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SF PERUSALS

BED AMONG THE LENTILS

A Monologue from *Talking Heads*

by Alan Bennett

SAMUEL FRENCH

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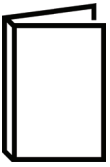
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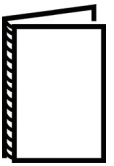
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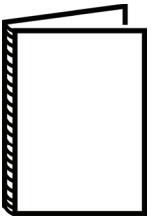
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

The set should be kept simple. There is no point in constructing an elaborate set (still less a series of sets) and just putting one person in the middle of it all. Less, in this case, is more; the simpler the setting, the more the audience is required to use its imagination and concentrate on the performer. If you want costumes and scenery do *Carousel*.

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BED AMONG THE LENTILS

First shown on BBC TV on 3 May 1988. The cast was as follows:

SUSAN	Maggie Smith

Directed by Alan Bennett
Produced by Innes Lloyd
Designed by Tony Burrough

Subsequently performed as part of the stage version of *Talking Heads*, which opened on 7 June 1996, at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester, transferring to the Comedy Theatre, London. The cast was as follows:

SUSAN	Maggie Smith

Directed by Alan Bennett
Designed by Simon Higlett

The kitchen. Morning.

There is an upright chair, another chair and a dresser, but no elaborate furnishings.

Music. The lights come up.

SUSAN *sits in the upright chair. She is a vicar's wife and is dressed accordingly. She is thin and nervous. (N.B. She is not drunk at any point in the play).*

The music fades.

SUSAN Geoffrey's bad enough but I'm glad I wasn't married to Jesus. The lesson this morning was the business in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prays and the disciples keep falling asleep. He wakes them up and says, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" It's my mother.

I overslept this morning, flung on a cardigan and got there just as everybody was standing up. It was Holy Communion so the militants were out in force, the sub-zero temperature in the side-chapel doubtless adding to the attraction.

Geoffrey kicks off by apologising for his failure to defrost the church. *(Subdued merriment)* Mr Medlicott has shingles, Geoffrey explains, and, as is well known, has consistently refused to initiate us lesser mortals into the mysteries of the boiler. *(Helpless laughter)*

Mrs Belcher read the lesson. Mr Belcher took the plate round. "Big day for you," I said to them afterwards.

The sermon was about sex. I didn't actually nod off, though I have heard it before. Marriage gives the OK to sex is the gist of it, but while it is far from being the be all and end all (you can say that again) sex is nevertheless the supreme

joy of the married state and a symbol of the relationship between us and God. So, Geoffrey concludes, when we put our money in the plate it is a symbol of everything in our lives we are offering to God and that includes our sex. I could only find 10p.

Thinking about the sermon during the hymn I felt a pang of sympathy for the Deity, gifted with all this sex. No fun being made a present of the rare and desiccated conjunctions that take place between Geoffrey and me. Or the frightful collisions that presumably still occur between the Belchers. Not to mention whatever shamefaced fumblings go on between Miss Budd and Miss Bantock. "It's all right if we offer it to God, Alice." "Well, if you say so, Pauline."

Amazing scenes at the church door. Geoffrey had announced that after Easter the bishop would be paying us a visit so the fan club were running round in small circles, Miss Frobisher even going so far as to squeeze my elbow. Meanwhile, Geoffrey stands there, the wind billowing out his surplice and ruffling his hair, what "Who's Who in the Diocese of Ripon" calls "his schoolboy good looks". I helped put away the books while he did his "underneath this cassock I am but a man like anybody else" act. "Such a live wire," said Mrs Belcher, "really putting the parish on the map." "That's right", burbles Mrs Shrubsole, looking at me. "We must cherish him."

We came back and I cherished him with some chicken wings in a tuna fish sauce. He said, "That went down well." I said, "The chicken wings?" He said, "My sermon. I felt it hit the nail on the head." He put his hand over mine, hoping, I suppose, that having hit one nail he might hit another, but I said I had to go round with the parish magazine. "Good girl," he said. "I can attack my paperwork instead."

Roads busy. Sunday afternoon. Families having a run out. Wheeling the pram, walking the dog. Living. Almighty God unto whom all hearts be open, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the

inspiration of thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy glorious name and not spend our Sunday afternoons parked in a lay-by on the Ring Road wondering what happened to our life.

When I got back Geoffrey was just off to Evensong, was I going to come? When I said "No" he said, "Really? Then I'd better pretend you have a headache."

Why? One of the unsolved mysteries of life, or the unsolved mysteries of my life, is why the vicar's wife is expected to go to church at all. A barrister's wife doesn't have to go to court, an actor's wife isn't at every performance, so why have I always got to be on parade? Not to mention the larger question of whether one believes in God in the first place. It's assumed that being the vicar's wife one does but the question has never actually come up, not with Geoffrey anyway. I can understand why, of course. To look at me, the hair, the flat chest, the wan smile, you'd think I was just cut out for God. And maybe I am. I'd just like to have been asked that's all. Not that it matters of course. So long as you can run a tight jumble sale you can believe in what you like.

It could be that Geoffrey doesn't believe in God either. I've always longed to ask him only God never seems to crop up. "Geoffrey," I'd say. "Yes, Susan?" "Do you really believe in God? I mean, cards on tables, you don't honestly, do you? God's just a job like any other. You've got to bring home the bacon somehow." But no. Not a word. The subject's never discussed.

After he'd gone I discovered we were out of sherry so I've just been round to the off licence. The woman served me. Didn't smile. I can't think why. I spend enough.

Music. The lights fade.

SUSAN *exits. She puts on a coat or pinny and collects an altar candlestick and cloth. She re-enters and starts to polish the candlestick.*

The lights come up on the same setting. The music fades. Afternoon.

We were discussing the ordination of women. The bishop asked me what I thought. Should women take the services? So long as it doesn't have to be me, I wanted to say, they can be taken by a trained gorilla. "Oh yes," Geoffrey chips in, "Susan's all in favour. She's keener than I am, aren't you, darling?" "More sprouts anybody?" I said.

On the young side for a bishop, but he's been a prominent sportsman at university so that would explain it. Boxing or rugby. Broken nose at some stage anyway. One of the "Christianity is common sense" brigade. Hobby's bricklaying apparently and refers to me throughout as "Mrs Vicar". Wants beer with his lunch and Geoffrey says he'll join him so this leaves me with the wine. Geoffrey's all over him because the rumour is he's shopping round for a new Archdeacon. Asks Geoff how outgoing I am. Actually says that. "How outgoing is Mrs Vicar?" Mr Vicar jumps in with a quick rundown of my accomplishments and an outline of my punishing schedule. On a typical day, apparently, I kick off by changing the wheel on the Fiesta, then hasten to the bedside of a dying pensioner, after which, having done the altar flowers and dispensed warmth and appreciation to sundry parishioners en route, I top off a thrill-packed morning by taking round Meals on Wheels… "somehow – and this to me is the miracle," says Geoffrey – "somehow managing to rustle up a delicious lunch in the interim", the miracle somewhat belied by the flabby lasagne we are currently embarked on. "The ladies," says the bishop. "Where would we be without them?"

Disaster strikes as I'm doling out the tinned peaches: the jug into which I've decanted the Carnation milk gets knocked over, possibly by me. Geoffrey, for whom turning the other cheek is part of the job, claims it caught his elbow and his lordship takes the same line, insisting he gets doused in Carnation milk practically every day of his life. Still, when

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