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Father's Day

A play

Eric Chappell

Samuel French — London
www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk



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ISBN 978 0 573 11557 8

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CHARACTERS

Henry Willows, serious-looking; 50s

Matthew Willows, Henry's son, jaunty, casually dressed;
20s

Christine, punk/Goth in appearance; 16

Sue, Henry's ex-wife, attractive, well-rounded, fair-skinned; late 40s

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in the living-room of the house of Henry Willows

ACT I

SCENE 1 A winter's evening

SCENE 2 Half an hour later

ACT II

SCENE 1 Midnight the same day

SCENE 2 Late the following morning

Time — the present

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ACT I

SCENE 1

Henry Willows' living-room. A winter's evening

A bay window, R, overlooks the front garden. A door, UR, leads off to the hall, kitchen and dining-room. Sliding doors, L, lead to the conservatory, and then to the back garden. On the back wall hangs a large, antique barometer. There is a fireplace in the R wall with an electric fire in the grate. A radiogram stands by the fireplace. Against the US wall stand a sideboard, a bookcase and a small table. On the sideboard are: a carriage clock, a drinks tray, various photographs, a fruit bowl containing four bananas, a Dresden figurine of a shepherdess and a Victorian miniature of a sheep dip. The bookcase is full of books and has a jar of loose change on it. There is a fishtank containing a single fish on the small table, with a container of fish food nearby. C, a three-piece suite faces DS with a coffee table before it. There is a lamp on the table

When the CURTAIN rises, classical music is playing on the radiogram. Henry Willows, a serious-looking man in his fifties, is seated listening to it. He is glancing at a paper and sipping a Scotch

The doorbell rings. Henry frowns and ignores it. It rings again. He crosses to the radiogram and turns off the music

Henry *(glancing at the clock; muttering)* At this time of night? *(He moves to the fishtank and sprinkles fish food into it)*

The doorbell rings again

(Addressing the solitary goldfish) Don't they ever rest? I've been doubleglazed, I've been tarmacked, I've been photographed from the air. What more do they want? *(He shakes his head)* They know when you've got money. They can smell it. No matter how discreet you are, how modestly you live — they're there on the doorstep. *(He taps the barometer with a grim smile)* Well, if it's cold calling — they've picked the right night. It's down to freezing.

The doorbell rings again

(Sighing) You can't discourage some people.

He finishes his drink and exits into the hall

A moment later a light comes on in the conservatory and shines through the glass panels of the sliding doors

The shadowy figures of Matthew and Christine appear against the glass. Matthew is Henry's son, a young man in his early twenties. He is carrying a large haversack and is wearing a baseball cap at a jaunty angle. Christine is very young, a punk rocker with white make-up, dark hair, black clothes, black mittens, black fingernails, bondage jewellery, body piercings and tattoos; a very gothic look. She also has a haversack

Matthew opens the doors and comes into the room. He turns back to his companion

Matthew (*whispering*) Stay in there. I'll have to get him used to the idea ...

Christine moves back out of sight

Henry enters. He regards Matthew coldly, noting the large haversack. He moves towards Matthew

Matthew takes an uneasy step back into the conservatory

Matthew (*brightly*) Remember me?

Henry (*bleakly*) Yes.

Matthew I'm your son.

Henry I know.

Matthew (*after a pause*) Aren't you going to ask me in?

Henry No.

Matthew I'm Matthew.

Henry I know. I was at the christening.

Matthew Aren't you surprised to see me?

Henry No. I've been expecting it.

Matthew How could you? It's been years.

Henry I know how long it's been. You're not going to make a habit of this, are you?

Matthew I thought you'd be pleased to see me.

Henry Life's full of disappointments. You'll find that out. I did.

Henry tries to close the sliding doors, trapping Matthew's head and shoulders. Matthew moves back, leaving his foot in the doorway

Would you mind moving your foot? I've got a busy evening planned. Drop the catch on the way out. I don't want any more intruders.

Matthew But, Dad —

Henry Don't call me that. You made your choice.

Matthew That was years ago ... (*He stops*) What am I supposed to call you?

Henry Mr Willows will do very nicely.

Matthew That was years ago, Mr Willows. Can't I come in? It's freezing out there.

Henry I'm not responsible for the weather.

Matthew I've got something to tell you.

Henry Well, tell me.

Matthew I'm frozen.

Henry Is that it?

Matthew No.

Henry sighs and reluctantly opens the door wider

Henry Well, since you've forced your way in, I'll give you five minutes.

Matthew comes in and puts the haversack down

But don't settle anywhere. And take that cap off.

Matthew Why?

Henry Because it's bad manners, that's why. Apart from that, I don't like them. They usually hide a pea-sized brain — close-set eyes, and a slack jaw.

Matthew (*removing the cap*) It's only a cap.

Henry It's the badge of the assassin, the thief and the intruder ...

Matthew I wasn't intruding. You didn't answer the door.

Henry At this time of night, to some shifty individual with dodgy credentials? (*Broodingly*) You never get a close look at the card. They just waft it about and then sell you a dozen dishcloths while they case the joint.

Matthew You can always say no.

Henry I do — but they don't leave it at that. The last one tried to sell me a time-share. Took me an hour to get rid of him. Left in a fury. Spat in the flower bed. Did a wheel-spin on the drive and for the next three nights I get a pizza delivery I hadn't ordered. (*He returns to feeding the fish*)

Matthew Nice fish.

Henry stares at Matthew coldly

What do you call him?

Henry I don't call him anything. He's a fish.

Matthew I suppose he'd be happier in a pond.

Henry How do you know?

Matthew He looks sad.

Henry (*studying the fish*) They all look like that. Ever seen one grinning?

Matthew I hate to see anything caged.

Henry (*sharply*) It's not a cage — it's a tank. He arrived here in a plastic bag. After that, this is luxury. Caged!

Matthew I think I've said the wrong thing.

Henry You always did. (*He moves to the sideboard and pours himself another Scotch*)

Matthew watches enviously

I remember the last Christmas we were together. We couldn't afford much. I'd bought your mother a very nice roll-neck sweater. I was really proud of that sweater. We were driving back from the shops and I said: "I've got a lovely surprise for you, dear." And a small voice piped up from the back of the car. "It's a roll-neck sweater." Completely spoilt the surprise.

Matthew Was that me?

Henry Who else?

Matthew Sure it wasn't Julie?

Henry No. That was the same year you kicked my hubcaps in — the ones on the new Cortina.

Matthew I never kicked your hubcaps in.

Henry You mean it was never proved.

Matthew It was cousin Nigel.

Henry As far as I'm concerned the jury's still out.

Matthew You certainly know how to hold a grudge.

Henry I've had plenty of time to think about it.

Matthew (*after a pause*) I don't remember you calling her dear.

Henry Who?

Matthew Mum.

Henry Well, I did. I was very affectionate.

Matthew I don't remember that either. (*Pause*) Why were you expecting me?

Henry I thought my early retirement on a handsome pension and lump sum — together with the sale of Grandad Willows' house in Peckham and his generous legacy — may have shown up on the radar ...

Matthew I didn't come here for money.

Henry There's a novelty.

Matthew It's not a question of money. Have you ever asked yourself if I was happy?

Henry No, I've never asked myself that question. Why should I? Did you ask yourself if I was happy? You couldn't get out this house fast enough.

They left the *Titanic* with more dignity than you left this place. I was almost killed in the rush.

Matthew looks around for somewhere to sit

No, don't sit down. You'll only stiffen up.

Matthew We were very young! — and Terry was nice to us. He kept giving us sweets.

Henry (*scathingly*) Sweets! You were easily bought, weren't you?

Matthew You never gave us sweets.

Henry You left here without a backward glance. Even Julie.

Matthew That must have hurt.

Henry What?

Matthew Julie. She regrets it now.

Henry Does she?

Matthew I know she was special to you. Daughters are. She called you Dumpling — you called her Pumpkin.

Henry That was then — this is now.

Matthew You had plans for her. You wanted her to be a brain surgeon. You never had plans for me, did you?

Henry She was brighter than you were.

Matthew And she's got the looks.

Henry Has she?

Matthew Grown into a beautiful young woman. You'd be proud to be seen with her.

Henry Well, I don't have that privilege, do I?

Matthew Terry likes to be seen with her.

Henry Does he?

Matthew Now she's attractive to men ...

Henry What?

Matthew In fact I don't like the way he looks at her ...

Henry (*looking at Matthew suspiciously*) That's none of my concern, Matthew. And if you think this is having an effect on me, you're mistaken. Why have you come here?

Matthew I had a big row with Terry.

Henry What happened? Has he run out of sweets?

Matthew No. He's moan, moan, moan, all the time.

Henry I could have told you. He hasn't got my easy-going nature.

Matthew And he's sadistic. Always picking on Frank. Little things — like getting him to look down the garden hose, then turning the water on — or bursting his balloon with the end of his cigarette ...

Henry (*staring*) He does that?

Matthew No wonder Frank wets the bed.

Henry He wets the bed? He never wet the bed.

Matthew He does now. It's always the children who suffer.

Henry Right. (*Pause*) So he's moan, moan, moan, is he?

Matthew He's no give and take.

Henry I don't know about give. He's got plenty of take — he took your mother.

Matthew She regrets it now.

Henry Another one! It must be a house full of regret.

Matthew He's always finding fault. Never leaves me alone. I got pissed off.

So I packed a bag and left.

Henry Just a minute. What did you say?

Matthew I packed a bag and left.

Henry No, before that.

Matthew He's always finding fault.

Henry After that.

Matthew He wouldn't leave me alone.

Henry No. After he wouldn't leave you alone and before you packed your bag.

Matthew I don't remember.

Henry Oh, yes you do. That language may be acceptable where you came from, but not here.

Matthew They say it on television.

Henry You'll observe there's no television here.

Matthew Why not?

Henry Because television is now being run by delinquents.

Matthew What?

Henry It started in the seventies. That first generation of delinquents has now matured and is running television for the benefit of a second generation of delinquents, who are raising further delinquents.

Matthew So things can only get worse.

Henry Not necessarily. The next generation will probably die out through sexually transmitted diseases.

Matthew (*after a pause*) I think you've been on your own too long.

Henry Have I? There are thirteen-year-olds receiving treatment at the hospital. They're going into the clinic on skateboards.

Matthew We're not all like that, Dad.

Henry I said don't call me that.

Matthew You're right. It's a label. It gets in the way of a relationship.

Henry What relationship? We haven't got a relationship.

Matthew My friends call their fathers by their first names. It gets over the age gap. Helps them to become friends.

Henry I thought I'd made it clear that I don't want to become friends. Do you know what I'm going to do? Something I haven't done in years. I'm going to speak to your mother.

Matthew (*uneasily*) I wouldn't do that.

Henry Why not? (*Studying Matthew*) You're hiding something. You've got that sly look. Comes from your mother's side of the family. (*Pause*) Do you still go there for Christmas?

Matthew Yes.

Henry And do they still leave an empty chair for me?

Matthew No.

Henry No — your grandfather never liked me because I knew his secret.

Matthew What was that?

Henry That he's clinically insane. He tries to hide it but you can see it in his eyes. He knows I know — it makes him uneasy.

Matthew I'm not surprised.

Henry Does he still make all that fuss over the turkey?

Matthew Yes. We had a twenty pound one this year.

Henry You were lucky.

Matthew What did you have?

Henry Flu. I was in bed all over Christmas.

Matthew Oh. (*Pause*) Were you on your own?

Henry Yes.

Matthew I wish I'd known.

Henry Do you?

Matthew Did you get my card?

Henry No. Did you send one?

Matthew Yes.

Henry You've never sent one before.

Matthew I was never sure of the address. And I can never remember the name of the house.

Henry *Sunnybrook.*

Matthew (*frowning*) I don't remember a brook.

Henry There wasn't one. (*Pause*) It wasn't that sunny either.

Matthew I remember that.

Henry opens the door to the hall

What are you going to say?

Henry I'm going to beg them to take you back.

Matthew Suppose they won't.

Henry Then you can go to your granny and grandad — they may still have some of that turkey left ...

Henry exits

Matthew opens the sliding door

Matthew (*whispering*) Come in and get warm. He has all the radiators turned down, except in this room. That's why his tomatoes never ripen.

Christine enters. She whispers in Matthew's ear

No — it's going to be fine. I just have to win him over, that's all. (*He feels her hand*) You're frozen. (*He picks up Henry's glass*) Drink this. It'll warm you.

Christine hesitates

He won't mind. But don't smoke. He'll tell you all his friends who smoked are dead; the drinkers are too, but they didn't die as quickly. You look hungry. Have a banana. Build your strength up. (*He hands her a banana from the fruit bowl*)

Christine peels the banana and takes a bite during the following

Put the skin in your pocket. He'll like you — I know he will. Once he's got used to you. It's just that he's never accepted body piercing. When you first meet him — you'll find he can be dry, very dry, almost rude. He doesn't mean it — it's just his very dry sense of humour ... (*He listens*) He's coming back! Finish it in there.

Matthew pushes Christine back into the conservatory

Matthew drains Henry's glass, refills it from the decanter, and puts it back in place

Henry enters. He regards Matthew balefully

Matthew Did you make the call?

Henry Yes.

Matthew Surprised you haven't got a mobile.

Henry I don't have a mobile because I don't want my brains scrambled by radioactive forces.

Matthew Do you think that's going to happen?

Henry It already has. Do you know there are people getting phone calls in areas where it's been proved they can't receive signals? They are hearing voices, Matthew. Did you know that?

Matthew No.

Henry picks up the glass and studies it

(Hastily) Well, what happened?

Henry It was brief and to the point.

Matthew I'm not going back.

Henry That's fine. Your stepfather doesn't want you. He's changing the locks.

Matthew You spoke to him?

Henry Apparently your mother's out looking for you. *(Pause)* He said you threatened him with a knife.

Matthew I didn't.

Henry That's Grandfather coming out — we shouldn't be surprised.

Matthew I didn't threaten him. I was cutting some sandwiches and I made an angry gesture. I just happened to have the knife in my hand.

Henry He said you'd previously threatened him with a sweeping brush and a pair of garden shears. Did they just happen to be in your hand?

Matthew Yes.

Henry You seem to be making yourself very useful around there. I always remember you as bone idle.

Matthew He's bigger than I am.

Henry Do you think that's any excuse, you hooligan? That man took everything from me: my wife, my family, my happiness. Did I threaten him with a knife?

Matthew No — you pushed him through a plate glass window.

Henry *(frowning)* There was a scuffle in Woolworths, resulting in the incident you describe, it wasn't intentional. I am not a violent man. I am not confrontational. My trouble is I let people walk all over me.

Matthew I can't say I've noticed. I think I made a mistake coming here.

Henry No, your mistake was leaving there.

Matthew I won't be the only one ...

Henry *(anxiously)* What do you mean?

Matthew There's Julie and Frank.

Henry There not coming as well, are they?

Matthew No.

Henry That's a relief.

Matthew Not yet ...

Henry What?

Matthew Then there's poor Mum.

Henry *(cynically)* What about poor Mum?

Matthew I came home a few weeks ago — found her sitting in the dark — in tears.

Henry Really?

Matthew It was your wedding anniversary ...

Henry Oh, yes ...

Matthew She had your photograph.

Henry Did she?

Matthew She had been trying on her old wedding dress.

Henry If she had been trying to squeeze into that, no wonder she was in tears.

Matthew She said: "What happened, Matthew? What went wrong? Where did it all go?"

Henry She said that?

Matthew I told her it was too late for regrets — that you were divorced. Do you know what she said? "We're still married in the eyes of God, Matthew."

Henry She brought God into it? That's a surprise. She hasn't been to church since the christenings.

Matthew Don't you remember your anniversary?

Henry No. If I was going to celebrate anything, it would be the divorce.

Matthew You can't celebrate a divorce.

Henry Why not? You don't celebrate the outbreak of war — you celebrate the peace. And it's been very peaceful around here — until you came.

Matthew If you feel like that, why are you drinking a little too much?

Henry I'm not!

Matthew Is it to deaden the pain?

Henry There isn't any pain!

Matthew (*motioning to the sideboard*) And why have you replaced her photo with a bowls team?

Henry For the simple reason that the bowls team hasn't been unfaithful to me. And she wasn't trying on her wedding dress, Matthew, because it was hired. Do you think I was mad enough to buy a dress you can only wear once — or in your mother's case, twice? (*He reaches for the decanter and frowns*) You've been at this Scotch.

Matthew No.

Henry Listen, I live alone. I have regular habits. I drink moderately. I know how much should be in this decanter on any day of the week. And the level has fallen ...

They study the decanter

Matthew Perhaps it's evaporated.

Henry Let me smell your breath. Not too close. (*He sniffs near Matthew*) Just as I thought. You've been drinking. It's amazing. I haven't seen you in years and one night, without warning, you burst into my home. And if that's not bad enough, I find you swear, you drink, you take things that don't belong to you, you're a stranger to the truth — and you're handy with a bread knife. And all that in the first half an hour. Have you any idea what a weekend would be like?

Matthew Were you thinking of just the weekend?

Henry No! (*The fruit bowl catches his eye*) And you've had a banana.

Matthew I haven't.

Henry There were four bananas in that bowl when I left this room. Now there are three. You've taken a banana and what's worse you've lied about it.

Matthew I'm not lying. (*After a hesitation*) Chris had the banana.

Henry Oh. So you have a companion?

Matthew Yes.

Henry And where is Chris?

Matthew In the conservatory.

Henry Finishing off the tomatoes, I suppose.

Matthew We haven't eaten all day.

Henry So he promptly lifts a banana. He could have asked — I'd have given him one.

Matthew Chris isn't a he. It's Christine.

Henry (*sharply*) You've brought a girl here?

Matthew Yes. That's the reason I came.

Henry Is it?

Matthew They don't approve of her.

Henry And you think I will?

Matthew You're not like them.

Henry I'm not?

Matthew You're strict, but, my God — you're fair.

Henry And do you think I need to be fair where Christine's concerned?

Matthew No, but she's encountered a lot of prejudice.

Henry Why the prejudice?

Matthew I don't know.

Henry Well, is she coming out from there — or is she happier amongst plants?

Matthew I thought I'd prepare you.

Henry I'm prepared.

Matthew opens the sliding door

Matthew Christine ...

Christine enters

This is Christine ...

Christine nods in Henry's general direction. She remains silent, head lowered. Henry stares incredulously as he takes in the sight. Christine whispers in Matthew's ear

(*To Henry*) Do you think Christine could use the bathroom?

Henry First door at the top of the stairs.

Matthew First door at the top of the stairs, Christine.

Christine exits

Henry What was that?

Matthew (*coldly*) Do you mean Christine?

Henry Christine? Thank God. I thought it was the third witch out of *Macbeth*.

Matthew You're as bad as Mum.

Henry Because she doesn't approve? Have you thought your mother may have a point? She's got more tattoos than a navy stoker and she appears to be held together with safety pins.

Matthew That's body piercing.

Henry Is it?

Matthew You shouldn't go by appearances.

Henry Oh? Then why doesn't your mother approve?

Matthew She says she's too young.

Henry How does she know? How old is she — beneath that layer of silt?

Matthew Sixteen.

Henry Sixteen! She's only sixteen! No wonder your mother doesn't approve.

Matthew That's not the reason. No-one's ever been good enough for her son. You know that. She's frightened of losing me.

Henry Are you sure? I don't think she's frightened of losing you — I think she's frightened of gaining her.

Matthew She may be only sixteen but she's old for her years — and intelligent. She's at college. She's doing catering.

Henry You mean they let her near food?

Matthew She's very good with food. She could do us supper.

Henry What does she use — a cauldron?

Matthew You can sneer but she'll make a wonderful wife.

Henry Wife?

Matthew We're getting married.

Henry What!

Matthew We want your approval.

Henry You've never wanted my approval before — why now? Why not your mother's approval?

Matthew I've told you — she doesn't approve.

Henry (*after a pause*) Can she talk?

Matthew Of course she can talk.

Henry I didn't hear her.

Matthew She's shy.

Henry Dressed like that! And she's shy! How are you going to get through the wedding service? They'll never hear her. You can't say, "She does." It's not legal.

Matthew She lacks confidence. I'm giving her that.

Henry You can't change people, Matthew. What she is now is what she will be — only worse. I know. I tried to change your mother.

Matthew Mum can talk.

Henry Yes — the problem there was stopping her. What does her father do?

Matthew Does it matter?

Henry Of course it matters. I'm not paying for the reception. Does he have any money?

Matthew It's always money, isn't it? Well, it doesn't matter because he doesn't approve of me.

Henry (*in mock surprise*) Really?

Matthew He preferred Simon. Boy next door. Got a good job at Nationwide. Drives his own Mondeo. So there won't be any money. Does it matter?

Henry Of course it matters.

Matthew Did Mum's dad have any money?

Henry If he did, he kept it a secret. I had to ask his permission. You did in those days. He had the air of a man passing me a counterfeit ten pound note. Pretending to be reluctant but at the same time knowing he was getting the best of the bargain. He was on an economy drive at the time. He'd had the phone taken out, the dog had been put down — your mother was next on the list. His only disappointment was that we didn't elope and save on the reception. His final words were, "Don't expect anything from me — she comes as she is." And that man's word was his bond.

Matthew He never gave you anything?

Henry I tell a lie. Years later he relented, and gave me a burnt-out power drill.

Matthew Then you can appreciate my position. I won't get any help from Christine's father. Simon was a better prospect. But they quarrelled. She came to me on the rebound.

Henry You should have ducked.

Matthew Look. Just get to know her. That's all I ask.

Henry How am I going to get to know her? You can't stay here.

Matthew Why not?

Henry There's not room for two of you — and if you think you're sharing ...

Matthew I wasn't suggesting anything of the sort. There are two other bedrooms.

Henry The little bedroom's full of apples.

Matthew We could move them.

Henry They bruise easily. (*He moves to the hall door*) How long is she going to be up there?

Matthew She's probably putting on her make-up.

Henry Isn't she wearing enough? (*Pause*) Ever seen her without it?

Matthew Why?

Henry You could be in for a shock.

Matthew If you insist on taking this attitude, I think we'd better go.

Henry Let me tell you something, Matthew. It's not the spider that catches the fly — it's the web. Now you can't blame the fly, he doesn't see the web — but we do. In fact, that's what we fall for.

Matthew (*staring*) What web?

Henry The web of deceit, of perfume and flattery, of make-up and come-hither looks. That's what we fall in love with, the web not the spider.

Silence

Matthew I think you've become disillusioned,

Henry (*drily*) You've spotted that, have you?

Matthew picks up his haversack

Where will you go?

Matthew I don't know. We'll sleep rough. A waiting-room — or someone's car.

Henry What!

Matthew I know how to get into them — and start them.

Henry Well, I'm glad your education hasn't been entirely wasted. Who taught you that? Those friends who call their fathers by their first names?
(*He opens the hall door*)

Matthew Where are you going?

Henry To get in touch with your mother.

Henry exits

Matthew listens at the door and then moves to the sideboard. He searches the drawers and finds a picture of his mother in the bottom one. He smiles and puts the picture out in place of the bowls team. He searches further in the drawers and finds a bundle of letters which he studies with some amusement and then pockets. He empties the jar on the bookcase and pockets the loose change. He finishes Henry's Scotch then studies the decanter. He fills it up from the water jug, giving it a generous level

There is the sound of a car arriving outside. Hearing this, Matthew moves to the window and peers out into the road. There is a moment's pause

Sue, Matthew's mother, enters from the conservatory. She is an attractive, rounded, fair-skinned woman in her late forties. She is wearing a topcoat and carrying a large shoulder bag

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