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SF PERUSALS

Day of Reckoning

A Play

Pam Valentine

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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ACT I

House lights dim. Sound of voices rising from chatter to crescendo. Firm rapping of a gavel

Pauline Ladies! Ladies, please!

The voices subside

...Thank you. Now, it's been a long—and I hope—fruitful evening. But we're all tired, tempers are getting a little frayed and I think we should get our diaries out, and fix a date for—what is it we're fixing a date for, Hon. Sec.?

Gloria Item fifty-three, Madam Chairperson. Fix date for first meeting of Summer Fête Committee. Sometime in January.

Pauline Thank you, Hon. Sec. Right then, ladies. A night in January that suits us all.

There is an immediate crescendo of voices giving nights when they cannot attend: "Thursdays no good", "I can't do Wednesdays", "Mondays are out", "It's patchwork on Fridays", "Tuesday's car maintenance", etc.

Sound of the gavel

Ladies! Ladies! Surely we can all find one night in January...

The CURTAINS *open*

SCENE 1

The village hall. The present

A hall of the old type. Drooping curtains at the rear conceal a platform. Cumbersome radiator is R. *The door* L *leads to the toilets and the kitchen. The door* R *leads to the car park. There is a window* L *with more drooping floral curtains. There is a notice board with many pieces of paper tacked up; trestle tables folded against a wall; a stack of chairs; here and there are remnants of Christmas: a drooping paper chain, a touch of tinsel, a sprig of dead holly*

Ethel Swift enters R. *She is a country woman of middle years, keeper of the village shop and fount of all local knowledge*

She switches on a light, looks round, shivers. She goes to the radiator, feels it and makes a noise of disgust. Goes to the trestle tables and drags one DL. *She attempts to erect it. Sings a doleful carol*

Ethel In the bleak mid-winter, frosty winds made moan. (*She tugs to release a table leg*)
Earth lay hard as iron, snow lay like a—bugger! (*She has caught her finger. She puts it in her mouth*)

We hear a motor bike revving outside. Puzzled, Ethel looks towards the door R. *The bike pulls away. The door* R *opens*

Angela Brownlee enters, hesitantly. This is her first committee meeting. She is an infant teacher in her twenties. Plain, shy, and longing to be loved

Angela Hallo, Mrs Swift! It's just started to... Oh! What have you done?
Ethel Caught me finger in this dratted table, Miss Brownlee, that's what I've done!
Angela Oh, poor you! I bet it ... you know... (*She makes an expression of pain*)
Ethel I shouldn't be surprised if the Youth Club hadn't been at them legs. Very funny they'd think that was.
Angela Oh, surely not...
Ethel They super glued the seat in the churchyard last summer. That one the old folk sit on to look down at the traffic on the bypass. We had to call the ambulance out to old Daddy Ludlow. Stuck fast, he was.

Angela is taking her coat off

I should keep that on if I were you. Them radiators is barely luke.
Angela I'm quite hot actually.
Ethel You do look a bit flushed. (*Casually*) Do you know I thought I heard a motorbike outside. Just before you came in...
Angela Oh! That was Raymond. Raymond Treadwell. He gave me a lift.
Ethel (*shocked*) Raymond Treadwell gave you a lift?
Angela He passed me as I was coming up Cherry Pie Hill. So he stopped and ... he had a spare helmet.
Ethel I'm sure he did. Look, Miss Brownlee, no offence, but you've not lived here long enough to know—it do not do to socialize with a Treadwell. Specially you being an infant teacher an' all.

Angela But he stopped and... I didn't want to be ... you know ... rude.
Ethel I'm not saying be rude! I'm saying have nothing to do with him. And what's he doing with a bike? He's only sixteen.
Angela Eighteen, actually.
Ethel Which makes it worse. (*Having succeeded with the table, she now puts chairs round*) Course, the trouble is you haven't made any friends in the village, have you?
Angela Not really. It's my fault. I'm so ... shy with people.
Ethel Not with the kiddies, you're not. I've seen 'em in the playground. Crawling all over you, they are.
Angela Oh, I'm all right with children. It's grown ups. I know what I want to say—in my head I hear myself saying it. Then I try to say it and I can't. That's why I've come on the Committee. To see if it'll help me to ... you know...
Ethel Well. If you want to say something tonight you say it. I know it's your first time and we all know each other and you're a stranger and you'll feel awkward when you speak but you say it.
Angela I'll try. People don't seem to see me...
Ethel Stick your hand up, then!
Angela Stick my hand up?
Ethel Yes. Like this. (*She gives a forceful salute*) See? Up! Right up!

Mavis Partridge enters R. *She is eighty-three, deaf when it suits her, a law unto herself and doesn't miss a trick. She has a large bag with knitting inside. She looks at Ethel's raised arm and copies her*

Mavis Heil Hitler. Cold i'n't it? I reckon me corsets have froze to me bum.
Ethel You should never have come out, Mavis, not on a night like this. Not with your chest.
Mavis Pardon?
Ethel Oh. We're having a deaf night.
Mavis I saw your lips move——
Ethel —But you didn't hear what I said.
Mavis But I didn't hear what you said. Think I'll go and spend a penny. 'Fore all the others get here. I never like going in front of the Vicar.
Ethel If he comes.
Mavis (*passing Angela*) Hallo, my duck. I didn't see you there.
Ethel This is Miss Brownlee, Mavis. She's the——
Mavis I'm not stopping long. There's snooker at eleven.

Mavis exits L. *to the toilets*

Angela Snooker?

Ethel You ought to see her watching American Football. She gets that worked up she throws herself out of her chair.
Angela How old is she?
Ethel Eighty-three. Eighty-four the day of the fête.
Angela Has she lived here long?
Ethel Always. And her family before her. You can't move in the churchyard without falling over a Partridge.

There is a persistent knocking on the door R

Angela I'll go!
Ethel Hang about! Hang about! It might be the Youth Club on the rampage. (*She goes to the door*) Who is it?
Sally (*off; calling*) It's I! Sally Martin. Do please open up. My arms are breaking.

Ethel opens the door

Sally Martin enters. An Army wife in her early forties. Immaculately casual. Confident and slightly condescending to other ranks. She carries a large object concealed in a blanket

Thank you, Mrs Swift. It's really beginning to come down out there, you know. (*She mock staggers to the table and deposits the object*) This would be a night when Colin's on manoeuvrers. I've had such a struggle. And after the most exhausting day. My cleaning lady went AWOL. Which made me late for my quilting class. Mad dash home, then off to my stint at the Oxfam Shop, then straight from there to that ghastly supermarket where four—four, mark you—checkouts were on the blink. Who'd be me? Oh! Hallo, Miss Brownlee, I didn't see you!
Ethel You've met, have you?

Angela opens her mouth but Sally beats her to it

Sally Oh yes, we're old chums. I pop in to the school and help with the slow readers...

She sees Ethel is tugging at the blanket tied round the large object

Oh! Mrs Swift! Do be careful!
Ethel (*hurt and huffy*) Only trying to help.
Sally (*redoing the blanket*) It's a rather lovely stone cherub. I bought him when we were stationed in Akrotiri.

Ethel Why ever have you brought him along tonight?
Sally Because one of those stupid oafs who are building our conservatory knocked the end off his arrow and I can't bear to look at him. Mrs Moxon can have him for the bric-à-brac stall.
Ethel Mrs Moxon's not coming tonight. And she's not doing the bric-à-brac neither.
Sally What?
Ethel She's starting B and B in May. Or so she says. I've told her folks nowadays expects en sweaty bathrooms but she won't have it.
Sally *Quelle disastre!* I wonder who we can possibly get to take her place...

Angela tentatively raises an arm and continues to jerk it up and down as Sally speaks

There's Cynthia Brinscombe ... she might do it ... unless they do get that Hong Kong posting ... she'd be marvellous ... none of this "Oh well, give me ten p then" nonsense... (*She becomes aware of Angela's arm*) Are you all right, dear?
Angela No. Yes. It's just if ... you know ... you can't find——

The door R *is thrown open. Gloria Pitt enters. She is a doctors' receptionist and Honorary Secretary to the fête committee, of middle to late years. Seemingly competent but actually clinging on by a thin thread. She brushes snow from her shoulders and looks towards Ethel*

Gloria Would you mind, Ethel?
Ethel (*darting forward*) Wheel it in, Gloria.

Gloria takes a newspaper from within her coat and hands it to Ethel who spreads the pages on the floor

Gloria exits and re-enters, wheeling a sit-up-and-beg bicycle. A basket strapped to the front contains an ancient and bulging briefcase

As Gloria speaks, she first removes and polishes her glasses, then divests herself of her anorak, scarf and woolly hat

Gloria What a night... Oh, hallo, Mrs Martin—I've had such a rush. I thought Surgery would never end. Everyone wanted to see Dr Summers. Nary a one could I persuade into young Dr O'Connor. And he's such a sweetie. Then the usual rush home to settle Mother, do her tray, leave everything to hand, then just as I was leaving, she said Sooty had gone missing, so it was hunt the cat for twenty minutes. And I went out of my

way to drop some pills into Mrs Partridge and she wasn't in. Oh! Hallo, Miss Brownlee! I didn't see you.

Ethel Mavis is here, Gloria. Been here ages.

Gloria (*looking round*) Where?

Angela Gosh! She went to the... Do you suppose she's all right?

Ethel Oh, yes, she'll be... (*She is struck by a sudden thought*) Why don't you pop and have a look? Only sometimes she nods off.

Sally In the loo?

Ethel She's eighty-three, Mrs Martin. She nods off wherever she's comfy. (*To Angela*) Go on, dear, run and see.

Angela (*thrilled*) Oh! Right.

Angela exits L.

Ethel watches her go then turns to the others

Ethel If you hear one word of gossip about that girl you're to knock it on the head.

Sally Gossip? What gossip? She couldn't say boo to a goose!

Ethel Then it's a pity she didn't say boo to Raymond Treadwell.

Gloria Oh dear.

Sally Which one of the Treadwells is he?

Ethel The one Vicar caught whipping the candles off the main altar.

Gloria It was during a power cut...

Ethel You'd see good in anyone, Gloria, you would.

Sally But—she's so timid, and shy, and ... plain.

Ethel Exactly, Mrs Martin, ripe for the plucking.

Gloria Probably nothing but silly rumour. You know what this village is like. Do you remember when——

Ethel Thank goodness it was dark...

Sally When?

Ethel Mm? Oh, when she got on his bike...

They all turn to Ethel, eager for more, Pauline Morris enters R. *Wife to the Reverend Geoffrey Morris and chairperson of the fête committee. In her fifties. She carries a capacious bag and has an air of distraction. As she speaks, she takes various items from the bag*

Pauline Hallo, everyone, sorry I'm late. We've got the grandchildren staying and I had to cook two suppers. Now they're watching something highly unsuitable on the box that they swear they're allowed to watch at home and quite honestly I was too tired to argue. They're up at the crack of dawn and permanently ravenous. It's all too much for poor Geoffrey, he spends most of the day locked in the study.

Ethel Locked in there now, is he?
Pauline (*instantly worried*) Isn't he here? He left a good ten minutes before me. Said he wanted some thinking time.
Ethel Oh well, I shouldn't worry. He's probably ... thinking.

Mavis and Angela enter L

Mavis And there weren't no proper roads in those days. Sea of mud it used to be most of the year. Mind you, it was safe to walk out at night, mud or no mud. Not like now. All this rape everywhere you look. You live alone, do you then?
Angela (*nervously*) Yes...
Mavis I hope you've got strong locks. Mind you, if they want to get in, they'll get in...
Gloria I called round to you with some pills, Mrs Partridge. How's the chest?
Mavis Pardon?
Gloria (*loudly*) How's the chest?
Mavis Nicely ta. I've not brought nothing up for at least a week. When are we starting? Cos I'm going once we've sorted out the bran tub. (*She sits next to the radiator*)
Pauline Is the bran tub far down on the agenda, Hon. Sec.?
Gloria Hang on... (*She tips a file on to the table, scattering papers. She takes one and searches down it*) Bran tub ... bran tub...
Pauline (*to Angela*) What a cold night for your first meeting. Are you full of bright ideas?

Angela opens her mouth to reply but Sally cuts in

Sally Pauline, do look! I'm giving this little chap to the bric-à-brac. (*She unties the blanket wrapped round the cherub*)
Gloria Here we are. Bran Tub. Item thirteen. It comes under...

The blanket falls. The cherub's back view is revealed. The ladies are looking at the front. The little chap is obviously male

...small attractions. (*She looks up and sees the cherub*)
Sally It's a Spanndic.
Ethel A what dick?
Sally Spanndic. A Danish sculptor of some repute. (*To the cherub*) You've lost your arrow, haven't you, pet?
Mavis He's got plenty of everything else.
Ethel Don't be coarse, Mavis.
Sally I was hoping Mrs Moxon could put him in her garage. Now he's

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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