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SF PERUSALS

Sitting Pretty

A play

Amy Rosenthal

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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SITTING PRETTY

Sitting Pretty was first presented at the Chelsea Centre Theatre on the 22nd November 1999 with the following cast:

Nancy	Yvonne D'Alpra
Nina	Judy Loe
Zelda	Amy Marston
Philip	Christopher Ravenscroft
Max	Christopher Strauli
Luka	Edward Hughes
Josie	Penny Bunton
Bridget	Tina Martin
Sylvia	Helen Blatch
Martin	Nigel Barden

Directed by Jacob Murray
Designed by Louise Ann Wilson
Lighting designed by Aideen Malone

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(See also page ii)

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CHARACTERS

Nancy, plump, faded, 55
Nina, slight, dynamic, 53
Max, jovial, round-faced, mid-fifties
Philip, artist, 48
Zelda, sassy, attractive, 20
Josie, brittle, elegant, 38
Sylvia, a stately lady, mid-sixties
Martin, thin, tetchy, mid-forties
Bridget, wife of Martin, mid-forties
Luka, tall, handsome,18

The action of the play takes place in a comfortable living-room of a small London surburban flat, an artist's studio and the National Gallery café.

Time: 1999

The author would like to thank Mel Kenyon, Francis Alexander and The Chelsea Centre, and David Edgar; with special thanks to Stephanie Dale and Karen Woodman

This play is dedicated to
my family
with love

Also by Amy Rosenthal
published by Samuel French Ltd

Lifelines

ACT 1

Scene 1

The neat, comfortable living-room of a small, London, suburban flat

Left and right-hand doors indicate two bedrooms, and a central open door suggests a kitchen. There is a front door. There is a painting of Florence hanging on the wall

As the play begins, Nancy is slumped on a sofa, wearing a coat and scarf. She is fifty-five, plump and faded, with a baffled, collapsed look

The Lights come up

Nina, fifty-three, enters. She is slight and dynamic, with a sharp face and an air of fierce energy. She wears a smart suit and carries two shopping bags and a briefcase. She puts down the briefcase and carries the shopping bags into the kitchen. During the following, as she talks, she moves between the kitchen and the living-room. When she is in the kitchen she raises her voice rather than pausing

Nina What a bloody day. What a bloody marathon. I haven't stopped talking since I got out of bed. You hungry? I'm starving. I've done six tours of the entire National Gallery on a handful of dry-roasted peanuts; I'm ravenous. I was stuck so long in bloody Camden tonight I seriously considered getting out the car, leaving it in the traffic jam, doing the shopping and coming back. Anyway I squeezed into that hideous car-park, against all the odds. Chicken escalopes all right for you, tonight? (*Beat*) So then this afternoon I had these tourists. A coachload, no less, the Winnipeg Circus Skills Society, fresh from a week in Stratford-on-Avon. And this man had never heard of Constable. He said "Gee, so you Brits had an artist too?" So I asked him, very nicely, if he'd ever come across Turner, And then this woman, nose job, must have been the wife, she says, "Sure honey, you know *The Haywain*. It's the one Marcie has on her nicotine patch." I mean, Christ! It's bad enough they're selling Monet bloody mousemats in the gift shop, but a nicotine patch, I could scream! (*Beat*) Salad with this? I got baking potatoes, but I thought I might do rice. Right. Preheat the oven. I'm starving, are you?

She exits into the kitchen

A beat

She returns. She looks at Nancy properly for the first time

Why are you wearing your coat?

Black-out

Scene 2

The flat, as before

The doorbell rings

Nina, dressed smartly, enters from her bedroom. She crosses to the front door

Nina Hallo, Max. Come in.

Max enters, a jovial, round-faced man in his late fifties. He carries a small tray of sunflower seedlings

Max Hey, look at you. Give us a twirl! Fantastic!
Nina Mm, well, my hair's terrible. Can't do a thing with it. Sorry, Max, I'm running really late. Will you make yourself a cup of tea?
Max You just get yourself ready, Nina, don't worry about me. (*Referring to the seedlings*) Oh, this is for you, from the greenhouse. Well, it's for Nancy, but it's for you too. It's for both of you.
Nina Sweet of you, Max. She'll like that.
Max Well, it's for you too.
Nina Yes, all right. Thank you.

A slight pause. Max looks around

Max So where is that sister of yours?
Nina (*indicating Nancy's room*) Where d'you think? She's been in there for most of April.
Max But what's she doing in there?
Nina She's just lying there. Inert. Staring at the ceiling. I came in from work tonight, and I took her a cup of tea, and I put it on her bedside table. Then when I went in just now it was still sitting there. Cold, of course. I said, "Didn't you want that?" And she said "Yes, but it was too far away." *Too far away*? She only had to stretch her arm out!

Max Blimey.

Nina I know. She said she was *watching* it. The steam coming off it. She lay there and she watched it go cold. What am I supposed to say to that?

Max It's not easy for you either, situation like this. It's stressful for everyone, it's a stressful situation. You've got to think of yourself as well, Nina, you can't expect yourself to ——

During the following speech, Nancy opens her door and creeps slowly into the room, unseen by Nina or Max. She moves cautiously, like an invalid. She stops and stands still, hugging herself. She wears a cardigan over a long nightdress

Nina I mean, I get home at the end of the day, completely shattered, hoping she might at least have peeled a few potatoes, and there she is sitting on the sofa, gazing into space, wearing fifty cardigans. Or she's standing in front of the fridge eating lumps of things. Chunks of things. Cheese, chocolate, hard-boiled eggs. And pickled onions, pickled bloody onions! I can't stop her. She gets up at two in the morning and eats a full jar of the bloody things, and then she says she can't sleep! Well who *could*?

Max Comfort eating, that's what that is. Eating, for comfort.

Nina Well, yes, I realize that, but she won't be very comforted when she can't get into any of her clothes. (*Beat*) And it has been nearly a month now, Max, and I've every sympathy but, you know — worse things happen. And if we all subsided like blancmanges every time we ... (*She sights Nancy*) Oh. Hallo, pet. All right? Say hallo to Max, he's brought you a plant, look.

Max Just a little something for you. Both.

Nina I should get going.

Nina exits to her room

A pause

Nancy sits, looking pitiful

Max (*gently*) I'm sorry about your job, love. Rotten thing to happen, losing your job. Makes you feel rotten. I should know. Worst time of my life, being made redundant.

Nina enters, clipping on an ear-ring

You feel useless. You feel ——

Nina Well, it's worse for Nance, in a way. Being fired.

Nancy Not fired, Nin. It wasn't firing. (*To Max*) They had to let me go.

Nina Well, let go, fired, whatever. Semantics. It's all the same. Fact is, it's

an unfair dismissal. I keep telling her, Max, we could sue if she wanted.

Nancy I don't want to——

Nina She doesn't want to. But it's ageist discrimination, plain and simple. And sexist. It's very topical.

Max Can you prove that, though?

Nina The chap who sacked her ——

Nancy No, Nin ——

Nina The chap who *let her go,* Barry Cropper, her boss, he's fifty-eight. And she's only fifty-five, aren't you?

Max Now that *is* out of order ...

Nancy (*sadly*) He's got a mug that says "Fifty-Eight Ain't Too Late." He has his Cup-A-Soups in it.

Nina Well, at least you're not making them any more. Right, I must dash, the traffic will be murder.

Nancy Where are you going?

Nina Oh Nance, I told you. It's an auction of fine art. I shouldn't be late, I suppose there'll be drinks and things afterwards. Will you be all right? Good. Bye, Max dear. Thanks for this.

Max escorts Nina to the door, helping her on with her coat

Max You have a lovely evening. You look a picture. (*He cautiously pecks Nina's cheek*)

Nina Well. See you later. Don't indulge her.

Nina exits

A pause

Max She looked a picture, didn't she? (*Beat*) Now. How about a nice cup of tea? I bet you could do with one, I know I could. What d'you say?

Nancy I can't seem to taste anything much, Max.

Max That's depression. You lose your senses. They do come back, believe me. I remember, I couldn't eat for weeks when Pam left.

Nancy Except pickled onions. I can taste pickled onions.

Max moves over to Nancy and sits beside her. He takes her hand

Max Nance. It's not that bad, you know, not working. (*Beat*) I mean, don't get me wrong, I know how you feel. It's rotten, being asked to leave and everything, 'specially when you've been there all that time. You feel rejected, used, useless. Like you just don't cut the mustard any more. Like you're over the hill, out of the race. Knacker's yard time.

Nancy is fighting back tears. Max doesn't notice

Thing is, though, once you get past that, it's not that bad. I mean, sure, at first it's pretty bleak. Waking up in the morning with no point to your day, no purpose. Thinking why should I even bother to get out of bed? Rest of the world rushing about, doing their business, getting on with it. Milkman delivering milk, postman delivering post. And you're standing there in the middle of the room, rooted to the spot while the hours go by. Not thinking, not moving. Turned to stone.

Nancy starts to cry quietly. Max remains oblivious

I've been there, Nance, where you are now. But I'm living proof: it gets better! Look at me! I can do all the things I ever wanted to do. Jump in the car and drive to the lakes, go fishing for a few days. Potter about in the greenhouse, come and visit Nina. And you. I can do whatever I like! And after a while, you'll get used to it, and I'll tell you something else and you'll think I'm barmy, but you'll *actually start to enjoy it.* I know you can't see it now, but I tell you, Nance, take it from me, these are going to be the best years of your life.

Nancy bursts into loud, hopeless sobs. Max, at a loss, pats her feebly. He looks desperately aroud for something to distract her. His gaze alights on the sunflower seedlings

Hey, Nancy. Nance? You see these little seedlings here?

Nancy looks up and nods through her tears

You see how they're leaning over to the left like that? Yes? Now, d'you know why that is?

Nancy shakes her head

Can't hear you, love. D'you know why?

Nancy (*snuffly*) No.

Max Well, we gardeners call that *phototropism.* Mean anything to you? No? Well, it means: growing towards the light. Now, those little fellers have been sitting in my greenhouse for the last couple of days, with the sun coming at them from the left-hand side. So they lean to the left, they gravitate to the source of light. Clever, isn't it? If you've got one lot of seedlings evenly lit, and you shine a directional light on the other lot, you'll see it happen. The ones with the directional light, they'll turn towards it. 'Cause they know they need that light to open up. They turn towards the light — and open up.

Nancy watches the seedlings, her sobs subsiding

(*Very gently*) You just have to sit out the worst bit, you know. The point where you think it's actually unbearable. It's like any pain, it's like a migraine. If you can get through the moment when you think your head's going to explode, or your heart's going to break, then I promise you, Nance, it does get better. It gets better from there on in. (*Pause; heartily*) So, I bet you're thinking, where's that cup of tea he promised me? (*Beat*) Coming right up!

Max exits

Nancy, all alone, stares bleakly ahead

Scene 3

A dark room, which we will later recognize as an artist's studio

A raised plinth in the centre draped in material could easily be mistaken for a bed. Zelda, aged twenty, reclines there, smoking a cigarette. She wears a thin Chinese silk robe

Philip enters, forty-eight, buttoning up his shirt. He watches Zelda for a moment

Philip I have to go. (*Beat*) Zeld? I've got to go.

Zelda stares ahead of her, expressionless

Zelda Do you have any idea what you do to me, Philip? Do you have any *idea* what you do? (*Beat*) You make me feel like a hotel.

Philip A hotel?

Zelda You move in. Take up residence. Occupy my head. You move in like some ageing rocker and you storm through my corridors, trash my rooms, empty my mini-bar and check out without paying in the middle of the night.

Philip Zelda ——

Zelda Every night. What pisses me off more than anything, though, what really makes me want to *scream,* is that when you leave, when you go, when you've gone — you're still there. (*She taps her head*) In here. You're still there.

Beat

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