

DEAR ETC.

ACT I

Music crackles out of a speaker as a needle hits a record; Wagner's Tannhauser Overture resonates, the following text fades up onto the screen:

Throughout the Lebanese Civil War, Alex Gibeily wrote uninterruptedly to his exiled children. What follows has been edited from some of his letters over the period 1978-1985.

The text fades, and after a gentle start, the musical piece has turned poignant and stutters as lights are projected onto a screen.

Footage 1: A short slideshow of scenes of Lebanon's heyday, moving to the first years of the war and footage of the Syrian bombardment of East Beirut (this footage is edited from archives from Lebanon and contemporary western reports).

The music fades and the last images flicker to a close – blackout.

SCENE 1

The image of a calendar appears on screen and a cross is made on a date – 1st May 1978 – fade to black. The lights slowly rise and we discover a man fervently writing on his typewriter: he is surrounded by bookcases, files in an organised mess. There is a drinks table and a very worn and comfortable armchair. The desk is in the centre of the stage, on a platform, and different sections of the office are connected but on slightly different levels. As the play progresses and Alex moves about these areas, they become more disjointed, uneven, dishevelled.

Alex finishes his letter and with a flourish extracts it from the typewriter and addresses the audience.

Alex

Cher Richard,

When one is plagued with worry, whom to tell if not one's own brother?

What I wouldn't give to be in Montreal with you now, far removed from the calamity that is this Lebanon. You will have seen the Syrian tanks and cannon bomb our dear Beirut every day: I still remember last year when you believed that the two-year war was coming to an end.

I, too, was an optimist back then. We'd fled the massacres, and survived the raids by the Palestinians and Muslim leftists, and there was a moment in 1977 as the guns fell silent when we all thought peace was around the corner. How could we possibly know that all of that was nothing more than an appetizer, an *amuse gueule*?

This has become sickening...

...Everything has fallen apart.

Workwise, it is as though my clients never even existed. The political situation has turned against us and so – at 56 – I am a retiree who retires badly.

Now more than ever, I only live for my family: Nirvah and ETC – our "etc.", that is, Elissa, Terence and Carl. Tell me what you are doing with your time. It might inspire

me. I listen to the BBC, read *Time* magazine and give French lessons to Carl – and that's it.

Alex sighs, signs his name to the finished document and sits in silence in his office, his sanctum. He mutters briefly to himself and then begins to type another letter. He turns to talk to the audience, dispensing his advice, as if they were his son.

Alex Dear Terence,

As you are probably aware, we have had a bit of trouble here with the Syrian troops. Our neighbourhood has been bombed and we are all at home waiting for things to come back to normal. Today the news is a bit better and there is a ceasefire. We expect everything to be all right in the next few days. At any rate, don't worry about us because we take all the necessary precautions.

He stands by his desk.

This is my fourth letter. Have you received my third letter? In that letter I gave you my opinion concerning your idea of sharing a flat with three other guys and I said I was against it because you are bound to get deflected from your work schedule at Imperial College. How come other students – your friend, Nick for example – can study alone without help from other students and my son can't do that? He must have somebody to look over his shoulder all the time?

I think you should be alone in a room so that you can go on with the kind of studying you put in when you were in Beirut. But if you feel terribly lacking and you need continuous coaching, if you need Nick's help every day of next year, then go ahead and share a flat. But think in terms of your academic year and not of how lonesome you will be: with the kind of work you will have to put in, you won't feel loneliness. Besides, you will still have your Sundays to relax.

Also, don't be too downhearted at being in London during the summer. After all it isn't exactly Jeddah or some other unspeakable hole.

You are in London to study in the first and only place. And it's still better than Beirut at home in this situation when we cannot, dare not go out.

I hope I have made myself clear, and all there remains for me to say is: good luck.

Fade to blackout.

SCENE 2

The date on the calendar, 8th November 1978, is projected onto the wall and Alex moves to another platform (section of the office). He sits, reaches for his daily newspaper – L'Orient Le-Jour – scans the headlines and then discards the paper with disgust.

Alex *Quelle merde.*

He talks to the audience as if they were his brother.

Alex *Cher Richard,*

Nothing to report here other than the daily trash in the papers. Life has become unbreathable. Just imagine: the Lebanese pound is now at 3.40 to the dollar...

Nirvah's car was stolen last month. A week later, we found her Volkswagen Beetle parked outside the local headquarters of the Christian militia. They laughed at us when we asked for it back and offered us the opportunity to buy it back from them.

Ces petits merdeux! The oldest turd was barely older than Carl. Riddled with bullets, we still bought it back: you know how attached Nirvah is to that car. Besides, despite my best attempts, she seems incapable of driving anything other than a Beetle.

I just read today that the Syrians intend to leave the coastal area and Beirut. I don't know yet if this is good news or not. The next few days will tell. Is the Lebanese army even ready to take over those positions? And what will the Palestinian resistance do? Will the fighting resume? So is this Syrian withdrawal for better or for worse? We hold our breath, especially since the Christian militias are now at each other's throat. *C'est le bouquet.* The volcano has not subsided.

The monotony is killing me. I can't seem to be interested in anything other than the future of my children.

Alex contemplates this and then his irritation rises as he picks up a letter (from Terence). He re-reads a passage from it:

Alex Pressure and workloads are depressing...

He discards the letter in the same direction as the newspaper and begins his reply to his son.

Alex Terence,

“Pressure and workloads are depressing”

These are the words you used in your letter. I had promised myself then never to write to you again unless you passed your exams. But I think you are entitled to my thinking.

First of all my reaction was that if you can't take normal workloads – normal to thousands and thousands of engineering students – then you are not cut out to become an engineer.

He stands and paces in frustration.

Secondly, that if you fail this second year it will mean the following:

One: Elissa cannot go to England and you are jeopardising her future as a student and as a girl looking for a husband. Since she doesn't leave the house at all here she doesn't stand a chance in a million to get married.

Two: That I am so disgusted with my children that I don't see why I should put in danger the money for my old age and that of Mother's for your sake and for the sake of my ungifted children.

Three: Carl would be staying in Beirut as I don't wish to spend on him thousands and thousands of pounds and end up the same way as with you.

Four: You will have the choice of coming back home to Beirut, in forced residence like the rest of us, until the situation clears up, and then work as a lowly clerk for 400 Lebanese pounds per month.

From now on spare me the bad news. I have enough worries as it is. Mother and I were gladly ready to make the utmost sacrifices for our three children, but I see now that in the face of mediocrity my duty lies in the protection of our old age since you three will be incapable of helping us out when our capital will have melted away in fees and unproductive expenses.

Until you pass your exams please do not write to me again, because it hurts too much. But write to Mother and Elissa. This is a necessity if you want to keep her alive and not kill her.

By the way, “*bon anniversaire*” is written BON and not BONNE.

Fade to blackout.

SCENE 3

The date on the calendar, 11th May 1979, is projected onto the wall and Alex is in his armchair.

Alex

Cher Richard,

I sometimes envy those fathers who simply produce children without worrying constantly about their wellbeing and development.

And it seems the older they are, the more I have to worry.

You will think that strange, I know, when you consider that Carl hasn't been able to go to school for over a year because of the situation. But at least I see him every day.

He has covered the maths books you sent. As you know, the school they all attended before the war closed down definitively after the battle of the Tal az-Zaatar Palestinian camp, and the headmistress has kindly accepted to give Carl private maths and physics lessons, while I teach him French and English, and Elissa was teaching him geography.

I say “was” since Elissa travelled to France yesterday. She had been stuck at home with us and with little to do all day, other than those lessons for Carl. She changed her mind about that further education course in England – I sometimes suspect she knows how tight our finances are...

So instead, Nirvah's brother, Octave, kindly offered her a short-term position for the summer season, working in his hotel in Antibes, outside Nice. In principle she will be staying and working at the hotel over the summer and then if she likes the life over there and if offered a good job in a large company, she may stay on, or else return.

As for Terence, he writes so rarely that your guess is as good as mine. For him, it is *loin des yeux, loin du cœur*.

The lights dim and when they come up Alex is by the drinks table.

He pours himself a whisky and savours the first mouthful.

Alex

Dear Terence,

Just to make sure that you do read my letters I have asked Elissa, who travelled to Nice last week, to mail you an envelope containing copies of all my recent letters to you since there were so many important things to tell you. Please read them all.

I am glad about your B+ and B in your written reports, and your A in the oral. You are doing fine, my son, and I am proud of you. We think very often of you – in fact all the time – because we would like so much to hug you and tell you that eventually everything will turn out fine and that at any rate you are our son we love so much and will succeed in life.

Uncle Octave was able to telephone us yesterday and told us that Elissa seems to be happy in her new job and in her new life in Antibes. Octave can get you a work permit in France and he is absolutely positive that you can get a first-class job once you get a degree from Imperial College. He has excellent contacts (he is going to be vice-mayor of Antibes and is therefore well-placed to help).

When you receive this letter you will probably have started your exams. Don't try to answer it, or if you wish to do so, then a very short note so as not to waste your time. But as I said before, you must enter the exam room with a strong heart knowing that your parents and the whole family are close by, and will never let you down. You have done your hardest, we know, and we will always be proud to have a son like you.

The lights dim.

Alex is at his desk.

Alex

Dear Elissa,

Mammy and I can't stay too long without getting in touch with our darling little daughter. So here is a letter written during an idle morning.

If you were here I would ask you a hundred questions as to how you are feeling just now, and if you are happy in your work and in your new surroundings in Antibes, if you are eating well (your grandmother wrote to say that you have put on two kilos is that true?) and also if you are happy to be in France. Your working hours, I understand, are from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm, then from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm, so you must stroll along the Croisette Corniche in the afternoons, I imagine, and some fresh guys must have wanted to keep you company.

If the opportunity presents itself with a gentleman, who looks like a gentleman, to ask you out to dinner or to a disco, ask some advice from Uncle Octave who knows all the places and will tell you if the place is to be trusted or not. Remember, you are a stranger in town and you don't know much about these places and about those guys who pick up girls who perhaps feel a little lonely. Give yourself time to look around to judge for yourself what sort of company you are in and with what sort of people you are dealing. You are our darling daughter and we would want you to have the best of everything in life. And you have the stuff to be choosy: education, beauty, family background, experience, etc.

All we want is for you to see the world – and one of the most luxurious part of it at that – with a job in your pocket that will give you more experience. If after a reasonable time you think you prefer to come back to Beirut, that will be absolutely fine with us. Don't decide yet, though, especially as things are still unsettled politically here.

Make the best of your stay in France, Terence will do his best to pass his exams and go to his final year, and Carl will go to school in England. If things go a little better in Lebanon I mean to get myself a job. I am still young and full of energy, and I know I can take the management of any outfit.

Write to us often as we love to read you. If you receive this letter, acknowledge receipt by stating letter No. 2 dated 28th May, then we shall know here that what I have just said has reached you.

My dear daughter, there is a big emptiness in the house. It's silly to say so because, being a girl, you will eventually get married and we will be forced to see facts in the face, i.e. that we shall "give away" our daughter to a total stranger with whom I pray God you will be happy with forever after.

Alex pours himself a whisky and sits in contemplation. Fade to blackout.

SCENE 4

The date on the calendar, 11th June 1979, is projected onto the wall.

Alex

Dear Terence,

We have received your letter dated 31st May today and, before you leave your flat and leave us without an address, Mammy and I would like to tell you that these last few weeks you have been on our thoughts every minute. Your exams must have been a harrowing experience and we were with you all the time, praying for you. You say you did quite well at your maths, but not as you had hoped. Still, we believe that, from your wording, you must have passed these two maths exams? What about electricity?

Please, at the receipt of this letter, telephone us any day or night to tell us how you did in your exams and what your impressions are – please keep trying to phone us even if it takes 20 attempts or more. We also want to hear your voice and feel you near us.

When will you have your results? Do also let us know this on the phone and the moment you have your results phone us again, as we must make plans for the future.

We have received a letter from Elissa who seems to be quite happy though with very little time of her own. Keep in touch with her. I know she would love that.

In case you have not made it at your exams, do not despair. Life is ahead of you and you're made of the right stuff.

He paces the room anxiously before switching on the radio. There's a pop programme on the BBC and Alex listens for a while to the current number one: Sister Sledge's We Are Family. He shakes his head unimpressed and switches off the radio.

Alex

Dear Daughter,

When you receive this letter you will be in the midst of the season and you must be very busy. But, as I said, if you take it as a whim, a lark, a new experience, then you will gain and lead a relaxed life.

At any rate the fact alone that you have put on 3 kilogrammes is a terrific bit of news and, as you say, take on a few more and become the most beautiful girl in the whole world, but don't go bare-chested to the beach...

I don't know yet if Terence has passed his exams, and I jump at every ring of the telephone. If he passes I will give him £100 to go and see you for a few days. Can you put him up? If he has failed then I'll ask him if he can resit in September, or June next year, coming to Beirut in the meantime to prepare his exams. I am foolish perhaps but stubborn concerning my family.

He finds himself humming We Are Family, and stops abruptly as soon as he realises.

Write to us often and tell us what you are doing, where you are sleeping, who you are seeing, and all you feel about your new life. We love you more than anything else in the world and we want you to be happy.

The lights dip.

Alex sits at his desk, his financial notebooks at hand.

Alex

Dear Terence,

First – and from the very deepest of our hearts: congratulations on passing your exams...

We aroused the whole building and we drank to your health and we drank also to your third year.

I hope that you have also celebrated the occasion and if you haven't yet, then take a little extra sum of money and give yourself a treat and drink to our health and to your future successes – say 20 or 25 pounds.

Secondly, there is a financial matter that has been worrying me. When I heard that you forgot to post that letter to the bank for the transfer of £1000 for the tuition fees, I unblocked my account in Beirut – losing all interest – in order to send you (*he glances down the financial column*) £539 by telex on the 3rd July, straight to your bank in London. In case the bank says they have not received this amount, please cable me immediately so I can take it up with the people here.

Tell me about where you are now living: is it a nice place, do you have friends there? How much are you paying, and do you do your own cooking? Don't forget my motto: keep warm and eat well.

If you intend to see Elissa in France, remember that it is imperative that you obtain a re-entry visa into the UK before you leave London. You can do that by going to the visa office in London, so you have no trouble getting back to the UK for your third year. Is that clear? I sent you a cable to that effect two days ago and I hope the meaning was clear.

Please do not count on obtaining a UK re-entry visa in France. It is impossible because you have to prove you can pay for your studies and live for a year on your own in England. You will otherwise be stranded in France and I will have no end of trouble to get you back to England. Please spare me that worry.

I allowed you £100 for that trip to France. I know it isn't very much but I cannot afford more. Elissa can help you in Nice since she is making a good salary. We were all very proud of you passing those difficult exams, and now for the third year. Just between you and me I lost 4 kilos waiting for your results. You can't blame me, this is the way I am made.

If you have to buy books to prepare for your third year don't hesitate, and damn the holiday. Go back to work and tell yourself this is my last year after 15 years of study and I must pass – just, must pass – and return to your parents with a diploma that will open doors for you. I'm already cutting out all the ads in the newspapers that might eventually be of interest for your future career. Will it be Saudi Arabia? France? England, Canada?

All that Mammy and I want is for you to be successful and happy. I am almost 57 and I'm passing the torch on to you, my eldest son.

Write soon to us and let us partake of your enthusiasm and happy dreams. God willing, we will see you at Christmas with Elissa and Carl, and the whole family will drink to the joy of reunion.

Alex raises his glass in a toast and takes a sip.

His mood darkens.

Dear Elissa,

After your phone call in which I told you it was all right for Terence to join you for about a week, I got worried about his UK re-entry visa, so I sent him this telegram:

DO NOT GO TO FRANCE BEFORE OBTAINING RETURN VISA IN UK BEFOREHAND

In case he has not received this telegram, I am attaching a photocopy of my bank statement which he can show to the British consulate in Marseilles or in Paris. But this is as a last resort. He must obtain his re-entry visa before leaving the UK.

How about you? Are you happy at the hotel? What you get is 2,000 French francs a month (is Octave paying you that by the way?) and there is a limit to the amount of work you can put in. I don't want you to lose either your health or your standing. Do you understand? Don't deflate your ego. You are a wonderful girl who has everything a man would ever want: education, background, good family, and a very pretty figure and a lovely pair of blue eyes.

He pauses.

I'm pleased that you have made some new friends, but be very careful as with whom you mix. France is in many ways an immoral country and one might be tempted to do things one doesn't usually under normal circumstances. As I told you before many times, I trust you implicitly. I don't mean by that to lock yourself up in

your room, but to pick and choose, and know what you are doing every single moment.

I'm also happy you are not in Beirut these days because there is a strong smell of war between Israel and Syria, and part of the war will be in South Lebanon and in the areas where the Syrians have placed their artillery and anti-aircraft. We are not too displeased with such a conflagration as this would probably clean up the country once and for all of all the foreigners, but it will be a hard 10 days, and I'm glad you will miss it. Of course, I could be wrong all the way, and things may take another turn, but still for the better for us. Or so we feel and analyse among all the neighbours in the building.

I told Terence to take only £100 with him. I don't know how much the blue train from London to Nice costs, but I think you will have to dish out some money to take him round a bit and have some fun together in spite of your work.

Tell him, for heaven's sake, to write to us.

If you are speaking the truth and that you have put on 5 kilos then it is again one of the best news we have received in a long time. If guys turn their heads to look at you don't get in a faint. You must be a lovely girl and you deserve only the best.

Mammy and I hope that, God willing, we can all be together in Beirut at Christmas.

The lights suddenly click off, cutting off his sentence.

Another damn power cut. I have to stop. Thursdays is now lights off.

Fade to blackout.

SCENE 5

The date on the calendar, 11th August 1979, is projected onto the wall. Alex prowls his office in agitation.

Alex

Dear Terence,

Your last letter was written just after your exams, round about the 15th June, and we are now two months without any news from you. Why, Terence? Should I blame the post office or blame you? In all honesty tell me if your letters have been written but mislaid by the post office, or that you just didn't feel like writing to us, and that would be terrible to hear.

We want to read you every 15 days, regularly: is that too much to ask? Mammy and I wrote to you half a dozen times in that period of two months, and we are both terribly unhappy not to hear from you, and worried too. We, who all our life, have done our best to keep close to our children and try to do their best in their interest, we feel today forsaken, *délaissés*. I wrote you letters with very important questions, putting them under separate points 1, 2, 3, etc. and I expect you to answer to these points.

I hope you have been able to obtain your re-entry visa and that you saw Elissa and had a holiday. But by the time you get this letter it will almost be September and the drudgery of looking for a room will begin. As I have probably told you before, the

school in England has increased its fees terribly this year, to £730 per term. I really don't know if we will be able to afford to send Carl to do his A levels in England – unless you help me out a little after you get your degree next year.

Frankly, Terence, I think I must tell you that your lack of correspondence is doing us a lot of harm. Sorry to go over that subject again but I think I should tell you that every so often I find Mammy in tears because she has no word from you. So please write, if only to help us carry the burden of having our children away from home.

Tell me how you feel about your third year and how happy we will all be when we learn that you have that much sought-after degree. I think then that I can tell myself that I have not failed in my life.

Mammy is near me as I write this letter and she tells me to send you lots of kisses. And from me much love, my dear, and lots of luck.

The lights dim and when they come up Alex is surveying the bookshelf pensively, a whisky in hand.

He taps the LMN volume of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Alex New Caledonia? *(he lets the question linger)*

He dispenses his advice to the audience as if they were his daughter.

Alex Dear Elissa,

We have received your letter of 11th July in which you say that life is quite nice after all in Antibes. Is that thanks to Christian? *(he lets the question linger)*

Mammy and I were happy to learn that you have been going out, but you seem to think that Christian is “serious” and in that concern we should like to ask you lots of questions.

Being a *beau garçon* has, in the final analysis, very little to do with whether he would be the good husband for you or not. If you ever see him again before you come back to Beirut you will have to “draw him out”, in other words get as much information on his background as possible. To begin with, you say he’s in “electronics”: does that mean he is an electronic engineer or a technician? An electronic engineer is a white collar with a career anywhere he goes; a technician is a blue collar. The mentality is different, the pay is different, the future social milieu will be different etc.

You say part of his work is in New Caledonia, which is farther than Australia. We've looked it up in the encyclopaedia and found it has 70,000 inhabitants in all, most of whom are natives.

Is the other part of his work in France? If so, what percentage of time is in France and what percentage is abroad? How much does he make regularly? Mammy and I would like very much to see him (before you fall head over heels in love with him), then we'll be able to tell you if you can be happy with him or not. Of course, you are 21, an adult, and you are entitled to say you know what you are doing. But my dear girl, when one is in love one doesn't see very much.

He sits, satisfied that he has successfully imparted his advice.

Your friend, Rosemarie, stayed with us for a few days before she could move in to her student accommodation at the Université Saint Joseph. I must say I am glad she has gone: she was a pain in the neck, absolutely hysterical.

By the way, we are very much surprised that Uncle Octave paid you 1,500 French francs for the month of June instead of the agreed 2,000. I think you should find an opportunity to broach the subject and see why the change – without an explanation, and yet you worked like hell in June. Has business been bad? When does the season end? And what you mean to do then?

If you or Terence want to reach us quickly and the phone doesn't work, then either send us a telex or cable Mammy at her work in the Port of Beirut, to the attention of:

MADAME NIRVAH GIBEILY, DISPENSAIRE, COMPAGNIE DU PORT BEYROUTH

I am glad about those extra 5 kilos and about that tan since you go to the beach quite often now. We'll soon see all that and love you the more for it. We miss you terribly but are glad you are making the most of that semi holiday.

Love from Mammy and Father, and Carl who misses his geography teacher

The lights dim.

When the lights come up Alex sits at his desk reading a letter, he folds it carefully and places it next to his typewriter.

Alex

Dear Terence,

Mammy and I were so happy to read you at long last, after more than two months. Your letter is now next to me because I want to try to answer as many points as possible.

It makes the world of a difference to be writing to a man rather than to a child. Nowadays I don't have much time to discuss serious matters with knowledgeable people. I am cooped up in this house and although Mammy is a wonderful person who helps me a lot when I am depressed, I still don't have anybody with some grey matter in his head to talk to when it comes to a man-to-man discussion.

First things first: you say that you have practically graduated and now it is a matter of honours. Good. But don't take too much for granted. You still need to put in a lot of hard work and to think of nothing else during next year. Take my advice, my dear: life is a question of priorities, you start by doing what is most urgent and most important. Only once you have got this behind do you then have all the time in the world to look about you, intellectually speaking, and cultivate yourself in order not to live with "engineering blinkers", as you called it. But NOW you need those blinkers.

You must not stray into philosophy and such things at this stage. Besides, you are too young and immature. I started on this path at the age of 24. You may want to start at the age of 22 or 23, and at any rate after your first priority which is the engineering degree that will open doors for you in life.

Work is the essence. Don't let that out of your mind.

So let's you and I agree here and now: drop all the bugs that are eating you up until you have graduated with honours. You will also make me and Mammy the proudest people in the world, and give meaning to the programme we have set out for our children, especially you, at the cost of many a worry and many a privation.

You never informed me whether you had been able to obtain your re-entry visa, but I hope that you had a grand holiday with Elissa. I only wish you had been able to phone us from there. Tell me what you did during your holiday and chit-chat about it for Mammy's sake.

Much, much love and luck from Father and Mammy. By the way Elissa is coming back to Beirut before the 10th September and I have found a good job for her next door.

The lights dip; Alex changes position in the blackout.

Alex sits in his chair, with a glass of whisky in his hand. The BBC World Service plays in the background. Alex listens with his eyes closed to the distant gunfire that permeates the flat from fractured city outside. He opens his eyes and addresses his brother.

Alex

Cher Richard,

You asked me why we could not emigrate. We have to remain, but it is not out of any sense of misguided loyalty to Lebanon. My deepest desire has always been to provide my children with the very best education since that is the truest and best passport anyone could have, opening doors to every country in the world.

We simply cannot afford to leave. Settling in any country in the West would be subject to my finding a good job and, marginally, Nirvah as well (and who would give me a job at 57?). We can't count on our present finances since the interest we get on the money covers only the inflation rates of around 10%, and I have calculated that we would then be drawing on our capital plus interest which would last us only some 10 to 11 years. This is very dangerous as you can well see.

In Lebanon it is different because we pay a very low rent on our flat, life is generally cheaper, and Nirvah – God be with her – still earns a small income from her job at the Port of Beirut. Moreover, who knows how much Carl is going to cost us if, that is, I can even afford to send him to England to study his A Levels like I did with Elissa and Terence.

But you need not worry too much about me. *Je suis débrouillard*; I look for opportunities even when the bombs prevent me from going out.

For instance, with the industrial unrest in England and the sudden collapse of sterling, you must have been concerned for me. But on the eve of the rout, I converted all my Beirut holdings into deutschmark, whose value has since gone up. I always keep a very close watch on my assets, and I spend most of my days studying the economic and monetary policies of the US, the UK and West Germany and up till now I have taken some very timely decisions that have resulted in some profits.

I read magazines, mainly *Time*, and sometimes the French *Le Point*, listen to the BBC, make calculations, keep a log book of my findings economy-wise etc. and all this keeps me pretty busy.

Alex closes his eyes and the lights fade.

SCENE 6

The date on the calendar, 18th October 1979, is projected onto the wall

Alex

Dear Terence,

You could easily devote half an hour once a week to tell us how you are faring, and ask us if we are still alive.

This is no good, and there is no excuse for it. I receive regularly all sorts of letters from the UK, including bank statements, that take a week to reach me. Only your letters seem to go astray...

Don't you feel the need to talk to us once in a while? And then in my very numerous letters I have asked you a number of important questions to which I am still waiting to receive an answer. Please look up all the backlog of letters (unless you have the habit to throw them in the wastepaper basket the minute you have read them) and answer fully all my questions.

Life is very hard here and the situation is deteriorating every day. I don't know whether you will be able to come and spend your Christmas holidays with us or not. I must be very careful because I don't want you to be stuck in Lebanon. So please this is very important: do not come to Beirut unless you receive a cable from me saying it's OK to come to Beirut.

How are things going at university this year? And what are the subjects you have taken? You must tell me all about it as soon as you can. Are you finding it difficult in your third year? And how is your health, and are you happy in your new flat, also how much are you paying for it? I want to learn about all this as soon as possible.

Remember, Einstein is an idol you can keep close to your bosom, but look first to your background: solid engineering. Life is a million little steps that you must take in order to reach your destination.

Hoping to hear from you soon, and regularly.

The lights dim and when they come up Alex is at his typewriter.

He types angrily.

Alex

Dear Terence,

It has been a week since my last letter and still nothing from you, yet I keep on writing to you because I believe that we must at all costs keep strong ties between the family and yourself. We must not drift away from each other. I have raised the child to become a man, and this with everything I had in my power. This man must become my friend in my old age, to prop me in my tottering age when the time comes (and I am far from this state now).

On the contrary, I feel I still have a lot to give you until you attain the maturity of mind which comes later than 20, which I call the age of foolish decisions and idealistic extremes. This, for example, is the age of cannon fodder and party

affiliations, of blind love and women worship. But it can also be the age of hard work, when the mind is cool and well guided, of dedication to true values, and of appreciation of sacrifices made.

This is why I am hurt when I don't receive any word from you. Deeply hurt.

Alex massages his brow. The lights dip.

Alex again moves to his armchair, he fills his glass with whisky, looks, pauses, then adds a little more. He takes a shot.

Alex

Cher Richard,

Nirvah had a serious car accident about a week ago: a collision at right angles with another car. I was with her at the time and I saw the other car coming, so I put up my arms to protect my eyes and face. The car rammed us exactly where I was sitting, and the debris from the glass showered all over me but without any harm either to Nirvah or to me. But the car took a battering and it cost us 600 Lebanese pounds to buy a new door. Thankfully, at least we did not need to buy new front and indicator lights.

As you know, our brother Philippe lost his son in the Battle of the Hotels, back in 1975. Our nephew used to drive the same model of Beetle as Nirvah and some time after his death, a band of his militia comrades came to our house to drop off several boxes of spare parts. I am thankful now that we stored them for all those years, and for those lights – still in their packaging – that we would otherwise have been forced to buy.

Elissa has started work here, in a job which is two minutes away by car, and she is happy. As for Terence, I know absolutely nothing about what he is doing, what subjects he is taking, in which he is majoring etc. etc.

I have also been giving a lot of thought lately about Carl's future. I am trying to do now what I have done for his brother and sister, and I hope to be in a position that he can pursue his education in England. In terms of profession, I think he would be best at economics, banking and accountancy. He is not the go-go type, but rather the quiet sort that could become an asset in banking. I have therefore looked up what subjects he should choose for his A levels and what university he would have to go to. He needs to have at least three A Levels to get to a decent university and with good grades; and it looks to me that the best university would be the London School of Economics, followed by Birmingham and Liverpool. I am going to write to all three universities very soon as I am a strong believer of doing things well ahead of time.

As for me, I was turned down for a job at a juice processing plant as production manager. This would not have been a fantastic break (the miserly salary was 2,500 Lebanese pounds per month) but it would have taken some of my financial worries off my mind for a while and besides, half a loaf is always better than no bread – *faute de grives, on mange des merles.*

Alex tops up his glass and takes a sip. The lights fade.

SCENE 7

The date on the calendar, 30th October 1979, is projected onto the wall. Alex is excitedly pacing behind his desk.

Alex

Dear Terence,

We were all so happy to hear from you at long last. Your letter dated 8th October (my birthday present, and I don't mean it sarcastically) is the only one we received since the one you gave Elissa in Nice. We were going out of our minds with worry: we were on the point of sending you a cable just in order to make sure you were OK.

Your last letter was a beautiful one and I will return to it shortly; first, two quick points:

Christmas: As much as we want you to come over to Lebanon, I am afraid that will not be possible for the simple reason that the situation being always on the brink of some new catastrophe, we fear that you might get stuck here and not be able to finish your academic year.

Finances: As I said before it's all OK. On the 1st November I will transfer the sum of £2,200. This should tide you over for the year. I received a letter from our bank manager in London, acknowledging receipt of my instructions.

Now back to your letter, which was so beautiful that I must delve into my wisdom in order to answer it. My dear boy, you are undergoing a change of attitude towards life just as one changes voice at the age of 14. You are a man now and your problems are just starting to prick you in the flesh and in the mind. It would be needless to give you an account of my own experience at your age: every one of us has a new set of circumstances that allow no parallel between two persons.

But I can tell you that I, too, began to ask myself questions about life and beyond, and I took stock of my poor trunk of knowledge and decided to become ambitious and leave meekness to the unsuccessful. I didn't have your education and your opportunities and I resolved to create them piece by piece. At the age of 20 I knew nothing, only a burning desire to learn more and seek truth. I was naive. I thought that by dint of soul-searching and study I could solve the problem of human nature and all I did, in fact, was get bogged down with half a dozen philosophies that led me nowhere except that I learned to read better, more deeply.

May I confide in you? You, Terence, are the embodiment of my ambition. I raised you since the age of four, carefully, with love and with an eye to your future, day after day, year after year. You would be what I could never be: a man with the power to become someone in life if you put your mind to it. There was achievement on my part as I saw you grow into an intelligent boy full of promise. The grain, the good grain – what makes you – was there. It was a matter of watering it as best Mammy and I could to see you grow into the man you are now: on the eve of graduating and then, with hard work and luck, become a man with a wealth of interests.

I am not afraid for you anymore, dear son. You have opened your eyes and you have the capacity and the capability to learn.

Don't forget we love reading you, and I worry when I don't receive a word from you, even a short note that you are OK.

PS Fine to buy yourself a bicycle. It's a good idea provided you keep warm and wear a raincoat (one of those nylon things would do the trick I think).

He gives a contented sigh then raises his glass in salute to his son and takes a gulp. There is a sudden and deafening sound of a bomb and closer gunfire. Alex looks up but remains seated. Fade to black.