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GETTING ON

A Play

by Alan Bennett

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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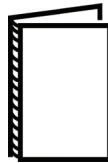


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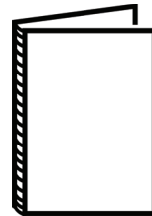
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*.

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GETTING ON

First presented at the Queen's Theatre, London, by Stoll Productions Ltd on 14th October 1971. The performance was directed by Patrick Garland and designed by Julia Trevelyan Oman, with stage direction by David Ayliff. The cast was as follows:

GEORGE OLIVER, M.P.

Kenneth More

GEOFF PRICE

Sebastian Graham-Jones

POLLY OLIVER

Gemma Jones

BRIAN LOWTHER, M.P.

Brian Cox

ENID BAKER

Mona Washbourne

ANDY OLIVER

Keith Skinner

MRS BRODRIBB

Edna Doré

The action passes in the basement flat of an Edwardian house in London.

Time: the present.

ACT I

Before and after the curtain rises a medley of radio one music and chat, traffic noise, and cars is heard.

*The play is set in the basement or the ground floor of an Edwardian house, of which the kitchen and living room run into one another. The kitchen is at the rear of the stage. The outside door is upstage and there is another door downstage which goes upstairs. Also downstage left is a large Victorian overmantel mirror, which **GEORGE** frequently addresses. There is much white paint, and the house has an airy good feeling to it... not cluttered Victoriana. Nevertheless there are a lot of objects around, furniture, glasses, pictures. A collage of children's drawings on the wall, photographs, Mr Heath, Private Eye covers. A red election rosette, haphazard, not artistic. A string of onions, a pan stand, some stripped pine. But not new looking. Fairly worn. It shouldn't look particularly smart or trendy.*

There is a child crying upstairs.

*When the curtain rises, **GEOFF** is preparing tea in the half-light of the kitchen. He is nineteen, handsome in a pre-Raphaelite way, and very thin. The lights of a car drawing up cross the window, then there is the slam of a car door.*

***GEORGE** enters from the front door, in his overcoat, with a briefcase and his car keys. He comes downstairs, talking as he does so, and turns on the lights on one side of the stage.*

GEORGE Were I to be taken and pinioned for hours at a time in a shuddering, jerking box of steel, lights-flashed in my eyes, fumes blown up my nose and gas pumped into my lungs, if this were done by the Chinese, I should be the subject of stern leaders in *The Times* and the righteous anger of the *Daily Express*. (*Walking to the fireplace*) Yet I submit to this treatment of my own free will. I do it every week and it's called driving down to London. (*He switches on the bracket by the fireplace, and sees GEOFF hanging about behind him*) Hello, I thought you were Polly.

GEOFF (*who looks at himself as if not entirely certain he isn't*)
N-o-o.

GEORGE Who are you? No. Don't tell me. You could be one of several people. You aren't the man from the central heating, or the man who comes to mend the washing machine. Both almost daily visitors. Perhaps you are another unemployed actor. Several leading lights in the National Theatre have not been ashamed to plunge their feather dusters through our accumulated possessions. Indeed that's one of the reasons I don't go to the theatre: it's hard to believe in Pastor Manders when you knew him first as a somewhat below average window-cleaner. And if not an actor, what?

GEOFF The marble, I...

GEORGE Mm? A supply teacher perhaps. My son has bitten Miss Gainsborough's leg again? Or from the Portobello Road with a new addition to our already definitive collection of stripped pine.

GEOFF I brought the marble.

GEORGE Marble?

GEOFF (*moving down to GEORGE*) They were clearing out this old bakery in Bethnal Green, and Polly – your wife – thought the slabs would come in useful, somewhere.

GEORGE Somewhere. I see. (*Going to the stairs*) Look around this room... I'm sorry I didn't catch your name.

GEOFF Geoff.

GEORGE Look around this room, Geoff. (*He turns on the kitchen light*) Can you see any surface not adequately covered, anywhere in fact where a piece of marble might come in handy?

GEOFF (*moving to the sofa*) Not offhand, no.

GEORGE (*moving to GEOFF*) No, Geoff, no. And the only reason I can think of why my wife should be picking up the odd marble slab is that with her customary foresight and economy she thinks it might come in handy as a good gravestone for me.

GEOFF I don't think so.

GEORGE Is she upstairs?

GEOFF She's just putting the children to sleep.

GEORGE (*after a pause*) Humanely, I hope. Oh, shut up. (*He starts upstairs*) I've caught this mood of relentless facetiousness from the car radio. (*He pauses*)

GEOFF *takes milk from the fridge to the kitchen table.*

Have you noticed that the BBC chooses its silliest programmes, its jokiest announcer for those times in the morning and evening when we are on our way to and from *work*. It's very significant. Why should the BBC choose *those* times to cover the land in a pall of fatuity? What is it about work that we have to be driven to and from it by drivelling idiots? I think it's an indication of profound malaise in the social structure.

GEOFF (*pouring hot water into the feeding cup and swilling it round*) I'd never thought of that.

GEORGE Nor had I until this afternoon. Is that tea you're making?

GEOFF Yes.

GEORGE That's not the teapot. There's the teapot, up there.

GEOFF Yes. Sorry. (*He empties the feeding cup and takes down the teapot*)

GEORGE That is an appliance for forcing beef tea down the noses of unsuspecting invalids. It hasn't quite found its place yet.

GEOFF It's very nice. You've got lots of nice things. (*He makes tea*)

GEORGE We have so many things that by the law of averages some of them must be nice.

POLLY enters by the stairs door. She is thirtyish, attractive, perceptibly younger than GEORGE. Harassed. Scatter-brained, or deliberately giving that impression, but not stupid. She is carrying a pile of children's clothes. She should always be doing something about the house finding odd jobs to do. She should start picking up stuff lying about. She never wastes a minute.

POLLY It is you. James said it was you and I said it was time he went to sleep.

CHILD'S VOICE (*offstage*) Dad, will you come up and see me?

POLLY (*collecting a child's pyjamas from the landing radiator; shouting*) No, it isn't George. It's the television.

CHILD'S VOICE (*offstage*) Will you come up and see me?

POLLY No, I can't. Not now. Read your reading book. This is George, my husband. This is Geoff – I never asked your other name.

GEOFF Price.

POLLY Price. By rights it's an old-fashioned inhaler. I can't think what to do with it. (*She comes downstairs, closing the curtains*)

GEOFF Flowers.

POLLY (*collecting clothes and putting them in a pile on the sofa back*) Flowers, I suppose, but I always think that's a bit

of a defeat. James has been using it as a rocket launcher. I suppose it will come in somewhere. Sit down, Geoff.

GEOFF Can't I help?

POLLY I'll see to it. (*She hands GEOFF a cloth from the back of GEORGE's chair; pouring tea into one mug*) How were the dark satanic mills?

GEORGE (*sitting at the kitchen table*) Rather nice today. I saw Nelly and Sam who send their regards. The Town Hall do was bloody. I said my piece for Granada. And I saw a falcon on the motorway. (*To GEOFF*) Oh, do sit down, for goodness' sake.

POLLY Are you wanting anything to eat? We had ours with the children.

GEORGE No. I ate on the Motorway. At the Grill n'Griddle. I had Ham n'Eggs. And now I've got 'ndigestion. Oh, and I ran into McMasters.

POLLY In Manchester? Which cup would you like?

GEOFF I'm easy. Any.

POLLY Would you like A View of Lowestoft, A Masonic Mug from Salford, or The Revd E. S. Clough, Twenty-Five Years at Scotney Road Chapel, Pudsey?

GEOFF Yes, that one.

POLLY *gives GEOFF a mug of tea and exits to the pantry.*

GEORGE There's not much to choose except that one's chipped, one's cracked and the other you can't get your finger through the handle.

POLLY *enters with a tray of scones.*

POLLY Scones. They're home made.

GEOFF If I lived here I should get fat.

GEORGE He said I could go back to Oxford any time I wanted.

POLLY That's nice to know, anyway. Lovely and thin, George used to be, just like you.

GEORGE I don't think I was ever quite as thin as that.

POLLY I wouldn't care about you getting fatter if you were getting jollier. (*Going to the kitchen table and starting to split the scones*) People are thinner now, aren't they? Young people. Younger people. I mean. It's the right foods.

GEORGE We never had any oranges during the war. You won't remember the war, of course.

GEOFF No.

GEORGE People don't seem to, nowadays. I don't suppose you were even born when it ended.

GEOFF No. Not by a long way.

POLLY It's funny. One meets more and more people who weren't. There didn't used to be any, and now one meets them all the time.

GEORGE I remember the end of the war. In fact, I remember the actual war.

GEOFF That must be great.

GEORGE Yes, it is.

Pause.

GEOFF (*sitting on the arm of the sofa*) Did you fight at all?

GEORGE I served – I didn't actually fight.

GEOFF It must be awful to have, you know, your earliest memories...you know, sort of seared by it.

GEORGE Yes. I was evacuated to Harrogate...and that was a bit...searing. Were you...seared at all, Polly?

POLLY *pointedly ignores him.*

POLLY More tea, Geoff?

GEOFF It's the German side of it that interests me.

GEORGE We weren't so much interested in the Germans as bitterly opposed to them.

GEOFF I collect one or two things – badges, things like that.

POLLY Really. I'll keep my eyes open. I often see odd bits of things when I'm on my travels. I'm not sure we don't have a bit of shrapnel upstairs. A buzz bomb fell near us at Stanmore. Would you be interested in that?

A motor horn sounds outside.

GEOFF That would be really marvellous.

POLLY It's just a jagged bit of metal, really, but it would be nice if someone had it who really appreciated it – for what it is. I've never been able to find a use for it.

A horn sounds again, more angrily.

GEORGE (*going up the stairs*) All right, all right. I'm double parked. You can't even park outside your own house nowadays. (*He goes out by the street door*)

POLLY George is an M.P.

GEOFF What sort?

POLLY Guess.

GEOFF Cons...

POLLY No. Try the other.

GEOFF Sorry.

POLLY I'm not offended. (*She starts folding the pile of clothes and putting them in the dresser*)

GEOFF It's just that – he has – a sort of look about him...

POLLY That's not party, that's politics. He's been up in his constituency holding a surgery. Where people come and tell him their troubles.

GEORGE *returns and comes downstairs.*

GEOFF What sort of thing. Troubles?

GEORGE (*moving to the fireplace*) He'd got miles of room. Troubles. The councils demolishing their houses, the Ministry withholding their pensions, benefits, compensations, ejection. The usual load of bitterness and despair people hump about with them you'd be amazed.

POLLY It's a very poor constituency. He was lucky to get it. I mean...

GEORGE Not really poor. It's the ones who've gone to the wall. I had a woman in today who believes that her husband, an unemployed fitter, is having an affair with the Queen. And the Household Cavalry has her under constant watch.

POLLY Why the Household Cavalry?

GEORGE Why the Queen?

POLLY Poor soul. What did you say. (*She finishes the clothes and pours a mug of tea for herself*)

GEORGE We agreed that the best thing for me to do was to ask the Duke of Edinburgh to have a quiet word with Her Majesty and when she'd gone I had a quiet word with the Mental Health Officer. Poor bugger. Then there was an enormous West Indian woman who said the people next door kept poisoning her cats and the police wouldn't listen to her. I didn't do anything about that at all.

POLLY There ought to be some way of stopping them wasting your time.

GEORGE That's why they land up with me, because nobody else has been prepared to waste their time. So they just get passed on. (*He takes the two empty mugs to the kitchen table, then removes his overcoat and hangs it in the pantry*)

POLLY *puts the mugs in the sink, retaining her own.*

They can't get into the army, they can't get out of the army, the wife's gone off with the kids, the kids have gone into

a home, a policeman's hit them over the head. Then some people come just because it's free and they want to talk to somebody and they know it's their right. I'm quite sure there are seventy-year-old ladies who line up at the ante-natal clinic because they'd feel cheated if they didn't.

GEOFF is a good listener and laughs at all GEORGE's more obvious jokes.

The words Member of Parliament still carry prestige though, extraordinary. One phone call and officials are scuttling about all over the place.

POLLY washes up the mugs and a china ornament from the draining board.

GEOFF That's great.

GEORGE (*moving to the sofa*) There are still people who stink, did you know that? They sit there on the other side of the table in Sam's airless little office and they stink of muck and squalor and filth and despair. They're just clinging on to the bare face of life. (*He sits on the sofa*) Sorry. Shop.

POLLY (*putting the ornament on the mantelpiece*) I'm just trying to think what else there is to do. Is electricity in your line, because there's the landing light? I ought to have asked Captain Oates to do it.

GEOFF Who?

POLLY Captain Oates. We call him, anyway. He was an electrician who came to do the bathroom. One day he went off saying, "I'm just going out. I may be some time." And he never came back. So George christened him Captain Oates.

GEOFF is perplexed and silent.

Captain Oates was someone who went with Captain Scott.

GEOFF smiles, but is still uncomprehending.

The first man to—

GEORGE The first Englishman—

POLLY —to get to the North—

GEORGE South.

POLLY —South Pole. This Captain Oates was with him, you see. He had a bad leg or something, and was holding them up, so one night he went out of the tent saying, “I’m just going outside. I may be some time.” When really they all knew he wasn’t going to come back.

GEOFF Oh. *(He tries to force a laugh)*

GEORGE Though it’s my belief he may have been going for a particularly long slash.

POLLY Anyway, that’s why we called the plumber Captain Oates.

GEOFF I thought you said it was the electrician.

POLLY It was.

GEOFF *(after a pause)* You must think I’m thick.

GEORGE No. It’s just a fact. You know it or you don’t.

GEOFF You both know it, though.

GEORGE So? It’s like knowing about cars or the times of trains. Facts. Nothing to do with intelligence. Of course I’m not saying you’re not thick. Only that doesn’t prove it. I could well do without knowing about Captain Oates. Useless facts swilling about the brain. Could all be drained off and I should be none the wiser. Or none the stupider.

A crash and crying are heard from upstairs. Perhaps a child calling: “Dad, Dad. Daddy. Dad”.

(running upstairs) Look out, I can hear Thompson and Bywaters. Our two children at present on licence from Strangeways. James’s seven...

POLLY *(putting the three mugs on the kitchen table)* Eight.

GEORGE And Elizabeth, three? *(He opens the landing door)*

POLLY Go to sleep, love. No, he's *not*. You're *not* to come down.

Sounds of children.

GEORGE No, young man. Back you go. You've no business to be out of bed. Up, up, up.

GEORGE *exits to the children.*

POLLY (*picking up some toys downstage*) They are demons. Have you got a flat?

GEOFF Yes. Sort of.

POLLY Do you live with someone? I mean not live with "live with", you know.

GEOFF Yes. In Notting Hill. We have this house. It's owned by some anarchists. I suppose it's a sort of commune, really – we're always borrowing each other's butter anyway. We started off trying to set up a small anarchist community, but people wouldn't obey the rules.

POLLY I suppose you think we're very corrupt.

GEOFF No. Are you?

POLLY (*putting the toys on the dresser then drying the mugs*) All this – property, possessions. Politics.

GEOFF (*rising and looking at the plants on the table*) Not really. Not this sort of stuff. This isn't really possessions, is it?

POLLY Isn't it?

GEOFF (*moving to the kitchen table*) No. Most people wouldn't want this sort of rubbish anyway, would they?

POLLY *nearly drops a mug.*

Do I make you nervous?

POLLY What? No. No.

But he does.

GEORGE *comes in.*

GEORGE He wants a banana and she wants a cup of tea. How many sugars?

POLLY (*pouring a cup of tea*) It varies.

GEORGE (*shouting*) How many sugars?

GEOFF *sits at the kitchen table there is an unidentifiable shout.*

Seven.

POLLY *puts three teaspoonfuls in the tea and hands the mug and a banana to GEORGE.*

GEORGE *exits.*

POLLY How did you take up – sort of – doing nothing?

GEOFF I wasn't much good at school. I got rheumatic fever when I was ten, and I got a bit behind hand. I went to a special school for a bit. Then I kept being off school and never really got the hang of it again.

POLLY *puts the milk in the fridge.*

There was a group of us. We just used to sit at the back of the classroom and wank.

POLLY (*looking in the fridge*) Was it a comprehensive school then?

GEOFF And I reckoned I could do that just as well at home. I went round Art School for a bit, but I didn't reckon that much either. Are you Sagittarius?

GEORGE *returns and comes downstairs.*

POLLY (*shutting the fridge*) Me? I always forget. December fourteen. I generally have to look it up.

GEOFF (*nodding*) Sagittarius.

POLLY How did you know?

GEOFF Vibes.

POLLY It's dogs and sport, isn't it, Sagittarius. Not really me.

GEORGE *moves above the table.*

GEOFF I sussed this Libra bird on the Tube last week and she'd never opened her mouth.

POLLY What's George then, if you're so good at guessing.

GEOFF Leo.

POLLY What are you? July thirty. Yes, he is. You are Leo, aren't you? Fancy Geoff knowing that.

GEORGE It's a load of rubbish, isn't it?

GEOFF It isn't, you know.

GEORGE *exits upstairs.*

GEOFF Where is this plug? (*He gets pliers and a screwdriver from the tool bag*)

POLLY (*putting the tea on the draining board*) In the cistern cupboard. Mind you don't get a shock.

GEORGE *enters, speaking off.*

GEORGE All right, it's very nice of you to bring the cup down, thank you. But if I catch you out of bed once more, there'll be no Jugoslavia. "Suffer the little children to come unto me." You might know Jesus wasn't married. (*He comes down, passing GEOFF*) He says you didn't read with him.

POLLY There wasn't time. Besides I don't understand this new system. There I am going C-A-T and they don't do it like that any more.

GEOFF *goes upstairs.*

GEORGE (*opening his briefcase*) Will you hear my words? (*He gives POLLY some papers*)

POLLY What for? (*She sits on the sofa*)

GEORGE That television. Here – skip the first bit, I’m going to rewrite that – start about there – burble, burble, burble – ours is a society which chucks people into the dustbin, some sooner, some later. We chuck some people in at fifteen, others in at sixty-five. (*Moving to the fireplace*) Ours is a society which produces a colossal amount of rubbish. Litter, junk, waste. (*Asks for a prompt*) Yes?

POLLY The left-overs.

GEORGE The left-overs. And in amongst the left-overs are people. We waste people. The best society—I happen to believe a socialist society—is one in which fewest people are wasted.

POLLY Elizabeth’s bottom’s cleared up a treat.

GEORGE Somehow society must be kept open at every level so that there are always options... (*He sits on the sofa*) Oh, sod it, what have I sat on? (*He fetches out a crumpled, brightly painted construction, an egg-box ark*)

POLLY It’s The Ark. James was very proud of it.

GEORGE (*sitting down*) Egg boxes. Always egg boxes. Miss Gainsborough has pushed the potentialities of egg boxes beyond man’s wildest dreams. I reckon she must be getting a retainer from the Egg Marketing Board.

POLLY It’s true. All schools are the same.

GEORGE What I want to know is when they take the crucial step from egg boxes to differential calculus. (*He moves to the fireplace*) I believe that some people are better than others, better not because they’re cleverer or more cultivated or God knows— (*He laughs*) because they’re better off, but...

POLLY Are you going to do that?

GEORGE What?

POLLY *imitates his mid-sentence laugh.*

I might. Why?

POLLY Oh nothing.

GEORGE *is nonplussed. He repeats the sequence without laughing.*

You didn't laugh.

GEORGE You said...

POLLY No. I liked it.

GEORGE It's a kind of grace, I think. The chosen few. If you can't produce such people because I'm not sure they're born not made, if you can't produce them, then what you can do, and this is where socialism comes in, what you can do, is to show such people to themselves to link them up.

POLLY I don't think Miss Gainsborough takes much notice of James. When I spoke to her last week she had to think before she even knew who he was.

GEORGE Not surprising if there are thirty-odd kids in the class. Anyway, what does it matter. He is thick. We have got ourselves a thick child.

POLLY Why should he be thick. I was a bright girl.

GEORGE Heredity isn't a law of the land. If one only knew beforehand what one's children were going to be like. One ought to be able to see a trailer.

“Pause before you enter here
Lest from this womb a child appear.
Matchless he in face and skin
Fair of hair and clean of limb
But let not your mind your senses rob,
For he will be a stupid slob.”

POLLY You laugh. If Andy were my son...

GEORGE (*moving to the yard door*) Ah, but Andy is not your son, and Andy, thank God, has brains. Brains and beauty, the only untaxable inheritance. He never had any special treatment

and look at him. An advertisement for the comprehensive system, brighter than ever I was and beautiful with it. I don't suppose you've seen him.

POLLY He was in at tea-time, just for a minute.

GEORGE Even now touching up some respectable girl in the Classic, Baker Street. *(He opens the door, throws out the egg boxes, closes it and picks up his briefcase)*

POLLY So we can't just abandon him.

GEORGE Andy?

POLLY James. *(She pauses)* I think he ought to go to Freshfields.

GEORGE *(taking the papers from POLLY and putting them in the case)* He is not going to Freshfields. *(He sits)*

They have plainly had this conversation before.

Saunders Road, even with Miss Gainsborough is a very...

POLLY I'm not having his whole life sacrificed to your principles...

GEORGE His whole life. The kid is seven.

POLLY Eight. You don't even know how old your own child is. Mozart was practically dead by the time he was his age. And why is it always the kids who suffer for the principle? Why is it, when it comes to schooling we always have to run up the red flag. Education with socialists, it's like sex, all right so long as you don't have to pay for it.

GEORGE I am not having him educated with a load of shrill-voiced Tory boys to buy him advancement which at the moment his talents do not appear to merit.

POLLY Merit? How can you talk about merit? At seven.

GEORGE Eight. I don't know what you're bothering about? The first sound he learns to imitate is that of a police siren. He is capable of detecting the subtlest distinctions in bodywork and performance. *(He goes to the stairs)* All indications are that we have brought into the world a tiny used-car dealer.

POLLY (*moving to the kitchen table*) You see, even about something like this, you can't be serious. It's jokes, isn't it? Scoring. You are condemning him to...

GEORGE (*irritated by POLLY's intrusion*) I know what I'm condemning him to better than you do. I had a state education.

POLLY State education? You?

GEORGE I went to a grammar school.

GEORGE *exits to the bedrooms.*

POLLY Grammar school! Founded about four hundred B.C. and wearing long blue frocks, some grammar school!

POLLY *picks up the tray of scones and exits to the pantry.*

The lights change to indicate a lapse of time. Traffic is heard during it.

The yard door opens slowly and quietly, and GEORGE and BRIAN come in.

BRIAN I was expecting another three o'clock do tonight. I reckon you must all be losing heart.

GEORGE (*carrying his coat*) What I don't understand about you, Brian...

(*he switches on the light*) What's the matter?

BRIAN I think I must have... (*He lifts his shoe*)

GEORGE Yes, you have. It's that bloody Dalmation.

BRIAN (*going back to the yard*) Better hop outside and get rid of it.

GEORGE It's always here that's what gets me.

GEORGE *goes on talking to BRIAN, who is just outside the door, cleaning his shoe with an old saw and newspaper.*

Why is it always us. Why does it always have to do its Number Two's at Number Seventeen?

BRIAN It doesn't happen in Australia. Did you know that? When I went on that extremely boring parliamentary mission to that God-forsaken— (*He comes back and goes to wash his hands in the sink*) —albeit, let it be said Commonwealth country, the thing that impressed me most, lifeguards apart, was the sweetness of the streets.

GEORGE I reckon it's sussed we're the only Socialists in the street. Question that dog closely and you'll find it's an avid reader of the *Daily Express*. If I ever catch it dropping its nasty canine britches round here again I'll kick it into the middle of next week. And her as well, Mrs Frederick Brodribb.

BRIAN (*sitting on the sofa*) Ah ah. She sounds like a supporter of the Conservative and Unionist Party. That's right. Shove the kettle on. I'm exhausted by that gruelling confrontation.

GEORGE You're so sensible in many respects, Brian, but when you actually get down to it, you're as bad as all the others.

BRIAN That's right.

GEORGE (*bringing a chair from the kitchen and sitting by*
BRIAN) I mean. Let's be clear what we are talking about. We are talking about the kind of class you can see any day of the week, shambling through Leeds, Nottingham, or Sheffield, shepherded by some broken-down, underpaid, defeated old man of forty-five. The class despises him. The passers-by pity him. He is the secondary school teacher walking his charges to the baths, traipsing them through art galleries, trying not to notice as they shove people off the pavement and make grabs at each other's balls.

BRIAN I don't think you can blame that on Mrs Thatcher.

GEORGE (*picking up the chair, switching on the kitchen light, and replacing the chair*) And on the other side we have a nice little crocodile of grey-flannelled boys with little pink caps and high middle-class voices going home to Children's

Hour and Ballet Shoes and Noel Streatfield. Which is very nice. Except that these others, they're going home to get their own teas in Peabody's Buildings. They're going home to margarine adverts and the *TV Times* and some of them, quite certainly, a fuck. At thirteen.

BRIAN Bully for them.

GEORGE All right. I know I'm being boring. That's quintessential Toryism. Any trace of passion or concern, they say you're being boring. (*He puts Nescafé in three mugs*)

BRIAN All right. I went to public school, of course. But looking back on it I think it may have been Borstal. I was taught by a succession of teachers all of whom seemed to have lost one or other of their limbs. It was cold, the food was disgusting, there was a great deal of what seemed to me entirely unnecessary running about and the sanitation was such as to make me a lifelong convert to constipation. And I would not send my worst enemy to public school. *But* if there are parents who are prepared to spend money on educating their children in such places... I am not going to stop them any more than I would stop them spending their money on power boats or go-kart racing or any other sophisticated way of throwing money down the drain. It's a question of freedom.

GEORGE It is not a question of freedom, it's a question of justice.

POLLY enters from the pantry, bringing bread and pâté with her.

POLLY I was hoping he'd bring you back.

GEORGE That flaming dog has messed on our steps again. It's the one species I wouldn't mind seeing vanish from the face of the earth. I wish they were like the White Rhino – six of them left in the Serengeti National Park, and all males. Do you know what dogs are? They're those beer-sodden soccer fans piling out of coaches in a layby, yanking out their cocks without a blush and pissing against the wall thirty-nine in a row. I can't stand it.

POLLY Question is whether you hate the coach party because they're like the dogs or hate the dogs because they're like the coach party.

GEORGE I hate them all. Where did you get that suit from?

BRIAN and GEORGE *go to the table.*

BRIAN It's old. I got it when I was in the army. Chester, I think.

GEORGE Why don't my suits look like that.

BRIAN Taste.

GEORGE Not taste. Nothing that implies one cares. It looks like it's grown on you, that suit. (*He goes to the fireplace*) I want something like that, bred in the bone, without anybody thinking I've paused before the mirror and *chosen* it. I want an honest suit of good broadcloth...whatever that is. I want to look like Sir Kenneth Clark or a well-to-do solicitor in a Scottish town or the head of an Oxford College. Such a suit as Montaigne might have worn, had he lived, or Marcus Aurelius.

BRIAN And something wrong, that's the mark of real distinction: the tie too loosely knotted, a bit of dinner down the waistcoat.

POLLY He's got that anyway.

A horn sounds in the street, regularly, and fading.

BRIAN You should go to my tailor.

GEORGE There you are, you see. My tailor, my doctor, my dentist. Your servants. With me it's the tailor, the doctor, the dentist. They're not mine. And I'm not theirs. Oh God, if it were only clothes, though. Look at this dry pink plate of a face. Why didn't God give me a face on which the skin hangs in genial brown folds, the mouth is firm...but kindly...and with long large ears. Nearly every man of distinction has long ears.

POLLY and BRIAN *involuntarily finger theirs.*

BRIAN In short you want to look like one of us and be like one of them.

GEORGE When I “walk down the street I want people to think “there goes a sadder and wiser man”. Instead of which it’s “Christ. He looks a slob.” Must have a pee.

POLLY Well, don’t wake the children. George’s trouble is...are you eating...

BRIAN *shakes his head.*

He’s a socialist but he doesn’t like people.

BRIAN Nor do I, much.

POLLY You’re a Conservative. You don’t have to.

BRIAN No.

POLLY There’ll doubtless be a bit of something tasty in the oven, cooked by the faithful Mrs Minter. Oh, Brian, it’s a nice life, yours. *(She gives BRIAN a mug of coffee, then prepares two more)*

BRIAN I have an ordered life, if that’s nice. *(He helps himself to sugar)* All is order. Would you like some cake?

POLLY I – would I like some cake. No. Why?

BRIAN In the car there’s a seed cake, I think a madeira cake. Two dozen jam tarts, and various bunches of assorted flowers, stuff I’ve brought back from my constituency.

POLLY Were you opening a fête?

BRIAN Not especially. My constituency’s run by a handful of big middle-class ladies. And I am their darling. Miss Cornfield, Miss Strickland, Mrs Chidlow. They love me.

POLLY *(putting the tray of coffee and bread and pâté on the chair by the fireplace)* I wish ours was. You never see any of the women, ever. And it’s all beer and butties. All I ever get is black pudding and black looks.

BRIAN *(taking a slice of pâté and standing by the sofa)* I just wish I had the energy of middle-class women in middle age. They’d organized this sale of work. There they were.

Sturdy legged, freckled forearmed, horny-elbowed ladies.
And the sort of arms that fill with fat.

POLLY (*at the fireplace*) And lots of straying shoulder straps.

BRIAN Blood donors, cake makers, stout old-fashioned cart-horses, ploughing through day after day. Flustered only by sex and sometimes not even by that. I could do with even a tenth of the energy they devote to flower arrangement.

GEORGE *enters.*

POLLY They're a vanishing breed. (*She sits on the sofa*)

BRIAN No. (*Sitting on the sofa*) You're a bit like that.

GEORGE See? (*He goes to the fireplace*)

BRIAN But why, I kept wondering today. What drives the pistons? What is it that puts one firm-fleshed sensible-shoed leg in front of the other day after day after day. What thoughts do you think flood in as they ease lisle stockings down those massive legs? And in the decency of the bathroom slip into one of Arthur's old pyjama jackets?

POLLY It's like me. Escaping boredom.

BRIAN Boredom. They don't know the meaning of the word. And those firm capable hands. Fingers that can with equal facility bottle gooseberries, address envelopes, arrange peonies, bind wounds, decontaminate (in the event of a nuclear attack) an entire village, pray, pry and at life's end lie freckled and calm upon the sheets with no sense of life wasted or purpose lost. O fierce, foolish Tory ladies, I love you. Except that I, your Member of Parliament, your elected representative at the Palace of Westminster am an outrageous pouff.

GEORGE Get on! Not outrageous at all. About as outrageous as St Augustine.

POLLY He wasn't, was he? The sly devil. I'm surprised they never twig.

BRIAN No. I'm just an agreeable young man who knows how to behave. Bachelors used to be very respectable. At Oxford and

Cambridge they still are. No, they don't twig. Mind you, I've caught one or two of the Nineteen-twenty-two Committee eyeing me rather uneasily, lest I should suddenly launch myself on their vast pin-striped bottoms. "Can't have pouffs in the Conservative Party. No seat would be safe."

POLLY I don't think they're human at all, half of them.

BRIAN Who?

POLLY The Nineteen-twenty-two Committee.

GEORGE No. A good test is whether you can imagine them on the lavatory. I reckon they just go in there, stand behind the door for five minutes then come out again – just to convince you they're like everybody else.

BRIAN It's a good job I got my seat without having to go through the cattle market. Normally you're not considered worthy of the trust of the electorate unless you've gone under the yoke with one of those upper class land girls from the front page of *Country Life*. Your credentials are a brace of spoiled and flaxen-haired children, evidence that you have on at least two occasions hoisted yourself on to her massive thighs. Though quite how this makes one of more use to the Conservative Party I am at a loss to imagine. No. Give me a nice clean sad boy of nineteen any day.

GEORGE Candidates will attend in company with their wives and/or boyfriends. That will be liberalism.

BRIAN That's enough, anyway. I can't stand talking about it. Some of them talk about nothing else. It's like making a career of being five foot eleven.

GEORGE Brian, you see, is like me. What we both crave in life is order.

POLLY Marriage and home is order.

BRIAN Come on. Undies marinating in the basin, no nice cool places in the bed. And kids. There can't be order where there are children...children are anarchists, booby-trapping the stairs...

GEORGE Oh, if it were only the stairs. One's whole life mined with affection and grief and remorse and ingratitude. Perhaps *that's* wrong with me...perhaps in the ninth year of my second marriage...

POLLY Tenth year.

GEORGE Perhaps in the tenth year of my second marriage I realize too late that I am homosexual by nature. Except that I don't like men.

POLLY You don't like anybody.

GEORGE (*putting his mug on the kitchen table*) Look at Brian. He is still a free man. Look at me...tethered like Gulliver by a thousand tiny ropes to every object in this house. Festooned with the fruit of a hundred visits to the Portobello Road, weighted down with jelly moulds, bread crocks, brass, old photographs. Yes, and children. You're right, they're part of it. Objects like the rest, except that they've been manufactured on the premises, in this century, in our lifetime" and we haven't quite found a place for them yet. But they're possessions and ornaments. And they've got to be polished in order to do us credit.

POLLY Here we go again.

GEORGE Anyway, I can go back to Oxford any time I want.

ENID (*offstage*) Hall-oo-oo.

POLLY (*putting her mug on the kitchen table*) Oh God, it's Enid. What's she doing here.

She runs for the pantry door and exits.

BRIAN (*rising*) Who is it? Don't abandon me.

GEORGE *also hides against the wall of the stairs.*

ENID, POLLY's mother, enters from the yard with a large canvas bag and a portfolio. She is a jolly, slightly raffish

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