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SF PERUSALS

JOKING APART

A Play

by Alan Ayckbourn

SAMUEL FRENCH

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ISBN 978-0-573-11204-1

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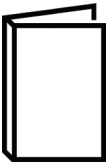
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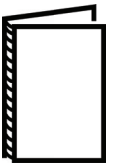
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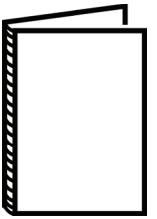
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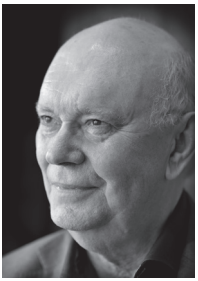
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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 seventy-nine plays, many one-act plays and a large amount of work for the younger audience. His work has been translated into over thirty-five 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 to 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.

JOKING APART

First presented at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, on 11 January, 1978, and subsequently in London by Michael Codron at the Globe Theatre on 7 March 1979, with the following cast of characters:

RICHARD	Christopher Cazenove
ANTHEA	Alison Steadman
HUGH	Julian Fellowes
LOUISE	Marcia Warren
SVEN	Robert Austin
OLIVE	Jennifer Piercey
BRIAN	John Price
MELODY **MANDY** **MO** **DEBBIE**	Diane Bull

Directed by Alan Ayckbourn

Setting by Alan Tagg

The action takes place in the garden of **RICHARD**'s and **ANTHEA**'s house

ACT I	**Scene One**	Twelve years ago, 5 November, 7.15 p.m.
	Scene Two	Eight years ago, July morning, Sunday
ACT II	**Scene One**	Four years ago, Boxing Day, 3.00 p.m.
	Scene Two	This year, August evening, Friday

ACT I

Scene One

A garden, about 7.15 p.m. on November 5th, twelve years ago.

Part of a tennis court can be seen; although in disrepair underfoot, it has solid enough fencing and the door is in working order. The rest of the court extends offstage. At the other side is a small summerhouse pavilion, very weathered. There is rough grass underfoot, together with bushes and trees. A wonderful garden for children, slightly more hazardous for adults.

At present it is dark, a fine clear night, with a little moon. From the other side of the tennis court comes the sound of three children's (aged between four and six) excited shrieks and yelps.

RICHARD, *a man in his late twenties, enters from the far end of the tennis court. He has on suitable bonfire gear – scarf, coat, old trousers and gumboots, thick gloves and possibly a hat. He carries a battery lantern.*

RICHARD *(shouting to the children behind him)* Now, the first one of you to touch those fireworks goes up on the bonfire instead of the guy, all right? Now, Debbie, you're the oldest. I'm leaving you in charge, young lady.

ANTHEA *(off from the house)* Are we all ready?

RICHARD Oh, come on, you lot. We've been waiting out here for hours.

ANTHEA *(offstage)* Coming.

RICHARD Have you brought the matches?

ANTHEA *(offstage)* Brian's bringing them.

ANTHEA *appears, a year or two younger than* **RICHARD***: cheerful, disarmingly frank, attractive but not beautiful.*

God, this place is treacherous in the dark. *(extending her hand to someone behind her)* Do be careful, Mrs – er – Emerson. Can you see? *(She waves a small pocket torch which she is carrying ineffectually.)*

RICHARD *(bounding forward with his larger lantern)* Here, let me...

It can now be seen that **ANTHEA** *is leading the Emersons:* **LOUISE***, a pale, rather tense woman of twenty-four and* **HUGH***, her husband, a young clergyman, two years older. Shy, rather nervous, but with an air of quiet determination.*

LOUISE That's fine, thank you. I can manage.

HUGH *(in the dark)* Ahhh...

RICHARD All right back there?

HUGH Yes, thank you, Mr Clarke.

ANTHEA *(moving towards the summerhouse)* We're going to watch over here, darling, if that's all right?

RICHARD You're a bit far away. You won't see much from there.

ANTHEA No, this is fine.

RICHARD Come in the tennis court.

ANTHEA No. Mrs Emerson doesn't like the bangs, darling.

RICHARD We haven't got many bangs. She wouldn't let me buy many bangs. Bangs are the best bit.

ANTHEA No, we're happy. Mrs Emerson and I will be perfect here.

LOUISE Please do call me Louise.

ANTHEA Oh fine. In that case, I'm Anthea. This is Richard.

RICHARD How do you do?

HUGH Hugh.

RICHARD I beg your pardon?

HUGH I'm Hugh.

RICHARD You're what? Oh Hugh, I see. Hallo. Right. I'll set things going. Where's Brian with the matches?

ANTHEA *(calling)* Brian!

RICHARD Brian!

ANTHEA Brian!

RICHARD We're not waiting for the Holmensons, are we?

ANTHEA No, they're obviously going to be late.

RICHARD Late? Late? Sven is never late. You must know that by now. Everyone else has got to be early. *(shouting)* Brian!

RICHARD *goes off towards the house.*

ANTHEA *(laughing)* This is Richard's partner and his wife. Sven and Olive Holmenson. Sven is terribly solemn, terribly Scandinavian, a sweet person but never, ever wrong.

LOUISE Really?

HUGH How awfully convenient.

LOUISE I can't believe that. I mean, nobody...

ANTHEA Well, he never admits he's wrong. Let's put it that way. I mean, you could go up to him and say, "Excuse me, Sven, I'm afraid you're on fire. Your jacket is alight and blazing." And he'll say, "No, no, I'm not," and that's the end of it. No point in arguing.

LOUISE When was this?

ANTHEA What?

LOUISE The…

ANTHEA Oh, no, sorry. I've got fire on the brain with this bonfire. That was just a sort of example. I mean, that sort of thing.

HUGH He wasn't really on fire, dear.

LOUISE Oh. That's a relief.

ANTHEA No, you'll have to get used to me. I chat away sixteen to the dozen. Nobody knows what I'm talking about, least of all myself. Not that anybody cares. Most of the time nobody's listening anyway.

HUGH It's really very kind of you to ask us.

ANTHEA Well, you'll be feeling a bit stranded, won't you? I mean, how long have you been moved in? A couple of days, isn't it?

LOUISE Yes, two days. Literally.

During the following, **HUGH** *sidles away from them and down the side of the tennis court to check on his offspring.*

ANTHEA You got everything straight yet?

LOUISE No, I'm afraid not. It's a terrible mess, I'm glad to be able to shut the door on it for ten minutes.

ANTHEA Well, we've been here six months and our place is just chaos.

LOUISE Of course you're in a very big house, aren't you?

ANTHEA Enormous.

HUGH *(crouching down and talking through the wire mesh)* All right, Christopher? Now, be a good boy. Play nicely with the little girl and boy, won't you?

During the above **RICHARD** *returns with the matches.*

ANTHEA Got them?

RICHARD Yes.

LOUISE Is he all right, dear?

HUGH Yes. He's getting a tiny bit over excited, I think.

RICHARD *(calling)* All right, kids, just a second.

ANTHEA Aren't Brian and thingy coming out?

RICHARD I don't know. *(pulling a face)* Things are a bit tense in there.

ANTHEA Oh.

RICHARD I thought I'd better leave them. *(moving into the tennis court)* Now then, you 'orrible lot. What's been going on behind here?

RICHARD *goes.*

ANTHEA *(to* **HUGH** *and* **LOUISE***)* Brian, whom you met and girlfriend whom you haven't. Going through agonies all weekend.

LOUISE Oh dear.

ANTHEA Ah well, that's love. I suppose.

HUGH Yes, yes.

LOUISE It's very good for our Christopher to have some other children to play with.

ANTHEA Didn't he have any friends before?

LOUISE No, there weren't any his own age where we were.

ANTHEA Oh dear. How old is he?

LOUISE Four-and-a-half.

ANTHEA Oh well, he's just between ours. Debbie's, what, nearly six and Giles was four last Thursday.

RICHARD *(offstage)* Here we go then. Ready?

ANTHEA Right.

LOUISE *(covering her ears and shutting her eyes)* Oh.

There is the blaze of a firework.

ANTHEA Whee! Isn't that pretty?

HUGH *(trying to make his wife hear him)* It's all right, Louise, it's all right.

ANTHEA *(amused)* Is she all right?

HUGH She doesn't like the bangs.

ANTHEA There aren't any bangs. Tell her we haven't got any bangs.

HUGH *(shouting)* They haven't got any bangers, Louise.

A second different-coloured firework goes off, with cries from the children.

ANTHEA Darling? Richard?

RICHARD Hallo?

ANTHEA If you're going to light a bang, could you give us some warning so it doesn't frighten Louise.

RICHARD *(offstage)* I'll try.

ANTHEA We're bringing some food out later on when we've lit the bonfire.

HUGH Lighting it in the middle of the tennis court, is that a good idea? I mean, it won't do it a lot of good, will it?

ANTHEA No, well with that court, it doesn't matter that much.

Another firework goes off. **LOUISE**, *who has emerged temporarily from her shell, goes back into it again.*

It's in a terrible state. We're going to have to have it redone sometime. I don't think the previous owners ever used it. Do you play, either of you? *(looking towards* **LOUISE***)* Oh. *(She sees she will get no answer from that quarter)*

HUGH *(answering for them both)* I do a little. But I don't think Louise does.

ANTHEA Well, I'm hopeless. We must learn together.

HUGH Good idea.

The firework light goes out.

LOUISE *(emerging)* All clear?

ANTHEA Yes, all clear now.

A big bang. **LOUISE** *screams and covers her ears.* **HUGH** *moves back down the side of the tennis court to check on his offspring.*

RICHARD *(offstage)* Sorry. That was a banger.

ANTHEA Thank you, darling.

HUGH *(crouching down by the side of the wire)* Christopher? Keep your balaclava on, there's a good boy. You keep your little hat on, there's a good boy.

LOUISE I am sorry. They just make me jump, I can't...

ANTHEA That's all right. It was frightfully loud. No, what I was going to say was, our house, of course, was the original vicarage. Did you know that...

A firework screams overhead. **LOUISE** *ducks.*

And then, of course, they built – oh lord... *(alling)* Richard, have you got any quieter ones? Poor Louise is cowering away here.

RICHARD *(offstage)* Sorry.

HUGH *(hurrying back)* Yes, I'm sorry. She shouldn't really have come. She's absolutely terrified of bangers.

ANTHEA Would you like to wait in the house?

RICHARD *(off, to one of the children)* Oy, oy, oy. Hands off.

HUGH *hurries off to investigate.*

LOUISE No, I'm fine, fine.

HUGH Is Christopher being a nuisance – er – Richard? Shall I take him?

RICHARD *(offstage)* No, he's all right. Just a bit over-excited... *(suddenly, fiercely)* Giles, that is still alight. Now put it down.

HUGH *(offstage)* Now, Christopher, quieten down. Quieten down, dear.

During the above, **BRIAN**, *a man in his late twenties appears from the house. He stands moodily apart.*

ANTHEA *(spotting* **BRIAN***)* Oh come on, Brian, you're missing it all. Is Melody coming out?

BRIAN I have no idea whatsoever.

ANTHEA Where is she?

BRIAN In the kitchen, I think, heating the soup.

Another brilliantly coloured firework.

ANTHEA Oh, good for her. *(taking in the firework)* I say, what a gorgeous colour. What's this one called, darling?

BRIAN *wanders away and gazes morosely at the display without enjoyment.* **HUGH** *sidles after him.*

RICHARD *(offstage)* I haven't the faintest idea.

ANTHEA *(calling)* Giles, look at the colours. Giles? Honestly, the kid's half-witted. He's looking in the wrong direction. Turn him round, Debbie, so he can see. Brian's working for Richard. Just temporarily. He's working in the retail shop. We import a lot of household stuff. Glassware – furniture – fabrics and so on. From Scandinavia.

LOUISE Ah.

HUGH *(to* **BRIAN***)* Mild enough, anyway.

BRIAN Yeah.

There is a silence between them.

ANTHEA Are you glad you're here? I mean, is this the sort of parish you wanted?

LOUISE Well, yes. Of course, it is only our first proper parish. We were very lucky to get it at all. I'm delighted. I think Hugh wanted more of an urban area but I love the country, you see. I was brought up in the country...

A firework blazes. **LOUISE** *blocks her ears.* **ANTHEA** *absent-mindedly follows suit.*

(continuing loudly) It'll be a challenge. Our predecessor, the Reverend Armthwaite, he was here for fifteen years. He was very popular.

ANTHEA *(unhearing)* Yes, yes.

LOUISE So we have a lot to live up to, I'm afraid.

ANTHEA No, no, quite.

A swoosh of a rocket.

Oh look, a rocket.

RICHARD *(offstage)* Rocket just gone up.

ANTHEA Yes.

HUGH *(to* **BRIAN***)* Rocket.

BRIAN Yes.

HUGH Do you live locally?

BRIAN No.

HUGH Ah.

BRIAN I'm just here for the weekend.

HUGH I see. Friend of the family?

BRIAN Something like that.

ANTHEA Watch the rocket, children. See? No, up, Giles. Up. It's up there, you fool. Honestly.

LOUISE Of course, in a way, I mean, I know your house is much more historical and interesting but I think in some ways, I prefer our little new house. I mean, as far as day–to–day running is concerned.

ANTHEA Oh gosh, yes, yours any day.

LOUISE I mean, it should be very easy to keep up. I don't normally like redbrick that much but I don't find, in this case, it's obtrusive at all. And as for keeping it clean...

ANTHEA Oh, there's no comparison. None at all. Modern houses are wonderful for that. I mean, we only got this place because it was going for absolutely nothing. And we happened to know the previous owner, that sort of thing. We wouldn't have bought it otherwise.

LOUISE It must be very difficult to keep clean.

ANTHEA It must be. I never tried. The place is a tip. Fortunately none of my family seems to mind. They're a totally squalid bunch.

LOUISE Oh.

RICHARD *(offstage)* This is an Arctic Snowstorm.

ANTHEA What?

RICHARD *(offstage)* It's called an *Arctic Snowstorm.*

ANTHEA Lovely. Darling, can you make sure Giles sees this one. I mean, you've set fire to a fortune out there and he's seen absolutely none of it. Debbie, don't pick noses with gloves on, please.

LOUISE No, I think we're going to find this job a very stimulating and challenging one. I'm really looking forward to it. And Hugh's full of good ideas. He's absolutely bursting with them. What he wants to do—

ANTHEA Golly! Sorry to interrupt you but just look at this. Isn't it lovely?

LOUISE *(covering her ears)* Oh yes.

RICHARD *(offstage)* What about that?

ANTHEA *(moving towards the tennis court)* It's almost like daylight. It's—good God! What on earth is your little boy doing by the fireworks? Richard, Richard, stop him.

RICHARD *(offstage)* Oh, my God...

HUGH Christopher. Christopher, you naughty boy. Stop that.

LOUISE *(simultaneously)* Christopher, Christopher, you little beast. Hugh, stop him.

RICHARD *(off simultaneously)* Oy, oy, oy.

HUGH You naughty boy. You naughty, naughty boy.

HUGH *goes into the court and disappears.* **LOUISE** *follows him.*

LOUISE Right, Christopher, I'm taking you straight home. I'm taking you straight home this minute. I'm taking him home, Hugh...

HUGH *(offstage)* You hear that, Christopher. Mummy's taking you home.

During the above, **BRIAN** *goes back towards the house.* **RICHARD** *comes into sight in the tennis court, abandoning the Emersons to their offspring, and shrugs towards* **ANTHEA.**

ANTHEA Yes, that's right, Giles. Christopher did a wee-wee in the fireworks. Wasn't that funny? Giles thinks it's a hoot.

RICHARD Oh well, on to the bonfire.

ANTHEA *(calling)* It's all right, Debbie, don't cry now. Daddy's going to light the bonfire.

HUGH *(offstage)* Naughty boy...

LOUISE *(offstage)* Naughty, naughty boy...

RICHARD Don't worry, Hugh, don't worry about it.

HUGH *reappears.*

HUGH I am so sorry. I don't know what to say.

RICHARD No need.

ANTHEA Light the bonfire, darling.

RICHARD Coming up.

RICHARD *goes off through the tennis court.*

HUGH *(approaching* **ANTHEA***)* I am absolutely mortified. I don't know how to apologize.

ANTHEA It's just the excitement.

HUGH He's suddenly started behaving like this. It's most weird.

ANTHEA Does he do a lot of that sort of thing?

HUGH No, not that particularly. But he suddenly gets these furious rages.

LOUISE *appears momentarily on the tennis court.*

LOUISE I'm taking him home.

HUGH All right. I'll follow you.

LOUISE Don't be too long. He won't go to sleep unless you're there.

HUGH All right. Five minutes, I promise.

LOUISE *(to* **ANTHEA***)* May I go back this way?

ANTHEA Yes, do. Just squeeze through the gap. *(calling)* Richard. Could you hold the fence for them so they can get through the gap?

LOUISE *goes.*

RICHARD *(offstage)* Right.

LOUISE *(offstage)* Come along, you naughty little boy.

ANTHEA By the way, it goes without saying, I hope, but do feel free, any of you, or your friends to use this garden when you want to.

HUGH That's really most...

ANTHEA They've been a bit stingy with your garden, haven't they? You haven't got much, have you?

HUGH No, not – er...

ANTHEA They just pinched enough of this garden to build your house and left it at that. Still, you've got nothing to mow or cut or prune – I suppose you can look on the bright side...

HUGH I still don't know how to apologize...

BRIAN *enters. He carries a tray with soup mugs and a dish of hot sausages.* **MELODY**, *a woman of about* **BRIAN***'s age, follows him.*

BRIAN Soup. *(He puts the tray on the summerhouse table)*

ANTHEA Oh, well done. Hallo, Melody.

MELODY Hallo.

BRIAN Sausages.

ANTHEA Melody, this is Hugh.

MELODY Hallo.

ANTHEA Hugh's our new vicar. Just moved into the house at the bottom of the garden. Melody's from Canada. She's a friend of Brian's.

MELODY You want soup?

HUGH Oh, thank you.

MELODY You're welcome. *(She pours soup)*

BRIAN Shall I take some round to Richard?

HUGH Oh no, let me please. Let me do something to make up.

MELODY *(handing soup to* **HUGH***)* That's yours.

HUGH Thank you.

ANTHEA Have a sausage as well.

HUGH Oh well, wouldn't say no.

MELODY *(handing* **HUGH** *a second cup)* That's for Richard.

HUGH Oh, thank you.

MELODY You're welcome.

HUGH *moves away, laden with sausages and two mugs of soup. He goes into the tennis court.*

(pouring another cup) That's yours.

ANTHEA Thank you.

MELODY You want some, lover boy?

BRIAN Yes.

The bonfire crackles alight with a roar.

RICHARD *(offstage)* There she goes. Watch yourself, Hugh.

ANTHEA Hooray! *(tasting soup)* This has turned out quite well.

MELODY The sausages are there. *(She stomps off towards the bonfire)*

ANTHEA Where are you going?

MELODY I don't want to be in the way.

MELODY *exits.*

BRIAN Oh God.

ANTHEA Did I say something I shouldn't?

BRIAN Oh forget it, forget it.

ANTHEA What?

BRIAN Forget it. Forget her. I'm sorry for bringing her down. I might have known.

ANTHEA She was very jolly yesterday.

BRIAN Oh, she can be if it suits her.

ANTHEA Oh Brian, try not to argue all weekend, there's a love. I mean, we adore you coming down here but you always seem to bring down some girl you loathe the sight of and then shout at her all weekend.

BRIAN And why do you think that is?

ANTHEA Well, can't you find one you like?

BRIAN *gives a bitter laugh.*

RICHARD *(offstage)* There goes the guy.

ANTHEA Oh, super. Hooray! *(Sotto voce again)* What do you mean?

BRIAN Are you that naïve?

ANTHEA What?

BRIAN Do you really think that because you're living with Richard my feelings for you have changed one iota? Do you?

MELODY *enters.*

ANTHEA Oh Brian, come on.

BRIAN *(gripping her arm)* Well, do you?

ANTHEA Oh, for heaven's sake...

MELODY *watches them, amused.*

MELODY Go ahead.

ANTHEA *(pulling away)* Oh, don't be ridiculous. Do be your age, Brian.

ANTHEA *goes up the side of the tennis court and disappears.*

BRIAN *(glaring at* **MELODY***)* Enjoying yourself?

MELODY Get lost.

BRIAN *(going towards the house)* Don't stand too close to the fire, you'll melt.

MELODY *(screaming after him)* Aw, screw you, brother! Screw you!

BRIAN *goes. Simultaneously,* **HUGH** *appears round the other side of the bonfire. He stands next to* **MELODY.**

HUGH *(conversationally)* Warm enough here. *(pause)* Of course, you won't have Guy Fawkes' Night in Canada, will you? *(pause)* No. It's very beautiful, I understand. So I've read. Of course in the south, you have the great lakes and, of course, the Niagara Falls. Then you have the big wheat-growing districts. Alberta. Manitoba. Saskatchewan. And then further north, you have the North-West Territories, of course. And a whole mass of lakes. Not forgetting good old Baffin Island.

MELODY Why are you telling me this?

HUGH I beg your pardon?

MELODY I don't want to hear all this. I know all this. I come from the goddamned place.

HUGH Ah.

MELODY I don't want to hear about it. Why do you think I'm here?

HUGH Ah.

MELODY Because I hated the place.

HUGH I'm sorry, I was... *(He moves away unhappily)*

MELODY *(calling after him)* Reverend?

HUGH Mmm?

MELODY I'm sorry. That was rude. That was churlish. That was ungracious. Will you accept my apology?

HUGH Er, well. Yes.

MELODY I think I would like you to understand. You see that dummy? That thing burning up there? That poor little helpless, half-charred rag doll?

HUGH The guy.

MELODY The guy? You call that the guy? Well, I'm like that guy, Reverend. Do you understand that? Someone is trying to burn me alive.

HUGH Metaphorically, I take it?

MELODY Metaphorically. Any other phorically. You name it. He uses me like a pawn in some game he's playing with that woman. My God, he has tried to take away my dignity. How dare he take away my dignity. Jesus Christ. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. God bless you, Reverend, God bless you and keep you. Why should you care about my problems?

MELODY *hurries off towards the house.*

HUGH *stands, perplexed.*

RICHARD *comes round the other side of the bonfire.*

RICHARD *(as he enters)* Watch Giles, Debbie, just for a minute. Don't let him get any closer. Now then, Hugh, are you being looked after?

HUGH Oh yes...

RICHARD Where is everyone?

HUGH Well, I'm not... I think...

RICHARD *(calling)* Anthea. Antie.

ANTHEA *(off, beyond the tennis court)* Hallo.

RICHARD Now, what can I get you? More soup?

HUGH I really ought to be getting back.

RICHARD Oh, go on, please. Sven hasn't turned up, we've got far too much. What have we got here? Aha, sausages. Have some of these.

HUGH Thank you... *(He helps himself to one)*

RICHARD Go on, go on. Take a handful.

HUGH *(complying)* Well...

RICHARD *(as he pours the soup for them)* No, though I say it myself when it comes to soups, Anthea takes a lot of beating.

HUGH Yes. I don't actually usually drink it but this is really quite...

RICHARD Oh, she knows her soups.

HUGH *(taking his mug)* Thank you. Yes, I must say I rather envy you. I – er – Louise doesn't claim to be anything of a cook so I'm not being disloyal. She really doesn't see eye to eye with a stove at all.

RICHARD Oh dear. What about you?

HUGH Me?

RICHARD Do you cook?

HUGH No. Not at all.

RICHARD You should learn. Highly satisfying. I always cook at the weekends. It's very relaxing.

ANTHEA *enters.*

ANTHEA They're having a wonderful display over in the distance there. Dozens of rockets. Are the kids all right?

RICHARD I'm going back. I'm just feeding up Hugh. He claims his wife starves him. *(He surveys the bonfire)*

ANTHEA No.

HUGH No, I didn't say that. I...

ANTHEA Grief. He's eating sausages by the fistful.

HUGH I'm sorry.

ANTHEA No, please do, there's masses. I'm joking. Please. *(she smiles dazzlingly at* **HUGH***)*

HUGH *manages to smile limply back.*

RICHARD That's burning really well this year. I think I've found the knack of building them...

HUGH Wonderful.

ANTHEA I've just been having a snoop up at the end there. You know, Richard, it wouldn't be a huge job to widen that gap in their fence and put a sort of gate there. And then Hugh and Louise could use the garden whenever they wanted.

RICHARD Why don't we knock the whole fence down altogether and have done with it? Ridiculous putting a fence there anyway. Not even well-designed. If we took it down, they could look out at the garden instead of a fence.

ANTHEA What a marvellous idea. *(to* **HUGH***)* Don't you agree?

HUGH Well, it's – yes – I mean...

ANTHEA Come on, let's knock it down.

RICHARD I'll do it now. Why not?

HUGH Now?

RICHARD Burn it on the bonfire. Best way...

RICHARD *goes off above the tennis court.*

HUGH Well, I...

ANTHEA There you are. No sooner said than done... *(yelling)* Check the kids.

RICHARD *(offstage)* Right.

HUGH Well, I hope Louise is agreeable.

ANTHEA Heavens, she'd far sooner look at trees than a fence. Besides this was your garden originally.

HUGH Well, yes.

She smiles at him again. He smiles back.

ANTHEA Look, we're not actually church-going people or anything, you know – either of us – but if there's anything we can do to help – you know, organizing or just fetching and carrying, do ask us, won't you? We'd be only too pleased.

HUGH Well, that is kind. Thank you.

ANTHEA We're always here.

There is a distant splintering of timber, and a gleeful yell from **RICHARD**.

Heavens, what is he doing?

HUGH Yes. Well, we might actually call on you sooner than you…

ANTHEA *offers him another sausage.*

Thank you…Sooner than you think. I think, especially early on, we're going to need all the help we can get. I mean, I really intend to get involved in as many different spheres as possible. My predecessor was, well, fairly ancient and – understandably, I think – he let things slide a bit. I noticed the other Sunday when I visited, there were very few young people in evidence. I'm hoping to remedy that…

Another splintering crash, and yell from **RICHARD**.

I hope your husband knows what he's doing. He'll stop when he gets to our house, will he? That's not to say that I want to discourage older people. Of course not. But it's a bit depressing if most of your congregation are in the churchyard instead of the church. *(He laughs)*

RICHARD *enters brandishing a piece of timber.*

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