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SF PERUSALS

WHILE WE'RE HERE

by Barney Norris

SAMUEL FRENCH

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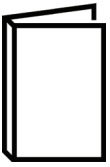
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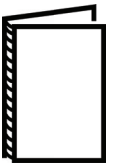
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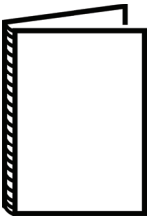
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barney Norris was born in Sussex in 1987. Upon leaving university he founded the touring theatre company Up In Arms with Alice Hamilton. His plays include *While We're Here* (Up In Arms, Bush Theatre and tour), *Echo's End* (Salisbury Playhouse), *Eventide (*Arcola Theatre, London and tour), the acclaimed *Visitors* (Up In Arms, Arcola Theatre and tour) and the short plays *Every You Every Me* (Salisbury Playhouse 2015 and tour 2017), *Fear Of Music* (Up In Arms / Out of Joint) and *At First Sight* (Up In Arms, Latitude Festival and tour). His book, *To Bodies Gone: The Theatre of Peter Gill*, is published by Seren, and his first novel, *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, was published by Transworld in 2016. Barney was nominated for an *Evening Standard* Award in 2014 and won the Critics' Circle Most Promising New Playwright Award in the same year.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I could tell you this play was the product of a newly systematic research process put in place by my company Up In Arms in 2016, when we were searching for a tale to tell. I could tell you it's a passionate attempt to evoke the life of an ordinary town, and ordinary people, the kinds of lives that all of us live, the kinds of crises we all encounter, and to insist on their dignity and their beauty and their importance, even if they might seem small, and ordinary, and mundane. Because I believe all that. I believe all our lives are important, and we are mired in a pernicious culture that strains with all its might to persuade us otherwise, in order to sell us things that might give us access to the lives we want, when the lives we want might in fact be all around us right now. I believe all that, and all of that found its way into this play, that was lovingly and laboriously researched through my company visiting Havant and getting to know the way people worked there. That's not what I read when I read it, though. The truth is that in the course of writing this play, I sailed through trouble that changed my understanding of how alone it was possible to feel in the world. I won't go into it here, because it's personal, and it doesn't change how the play works, but I will say that I wanted, desperately, to tell someone how dark it was at the bottom of that well. I realised the world was full of people going through what we were going through, and it was urgent we tried to reach each other. It was urgent we tried to tell each other we weren't alone. This is the play that mattered to me most, of everything I've written to date. What I wanted to do was love these two characters, insist on their dignity and their humanity, demand we see the importance of their crises, the wonder and the scale of what they were dreaming. I resolved to reject the dark I had been plunged into; I resolved to make poetry out of it. This was one of the results, and I hope it will allow other people to turn their sorrow into song. I had to watch the play a lot before I understood what I thought it was saying. I think it offers a possible reading of the state of being in life as being set on fire and dumped in a wood. There's a half-quotation of Dante hidden in the text, that leapt out at me, three weeks into watching the play: 'halfway down the road I have to travel I got lost in a forest. I wish I could tell you what it felt like to be in that dark.' I'm translating very freely, but I think *While We're Here* is a riff

on that line; on the idea that we're all here, burning, trying to attract someone's attention, trying to attract someone's help.

While We're Here was first presented by Up In Arms, the Bush Theatre and Farnham Maltings on 26th April 2017, with the following company:

Carol – Tessa Peake-Jones
Eddie – Andrew French

Director – Alice Hamilton
Designer – James Perkins
Lighting Designer – Sally Ferguson
Composer and Sound Designer – Dom Coyote
Production Manager – Jasmine Sandalli
Company Stage Manager – Charlie Young
Deputy Stage Manager – Ashley Illman
Assistant Stage Manager – Beth Absalom
Producer – Sarah Wilson-White for Farnham Maltings

The islands feel the enclasping flow,
And then their endless bounds they know.

Matthew Arnold, *To Marguerite: Continued*

CHARACTERS

CAROL
EDDIE

ONE

The sitting room of **CAROL***'s house.* **CAROL** *and* **EDDIE** *are making up a bed on the sofa.* **CAROL** *is sorting out a sheet.* **EDDIE** *is doing the duvet. His system, inevitably, involves getting inside the duvet cover with the duvet for a bit.*

EDDIE There was this deer, this doe, came and spied on me sometimes when I was sleeping. I'd catch her, looking at the tent when I woke up, stuck my head out. She'd look at me for a minute, then run.

CAROL Beautiful, deer. Dapply, aren't they.

EDDIE Only at certain times of year.

CAROL Yeah, course, when they're babies. Then they get antlers.

EDDIE Only the males.

CAROL Yeah, course. Like cows.

EDDIE I use to try to work out why she looked at me. Was she afraid? Did she think I could be a source of food? Or just one animal's curiosity about another, you know?

CAROL I don't know, Eddie.

EDDIE No. That's what's beautiful, isn't it. You just look in their eyes, you know? And that's all you see.

CAROL What on earth are you doing?

EDDIE This is how I do it.

CAROL I don't think it's how anyone else does it.

EDDIE Works for me. You gotta do things how you do 'em, Carol, that's what I've found. This is a good duvet, this one.

CAROL Leanne always used to complain the house was cold.

CAROL *has finished with the sheet and moves onto the pillowcases. In a moment* **EDDIE** *will have finished with the duvet; he moves onto the pillowcases too.*

Do you have a favourite animal?

EDDIE Guess.

CAROL Guess your favourite animal?

EDDIE Yeah.

CAROL I don't know. Cows.

EDDIE No. Whose favourite animals is cows? I like otters best. I used to say, what I really want to do, I want to make a TV show called *What a Lotta Otters*. Isn't that the best title you ever heard? And it would pretend to be like, a documentary, me going round the world looking at the three main different types of otters. So I'd go to Ireland and look at that kind of otter, yeah? Standard otter. And you'd see otters holding hands and swimming on their back and whatever. I'd interview a fucking otter farmer or something. And then I'd go to the Arctic. And I'd tell you, to camera, the Arctic otter has ten thousand hairs per square inch of its body. Isn't that amazing? And we'd look at them for a bit. But then, two episodes in, right, the TV show would change. Its true purpose would be revealed. I'd go to Brazil to find an Amazonian otter. You know those?

CAROL I don't think so, no.

EDDIE They grow up to two metres long. Bigger than us. Yeah? Amazing. Absolutely – in a fight, they will fuck up a crocodile. Yeah. Best animal. And for the final show I'd just go searching. I'd just look for one and get more and more desperate, and more and more mad. And I'd be on camera going like, whoa! Whoa! People'd be scared. And then the show would end, and I'd have told you everything you need to know about Amazonian otters. To camera. While I was

mad. But we wouldn't have seen one. And people would realise, that wasn't a show about otters at all. They'd talk about it afterwards, they'd say, I know. It was a show about something else.

CAROL What would it be about?

EDDIE Well there you go. That's the mystery, isn't it? That's the adventure.

CAROL I don't think people would get that.

EDDIE No?

CAROL There we go. That's all right, isn't it.

EDDIE It's brilliant.

CAROL I'm sorry. I don't really go in her room that much, if I'd known she'd left it in such a state...

EDDIE Don't be silly.

CAROL I'll sort it all out when there's time and you can be in there, but there's no point doing it tonight if you don't mind.

EDDIE I'm just so grateful to you Carol, you're so kind.

CAROL It's nothing. It's a pleasure.

EDDIE Leanne must be a proper grown up now.

CAROL Oh, yeah.

EDDIE Where does it go, right?

CAROL Flies by, yeah.

EDDIE Except when you get a moment like today. Then it's like there hasn't been any time ever happened at all, or you've circled back somehow. I saw you, it was like you were walking up out of the past.

CAROL Yeah, I know. So funny. I'd only gone out for a breath of fresh.

EDDIE Yeah.

CAROL When Leanne still lived here I used to meet her in that park Saturdays, so we could have our lunch together, so I suppose I just wandered out thinking about Leanne.

EDDIE Oh right?

CAROL She worked part time in the Wilko's by there, on the tills. Half the year. The other half the year she'd move to do the camps on Hayling, that's where she's moved now, which she really loves, so...

EDDIE That's great.

CAROL She loves it, yeah. Really happy doing that.

EDDIE That's really great for her.

CAROL I met you off the bus there one time, didn't I, remember?

EDDIE Oh my God, yeah.

CAROL And you took me into Gregg's and bought me an apple turnover to say sorry cos you were late, and you bought a packet of custard donuts for yourself and promised you'd ration them, and I knew you wouldn't.

EDDIE Sounds like me. So you said you were still at the council?

CAROL I've got a job in electoral registration now, yeah.

EDDIE No way.

CAROL Yeah.

EDDIE What job?

CAROL Team leader.

EDDIE What's that mean, that good?

CAROL It's like manager. I'm like, head of electoral registration for Havant, actually.

EDDIE All of Havant?

CAROL Yeah.

EDDIE Is that as good as it sounds?

CAROL It is quite good, yeah.

EDDIE I thought so, I fucking knew so! You can tell from the sound of it, I could tell that was good. Well played mate, well done.

CAROL It's more stress than anything, really.

EDDIE How did it happen, how come you've got such a good job? I mean, I don't mean to be rude—

CAROL I just fell into it, to be honest. Obviously I was doing the invoicing in the depot—

EDDIE You were good at it.

CAROL Well.

EDDIE Worked in the bank.

CAROL That was my career, yeah. You remember a lot, don't you?

EDDIE I remember everything.

CAROL Really?

EDDIE Total recall.

CAROL Bloody hell.

EDDIE Just a skill I've got.

CAROL Well.

EDDIE I'm distracting you. You were telling me how you got your job.

CAROL Oh yeah. Well I just, I don't know whether you remember but when we first knew each other—

EDDIE Your husband had left you.

CAROL Total recall. Well I was doing whatever bit extra I could find, for money, like, and someone asked me to do some canvassing.

EDDIE To be an MP?

CAROL What?

EDDIE That's when you knock on doors?

CAROL Sometimes, but this was easier. This was just that every time you have an electoral registration sign-up, everyone has to get a sign-up form through their letterbox, see? So they can take part. And in Havant, cos it's all so close together, it's not all little villages or whatever, is it, it's cheaper to pay someone to post them by hand than send them through the post. So they hire thirty-six people to post all these forms in their evenings and weekends, that's how many people you need to do the borough. And that's the sort of canvassing I did.

EDDIE OK.

CAROL They give the work to council people first off, cos it's not a proper job, it's just a few evenings, they just need it done.

EDDIE I could do it?

CAROL Absolutely, yeah.

EDDIE Good to know. I'd ask you probably. If I wanted that job.

CAROL Yeah, if we had a vacancy.

EDDIE Good to know.

CAROL And then I was doing that, and after a while I was asked if I wanted to join the electoral registration team. It's a team of three, a sort of part-timer at the bottom, which was me, then a deputy team leader, then a team leader. And when I joined it was Wendy was team leader and Irene was deputy and I was part-time, and then I was deputy and Irene was boss, and now it's my turn being team leader and the funny thing is that it's quite three musketeers, because Wendy's actually come back to do the part-time job now the leader's me!

EDDIE Isn't that funny!

CAROL Well, no, I suppose it's not really, is it, but... We meet sometimes with Irene for lunch.

EDDIE I see the irony of it. How small the world.

CAROL How small the world indeed.

EDDIE You mean us?

CAROL What?

EDDIE Bumping into each other?

CAROL I was just repeating you.

EDDIE Oh. Maybe I meant us then. Must have done. Cos when you said that just then, you know. I thought of us.

CAROL That must be it then. You said you're a recycler now, that right?

EDDIE That's sort of it.

CAROL Not for the council though?

EDDIE No, don't really want a proper job right now, it'd be too – I just met this bloke in a pub, did some work for a scrapyard. He gives me work cash in hand if I help out, keep me ticking over. That's why I came over this way, see.

CAROL That sounds interesting.

EDDIE It's all right.

CAROL Shall we have one more drink? Seeing as we're settling you in. Celebrating your arrival.

EDDIE Yeah, why not?

CAROL All right.

CAROL *exits to get a bottle of wine.* **EDDIE** *very quickly changes out of the clothes he's wearing, into a new T-shirt he pulls out of his bag, getting it on just as* **CAROL** *re-enters.*

(offstage) I had a good title for a story once. Like your otter title.

EDDIE Yeah?

CAROL *Everything's Battered In Bournemouth*.

EDDIE Oh yeah?

CAROL *Everything's Battered In Bournemouth*, yeah. It'd be a telly, about a fight that breaks out in a chip shop on a stormy night in Bournemouth, in 2008, you know, while the recession's really kicking in. And the woman behind the counter's in an abusive relationship. Every type of battered you can have, in one show, all rolled in together, and you really sort of see what's happening in the country. I think it'd star Olivia Colman.

EDDIE Yeah.

CAROL Or Sarah Lancashire.

EDDIE I don't know her.

CAROL They're both good.

EDDIE You've thought about it quite a lot, haven't you.

CAROL *enters*.

CAROL I have, actually, yeah. You've changed.

EDDIE Well, everyone changes if you know 'em long enough.

CAROL Your clothes.

EDDIE I know. I was doing a funny joke.

CAROL Very quick.

EDDIE That's what all the nice girls tell me.

CAROL Here you go.

EDDIE Thanks. Why Bournemouth then?

CAROL Alliterated. You'd be good on the telly.

EDDIE Yeah?

CAROL Charismatic.

EDDIE I never really watch any TV any more.

CAROL I suppose you can't, living as you did.

EDDIE Exactly.

CAROL You must miss out on so much.

EDDIE The news.

CAROL More important things than the news, the TV, all the TV. I don't know how you cope.

EDDIE Sometimes I have to sit out chats at work.

CAROL I bet you do. You can watch mine now.

EDDIE I don't think I'd like it, to be honest.

CAROL Why not?

EDDIE I don't know. The thought of loads of people all sitting watching the same thing at once. Like babies. I dunno. I've got enough in my head.

EDDIE *sits down on the sofa.*

CAROL Is it comfy?

EDDIE It's great. Everything's great.

CAROL Good. I'm glad. It's gonna be nice having someone else in the house again.

EDDIE Well hopefully I won't be under your feet for too long, you know.

CAROL Don't think about it, it's fine. You can stay for as long as you need. Leanne probably won't come home till Christmas, she's so busy with work, so I'm on my own in the house till then.

EDDIE Well I'll stay for as long as I can if the food's that good.

CAROL It was good, wasn't it.

EDDIE Yeah.

CAROL Got it off *Saturday Kitchen*.

EDDIE Oh yeah?

CAROL Great source of inspiration, *Saturday Kitchen*.

EDDIE I don't know it.

CAROL We'll watch it together, you'll love the omelette challenge.

EDDIE I don't think we ever had dinner together, did we. Think this was our first time.

CAROL Wasn't really that sort of friendship, was it.

EDDIE I'd like it if it was.

CAROL Yes. So would I.

EDDIE Hm.

CAROL What?

EDDIE Wouldn't you give anything just to go back?

CAROL What d'you mean?

EDDIE And have it again. To the start, even just to have the last five minutes again. Isn't it sad? And lovely, but... Wouldn't you do anything?

CAROL You mean you and me?

EDDIE No, I just mean being young.

CAROL I guess so, yeah. I don't know. Where were you sleeping before, exactly?

EDDIE Over towards Emsworth.

CAROL Oh yeah? Nice in Emsworth.

EDDIE Yeah.

CAROL I used to think if I moved again I'd try to move to Emsworth, because it's not really so much of a commute when you think about it, if the trade-off's being somewhere nice. But the cost. And it's not like I'd go back to renting now, and maybe I wouldn't be able to afford that either, I don't know, I haven't looked, I suppose I could look online. But

wouldn't it be nice to drive to work past an oyster farm, wouldn't you feel la-di-da? It must have been terrible out there for you though, of course you didn't care about the oysters.

EDDIE No, no. It's all right. Layer up if it's cold. It's not a thing. I'm just in between – defensible living arrangements, that's all, it's not a tragedy. It's only till I sort my plan.

CAROL Your plan?

EDDIE For my future, you know? I have actually got a bit of a plan brewing about where I'll go next, you see.

CAROL Oh right?

EDDIE D'you wanna hear it?

CAROL Go on then.

EDDIE D'you think you're ready for it?

CAROL Sod off then.

EDDIE No, no, sorry. I'll tell you. Rewilding.

CAROL What?

EDDIE That's what I'm gonna do. Rewilding.

CAROL What's that?

EDDIE Have you not heard of it?

CAROL I don't know.

EDDIE Big thing.

CAROL Isn't it when they reintroduce wolves to Scotland?

EDDIE That's it.

CAROL I know about that. It's shipping beavers back to England and whatever.

EDDIE Yeah. That's, yeah. It's about restoring historic habitats. Ecosystems, innit. The balance of things. It's rewilding the countryside, ecological – you know you press edit undo on computers? It's that, for nature.

CAROL Why do you want to do that?

EDDIE Why?

CAROL Yeah.

EDDIE Because it's amazing! You know what the same kind of work did to the red kite population in Oxfordshire?

CAROL Something good?

EDDIE Exactly! And that's brilliant, isn't it.

CAROL Do we want to increase the number of wolves in Scotland?

EDDIE The question is, do we have the right to have removed them in the first place? Maybe, right, instead of making all this fucking mess, ought we to be pressing edit undo on what we've done, you know?

CAROL Right.

EDDIE No?

CAROL Well you can't press edit undo on the world, can you, that's not possible.

EDDIE It's a manner of speaking. It's about balance, that's the thing.

CAROL So what are you actually going to do?

EDDIE Well, there are these charities. Really doing it, you know? Mostly up north, you know, mostly Scotland. There's more room there to get stuff done.

CAROL Where the wild things are.

EDDIE Yeah. And it's really busy up there, you know, it's really happening. So I'm thinking I'm gonna go up there and be part of it.

CAROL Do they have jobs going?

EDDIE Well a lot of it, it's more like a volunteering network at first, sort of thing. But that's how all these things start.

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