

Forest Fires

Hannah is walking along a woodland path, circling the stage. In the centre is an old caravan.

Hannah: I don't know what it is. The soft crunch beneath your feet, the dappled light and dancing shadows. The sense of calm. Solitude. Secrecy. It feels as though you're as close as you possibly can be to the oxygen that is created, and you can fill your lungs with the cleanest, freshest unfiltered air. And yet it still isn't quite the same without your polluting presence. That freshness tinged with wafts of stale nicotine. I must get Jem to walk alongside me more often.

Jem comes out of the caravan in his pyjamas. He pulls out a lighter and cigarette. Susie opens the caravan door and Jem instinctively hides the cigarette.

Susie: Morning. Don't stop killing yourself on my account.

Jem: I won't. Never kicked the instinctive reaction around family.

Susie: It's not all you haven't kicked.

Jem: I see. Picking up where we left off are we?

Susie: Let's not, for Mum.

Jem: It's ridiculous that we're made to feel like outlaws these days. I'm well within my right to pop out for a breath of fresh air.

Susie: Sure. In a forest, during a heatwave. Even if we are ignoring the irony of your statement.

Jem: Well I can't bloody well smoke in there can I? Even though it had years of...

Susie: I was just going to ask if you wanted a tea.

Jem: Yeah. Cheers.

Susie: Some people might still be trying to sleep.

Jem: They still will in those pods. They're probably soundproofed. Couldn't we at least have got a pod?

Susie: *(from inside caravan)* She wanted it to be like it used to be.

Jem: We should have come in monsoon season then. I'm surprised they still let you camp these days. It's all pods and cabins now. *(calling to Susie)* Most people have moved on.

He lights his cigarette. We move our attention to Hannah in the Forest

Hannah: Thirty years. It's like I can remember every step. Well, we must have walked these paths together hundreds of times. "Let's go off the path Han. Let's get ourselves lost." You were a bad influence on me Simon Wilkinson. It's probably just as well the children came along to keep us to the path. On the straight and narrow. Even though

Jem was probably conceived just around....here? I can't tell. (*Reads a sign*) "Keep to the path"? Shan't!

Susie brings a tea to Jem and they sit on old deckchairs.

Susie: How's work?

Jem: Seriously?

Susie: Go on. I am actually interested.

Jem: How's yours?

Susie: I wax women's' fannies for a living Jem, there really isn't that much to talk about.

Jem: It's alright. Meeting the health minister next week to discuss designated spaces outside hospitals.

Susie: What? Of all places.

Jem: It's people's right Susie. NHS England are talking about a blanket ban.

Susie: Good.

Jem: No, not good. It's a vindictive policy that discriminates against the elderly and the infirm who may find it difficult, if not impossible, to leave the grounds without assistance.

Susie: By protecting their health.

Jem: Stop being so fucking flippant. It demonstrates a staggering lack of compassion for smokers who may be stressed, upset and in need of a comforting cigarette.

Susie: Sounds like you've swallowed a Forest speech there Jem.

Jem: I wrote the fucking speech. Did you only ask to have another argument?

Susie: Not really. I would like to understand better. What does it stand for again?

Jem: Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco.

Pause

Susie: Quite appropriate really.

Jem: What is?

Susie: Well, to have spent such a chunk of your youth in a forest and now to be in a Forest of a different kind.

Jem: S'pose so.

Susie: I guess I've sort of gone the opposite way.

Jem: What?

Susie: Well, my work's more concerned with deforestation isn't it!

Jem laughs in spite of himself

Hannah: *(clambering through the trees)* Pretty... dense....when you get into it. For all I know I could be miles from civilisation. *(she finds a spot to sit)* Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea, resurrecting the old holiday, I just thought.....we don't really connect much anymore. You were always the glue Mr W. They stuck to you like, well, like...glue! Alright, you weren't always actually with us - work priorities - but something about the fact that you would tow us out here, get us set up. It's like we knew you'd always be back by the weekend. Until you weren't, of course.

Jem: Where is she anyway?

Susie: Gone for a walk I suppose. I heard her get up. I heard bloody everything last night. Are they really soundproofed?

Jem: Probably but you pay for it. I looked into it, to save me having to tow this eyesore. 800 quid! And then there's the extras.

Susie: Extras?

Jem: Another £25 just for a basket of games!

Susie: What?

Jem: I know!

Susie: Just for a pack of cards?

Jem: I think there are other games available.

Susie: Nonsense. A game of pontoon, with a large box of matches for the betting chips, that's the only game you're allowed to play. It's written in caravanning law, surely.

Jem: You were quite obsessed. And you always flippin won. I'm surprised you didn't become a professional gambler.

Susie: No. You can't cheat as a professional gambler.

Jem: What?

Susie: I always had an extra pack of matches under the table.

Jem: Seriously?

Susie: I'd have thought you'd have worked it out. Mum knew.

Jem: Oh right, helping little sister get the better of her big brother. Undermine him just at the time he's having to step up into the role of man of the house.

Susie: Come again?

Jem: It was alright for you. Mum had expectations. I had to fill his boots. It's still the same now. Fuck's sake.

Susie: Er...it was just a game of pontoon Jem.

Pause

Jem: I need a cig. *(He walks away)*

Hannah checks her phone

Hannah: No signal. Just like the bad old days. We strive to be uncontactable these days you know. We're aching to return to a simpler life. To be at one with nature. I suppose we always did. But after they took so long to find us, to tell us about you, I was rather relieved when mobile phones became the norm. You can actually track people's whereabouts from their phone signal these days. It would absolutely blow your mind. I'm not sure they can if I've got no signal though, can they? Jem would know.

Jem returns. Susie on her phone.

Susie: How come, in an age of 5G and worries about the Chinese spying on us through their superior software, can we still barely get a bloody signal around here. We're hardly in the back of beyond.

Jem: Something important?

Susie: Well no but.....can't they just stick up a mast round here and disguise it as a tree? It'd hardly affect the aesthetics; you wouldn't even notice.

Jem: She still not back yet?

Susie: Not yet. You got over pontoon-gate yet?

Jem: It was tough, you know. Stepping into Dad's shoes.

Susie: At least you were trusted to take on responsibility.

Jem: I had no choice.

Susie: More than I had. I was the silly little girl who didn't fully understand. Just because I didn't wallow.

Jem: Suse, you didn't even seem to notice he'd gone. We were struggling. Mum was seriously struggling, and you seemed to be having the time of your life.

Susie: I guess people deal with things in different ways.

Jem: Sure, but....

Susie: Hospitals, seriously?

Jem: What?

Susie: I mean it's bad enough the financial drain on the NHS that smoking causes, but you can't expect hospitals to tolerate smoking on their grounds. There should have been a blanket ban years ago.

Jem: It.....it's about liberties in general. Look there's more to it than just the right to smoke, you wouldn't understand.

Susie: Try me.

Jem: Well, if we allow the nanny state to control our choice to this extent where will it go next? This isn't just about tobacco. Sugary drinks, convenience food and alcohol are already being lined up for similar treatment.

Susie: But that's a good thing. They're bad for you.

Jem: What's bad for you is the removal of choice. It's about our human rights. Coca Cola for example. They've created less sugary versions, but they've also kept their original recipe as well. Why? Because they believe in giving their customers a choice – they have trust in their consumers to be able to make their own decisions.

Susie: You're holding Coke up as a bastion of liberties? Wow!

Jem: Oh, go back to your Instagram. Who knows, perhaps you can find some more customers with body image issues to prey upon, drum up a bit more business.

Hannah: Peaceful. At peace. I rather like doing nothing. Always have. The kids need something to do, to keep their hands occupied. To flog up their brains. That's flog, Simon, flog! I always envied your ability to just turn off. To sleep. Perchance to dream. It's not a skill you passed onto me sadly.

Hannah closes her eyes and falls asleep

Jem takes a puff of an inhaler

Susie: Hayfever?

Jem: No, it just helps me to smoke better!

I can usually hold a reasoned debate, you know, without.....without resorting to a slagging match. I'd be pretty crap at my job if I couldn't.

Susie: Go on then.

Jem: It's just...different....with your sibling for some reason.

Susie: Yeah, she's only young, she wouldn't understand.

Jem: Nobody quite knows how to press those buttons like you.

Susie: Maybe because it's too close to home. Because Dad...

Jem: No, stop there. There's no saying that he died because of smoking.

Susie: But if you put two and two together.

Jem: People have heart attacks for many reasons Susie, not just smoking. His heart probably could stand the stress of work.

Susie: Or of arguing children! OK, so taking Dad out of it, is it not the case that smoking causes death.

Jem: Of course it does, in some cases, but look at it practically. The cost of treating smoking related diseases is 2.7 billion, but the industry generates 10 billion in

taxation. Yet still there is this constant harassment of adults who choose to smoke tobacco, a legal product.

Susie: Interesting.

Jem: Bloody hell have I got you? Have I actually managed to conduct a reasoned argument with you and win?

Susie: Depends how you view winning. Presumably the billions in taxation isn't a nicotine patch on the squillions the tobacco companies make from people's addictions.

Jem: Ah, but at least they help to pay my wage.

Susie: Forest is financed by the tobacco companies?

Jem: Of course. It's only right that the tobacco companies support their consumers. Plus, it keeps me in Marlboroughs so it's a win-win!

Jem strikes a match to light another cigarette. Susie is more amused than disapproving

Susie: How long before we should start worrying about Mum?

Hannah wakes up, disorientated

Hannah: You know what I'm like Simon. I struggle to work out where I am when I wake up on the wrong side of my own bed but....this isn't familiar at all. Now which way did I come in? I'll find the path. We always did.

She starts walking through the trees. Hannah interspersed with Jem and Susie conversation;

Jem: She never had a problem with it. She used to let him smoke in there! (*indicating the caravan*)

Susie: She tolerated it. That's different.

Jem: No, it was just that it was more socially acceptable. She recognised that that was when he was most at ease. On his holiday, in the van, with the family, cigarette in hand.

Susie: You kidding me? He hated this van. He always joked about his wishful thinking that the chimney could fall on it while it was parked on the driveway. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't secretly hope to fall asleep with a fag in hand just to torch the bloody thing.

Hannah: There was a news story recently. A lady stopped her car to have a wander in the woods. Only she got disorientated and couldn't find her way back to the car.

Jem: Now that's why she doesn't allow it now. Those cushions are no more fireproof than they are comfortable.....

Susie: Particularly when you've got your overgrown brother as a bed buddy.

Jem: ...but other than that she's just been brainwashed by the raft of unnecessary legislation.

Susie: Isn't it actually illegal now. To smoke in a vehicle with children?

Jem : I don't think we count as children anymore Suse.

Susie: No, but...

Jem: And that was just gesture politics. There were only about 10% of people still doing that anyway.

Susie: Right. And what does only one child in every ten matter! No, if Mum had her way she would have never...

Jem: She smoked as well, you know.

Susie: What?

Hannah: 17 days she was lost in the forest, before they found her. I'm not sure I'd last 17 days. Not at my age.

Jem: Only for show really, but she used to have those assorted pastel coloured cigarettes. We used to buy those cigarette bangers from the joke shop on the camp site and place them in one of them and then she'd tease us asking which colour should she smoke next.

Susie: How can I not remember this?

Jem: Too young, I guess.

Susie: Only two years.

Jem: Anyway, there you are. You're the only self-righteous non-smoker in the family.

Hannah: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it then there's probably not much point in calling for help is there! Not when nobody truly listens anyway these days.

Susie: Ok, what if it became outlawed or, I don't know, as outdated and socially unacceptable as, say, snuff. You'd be out of a job for starters.

Jem: Never going to happen. It's part of our cultural heritage. Too many people are pro-smoking.

Susie: Only smokers.

Jem: Not true. Our director is a non-smoker.

Susie: Hang on. The director of the pro smoking lobby group is a non-smoker?

Jem: Yes.

Susie: Oh my god! So he's profiting from you poor weak-willed sods as much as the tobacco companies are! You're all mugs.

Jem: No. It's just that not all people are narrow minded like you. Gay people have stood up for their rights. The social change there has been incredible. It's almost all the rage to be gay these days.

Susie: What??

Jem: Smokers just need to stand up for their rights rather be shamed into quitting and they need our support to avoid being marginalised for their lifestyle choice.

Susie: I can't believe you're drawing such a parallel. You're a cretin!

Jem: Oh what do you know. You're involved in beauty; feeding the paranoia over body image. So as well as being ignorant you're no saint either.

Susie: *(Shouting)* At least I recognise a cunt when I see one.

Hannah: Susie?

Jem: *(apologetic to other campers)* Morning. *(to Susie)* The outside isn't soundproofed. And how is that any more socially acceptable?

Hannah: Jem? Susie? Is that you?

Susie: Mum? *(looking into a clump of trees)* Are you in there?

Hannah: Apparently so.

Jem: Do you need a hand?

Hannah: No, I think I'm.....ah, there you are!

Jem: What were you doing in there?

Hannah: Oh, just got a little....lost. Or, as it turns out, not lost!

Susie: Sorry Mum, if you heard.....

Hannah: So, who's for a game of pontoon then?

Susie: Sure. Why not.

Hannah gets the cards and box of matches and starts to set up

Jem: *(passing her his box of matches)* Here, you'll be needing these.

Susie: *(Amused)* Thanks.