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SF PERUSALS

KAFKA'S DICK

A Comedy

by Alan Bennett

SAMUEL FRENCH

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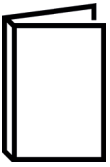
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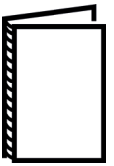
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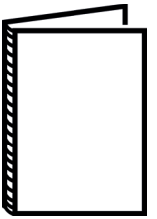
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Bennett was born in Leeds in 1934. After studying at Oxford University he collaborated as a writer and performer with Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook in *Beyond the Fringe* in 1960 at the Edinburgh Festival.

He then turned to writing full time and produced his first stage play *Forty Years On* in 1968. His other plays include *Getting On, Habeas Corpus, The Old Country, The Lady in the Van, A Question of Attribution, The Madness of George III* (together with the Oscar-nominated screenplay *The Madness of King George*), an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and *The History Boys*; as well as many television plays such as *A Day Out, Sunset across the Bay, A Woman of No Importance* and the series of monologues *Talking Heads* and *Talking Heads II*.

KAFKA'S DICK

First performed in an earlier version at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 23rd September, 1986. The cast was as follows:

KAFKA	Roger Lloyd Pack
BROD	Andrew Sachs
LINDA	Alison Steadman
FATHER	Charles Lamb
SYDNEY	Geoffrey Palmer
HERMANN K	Jim Broadbent
JULIE	Vivian Pickles

Director	Richard Eyre
Designer	William Dudley
Lighting Designer	Mark Henderson
Sound	Christopher Shutt
Music, Effects and Arrangements	George Fenton
Dances	David Toguri

CHARACTERS

KAFKA

BROD

LINDA

FATHER

SYDNEY

HERMANN K

ACT I

Scene One

The date is immaterial, though it is around 1919.

KAFKA, *a tall, good-looking man is sitting in a chair, dying.* **MAX BROD**, *his friend, is smaller, slightly hump-backed, and very much alive.*

KAFKA Max.

BROD I hoped you were sleeping.

KAFKA Max.

Pause.

BROD What?

KAFKA I think I shall die soon.

BROD *says nothing.*

Did you hear me, Max?

BROD Let's cross that bridge when you come to it. You've said you were dying before.

KAFKA I know. But I won't let you down this time, I promise.

BROD Kafka, I want you to *live.*

KAFKA Forgive me. If I die...

BROD What's this if? He says he's dying then suddenly it's "if". Don't you mean "when"?

KAFKA When I die I want you to do me a favour.

BROD Come to the funeral, you mean? Look, this is Max, your best friend. I'll be up there in the front row.

KAFKA No. The funeral can take care of itself.

BROD Pardon me for saying so, but that's typical of your whole attitude to life. A funeral does not take care of itself.

KAFKA *(overlapping)* I know, Max. I know.

BROD Take the eats for a start. You're dealing with grief-stricken people. They want to be able to weep secure in the knowledge that once you're in the grave the least they'll be offered will be a choice of sandwiches.

KAFKA But after the funeral…this is very important… I want you to promise me something, Max. You must burn everything I've ever written.

BROD No.

KAFKA Stories, novels, letters. Everything.

BROD What about the royalties?

KAFKA I've published one novel and a few short stories. Does it matter?

BROD But where would they go in a bereavement situation?

KAFKA My father, where else? Which is another reason to burn them. I've got stuff in technical periodicals to do with my work at the insurance company. Don't worry about that…

BROD But the rest I burn, right?

KAFKA Yes.

BROD That is your honest decision?

KAFKA Cross my heart and hope to die.

BROD That's not saying much; you are going to die.

KAFKA Max, I *mean* it. All my works burned. Understand?

BROD All your works burned.

KAFKA Everything. When I go, they go. Finish.

BROD You've got it. Message received and understood.

Pause. **BROD** *starts to go.*

KAFKA Where are you going?

BROD To buy paraffin.

KAFKA Max. Stay a minute. After all, my writings are worthless. They wouldn't survive anyway. They don't deserve to survive.

Pause.

Don't you think so?

BROD You're the one who's dying. I'm Max, your faithful friend. You say burn them, I burn them. *(Going again)* Maybe I'll get petrol instead.

KAFKA Max! *(Pause)* If you want to read them first, feel free... just to remind you.

BROD *(going again)* No. I read them when you wrote them. I'm going to burn them I may as well press on and burn them. Only...

KAFKA *(brightening)* What?

BROD Well, I ask myself, are we missing an opportunity here? Why not juice up the occasion? ...Ask one or two people over, split a bottle of vino, barbecue the odd steak then as a climax to the proceedings flambé the Collected Works? Anyway, old friend, don't worry. All will be taken care of.

KAFKA Good. Still, if in fact you can't get hold of all my stuff, no matter. Some of it has been published. It could be anywhere.

BROD You're kidding. I mean, what are we saying here? This is your faithful friend, Max. Kafka wants his stuff burned, Max will find it and burn it. It won't be difficult. You'd be surprised how helpful people are when it's a dying wish.

KAFKA But I'm in libraries, Max. You can't burn them. *Metamorphosis,* my story about a man who wakes up as a beetle. That's in libraries. Ah well. I shall just have to live with that.

BROD Don't be so negative. Here's the plan. I go to the library, borrow you books, go back and say they've been stolen. Then it's burn, baby, burn.

KAFKA Some are in America. London. Paris.

BROD So? I've always wanted an excuse to travel. I can't wait. Max Brod. Search and destroy! *(Pause)* Hey, you look really depressed.

KAFKA Wouldn't you be depressed? I'm dying.

Pause.

BROD Look. *Vis-à-vis* your books. I've just had a thought.

KAFKA *(clutching at a straw)* Yes?

BROD Maybe I won't burn everything. Not every single copy. Could you live with that?

KAFKA Well... I... I'm not sure. I really wanted them burnt...

BROD Can I just let you in on my thinking? We're in 1920 now, right? You're going to die soon...give a year, take a year, say 1924 at the outside. Well, less than ten years later we get the Nazis, right? And, as prefigured in some of your as yet unrecognized masterpieces (which I'm going to burn, I know, I know), the Nazis seize power and put into operation the full apparatus of totalitarian bureaucracy.

KAFKA Max, I saw it coming.

BROD You did.

KAFKA Would that history had proved me wrong, Max.

BROD Would that it had. Only, tragically it didn't. Because in 1933 the Nazis are scheduled to stage their infamous Burning of the Books...

KAFKA Burn books? Who in his right mind would want to burn books? They must be sick.

BROD The Nazis ransack libraries for what they term decadent literature. Film shows Brownshirts bringing out books by the armful and casting them into the flames.

KAFKA In civilized Europe! I can't bear it. It's tragic. It's insane. *(Pause)* Max. Which books in particular?

BROD Freud. Proust. Rilke. Brecht.

KAFKA Er…anybody else?

BROD Hemingway. Thomas Mann. Gide. Joyce…

KAFKA Max… Don't I figure?

BROD Well, this is the point… I'll have burnt your stuff already.

KAFKA But nobody will know that.

BROD Exactly. People will look at the credits and say: They burnt Proust. They burnt Brecht. They burnt Joyce. Where is Kafka? Not worth burning, maybe.

KAFKA God. I was depressed before. Now I'm suicidal.

BROD Maybe I can fix it.

KAFKA You think?

BROD I can see it now: a shot of flames licking round a book jacket, the name Kafka prominently placed.

KAFKA Dreadful.

BROD Sure, but burn one and you sell ten thousand. Believe me, if the Nazis hadn't thought of it the publishers would.

KAFKA Max, I'm still not sure. Do I want to survive?

BROD Of course you do. I'm a successful novelist, so I'm headed that way myself. I know you've got talent. You haven't made it big yet, in fact you haven't made it at all, but once you're dead I've a hunch your fame is going to snowball. Who

knows, you could end up as famous as me. Whereas, you burn everything, you've squandered your life.

KAFKA You're right.

BROD Believe me, in ten years' time, your stuff is going to be classic. That one you mentioned, *Metamorphosis,* where he wakes up one morning and finds he's a cockroach. Brilliant.

KAFKA *(leaping from his chair)* That's it. That is *it.* I've changed my mind. As you were. Burn them. Burn everything!

BROD What did I say?

KAFKA What did you *say?* What did you say? He didn't wake up as a cockroach. I never said he woke up as a cockroach. He woke up as a beetle.

BROD Cockroach, beetle, they're both bugs, who cares?

KAFKA Me! Don't you see? That's the trouble with words. You write one thing, the reader makes it into another. You try to be honest, only words fail you. They always do in the end. They're the worst method of communicating with anybody.

BROD Look...

KAFKA No, I was right first time. Burn them.

BROD If you say so.

KAFKA And Max. No biography.

BROD Who'll want to write your biography? You won't have written anything.

KAFKA Promise.

BROD I promise.

KAFKA Forgive me. I'm a terrible human being.

BROD Don't worry about it. *(He yawns)*

KAFKA I'm just a dog pretending to be a person, an ape.

BROD Yeah, yeah. We've been through all that. Now try and sleep a little. Come to bed.

The lights begin to fade, with music possibly.

KAFKA I would sleep, only I dream.

BROD Everybody dreams.

KAFKA Not like me. I dream the future.

KAFKA *and* **BROD** *exit.*

Lights up immediately on:

Scene Two

The present day. A room in a middle-class house, possibly a kitchen cum living-room. I am not sure how representational the room should be. Since some of the happenings that take place in it are downright unreal perhaps the room should look unreal also, but the reverse could be more convincingly argued. An over-scrupulous naturalism would be out of place, though the reality of the bookcase is crucial. There are doors or exits to other parts of the house, and an entrance, say, french windows on to the garden.

Sydney, a mild, middle-aged man, is reading. **LINDA**, *his wife, stares out into the garden.* **SYDNEY'S FATHER**, *an old man with a Zimmer frame, is consulting the bookcase.*

LINDA That fool of a tortoise is out again. Galloping across the lawn.

FATHER When are they coming?

LINDA *(ignoring him but without rancour)* They are not coming.

FATHER *(taking an orange Penguin from the bookcase and carrying it over to* **LINDA***)* Is that a detective?

LINDA *(still ignoring him)* There are no detectives. Nobody is coming.

FATHER What have I done?

SYDNEY *(kindly)* Nothing, Father. You have done nothing. *(Pause)* There can be few people who realize that Hitler went to the same school as Wittgenstein.

LINDA The way he went on to behave I'm surprised he went to school at all.

SYDNEY Another five years they might have been sharing the same desk.

LINDA You are clever, Sydney.

FATHER *(now poised to leave)* When are they coming?

LINDA They are not coming.

FATHER *exits.*

When are they coming?

SYDNEY They didn't say. *(He looks unhappy)*

LINDA Now it's making a beeline for the road. It must want to die.

SYDNEY I wonder if there was a school magazine. Old Boys' Notes. Wittgenstein, L. (Class of 1904) has just published his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and been elected a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. Contemporaries will recall the model sewing machine he made out of matchsticks. Hitler, A. (Class of 1899) has recently been elected Chancellor of Germany. He will be remembered as an enthusiastic secretary of the Art Group.

LINDA Does Mr Cunliffe read?

SYDNEY I don't know. As Deputy Supervisor Vehicle Insurance North Western Area I doubt if he gets much chance.

LINDA *says nothing.*

I didn't want the job. And remember this: Mr Cunliffe has never had an article in the *Journal of Insurance Studies.*

LINDA No, but Mrs Cunliffe's got a new bedroom suite and they pop over to Jersey quite regularly. *(Pause)* Why do you never read novels?

SYDNEY I'm an insurance man, I prefer facts. Biography. I'd rather read about writers than read what they write.

LINDA Yes. I know why. More dirt.

SYDNEY *(at the bookcase)* Not necessarily. *The Life of E. M. Forster.* Hardly dirt.

LINDA Really? I thought he lived with a policeman.

SYDNEY He was a friend. Forster had friends in many walks of life.

LINDA Not merely walks. You said one was an Egyptian tram-driver. And there were umpteen darkies.

SYDNEY Linda. *(Pause)* We complain about my father: Kafka's father used to rummage in his ears with a toothpick then use it to pick his teeth.

She hangs over his shoulder, looking at his books. She would probably like to be in bed.

LINDA No pictures?

SYDNEY No. I sometimes wish biographers carried nude photographs.

LINDA Sydney.

SYDNEY It would settle this argument anyway. *(He holds up a book)* This is by two psychologists at the University of North Carolina, who having analysed everything Kafka ever wrote, deduce that one of his problems, of which there were many, was a small penis.

LINDA I never liked the word penis. I don't mind the pee…after all that's what it's for. It's the – nis I somehow don't like. Anyway, he's not unique in that department.

SYDNEY Linda.

LINDA I was thinking of Scott Fitzgerald.

SYDNEY How do you know Scott Fitzgerald had a small…thing?

LINDA The same way I know W. H. Auden never wore underpants, that Kafka's grandfather could pick up a sack of potatoes in his teeth and that Kafka's father used to rummage in his ears with a toothpick. Because that kind of conversation is all I ever get. If it weren't for looking after your father I could still be a nurse.

SYDNEY I like odd facts.

LINDA When are you going to tell me the bits in between? I'd thought of taking a course. So I can help you in your work.

SYDNEY An insurance course?

LINDA This work.

SYDNEY If there are courses in Kafka, which I doubt, they would be the first casualty of the cutbacks.

LINDA Literature in general.

SYDNEY Ah. Literature in general.

LINDA I should have stayed a nurse. What do I do now? Hang about. I'm nothing.

SYDNEY I know it's a wicked thing to say nowadays but you are not nothing. You are my wife.

LINDA It's not enough.

SYDNEY It's enough for Mrs Cunliffe.

LINDA Couldn't I do research? File your papers?

She makes a move to do so. He stops her.

SYDNEY Linda.

LINDA Let me at least read it.

SYDNEY *(taking back his manuscript)* You wouldn't understand it.

LINDA I might. After all he's got a nice face. Would I have liked him?

SYDNEY He was never short of symptoms. You could at least have nursed him. You wouldn't like his stories. Not what you'd call "true to life". A man turns into a cockroach. An ape lectures. Mice talk. He'd like me. We've got so much in common. He was in insurance. I'm in insurance. He had TB. I had TB. He didn't like his name. I don't like my name. I'm sure the only reason I drifted into insurance was because I was called Sydney.

LINDA Sydney's a nice name. I like Sydney.

SYDNEY Now this is interesting. Kafka had read *Crime and Punishment,* which is a novel by Dostoevsky. In *Crime and Punishment* the student Raskolnikov commits a murder for which another man is wrongly arrested; the man is a house painter. In Kafka's *The Trial*, Joseph K is wrongly arrested. Who has actually committed the crime? A house painter. And someone in whose name millions of people were wrongly arrested was Adolf Hitler. Who is himself wrongly accused of being...a house painter.

Pause.

LINDA And?

SYDNEY Linda, it's interesting.

LINDA It is, it is.

SYDNEY One of the functions of literary criticism is to point up unexpected connections.

LINDA With you being in accident insurance I thought your only interest in unexpected connections was when they occurred between motor cars. Sydney.

She draws him out of the chair.

SYDNEY Linda. It's two-thirty in the afternoon.

LINDA It'll be another unexpected connection.

The doorbell goes. They stop.

SYDNEY Is his case packed?

LINDA *nods.*

LINDA *(meaning "Be brave")* Sydney.

LINDA *answers the door, but the visitor has already come round to the french windows. It is* **BROD**, *who is just as we have seen him previously, except that he is minus*

his hump. He carries in his hand a large Homburg hat which conceals a tortoise.

BROD I ring your doorbell with reluctance. I have met with an accident. I am a visitor to these shores. Suddenly a temperamental prostate and a total absence of toilet facilities necessitates my emptying my bladder outside your front door.

LINDA *returns.*

LINDA Sydney, it's all over the step.

BROD Worse is to follow. Picture my distress as I am rebuttoning my trousers when I discover I have urinated not only over your doorstep but also over your tortoise. *(He removes the Homburg to reveal the tortoise)*

LINDA Our tortoise? *(She puts out her hand for the tortoise then thinks better of it)* He's wet through!

BROD *puts the tortoise down on the floor. It begins to move off—***BROD***, without looking, puts his Homburg hat over it.*

SYDNEY It was an accident, I'm sure.

BROD Blame the disappearance of your public conveniences. Time was they were the envy of the civilized world. To be incontinent here is some problem, I can tell you.

The doorbell has alerted **FATHER** *and he has come in.*

FATHER It's not true. Someone's been telling lies about me. I am not incontinent. Furthermore I can tell you the name of the Prime Minister. Are you them?

SYDNEY No, he is not them. There is no them. This gentleman has just urinated over the tortoise.

FATHER I know what that means. You want my room.

BROD Why does urinating over the tortoise mean they want your room?

SYDNEY My father imagines things.

FATHER I don't imagine things. You say I imagine things. I never imagine things.

At which point **BROD***'s hat begins to move slowly across the room towards* **FATHER***, who retreats before it in shocked silence, then (Zimmer frame permitting) bolts.*

LINDA *picks up the hat and hands it to* **BROD***. Ignoring the cue to go he sits down and opens a book.*

SYDNEY Should we offer him a cup of tea?

LINDA And put another innocent tortoise at risk? No.

BROD How singular! I open a book and what do I find? Kafka. *(Opening others)* Kafka, Kafka.

SYDNEY You know his work?

BROD Only by heart. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed into a gigantic cockroach." "Ah, ha," says the browser at the airport bookstall. "The very thing to while away my flight to Sri Lanka." And ring a ding ding. It's another sale for our Czech Chekhov.

LINDA I was a nurse. Waking up people was half my job. I never came across anyone waking up as an insect.

BROD You probably never came across metaphor either. She says no-one wakes up as a cockroach. Next to her I'd wake up a wild beast. So what is it about our Prague Proust that interests you?

SYDNEY It's not generally known but Kafka worked all his life in an insurance office…

BROD It is known to some people.

SYDNEY And as I'm in that line myself, I'm writing a piece about him for *Small Print,* the *Journal of Insurance Studies.*

BROD For a moment I thought you were yet another of those academic blow flies who make a living buzzing round the faeces of the famous. You've read his biography?

SYDNEY I've read several.

BROD Excuse me. There is only one. Mine.

SYDNEY You've written a biography of Kafka?

BROD I wrote the biography. I edited the diaries. I published the novels. You want to know about Kafka, start here. Max Brod.

They shake hands.

SYDNEY Max Brod! You are Max Brod? You're pulling my leg. No. *(He laughs nervously)* How could you be?

BROD Why?

SYDNEY You're Kafka's closest friend.

BROD Correction. Not his closest friend. His only friend. His only real friend.

SYDNEY You're a great man. A legend. What would you be doing here? Max Brod! *(He shakes hands again)*

BROD What about Nurse Cavell? Doesn't she want to shake hands with a legend?

LINDA Brod? You spell it B—R—O—D? *(She goes to look it up)*

SYDNEY No need to look him up. I know all about him.

BROD *(to the audience)* She's about to discover I'm dead. But then I'm also famous. These are the dead ones. Nobody's ever heard of them. That's death. You read my book?

SYDNEY Every word.

LINDA *(beckoning him with the book)* Sydney.

SYDNEY I've read half a dozen biographies but I always come back to yours.

BROD Of course you do. I knew Kafka. They didn't.

LINDA Sydney, can I have a word?

SYDNEY In a minute, Linda. Tell me, was Kafka as saintly as you make him out?

BROD*'s interest throughout this conversation is in* **LINDA***, not* **KAFKA** *and still less* **SYDNEY**.

BROD I should lie? Kind, modest and with that clod of a father… what type of a nurse was this, crisp, white uniform, thin, black stockings…that type?

LINDA Yes. Strict. And I was a past master of the enema. Sydney.

SYDNEY *(eluding* **LINDA***'s attempts to draw him aside)* To me Kafka is the last, authentic, modern saint. It's interesting that one by one the moral giants of the twentieth century have all been toppled. I say that in my article. "It is interesting that one by one the moral giants of the twentieth century have all been toppled." But not Kafka.

BROD That's fascinating. Nurses have a reputation for unbridled promiscuity. How does that accord with your experience?

LINDA Sydney.

SYDNEY Take Wittgenstein. People said he was a saint, but not any more. *(Feigning interest)* No?

Biography reveals that his less philosophical moments were spent picking up youths.

BROD What for, when there's so much else on offer?

SYDNEY And who nowadays admires Freud?

LINDA Oh? Where did he slip up?

SYDNEY Dishonest. Freud was quite small…

BROD Minute. He would only have come up to here *(on* **LINDA***)*.

SYDNEY And yet in a photograph of Freud with his colleagues he's head and shoulders above everybody else. Why? Biography reveals he's stood on a box.

LINDA Oh. Like Alan Ladd.

SYDNEY Alan Ladd?

LINDA Alan Ladd wasn't tall. He often had to stand on a box. Either that or his leading lady stood in a trench. Maybe Freud wasn't on a box. Maybe the others were in a trench.

SYDNEY Linda. Nursing, though an admirable profession, doesn't exactly hone the mind.

BROD Don't worry about it.

LINDA But Sydney. You said literary criticism was about unexpected connections. You can't get more unexpected than Freud and Alan Ladd.

BROD That's the danger with big tits. The mind goes on holiday.

LINDA Sydney, I want to tell you something.

SYDNEY Linda, I'm talking. You wouldn't catch Kafka standing on a box. Wanting to make himself bigger. Not your friend Kafka, eh?

BROD No.

SYDNEY In fact, I'd have said the reverse. I'd have said he wanted to make himself smaller. Would you agree?

BROD Larger, smaller, one or the other. You don't still have your uniform?

LINDA Where's the tortoise gone?

She gets down on her hands and knees to look, further fascinating **BROD**.

SYDNEY We only have to look at his work. Who does Kafka identify with? An ape, a mouse, a cockroach. Smaller and smaller.

BROD Can I help?

SYDNEY I tell you, give him a few more years and he'd have needed a microscope to see what he was writing about. I

actually say that in my article: "Give him a few more years and he'd have needed a microscope to see what he was writing about."

BROD How interesting. Will it ever stop? If I never hear the name Kafka again it will be too soon. *(He sits down again)*

LINDA Sydney. You don't think he is this man?

SYDNEY I'm not sure. Max Brod was a hunchback.

LINDA Sydney. He's also dead. I looked him up for you. *(She shows him the book)* Died in 1968.

SYDNEY In Tel Aviv, yes.

LINDA You know?

SYDNEY Of course.

LINDA So who is he?

SYDNEY He could be to do with father. A health visitor perhaps.

LINDA Masquerading as a friend of Kafka?

SYDNEY The social services are notorious for their imagination.

LINDA So why not ask him?

SYDNEY Linda. Don't *worry*. We are having a conversation. Ideas are being exchanged, hypotheses put forward. For me this is a treat. A picnic of the mind. How often do I find someone who's even heard of Kafka let alone someone who can't wait to discuss him?

LINDA Yes, Sydney.

SYDNEY All in good time.

LINDA Yes, Sydney.

SYDNEY *(finding the tortoise)* Here he is. Why don't you put him under the tap?

LINDA I'll go put him under the tap.

BROD Can I help?

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