

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Burnt Piano

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by Justin Fleming

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EXTRACT

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## ACT ONE

*Sam Beckett at a piano, in his own space, plays the first dark notes of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8, the Pathétique, at the start of the First Movement (the Grave). After the first chord, Karen speaks her first line, after which the Grave continues for sufficient time to establish:*

*A rented room on the Boulevard du Montparnasse, Paris, 1989. Karen Idlewild dictates her diary onto a tape. When the convention is established, the dictaphone can be dispensed with, and she can speak into the space.*

KAREN: "In my imagination, I meet him...."

*Sam trails off at the piano and leaves his space. Karen switches off tape, considers. Pete Idlewild, her father, enters with a newspaper, sits in a chair. He is rough, wiry and in his own hard way, literate.*

PETE: You still at it.

*She dictates.*

KAREN: "He is a man unlike every other man."

PETE: *(sighs)*

*She considers, erases, speaks again.*

KAREN: "He is a man unlike *any* other man."

PETE: Give it up awhile, for Christ's sake.

KAREN: *(erases, speaks again)* "He is a man unlike any other. He's his own breed, unique, a species...."

PETE: Are you going to ignore your father completely?

KAREN: *(continues)* "...Completely unlike my father."

PETE: *(sighs)*

KAREN: *(stops tape)* What do you want, then?

PETE: I want to go out.

KAREN: Go out, then.

PETE: Here in Paris, daughters walk with their fathers, arm in arm. Haven't you noticed?

KAREN: Do they?

PETE: They do. *(pause)* I'd go on my own, but I got dizzy yesterday.

KAREN: Dizzy?

PETE: Yesterday.

KAREN: I'm working.

PETE: Why don't you just write it down?

KAREN: I do. Eventually. But I like to hear what it sounds like first.

PETE: Can't get a word in edgewise when you're at that thing.

KAREN: It's not a thing. It's a journal.

PETE: I shouldn't have come with you in the first place.

KAREN: You're like a broken record.

PETE: Why do you keep a diary, anyway?

KAREN: (*sing-song*) We've been through this.

PETE: Politicians, artists, yes. The literati. But you're a bookseller, a (*with ironic emphasis*) *bibliophile*.

KAREN: You say that as if I had the plague. (*dictates*) " But let me go back and start at the top. I was born on the 3rd of January, 1953."

PETE: Nobody reads diaries by bibliophiles. It's like getting a medical opinion from a hypochondriac.

KAREN: Who asked you?

PETE: (*opens newspaper, as if both a shield and a weapon*) I'll stop here, then, until you're good and ready.

KAREN: Why don't you go out, if you want to?

PETE: I'll stop here.

KAREN: You're hanging around like flat earth.

PETE: (*flexes newspaper*) Well, before the afternoon's out, I'll do my best to develop a contour. Perhaps a little rise, if you're lucky.

KAREN: And turning into an old bore. Why don't you write?

PETE: Arthritis, spelt with a W. Arth...writis.

KAREN: You could write if you wanted to. Blind people with no hands manage to make a fist of it, pardon the oxymoron.

PETE: You're making me out to be a malingerer.

KAREN: You are a malingerer. You've written all your life. Here you are at your age, on your first trip to Paris, doing nothing.

PETE: There's nothing to be done.

KAREN: Write your memoirs.

PETE: I would write my memoirs if it weren't for the arth-writis.

KAREN: This is Paris in the age of the new technology. There are word processors in libraries. Instead, you sit there with a steady flow of drivel, like an ooze.

PETE: I don't just sit here. And I don't think "ooze" is very nice. Just because I said I'll stop here today...

KAREN: Well all right, "stop" there. Like a plug.

PETE: This is not a subtle point you're making.

*A pause.*

PETE: No mail today?

KAREN: No.

PETE: *He* hasn't written, then?

KAREN: No.

PETE: Mr Samuel High-and-Mighty Beckett.

KAREN: He is just elusive, that's all.

*Light change. Outdoors. A street. Blazing reality. Sam Beckett, a little unsteady by virtue of age, passes at a fast shuffle. Karen moves to a point in his path, ready to speak to him.*

KAREN: Hello...

SAM: Excuse me....

*He proceeds past her, shielding himself, as if used to avoiding people. She sighs, returns to her former position in her apartment in time for:*

PETE: You can't meet him and he won't write back.

*Lights die on the street. As before:*

PETE: I heard Alec Guinness on this. *Sir* Alec Guinness from, you know, *Bridge on the River Kwai* and other stories.

KAREN: *Many* other stories.

PETE: Yes, well he said "Fans can be very dangerous".

KAREN: Dangerous?

PETE: He got some guard dogs.

KAREN: Why dangerous?

PETE: This woman kept following him, and leaving gifts for him. When she finally confronted him at the stage door, he begged her not to go buying all these gifts. Some time after that he read in the paper that she'd shoplifted all the stuff so he worried he had a lot of stolen goods on his hands. But also they think you're a nutter who's going to stab them. As I remember, Beckett was stabbed, wasn't he? Missed the heart and lung by a hair's breadth. A fan, wasn't it? A *fan-atic*?

KAREN: No.

PETE: Who, then?

KAREN: A nutter.

PETE: Is there a difference?

KAREN: Yes.

PETE: Well not to Beckett, there isn't. All those letters you send him. He's probably filed you away under nutter. Nutter with a possible knife.

KAREN: I'm not a nutter.

PETE: Nutter, bibliophile, obsessive - they're all just as bad in his eyes.

KAREN: Oh really.

PETE: Jonah says he finds you in a trance every now and then.

KAREN: Does he just?

PETE: He does. Sort of muttering to yourself like you were talking with someone. But there's no one else there....

KAREN: It's a fact: the older we get the more we talk to ourselves.

PETE: .... You doing both parts.

KAREN: Yes. Eventually we become a whole conversation.

*A pause.*

PETE: And then John Lennon.

KAREN: Have you finished?

PETE: I'm only saying that Beckett is the sort of writer who doesn't answer letters from total strangers.

KAREN: *You* used to.

PETE: I never forgot what it was like to be ordinary.

KAREN: (*pointedly*) No.

PETE: Not "Precious" Writers, though. They never send replies. It's an imposition. The whole world can write to them, but not a word shall they venture in response. Why would they? Answer one, and the word's out. Every two-bit, awe-struck, fixated devotee will be up

their arse for a scrap of their handwriting. (*flexes newspaper*) And he's got a wife, too, hasn't he?

KAREN: Suzanne. A music teacher.

PETE: Beware the spouse of the "Precious" Writer. She's convinced her home's in danger of becoming a shrine, awash with grey-robed pilgrims seeking doctorates and autographs, and all kinds of demented Thespians planning bold new productions of that (*under breath*) dull play.

KAREN: *Waiting For Godot*, far from being a dull play, is arguably the most important play this century.

PETE: Agreed.

KAREN: What?

PETE: "Arguably"

KAREN: Yes.

PETE: Which implies another equal and opposite *argument*, point of view, namely, dull.

KAREN: You've never read it.

PETE: I tried to.

KAREN: You tried to.

PETE: So it's better than, let's see, *Hamlet*?

KAREN: *Hamlet* wasn't written this century and it's not the point.

PETE: No, but is it *better*?

KAREN: There *had* to be *Hamlet* before there could be *Godot*. There had to be the watch-spring before there could be the moonlanding.

*She switches on tape*

KAREN: (*dictates*) On the 3rd of January, 1953, *Waiting For Godot* premiered here at the Théâtre de Babylone.....

PETE: I read the other one.

*Karen stops*

PETE: *Days Of Our Lives*. People buried up to their back teeth in shit.

KAREN: *Happy Days*. And it isn't shit....

PETE: That's a matter of opinion.

KAREN: ....that they're buried in. It's a mound of earth. Anyway, you didn't finish it. You never finish anything.

PETE: Was I meant to? No, let me rephrase that. *Is one* meant to?

KAREN: Look...

PETE: No, but aren't there some books, when you think about it, that are just *titles*? You know, you simply take on board the name of the book and that's quite sufficient, even though words follow in deadly profusion.

KAREN: This, from a writer.

PETE: A very prolific writer. Very popular and prolific writer. Quite a bulky *œuvre*, when it comes down to it. Quite a bulky *œuvre*. Yes. *Bob Gets Away and Other Stories* was a sensation in Finland. I showed you the *Helsinki Review*, didn't I?

KAREN: As I recall, you had it made into wallpaper.

PETE: And it was greatly admired by A.E. Vandevere.

KAREN: No one in the world, other than you, has ever heard of A.E Vandevere. He's never been in *Who's Who*. Perhaps his name appears in a more exclusive catalogue - simply *Who*?