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# IMPROBABLE FICTION

A Comedy

by Alan Ayckbourn

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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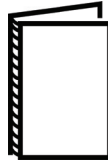


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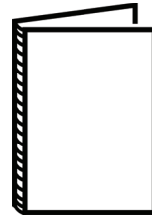
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alan Ayckbourn has worked in theatre as a playwright and director for over fifty years, rarely if ever tempted by television or film, which perhaps explains why he continues to be so prolific. To date he has written more than 79 plays, many one act plays and a large amount of work for the younger audience. His work has been translated into over 35 languages, is performed on stage and television throughout the world and has won countless awards.

Major successes include: *Relatively Speaking*, *How the Other Half Loves*, *Absurd Person Singular*, *Bedroom Farce*, *A Chorus of Disapproval*, and *The Norman Conquests*. In recent years, there have been revivals of *Season's Greetings* and *A Small Family Business* at the National theatre, in the West End *Absent Friends*, *A Chorus of Disapproval*, *Relatively Speaking* and *How the Other Half Loves*. In 2015, Chichester mounted a very successful revival of *Way Upstream*.

Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph theatre from 1972 – 2009 where almost all his plays have been first staged, he continues to direct his latest new work there. In recent years, he has been inducted into American Theatre's Hall of Fame, received the 2010 Critics' Circle Award for Services to the Arts and became the first British playwright to receive both Olivier and Tony Special Lifetime Achievement Awards. He was knighted in 1997 for services to the theatre.

Image credit: Andrew Higgins.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

After a lifetime of playwriting (I first started as an unpublished writer at the age of ten!) my career has moved steadily forward from the status of untried tyro through to establishment figure to ageing experimentalist!

The work has reflected this. From the early tried and tested plays, (*Relatively Speaking*, *How the Other Half Loves*, *The Norman Conquests*, etc.) which thankfully people still seem happy to produce and come to see, through the middle period, larger scale so called “social” pieces (*Man of the Moment*, *A Chorus of Disapproval*) to the more recent smaller scale departures such as *Private Fears in Public Places*, *Snake in the Grass* and *Haunting Julia*, I have continued to experiment with shape and form, whilst I hope continuing to deepen my characters.

Throughout this, though, I have always needed to remind myself of the overriding prime directive drummed into me at an early age by my mentor, Stephen Joseph, that above all else a playwright is a storyteller.

To keep an audience in their seats you need to involve them in a constantly unfolding series of unexpected twists and turns. These can, of course, be the narrative of the story itself as in *Relatively Speaking* or, as with *Woman in Mind* say, through the psychological development of the characters.

One of the nicest things people can ever say to me, coming out of a new play for the first time of seeing it, is “Well, I never saw THAT coming!”

Alan Ayckbourn

## **IMPROBABLE FICTION**

First presented at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough,  
on 26th May 2005, with the following cast:

**ARNOLD**

John Branwell

**ILSA**

Laura Doddington

**BREVIS**

Terence Booth

**VIVVI**

Claire Swinburne

**CLEM**

Giles New

**JESS**

Becky Hindley

**GRACE**

Eileen Batty

Directed by Alan Ayckbourn

Designed by Roger Glossop

Lighting by James Famcombe

Music by Denis King

## CHARACTERS

### *Members of the Pendon Writers' Circle*

**ARNOLD HASSOCK**, chairman, shop assistant (factual), late forties

**JESS BALES**, farmer (historical romance), forties

**GRACE SIMS**, housewife (children's fiction), forties

**VIVVI DICKINS**, journalist (crime fiction), thirties

**CLEM PEPP**, council worker (science fiction), thirties

**BREVIS WINTERTON**, retired schoolteacher (musical adaptations),  
sixties

**ILSA WOLBY**, shop assistant, about eighteen

The action takes place in the hall of Arnold's family home on the outskirts of a small country town.

Time - the present, more or less.

## MUSIC

The music for the song *Light at the End of the Tunnel* by Denis King is available on hire from Samuel French Ltd.

“If this were played upon a stage now,  
I could condemn it as an improbable fiction”

*Twelfth Night*, Act III Scene Four

## ACT I

*The hall/sitting room of **ARNOLD**'s and his mother Elaine Hassock's home. The present, more or less. A week or so before Christmas, around 7 p.m.*

*It is a large twenties/thirties suburban, stockbroker mock-Tudor house on the outskirts of a small country town. Filled with sturdy furniture and uninteresting pictures, it was probably once very splendid, but is neglected of late. It has probably not altered much since the Hassocks first moved in nearly half a century ago.*

*It is a large open hall with a staircase to a first floor short gallery above, which leads, in turn, to the bedrooms. At ground level, there is a front door opening directly on to the driveway with a set of hooks beside it, a doorway to the rest of the house (hereafter referred to as the "dining-room doorway") and another, more modest doorway, leading to the "below stairs" area, the kitchen, etc. Among the furnishings are a number of chairs, armchairs, that clearly belong in the room, plus a few extra upright chairs imported from the dining-room. These are arranged into a rough circle as if a meeting is soon expected. Seating is currently available for nine people. There is also a solid sideboard with a modern phone on it, occasional tables and, in one corner, a small grand piano. There is little or no sign that it is the festive season.*

*At the start the lights are on.*

*After a moment, **ARNOLD**, a mild, ineffectual, pleasant-natured man in his late forties, enters from the upper gallery and starts to come downstairs.*

**ARNOLD** (*as he does so, calling to someone upstairs*) ...all right, Mother. I'm just popping downstairs... She'll be here in a minute. I say, she'll be here in a minute... (*Looking at his watch; to himself*) At least, I hope she'll be here in a minute, anyway. (*He stops in the centre of the circle of chairs and inspects the seating arrangement. To himself*) Now... How many are we? (*Counting on his fingers*) Let's see, yours truly, Brevis, Jess...four, five...seven, eight, nine, ten... Ten of us. And we've got...let's see... (*Starting to count the chairs in the circle, deliberately*) ...One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, te— ...no, I've counted that one already... (*Starting again*) ...One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, ni— ...now, have I counted that one or haven't I? (*Starting yet again*) One, two...come along get it together, Arnold...one, two...

*The doorbell rings. A cheery ding-dong, not quite in keeping with the house.*

(*hurrying to open the front door*) Oh, thank goodness... (*As he opens it*) Come in! Come in! Come in, Ilsa!

*He admits ILSA, a girl of about eighteen from the local village, rosy-cheeked from the cold. She has on her winter coat and jeans beneath. She carries a motorbike helmet and a carrier bag.*

**ILSA** (*a local accent*) 'Evening, Arnold.

**ARNOLD** Good evening, Ilsa. Come on in, you must be frozen.

**ILSA** Bit cold, yes.

**ARNOLD** Kevin give you a lift, did he?

**ILSA** Yes. He's going off to see his nan as usual. (*Calling back through the door, waving, mouthing*) 'Bye! See you later, Kev! Give her my love!

*The sound of a motorbike roaring off.*

**ARNOLD** He's a good lad, isn't he, Kevin? Considerate.

**ILSA** Kev likes his nan. He gets on with her fine. (*She starts to unbutton her coat*)

**ARNOLD** (*shutting the front door*) That's nice.

**ILSA** Interesting, that.

**ARNOLD** What's that?

**ILSA** How you can sometimes, you know, get on better with your grandparents than you do with your own parents. Interesting that. Like it skips a generation. I mean, I say things to my gran who's – I don't know – quite old really, about seventy, you know, that I'd never dream of saying to my mum. Not in a million years, I wouldn't. Interesting that.

**ARNOLD** Maybe your gran's got more time for you. Maybe your mum's a bit busy.

**ILSA** You can say that again. Never stops, she doesn't. No, I usually get on better with older people, don't know why.

**ARNOLD** Except for Kevin of course.

**ILSA** I don't count Kev. He's quite old, anyway. He's nearly thirty.

**ARNOLD** Well...

**ILSA** Cradle-snatcher, that's what my mum calls him. How's your mum this evening? Still the same, is she?

**ARNOLD** Still the same.

**ILSA** No, well, you don't get better, do you, not from that. Once you've lost it, you've lost it for good. That's what they say, don't they?

**ARNOLD** Probably.

**ILSA** My Uncle Ben, he had it. Wandered round the village with no clothes on.

**ARNOLD** Oh, dear.

**ILSA** Thank your lucky stars she's bed-ridden... At least your mum won't be doing that. (*Surveying the seating layout*)

Got everything ready, have you? For your meeting? (*Moving to the kitchen door with her coat and belongings*) I'll just put these away. Then I'll give you a hand, Arnold.

**ARNOLD** (*indicating the hooks inside the front door*) You can leave those here, Ilsa.

**ILSA** (*as she goes*) No, you'll need those, I'll leave these in the kitchen. You've got all those people coming. You'll need your hooks.

**ILSA** *goes off.*

**ARNOLD** There'll still be room for... (*Giving up*) Oh, well. (*Returning to the chairs again*) One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine...ten. No, *not* ten. That's one again. (*Starting again*) Try it backwards...nine, eight, seven – why can't I get this? – nine...eight...seven...

**ILSA** *returns with her carrier bag.*

**ILSA** You want any more chairs fetching, Arnold?

**ARNOLD** What? Oh. Six. No. Forgotten. What?

**ILSA** Have you got enough chairs, have you?

**ARNOLD** I've no idea, I was just trying to count them, Ilsa.  
How many seats there, do you reckon?

**ILSA** (*after a split-second pause*) Nine.

**ARNOLD** We need one more then.

**ILSA** I'll get it.

**ARNOLD** We need ten. Probably.

**ILSA** (*heading off*) Dining-room.

**ILSA** *goes off to the dining-room.*

*The sound of thumping from the floor above.*

**ARNOLD** (*calling, up the stairs*) All right, Mother, just a minute!  
(*Regarding the chairs*) No, the trick, of course, is when

you're counting not to stand in the middle. The trick is to stand on the outside and count.

*ILSA returns with another chair.*

**ILSA** What's that?

**ARNOLD** I'm just saying, I should have stood on the outside.

**ILSA** Right, probably. (*Placing her chair*) Ten. There you are. Want me to make your coffee at half-time, do you?

**ARNOLD** Now, you mustn't keep doing that, Ilsa. It's very kind of you but you're here to sit with Mother, not run after us.

**ILSA** No trouble, doesn't take a sec. I'll just creep through, won't disturb you. She'll be asleep, time you want it. I'll read to her. That always sends her to sleep, the speed I read at.

**ARNOLD** I don't know where you find the patience. I've tried reading to her but it's hopeless. By the time I get to the end of the first paragraph, she's forgotten the title of the story.

**ILSA** No, well. It's not really the story, is it? She just likes to know you're there. Perhaps I should read her one of yours?

**ARNOLD** No, Ilsa, I've told you, I don't write stories.

**ILSA** You're a writer, though?

**ARNOLD** Of sorts, yes.

**ILSA** So you could do. If you wanted to. Write stories.

**ARNOLD** No, no. My sort of writing, it's... Well, I'm only part time, of course... It's more – practical writing, you see. Instruction booklets and so on, you know. Actually, I'm doing quite a lot of instruction books these days. I think I may have nearly cornered the market.

**ILSA** They're important, aren't they? Instruction books? We need booklets.

**ARNOLD** We do.

**ILSA** Vital. Blow yourself up, otherwise.

**ARNOLD** Some of them are written...well, I suppose it's English... of sorts... "strike manfully with palm of fist" ...I had to make sense of that the other day... "jump up excitedly until fizzy", that was another one. I mean, people could have trouble interpreting those. Could lead to accidents.

**ILSA** Especially if they're old folk.

**ARNOLD** Especially if they're any age.

**ILSA** Anyway you're a writer. That's the point.

**ARNOLD** Well, I'm a renderer of English. Let's put it that way.

**ILSA** You're too modest, Arnold. Better than me. I admire anyone who can write. Think of it. All of you, sitting here. All writers.

**ARNOLD** In our different ways.

**ILSA** Do they get a lot of it – like – published in books, do they?

**ARNOLD** Well – not as much as some of them would like to. But the joy is in the writing, really, Ilsa. And some of them are really – very...much more than I am.

**ILSA** There you go again. You're the chairman, aren't you?

**ARNOLD** True. The chair, yes.

**ILSA** Then stop running yourself down. You're the chairman.

**ARNOLD** The chair, yes. One or two of them prefer it if I call myself the chair.

**ILSA** So you're the best then, if you're the chairman?

**ARNOLD** No, it really doesn't work like that, Ilsa. I'm the chair, mainly because – other people don't really fancy doing it – or don't have a lot of time – and, I suppose, I'm quite good at organising guest speakers and – generally making lists...

**ILSA** And you've got this nice big house for you all to meet in.

**ARNOLD** Yes, I think that probably has a lot to do with it, too. A house that costs a fortune to heat. Ought to sell it really. Only, of course, she – Mother, wouldn't hear of it. When

you've lived somewhere for nearly fifty years of your life, I suppose...

**ILSA** ...memories...

**ARNOLD** Oh, she's plenty of those. My father, of course. She remembers him very clearly. I hear her talking to him some nights. She's quite clear and rational then. Like he's really there in the room with her. First time I heard her, I got out of bed to see if there wasn't someone there. Of course, there wasn't. Just in her mind, you know. But – it's like her whole life's unravelling, if you know what I mean. Her childhood, her marriage, her youth. Odd. Me, I can hardly remember last month.

**ILSA** Last month! I can't remember last week. Nice for her, though, to be able to remember. Like an old photo album, isn't it?

**ARNOLD** Did your uncle remember at all?

**ILSA** Uncle Ben? No, he didn't remember anything. He was just grumpy as hell. Kept taking off his clothes.

**ARNOLD** Oh, dear...

**ILSA** Relief to us all when he went, I can tell you. But with people like you...anyway it's different, isn't it?

**ARNOLD** How do you mean?

**ILSA** Well, you've got your imagination, haven't you? To fall back on? You can make up worlds of your own, can't you? You don't need to remember. You can just make them up for yourself, if you want to, can't you? See what I mean?

**ARNOLD** Yes, I take your point, Ilsa, but creative writing is largely based on memory, of course. I mean, when you say making it up – it's not totally original. It's more a – fusion – a reorganising of past memories – our own – sometimes other people's, even—

**ILSA** You mean you steal them?

**ARNOLD** No, no, no. Well, occasionally we do. Shall we say inadvertently borrow them. But normally, you have an experience in your life and then – as – as an artist – you – re-interpret that experience. Into something other. Hopefully higher.

**ILSA** (*impressed*) Brilliant. Is that what you do, then?

**ARNOLD** No, I keep saying, Ilsa, I just try to make sense of foreign instruction booklets, that's all. To be honest, the sad truth is that I've got as much creative imagination as that doorknob. And that's the truth.

**ILSA** Rubbish.

**ARNOLD** Look, some people when they're woken up in the night by banging, they hear burglars – or they hear ghosts – or the central heating boiler about to explode. They hear all manner of things. Me? All I hear is banging. Pure and simple.

**ILSA** Well, I think you're all right. You're very nice, as well.

**ARNOLD** Yes, well, that's kind of you to say so, Ilsa. Unfortunately, niceness has very little correlation to creativity, alas.

**ILSA** Right.

*The sound of more thumping on the floor above.*

**ARNOLD** (*calling up the stairs again*) Just a minute, Mother! Ilsa's just coming!

**ILSA** I'd best get up there. (*Remembering her carrier*) Oh, look, I nearly forgot. You've got no Christmas decorations again, have you? You didn't last year either. Look, I bought you something, Arnold. Here. (*She produces a very small artificial Christmas tree in a plastic pot*) There! For you.

**ARNOLD** (*quite touched*) Oh, that's lovely, Ilsa. Thank you.

**ILSA** (*fiddling with the base of the pot*) Look! Look! Wait! See? (*Switching it on*) Isn't that great? Look!

*The tree is illuminated with tiny lights.*

ARNOLD Oh! Just look at that!

ILSA (*handing him the tree*) Got it in Christmas Novelties.

ARNOLD You shouldn't have.

ILSA Don't worry, I used my staff card. Got my discount.

ARNOLD Quite right, too. Well, thank you, Ilsa. I'm very, very touched.

ILSA You deserve it. Ten days till Christmas, you need something. You were right. Useful, those staff cards, aren't they? Got all my presents from Cresswell's, this year. Practically. You get all yours there, did you?

ARNOLD No, well, I don't have – that many to get really. Another bedjacket for Mother but apart from that... Not that she ever wears them. She just flings them off... Now, I should have bought you something, Ilsa.

ILSA Me? No... I don't need presents. Not from you. Just glad to help, that's all.

*ILSA smiles at him. ARNOLD smiles back. A moment. It is interrupted by more thumping from above.*

Whoops! There she goes again!

ARNOLD Look, why don't you put this upstairs in Mother's room?

ILSA In her room?

ARNOLD Be nice for her.

ILSA It's for you.

ARNOLD Yes, I know. But that way we can both enjoy it.

ILSA (*just a fraction disappointed*) Right. OK, then. (*She takes the tree back from him and starts up the stairs*)

ARNOLD (*aware he may have offended ILSA slightly*) You ought to – you ought to sit in on our meeting one night, Ilsa.

ILSA Me?

ARNOLD I'm sure we could find someone to be with Mother, just for—

ILSA You're joking. Me? Sitting with all those intellectuals?

ARNOLD Hardly.

ILSA (*continuing up the stairs*) Wouldn't understand a word you're all talking about, would I?

ARNOLD I don't see why not. We're hardly—

*The doorbell chimes.*

Aha! Here they all come. Why don't you stay and...

*But ILSA has hurried up the stairs and off.*

ARNOLD *opens the front door.*

*It is JESS, forties, with a healthy outdoor glow. She is dressed in casual farmer's gear with a worn sheepskin jacket. She has a briefcase.*

Good evening, Jess. Glad you could make it. How are you?

JESS All right. How are you, Arnold?

ARNOLD Pretty fair, pretty fair.

JESS Your mum any better?

ARNOLD Much the same. We were just saying—

JESS (*removing her coat; cheerfully*) Once they're there, they're there, aren't they? That's life, isn't it? I sometimes think the sooner it's all over the better. Bloody awful business, life, the whole thing. (*Of her coat*) Hang it up here, shall I? (*She hangs her coat on a hook*)

ARNOLD The farm not doing so well, then...?

JESS Four ducks, thirteen chickens – correction *twelve* chickens, bloody fox got in again last night – a solitary cow, six new-born, unwanted kittens, and one old, nearly blind, seventeen-year-old incontinent collie doesn't constitute a

farm, Arnold. By no stretch of the imagination. (*Holding out a paper bag*) Here. I brought you some eggs.

**ARNOLD** Oh, thank you so much. That is kind. Mother loves an egg.

**JESS** At least they're still laying, the ones that are left. Don't know for how much longer. Our chicken shed's like something out of an Agatha Christie novel. All eyeing each other, wondering who's going to be next.

**ARNOLD** Better suggest it to Vivvi. She could write it.

**JESS** Probably already has. Bitter out there. Going to be a storm later. Dog's jammed her arse under the Aga. Usually means a storm. Am I the first?

**ARNOLD** So far. Thank you for these. You really shouldn't.

**JESS** Well, I can't eat them all. And Po's allergic. So there you go. Either eat them or hurl them at the bloody town hall, either way.

**ARNOLD** And how is Polly?

**JESS** Po? She's fine. Usual bouncy self. Drives me up the wall some days but you have to love her.

*The doorbell rings again.*

**ARNOLD** Excuse me.

*JESS moves away with her briefcase and sits in a chair and starts sifting pages of notes, using the empty chair beside her as a desk.*

*ARNOLD opens the door again.*

*It is GRACE, also in her forties. In contrast to JESS, though, she is a pale, rather fraught, town-dweller. She is also dressed warmly and carries an artist's cardboard portfolio.*

**GRACE** Hallo.

ARNOLD Grace, come in, come in. You must be frozen.

GRACE Bit nippy, isn't it? Am I the – (*Seeing JESS*) Oh.

JESS Hallo.

GRACE (*rather coolly*) Hallo, Jess.

ARNOLD (*helping GRACE with her coat*) Come on the bus, did you, Grace?

GRACE Yes, on the bus. On time for once, thank goodness.

ARNOLD Yes, you don't want to be standing around...

GRACE Not tonight.

ARNOLD Not tonight.

GRACE (*admiring the room*) Oh, look. It's so lovely here, isn't it? It's lovely. I so love coming. Lovely and welcoming always, Arnold.

ARNOLD (*seeing GRACE's portfolio*) Do I spy you've brought something with you tonight?

GRACE Pardon? (*Shyly*) Oh, well. Maybe. I don't know.

ARNOLD Something you're going to share with us, Grace?

GRACE (*with a slight glance towards JESS*) Well, we'll see.

ARNOLD Hear that, Jess? Grace has brought something to share with us.

JESS (*unimpressed, without looking up*) Goodo.

ARNOLD Well, I'm excited. Not before time, Grace.

GRACE Well, we'll see.

ARNOLD How's the family?

GRACE Oh, you know. Wanetta's doing well. Just sitting her A levels. And Delwyn, he – well, we don't hear from him very much since he went off to London.

ARNOLD What's he doing there, exactly?

GRACE We don't exactly know. We don't even know where he is, exactly. Actually. Except he's in London. Somewhere.

ARNOLD Oh, dear, that must be worrying.

GRACE Yes, it is a bit. For me anyway. I don't think Jeff cares one way or the other. Good riddance. That's all he says.

ARNOLD Well, he's probably joking, you never know.

GRACE No, not Jeff. Jeff never jokes. Not these days.

ARNOLD (*waving the paper bag he still holds*) Yes, I'm just going to pop these in the fridge. Keep them fresh. Eggs. From Jess.

GRACE Right.

ARNOLD *hurries out to the kitchen.* GRACE *is left alone with JESS.*

(*awkwardly*) Well.

JESS (*still absorbed*) Still stuck with that bloody awful man, then?

GRACE Yes. (*Slight pause*) Still stuck with that bloody awful woman?

JESS At least she doesn't beat me.

GRACE Neither does Jeff.

JESS (*disbelieving*) Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. Hmm.

GRACE (*after a slight pause*) You wouldn't understand, anyway.

JESS What precisely wouldn't I understand?

GRACE You wouldn't understand the pressure they're under sometimes. Men? You wouldn't understand that, would you?

JESS I understand enough not to share my life with the buggers. I've more sense than that.

GRACE What could you possibly know? Possibly? (*She sits in a chair at a distance from JESS – there are four chairs between them*)

*The doorbell goes.*

*Pause.*

**JESS** (*without looking up*) Doorbell.

**GRACE** (*without moving*) So it is.

**ARNOLD** *returns from the kitchen.*

**ARNOLD** Was that the doorbell?

**GRACE** Oh, yes. I think it probably... (*She half-heartedly makes to rise*)

**ARNOLD** Let them in, then. Too cold to stand out there.

*The doorbell rings again.*

(*calling*) Just coming!

**ARNOLD** *opens the front door.*

**VIVVI**, *in her thirties, effusive and attractive, waits with CLEM, mid-thirties, a silent, rather awkward man who some, perhaps uncharitably, might describe as a nerd. They would not be too wide of the mark. CLEM has a briefcase; VIVVI, a large shoulder bag.*

**VIVVI** (*singing*)

“THE FIRST NOËL...”

(*Excitedly*) Let us in! Let us in!

**ARNOLD** (*cheerfully*) Yes, come in, Vivvi, come in.

**VIVVI** (*moving into the room*) Brrrrrrrr!

**ARNOLD** 'Evening, Clem.

**CLEM** 'Evening. (*He follows VIVVI inside*)

**ARNOLD** *closes the door.*

**ARNOLD** (*to CLEM*) Vivvi give you a lift, did she?

CLEM Yes. *(He takes off his coat, hangs it up and then goes and sits down by himself next to GRACE and anticlockwise from her)*

VIVVI *(also removing her coat and hanging it up)* Hallo, you two. *(She sits, two seats away, anticlockwise, from CLEM)*

ARNOLD *sits two seats away, clockwise, from GRACE.*

GRACE Hallo.

JESS Hi.

VIVVI Happy Christmas – nearly. Now, I have masses of apologies, I'm afraid.

ARNOLD Oh, dear.

VIVVI From Bernard who's skiing with the family, of course. And Gerald, who's going down with something and doesn't know what. And abject apologies from Sally who has relatives. And Paula who's already gone to Scotland for Christmas and New Year.

ARNOLD I know, it's a bad time to have a meeting, I said it was, last time. How about Ray?

VIVVI Don't know. Haven't heard from Ray at all. Not for weeks.

JESS I think he's abroad, as well.

VIVVI Is he?

JESS I have a feeling he said something last time. What about Brevis? Is he coming?

VIVVI God knows.

GRACE I certainly hope not.

VIVVI *laughs. It's a nervous laugh at the slightest hint of tension.*

ARNOLD *(to JESS; playfully)* Now, now, now. Well, I don't know, what's the time? It's only just gone half past. *(Looking at them all in turn)* Should we give Brevis a minute longer?

VIVVI Yes. Better give him a minute.

JESS *shrugs.*

CLEM Don't mind either way.

GRACE Listen, if Mr Winterton – Brevis – is coming then I certainly shan't be showing my work, I'd like that minuted, please.

ARNOLD Oh, dear, we won't have anyone to take the minutes, will we? Not if Paula's away.

VIVVI I'll do it.

ARNOLD Oh, would you mind, Vivvi? Thank you very much.

VIVVI No problem. I have shorthand. Let me through, I'm a journalist! (*She produces a notebook and pencil during the following*)

JESS More than Paula has.

ARNOLD No, I won't hear a word against Paula, Jess...

GRACE Hear! Hear!

JESS I've nothing against Paula personally. I just wish to God her minutes bore some resemblance to our actual meetings. I appreciate this is a Creative Writing Group, but I don't think that necessarily includes the minutes.

VIVVI *laughs.*

GRACE Oh no, that's unfair. Just because Paula isn't here to defend herself— If some of us in this group had done half as much as Paula's done...

ARNOLD Yes, all right, all right, Grace.

GRACE Paula has worked her fingers to the bone, Jess...

ARNOLD Yes, all right, Grace, point taken.

GRACE Well. Honestly.

**ARNOLD** Perhaps we could minute it, Vivvi, that the meeting passed a vote of thanks to Paula, Mrs Boon, in absentia, for all the hard work she has put in during the past year.

**VIVVI** (*who now has her notebook and pencil poised*) Right.

**ARNOLD** All agreed? Grace? Vivvi?

**VIVVI** (*writing*) Sure.

**ARNOLD** Clem?

**CLEM** Either way.

**ARNOLD** Jess?

**JESS** (*shrugging, reluctantly*) If you like.

**ARNOLD** Thank you, Jess. (*Looking at his watch*) Well, I do think now we ought to be making a start, Brevis or no Brevis. It's thirty-four minutes past so—

**VIVVI** Did you say you'd brought something to show us, Grace?

**GRACE** Yes, but if Mr Winterton is going to be here, I don't intend to – I mean, he'd just... You see I still call him that. He hasn't taught me for twenty years and he still terrifies me. He used to make us stand out in the—

**VIVVI** Well, he's not here yet, is he? Come on, let's have a quick look, a sneak preview, can we?

**ARNOLD** Why not? We've all waited long enough, Grace. The suspense has been killing us. I think we deserve a look, don't you?

**GRACE** (*clasping her portfolio*) Well. All right. I think, before I show you, you ought to know the circumstances of how I came to write this. Write it...

**JESS** (*muttering*) Oh, for God's sake...

**GRACE** (*with a glare at JESS*) ...to create this... I started this several years ago when both my children were still very tiny. I intended to write them something that would be

both edifying and amusing and instructive. That they could take with them as they grew up. If you see what I mean.

ARNOLD Excellent. Yes. Splendid.

GRACE There's so little these days – or even in those days – that's really edifying. I think. Especially for young children. It's all terrible TV trash, isn't it?

ARNOLD Yes. I don't see a lot of television. Mother has a set in the bedroom. I catch a glimpse of it occasionally. It's really quite alarming some of it.

GRACE Well, I meant more the written stuff, really. It's all very – whatever the opposite of uplifting is, I suppose.

JESS (*drily*) Downlifting.

VIVVI *laughs*.

GRACE So the point is, I tried to write something for them myself, my children, to try to fill the vacuum. Try to fill it.

ARNOLD And how did they like it? Did they appreciate it?

GRACE No, the point is, I started it – but I never got to finish it, you see. Finish it. Other – things – family things – got in the way. So they never got to see it. And Jeff said I was wasting my time anyway so I – I sort of gave up.

VIVVI So they never saw it at all?

GRACE No.

VIVVI Oh, how sad. I didn't realise.

GRACE But, then I thought, why not have another go? So I dug it out of the attic. And I'm seriously trying to finish it this time. You know, finish it.

VIVVI Good for you.

ARNOLD Never too late, no. How old are they now, the children?

GRACE Wanetta is sixteen and Delwyn's eighteen.

VIVVI And what's your book called? Does it have a name?

**GRACE** “The Exciting Adventures of Doblin the Goblin.”

**VIVVI** Ah.

**ARNOLD** Well, they may be a trifle old. But there’ll be others. Younger children. Coming up.

**GRACE** (*a trifle alarmed*) Not from me. No, no, never...

**ARNOLD** No, no. I meant generally. Children. Everywhere. Aren’t there? Lots of them, all in need of a good read.

**VIVVI** May we look, Grace? Will you let us have a look?

**GRACE** All right. (*She unfastens the portfolio*) A lot of it is pictures, of course. Because, as you probably know, I was trained originally as an artist, of course... I have these pictures... (*She produces a sheaf of brightly-coloured illustrations*) Perhaps you’d like to – pass them round, Arnold. They’re in order but...well, you’ll see...

*During the following, GRACE passes the pictures round clockwise to ARNOLD over the empty chair between them; ARNOLD, in turn, passes them to JESS over the two empty chairs between them; JESS, in turn, passes the pictures to VIVVI over the empty chair between them; VIVVI then passes them to CLEM over the empty chair between them; CLEM finally passes them directly back to GRACE. JESS gives the pictures barely a glance. CLEM feigns some interest but isn’t very convincing. It is left to ARNOLD and VIVVI to make up for their unenthusiastic colleagues.*

**ARNOLD** Oh! Oh! These are splendid. Splendid, Grace! I knew you were an artist but, no... I had no idea.

**GRACE** That’s at the start of the book. At the start, when Doblin first emerges out of his winter burrow...

**ARNOLD** Yes, I can see, I can see. You can just see his little head popping out of the hole there, can’t you... (*Passing on the picture*) Here, Jess, take a look at that. Isn’t that splendid?

**JESS** (*cursorily*) Oh, yes. (*She passes the picture on to VIVVI*)

ARNOLD Isn't that wonderful, Vivvi? What do you think?

VIVVI Oh, it's brilliant, Grace. Brilliant. What a waste.

GRACE How do you mean?

VIVVI Well, that you haven't, you know, taken them any...  
further... (*Passing the picture to CLEM*) Look, Clem.

ARNOLD She's intending to, Vivvi. That's the point. Grace is  
planning to...

CLEM (*looking at the picture*) Fantastic.

ARNOLD Clem likes them. Look, Clem likes them.

CLEM Great. (*He passes the picture back to GRACE*)

ARNOLD Come on, Grace. Any more, are there? Pass them round.

GRACE (*taking up a second picture*) This is a bit later on,  
when Doblin's out of his burrow. He's standing in the big  
meadow, looking round, you see? (*She passes the picture  
to ARNOLD*)

ARNOLD Oh, yes, there he is again...

GRACE Looking round. You can see how small he is beside  
the buttercup. You can tell from the size of the buttercup,  
you see.

ARNOLD Oh yes, huge. It's a huge buttercup. Cheery little chap,  
isn't he? Seems to be always smiling.

GRACE This is early on, of course. Early in the book. Before  
things go wrong for Doblin.

ARNOLD (*passing the picture to JESS*) Oh, dear, do they?

VIVVI Not too wrong, I hope?

GRACE No. Not too... You know. Just – adversity.

JESS Wipe the grin off his face. (*She passes the picture on to  
VIVVI*)

VIVVI *laughs.*

# WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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