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SF PERUSALS

Neighbourhood Watch

Alan Ayckbourn

A Samuel French Acting Edition

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NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH was first produced at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough on 8th September 2011. The performance was directed by Alan Ayckbourn, designed by Pip Leckenby, with lighting designed by Mick Hughes. The cast was as follows:

DOROTHY . . . . . Eileen Battye
ROD . . . . . Terence Booth
LUTHER . . . . . Phil Cheadle
MARTIN. . . . . Matthew Cottle
GARETH . . . . . Richard Derrington
AMY . . . . . Frances Grey
MAGDA . . . . . Amy Loughton
HILDA . . . . . Alexandra Mathie

CHARACTERS

MARTIN MASSIE, 40s

HILDA MASSIE, his sister, a little older

LUTHER BRADLEY, 30s

MAGDA BRADLEY, his wife, 20s

GARETH JANNER, 40s

AMY JANNER, his wife, 30s

ROD TRUSSER, 60s

DOROTHY DOGGETT, 60s

SETTING

Martin and Hilda's sitting room at number three,
the Bluebell Hill Development

TIME

Now and four months ago.

PROLOGUE

(Today.)

*(***HILDA** *appears in a single spot. She is addressing us all plus a few more who are unseen, including several dozen of the world's press. Being an unassuming, fairly ordinary 50-year-old woman quite unused to this sort of thing, she is understandably nervous initially but as she speaks she gains in confidence. There is the occasional flicker of a flash bulb. To start with she consults her notes.)*

HILDA. Dear friends. It is my pleasure to officially open the Martin Massie Memorial Park.

Three months ago, I said farewell, in this world at least, to my dear brother, Martin. We'd been extremely close all our lives. Indeed my first memory, as his older sister, was looking after Martin. Our dear mother, after giving birth to him, was in frail health for her all too brief remaining days.

As a sister only a handful of years older than he, I soon grew used to the routine day to day caring of my little brother, the nurturing, the caring, the cleaning – all the tasks usually coped with by a mother.

But as the years went by, as we both grew older, as my responsibilities grew less onerous and as my brother became increasingly self-sufficient, very soon our roles became in many ways reversed. Martin developed into a strong-minded, independent, able-bodied young man and began gradually to take care of me, his sister – *(smiling)* – who was no less able-bodied I hasten to add, but nonetheless a young woman with the natural

limitations of physical strength and the vulnerabilities of her gender.

And so, as time passed, his older sister began to rely on him. Initially, as I say, on his role as physical protector but then, gradually, on his wisdom and judgement as well. I soon grew to realise that my brother was, from an early age, already someone quite remarkable.

From our formative years at the insistence of our firm and at times strict father (these days indeed he would be regarded as over-strict), Martin and I had both become devout Christians.

But, as many of us who attempt to adhere to that creed are only too aware, adherence to the Christian faith requires very much more than lip service. It is above all a faith that demands that, when asked of you, those spiritual beliefs are translated into active deeds. How many of us fail that test?

But my brother never waivered. Whenever the call came for action, no matter how daunting or dangerous the odds, Martin was there to respond. To respond as my brother, to respond as a man and above all to respond as a Christian.

Is it not typical of him that he died protecting his loved ones, protecting his home, unarmed and unafraid, clasping in his hand the symbol of his belief, the final words on his lips the name of our Blessed Saviour?

Martin was a man driven by faith and powered by love. Love for his fellow men and women. *(Faltering)* I am privileged and humbly grateful to have been a recipient of a small part of that greater love.

(Recovering) Why did Martin need to die so tragically and prematurely? What was in God's purpose? Over the weeks I have prayed for the answer.

I believe it to be this. With the founding of The Bluebell Hill Development Neighbourhood Watch

Scheme, Martin laid down his blueprint, his dream, his plan for a better world.

True that dream has faltered; beset by human, temporary frailties, it has suffered set-backs. But, dear friends, it must never be allowed to die. We, the currently insignificant few, must go forth and multiply. Increase our number until the insignificant few grow into the significant multitude. It must be allowed to grow until every parent loves the child; every child respects the parent. Every husband honours the wife; every wife respects the husband. Till every neighbour reaches in friendship to neighbour. Till no stranger is turned away from our door. Till love becomes the only arbiter, and God the final authority. Let us then carry the fight forward as Martin would have wanted. As long as I have breath in my body I am ready to help reignite his glorious flame that has been left to flicker and grow dim.

It is my joy today not only to open the Martin Massie Memorial Park – many a time he delighted in looking out over this field – but also to unveil his memorial. Why this particular image, I hear you asking? Well, I have chosen a symbol which, though reflecting England and all things English, also reaches out in non-denominational greeting to every corner of the world, to all mankind. It's an image that was also personally dear to Martin. He believed it stood for the important things – all sadly unfashionable these days. Important things like Respectability and Decency, Honour and Moral Strength, Courage and Spiritual Conviction. It is with pride and pleasure that I declare this park open. Thank you.

(The band strikes up. The light fades on **HILDA**. *As the music continues, the lights come on:)*

Act I

Scene One

(Four months earlier.)

*(***MARTIN** *and* **HILDA***'s sitting room in their house at number three The Bluebell Hill Development.)*

(The setting is representational and by no means realistic. References to objects, patio and internal doors, walls, etc. are invisible.)

(We are largely asked to imagine, therefore, the large living room of a detached modern home, with a picture window along one wall with sliding patio doors opening on to an (also unseen) large-ish back garden. Two other doors, on the other side of the space, lead off, one to the hall, the front door and the rest of the house; the other door via a passage to the kitchen. These two entrances are linked via an offstage dining room.)

(The only visible furnishings are a trio of low, modern, dark, neutral-coloured, slightly curved three-seater sofas arranged in the form of an interrupted horseshoe, the open end of which looks out on to the garden. The sofas are adorned by several brightly-coloured pairs of scatter cushions. Low tables service this seating area. An additional upright chair and possibly a side table furnish the room's perimeter. Plain and uncluttered best describes it.)

(It is afternoon in early summer around tea-time and at present **MARTIN***, in his forties, is standing at the window admiring the garden with satisfaction.)*

MARTIN. *(looking out to the garden, calling)* You've certainly made a start out there. Well done.

HILDA. *(off)* It's a start, anyway.

MARTIN. *(calling)* I see Monty's already in pride of place. He likes it here.

HILDA. *(off)* He would.

MARTIN. *(calling)* He prefers it to number thirty-one. He would. He only had the yard before. Now he's got a whole lawn. Look at him. Mr Montmorency, master of all he surveys. All he needs now is a pond. Next thing is to dig him a pond.

HILDA. *(off)* There's enough to do on the house before we start digging ponds.

MARTIN. *(calling)* I'll dig him one, don't worry. Soon as we're straight, I'll get digging. *(Scanning the garden)* What have you done with Jesus? I can't see him anywhere.

*(***HILDA** *enters with a couple of plates of nibbles. They are expecting company.)*

HILDA. *(as she enters)* Oh, he's out there.

MARTIN. Ah, yes, there he is, I see him. In the shrubbery, there, peeping out of the shrubbery. What's he doing in the bushes?

HILDA. Keeping an eye on things.

MARTIN. He's Jesus. He shouldn't be lurking in the bushes, should he?

HILDA. He's a bit – cautious, at the moment.

MARTIN. Cautious?

HILDA. He's missing his alcove. He'll be out in a day or two, you'll see. Don't rush him. He can bless things just as easily from the bushes.

*(***MARTIN** *smiles and shakes his head at the turn the conversation is taking.)*

MARTIN. *(laughing)* If people could see us now they'd think we were mad, wouldn't they?

HILDA. What do you mean? We are mad. *(She laughs)* We're both completely mad, didn't you know that?

MARTIN. *(laughing)* No need to advertise it, though, is there?

HILDA. People next door'll think there's a couple of lunatics moved in.

(Standing beside him and looking out.)

Oh, look at that view. I'll never tire of that view, you know, Martin. Looking out over the field. Could be in the country, couldn't we?

MARTIN. We could be. Easily. Except for the estate. That housing estate at the bottom there.

HILDA. That's miles away.

MARTIN. Quarter of a mile, I reckon.

HILDA. Doesn't bother me.

MARTIN. All that red brick, though. Spoils the vista.

HILDA. I don't mind it. I'm glad we don't have a great high fence, not like they've got on either side. They can't have any view at all, not with those fences, surely? Can't think why they put them up, can you?

MARTIN. Security, probably. With that sort of estate down there at the bottom, you never know. People get nervous. Feel vulnerable. You can't blame them, these days.

HILDA. The woman who sold us this, old Mrs Beadie, she didn't seem to need a fence. And she was on her own in her eighties. She had more reason than most to be fearful. It didn't bother her, did it?

MARTIN. Probably couldn't afford a fence, poor soul. Single pensioners like her on fixed incomes can't splash out on fences.

HILDA. You're not planning on putting one up, are you?

MARTIN. No … I can cope. Any trouble ...

HILDA. *(laughing, teasing)* Oh, yes? You and who else?

MARTIN. Me and Jesus. We'll sort them out between us, don't worry. You know, I bet all that, as far as we can see, all of it was designated green belt at one time, wasn't it? Originally? But governments, despite all their promises, they keep eating away at it. Same everywhere. Tragic. Not a blade of grass left eventually. England's green and pleasant land, all sold off. Concreted over. All in the name of progress. Personal profit.

HILDA. So long as we don't get a fence, that's all. I must get on, they'll be arriving soon.

MARTIN. How many are we expecting?

HILDA. Oh, everyone. Everybody in Bluebell Hill. The ones I didn't get to speak to, I popped cards through their door.

MARTIN. There'll be at least a hundred then, if they all come.

HILDA. They won't all come

MARTIN. You never know. Free cup of tea. They'll be beating a path.

HILDA. They won't all come …

MARTIN. Be interested to see what we've done with the place, too. I would.

HILDA. It was quite short notice. I said tea from five onwards. Some of them will probably be busy. Might be working late, you never know. Still, it's a gesture. House warming. It's a gesture, isn't it? Breaking the ice, that's all it is. I've been so busy I've hardly spoken to anyone, have you? Apart from the young woman next door. She seemed friendly. Little bit shy … I think she might be artistic. I got that impression, anyway.

MARTIN. Oh dear, oh dear, not an artist! There goes the neighbourhood. *(He laughs)* I did pass the time of day with the bloke three doors down, yesterday. Retired security bloke. Pleasant enough. Seemed a bit lonely.

HILDA. That can be your job then, cheer him up.

MARTIN. I think that might be beyond even me, from the look of him.

HILDA. I'll pop the kettle on. I've laid it all out in the dining room. Then we can invite them to wander at will. Rather than doing official conducted tours.

MARTIN. Hope they don't drop crumbs everywhere.

HILDA. They won't.

MARTIN. Spill tea all over the new carpets.

HILDA. They're not those sort of people.

MARTIN. You never know with artists. Throw tea everywhere, given half a chance.

HILDA. *(giggles)* Oh, you … If the bell goes can you let them in, I'll be in the kitchen …

MARTIN. Right. Will do.

HILDA. *(straightening a plate as she goes)* I'll leave these here, then they can top up as they pass … We can leave those garden doors open, can't we? Still quite mild.

MARTIN. Oh, yes. You never know, some of them may want to wander outside if it gets overcrowded in here.

*(***HILDA** *goes out.* **MARTIN** *surveys the room.)*

(Half to himself, contentedly) Yes … yes … *(Calling)* I think you chose rightly with this wallpaper, you know, Hilda.

HILDA. *(off)* Oh. Coming round to it at last, are you? About time, too!

MARTIN. *(calling)* Yes, I should have trusted you in the first place. I ought to know better by now in matters of interior decoration, always be ruled by you. You're the artistic one. *(Turning back to the window, as he speaks)* You were right. This green, specially the paintwork, reflects the garden there, like you said … *(He breaks off as he sees something happening outside)* What the – ? What's that kid doing? What's he doing? *(Yelling out of the window)* Oy! You!

HILDA. *(off)* What's that?

MARTIN. *(calling out of the window)* What do you think you're doing? Get down off there at once! This is private property! Do you hear me?

*(***HILDA***, alarmed by the disturbance, hurries in from the kitchen.)*

HILDA. *(as she enters)* What's going on? What's the trouble?

MARTIN. *(ignoring her, yelling)* Get down off there! Get down this minute! It's some kid there, do you see?

HILDA. What's he doing? *(Calling)* Get down! Shoo! Shoo! Go away!

MARTIN. *(going out into the garden)* What's he got in his hand there …? What have you got there?

(As **MARTIN** *goes out,* **HILDA** *hovers in the garden doorway, agitatedly.)*

Careful, Martin! Do be careful. He may be armed, you never know.

(The doorbell.)

(Torn) Oh, the doorbell. *(Calling)* Be careful, Martin, careful!

MARTIN. *(off, from the garden)* Give me that! Give that to me! OW!!! You little …

HILDA. You alright?

(The doorbell rings again.)

(Flustered) Oh! Oh! Oh! I have to answer the door, Martin. I'll be back, love! Oh!

*(***HILDA** *hurries off to the front door.* **MARTIN** *returns from the garden, limping. He carries a battered clarinet case, though this is not immediately apparent.)*

MARTIN. *(calling back as he goes)* Yes, you run home! Off you go! I'll know you again, young man! I'll know you! Little devil.

(He stands at the window watching the boy as presumably he runs off across the field.)

*(***ROD TRUSSER** *enters, the first of the guests. He is well built, in his sixties, a man who has evidently led an active life and is still in fair condition for his age. He strides into the room in response to the emergency.)*

*(***HILDA** *follows with the second of their guests,* **DOROTHY DOGGETT***, a widow also in her sixties.)*

ROD. *(as they enter)* Spot of trouble, is there?

HILDA. You alright, Martin?

MARTIN. Yes, he's … he ran away ...

ROD. *(moving to the window)* Which way'd he go?

MARTIN. Across the field there towards the estate.

ROD. *(disgustedly)* Ah! Might have known it. One of them. Where'd he come from, did you see which way?

MARTIN. *(rubbing his shin)* He was climbing over the dividing wall to next door, there. That way. I caught him red handed, sitting astride it.

ROD. Next door?

MARTIN. That way. From number five, is it?

DOROTHY. Oh, them.

*(***ROD** *steps out into the garden, momentarily.* **MARTIN** *flexes his injured leg.)*

HILDA. *(concerned)* You alright, Martin?

MARTIN. Yes, he … When I grabbed hold of him he – kicked me, that's all. In the shin.

HILDA. Oh, dear. *(Moving to him)* Let me see.

DOROTHY. Lucky he only kicked you. He could just as soon have knifed you, easily.

HILDA. Oh, don't say that. Do sit down, Dorothy, won't you?

DOROTHY. They all carry knives these days. Bristling with them.

HILDA. Oh, Martin, this is Dorothy, by the way –

MARTIN. How do you do?

DOROTHY. Hallo.

HILDA. *(examining* **MARTIN***'s leg)* – no, it looks alright, you'll have a bit of a bruise in the morning but … Dorothy? I'm sorry, I didn't catch your second name, Mrs –

DOROTHY. Just call me Dorothy. Everybody calls me Dorothy round here. Dorothy from number four opposite.

HILDA. This is my brother, Martin. I'm Hilda. *(To* **MARTIN***)* Please call me Hilda. Do you want something on it, Martin? Arnica?

MARTIN. No, no, it's alright.

DOROTHY. Arnica's wonderful.

HILDA. Oh yes, I swear by it.

MARTIN. *(moving to the window, evading further attention)* I'm fine, really. It's fine. *(Calling out to* **ROD***)* Any sign of him?

ROD. *(off)* No. He's gone. Little bugger's scarpered.

HILDA. *(noticing the music case)* What's this?

MARTIN. *(turning)* Eh?

HILDA. This, here? Where'd it come from?

MARTIN. That's what the kid was carrying.

HILDA. *(reaching to examine it)* Oh, what is it?

DOROTHY. Careful! Could be a gun.

HILDA. *(drawing back)* Oh!

DOROTHY. They all carry guns ...

*(***ROD** *re-enters through the windows.)*

HILDA. We'd better not touch it, then.

MARTIN. I've already touched it.

HILDA. That's different, you had to touch it.

ROD. Touch what?

DOROTHY. That.

ROD. What's that, then?

MARTIN. It's what the kid was carrying. I took it off him.

HILDA. We were saying, it could be a gun.

MARTIN. I don't think it's a gun. Bit long for a gun, isn't it?

ROD. Might be a rifle.

MARTIN. Bit short for a rifle, surely?

ROD. Modified sniper rifle, possibly.

HILDA. *(impressed)* Oh.

MARTIN. *(impressed)* Really?

DOROTHY. *(impressed)* Goodness.

ROD. There's dozens of them. The country's flooded with them. Eastern Europe. Never should have torn down the Iron Curtain. Biggest mistake we ever made. Best not touch it. Be on the safe side.

HILDA. Could it go off, then?

ROD. *(darkly)* In the right hands, it could blow your head off. I'm Rod by the way, from number nine. How do you do?

MARTIN. *(shaking his hand)* How do you do? Martin. This is my sister, Hilda.

HILDA. Hallo.

ROD. Pleased to meet you. Just moved in, have you?

MARTIN. Yes, a few days ago.

ROD. Yes, I saw you yesterday, didn't I? Welcome to the neighbourhood. *(He laughs dryly)*

DOROTHY. What a welcome, then? First day, you get assaulted.

ROD. Par for the course round here. Take my tip, friend, you'll get a fence put up.

HILDA. Oh. Do we really need one?

ROD. They'll be walking in and out of here all day long, otherwise. Riff-raff and vermin...

DOROTHY. At night specially.

MARTIN. Yes, well, we'll consider a fence, won't we, Hilda?

ROD. I mean what have you got at the moment separating you from that field? Just a ditch, isn't it? With a couple of marker posts. Anyone could jump that, easily. In and out in a second.

DOROTHY. They'll have your gnome, quick as a flash.

MARTIN. Sorry?

DOROTHY. Your garden gnome there. You're lucky the kid didn't make off with him.

HILDA. Oh, no, not Monty. They can't take Monty. He's Martin's pride and joy.

ROD. They'll take anything that moves.

HILDA. *(smiling)* Not that he moves, of course.

MARTIN. Only at night-times. He's been known to creep around at night.

*(***DOROTHY** *and* **ROD** *stare at him blankly.* **MARTIN** *laughs to help indicate he's joking.)*

HILDA. Oh, Martin, really. Him and his jokes …

ROD. Oh, right … *(He laughs)*

DOROTHY. Oh, yes … *(She laughs)* At night. That's a good one.

HILDA. Don't mind us, we're both completely mad.

MARTIN. Speak for yourself. *(He laughs)*

(They all laugh this time, starting to get the hang of it.)

HILDA. *(wiping her eyes)* Oh, dear. It gets madder by the minute.

ROD. Ah well, it's only being mad that keeps you sane, isn't it?

DOROTHY. I love what you've done to the room, by the way.

HILDA. Do you? Thank you …

DOROTHY. Did you get somebody to do it? You know, design it?

HILDA. No, just us.

MARTIN. All Hilda, this. I can't take credit for this.

DOROTHY. Well, she's very talented. You've got an eye, Hilda. Beautiful, isn't it, Rod?

ROD. Yes, nice green. I like the green.

MARTIN. All Hilda …

HILDA. *(enjoying this, if a trifle embarrassed)* Now, I'm sure we're all dying for a cup of tea, aren't we? *(Moving off)* I've laid everything out in the dining room …

DOROTHY. *(making to follow her)* I'll give you a hand, Hilda …

HILDA. No, it's alright I—

DOROTHY. I'd love to have a little look round. See what you've done with the rest of the place …

*(***HILDA** *and* **DOROTHY** *go off.)*

HILDA. *(as they go)* Yes, of course. We're still getting sorted out. It's all a dreadful mess …

(Slight pause. As the two men are left alone.)

ROD. No, take my tip, a fence. First thing you need.

MARTIN. You think so?

ROD. If you want to feel secure, you and your sister.

MARTIN. Well …

ROD. I mean, that's the reason everyone else has got a fence. They feel vulnerable. Even I've got a fence.

MARTIN. Really?

ROD. And I was in the security service.

MARTIN. Were you?

ROD. I can handle myself. Twenty-five years. Before that, the army. Not much frightens me, mate. But even I've got myself a fence. First rule of security, get yourself a fence.

MARTIN. Well, my sister was worried about losing the view. The vista.

ROD. Suit yourself. It's either a fence or a dozen yobbos coming up the hill intent on vandalising the place.

MARTIN. As bad as that?

ROD. That estate down there, the Councillor Mountjoy Estate, it's a cesspit. All the local scum gathered down there. Drugs, violence … incest.

MARTIN. Goodness!

ROD. Go down and have a look at it if you want. Only during the daytime, mind you. It'll turn your stomach. Streets coated in vomit, blood, graffiti and worse … Half the doors hanging off, windows broken, boarded up … Street lights vandalised … Sodom and Gomorrah.

MARTIN. You'd think the police would have stepped in, wouldn't you …

ROD. The police? Forget them. It's a no-go zone. Won't get a copper venturing in there after dark. Not even in full riot gear. I have a friend in the force and he tells me that, day to day, the police are hanging on by a whisker … by that much … It's not just here, mark you. It's nation-wide. One breath of wind – anarchy! That's a serving police officer told me that. He says that lately his chief super, his chief superintendant this is, he's taken to cowering under his office desk. Anyone knocks he shouts out, "Whatever it is, I don't want to know!"

MARTIN. That's unbelievable!

(The doorbell rings.)

Ah, I think that may be someone …

ROD. *(now fully warmed up)* No, they're fighting a losing battle, poor sods. You can't help but feel sorry for them, the police. It's every man for himself, mate. First thing you need to do is get yourself a fence.

MARTIN. Right. I must just see who –

ROD. It doesn't need to be a solid fence. I mean, your sister can still enjoy her vista. No, what you need is reinforced chain link. Industrial strength. Eight feet high. No lower. Razor wire on the top. You're welcome to come and have a look at mine. I'll chain the dog up, first.

MARTIN. Dog?

*(***HILDA** *and* **DOROTHY** *return with four cups of tea between them.)*

ROD. Oh, that's another thing. You might consider getting yourself a dog as well. They're reassuring.

HILDA. Are we talking about dogs? I'd love a little doggie. I keep trying to talk Martin into having one. We brought you both a cup. Here, Martin, that's yours. Dorothy's got yours, Rod. She says she knows how you like it.

DOROTHY. I should do by now. Here we are, Rod. Sugared as you like it.

ROD. Ta.

HILDA. Oh, there's someone else arrived, Martin.

MARTIN. *(making to move)* Oh, right, I'll …

HILDA. No, it's alright. No rush. He's in the – little boys' room.

ROD. Who is it?

DOROTHY. It's Gareth.

ROD. Oh, him. *(Significantly)* Has he brought her with him?

DOROTHY. *(likewise)* No, he's on his own.

ROD. Good.

DOROTHY. Thankfully. She's following on later. *(Explaining to the others)* Mr and Mrs Janner from number eight.

HILDA. He seems very nice.

DOROTHY. Yes, he's very nice.

ROD. He's nice enough. Good cup of tea.

HILDA. Thank you.

(Pause. They drink. Conversation appears to have dried up temporarily. **ROD** *contemplates the nibbles.)*

DOROTHY. Yes, it is a good cup of tea.

HILDA. Thank you. Yes, help yourself, Rod, they're there to be eaten.

*(***ROD** *tries one of the nibbles. He decides against eating any more.)*

Dorothy was explaining to me, Martin, the reason we're the only ones who don't have a fence is that old Mrs Beadie who was here before refused to have one …

DOROTHY. No, that's right, she did.

ROD. We tried persuading her …

DOROTHY. She had an open house. Kids wandering in and out all day. Shouting, laughing, swearing, smoking …

HILDA. 'dear …

DOROTHY. She used to give them fruit juice and buns …

MARTIN. Buns?

ROD. *(shaking his head)* She was lucky to be alive, that's all I can say.

DOROTHY. Well, she's not now. She died peacefully in her bed. Just upstairs there. Sorry, you're not superstitious are you, either of you?

HILDA. No. Not in that way, anyway. We've nothing at all to fear. Not from the Other Side.

MARTIN. Perhaps that's why that kid was climbing in here just now. In search of buns? *(He laughs)*

DOROTHY. What, with a rifle?

MARTIN. We don't know it's a rifle. Not necessarily.

(They all stare at the case.)

HILDA. I'm dying to look, see what it is.

ROD. I wouldn't advise it. Leave your fingerprints on there, knowing them they'll probably charge you with nicking it.

HILDA. They wouldn't do that, surely?

ROD. Oh, you've no idea. I had this hedge trimmer, you remember – shall I tell them about my hedge trimmer? Shall I tell them, Dorothy?

DOROTHY. Oh yes, do. Tell them about your hedge trimmer, Rod … He bought this hedge trimmer, you see …

ROD. I bought this hedge trimmer …

DOROTHY. Brand new …

ROD. Brand new, mark you …

DOROTHY. He hadn't had it a week …

ROD. Less than a week …

*(***GARETH** *Janner, a man in his forties, has entered. He has a cup of tea.)*

GARETH. Hallo, everyone.

HILDA. Hallo, come in, Gareth – you don't mind me calling you Gareth, do you?

GARETH. No, not at all. Helped myself to a cup of tea, hope you don't mind?

ROD. Hallo, Gareth. Just telling them about my hedge trimmer …

GARETH. Oh, that. Right. Carry on. *(To* **MARTIN***)* Hallo. I'm Gareth.

MARTIN. Martin. Hallo. Her brother.

DOROTHY. Hallo, Gareth.

GARETH. Hi, Dorothy.

DOROTHY. Go on, Rod. He bought this brand new hedge trimmer, you see. Hadn't had it a week, had you, Rod?

ROD. Less than a week. I was trimming the front hedge …

DOROTHY. He's got this little bit of a hedge, you see. He was calmly trimming away …

GARETH. Oh yes, that's right, I remember. You turned round for ten minutes, didn't you?

ROD. Ten minutes, that's all it was…

DOROTHY. Just to make himself a cup of tea …

GARETH. This bloke walks in through his front gate …

DOROTHY. Cool as you like …

ROD. Cool as you like, barefaced … and he walks off with it …

GARETH. He calmly walks off with it.

MARTIN. Heavens!

HILDA. Gracious!

DOROTHY. Broad daylight. But, you see, Rod recognised him, didn't you, Rod?

ROD. I'd seen him around from the Mountjoy Estate …

GARETH. He was from the Estate …

MARTIN. Aha!

ROD. And I thought, he's not getting away with that, no way is he getting away with that …

DOROTHY. He didn't know Rod.

MARTIN. What did you do, report him?

ROD. I certainly did. Went straight down to the police station, gave them full description, everything short of the bloke's DNA and fingerprints. All they had to do was stroll down there and nick him. But instead, what happens?

DOROTHY. He waited days, didn't you, days …

ROD. Days and days …

DOROTHY. While all the police did was fill in forms.

GARETH. So in the end, what did he do? You went down there yourself, didn't you?

ROD. In sheer frustration. I walked straight into this bloke's house …

DOROTHY. Rod knew where he lived, you see. He walked straight in there without knocking …

ROD. And I said to him, "Oy, you, sunshine, what have you done with my hedge trimmer?"

DOROTHY. What have you done with it?

GARETH. He's acting all innocent like, isn't he?

ROD. Sitting there calm as you like, reading the evening paper.

GARETH. Reading the paper, wasn't he?

DOROTHY. So he'd had enough, by now, hadn't you, Rod?

ROD. I started turning the place over, you know, gently to start with, I'm looking in all his cupboards and under his furniture and finally …

GARETH. He tips this bloke out of his chair, don't you…?

ROD. Straight out of the chair, on the floor, flat on his face …

DOROTHY. Flat on his face …

ROD. And there it is, my hedge trimmer. Stashed underneath it …

GARETH. Under his chair …

DOROTHY. Where this bloke's hiding it.

MARTIN. What happened then?

HILDA. What did you do then?

ROD. I went back home and I finished off my hedge, didn't I?

MARTIN. Good for you!

HILDA. Well done.

GARETH. No, well … until … tell him the other bit, Rod …

DOROTHY. Tell them the rest of it, Rod … Later on, Rod gets this visit …

GARETH. From the police, wasn't it …?

ROD. Couple of them. To tell me there's been a complaint from this bloke. Damage to his property, physical assault …

DOROTHY. Can you believe this? Can you believe this?

ROD. Threatening to charge me. I said hang on. He stole my hedge trimmer, that's what started it.

GARETH. He started it.

ROD. They said, where is it now, then? I said, it's in my shed hanging up where it belongs. And they said, how do you know it's yours? I said, I saw him nicking it less than a week ago. They said, have you got proof of that? I said, how many more times, I saw him. They said, well, he denies it. And I said, well, he would do, wouldn't he? And they said, then it's his word against yours, isn't it? You can't go around taking the law in your own hands, that's breaking the law. I said, what? I said, what? They said, that hedge trimmer was reported stolen four days ago and we've still got it down here as an unsolved crime, it's still officially stolen until it's been officially recovered. And what's more, if you're not careful, if we find your fingerprints on it, we'll have you for receiving stolen property, as well. I mean, where's the justice? Where's the justice?

MARTIN. What happened to the hedge trimmer?

ROD. Still at the police station, isn't it? Officially being held as evidence. Except I'm sure one of those bastards is

trimming his own hedge with it. No, don't you get me started on the law.

DOROTHY. Don't get him started …

GARETH. You'll never stop him, once he gets started.

HILDA. Well. I'm appalled. Enough to make you lose trust, isn't it?

MARTIN. Certainly is.

(A sober moment of reflection.)

DOROTHY. Where's Amy, Gareth? She's very late.

GARETH. *(awkwardly)* Yes, well … she's possibly been held up. I don't know.

DOROTHY. She is coming, though?

GARETH. Oh, yes, probably. She said she was.

DOROTHY. Is her back any better?

GARETH. *(uncomfortably)* No. Not a lot.

DOROTHY. She's still undergoing treatment, then?

GARETH. Yes.

HILDA. I've had back trouble … *(To* **MARTIN***)* Haven't I?

MARTIN. You certainly have.

DOROTHY. She's still having it done by the man at number thirteen, is she?

GARETH. No, she's not seeing him any more. She's moved on …

DOROTHY. Trying someone else, is she?

GARETH. Apparently.

DOROTHY. Well, I hope she'll get someone to straighten her out eventually, Gareth. For your sake.

GARETH. *(suddenly, moving to the door)* Would you mind if I helped myself to another cup of tea?

HILDA. *(making to go with him)* No, of course. The pot may need topping up. Let me.

GARETH. No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to …

MARTIN. *(intercepting her)* No I'll go, Hilda … Stay there. I'll come with you, Gareth. If we're starting on about

medical conditions, leave it to the women-folk. Best off out of it, aren't we …? *(He laughs)*

*(***GARETH** *gives a sickly smile and he and* **MARTIN** *go off to the kitchen.)*

*(***ROD***, left alone with the women, appears awkward.)*

(A pause.)

HILDA. Well, looking at the time, I don't think anyone else is coming, do you?

DOROTHY. I think most people, round here, you know, they're all very busy. This time of year, you know. It's alright for people like us, Rod, isn't it? Being retired.

ROD. I'm still kept busy.

DOROTHY. And then poor Gareth, of course, being made redundant. Mind you, he keeps busy, doesn't he?

ROD. He does.

DOROTHY. In that shed of his.

ROD. Oh, yes …

HILDA. What does he get up to in his shed, then?

DOROTHY. Oh, all sorts of things. He's an engineer, isn't he?

ROD. He was.

DOROTHY. Wonderful with his hands. Turn them to anything. His hands. Metal work. Woodwork. You name it. He did a wonderful job on my hanging baskets, didn't he, Rod?

ROD. Skilled craftsman. On the scrap heap. Years before his time. Crying shame. Death of British industry.

HILDA. Same all over.

DOROTHY. Crying shame.

(Silence.)

HILDA. This man at number thirteen. Is he good with backs?

DOROTHY. They say he is. I've never tried him. Gareth's wife, Amy, she swears by him. She always comes out of there smiling, anyway.

HILDA. Really?

ROD. Look, I think I'll – just join them out there, if you'll excuse me. *(Indicating the plate of uneaten nibbles)* Very nice … unusual …

HILDA. Well, help yourself, there's masses more out there.

*(***ROD** *goes out to the kitchen.)*

I made enough for dozens. I don't know what we're going to do with them. I hate waste, don't you?

DOROTHY. Oh, yes.

(The doorbell rings.)

HILDA. Oh, more people. It's alright. Martin'll let them in. Sorry, you were saying, Dorothy? Number thirteen?

DOROTHY. Yes, his name's Ruderbeck. Ralph Ruderbeck. He's a Swiss. Apparently. Foreign, anyway.

HILDA. A therapist, is he?

DOROTHY. Of sorts. Amy's been seeing him for ages. Quite openly. She doesn't care who knows it, either. It's him I feel sorry for. Making Gareth look … Her own husband. She's demeaned him.

HILDA. Poor man.

DOROTHY. Still, as you heard, she's moved on since him. Gradually working her way round Bluebell Hill. Better watch – oh, no, he's only your brother, isn't he? I was forgetting.

HILDA. *(smiling at the idea)* He'd better not! Who's she with now, do we know?

DOROTHY. Well, according to Della at number seven, Mrs Cable … She's at it with him … *(Mouthing, silently)* … next door.

HILDA. *(not hearing her)* Sorry?

DOROTHY. Him, next door. Next door to you. Mr Bradley. Luther Bradley.

HILDA. Oh.

DOROTHY. Hark at me gossiping on. That's what fifteen years on a local paper does for you.

HILDA. Were you? Were you really?

DOROTHY. Fifteen years on *The Advertiser*. Before it folded. Old habits die hard. Still have the nose for a good story.

HILDA. Fascinating. No, I mean, as you say, what can it be like for him? For her husband, poor man. If she's –

DOROTHY. He should have done something ages ago. Taken a stand. But Gareth's not the type.

HILDA. I wonder why she married him?

DOROTHY. Before my time. Apparently on the rebound from someone else, by all accounts. She'd never have looked at him, otherwise. Let's face it, he's not much of a catch is Gareth.

HILDA. Poor man.

DOROTHY. Now, if it had been Rod there, he'd never have stood for it. Not for a minute. Gone round and sorted the bloke out. Sorted her out as well, most like.

HILDA. Was he ever married, do you know? Rod?

DOROTHY. Yes. Only they say she … his wife … *(Confidentially)* … ran away.

HILDA. Ran away?

DOROTHY. So they say.

HILDA. Perhaps he sorted her out.

DOROTHY. Wouldn't put it past him. I mean, he's nice enough, everyday, don't get me wrong. But then he gets this look in his eyes. Just occasionally.

HILDA. Yes?

DOROTHY. You should see him talking to his dog sometimes. Terrified of him, she is.

*(***AMY** *enters, attractive, in her mid thirties. From the reputation that has preceded her, she does not disappoint.)*

AMY. Hallo, mind if I join you?

DOROTHY. Oh hallo, Amy. This is Amy, Hilda, I was telling you all about.

HILDA. Oh, yes. Nice to meet you, Amy. Thank you for coming.

AMY. Sorry I'm a bit late. Typical. I got held up. Thank God, I arrived with a couple of others so at least I'm not the last.

HILDA. I think your husband's in the dining room, Amy. If you're looking for him.

AMY. *(offhandedly)* Not specially, no. I stuck my head in there briefly.

HILDA. Are they alright in there?

AMY. Oh, yes. They're having a high old time. Rod Trusser's keeping them entertained with tales of hedge trimmers …

HILDA. Oh, yes! What a story! It's unbelievable, isn't it?

AMY. Yes, it is, isn't it? It improves every time with the telling. Sorry was I interrupting – ?

HILDA. No, not at all. Do sit down, Amy. Would you like some tea?

AMY. No, thanks, that's OK. Your – Martin, is it? – your husband's bringing me some.

HILDA. No, he's my brother. Martin's my brother.

AMY. Oh, sorry. He's your brother?

HILDA. I don't have a husband.

AMY. *(smiling)* Lucky you. Hallo, Dorothy.

DOROTHY. *(slightly stiffly)* Hallo, Amy.

AMY. Been filling Hilda in with all the gossip then, have you?

DOROTHY. A little.

AMY. I bet you have. So how's it all going, Hilda? Settling in OK?

HILDA. Yes, we've been here, well, nearly two months, on and off. Popping in on odd days, you know. We've only moved in properly in the last week.

AMY. Poor you. I don't envy you. Moving house is always murder, isn't it? What is it they say about it? It's one of the most traumatic things that can happen to most people in their entire lives. I don't know what the others are. Getting married and losing your virginity, probably.

(She laughs. **DOROTHY** *doesn't.)*

HILDA. *(smiling frostily)* Yes, we're gradually getting straight. Still masses more to do, of course.

AMY. Yes, I can see. *(Looking around)* Masses. This room for a kick off. God! This wallpaper for a start. I ask you, how anyone could bear to live with this day after day for any length of …

(Slight pause.)

(realising) Whoops.

HILDA. *(icily)* My brother finished decorating it yesterday.

AMY. It's simply stunning! Congratulations!

HILDA. *(slightly tensely)* Thank you. I'm particularly fond of this paper. It was quite expensive, actually.

AMY. Wow!

DOROTHY. As I said, I think it's quite beautiful, Hilda. It shows magnificent taste.

AMY. Yes. *(Slight pause)* Sorry to ask – but the choice of paintwork, that's yours, too? *(A slight pause)* Yep. Thought it was. Inspired. Great choice. Brilliant. Green. *(Slight pause. Singing)* Isn't it a lovely day, to be caught in the rain …?

(Silence.)

*(***MARTIN** *enters with a cup of tea for* **AMY**.*)*

MARTIN. Sorry, Amy, I'd have been a bit quicker, only …

AMY. Thank you.

*(***MARTIN** *gives her the tea. The silence between the women continues.)*

MARTIN. … I had to wait till Rod had finished his story again … Well, how are things in here? Having a good time then?

(Silence. **MARTIN** *becomes aware that things aren't going too well.)*

*(***DOROTHY** *and* **HILDA** *maintain their frozen silence.)*

DOROTHY. *(rising suddenly)* Excuse me, I must just – have that little peek at the bedrooms, if I may, Hilda?

HILDA. *(rising)* Yes, of course, Dorothy. I'll show you round…

DOROTHY. Oh, lovely. I'm dying to see what you've done upstairs…

*(***DOROTHY** *and* **HILDA** *go out to the hall.)*

AMY. *(cheerfully)* I think your sister and I may have just got off on the wrong foot,

MARTIN. Oh, dear. Why's that?

AMY. I'm afraid I was rather rude about her choice of colour scheme.

MARTIN. Oh yes, that would do it. Hilda's quite sensitive in that department. *(Smiling)* As I know to my cost over the years.

AMY. That's me, I'm afraid. What I lack in tact, I make up for in honesty. Which makes a refreshing change from most of the people round here on this narrow-minded, middle-class, fucking little estate.

MARTIN. I warn you, you certainly won't get on any better with her if you start using language like that in front of her.

AMY. What, middle-class, you mean? I do beg your pardon.

*(***MARTIN** *finds this amusing.)*

Sorry. I take it you don't share her views on wallpaper.

MARTIN. She and I have occasionally begged to differ in the past. These days I tend to settle for the quiet life.

AMY. Or so-called bad language? Do you share her views on that?

MARTIN. No, not really. I've been known to use it occasionally myself. Under my breath and under stress. Struggling to put up this sodding wallpaper for one …

*(***AMY** *laughs.)*

But I try not to swear too often. I think on the whole, it's usually the symptom of a somewhat inadequate vocabulary. I mean, there's so many beautiful words one can use. Why settle for an ugly one?

AMY. Yes. You're right. There are. Beautiful words. Meringue. That's a pretty word.

MARTIN. Right. Next time I hit my thumb with the hammer I'll try that. Oh, meringues!

AMY. M words are generally nice. Mellifluous. Melodic … *(Looking out of the window, with a cry of delight)* Oh, look out here, I can't believe it. There's a gnome. A garden gnome. That surely must have been left over from old Mrs …? No? Thank God I didn't spot it whilst your sister was here. Imagine if I'd made mock of her gnome …?

MARTIN. No, he's mine, actually. He belongs to me.

AMY. Your gnome?

MARTIN. 'fraid so. I've had him since I was a kid. He was a birthday present. A stupid birthday present for a five-year-old … but …

AMY. From your parents? Did your parents give him to you?

MARTIN. My mother. Last birthday present she gave me, actually. Before she died. He's called Monty, by the way. Short for Montmorency.

AMY. That's nice. Another M word. *(smiling)* Then there's Martin, of course.

MARTIN. Martin Massie. Two of them.

AMY. Two? That's unfair.

MARTIN. Amy.

AMY. A – words? Not so good. A's. Mostly negatives. Awful. Abominable. Anti-social … Aggressive …

MARTIN. Attractive?

AMY. … appalling …

MARTIN. … angelic …

AMY. … altogether atrocious … !

MARTIN. *(rapidly)* … agreeable … appealing … alluring … awesome … adorable … amazing … audacious … august … appetising … amusing … altruistic … astounding … affecting … adventurous … admirable …

AMY. *(holding up hands in defeat)* OK. OK. You win.

MARTIN. I do a lot of crosswords …

AMY. *(smiling)* Right. I really must do some serious work on my vocabulary.

MARTIN. *(smiling)* Absolutely.

(A silence. **AMY** *smiles at him.* **MARTIN** *smiles back at her. The doorbell rings. Neither registers it.)*

AMY. Well, you're full of surprises, aren't you, Mr – Martin – Massie.

MARTIN. *(nodding)* Mmm.

(They look at each other.)

(Love at first sight might be nothing new for **AMY** *but for* **MARTIN** *it is very much the first time.)*

*(***HILDA** *enters with* **MAGDA**, *in her 20s and at present very distraught.)*

HILDA. Martin, this is Magda from next door. She's – she's in a bit of a state …

MARTIN. What on earth's wrong?

HILDA. Her husband isn't back from work yet. She's all on her own next door and –

MARTIN. Come and sit down, Magda. What's the problem?

*(***MAGDA** *shoots* **AMY** *a look.)*

You know Amy, of course …?

AMY. *(moving to the door)* Excuse me, I'll just …

*(***AMY** *goes out.* **MARTIN** *is slightly puzzled.* **HILDA** *sits* **MAGDA** *on the sofa.)*

HILDA. *(shooing* **MARTIN** *from the room)* It's alright, Martin. Leave this to me. It may be – it might be – *(Mouthing to him)* it might be a – a woman's thing …

MARTIN. Oh, right. One of those. Right. *(He hurries out)*

HILDA. *(gently, as soon as he has gone)* Now, tell me. You can tell me, dear. What's the problem? You can tell me. I'm very broad-minded.

MAGDA. I do apologise – bothering you with all – when you've got a house full of – I'm sorry – It's just so awful. It's Ethan, you see –

HILDA. Ethan? Who's Ethan?

MAGDA. One of my students – he's brilliant – he's just so sensitive and talented – he's brilliant. I'm a music teacher, you see – woodwind – and I give private lessons after school. Next door. And one of my students has just been attacked and robbed. On his way home from a lesson. His father's just phoned me in a terrible state. It happened about an hour ago. I let Ethan leave by the back way, as always, and he was apparently climbing the fence and … this man came from nowhere. Probably some terrible paedophile – and he grabbed hold of Ethan. And they struggled and Ethan managed to escape. Only the man made off with his instrument.

(As **MAGDA** *is speaking,* **HILDA***'s eyes have been sliding round to look at the music case.)*

HILDA. *(the truth dawning)* I see. I see. This instrument. Can you describe it?

MAGDA. It's an ordinary student clarinet in an old case. A standard B flat clarinet. Second hand. Not really worth

much. I don't know why the man took it, it's of no use to him …

HILDA. *(revealing the case)* Is this it? Is this the one?

MAGDA. Oh! Oh! Oh! How did you – ? *(Opening the case and examining its contents briefly)* Yes, it's all here, it's definitely his! *(Overjoyed)* Oh thank you, thank you! You're an angel! A guardian angel! Thank you!

*(***MAGDA** *kisses a bewildered* **HILDA** *impetuously on both cheeks.)*

Bless you. I don't know how you found it! But this will make him so happy. There is a God! There is a God, after all. Thank you! May I take it to him?

HILDA. Yes, of course. If it belongs to him ...

MAGDA. Thank you. I'll ring him first! I'll give Ethan a call. He'll just be so happy, you've no idea! See you soon.

*(***MAGDA** *rushes out to the front door.)*

HILDA. Oh, dear. Oh, dear, oh dear. *(As she goes, calling)* Martin! Martin, dear …

(As **HILDA** *slowly goes out to the kitchen, music as the lights fade to:)*

Scene Two

(The same, a few days later.)

(Late afternoon. It gradually grows dark through the scene.)

*(***LUTHER** *Bradley,* **MAGDA***'s husband, in his late thirties, is standing by the window impatiently waiting.)*

(In a moment, **HILDA** *enters with* **MARTIN***.)*

HILDA. This is Mr Bradley, Martin. I'll leave you both. Excuse me.

*(***HILDA** *goes out again.)*

MARTIN. *(prepared for trouble)* Good afternoon. What can I do for you, Mr Bradley? I'm afraid I don't have a lot of time, we have an important meeting here in a minute.

LUTHER. Oh, yes. This so-called Neighbourhood Watch meeting you've called. I hope you weren't expecting my wife and I to attend?

MARTIN. That's entirely up to you, Mr Bradley. An invitation was extended next door at number five to you and to Mrs Bradley, as indeed has one to everybody at Bluebell Hill. Now, I repeat, what can I do for you?

LUTHER. I think you know why I'm here, Mr Massie. It's concerning your assault on a child the other day, putting it briefly.

MARTIN. I beg your pardon, my assault on a child?

LUTHER. The young person whom you set upon and robbed whilst innocently on his way home …

MARTIN. I cannot believe I am hearing this. What on earth are you talking about?

LUTHER. Ethan Dudgeon, the young person whom you set upon and robbed whilst innocently on his way home from a music lesson with my wife. Whom you robbed, making off with his rightful property …

MARTIN. I presume you're referring to the same youth, the one I legitimately apprehended whilst illegally climbing over my wall –

LUTHER. – our wall – it's a party wall –

MARTIN. Granted – into my garden, caught *flagrante delicto* in the act of illegal trespass. Carrying what appeared to be, judging from his furtive and secretive behaviour, stolen property? That innocent child?

LUTHER. Oh, come off it, Mr Massie, that is total bollocks and you know it –

MARTIN. That was how it appeared to me in the heat of that moment in time.

LUTHER. Did you even ask him what he was doing there, Mr Massie?

MARTIN. I didn't get a chance to, did I? He kicked me in the leg! If I was mistaken, as it appears I may have been, then as I said to you on the phone, I am fully prepared to apologise to all parties.

LUTHER. I think this is beyond a mere apology, Mr Massie.

MARTIN. Well, that's all you're getting, I'm sorry.

LUTHER. Since you and I spoke on the phone, I have consulted with the lad's distraught father, Mr Dudgeon, and we are both of the opinion that we are entitled to some compensation.

MARTIN. *(incredulously)* Compensation? Are we talking about financial compensation?

LUTHER. Indeed we are. That boy, Ethan, is a sensitive child. He has undergone traumatic distress and, as a result, he can no longer face another music lesson and he's selling his clarinet. His family are heartbroken. Their dreams for their only son who showed such potential talent, whose future career as a clarinet player knew no boundaries, have been dashed. According to my wife, Magda, Ethan stood a fair chance of ending up in the London Symphony Orchestra. As for her, you appreciate because of the cancelled lessons, she has undergone a considerable loss of income and as a

consequence, she's been forced to lie down with the curtains drawn in a darkened room.

MARTIN. Well, I'm very sorry to hear that. My sympathy goes out to all concerned.

(The front doorbell rings. They ignore it.)

LUTHER. I should warn you that Mr Dudgeon and I are prepared, if it comes to it, to have recourse to the law, Mr Massie.

MARTIN. Well, I should certainly do that, Mr Bradley, if I were you. As my late father would have put it, I eagerly look forward to hearing from your solicitors, Messrs. Balderdash, Bluster and Bunkum.

LUTHER. If that's the way you want it. We shall see, won't we?

MARTIN. We shall indeed. Oh, by the way, when you next have occasion to speak to Barry Dudgeon, say two words to him from me, will you? Hedge trimmer!

LUTHER. What?

MARTIN. Just say that. Hedge trimmer. I've been doing my research, Mr Bradley.

LUTHER. *(mystified)* Hedge trimmer?

*(***HILDA** *shows in* **MAGDA** *who enters nervously.* **HILDA** *hovers in the doorway.)*

HILDA. I'm so sorry to interrupt, Martin, but Mrs Bradley was anxious to have a word with you.

LUTHER. *(evidently angry to see her)* What are you doing here, Magda? I told you to stay at home.

MARTIN. Please do come in, Magda. If I may call you Magda?

MAGDA. *(distraught)* Luther, we mustn't keep on with this, we really mustn't –

LUTHER. *(sharply)* Magda, I told you to keep out of this!

*(***MAGDA** *flinches.)*

HILDA. I'd prefer it if you didn't shout at your wife, Mr Bradley. Not in our house.

(A silence.)

MAGDA. The only one who is going to lose out in all this, is Ethan. I'm thinking of Ethan. What's all this going to do to him? It'll ruin his future.

MARTIN. I understand that's already ruined.

MAGDA. What?

MARTIN. According to your husband, he can no longer face another music lesson and he's selling his clarinet.

MAGDA. That's rubbish. *(To* **LUTHER***)* Who said that? Who told you that?

LUTHER. *(muttering)* According to Barry Dudgeon …

MAGDA. Oh, that man … Anyway it isn't his to sell. It isn't even his instrument …

MARTIN. It isn't?

MAGDA. Ethan could never have afforded one. Not even a cheap one. His father would never … *(She tails off)*

LUTHER. Then where did he get it?

MAGDA. *(blurting it out)* Alright! It cost seventy-nine pounds plus postage from the internet and I bought it for him with my own money!

(A pause.)

LUTHER. *(slowly)* You did what?

MAGDA. I bought it for him. I didn't tell you because …

LUTHER. You spent seventy-nine pounds of our money on that …? Of our money…?

MAGDA. … no, of my money, Luther. It was my money …

LUTHER. … seventy-nine pounds …?

MAGDA. … he needed one so he could practise. He asked his father but Dudgeon's such a terrible man, he wouldn't – even – rent him one –

MARTIN. Aha! Now we're hearing it. Terrible man. His own father, the lad's own distraught father, and he wouldn't even bring himself to buy the lad a cut-price clarinet …

MAGDA. He could have afforded it, if he'd wanted to. Instead he spent all his money on drink and drugs and – pigeon food ...

LUTHER. Pigeon food?

MAGDA. He said that sort of music was middle class rubbish – or some such nonsense. No, it's Ethan we should feel sorry for. He's the one losing out. His father won't let him come for any more lessons. He refuses to let him.

MARTIN. From the sound of the man, I'm amazed he was even prepared to pay for them in the first place …

(He stops at the sight of **MAGDA***'s guilty expression.)*

Sorry.

MAGDA. *(staring at her feet)* Well, I …

LUTHER. I don't believe it. Magda, you gave that boy free lessons as well? On top of a complimentary clarinet?

MAGDA. Luther, you've no idea! A boy from a background like that –

LUTHER. What else did you give him, for Christ's sake?

MAGDA. If you're a teacher, you pray to find a natural talent like that once in a lifetime. Natural … He was a natural –

LUTHER. *(snapping)* And you're a natural gullible idiot!

(A brief silence. Even **LUTHER** *realises he may have gone too far. In public at least.)*

HILDA. We'll have to ask you to leave now, Mr Bradley. This room is required for a meeting.

LUTHER. We're going, don't worry. Come along, Magda.

MAGDA. I think I'll stay.

LUTHER. What?

MAGDA. I said, I'll stay for this meeting. There may be things that concern us.

*(***LUTHER** *stares at her. He looks as if he might hit her.)*

HILDA. You'll be most welcome to stay, Magda. Won't she, Martin?

MARTIN. Oh, yes. Most welcome.

LUTHER. *(moving to the door)* This isn't the end of this business. I'm phoning Mr Dudgeon now. I'm sure he will wish to take this matter on from here.

MARTIN. Give him my regards. Don't forget to mention the hedge trimmer, will you?

LUTHER. *(as he goes, muttering)* What's all this about a bloody hedge trimmer?

*(***LUTHER** *goes out.)*

MARTIN. I'll see you off the premises, Mr Bradley. *(He moves to follow* **LUTHER***)*

HILDA. *(as* **MARTIN** *passes)* Well done, Martin.

*(***MARTIN** *goes out.)*

(To **MAGDA***)* I think that was very brave of you. Standing up to him.

MAGDA. He's not … Luther's not – usually … anyway, not in front of other people … he's … It's just I feel so strongly … I really do ….

HILDA. *(taking her hand)* In this life, you must always stand up for things you believe in, Magda. Even if bigger and stronger people don't always agree with you. You did right.

MAGDA. Thank you.

*(***HILDA** *continues to hold* **MAGDA***'s hand until* **MAGDA** *rather self-consciously withdraws it.)*

Actually, I didn't say – not in front of Luther – but I gave Ethan permission to take the short cut. I mean when old Mrs Beadie was here, it wasn't a problem, but – when you and your brother – I should have said to you – only I didn't think. It's all entirely my fault.

HILDA. Not to worry.

MAGDA. It was just easier for Ethan going that way. Otherwise he has to walk all the way round, crossing that busy ring road. I always used to worry.

HILDA. Trust my brother. He'll sort it out. He's strong. He has inner strength.

MAGDA. Yes, I'm sure he has.

*(***MARTIN** *appears in the hall doorway.)*

MARTIN. Are we alright to bring them in then, Hilda? There's a few of them arrived, anyway.

HILDA. Oh, yes.

MARTIN. *(calling back through the doorway)* Would you care to come in, please?

*(***MARTIN** *ushers* **ROD, DOROTHY** *and* **GARETH** *in. General greetings between the new arrivals and* **HILDA** *and* **MAGDA**. *They all seat themselves on the sofas.)*

(A brief silence.)

MARTIN. Well, this appears to be it. The usual suspects, I think.

*(***ROD** *shakes his head disgustedly.)*

First of all. For those of you I haven't managed to contact in time, my apologies – a bit of bad news, I'm afraid. I had a call earlier from police sergeant Rawlings who is apparently our local liaison officer in charge of advising on the setting up of neighbourhood watch schemes … Unfortunately, he tells me, owing to pressure of work – vital police work – and, of course, due to the recent cut-backs .. they couldn't regrettably spare anyone to come along this evening to advise us …

DOROTHY. Oh, dear

ROD. *(muttering)* Typical …

MARTIN. My first instinct was to postpone this meeting altogether, but then I thought, we can set this up for ourselves, surely? After all, what are the police going to tell us? That's fairly predictable, surely? During the day, at all times, exercise vigilance. If you go out, lock your windows and doors. Take note of any suspicious or unusual behaviour, especially regarding strangers.

And at night, organise peaceful patrols. With two or more able-bodied volunteers to do the rounds of the property at intervals, always varying the routine so the villains are never sure when to expect them. If something does occur, and they run into something suspicious, first issue a reasonable challenge. If that is ignored, issue a second reasonable challenge; and then, if necessary, a third one …

ROD. Providing the bugger hasn't legged it by then …

MARTIN. Well, in that case we'll have frightened him off, won't we? Mission accomplished! That's a positive result, isn't it? And if it is necessary to apprehend someone, employ only reasonable force in order to subdue him ... With the emphasis on reasonable …

ROD. Or else the bastard will turn round and sue you …

GARETH. What if he's armed?

MARTIN. If the suspect turns out be armed, then exercise caution. If it's a knife, keep your distance, if it's a gun, take cover or run like hell. That's probably what they'd advise us to do. It's all common sense really.

GARETH. Where are we going to find these volunteers? Judging from the vast crowds who've come along this evening, this is hardly a pressing issue for most people on Bluebell Hill, is it?

DOROTHY. Apathy. As Rod here's said, time and again, sheer apathy. Well, they'll be sorry, that's all I can say, when it happens to them, they'll all come crying for help, you'll see. Wait till it happens to them.

MAGDA. When what happens to them?

DOROTHY. *(darkly)* Everything. Robbery, violence. Destruction to your property. Personal invasion of your private space. Especially if you're a woman. Some thug in a ski mask, climbing in through your window at night …

HILDA. Dorothy, don't go on, you're frightening Magda.

DOROTHY. Sorry, love.

MAGDA. No, she's right, it can happen … it can easily happen …

ROD. Oh, yes, easily …

MARTIN. *(firmly)* Well, not round here it won't. Providing we take sensible precautions. No need to be afraid, ladies. Not while you have us.

GARETH. Who's us? That's what I'm asking …

MARTIN. … well, we'll have to organise a vigorous recruiting drive, won't we …?

GARETH. … you, me and him? We're not going to be able to protect you, are we?

MARTIN. Yes, point taken, Gareth. We don't want to start spreading despondency, now do we? Anyone else anything to add? Before we adjourn for tea?

HILDA. I'll put the kettle on… *(She starts to rise)*

DOROTHY. Switch all the lights on, Hilda. Just in case …

MARTIN. Anyone else?

DOROTHY. And don't forget to draw the curtains.

HILDA. I will.

*(***HILDA** *goes off to the kitchen momentarily.)*

MARTIN. Rod? Anything to add?

ROD. In my opinion we'd stand a better chance if these patrols were armed.

MAGDA. Armed?

ROD. Lightly armed.

MARTIN. How do you mean, Rod, lightly armed?

ROD. Baseball bats. They have their uses. Bloody awful sport but a very useful weapon.

DOROTHY. Oh, dear.

ROD. Go for the knees or elbows. That'll get his attention. That's as good as a challenge and more effective. If you catch anyone red-handed, club him senseless and sort it out later.

MARTIN. Oh no, no, no, Rod, out of the question. The police would never condone that.

ROD. We don't need them.

MARTIN. Sorry?

ROD. You're right. We can do this without the police. They'll be worse than useless as far as we're concerned. I mean, look at it this way. We have a serious shortage of man power at present, right?

GARETH. That's my point.

ROD. Now, has it occurred to you, why that is?

DOROTHY. Apathy.

*(***HILDA** *returns from the kitchen.)*

HILDA. It's on.

ROD. Now, have you considered this? Perhaps the reason we've got so few attending tonight is because you've announced the police were going to be involved?

MARTIN. I don't quite follow.

ROD. There are a considerable number of people – and this is a tragic reflection of the times we're living in – but it is a fact of life that there are an increasing number who have developed a natural mistrust of the police.

HILDA. Who?

ROD. More widespread than you might imagine.

MARTIN. Who are these people?

ROD. You'd be amazed. A lot of them on this Bluebell Hill. People who've become disenchanted with the established forces of law and order. They no longer trust them. Been victimised once too often. Needlessly stopped and searched. Gratuitous traffic violations. Day by day the rift is growing. The breakdown of trust. Many of us are now fearful of the very people we are paying to protect us.

MARTIN. Well, I think those are people with something to hide, that's all.

HILDA. Guilty consciences.

MARTIN. Exactly.

HILDA. I trust the police. Implicitly.

ROD. Just wait till it happens to you, Hilda …

HILDA. What?

ROD. *(darkly)* You'll see.

MAGDA. *(rising suddenly, urgently)* Sssh!

(The others look at her as **MAGDA** *stares towards the window.)*

DOROTHY. What is it, dear?

MAGDA. I saw somebody out there in the field. I thought I did.

*(***ROD** *moves swiftly to the window and, cupping his hands to the glass, strains to see out into the darkness.)*

MARTIN. Anything, Rod?

ROD. No. Nothing. Can't see anything. You did well to stay alert, though.

MARTIN. I have taken certain precautions, out there, since our incident. I've put up properly worded signs. Private property. Trespassers will be prosecuted. That sort of thing. At regular intervals along our boundary.

HILDA. Mind you, Martin, when it's dark they won't be able to read them.

ROD. I'll be amazed if half of them can read anyway.

MARTIN. Well, it's a gesture. It's a start. I take your point, Rod. We do need to take action certainly, but I believe it must fall well short of unprovoked violence.

HILDA. Hear, hear!

MARTIN. And I would at present prefer to maintain my trust in our police force. We can't proceed any further, at least until we've had a more formal meeting and hopefully had an official visit from a police representative

ROD. *(shrugging, hopelessly)* Well …

HILDA. I feel the same as Martin. I support my brother.

DOROTHY. I suppose you're right.

MAGDA. Yes.

HILDA. Well, on that note, shall we all adjourn for tea? Kettle should be about boiling. In here or in the kitchen, everyone? There's so few of us.

DOROTHY. Oh, kitchen. Every time. Nothing like it, is there, a cuppa in the kitchen?

HILDA. Yes, after all, we're all friends … If you care to follow me, everyone.

(They all rise and start to move to the kitchen door. Before anyone can leave the room, there comes a sudden, ear-splitting crash of breaking glass as the window is shattered and a projectile lands in the middle of the carpet where a few seconds ago some of them had been standing. **MAGDA** *screams,* **DOROTHY** *and* **HILDA** *cry out in surprise. The men express alarm.)*

GARETH. *(simultaneously with the women)* Look out!

ROD. *(simultaneously)* Get down! Get down! Hit the floor! *(He takes his own advice and lies down)*

MARTIN. *(simultaneously)* Oh my goodness, what on earth –?

(A stunned silence.)

*(***MARTIN** *is the first to move.)*

ROD. *(rising, cautiously)* Careful! It might be a grenade.

*(***MARTIN** *continues to approach the missile.)*

Careful … carefully, now …

HILDA. Be careful, Martin.

DOROTHY. Might be a bomb.

GARETH. Looks like a rock. A brick.

MARTIN. *(bending to pick up the debris)* No, it's – it's … Hilda, it's Monty.

HILDA. *(her hands to her mouth)* Oh, no, Martin! Not Monty …

ROD. *(sotto)* Monty? Who the hell's Monty?

MARTIN. He's … lost his little head … Hilda!

*(***MARTIN** *holds up the two halves of the broken gnome.)*

HILDA. Oh, no, no.

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