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SF PERUSALS

A CHIP IN THE SUGAR

A Monologue from *Talking Heads*

by Alan Bennett

SAMUEL FRENCH

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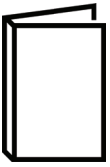
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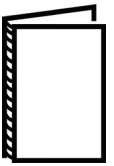
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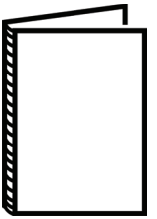
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Bennett was born in Leeds in 1934. After studying at Oxford University he collaborated as a writer and performer with Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook in *Beyond the Fringe* in 1960 at the Edinburgh Festival.

He then turned to writing full time and produced his first stage play *Forty Years On* in 1968. His other plays include *Getting On, Habeas Corpus, The Old Country, The Lady in the Van, A Question of Attribution, The Madness of George III* (together with the Oscar-nominated screenplay *The Madness of King George*), an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and *The History Boys*; as well as many television plays such as *A Day Out, Sunset across the Bay, A Woman of No Importance* and the series of monologues *Talking Heads* and *Talking Heads II*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"I didn't say anything": this is the phrase most often uttered by Graham, a middle-aged bachelor, in this acute study of a lonely and repressed life from Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* series. Emotionally retarded and chronically dependent on his mother, with whom he lives, Graham finds life difficult enough at the best of times; when Mother meets an old flame and seems set to marry him, however, Graham's old insecurities (Will he be parted from his mother? Is there someone watching the house?) rear their ugly heads again. Fate, eventually, rescues Graham and he resumes his normal life of banal muddle under his mother's amnesiac tyranny. This monologue represents Graham's obsessive outpourings, which are touching, amusing, and disturbing simultaneously and provide a major challenge for the actor.

Scenery
No attempt should be made to make the setting realistic. There should be no unnecessary decoration, and no furniture additional to that needed in the action.

Lighting
In order to avoid applause, the lights should fade between each section of the play, as indicated, but not to black-out, the only black-out being at the end of the play. The performer should be visible in the fade as sometimes there is relevant action between the scenes.

A CHIP IN THE SUGAR

First shown on BBC TV on 19 April 1988. The cast was as follows:

GRAHAM Alan Bennett

Directed by Stuart Burge
Produced by Innes Lloyd
Designed by Tony Burrough

Subsequently performed as part of the stage version of *Talking Heads*, which opened on 28 January 1992. The cast was as follows:

GRAHAM Alan Bennett

Directed by Alan Bennett
Designed by Simon Higlett

GRAHAM*'s bedroom.*

There is a bed, covered with a dull bedspread, a bedside table with a cup of tea on it, and a wardrobe. There are upright chairs downstage right and downstage left and a high armchair right. The walls are papered in a plain, dull fashion.

Music plays; as the curtain rises it fades.

GRAHAM*, a mild middle-aged man, sits in the armchair right.*

GRAHAM I'd just taken her tea up this morning when she said, "Graham, I think the world of you." I said, "I think the world of you." And she said, "That's all right then." I said, "What's brought this on?" She said, "Nothing. This tea looks strong, pull the curtains." Of course I knew what had brought it on. She said, "I wouldn't like you to think you're not Number One." So I said, "Well, you're Number One with me too. Give me your teeth. I'll swill them."

What it was we'd had a spot of excitement yesterday: we ran into a bit of Mother's past. I said to her, "I didn't know you had a past. I thought I was your past." She said, "You?" I said, "Well, we go back a long way. How does he fit in *vis-à-vis* Dad?" She laughed. "Oh, he was pre-Dad." I said, "Pre-Dad? I'm surprised you remember him, you don't remember to switch your blanket off."

She said, "That's different. His name's Turnbull." I said, "I know. He said."

I'd parked her by the war memorial on her usual seat while I went and got some reading matter. Then I waited while she went and spent a penny in the disabled toilet. She's not

actually disabled, her memory's bad, but she says she prefers their toilets because you get more elbow room. She always takes forever, diddling her hands and what not, and when she eventually comes back it turns out she's been chatting to the attendant. I said, "What about?" She said, "Hanging." She was in favour of stiffer penalties for minor offences and I thought, "Well, we know better, our Graham and me." I wish you'd been there, love; you could have given her the statistics, where are we going for our tea?'

The thing about Mam is that though she's never had a proper education, she's picked up enough from me to be able to hold her own in discussions about up-to-the-minute issues like the environment and the colour problem, and for a woman of her age and background she has a very liberal slant. She'll look at my *Guardian* and she actually thinks for herself. Doctor Chaudhury said to me, "Full marks, Graham. The best way to avoid a broken hip is to have a flexible mind. Keep up the good work."

They go mad round the war memorial so when we cross over I'll generally slip my arm through hers until we're safely across, only once we're on the pavement she'll postpone letting it go, because once upon a time we got stopped by one of these questionnaire women who reckons to take us for husband and wife. I mean, Mam's got white hair. She was doing this dodge and I said, "Mam, let go of my arm." I didn't really wrench it, only next thing I know she's flat on the pavement. I said, "Oh my God, Mother."

People gather round and I pick up her bag, and she sits up and says, "I've laddered both my stockings." I said, "Never mind your stockings, what about your pelvis?" She says, "It's these bifocals. They tell you not to look down. I was avoiding some sick." Somebody says, "That's a familiar voice," and there's a little fellow bending over her, green trilby hat, shorty raincoat. "Hallo," he says, "remember me?"

Well, she doesn't remember people, I know for a fact because she swore me down she'd never met Joy Buckle, who teaches

Rowers in Felt and Fabric at my day centre. I said, "You have met Joy, you knitted her a tea-cosy." That's all she can knit, tea cosies. And bed socks. Both outmoded articles. I said to her, "Branch out. If you can knit tea cosies you can knit skiing hats." She says, "Well, I will." Only I have to stand over her or else she'll still leave a hole for the spout. "Anyway," I said, "you do remember Joy because you said she had some shocking eyebrows." She said, "Well, I don't remember." And that's the way she is, she doesn't remember and here's this little fellow saying, "Do you remember me?" So I said, "No she won't. Come on, Mother. Let's get you up." Only she says, "Remember you? Of course. It's Frank Turnbull. It must be fifty years." He said, "Fifty-three. Filey. 1938." She said, "Sea-Crest." He said, "No sand in the bedrooms." And they both cracked out laughing.

Meanwhile she's still stuck on the cold pavement. I said, "Come along, Mother. We don't want piles." Only he butts in again. He says, "With respect, it's advisable not to move a person until it's been ascertained no bones are broken. I was in the St John's Ambulance Brigade." "Yes," said Mother, "and who did you learn your bandaging on?" And they both burst out laughing again. He had on these bright yellow gloves, could have been a bookie.

Eventually, I get my arms round her waist and hoist her up, only his lordship's no help as he claims to have a bad back. When I've finally got her restored to the perpendicular she introduces him. "This is Frank Turnbull, a friend of mine from the old days." What old days? First time I knew there were any old days. Turns out he's a gents' outfitter, semi-retired, shop in Bradford and some sort of outlet in Morecambe. I thought, "Well, that accounts for the yellow gloves."

Straight off he takes charge. He says, "What you need now, Vera, is a cup of coffee." I said, "Well, we were just going for some tea, weren't we, Mother?" Vera! Her name's not Vera. She's never been called Vera. My dad never called her

Vera, except just once, when they were wheeling him into the theatre. Vera. "Right," he says, "follow me." And puts his arm through hers. "Careful," she says. "You'll make my boyfriend jealous." I didn't say anything.

Pause.

Now the café we generally patronize is just that bit different. It's plain but it's classy, no cloths on the tables, the menu comes on a little slate and the waitresses wear their own clothes and look as if they're doing it just for the fun of it. The stuff's all homemade and we're both big fans of the date and walnut bread. I said, "This is the place." Mr Turnbull goes straight past. "No," he says, "I know somewhere, just opened. Press on."

Now, if there's one thing Mother and me are agreed on it's that red is a common colour. And the whole place is done out in red. Lampshades red. Waitresses in red. Plates red, and on the tables those plastic sauce dispenser things got up to look like tomatoes. Also red. And when I look there's a chip in the sugar. I thought, "Mother won't like this." "Oh," she says, "this looks cheerful, doesn't it, Graham?" I said, "There's a chip in the sugar." "A detail," he says, "they're still having their teething troubles. Is it three coffees?" I said, "We like tea," only Mother says, "No. I feel like a change. I'll have coffee." He gets hold of the menu and puts his hand on hers. "Might I advise," he says, "a cheeseburger?" She said, "Oh, what's that?" He said, "It's fresh country beef, mingled with golden-fried onions, topped off with toasted cheese served with french fries and lemon wedge." "Oh, lemon wedge," she says. "That sounds nice." I thought, "Well, I hope you can keep it down." Because it'll be the pizza saga all over again. One mouthful and at four o'clock in the morning I was still stuck at her bedside with the bucket. She said, "I like new experiences in eating. I had a pizza once, didn't I, Graham?" I didn't say anything.

They fetch the food and she's wiring in. He said, "Are you enjoying your cheeseburger?" She said, "I am. Would I be

mistaken in thinking that receptacle contains tomato sauce?" He said, "It is." She says, "Give us a squirt." They both burst out laughing. He said, "Glass cups, Graham. Be careful or we'll see up your nose." More laughter. She said, "Graham's quite refined. He often has a dry sherry."

"Well, he could do with smartening up a bit," Mr Turnbull said. "Plastic mac. He wants one of these quilted jobs, I've shifted a lot of those." "I don't like those quilted jobs," I said. "He sweats," Mother said. "There's no excuse for that in this day and age," Mr Turnbull said, "the range of preparations there are on the market. You want to invest in some roll-on deodorant." Everybody could hear. "And flares are anathema even in Bradford."

"Graham doesn't care, do you, Graham?" Mother said. "He reads a lot." "So what?" Mr Turnbull said. "I know several big readers who still manage to be men about town. Lovat green's a nice shade. I tell you this, Graham," he said, "if I were squiring a young lady like this around town I wouldn't do it in grey socks and sandals. These shoes are Italian. Feel." "I always think Graham would have made a good parson," Mother said, feeling his foot, "only he doesn't believe in God." "That's no handicap these days," Mr Turnbull said. "What do you do?"

"He's between jobs at present," Mother said. "He used to do soft toys for handicapped children. Then he was making paper flowers at one stage." I went to the toilet.

Pause.

When I came back he said, "I don't believe in mental illness. Nine times out of ten it's a case of pulling your socks up." I didn't say anything. Mother said, "Yes, well, I think the pendulum's gone too far." She didn't look at me. "It's like these girls, not eating," he said, "they'd eat if they'd been brought up like us, Vera, nothing to eat." "That's right," Mother said, "they have it too easy. Did you marry?" "Twice," he said. "I buried Amy last May. I was heartbroken but life has to go

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