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STITCHERS

by Esther Freud

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-11556-1
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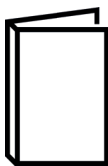
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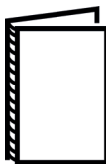


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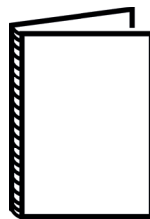
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WITH THANKS.

I'd like to thank Katy Emck, Victoria Gillies and Katie Steingold from Fine Cell Work, who did so much to facilitate my research. Isabella Tree, who added to many, many drafts with her precision and humour. Matthew Byam Shaw for early encouragement and support, Jeremy Herrin and Ed Hall who gave up precious time to advise me, Patrick Barlow for his generous enthusiasm, Alex Boyt for inside information, Kitty Aldridge for a particularly brilliant note, Xandra Bingley for being there for me from the start, Edward Henry, so generous with his legal knowledge, Erwin James whose acknowledgement means so much, Margie Markwick whose determination got me inside on many prison visits, Molly Eagles for her ingenuity and dedication, and Gaby Dellal whose insight and passion turned the play around on more than one occasion. Also to Julia Sowerbutts and the Ink festival for giving me the chance to workshop an early version, and Helen Atkinson Wood for showing me how it could be done. Also Taz Fustok for the use of his club, Laylow, Jacquie Wood and Caroline Wilkinson for sharing needlework expertise, and Annie Warburton from the Craft Council for financial advice. I am very grateful to you all, and to my beloved family.

With special thanks to sponsors: Kitty Aldridge, Emma Freud, Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell, Esther and Jamie Cayzer-Colvin, and Lady Jane Rayne.

For my friend and fairy godmother, Dena Hammerstein.

CHARACTERS

LADY ANNE TREE – Seventy. Upper class. No nonsense.

TOMMY – Early twenties. Londoner. On remand.

LUKASZ – Forties. Polish. Been inside eight years.

LEN – Fifties. Black. Ex-army. Lifer.

BUSBY – Thirty-five to forty-five. In a wheelchair. Repeat offender.

DERRICK/DENISE – Thirties. Back in on recall.

KEITH CLARKE – Prison officer.

The play is set in 1997 and is based on the true story of prison reform campaigner Lady Anne Tree.

This script went to press during rehearsals and may differ from the text in performance.

ACT ONE

Scene One

Six men sit on chairs. Each has a cup and a plate. They are dressed in grey tracksuit bottoms and blue T-shirts, apart from one, who is in uniform – white shirt, black trousers. As the lights come up there is a cacophony of sound, cups against plates, whistles blowing, shouts, doors slamming, feet running. Then KEITH, the prison officer, stands and shouts:

KEITH Alright everybody. Lock up. Now!

The slam of a door. Then the echo of other doors. Slam, slam, slam.

Into the silence steps LADY ANNE TREE. She stands alone in a dingy, windowless room. There are a few plastic chairs and a small pool table. She has a large bag in each hand – the kind you take to the laundrette – and a key belt around her waist. She waits for a moment, and then sets the bags down. On the wall behind her is a wide flat cupboard. She checks her belt and then, remembering, takes a small key from her jacket pocket. She opens the cupboard. Inside, outlined in bright pen, are scissors, unpickers, tape measures, reels of cotton.

Just then the overhead light goes out.

ANN Oh gawd. Hello? Hello?

The light flicks on. BUSBY sits there in his wheelchair.

BUSBY They're on a timer. Only last a few minutes. Have to press that button – the harder you press it, the longer they last.

ANNE locks the cupboard. Puts the key back in her pocket.

ANNE How do you do? Anne Tree.

BUSBY FF475 Busby.

ANNE Welcome, Mr Busby.

They wait.

Will it just be you?

BUSBY I'm... I think Speedy might come down if he's not on bang-up.

ANNE Right.

She unzips a bag and takes out a square of material and a skein of orange wool.

Shall we?

*She pulls up a chair so that she is sitting beside **BUSBY**.*

It's best to start with a simple sloping stitch – tent stitch, or half cross – not that it matters terribly what it's called. What *is* important is that the stitches all go the same way. And keeping the back tidy, that's the sign of a professional. If anything gets tangled – unpick. If it isn't perfect, we won't be able to flog it.

*ANNE has threaded the needle and now hands it to **BUSBY** with the material.*

Ready? So...you bring your needle up from behind, that's it, and in again above...above...and to the right, that's it, and then... Ahhh...not to worry. Slide the wool off and pull the needle through, rethread. Can you manage that?

Painstakingly he attempts to rethread. ANNE offers him her glasses.

Just the job. And start the stitch again. Now you see these little squares, change colour each square. It's rather nice if the pattern repeats, but of course, if you prefer, you can make it up as you go along.

ANNE watches while BUSBY manages a few more stitches, frowning intently.

BUSBY Miss, what am I making?

ANNE Oh Lord, I'm sorry. A pincushion.

She digs in her bag and finds one. A tiny brightly coloured tapestry cushion. She holds it up and, projected, it multiplies, each small cushion spinning across the back of the stage.

As the lights fade there is a jangling of keys, the rattling of metal gates, the sound of locks turning. The lights come up on:

Scene Two

TOMMY, *young, angry, scared, is being led by KEITH through the prison. He has a bedroll under his arm, and carries a cup, plate and plastic bowl. With the use of sound and light projection we see them pass through a series of holding tunnels and gates, the same locking and unlocking procedure repeated each time, until they reach the wing and a long row of cell doors.*

KEITH *stops and unlocks one.*

KEITH In you go, son, don't be shy.

Scene Three

Lights up on interior of the cell. It is lit by a fluorescent strip. There's a table, two chairs, a toilet, a basin, and a metal bunk. At the table sits LUKASZ, a half eaten plate of food in front of him. Behind TOMMY the door slams.

LUKASZ The bad news – you missing tea.

He takes a mouthful, winces.

The good news – you missing tea.

He gets up and scrapes the remaining food out of the narrow slice of open window. Then from a small cupboard he takes a variety pack of cereal and a packet of UHT milk.

What will Lukasz choose today? Coco Pops. Followed by...
(*He pulls out an apple.*) One fruits. You got any thing for trade? Cash. Weed. Alcohol?

TOMMY They took everything off me, didn't they? Even my fags. Get it back when I'm released, they said.

He takes a packet of Red Bull tobacco out of his pocket.

Instead I got this shit.

LUKASZ (*looks at him*) Usually I am charging double bubbles for loans. But for you, for new boy...

TOMMY Tommy.

LUKASZ For Tommy (*He takes a roll-up from behind his ear.*) you have one roll-up, then when you get funds, you pay me back, Lukasz Pietrowski, one roll-up and a half.

TOMMY You haven't got...any...

He looks around, desperate.

LUKASZ What?

TOMMY Anything to...you know...take the edge off.

LUKASZ What you think this is? A nightclub?

TOMMY I shouldn't be here.

LUKASZ I never hearing that before.

TOMMY No, it's just. I've not been sentenced.

LUKASZ Why you not get bail?

TOMMY It won't be long.

LUKASZ I can do you deal on cornflake. If was crispies I say no. But cornflake. Not my favourite.

TOMMY The lawyer, the one they gave me, he said bail might go against me, best to wait it out...

LUKASZ (*pouring milk into his cereal, eating*) So what you do then?

TOMMY What, me? Nothing.

LUKASZ Nothing? Really? Last cell mates – he never shutting up. Slicing wife from... (*draws his hand from groin to neck*) *pizda* to throat. He telling whole of prison. Man she was in bed with, stabbing seventeen times and...*spusic sie...* on his face.

Takes another mouthful.

TOMMY No! I just... Fucking hell!! I was drunk, that's all. I never meant... A couple of days, a week at the most, and I'll be out of here.

LUKASZ Sure, sure.

Silence.

TOMMY (*nervous*) And you? What you done then?

LUKASZ Me? Same like you. Nothing.

TOMMY How long you in for?

LUKASZ Thirteen years.

They look at each other. Lights dim and come up again on...

Scene Four

Sewing room.

ANNE *sitting with* BUSBY.

ANNE Marvellous. And again. That's it. Good. Ahh. Never mind. Unpick. Rethread...

She hands him glasses again.

Gently, gently... If you pull the thread too tight...

LEN *enters. A big, menacing-looking man. He coughs.*

BUSBY *stares at his work.*

(getting up) You here for the stitching?

LEN Stitching?

The lights go out.

ANNE Blast.

There is some scrabbling. ANNE gets to the switch. Lights go on. LEN and the bags are gone.

Well, I'll be blowed.

BUSBY *carries on sewing, head down.*

LEN *(appears from behind the door)* Boo.

ANNE *(tries to recover her humour)* Ha! You nearly had me there! But seriously, any high jinks and we won't be able to get this enterprise off the ground. This is a trial, you see, and if anything goes missing they'll throw the rule book at us.

ANNE *begins laying her things out on the table.*

No wool, no kits. Especially no needles. If a needle breaks, you bring it straight to me, both ends, and I'll replace it. If you need more wool, you snip a bit off, stick it to a piece of paper, send it off, and I'll be sure to bring more in when I next come. Now.

She hands him a square of material, and a needle threaded with white wool. He stands, bemused.

Have you stitched anything before?

LEN I sewed a button on once, when I was...in the army.

ANNE An army man?

LEN Agghhhh. Pricked my bleeding finger.

ANNE No blood on that white wool!

LEN I'll do my best, Miss.

ANNE I know you will, Mr...

LEN DL476 Maxwell, Miss.

ANNE Mr Maxwell. Lady Anne Tree.

She sets a chair for him.

We're making pincushions. Ideally you use your arm to measure the length of each strand of wool, needle to elbow, then you don't get tangled up.

BUSBY What do I do when I have to cut the thread, Miss?

ANNE uses a thread-cutter that hangs round her neck. She snips the thread for BUSBY.

ANNE You're allowed nail-clippers I believe?

LUKASZ appears in the doorway, looking through the metal bars of the gate. ANNE, sensing something, looks round but he is gone.

LEN Or this works just as well...

He bites the wool off with his teeth.

ANNE Perhaps nail clippers might be neater? Now, start from the back, no knots, leave a tail, that's it, and bring the needle up and...down again at an angle.

LUKASZ is at the gate again. ANNE turns.

Will you be joining us?

LUKASZ I come to watch how you make money.

ANNE I can assure you there's no money to be made by watching.

LUKASZ pushes open the gate and comes in. ANNE turns her attention back to LEN.

Now for the next stitch, out, and down again... That's it...
Do you see? Not so tight or the work becomes uneven...
and again...

BUSBY *(to himself, tense)* I've messed this up.

LUKASZ *(yawning)* How long this going to take? Half hour
for one tiny squares.

LEN *(quiet, threatening)* You finished my laundry yet, Busby?

BUSBY *(nervous)* I said I'd have it for you tomorrow.

ANNE *(to LUKASZ)* It'll be slow at first. But you'd be surprised
how one speeds up once one gets the hang of it.

LUKASZ *(flexing an arm)* I strongest man in all prison.

ANNE Sorry. I didn't get your name?

LUKASZ Pietrowski. Lukasz.

ANNE *(stands and puts out her hand)* Very nice to meet you,
and congratulations, Mr Pietrowski.

They shake. The lights go out again.

Gawd!

ANNE thumps the switch, hard. When the lights go on

LUKASZ is still looking at his hand.

Are you alright?

LUKASZ In eight years no one shook my hand.

He takes a chair and places it beside the others.

So what do I start with? Crossing stitch. Blankets stitch.
Chain stitch...?

ANNE You can sew, Mr Pietrowski?

LUKASZ My mother, she was stitcher. Making clothes for whole village.

ANNE In that case, there's something here that's a little more ambitious.

Goes through her bag and draws out a kit – an image of a snarling terrier marked out on tapestry material.

Guzzle works well in cross stitch, I find. And for the collar and the...teeth...fly stitch might be awfully nice.

LUKASZ We have dog at home, on chain. Teeth? You see nothing.

ANNE (*looking at image*) He was my husband's dog.

LUKASZ Dead?

ANNE Last year, my husband. Sorry. You mean Guzzle. Very much alive.

Expertly LUKASZ licks the end of his wool, twists it between his fingers and threads up. He begins to stitch, confident, flamboyant. The others look at him, daunted.

LEN (*tangled up*) I don't think I'm cut out for this, Miss.

ANNE (*looks at his work*) It may be best to start again.

She takes it from him and begins to unpick.

You see, the work we do in here, if it's going to sell, needs to be absolutely top notch. None of this stuffed teddies, church hall nonsense. If we want it stocked in Colefax and Fowler, Liberty. Harvey Nicks!

She hands work back to LEN.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Practice makes perfect, eh? And the more you practise...

LUKASZ How long do we get? One hour in week?

ANNE We were jolly lucky to get that. But don't get me started. No. The real practice, that's what happens *between* sessions.

LUKASZ (*stops sewing*) You saying we take threads to cell?

LEN (*laughs*) Yeah? And what about my cell mate? He'll think I'm a right nancy.

ANNE (*stern*) There's nothing poofy about stitching. And you should know that, Mr Maxwell, being an army man.

LEN Army man, you're joking. After the way they washed their hands of me? Not once – and we're talking twenty years – has a single member of the armed forces lifted a finger in my defence. So don't give me army man! Jack Shit. That's what they've done for me.

He throws down his work.

Jack Shit.

ANNE Mr Maxwell, I'm so sorry.

LEN (*to BUSBY*) And I want that laundry done by five. Today. You hear me? Pin cushions! What the...

LEN thumps himself on the head and walks out.

ANNE At least take your work with you.

But he's gone.

Mr Maxwell!

BUSBY (*holding up his sewing with a mess of orange*) Do I have to unpick this again, Miss?

ANNE (*deflated*) Yes, Mr Busby. I think you probably do.

Muted sound of phone ringing.

Scene Five

Prison wing.

TOMMY *is waiting at the payphone for someone to answer, becoming increasingly frustrated.*

TOMMY Hello, Mum? (*silence*) Hello? (*There's a little sniff.*)
 Lauren, is that you? It's me, Tommy... (*the sound of crying down the line*) Don't cry. Come on, girl. Where's Mum anyway? (*agitated as crying gets louder*) Mum! For Christ's sake, Lauren! (*wailing now*)

LEN *walks on and stands behind him, too close.*

Shhh, I'll be home soon... No. Not today. Not tomorrow.
 NO! Not cause I'm drunk. Listen. When Mum comes in, tell her I need... Lauren! I can't hear myself think.

LEN Get a shift on, son.

TOMMY *takes a slip of paper from his pocket.*

TOMMY Tell her she's got to call Mr McGarr...Garrig... (*He reads with difficulty.*) McGarrigle... He's the lawyer...the one they gave me. Can you remember that? McGarrigle. Say it back. Christ. Or tell her to go round. He never answers the fucking phone anyway... No, she can't call me. I'll try again, alright. What's that? Kelly?! What did she say? Was she...? Listen, Lauren, if you see her again... Kelly...tell her, please...

The money runs out. He looks at the phone. Fury swells.

It's a fucking joke. Two quid. For a few measly fucking minutes.

He slams the receiver against the wall. Goes to smash it, but LEN grabs him from behind, and is about to lay into him when he stops himself. He holds him very still.

LEN Twat.

He picks up the receiver. He shakes it. It's still working.

It's your lucky day, mate.

He lets go of TOMMY, puts his card in and dials. The phone is picked up almost immediately.

Hello, darling... Yeah, and you.

TOMMY *slumps against the wall.*

So, what you up to? Blimey. Sounds a bit exerting. You want to be careful. Too right. Make yourself comfortable, why don't you. You're slipping off your shoes... Good girl, why don't I give your feet a rub? Feels good eh? And while you're at it, might as well slip out of...

He looks round at TOMMY.

Are you going to fuck off or what?

TOMMY *slopes off. LEN turns back to phone.*

Oh you have, have you? For me? Better slide that off and all. Slowly now. Mmmm, lovely darling, What's that? Who's calling round at this time? Ignore it. Ignore it, I said. I couldn't give a toss if it's... Tell her to bleeding... Trish...? Trisha!

He puts his head in his hands. Moans.

BUSBY *rolls on in his wheelchair.*

And, Busby, you can fuck off an' all.

BUSBY *spins round and wheels off again.*

Bitch.

He slams down the receiver.

Scene Six

Prison cell.

TOMMY *lies on the bottom bunk. He's really suffering now. DTs. On the floor beside him LUKASZ is doing press-ups. Two-armed. One-armed. Up against the wall. He counts in Polish.*

LUKASZ *Szesnascie, siebmnascie, osiemnascie, dziewietnascie, twenty!*

He stands and stretches.

Now you.

TOMMY I'm alright thanks, Poland.

LUKASZ When I first inside I was weakling. Much trouble. Now I am strong, not so much.

TOMMY *rolls off his bunk, and starts doing half-hearted press-ups. LUKASZ stands over him.*

I do one for wife. Up. One for children. Up. One for mother. Hup. None for father. Down. Down. He bastard. One for barscht. One for vodka. One for pickles mother make in autumn. Red pepper. Aubergine. One more for pancake. Butter. Charlotka. Plum.

TOMMY *(lying flat on the floor)* I do one for bit of fucking quiet.

LUKASZ How ever long or short you in here, you need must look strong. Yes? If not look strong you, how you say...fucked.

TOMMY *jumps up and starts kicking the wall.*

TOMMY I'm already fucked. You hear that?

LUKASZ Relax. Boxing is good too.

He punches imaginary punch bag.

You do one for Lukasz. Strongest man in prison. Maybe more than one. Maybe hundred.

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