and reflect)**

EDWARD: When does your training start?

ALAN: Two weeks. You?

EDWARD: Next month.

ALAN: That's why I'm keen to go out on some proper dates with Beatrice. Before I leave for France.

EDWARD: Having second thoughts about joining up?

ALAN: No. Not really.

EDWARD: You just want the uniform to impress Beatrice and all the other girls. They love a man in uniform - like it says in that song.

ALAN: The Khaki Song?

EDWARD: That's the one.

ALAN: Everyone's volunteering. We'd look like cowards if we didn't.

EDWARD: We've just popping over to France for a bit to whack a few Germans. We'll be back by Christmas. It'll be a laugh. An adventure. I can't wait.

ALAN: Some of the suffragettes are handing out white feathers to men in the street who haven't joined up. It was that Emmeline Pankhurst's idea. Don't want one of those.

EDWARD: One of those pacifist blokes said he'd been given so many he had enough to make a fan.

ALAN: It's not funny Edward. It would humiliating to get given one.

EDWARD: You didn't volunteer not to be called a coward. You volunteered cos you wanted to!

ALAN: It's Beatrice. She keeps telling me I'm being exploited by the "ruling classes".

EDWARD: She should concentrate on women's stuff and leave men's things to men!

ALAN: You're right. Don't know what's the matter with me. It will be an amazing adventure.

**(A voice offstage shouts out "Time gentleman please!")**

EDWARD: I never heard them call last orders. I was gonna get another pint.

ALAN: Too late now. Never mind, we'll have an extra pint tomorrow to make up for it.

EDWARD: Good idea. Let's sing that song.

ALAN: The Khaki Song?

EDWARD: Know the words?

ALAN: Heard it so many times I reckon I know it off by heart.

EDWARD: Me too. Let's give it a go.

**(They stand up, link arms and start singing the song rather drunkenly as they exit. The lights in the pub are switched off. For a while the audience can hear Alan and Edward singing (offstage) as they walk**

**away from the pub. The song slowly fades away to nothing as they get out of hearing distance)**

“Now, I do feel so proud of you, I do honour bright.  
I'm going to give you an extra cuddle tonight.  
I didn't like yer much before yer join'd the army, John.  
But I do like yer, cocky, now you've got yer Khaki on”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Extract from the song “**Now You've Got Yer Khaki On**”, written and composed by **Charles Collins & Fred W. Leigh** in 1915 and sung by **Marie Lloyd** (1870-1922)

### SCENE 3

**(The Western Front, France, 1915. Alan, dressed in a soldier's uniform and coat, sitting alone on a tiny broken wall. He is cold, wet, muddy and shivering. He is writing a letter. Whilst he writes, a man dressed in a sergeant's uniform enters and recites a poem. The reading of the poem is punctuated by the sound of gunfire and other warlike sounds)**

SERGEANT:

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all.

And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea.  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.<sup>5</sup>

**(The Sergeant exits. Alan stops writing and starts reading what he has written out aloud to himself)**

ALAN:

**(Reading aloud from his letter)**

Dear Beatrice,

I am writing to you as I promised I would. I don't expect you will write back to me as you will be far too busy painting stations and doing your suffragette things. If you do get a chance to write to me however that would be really grand and would cheer me up.

Things weren't too bad when we first got here. I'm not allowed to tell you where we are. Then, on our second day, we came under fire for the first time. Everything was fine then, suddenly, out of nowhere, bullets were screaming at us. We all dropped face-down into the mud

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<sup>5</sup> "Hope is the thing with feathers" by Emily Dickinson

in terror. There was a huge explosion over our heads. I've never been so frightened. The others were the same. They were terrified. I could see them shaking and twitching. Their teeth were chattering. After a while it stopped. There was a deathly silence – then one young lad said, "If this is what it's like, I hope I'll be killed off now".

Things have got even worse since then. Today I'm freezing cold, soaking wet and covered in mud with not the slightest hope of drying my clothes, which means I will stay wet and cold for several days.

Our Sergeant is a nice man and he gives us good advice. His best piece of advice was about the trenches. He told us to make sure that we kept our heads, arms and legs inside the trenches at all times.

There's lots of our horses over here. I feel so sorry for them. The Germans are using them as well. It's not right. Wars aren't for horses. Horses aren't for wars. Horses are for nice things. Horses are for...

**(Alan stops reading. He crumples up the letter and angrily throws it away)**

ALAN:

What's the point? **(Tearful)** What's the fucking point?!

**(Alan sits very still for a moment and then slowly and very deliberately starts to empty his pockets. Every item he takes from his pockets he stacks very carefully and very neatly (as someone suffering from OCD would do) in a line on the brick wall. The items include a small bible, a photo, a cigarette tin, his pay book, a diary, some letters and a pack of playing cards. When he has finished, he takes off his coat, throws it on the ground and sits staring despondently at the items on the wall. Private Priestley enters, smoking a pipe)**

PVT PRIESTLEY:

**(Yorkshire accent)** You alright?

ALAN:

Not really.

PVT PRIESTLEY:

I could tell that.

ALAN:

How?

PVT PRIESTLEY: From the way you were lining up those things on the wall. So neat. So careful.

ALAN: Don't understand.

PVT PRIESTLEY: It means you've got a mental disorder.

ALAN: I'm not mad.

PVT PRIESTLEY: Not saying you are. You're suffering from anxiety.

ALAN: Of course I'm fucking anxious. I'm on the Western Front. I feel dreadful. One mate's got typhoid. Another's got trench foot. His feet are blue and covered in open sores. Chances are he'll get gangrene. My best mate's got trench fever. Do you know how you get trench fever? Body lice! Body lice pass it on. I've got lice! They're in my hair! They're in my clothes! I can't get rid of them! I'm freezing cold and soaking wet. Off course I'm fucking anxious!

PVT PRIESTLEY: Let's start again. **(Holds out hand for Alan to shake)** John. John Priestley.

ALAN: Alan Jackson. I won't shake hands. Just in case.

**(Pvt Priestley looks puzzled)**

ALAN: The body lice...

PVT PRIESTLEY: **(Withdrawing hand)** Of course. Most considerate.

ALAN: You new here?

PVT PRIESTLEY: Newish.

ALAN: What was all that mental stuff?

PVT PRIESTLEY: People don't understand what war does to soldiers mentally.

**(Alan looks puzzled)**

How it messes up their minds. Most of the blokes here – if they somehow survive and get home – will never be the same again. Their minds will never be the same again.

ALAN: How do you know all that?

PVT PRIESTLEY: I know lots of things. I know that back home the official line is that this is a “glorious” war “our boys” are fighting. It’s not. It’s a cruel, stupid war, with cruel, stupid, arrogant officers in charge. It’s a class thing. We’re cannon fodder. The officers couldn’t care less about the sort of thing that’s happening to you and your mates.

ALAN: Our sergeant’s a nice man. He reads us poetry.

PVT PRIESTLEY: I don’t mean sergeants. They’re not ruling class. I mean officers. The ones back at HQ swilling down the best French wines while you and your mates are sleeping in liquid mud, with trench foot, trench fever and God knows what else.

ALAN: Typhoid?

PVT PRIESTLEY: Exactly.

ALAN: Is it true the Germans are going to use gas to attack us?

PVT PRIESTLEY: There’s a big battle coming up. They’ll use anything they can get their hands on. The rules have changed. The Zeppelins started it – killing innocent civilians and burning babies to death. Things will never be the same again.

ALAN: Think you’ll get out alive?

PVT PRIESTLEY: If I do, I’m going to write a book about it. Tell the world what it was really like. What our officers were really like.

ALAN: Blokes like us don’t write books.

PVT PRIESTLEY: Blokes like us can do whatever we want. That’s the point! We need a revolution when we get back home! You’re shaking. Put your coat back on. You shouldn’t take your coat off if you’re cold. **(Helps Alan put his coat on)** Who were you writing to?

ALAN: My girl. I’ve chucked it away. I couldn’t tell her all the really bad stuff. It would have upset her. I told her a bit of some it. I told her about the horses. I hate what they’re doing to the horses. Horses aren’t for fighting. Horses aren’t for killing. They’re doing terrible things to the horses. **(Alan breaks down and sobs)**

PVT PRIESTLEY: Horses will win this war. That’s why they’re using them.

ALAN:

I'm going. **(He takes off his coat. Throws it to the ground and runs off)**

PVT PRIESTLEY:

**(Picking up the letter Alan has written and smoothing it out)** Me and my big mouth.

*End of extract from GENDER FLUID...*