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SF PERUSALS

A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

A Monologue from *Talking Heads*

by Alan Bennett

SAMUEL FRENCH

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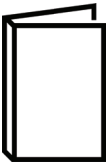
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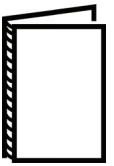
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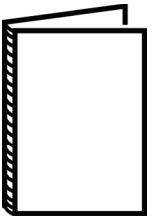
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

First shown on BBC TV on 19th November 1982. The cast was as follows:

PEGGY	Patricia Routledge

Directed by Giles Foster
Produced by Innes Lloyd
Designed by Vic Meredith

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

PEGGY	Patricia Routledge

Directed by Alan Bennett
Designed by Simon Higlett

At the back of the stage is a flat, plain but with, perhaps, a dado rail to suggest a hospital. A locker stands in front of the flat, to the right, with a vase of anemones and several 'Get Well' cards face down on it. There is a radiator downstage left. A plain upright chair—which should not look out of place in the home or in a hospital—is placed centre.

PEGGY *is a middle-aged woman. She sits on the chair, her handbag on her lap, facing the audience.*

PEGGY I was all right on the Monday. I was all right on the Tuesday. And I was all right on the Wednesday until lunchtime, at which point all my nice little routine went out of the window.

Normally, i.e. provided Miss Hayman isn't paying us one of her state visits, come half-past twelve and I'm ready to down tools and call it a morning. I put on a lick of paint, slip over and spend a penny in Costing—I should technically use the one in Records but I've told them, that lavatory seat is a death trap. And I'm not ringing up again. 'Try a bit of sellotape.' What are they paid for? I'll then rout out Miss Brunskill from four-o-two and we'll meander gently over for our midday meal. But you just have to hit it right because, give it another five minutes, and believe me, that canteen is dog eat dog.

However, if you can manage to nip in before the avalanche you have the pick of the tables and there's still a semblance of hygiene. Our particular stamping ground is just the other side of the bamboo framework thing they tried to grow ivy up. It's what Miss Brunskill calls 'our little backwater'. We're more or less fixtures there and have been for yonks. In fact Mr Skidmore came by with his tray last week just

as we were concluding our coffee and he said, 'Well, girls, fancy seeing you!' We laughed. Girls! Mr Skidmore generally gravitates to the table in the far corner under that silly productivity thermometer-type thing. 'Export or Die!' It's actually broken—stuck anyway—but it's where management tend to foregather since we've had this absurd 'All Barriers Down' policy. Once upon a time management had tables roped off. That's gone, only they still congregate there. 'Huddling together for warmth,' Mr Rudyard calls it. I said to Mr Cress well, 'You can tell who's an activist'. We laughed, because anybody more conformist than Mr Rudyard you couldn't want, and he has beautiful fingernails. Of course once the management started frequenting that particular table sure enough Miss Hayman and the Personnel brigade pitch camp next door. And she'll turn around and chat to Mr Skidmore over the back of her chair. She never used to have all that hair.

Our table though we're very much the happy family. There's me, Miss Brunskill, Mr Cresswell and Mr Rudyard, Pauline Lucas, who's ex-Projects…to tell the truth she's still Projects, only she's in Presentation wearing her Projects hat. Then there's Trish Trotter (when she's not in one of her 'bit of cheese and an apple' phases); Joy Pedley pays us the occasional visit, but by and large that's the hard core. Trish Trotter is the only one with a right weight problem but we're all salad fanatics and keep one another in line. I have to watch my stomach anyway and salad suits Miss Brunskill because she's a big Christian Scientist. But to add that bit of excitement I bring along some of my home-made French dressing. Mr Cresswell keeps pestering me to give Mr Rudyard what he calls 'the secret formula'. He's a keen cook, Mr Rudyard. Little moustache, back like a ramrod, you'd never guess it. I pretend there's a mystery ingredient and won't let on. We laugh.

People are a bit envious of us, I know. I ran into Mr McCorquodale the other day when we were both queueing in (guess!) Accounts and he said 'You do seem to have a

good time on your table, Peggy. What do you talk about?' And I didn't know. I mean, what do we talk about? Pauline's mother keeps getting a nasty rash that affects her elbows and we'd been discussing that. Mr Cresswell and Mr Rudyard were going in for some new curtains for their lounge and were debating about whether to have Thames Green. And I was saying if Thames Green was the green I thought it was I liked it in a front door but wasn't keen on it in curtains. So that made for some quite lively discussion. And Trish Trotter had got hold of some new gen on runner beans as part of a calorie-controlled diet, and we kicked that around for a bit. But honestly, that was all it was. I don't know what we do talk about half the time! My secret is, I don't talk about myself. When Joy Pedley went to Thirsk on a 'Know Your Client' course that was apparently the whole gist of it: concentrate on the other person. I said, 'Well, I've no need to go to Thirsk to learn that. It's something I've been born with.' We laughed.

Once we've lined up our eats and got the table organized Miss B. gets her nose into her crossword while I scan the horizon for the rest of the gang. I have to be on my toes because there's always some bright spark wanting to commandeer them and drag them off elsewhere. I don't think people like to see other people enjoying themselves, basically. Take Pauline Lucas. The other day, she came in with young Stuart Selby. He's ginger, and when Mr Oyston went up into Accounts and Mrs Ramaroop moved to Keighley, Stuart did a bit of a dog's hind leg and got into Costing. Him and Pauline were making a bee-line for the window, which is in the Smoking area. Now Pauline doesn't smoke, in fact rather the reverse. So I sang out, 'You're not deserting us, are you, Pauline? Fetch Stuart over here. See how the other half lives!' So she did. Only halfway he ran into Wendy Walsh and it ended up just being me and Pauline. I said to her, 'That was a narrow escape.' She said, 'Yes'. We laughed. Her acne's heaps better.

And then look at Mr Cresswell and Mr Rudyard. It's the biggest wonder last week they didn't get sat with the truck drivers. They were dawdling past with their trays and there was room but luckily I just happened to be going past *en route* for some coffee and saw which way the wind was blowing and rescued them in the nick of time. I said, "You two! You don't know you're born!' They laughed.

However, as I say, on this particular Wednesday I'm in the office, it's half-past twelve and I'm just thinking, 'Time you were getting your skates on, Peggy,' when suddenly the door opens and nobody comes in. I didn't even look up. I just said, 'Yes, Mr Slattery?' He was on his hands and knees with a pro forma in his mouth. Anybody else would have got up. Not him. He crawls up to me, pretending to be a dog and starts begging, this bit of paper in his mouth! I thought, 'You're a grown man. You've got a son at catering college; your wife's in and out of mental hospital and you're begging like a dog.' I enjoy a joke, but I didn't laugh.

Surprise, surprise he's after a favour. The bit of paper is the Squash Ladder. Would I run him off two dozen copies? I said, 'Yes. By all means. At two o'clock.' He said, 'No. Now.' Wants to put them round in the lunch hour. I said, 'Sorry, no can do.' I haven't forgotten the works outing. Running around with that thing on his head. He was like a crazed animal. I said, 'Anybody with an atom of consideration would have come down earlier. Squash Ladder! It's half-past twelve.' He said, 'It's not for me.' I said, 'Who's it for?' He said, 'Mr Skidmore.'

Pause.

Well, as luck would have it I hadn't actually switched the machine off. And, knowing Trevor Slattery, Mr Skidmore had probably asked him to do it first thing and he'd only just got round to it. I know Mr Skidmore, courtesy is his middle name. But it did mean I didn't get out of the office until twenty to, by which time of course there's no Miss Brunskill.

Any delay and La Brunskill's off like a shot from a gun, plastic hip or no plastic hip.

By this time of course the canteen is chock-a-block. I was five minutes just getting inside the door, and if I'd waited for a please or thank you I'd be stood there yet. They looked to be about to introduce martial law around the salad bowl so I thought, 'Little adventure, I'll opt for the hot dish of the day, steak bits or chicken pieces.' I knew the woman doling it out because she gets on the fifty-six. She's black but I take people as they come, and seeing it was me she scrapes me up the last of the steak bits. I topped it off with some mushrooms, and trust me if I didn't get the last of the yogurts as well. I heard someone behind me say, 'Damn.' I laughed.

I beetled over to our table but no Pauline, no Mr Cresswell and no Mr Rudyard. It's a cast of unknowns and only Miss Brunskill that I recognize. I said, 'Didn't you save me a place?' She said, 'I thought you'd been and gone.' Been and gone? How could I have been and gone, she knows I'm meticulous. But I just said, 'Oh' rather pointedly, and started touring round.

Eventually I pinpoint Pauline sat with little Stuart Selby, only there's no room there either. 'Scattered to the four winds today, Pauline,' I said. 'Yes,' she said, and he laughed. I see she's starting another spot.

I trek over to the far side and blow me if Mr Cresswell and Mr Rudyard aren't sat there with all the maintenance men, some of them still in their overalls. Mr Cresswell is smoking between courses, something he never does with us, a treacle sponge just stuck there, waiting. Mr Rudyard is having a salad and I wave my jar of French dressing in case he wants some but he doesn't see me because for some reason he's not wearing his glasses.

Just then I spot somebody vacating a place up at the top end. I say, 'Room for a little one?', only nobody takes on. They're young, mostly from Design, moustaches and those

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