

# Floating

by Michael Olsen

**Characters:** JENNY, 20's, a journalist  
 LIZ, 30's, a teacher, JENNY's mother  
 BRIAN, 30's - 40's, an academic, LIZ's boyfriend

*Half lights come up on the living room of a beach house. It is day, and we hear rain hitting a tin roof. White dust sheets cover a coffee table, two chairs and a sideboard with an old radio on it, and glasses and bottles of drink in it.*

*JENNY enters, her hair dripping wet. She carries a large bag. She laughs nervously at seeing the house again.*

**JENNY:** Still here.

*She breathes in the whole house. She goes to the coffee table and pulls off the sheet. From the bag she pulls out a small sealed urn which she puts on the coffee table, followed by her mobile phone. She uses the sheet over the coffee table to dry her hair. Eventually she stops, and takes out a small pearl earring from her bag. She clicks it on.*

**JENNY:** The place is just like I remember it. The wooden floor, the pine walls, the trees outside that used to scare me at night when it was windy. The Aborigines used to say that a place became infused with the spirit of whatever happened there. *(Pause)* There's the outline of that picture that used to hang on the wall for years before—what did happen to that picture? And there are the shells I collected one day when the tide was out and—and you were out swimming. *(Pause)* Words won't make much of a difference now, will they? You never thought much of it, did you? "My daughter the hack," you'd say. "She's in the word business." Maybe I just want to get that Sunday supplement spot and show David that I'm more than the local fete, or the new fire engine, or new traffic signals around the supermarket. *(Pause)* Everyone's lost someone. Everyone can relate to that—or they will, one day. *(Pause)* I wish David was here. He'd be up laughing, getting a drink, wondering why I hadn't brought him down here before. I'd tell him I had my reasons, that you can't know everything about a person after working with them for six months. I want to cultivate an air of mystery, I'd say. He hates mysteries. He's probably wondering what's going on. *(She looks at the urn, picks it up.)* You brought me here. Now what? Hey? I don't know what to do. Where am I going to put you? On the mantelpiece? Overlooking everyone? You'd like that. How about on the sideboard, near the drinks? That'd be appropriate. *(smiling, then serious)* What am I gonna do with you? *(Pause)* I should call David, shouldn't I? "What for?" you'd say. "You're a big girl now. You can look after yourself. No need to let the little fellow know where you are all the time." But he's a good man, mum, and he's probably worried. So why hasn't he called? *(Jenny picks up the phone)* That's why. See? It's on message bank.

Here. *(Jenny checks her messages)* It is him. Hear him? He's got such a nice voice. *(listening)* Hmm. I'll give him a ring. *(Jenny dials a number, then stops halfway through.)* I suppose running off like that after the service did get them a bit worried, but I couldn't hang around. All that small talk. People saying those gushy nice things about you. Yuck. You would have hated it too. *(Pause)* Well, can't sit around here all day just waiting. *(Jenny pulls the sheet off the sideboard)* Work to do. You always said it when we arrived.

*Full lights come up. It is day. LIZ enters. She dumps her bag on the floor.*

**LIZ:** Let's clear out the cobwebs!

*Liz pulls the remaining sheets off, then grabs a feather duster and starts doing the windows. BRIAN enters, carrying a couple of boxes of food which he puts down on the coffee table. He pauses from his unpacking as Jenny touches him, remembering his face, the feel of his arms, his hands and arms.*

**JENNY:** I must admit you weren't too bad as boyfriends went, but there was no way I was going to be nice to you. *(Pause)* I'd forgotten how strong your arms were. Dad never had such strong arms.

*Brian resumes unpacking.*

**LIZ:** It's always the same. The place needs a good going over.

**BRIAN:** What about Jen?

**LIZ:** What about her?

**BRIAN:** I really didn't think you'd just dump her at the milkbar!

**JENNY:** You really called my bluff on that one.

**LIZ:** She'd been complaining all the way down about how she wanted an icy pole, but when she said daddy would always get her one, well, that was it. She got one. It's only a short walk.

*Liz goes to pull out a cigarette, but her packet is empty.*

**LIZ:** Shit. Should have got Jen to get me some more.

**BRIAN:** It's hot outside. She doesn't have a hat.

**LIZ:** She'll be fine.

**BRIAN:** Liz.

**LIZ:** What do you think of the house? Nice huh? And the beach is just across the road.

**JENNY:** Always good at diversions.

**LIZ:** Always makes me feel—you know.

*Liz drapes her arms around Brian and kisses him. Brian responds in kind.*

**LIZ:** The heat in the sand, the sun, the water. I can't help it. It all takes me back to lazy days on Brighton Beach and feeling coconut oil being rubbed into my back. *(Pause)* I think there's some in the bathroom.

*Liz goes off into the bathroom.*

**BRIAN:** It's got a nice feel about it this place. Whose is it?

**LIZ:** *(off)* My father built it years ago. We've been coming down here for years.

**BRIAN:** Oh.

*Liz enters with a bottle of coconut oil.*

**BRIAN:** So why haven't we been down here before?

*Liz goes to Brian.*

**LIZ:** I don't know. You've been busy. I've been busy. Jen's had things on.

**BRIAN:** I'm sorry we have to go back Sunday morning.

**LIZ:** The little rats playing up?

**BRIAN:** It's the only time the uni gives me to do my research. Goodness knows it's hard enough getting grad students to help out.

**LIZ:** What are you looking at again?

**BRIAN:** The effect of isolation on the immune system.

**JENNY:** How ironic.

**LIZ:** How do you measure that?

**BRIAN:** We infect two rats with a disease and leave one on his own, and the other we pop in with all the others.

**LIZ:** This is science? They'll die. Won't they?

**BRIAN:** Not necessarily. Most will die, but some—mostly the ones who are in the group—will survive.

**LIZ:** And the point of all this is?

**BRIAN:** He who sticks with the group will have a greater chance of survival.

**LIZ:** Why is the whole of psychology all about proving things your mother could have told you?

**BRIAN:** What things did your mother tell you?

**LIZ:** The usual. To be nice. To always look your best. Always wear clean undies. That sort of thing. But there was this frivolous quality about her. She could walk into any shop in town and tell you the price of everything there, but she only ever bought things from Woolies and K-Mart. My father told me once that when I was sick as a kid—really crook—and he was away working—we lived in the country—I had a really bad cough. Went on for days. Mum took me to the doctor's—I don't remember any of this—and the doctor wasn't too sure about what I had, but he offered my mother the choice of two vaccines, a new one that covered quite a few things, and the old one, that just dealt with whooping cough. There was a bit of a price difference, but mum didn't hesitate: she bought the cheaper vaccine. Obviously it was the right one.

**BRIAN:** Obviously. *(Pause)* When will the divorce be final?

**LIZ:** Next month. God knows why we've taken so long to get around to it. Maybe the nuns did a better job on me than I thought.

**JENNY:** Bullshit. You were just lazy.

**BRIAN:** George didn't want to, did he?

**LIZ:** He thought we could work things out. I never knew the Greeks could be so stubborn.

**JENNY:** Well couldn't you?

**BRIAN:** But you didn't want to.

**LIZ:** When it's dead, it's dead, and nothing's gonna revive it.

**JENNY:** And you had nothing to do with it!

**BRIAN:** Always takes two to tango, I suppose.

**JENNY:** Exactly!

**LIZ:** And just what the hell do you mean by that?

**BRIAN:** Could explain why Jen's behaving the way she is.

**LIZ:** She's a kid. They play up. Simple as that.

**BRIAN:** I just think you should take it easy with her, that's all. You don't know what she's going through.

**LIZ:** And you do?

**BRIAN:** My parents separated when I was 8.

**JENNY:** I never knew that.

**BRIAN:** I thought I was responsible. Thought my mother was to blame. I didn't speak to her for a whole year. It turned out my father was having an affair.

**LIZ:** What happened?

**BRIAN:** He'd started coming home late at night from work. Mum got suspicious and hired a private detective to follow him, and that's how she found out.

**LIZ:** Lovely.

**BRIAN:** So you don't know what Jen's going through.

**LIZ:** Well neither do you—really—and I'd appreciate it if you just let me handle her in my own way, OK?

**JENNY:** You handled it really well, didn't you mum?

**BRIAN:** OK.

**LIZ:** I didn't even want her down here this weekend. George was going to have her but cancelled at the last minute. Some deal had come up he didn't want to get out of.

**JENNY:** Nice to be wanted.

**BRIAN:** Model father.

**JENNY:** You didn't know a thing about him!

**LIZ:** At least he's consistent. I'll give him that.

**JENNY:** He tried, alright! He really tried! You didn't help.

**BRIAN:** I can't believe how a parent could be so unreliable. It absolutely amazes me. It's almost like he doesn't know he has a daughter.

**LIZ:** That's right. That's right. Whereas I know only too well that I've got one.

**JENNY:** Well who had me for goodness sake!

**LIZ:** Must admit though, he is getting better in some respects. He was there for the first day of high school, taking pictures, getting her to pose in front of the school gate. It was a bit of a surprise.

**BRIAN:** I remember what you were like before you guys finally separated. You were a wreck. I couldn't bear seeing you like that.

**LIZ:** Thanks Lancelot.

**BRIAN:** I'm here for you, for Jen—that's all.

**LIZ:** I know. (*Liz goes and kisses Brian*) Come on. How 'bout it?  
*Liz stands and starts stripping down to a pair of bathers.*

**BRIAN:** What? Jen will be here any—

**LIZ:** Let's go to the beach!

**BRIAN:** It's a bit late, isn't it?

**LIZ:** It's only 5:30! Come on! I can't wait. I've been in a stuffy classroom all week with 40 farting adolescents. I want to get out there, just float away.

**BRIAN:** What about Jen?

**LIZ:** What about her?

**BRIAN:** I might wait here for her.

**LIZ:** We'll just leave a note.

**BRIAN:** I'd feel better if—

**LIZ:** Come on, Bri. She's a big girl now. She knows how to get to the beach.

**BRIAN:** Really, it's no problem.

**LIZ:** What is it Bri?

**BRIAN:** What?

**LIZ:** Almost makes me think...

**BRIAN:** What?

**LIZ:** I don't know. Seems odd, what you say about Jen. How do you feel about her?

**BRIAN:** How do you—oh, I get it, you think—

**LIZ:** I don't know what to think.

**BRIAN:** I'm just worried, that's all. She's a great kid and she's going through a tough time.

**LIZ:** Yeah? Well so am I. Have you thought about that? Huh? Maybe I need you more than she does, OK? What do you think of that?

**BRIAN:** I love you, you know that. Of course I do. But Jen's a kid.

**JENNY:** *(to Brian)* Why did you care so much?

**LIZ:** Oh great here we go. Forget about it. Let's go.

**BRIAN:** No.

**LIZ:** Alright stay here. See if I care. I'll see you when I get back.

*Liz leaves.*

**BRIAN:** OK.

**JENNY:** It was the first time I'd been alone with Brian. I asked that big question, the one that every kid asks a parent's boyfriend or girlfriend.

**BRIAN:** I don't know if we will or not. It just depends how things work out. We've only been together a little while but—who knows? Come on. We better hurry up and find your mum.

**JENNY:** I didn't want to.

**BRIAN:** Don't you want to go for a swim? It'll be nice. Really.

**JENNY:** So we went down there. Following mum, trying to catch up with her.

**BRIAN:** Can you see her?

**JENNY:** She was a mile offshore—floating—like she always did.

**BRIAN:** She's—ah—quite a way out, isn't she?

*Brian slowly exits.*

**JENNY:** That was mum. Distant. Untouchable. Unsinkable. She swam away from all of us. Even dad didn't swim out to her. He said he could, he just couldn't be bothered.

*Jenny turns back to the urn, then looks around the house.*

**JENNY:** *(singing)* We're all going on a summer holiday (et. al). Every time I hear that song I think about this place, and that weekend when it all turned.

*Brian enters, followed by Liz. They have just returned from the beach, and carry umbrella, spade, towels and bags full of beach gear. Brian also carries an early model mobile phone, big and bulky. As Liz enters she storms up to the radio and turns it off.*

- LIZ:** Who left this damn thing on?
- BRIAN:** *(Shrugging)* Who cares? You saved us from Cliff Richard. We're safe now.
- LIZ:** Waste of electricity. *(to Jenny)* Go and buy yourself an icy pole, OK? OK? Off you go.
- JENNY:** But I didn't go, did I? I stayed outside and listened.  
*Liz collapses in a chair.*
- LIZ:** My God! This heat! You just can't get away from it. The moment you're out of the water you're dry. *(Wiping her ears and face)* And the sand. It gets in everywhere.
- JENNY:** You loved the heat! You were made for summer.
- BRIAN:** Drink?
- LIZ:** A large one, thanks.  
*Brian goes and prepares drinks.*
- LIZ:** Oh.
- BRIAN:** What?  
*Liz pulls out a travel brochure she was sitting on. Brian takes it off her.*
- BRIAN:** This is the Trafalgar Tours brochure—
- LIZ:** Uh-huh.
- BRIAN:** —for Europe. I brought down a whole lot of them so we could look through them all. *(Brian scoops up a few from beside the radio)* Did you see this one? You can do half a dozen different countries in three weeks. That's the great thing about Europe—it's all packed together in one small little area. What do you think?
- LIZ:** I don't want to think right now. OK?
- JENNY:** You never went anywhere, did you? Not then, not ever. Australia was more than you ever needed.
- LIZ:** Where's that drink?
- JENNY:** The first for the day, but not the last.
- BRIAN:** Come on. We need to decide soon so we can book.
- LIZ:** Fine. But not today. Not now. Alright?
- BRIAN:** *(handing Liz her drink)* OK.  
*Liz notes how small the drink is, and downs it quickly. She holds out the empty glass for a refill.*
- LIZ:** *(smiling)* Better make this one a double.  
*Brian takes the glass, fills it, makes his own drink.*

**BRIAN:** Why did you have to go off like that?

**LIZ:** Like what?

**BRIAN:** Go off swimming like that.

**LIZ:** Hello. It's summer. It was a great day to swim.

**BRIAN:** I really needed you on the beach, you know.

**LIZ:** Oh come on. What was the matter?

**BRIAN:** Jenny was upset. I think she might have heard what you were saying on the phone.

**JENNY:** I did. All the times you thought I wasn't listening!

**LIZ:** Why did you have to bring that mobile phone thing with you? We come down here to get away from all that.

**BRIAN:** Away from George?

**LIZ:** Of course George. The way he's been behaving you'd think we were still married.

**BRIAN:** He's still her father.

**LIZ:** Don't I know it. Whenever we have a spat she threatens to run back to him. Drives me nuts. What did she say to you?

**BRIAN:** She wanted to go live with George.

**LIZ:** What is this? Blackmail?

**JENNY:** I learnt from the best.

**BRIAN:** She's a very determined girl. She's got a lot of spirit. She just needs the right direction.

**LIZ:** Another poor little Jenny speech.

**BRIAN:** She's been through a lot these last few years. I just feel for her, you know?

**LIZ:** And what do you feel for me, huh?

**JENNY:** *That* was the question, wasn't it?

**BRIAN:** Liz.

**LIZ:** Well?

**BRIAN:** I think you shouldn't be so hard on her all the time. You should—

**LIZ:** You didn't answer my question.

**BRIAN:** I love you.

**LIZ:** Of course.

**JENNY:** You could never quite believe it when someone said it, could you?

**BRIAN:** Maybe you should share more things. Mother daughter things.

**LIZ:** She didn't want to come in for a swim.

**BRIAN:** Taking a rip out beyond the breakers is not what I was thinking.

**LIZ:** It's such an exhilarating experience. Why don't you come out? Get out where it's calm. You just float there like a whale. All that water. It's very soothing.

**JENNY:** Like some underwater creature sucking energy from the sea.

**BRIAN:** I asked Jen when you were coming in, but she said she couldn't tell. You could be out there for hours.

**LIZ:** I wasn't, was I?

**BRIAN:** I timed you. An hour and forty-three minutes.

**LIZ:** You timed me?

**BRIAN:** It was a hell of a long time.

**LIZ:** Sounds like you had a nice time with Jen anyway.

**JENNY:** You never saw the sandcastles, did you?

**BRIAN:** And another thing.

**LIZ:** What?

**BRIAN:** I—um—I thought, well, I couldn't be sure, but from the beach I thought I saw you talking to someone out there. *(Pause)* You were out so far I couldn't see who it was. *(Pause)* So?

**LIZ:** So what?

**JENNY:** You were so worried about losing her.

**BRIAN:** Who was it?

**JENNY:** In some ways you were perfectly matched.

**LIZ:** No-one.

**BRIAN:** You looked pretty close together.

**LIZ:** I thought you said I was so far out you couldn't see me?

**BRIAN:** It helps if I squint.

**LIZ:** It was a surfie. He asked me what the time was.

**BRIAN:** Oh right. Did you tell him it's 1985?

**LIZ:** Brian!

**BRIAN:** For a moment I thought it was George.

**LIZ:** Brian—

**BRIAN:** It was the thought of it. I got so—

**LIZ:** He can't swim, Brian. OK? He can't swim. Funny, isn't it? If George was out there with me this afternoon he was saying hello to Harold Holt.

- JENNY:** Hmm. Loves the beach but can't swim.
- BRIAN:** I'm sorry. I don't know why I get so—  
*Liz holds out her hand. Brian takes it.*
- BRIAN:** I remember coming around for dinner when you two were still married, the tension between you two. And he was so cocky, so sure of himself that—
- JENNY:** That's dad.
- LIZ:** You wanted to wipe that cocky grin right off his face.
- JENNY:** So he was confident. What's wrong with that?
- BRIAN:** Well, yes.
- LIZ:** Don't you think helping bring up his daughter is revenge enough?
- BRIAN:** Revenge? Who said anything about revenge? I hope I've brought some stability into Jennifer's life. Into your life. Is that so bad? Have you forgotten what it was like with George?
- LIZ:** No. I just don't like to be reminded of it, that's all.
- BRIAN:** Sorry.  
*Pause*
- LIZ:** Marriage. My God. What about yours? I bet you hated Jocelyn at times.
- BRIAN:** Hate? That implies you still give a damn. We just became—indifferent to each other. *(Pause)* Can you see yourself getting married again?
- LIZ:** One marriage per lifetime's enough for me. Besides, what you and I have doesn't need a marriage to cement it. Does it?  
*Brian nods.*
- BRIAN:** Nah.
- JENNY:** My god he was going to ask you! That day! He was going to do it!