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Family Circles

A comedy

Alan Ayckbourn

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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FAMILY CIRCLES

This play has had several incarnations, starting life at the Library Theatre, Scarborough on 20th August, 1970 as *The Story So Far...*

It was re-written and re-titled a number of times, touring at one point with Celia Johnson as Emma before culminating in this final version which was first produced at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond on 24th November, 1978 with the following cast:

Edward	Rio Fanning
Emma	Jan Bashford
Jenny	Jan Carey
Deirdre	Liz Crowther
James	David Gillies
Oliver	Michael Wynne
David	Brian Miller
Polly	Auriol Smith

Directed by Sam Walters

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CHARACTERS

Edward Gray
Emma Gray
Polly
Jenny } their daughters
Deirdre
Oliver
David } their daughters' men
James

The action of the play takes place in the living-room of the Grays' house

Time: an August weekend

PRODUCTION NOTE

During the first three scenes of the play, everyone, with the exception of Edward and Emma, takes on a different relative role; that is, they remain the same person, but have a different partner in each scene.

In the last scene (Act II, Scene 2), everyone, again with the exception of Edward and Emma, appears in the various roles they played in the previous three scenes, so they are numbered according to the scene in which their character role first appeared. Thus, the Deirdre who enters at the start of this scene is known as Deirdre 1—the one that first arrived with James 1, and so on.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

SCENE 1 — *Saturday Afternoon*
Polly and David
Jenny and Oliver
Deirdre and James

SCENE 2 — *Saturday Afternoon, later*
Polly and James
Jenny and David
Deirdre and Oliver

ACT II

SCENE 1 — *Saturday Night*
Polly and Oliver
Jenny and James
Deirdre and David

SCENE 2 — *Sunday Morning*
All

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Ernie's Incredible Illucinations
Henceforward ...
How the Other Half Loves
Intimate Exchanges (Volume 1)
Intimate Exchanges (Volume 2)
Joking Apart
Just Between Ourselves
Living Together
Man of the Moment
Mixed Doubles (*with other authors*)
Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays
Mr Whatnot
My Very Own Story
The Norman Conquests
Relatively Speaking
The Revengers' Comedies
Round and Round the Garden
Season's Greetings
Sisterly Feelings
A Small Family Business
Suburban Strains
Table Manners
Taking Steps
Ten Times Table
This Is Where We Came In
Time and Time Again
Time of My Life
Tons of Money (*revisor*)
Way Upstream
Wildest Dreams
Wolf at the Door (*adaptor*)
Woman in Mind

ACT I

SCENE 1

The Grays' living-room. Comfortably middle class

There are several doors off; one to the kitchen; one to the hall and front door; french windows leading to the garden. A staircase leads via a landing balcony to the upstairs rooms

Emma, a pleasant if rather fraught woman in her mid-fifties, is busy laying a table-cloth on a tea table

After a few moments, Edward, her husband, aged about sixty, enters. He has returned from his walk, hatted and wielding a stout stick

Edward (*seeing Emma*) Hah!

Emma (*without looking up*) Good walk, dear? Worked up a good appetite? Tea won't be very long.

Edward looks out of the window

Thinking of mowing the lawn? It does need it, I agree. I've made some Mummy's Delights. You know, those little cakes of mine. The ones the girls love. You seemed to like them, too, I remember. That's Oliver's new car in the drive. Have you seen it? Enormous. Well, I suppose they need it. With their family. He's in the garden somewhere. Did you see him? And Jenny's busy buttering bread for me. Isn't that kind? She's been telling me they seem to be getting on a little better. That's good news, isn't it?

Edward Who are?

Emma Jenny and Oliver, dear. They seem to have worked out one or two of their little problems.

Edward Disastrous.

Emma Mmm? What's that, dear?

Edward Of all the men Jenny had to choose, not that she had any choice when it came down to it, I don't know why she chose him.

Emma Oliver's doing very well for himself...

Edward Exactly. Far too clever for her. She's as thick as a Portuguese gangplank.

Emma That's not a very nice thing to say about your daughter, is it?

Edward Oh, she's a *nice* girl. Very *nice*. But I don't know... Only one absolutely certain thing you can say about marriage. Whoever you decide on to share your life with invariably turns out to be the worst possible choice you could have made, present company excepted, of course. Fact of life.

Emma There are those who say that Oliver is a little stuffy for her.

Edward Stuffy?

Emma She's a very considerate girl, anyway.

Edward Born worrier like her mother, that's all. Think I'll go and have a word with Oliver. Show him my dahlias.

Emma Oh, yes. Do that.

Edward Stuffy or not, he certainly appreciates my dahlias. More than can be said for some of them.

Jenny, a woman of twenty-eight, enters carrying two plates of sandwiches. She is obviously pregnant

Jenny Hallo, Father. How are you?

Edward Hallo, Jenny.

Jenny (*kissing him awkwardly on the cheek*) Many, many, congratulations.

Edward Mmm?

Jenny Congratulations.

Emma She means our anniversary, Father.

Edward Oh, yes. Yes, thank you. And to you. I'm just going to go and sort out your husband. Show him how to grow dahlias. Not like the forget-me-nots he grows. No business calling them dahlias at all...

Edward goes out

Jenny (*calling after him*) See you later. (*To Emma*) Mother, I don't know if you got enough butter. We seem to be running awfully short.

Emma (*concentrating*) Now, there may possibly be some more in the bread bin.

Jenny The bread bin?

Emma Yes, I seem to remember putting some in there. I don't know why I did now. I seem to remember I had a very good reason at the time... Yes, I remember. It was to remind me, when I got the bread out, to remember to buy some more butter.

Jenny (*patiently*) Yes, Mother. If you'd only make a list...

Emma Oh, darling, you know me. The first thing I do is lose it.

Jenny Oliver and I bought you that little silver note pad for your birthday, specially.

Emma So you did. I must try and use that. That's a good idea. I wonder where I put it.
Jenny Mother, honestly...

Deirdre, a girl of twenty-four, enters noisily. She is followed at a discreet distance by James, a rather lost-looking young man in his mid-twenties, laden with her luggage. He is dressed rather incongruously in white shorts

Deirdre Nobody move. Don't panic. We've arrived.
Emma (*with great joy*) Deirdre...
Deirdre Hallo, Ma.
Emma (*hugging her*) How nice. This is nice. You know, I wondered for a moment if you'd remember... (*She sees James*) Oh...
Deirdre Oh. Dump it down there, Jas. Ma, this is Jas.
Emma Jas?
Jenny (*staring at the luggage; to Deirdre*) How long have you come for?
James How do you do, Mrs Gray? (*He shakes hands with difficulty*)
Emma Yes, how do you do. (*To Deirdre*) Jas, did you say, dear?

James unloads the luggage in the hall

Deirdre James. I call him Jas. James is a boring name. Almost as boring as Deirdre.
Emma (*a little taken aback*) Oh. Well. That's nice. We have an extra for tea then, Jenny.
Jenny And presumably for dinner.
Deirdre Dinner?
Jenny We're going out to dinner tonight. I told you in my letter.
Deirdre Oh God, so you did.
Jenny Oliver and I booked the table.
Emma Well, that's all right. If Deirdre wants to bring her young man along, it'll make it even jollier. Why not? It just means eight instead of seven. That's easily arranged, surely?
Jenny (*fiercely; to Deirdre*) I mean, all you had to do was to phone me or drop me a card telling me you were bringing someone.
Deirdre I didn't know I was when you wrote. I only met Jas on Thursday, didn't I, Jas?
James Yes. I'm sorry if I...
Jenny Yes, well, I'm sorry too. I don't want you to feel unwelcome. (*As she goes to the kitchen*) It's just that it does make things terribly difficult when people spring things on you like this at the very last minute.

Jenny has gone

Deirdre She hasn't changed, has she?

Emma You must understand, dear, she's a lot of things worrying her at the moment.

Deirdre What's wrong? Has Ollie been shouting at her again?

Emma I don't know, dear. Presumably with the baby on the way and—well, I never ask about these things. You know me, so long as all of you are happy, I don't enquire. Now do sit down—Jas—and feel very welcome.

James (*still uneasy*) Thank you. I'm very sorry, I don't really seem to have come dressed for the occasion. I'm sorry. Perhaps I'd——

Emma Of course not. Deirdre's sister is a little bit excitable——

Deirdre Ha!

Emma —But she does mean well. If you'll excuse me a moment, I must get on with the tea.

James Of course.

Deirdre How's Pa then?

Emma Oh, much the same, dear, much the same.

Emma goes out to the kitchen

Deirdre (*half to herself*) Sorry to hear that. (*To James*) Well, this is it. Home. Does this explain to you why I wake up in the middle of the night screaming?

James You didn't tell me this was going to be a big family thing. I can't go out to dinner dressed like this.

Deirdre You look fantastic.

James I thought this was just to be a quiet weekend.

Deirdre No, well, it's Ma and Pa's anniversary, you see. We usually all come down for that. Particularly if they're at weekends and in this case it's—Oh, God!

James What is it?

Deirdre I never got them anything. Hell! I meant to buy them something at the station. Chocolates or crisps or something. I forgot all about it.

James Oh. We could always nip back to that village and——

Deirdre No. Don't bother. They'll get plenty. Jenny will have bought something. Embroidered oven mitts with "I love Mother" on them, no doubt. And Polly will probably bring them a loaded shotgun... In all the excitement they'll never notice.

James (*worried*) Should have got them something, though. I mean it's the thought...

Deirdre Oh, don't be so boring. I barely like them—either of them—I'm certainly not going to be a hypocrite as well. Look, can you amuse yourself for a minute? I'd better go and jolly up sister cow-face in the kitchen. Break it to Mother you're staying the night.

James Don't you think it would be better if I went back earlier? (*He indicates his attire*) I mean I'm hardly——

Deirdre No, I damn well don't. I need you here. You might help to keep me sane. Why do you think I brought you? There's the spare room going free. It's full of horn gramophones and Father's old dress uniforms, but it's still habitable. It's also next to mine. Wink, wink. Won't be a sec. Amuse yourself. Kick the furniture or something.

Deirdre goes out

James prowls about

After a while, Oliver, a man still in his thirties but whose manner suggests he can't wait to get into his fifties, enters. He stares at James without speaking

James (*at length*) Hallo.
Oliver Hallo. Oliver.
James James.
Oliver Hallo.
James Hi.

A pause

I'm with Deirdre. A friend of Deirdre's.
Oliver Are you? (*He nods*)
James (*trying again*) Got a terrific view from your window here.
Oliver Yes, indeed. (*He moves to the table*) Absolutely first class. Would you say these were tuna fish?
James Sorry?
Oliver They smell like tuna fish. Hope to God they are. The alternative's too terrible to contemplate. (*He laughs*)
James (*joining in uncertainly*) Yes.
Oliver Been having a look at Edward's dahlias. Got to hand it to him. They're good, very good. Mind you, he's a specialist. He can't grow anything else. His lawn's in a terrible state. Seen the lawn?
James I think I—walked over it.
Oliver Terrible state. Dandelions. Well, you've chosen a good weekend you have.
James So I understand. Deirdre didn't actually tell me that——
Oliver You'll probably live to regret it. You know these family do's. Especially this family. Get a bit out of hand. Not so much a beargarden, more a... (*He tails off and gazes into the distance, clicking his fingers thoughtfully—a habit he has*)

James (*after a pause*) Yes.
Oliver Anyway.
James Yes.
Oliver I say, did you know you had shorts on?
James Yes.
Oliver Yes. It is fairly humid, I suppose. Ninety-three for four at lunch.
James Ah.
Oliver Not bad that. Ninety-three for four. Another couple of quick wickets... Drive down, did you?
James No, train. With Deirdre.
Oliver Oh, yes. You know, I'm not at all sure these are tuna fish. (*He investigates*) I'm married to her sister, you know. That's her sister Jenny. Met her, have you, my wife?
James Yes, just now.
Oliver She's all right. Speak slowly to her or she misses the point.
James (*smiling uncertainly*) Oh...

Deirdre enters hurriedly. She is clutching the fastening of her trousers with one hand

Deirdre (*yelling behind her*) Where? (*To James and Oliver*) Excuse me, folks.
James Hallo.
Deirdre (*going back to the door*) Where, Ma?
Emma (*off*) In the top drawer.
Deirdre (*to James*) All right, love? Oh, hallo, Ollie. God, you're not stuck with Ollie, are you? That's a fate worse than Father.
James No, we've just been——
Deirdre (*yelling*) Top drawer, did you say?
Emma (*off*) Yes, dear. In the tin. The little blue tin.
Deirdre (*to James*) Safety pin. Bust my zip.
James Oh. No, Oliver was just——
Deirdre (*searching in a drawer*) Little blue tin... Mother has little red tins, little green tins and little blue tins all over the house. And only Mother knows what's in them. (*She finds what she's looking for*) Ah. Right. Operation Emergency Pins. Won't be a sec. (*Yelling*) Got them.

Deirdre goes out

Oliver Well, I take my hat off to you, coping with her.
James Great fun.
Oliver So's a broken neck, I understand. In business, are you?
James No. Pleasure, really. (*He smiles at his joke*)
Oliver Don't quite follow you.

James I always say that. When people say, "Are you in business?", I always say, "No, pleasure".
Oliver Do you?
James I sell sports equipment, you see.
Oliver Sports equipment, eh? (*He looks thoughtful*)
James That's how I met Deirdre, actually.
Oliver Football boots, you mean? That sort of thing?
James That sort of thing, yes. She came in to buy a squash racquet and I sold her one.
Oliver Deirdre plays squash?
James That's the point, no.
Oliver No?
James She wanted to learn. I offered to teach her. Last night.
Oliver Mmmm?
James Squash.
Oliver Ah.
James But when I came round to collect her, she found she hadn't any suitable shoes. So we went to the cinema instead.
Oliver Ah.
James Just as well, really. I've never played squash in my life.
Oliver No?
James First time I've ever been to a film in tennis shorts, though.
Oliver What would be your biggest selling line, then?
James At the shop? Footballs, I suppose ... and—gentlemen's supports... (*He gestures*) About fifty-fifty, really.
Oliver (*watching him intently*) Is that size or quantity?
James Quantity.
Oliver Mmm, surprising. A conclusion to be drawn somewhere there I should imagine. I might have a pair in the boot.
James I beg your pardon?
Oliver Trousers. If you feel the need for trousers.
James Oh, yes, thank you.

Oliver moves to the table again

Oliver They look like blackcurrant jam.
James Oh, I don't mind what colour they are.
Oliver (*irritated; indicating sandwiches*) No, no, no.

Jenny comes in with more plates of food. She looks hot, flustered and a little tired

Jenny Have Polly and David arrived yet?

Oliver Not yet.
Jenny Well, it's really too bad. Mother's all on her own out there. There's only me helping. Deirdre's split her trousers or something. She cut one slice of bread, ruined the loaf and split her trousers. I understand you're staying with us, Mr...?
James If it's no trouble.
Jenny Not at all. It's no trouble for me. I'm sure Deirdre will arrange everything, make sure you're comfortable.
James (*indicating his shorts*) I was wondering if I——
Jenny (*to Oliver*) I've told Mother we must leave here by seven, Oliver. They won't hold that table reservation if we're late.
Oliver Bags of time. If we leave at... (*He trails off, fingers clicking*)
Jenny (*gently*) Don't do that, dear.
Oliver What?
Jenny That—clicking. You keep doing it lately.
Oliver Why shouldn't I?
Jenny Because it's just a little bit irritating, dear.

Oliver gives her a look

I'll phone Mrs Curtis after tea and make sure the children aren't playing up.
Oliver I should forget them. Out of sight, out of mind.
Jenny Yes, I know, dear. But somebody has to worry about them, don't they?
Oliver Don't see why. They never worry about us.
Jenny Honestly, it's too bad. I'm the only one out there helping, Oliver, the only one. There's masses to do. (*More confidentially*) Oh ... and there's been some trouble.
Oliver Trouble?
Jenny Yes, Mother's hinted at it. I mean, she said nothing definite but I could read between the lines. And I didn't tell you, I also... (*She counts side plates*) Two, four, five...
James Er...
Oliver Are those tuna fish, do you happen to know?
Jenny Crab, I think. No, I didn't tell you I had a... Oh no, you don't like crab, do you?
Oliver I had rather hoped I'd got that point to register by now. Still...
Jenny I'll see if there's anything else. There's some cheese spread, I think.
Oliver It's all right, don't panic. I just won't eat them, will I?
Jenny Are you sure?
Oliver Quite sure. I'll stick to the blackcurrant jam.
Jenny (*no less alarmed*) It's home-made damson.
Oliver Fine, fine, fine.

Deirdre enters

Deirdre There we are. I'm decent again. You'll have to bury me in these trousers now. I'll never get them off again. But I am decent. And decency is all, around here.

Jenny Deirdre, do come and help. Mother's doing it all.

Deirdre Mother always does it all. She likes doing it all. It's so she can droop finally at the tea table, pale and exhausted, amidst scattered applause.

Jenny That's beside the point. It's supposed to be a party for her.

Deirdre Thirty-two glorious years...

Oliver Celebrated with crab sandwiches. Very fitting.

Deirdre Crab? Super.

Jenny You really are the laziest little devil. Well, you can do the plates, then. I've got a terrible headache coming, I can feel it.

Jenny goes out to the kitchen

James Look, I——

Deirdre Hallo, Jas, darling. Are you terribly bored?

James No...

Deirdre Oliver, have you been boring Jas?

Oliver (*picking up a newspaper*) I've hardly said a word. (*He makes for the hall*)

Deirdre Exactly. You get the same sensation talking to Oliver as you do yelling into an old laundry bag.

Oliver (*at the hall door*) Very dangerous all this luggage here. Nearly fell over it just now.

Deirdre That is all I have in the world.

Oliver Oh, it's yours, is it? I take it you like to travel prepared?

Deirdre I am in the process of changing residence, actually.

Oliver Oh, got somewhere nicer?

Deirdre Not quite. I had rather sudden notice to quit, that's all.

Oliver When was this?

Deirdre Last night. My landlord objected to the use of the bath...

Oliver Seems a bit unreasonable.

Deirdre That's just what Jas and I felt. We sat there and argued with him till the water turned cold.

Deirdre wanders to the tea table. James smiles sheepishly at Oliver

Oh, God, she's made some of those awful cakes. Mummy's Delights. (*To James*) Whatever you do, steer clear of these. They're foul.

Oliver I wouldn't say that to her face. I seem to remember she's rather proud of them. (*He sits with the paper*)

Deirdre She always comes up with these. The first time she made them, we

all three took one bite... And when Mother was out of the room, Polly tipped the whole plateful into a paper bag and hid it under the sofa. Mother comes back in and she says "What's this? All gone?" she says, "I must make some more of those." And for ever after... I can't remember how we got rid of them eventually. Oh yes, used them as ammunition against the boy next door, that's right. Made super ammo. Polly hit him right between the eyes with one. Stopped him peeing through our fence, anyway. Filthy little beast. By the way, have they arrived yet?

Oliver Who?

Deirdre Polly and David?

Oliver No.

Deirdre With any luck they won't come.

James Why?

Deirdre Oh, just you wait. David twitches. And when he's not twitching he's fussing. And Polly's never really happy unless she's having a row with someone, especially Father.

James (*smiling feebly*) Sounds fun.

Oliver (*without looking up from his paper*) Been some trouble, apparently.

Deirdre What?

Oliver Jen was saying so. She's probably got it wrong, mind you. Trouble. With Mother and Father.

Deirdre Let's hear something new.

Jenny enters, agitated

Jenny Mother's cut herself on the pickles.

Oliver She's what?

Jenny (*tensely*) Mother has cut herself on the pickles and I don't think I can cope. Oliver ... please, quickly... I think I'm going to faint.

Oliver (*used to this*) Now don't be silly, Jenny, sit down. Sit down. Head between your knees... (*He steers her to a chair*)

Deirdre Elastoplast. (*She opens a drawer*) Wonder what colour tin she keeps that in... (*She searches*)

Oliver rams Jenny's head between her knees

Jenny (*muffled*) Oh, my God.

Oliver (*calmly*) You must stop making everything into a crisis, Jenny. You'll have nothing in reserve when World War Three breaks out.

Jenny Please, Oliver, do something. She is bleeding out there.

Deirdre Can't find the Elastoplast.

Oliver (*wearily*) It's in the kitchen dresser, if I remember correctly. I'll deal with it, don't worry. I've dealt with it before.

Oliver goes out

Deirdre How did she manage to cut herself on a pickle? That's pretty good going, even for Mother.
Jenny (*through gritted teeth*) She was trying to open the pickle jar. I told her to leave it to me. Her hand slipped and she cut herself on the lid.
Deirdre (*jubilant*) Isn't that typical?
Jenny For God's sake, Deirdre, she's bleeding all over the bread board out there.

Jenny rushes out

Deirdre That's this house for you. Instant panic. If the lavatory doesn't flush properly they call out the fire brigade.
James Do you think your mother's all right?
Deirdre A teeny cut, I bet you. But Mother has the sort of manner that instils instant lack of confidence. She is entirely responsible for this whole twitching family.
James (*anxiously*) You don't twitch, do you?
Deirdre Not me. I swung the other way. The whole house could fall down for all I'd care.
James With them in it?
Deirdre Preferably. Are you shocked?
James (*uncertainly*) No. I was just thinking how people change as soon as they get home with their families.
Deirdre I suspect you're one of those unfashionable people with a happy childhood.
James Yes, I suppose it was really, I——

Oliver comes back from the kitchen

Deirdre Right. (*To James*) Conducted tours time.
James What?
Deirdre Round the estate, along the privets, twice round the rhubarb and back for tea.
James But, Deirdre, I must get hold of a pair of trousers.
Deirdre Excuse us.
Oliver Of course.

Jenny enters

Jenny Where are you going now?
Deirdre Out.

Deirdre and James go out the front door

Jenny She hasn't done these plates now.
Oliver (*in his newspaper again*) Plates?
Jenny They need napkins putting on them all, then they're ready to hand out.
Oliver Good idea.
Jenny (*starting on the plates*) I've got a splitting headache.
Oliver I should take something for it, then.
Jenny Oliver, you really should have a word with Mother.
Oliver Mmm?
Jenny We're the only ones she can turn to, you know.
Oliver What's that?
Jenny The point is, I phoned Polly this morning just to check she'd remember to bring some spare sheets—and she told me—well, she didn't go into detail but—I pray God it won't—but—we may have to try and get Father certified.
Oliver (*looking up*) Get him what?
Jenny (*agitated*) It may come to it. God, it may come to that.
Oliver (*sharply*) Jenny, will you please sit there, put your head back between your knees again and bloody well simmer down.
Jenny I didn't want to tell you before, in case it upset you.
Oliver (*angrily*) Upset me? Upset me, did you say?

Emma enters from the kitchen with more plates

Emma Oh, Oliver. Where's Father? I thought he was with you?
Oliver I left him beating the butterflies off his dahlias with his hat and bellowing at old Cartwright from next door.
Emma (*surveying the table*) Oh, dear. Do you think we've made enough?
Jenny Plenty, Mother. You've done plenty.
Emma We've a long drive ahead of us. I mean——
Oliver How's the hand?
Emma Oh, I can hardly feel it. Hardly at all.
Jenny If you'd asked me to open them in the first place——
Emma It's all right. Don't fuss, dear.
Jenny Well, sit down, Mother, just for a minute, please.
Emma Yes, I think I've earned it. Just for a second. (*She sits at the table*) Look, Oliver. We're using my new little spoons, see?
Oliver Oh, yes, they're nice. Who gave you those?
Jenny We did.
Emma Polly and David not arrived yet?
Oliver Not yet. They will no doubt do something appropriate like walk into the room when they do.

Emma (*concerned*) Oh, dear. You don't think anything can have——

Oliver With David driving at fifteen miles an hour along the grass verges it's unlikely, Mother.

Jenny It's unlikely, Mother.

Emma That dreadful old car of theirs. It's never safe. I sometimes wake up in the night, Jenny, and think... (*She sighs*) I dread to think what I think.

Oliver Mother, could I possibly remind you again that I don't care for crab.

Emma Now. I want you all to be very, very tactful this evening. For my sake.

Jenny I always am.

Oliver Anything but crab.

Emma You know, I sometimes think that Polly deliberately tries to annoy Father. And when Deirdre gets that naughty look in her eye... I can't think why, after all these years, you children haven't learnt that the only way to deal with Father is to ignore him.

Jenny From what I've heard that isn't enough.

Emma What do you mean, dear? From what you've heard?

Jenny (*darkly*) I've heard. Leave it at that.

Oliver I shouldn't try to follow it up, Mother. She's trying to tell us something. But it'll take a little time, as usual.

Emma All I'm saying, is, try and be tactful. You only have to see your Father about once a year.

Jenny What are you talking about? There's hardly a weekend Oliver and I aren't down here with the children.

Emma Yes, I know *you* are, dear.

Jenny (*flaring up*) Then tell Polly and Deirdre. I don't need lectures on being tactful. When I think of the times...

Oliver Jenny.

Jenny No, well, it's too bad. I mean, who went to all the trouble to arrange this evening? We did. Not Deirdre and Polly. They haven't done a stroke, either of them. Not a thing. I've been out there all afternoon, you know, Oliver, cutting cakes, icing sandwiches...

Oliver Jenny, quieten down.

Emma And do stop being so touchy, dear. She really is dreadfully touchy, don't you find that, Oliver? Even as a child she was always the one that whined.

Jenny Me, whine? That was Deirdre. Deirdre whined.

Emma That's not true, Jenny. Deirdre had a lovely nature. Everyone adored her. She had the sweetest little blue pinafore dress, Oliver, and little red socks.

Jenny Deirdre was always bawling her head off. I want, I want, that was her.

Emma If she did that, it was only because you two were so mean to her. Do you know, Oliver, what these two little beasts did to Deirdre one day in the park?

Jenny (*rising*) Oh, well, if you're going to drag that up again...
Emma I'd only left them alone for a second.
Jenny I'm not listening to this again.

Jenny goes out

Emma "Polly, Jenny," I said, "take good care of little Deirdre, Mummy's just going to spend a penny." And do you know what they did? They took Deirdre's dolly that she absolutely adored, tied a stone to its feet and threw it in the pond.
Oliver (*bored*) Too much television.
Emma Well. When I came back... "Mummy, mummy," she said, "they downed Diddy's dolly." She kept saying it over and over, utterly heartbroken. "They've downed Diddy's dolly." All the way home. Well. Those two had no supper that night, I can tell you. If I'd been their father I'd have spanked them but he was never... They really were difficult children. Do you find Jenny quite so difficult, Oliver?
Oliver Well, I don't let her get on top of me more than I can help. If you know what I mean. The way I look at it, as Father's very fond of saying—we all marry the wrong people. Not much you can do about it really. I remember when I went to ask Edward if he'd mind if I took one of his daughters off his hands, he said "Well, you've got a choice of three evils. If you marry Polly, you'll never get off the ground. If you marry Deirdre, you'll never come out of the clouds. And if you choose Jenny, you'll finish up somewhere between the two." Halfway up the wall, presumably. Too late to do a swap, isn't it? Leave her alone as much as I can. That's my philosophy.
Emma Well, I'm grateful she married you, Oliver. You're such a sensible person.

Jenny enters

Jenny (*grimly*) Polly and David have just arrived.
Emma Oh, thank goodness.
Oliver There's no need to look so tragic about it.
Emma (*going*) I'll put the kettle on.
Jenny Polly's got a face like thunder.
Emma Oh, dear.
Oliver Her normal expression, isn't it?

Emma goes out

Jenny Oliver.

Oliver Mmmm?
Jenny Have you said anything yet—about the trouble?
Oliver What trouble?
Jenny With Father. I left you alone just now, especially. So you could.
Oliver Ah. Is that why you left us alone. I wish you'd leave me alone. Go away.
Jenny You must talk to Mother. You're the only one of us who...

David enters. Early thirties, frenzied and fussy

David My God. Oh, my God, what a journey. Hallo, Ollie, Jenny. I must sit down. I must. (*He sits*)
Jenny Hallo, David. Tea won't be long. I'll just give Mother a hand.
David (*getting up again*) Jenny, love, I wonder if you could bring me a glass of water. I'm shaking. I'm literally trembling all over. (*He fumbles in his pocket for a bottle of pills*)
Jenny You poor thing.
David I'll have to take a couple of these.
Jenny Right, sit there. Try to calm down. Take deep breaths. I won't be a minute.

Jenny hurries out

David You don't know how lucky you are to be married to a nurse.
Oliver An ex-nurse.
David Never mind. She still has a training.
Oliver Not much of one. I understand she was off sick most of the time.
David Polly is being impossible. You've no idea, Oliver, absolutely impossible. She refused point blank to let me drive down here. I don't know why. I'm a perfectly good driver. I've been driving for years... But no, she had to drive. Three sets of traffic lights we went through. At least two halt signs and as for speed limits... My nerves, Ollie, for the last ten miles, they were literally screaming...
Oliver Couldn't have gone that fast. You're nearly an hour late as it is.
David That's only because we started *two* hours late. Can you imagine that? Trouble is, basically, it's not her fault. It's just that I'm no good for her. It's a terrible admission, but I'm not.
Oliver It doesn't sound as if she's doing you an awful lot of good, either.
David I let her down. In every way. I can see her—visibly being let down while I'm doing it. Why do I do it?

Jenny enters with a glass of water

Jenny Here you are.

David Bless you, Jen. (*He holds up the pill bottle*) These are the only things that do the trick. For me, anyway. Absolutely marvellous.
Jenny What are they?
David Para-hydrus-neutra-valisterin compound. Haven't you come across them?
Jenny No, they're new, aren't they?
David They keep me alive. They're wonderful for the nerves.
Jenny I must try them.
David They're a sedative, really.
Oliver Does that mean you're about to fall asleep?
David I wish to God I could. Polly's in an extraordinary mood. Wouldn't speak to me all the way down. Seventy miles an hour, just kept muttering to herself.
Oliver Muttering what?
David Don't know, couldn't hear half the time. Things like, "We'll settle that bitch once and for all." Things like that.
Jenny Who did she mean?
David How the hell should I know? You? Mother? Deirdre? Do you think she talks to me? As far as I can make out, she only keeps me around the house to open bottles and frighten burglars.
Oliver Are you effective?
Jenny Tea's nearly ready, anyway. I'm just going to fetch Father.

Jenny goes off upstairs

David I'll feel better in a minute. (*He makes for the table*) These are very fast-acting. (*At the table*) What are in these?
Oliver (*sourly*) Crab.
David Oh my God, that's the last straw. Everyone else arrived?
Oliver Yes. Deirdre's brought another bloke.
David Not another one of those?
Oliver No, he's quite presentable.
David Never forget Mother's face last time. She drew the curtains in the morning and saw them both sitting on the lawn absolutely stark naked, watching the sunrise.
Oliver I think her main worry was they'd get rheumatism.
David Well, this family's got quite enough problems without that.
Oliver Do you mean normally? Or are you referring to something special?
David Polly'll tell you. I couldn't begin.
Oliver Everyone's been dropping rather dark hints. I seem to be the only one who doesn't know.
David You will, don't worry, you will. We're leaking oil too.
Oliver Mmm?

David The car's leaking oil. We're getting through pints.
Oliver Better get it fixed.

Emma enters with a teapot

Emma Tea up. Hallo, David. Where's Polly?
David She's here.
Emma Jenny's gone up to fetch Father.
David How is he?
Emma Oh, well, I think. Very well.
Oliver What on earth does he get up to, in that room of his? I've often wondered.
Emma Well, I've never really dared ask him. He's very quiet about it, whatever it is, which is one blessing, I suppose. I think he just reads. Oliver, I wonder if you could give Deirdre and her young man a call?
Oliver Yes, of course. Tell them to put their clothes on and come in for tea.
Emma We're having no more of that, I can tell you.

Oliver goes out

We had a petition, you know, David, a petition. Dr and Mrs Cartwright from next door with fourteen signatures.
David But the garden isn't overlooked by that many people.
Emma Yes, dear, now come and sit down. Well, how are you both?
David Oh, pretty fair.
Emma Polly very busy, is she?
David Oh, yes, yes.
Emma She doesn't write very much these days.
David I wish she'd write to me occasionally as well. I see so little of her. She's been working evenings, you see.
Emma Evenings, too?
David Well, they had a rush job. Her boss asked her if she'd... She got overtime, of course.
Emma That's nice.

Jenny enters

Jenny He threw a book at me.
Emma What's that, dear?
Jenny Father. He threw a book at me. I put my head round the door and said, "Hallo, Father. Tea's ready. Don't be long, will you?" And he threw a book at me.
Emma Now I did tell you, dear, not to go in there. He doesn't like it. He never did. Just a little knock and then very gently, "Tea's made, Father".

Jenny But I'm his daughter, Mother. His daughter. If I can't even call him for his tea...

David From what I've heard, it's a good job you're not his wife.

Emma Now that's an uncalled for remark, David. What did you mean by that?

David Nothing.

Jenny (*nervously*) He didn't mean anything, Mother. Nothing at all.

David Nothing.

Emma Well, this is going to be a happy evening. I won't have any of you spoiling it. That includes you, David. I know we must make allowances because of your nerves, but all the same.

Oliver enters

Oliver They're coming in. Very respectable. Fully clothed and playing football on the lawn.

Emma Not the side lawn.

Oliver That's the one.

Emma I hope they didn't disturb Father. It's right under his window.

Oliver He'd no doubt have made his feelings known, if they had.

Jenny Your tea, Oliver.

Emma Pass round the sandwiches, too, dear. We won't wait for the others. Where on earth is Polly?

David In the garden, I think. She went to look at—something.

Emma Went to look at what?

David (*guiltily*) The greenhouse.

Emma The greenhouse? What on earth did she want to look at in the greenhouse?

As David opens his mouth to reply, Deirdre enters

Deirdre Ta-ra! Everyone, a presentation ceremony. Come in, Jas.

James enters with a large bunch of flowers

Speech by Jas.

James (*sheepishly*) On behalf of us both, Mrs Gray, to wish you and your husband a very happy anniversary.

Emma Oh, how lovely.

Deirdre Happy Anniversary, Ma.

Emma (*touched*) How absolutely lovely. Look everyone, what... Oh, my God! They're Father's.

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