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SF PERUSALS

HERO'S WELCOME

by Alan Ayckbourn

SAMUEL FRENCH

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ISBN 978-0-573-11220-1

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United Kingdom and World
excluding north america
plays@samuelfrench.co.uk
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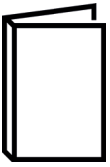
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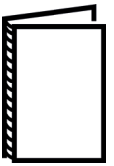
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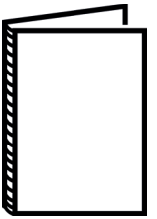
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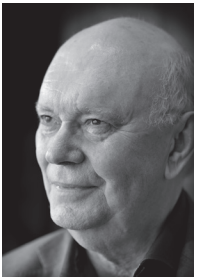
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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 eighty 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*; and at Chichester Festival Theatre, major revivals of *Way Upstream* in 2015, and *The Norman Conquests* in 2017.

Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph theatre from 1972–2009, where almost all his plays have been first staged, he continues to direct his latest new work there. He has been inducted into American Theater'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.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Baba's native language is fictitious and is pronounced very much as written. She comes from a country currently steeped in conflict which deliberately has no specific location.

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HERO'S WELCOME

First presented at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, on 8 September 2015, with the following cast:

Murray Richard Stacey
Baba Terenia Edwards
Brad Stephen Billington
Kara / Simone Emma Manton
Derek Russell Dixon
Alice Elizabeth Boag
Interviewer 1 Harry Gration (voice only)
Interviewer 2 Amy Garcia (voice only)

Director Alan Ayckbourn
Design Michael Holt
Lighting Jason Taylor

This production began a UK tour at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford, on 13 January 2016.
The role of Baba was played by Evelyn Hoskins, who continued in the role when it was presented at 59E59 Theaters, New York, as part of the Brits Off Broadway Festival, commencing 26 May 2016. Charlotte Harwood also joined the New York production in the role of Kara/Simone.

CHARACTERS

MURRAY – a former soldier, 38
BABA (Madrababacascabuna) – his wife, 22

BRAD – a farmer and landowner, 38
***KARA** – his wife, 35
***SIMMY** (**SIMONE**) – their daughter, 17

DEREK – a builder, 43
ALICE – his wife, 39

Two TV interviewers (voices only)

*played by the same actor

SETTING

A bedroom, a kitchen and a sitting room in different locations.

TIME

A week or so in summer. Any day now.

ACT I

Scene One

As the house lights fade to blackout, the sounds of a triumphal parade with a band and cheering crowd. Over this, as it fades, we hear an **INTERVIEWER***'s voice.*

INT 1 *(male)* The scenes earlier today in the centre of Hadforth as the town turns out in strength to welcome home, after seventeen years, its very own local hero.

INT 2 *(female)* And now, live from our Hadforth studio we have the man himself, Murray Truscott…

The lights come up to reveal **MURRAY** *and* **BABA** *sitting in a remote TV studio side-by-side on a sofa.* **MURRAY** *is a soldier in his late thirties. He is dressed smartly in his dress uniform.* **BABA***, his young wife, in her early twenties, clings to him shyly as if for protection.*

Watching them from home, on her (unseen) wall-mounted TV is **ALICE***, late thirties, soberly dressed, seated at the table in her kitchen working on her mobile tablet, only occasionally glancing up at the TV.*

The kitchen, which she shares with her husband **DEREK***, is part of their upstairs town centre apartment. One door leads to the rest of the flat. The room has a window which looks straight out on to the precinct below. A table and two stools. At one side of the room, somewhat incongruously, part of an extensive model railway is visible. The bit which we can see emerges from a tunnel to a small station. The line then continues on, stops briefly at a set of operating signals, currently at red and, as*

they turn green, finally disappears into another stretch of tunnel. In the living room area, **KARA***, mid-thirties, sits on her sofa with a cup of coffee, watching her larger (also unseen) TV. The room is part of her and* **BRAD***'s expensively converted manor house. A door to the rest of the house. A wall of windows with a door leading directly out into extensive gardens.*

Murray, welcome to Outlook East.

MURRAY Thank you, Judith. Great to be here.

INT 2 Now, before we go any further, I must of course introduce viewers to your wife – Now it's Madra – I'm afraid you're going to have to help me out here – Mad – Madra – ba –

MURRAY Madrababacascabuna –

INT 2 Madrababa –

MURRAY – cascabuna... But she usually answers to Baba.

INT 1 *(laughing)* Thank goodness for that –

INT 2 *(laughing)* Yes, I noticed you left that one to me as usual, Jim...

INT 1 *(laughing)* You know me, Judith, always ready to avoid a challenge...

INT 2 *(laughing)* Yes, thanks, Jim. Baba – if I may call you Baba –?

BABA *smiles in response.*

– also welcome. I'm told your wife speaks very little English, Murray?

MURRAY Not very much at present. But she's learning fast, aren't you? – *(To* **BABA***) Ni cognasca Anglish, Baba?*

BABA *Ni. (Smiling and gesturing a tiny amount) Miniscillee...*

INT 1 Murray, we've just been seeing a recording of your civic welcome in Hadforth earlier today. That must have been quite an experience?

MURRAY Yes, it was, Jim. A bit overwhelming. Didn't quite expect that.

INT 1 I don't think the town's seen anything like that since Albion got promoted.

INT 2 According to official figures, a crowd of nearly three thousand...

INT 1 Murray, take us back, if you will, six months or so, to when this all happened. Could you tell us, in your own words, the sequence of events leading up to – what can only be described as an incredible act of heroism. Can you talk us through it, please?

MURRAY Yes, well – we were – me and the rest of the lads – we were – engaged in street fighting against the rebels, you know – house to house –

INT 1 This was you and the rest of your platoon?

MURRAY Yes, largely – and we got – you know – pinned down by these two snipers at high level – pinning us down, like – you know – they were high up on this scaffolding, on the front of this building, this kiddies' hospital – they were really dug in –

INT 1 The building was a children's hospital –?

MURRAY Yes, so we found out –

INT 1 Which the snipers were using virtually as a shield?

MURRAY Right. We couldn't properly engage them, you see. We couldn't call up any of our heavy stuff, even if we'd wanted to, 'cos we were frightened of injuring the kiddies inside...

INT 1 In other words, it was something of a stalemate between you?

MURRAY Yes, for several hours, it was. We couldn't move and they certainly weren't coming down. So we thought, nothing else for it but climb up and try to dislodge them.

INT 1 Which you volunteered to do?

MURRAY *(laughing)* I think I was the only one daft enough. We were just sitting there, otherwise. So I worked my way round the back of them – you know – bit by bit – around to the base of this scaffolding.

INT 1 Which you then started to climb?

MURRAY Well, I started to try to. Only the structure wasn't that stable, you see. They'd taken away some of the main supports low down to prevent us from doing just that. So it was quite hard – and – I must have – you know, as I was trying to get a handhold, I must have – upset the balance of it, its structural integrity, like – and before I knew it, the whole lot came down.

INT 2 You're lucky to be alive...

MURRAY Yes. I had a lucky fall. Sideways into this alcove, like. Protected me. Which was more than it did for them. Eighty foot drop, you know. Both killed outright. Which then left us, you know, clear to enter the hospital building. Where we came under fire from inside. There were more of them inside, waiting for us. Which is when I got the leg injury. So we engaged them, returned fire. Then, once we'd secured the building, made it safe, we realised that meanwhile they'd set fire to it. Smoke everywhere. And then we heard these kiddies screaming. Down in the basement. They'd been locked in the basement. About forty of them. So we set about trying to bring them out, you know. Till eventually there was that much smoke, it became impossible. Then we had to give up.

INT 2 But the point is, surely, Murray, long after your colleagues had given up, you refused to, didn't you? You alone kept going back in to that burning building, time after time, at considerable risk to yourself? After the rest of them had given up even trying? What drove you to do that, do you think? To perform such an amazing act of heroism?

MURRAY *(awkwardly)* Well, you don't really think about it, do you? Not at the time. I don't know. I've been asking myself

that. I just felt I – just felt I had to. I just had to. I don't know, really...

INT 1 Well, it's largely thanks to you, that thirty four out of those forty young children, some of them as young as five, are still alive today.

MURRAY Only wish I'd rescued them all, that's all.

INT 2 Well, you would have carried on trying but for your colleagues preventing you. Literally, physically holding you back. That was above the call of duty surely? The action of a hero?

MURRAY *(embarrassed)* I just don't see it like that, you know.

INT 1 Well, there is no doubt in my mind, Murray – I can see you're a naturally modest chap – and I've no wish to embarrass you further but it's an honour and a privilege to talk to you, mate.

In her living room, **KARA** *reacts.*

KARA *(heartfelt and a little tearful)* Hear! Hear!

INT 2 A truly uplifting story, and a welcome spark of light amidst the appalling darkness of that dreadful conflict.

INT 1 Now, Murray, before we finish, mate. Now, tell me, it's been seventeen years. Seventeen years you've been away. How's it feel to be back?

MURRAY Oh, tremendous. A great feeling, Jim. I'm over the moon to be back here. We both are, aren't we? *(He smiles at* **BABA***)*

INT 1 Because, let's be honest – I don't quite know how to put this – but, frankly, you did leave under a bit of a cloud, didn't you? Be honest.

MURRAY Oh, yes well...back in those days I was a bit of – you know –

INT 2 A bit of a tearaway?

MURRAY Yes, you could say that...

INT 1 Well, I'm sure at that age, there are very few of us who wouldn't want people to overlook – how shall I put it – one or two youthful indiscretions –

INT 2 *(playfully)* Speak for yourself, Jim Wilson!

INT 1 – and I'm certain that everyone concerned, after all these years, will long ago have forgiven and forgotten –

ALICE*, alone in her kitchen, reacts.*

ALICE *(dryly)* Ha-ha-ha!

INT 2 So, Murray, tell us about your plans for the future. Is this just a flying visit? Or are you planning on staying here?

MURRAY Oh, staying. We're definitely planning to settle here. I promised Baba, when I married her, I promised to treat her to a little bit of heaven. I promised her the best. In my opinion you can't get better than here. I can't say too much at the moment – but let's just say we've got plans.

INT 1 Can't you tell us a little bit more?

MURRAY No, as I say – I may have left – as you put it, under a bit of a cloud – but I'm determined, you know, to set things straight. And that means, as far as I'm concerned, starting with my mum and dad. My mother, as you may know, sadly passed away a few years back. In fact, that's the only time I've been back here, you know, for the funeral. Compassionate leave. But yesterday I went straight to visit my dad in the nursing home and I outlined my plans to him and he seemed – I'm not sure he was able to take them all in – he's a bit frail these days – but he seemed, so far as we could tell, he appeared very excited by them. So what do they say? Watch this space. Never fear, we're home for good this time!

INT 1 Home is the hero. I'm sure everyone is delighted to see you back.

MURRAY Thank you.

INT 2 And finally, may I put one question to Baba? I know she's been here only a very short while but I wondered what are her impressions so far? I appreciate her English is not very good but does she have one word in English which best sums up her feelings at this time?

MURRAY *(to* **BABA***) Chesta sentimentagies? Instament? Doos? At Anglish?*

BABA *Mees? At Anglish?*

MURRAY *Doos?*

BABA *(into camera, hesitatingly)* He – iss – my – hero.

She smiles and clings to **MURRAY** *tightly.*

INT 1
INT 2 } (touched by this) Ah!

KARA *(likewise)* Oh, that's so sweet! Lovely!

ALICE *(angrily)* Oh, for God's sake! What utter bullshit!

ALICE *irritably switches off her TV via her remote.* **KARA** *simultaneously does likewise. As they do this, the lights snap out on* **MURRAY** *and* **BABA***, who both exit.*

ALICE *stares at her tablet, deep in thought. In the living room,* **KARA** *rises with her cup, as* **BRAD***, in his late thirties, enters from the garden. He carries a shotgun, broken open.*

KARA Oh, there you are. You just missed it.

BRAD Missed what?

KARA The programme. On the telly. Your friend was on.

BRAD Friend?

He props the gun against the chair and, during the next, takes off his jacket.

KARA Your friend, Murray.

BRAD Oh, was he?

KARA You knew he was. With his wife. Being interviewed.

BRAD Good for him.

KARA I thought he was a friend of yours?

BRAD Twenty years ago, he was.

KARA Well, he'll be here soon, won't he? In person. I hope you'll at least look pleased to see him.

BRAD *(throwing his jacket on the settee)* He's a wally.

KARA No, he's not. He's a hero.

BRAD Once a wally, always a wally.

KARA He's got a lovely wife. Sweet little thing.

BRAD *(moving to the door)* Lucky for some, then.

KARA What's got into you this morning?

BRAD I'm going to have a shower.

KARA Brad! Don't leave that there! That gun! For God's sake! How many more times? If one of the kids touches it – Put it away, please. In the gun cupboard.

BRAD It's not loaded –

KARA You say that now – You can never be too sure, can you?

BRAD Then you put it away. *(As he leaves)* With any luck you'll blow your stupid head off...

BRAD *goes out.*

KARA Brad! Don't talk to me like that, even as a... *(Tailing off, realising she's talking to herself)* ...I hope it was a joke, anyway. I hope it was.

She sighs. She gathers up her empty cup and his discarded jacket. She hesitates. Then gingerly picks up the gun as well. She goes out after him.

In the bedroom, **BABA** *enters in her underslip and carrying her dress which she lays carefully on the bed. She is holding a small, well-thumbed English phrase book. She sits at the dressing table and, during the next, starts to do her make-up whilst occasionally consulting the book and mouthing phrases under her breath.*

DEREK, *forties, enters the kitchen. He is wearing his mayor's consort chain. He carries* **ALICE***'s more impressive mayoral one.*

DEREK Did you see it, then?

ALICE Yes, I saw it.

DEREK What were you sitting out here for? You could have seen it in there on the big screen –

ALICE Here's fine –

DEREK – in comfort.

ALICE The screen in here was quite big enough for me, thank you...

A model electric train comes out of the tunnel and stops briefly at the station. **DEREK** *looks at his watch.* **ALICE** *shuts down her tablet.*

DEREK *(with satisfaction)* Hey! Look at that! Bang on time.

As the lights turn green, the train whistles and moves on.

ALICE *(frowning)* Do they really need to run at this time of morning, Derek? Right through the kitchen?

DEREK Yes, they need to keep running, Alice. I've explained to you. The whole system's interconnected, you see. I can't shut down one branch, can I? Just the kitchen branch? It's all linked. Computer controlled, you see.

ALICE Yes, yes, alright. It's time to leave, isn't it?

DEREK Feeling a bit on edge, are you? Bound to be. *(Holding up her chain)* Here. I brought this up for you. Maurice brought it round.

ALICE Thank you. Car outside, is it?

DEREK Oh, yes, Maurice is here. Good and early, as usual. *(Helping her on with her chain)* I tested out the new branch line in the dining room, yesterday.

ALICE *(abstracted)* Oh, good.

DEREK It's alright, I've routed it well clear of the dining table. Besides we seldom eat in there these days, do we? Not in the dining room.

ALICE Chance'd be a fine thing.

DEREK *(anxiously)* You're quite sure you're up to this, love?

ALICE I've said, I'm perfectly fine, Derek.

DEREK I mean you don't have to go through with it necessarily –

ALICE I have to be there. I'm the mayor –

DEREK – people will understand, if you choose –

ALICE Derek, for God's sake, I've stopped drinking, I've stopped smoking, if you stop me working, I really will drop dead on the spot, I promise you.

DEREK No, I could always deputise for you. Step in, as your consort. People would understand, Alice. I'm sure they would.

ALICE It was seventeen years ago, Derek, most of them weren't even around then, were they?

DEREK Well, as long there isn't a – you both don't – you know –

ALICE There isn't a what? What?

DEREK You know – an incident? Between you and him. I mean, it would be terrible if there was an incident. I mean the

press are going to be there, aren't they? If they witnessed an incident...

ALICE Derek, I promise, I shall be there in my official capacity as mayor, performing my civic duty. I shall be all smiles, I promise. I'll make a brief speech of welcome and that'll be that. Now, do come along, please. Let's get it over with...

ALICE *sweeps out, leaving* **DEREK**.

DEREK *(following her)* He's parked just across the road, outside Topshop... *(Having forebodings)* Oh dear...

DEREK *leaves.*

In the bedroom, **BABA** *at her dressing table continues to practice her colloquial English.*

BABA *(practising)* Hallo there...how simply topping to meet you...how simply topping...topping to meet you...

MURRAY *enters. He is now in his civilian jacket and trousers.*

MURRAY *(as he enters)* What did you say, Baba?

BABA Practising...see? *(Holding up her book)* Practising. How simply topping to meet you.

MURRAY Yes...very good. Excellent!

BABA Topping.

MURRAY Yes. Well done. How old is that book? *Ques anteggar bibli?*

BABA *Hiss bibli. Oh, vanitsanzu. Me patricossella sula drack. Enterniss.*

MURRAY *Su patricossella?* Your grandmother? Well, it's probably a bit out of date, love. *Ni sassa.*

BABA *(worriedly) Ni sassa?*

MURRAY *Ni, ni sassa.* I'll buy you something more up to date. *How drech hwecker.*

BABA *(sadly, laying the book aside)* No good – book? Bad book.

MURRAY Don't worry, darling. We'll buy you another one, won't we? Come on then! Time's getting on, now. Better get you dressed, hadn't we? *Hwanzerfrocker neeto. Vit! Vit!*

BABA *(jumping up) Hwanzerfrocker! Vit! Vit! Vit!*

She grabs up the dress and starts to struggle into it.

MURRAY No hurry! There's no hurry! More haste, less speed. Now you're getting yourself all in a tangle, aren't you? *Lantich! Baba, lantich!*

BABA *Lantich!* Sorry.

She calms and stands obediently, while he helps her to dress, as if she were a child.

MURRAY *(as he does so, reassuringly)* Now we've got some exciting days ahead of us. All this is going to be a big adventure. *Tizzernach, sooch?*

BABA *Tizzernach, sooch, sooch...*

MURRAY But we need to keep calm, darling, keep our heads. We're going to be fine, alright?

BABA Fine...

MURRAY ...everything's going to work out great...

BABA ...great...

MURRAY ...just great...

BABA ...just gre-at...

MURRAY You haven't a bloody clue what I'm talking about, have you? *(Standing back to admire her)* There you go!

BABA *(happily)* There you go!

He performs a few straightening touches as she stands obediently.

MURRAY *(indicating the door)* Ready?

BABA *(hesitating)* Wait! I need...

She searches in a drawer and takes out a screw top container of tablets.

MURRAY Baba, you don't need those now...

BABA *(struggling to get the lid off) Sooch!* Yes, yes! *(Impatiently)* Hi-yi-yi-yi!

MURRAY Here, give it me... *(He effortlessly removes the lid)*

BABA Norvous...

MURRAY Norvous? Oh, you mean nervous? *(Giving her a tablet)* Now here's one. Alright? You mustn't take too many at once. Dangerous. Now, do you need some wa –?

BABA *has already swallowed the tablet.*

Oh. These are not sweets, you know. They're drugs to calm you down. That's why they have these safety lids. To stop people like you from taking too many... *(He gives her back the container)*

BABA *(returning it to the drawer)* Norvous...

MURRAY Not norvous. Nervous. And you're not to be nervous, neither. Nothing to be nervous about, is there? These are friends we're going to see. Old friends. Come on then, off we go!

MURRAY *goes out.*

BABA Old friends! Yes! Off we go...

As they leave, the lights cross-fade to the living room, as **BRAD** *and* **KARA** *enter. They have changed their clothes since we last saw them and are now dressed for the formal event which is about to start in their garden.*

KARA *(as they enter)* ...I thought he was supposed to be a friend of yours? Your great childhood friend?

BRAD Once upon a time he was –

KARA You've been going on about him for years. Me and Murray, this, me and Murray, that. I'm sick to death of hearing about the bloke. Now he's actually here, you don't even want to see your old mate, apparently.

BRAD It was twenty years ago. We used to play together, that's all.

KARA Play together? What with? Wendy houses? Cowboys and Indians? Twenty years ago, you were both eighteen!

BRAD Yes, well, slightly longer than that even. Eight or nine. I can't remember.

KARA Where did you play?

BRAD Where? I don't know where. Round here usually. I had better toys. More room. Besides I think his parents were glad to get shot of him. Didn't want us kids cluttering up the hotel, did they? Getting under everyone's feet.

KARA Oh, yes, they used to run that old hotel, didn't they? Middle of town. What was it called? The Bird of Prey. Amazed your mother even allowed him in here – common publican's son, wasn't he? Not much better than I was, was he? *(Half to herself)* God, she was a snob, that woman! Thank heaven, she died before she could get her hands on our kids, that's all I can say –

BRAD *(at the window, ignoring her)* One or two starting to gather out there – the great and the good of the district. Just look at them all. Half the town council, itching to get their fingers on the cheese nibbles. Nothing like free food and drink, is there, to attract a councillor?

KARA We'll go out and join them as soon as the VIPs arrive. Just the six of us, there'll be. The lady mayor and consort, Alice and Derek, plus the guests of honour, Murray with his wife – whatsername, they did say it on the programme – something complicated and foreign, can't remember.

BRAD Is she foreign?

KARA Yes, he brought her back with him, didn't he? Back from – wherever he was – where he'd been fighting. She looks very young.

BRAD How young?

KARA Much younger than him. Than us. Early twenties? No more. Beautiful.

BRAD Bloody hell. Jammy bastard!

KARA *(amused)* Jealous? I love it when you get jealous. So used to having all the best toys, aren't you? Always have been. You can't bear it, can you, when the kid next door turns up with a shiny new fire engine?

BRAD *(muttering)* Oh, do shut up! Occasionally you're really boring, Kara...

KARA What did you both get up to then, you and Murray, when you were older? What sort of games did you play together when you were both eighteen?

BRAD I don't know. Getting drunk, driving fast cars, chasing girls...

KARA Did you ever cheat?

BRAD What?

KARA When you played your games together? Did you ever cheat in those days?

BRAD If I thought I could get away with it, I did.

KARA You used to cheat with the children. On the rare occasions you ever played with them. Monopoly. Even Ludo. You cheated at everything. Till they refused to play with you. Daisy cried for days afterwards, you know...

BRAD Great object lesson for life. Never trust your bloody parents...

KARA Going to be interesting this, isn't it? You, him and her, all in the same room? When did that last happen, I wonder?

Twenty years ago? Must have been. That's why you're in such a foul temper, isn't it? She must have been quite something, must Alice. In those days. Quite the – what d'you call it? – the femme fatale, mustn't she? Stringing you two along. Bet that took some doing.

BRAD Why don't you just shut up for a minute, eh?

KARA That the reason you've gone off your friend, is it? Still haven't forgiven him for stealing your girl? That the reason you hardly speak to her, either? Because she preferred him to you?

BRAD The reason I'm bad tempered, my love, is because I'm reminded that at the end of it all, by a cruel twist of fate I ended up with you.

The doorbell rings.

KARA *(grimly)* Thank you very much, darling. Always manage to say the right thing, don't you? That'll be them. *(As she goes)* God, the way you talk to me sometimes, Brad. If people could only hear you...

BRAD *(shouting after her)* I don't care if they do. *(To himself)* God, she drives me insane sometimes.

KARA *goes out.* **BRAD** *glares after her. He moves to the garden door.*

(calling to someone through the glass, affably) 'Morning, Ron. Be with you in a minute. Just waiting for the guests of honour...so far yes...it's holding off, isn't it? ...so far so good...fingers crossed, eh? See you in a bit, Ron! Try not to eat all the buns, will you? Leave one or two for us. *(He laughs)*

KARA *re-enters with* **ALICE** *and* **DEREK.**

KARA *(as they enter)* ...they could have got lost in the one way system, of course. If they're not used to it...

DEREK ...probably all changed since he was last here... Brad, mate, how you keeping...?

BRAD Alright, Derek. Good to see you.

DEREK How's everything, then?

BRAD Oh, you know, pretty fair. Thank you both for coming.

DEREK Well, we couldn't miss the hero, could we? Couldn't miss out on welcoming home the hero. I understand he was a good mate of yours?

BRAD Oh, yes. Once upon a time. A childhood chum. *(More mutedly)* Alice.

ALICE *(reserved)* Brad...

BRAD I love your necklace. I rather go for it. Don't think I've ever seen you in your full regalia, Alice, have I?

ALICE *(smiling frostily)* Goes with the job.

BRAD Yes. Congratulations. On your – on your – appointment.

ALICE Thank you.

DEREK It's just for a year. Next year, there'll be another one.

KARA Like buses, then, eh?

Slight pause as the conversation threatens to stall. The tension between **BRAD** *and* **ALICE** *is palpable.*

DEREK *(gallantly filling the breech)* Traditional of course, these chains. They go back – oh, generations... How many generations is it now, Alice? They did tell us at mayor making, do you remember?

ALICE No, I don't. I've no idea.

Slight pause.

KARA *(helping out)* Of mayors?

DEREK Pardon?

KARA Generations of mayors? Handing down their chains...?

DEREK Oh yes, goes right back to – *(To* **ALICE***)* They did say, didn't they, Alice? I forget, now. Eighteen – something...

KARA Eighteen something? Gracious. That is a long time ago. Fancy that. Eighteen something... That's interesting, isn't it, Brad?

BRAD Breathtaking.

Another silence.

DEREK Or perhaps it was only nineteen – something. Still, a long time ago, though.

Another silence.

KARA Yes. It's good we have these traditions, isn't it?

DEREK Well, it's part of being British, of course.

KARA Historical.

DEREK Traditional.

KARA Yes.

Pause.

DEREK How are the children then, Kara? All growing up now, I expect?

KARA Yes, they're well, thank you for asking, Derek. Simmy's – that's our eldest, Simone – she's in her last year at Greystones – hoping for university... Isn't she, Brad?

BRAD She'll be lucky.

Slight pause.

KARA And then Daisy – she's our second, she'll soon be celebrating being a teenager in a month or two... They soon grow up, don't they? And then Billy, of course, he's still the baby... I still think of him as my baby...but then, even he's – what? – this year? – what'll he be –? Eleven, come November, won't he, Brad?

Slight pause.

Yes. Eleven. Goodness. Yes. My goodness… *(Pause)* Time flies… Flies by, doesn't it? *(Pause)* Yes, it really does fly, doesn't it… Seems to fly, anyway…

Silence. **KARA** *finally runs out of steam.*

ALICE *(breaking the silence, impatiently)* Where the hell are these people, then? Where have they got to?

KARA They're staying out at that motor lodge on the ring road. I was saying, if they're coming from the other side of town, they may have got caught up in the new one way system. It's not easy if you're unfamiliar with it, is it?

ALICE It's not that complicated. We spent months in committee making sure it wouldn't be complicated. A child of five could find their way round it…

Slight pause.

DEREK They would have done far better if they came via the ring road. It's slightly longer that way but I find it's quicker in the long run. The other way through the town's shorter but I find it takes slightly longer in the long run. Even though it's slightly shorter. Yes…

A silence.

The doorbell rings.

ALICE At last!

KARA That'll be them.

KARA *goes out.*

DEREK *(confidentially)* I have noticed, you know. She tends to get very nervous, Kara. When she's among people. I've noticed it before. I can appreciate that, because I do as well. It's understandable, isn't it? I mean, who doesn't get nervous, now and then, eh? *(Pause)* Yes.

KARA *returns with* **MURRAY** *and* **BABA**, *who shyly lingers in the doorway behind the others. Suddenly, by contrast, the group explodes into life.*

KARA Here they are!

MURRAY Sorry, sorry, sorry, everyone! Are we a little bit late? You can blame that crazy one way system. Designed by lunatics, eh? *(Seeing* **BRAD**, *joyfully)* Yey – hey! Brad! There he is, the lad himself!

BRAD *(joyfully)* The hero returns! Murray, old mate!

MURRAY You bugger!

BRAD Long time, no see, you old bastard!

They go through their ritual with much embracing and slapping of palms.

The others watch with varying degrees of polite embarrassment. **ALICE** *is stone faced.*

KARA *(over the end of this)* And this is Derek, Alice's husband, Derek. You won't know him, of course, Murray.

MURRAY Hallo, Derek, pleasure to meet you.

DEREK I think we did meet briefly, way back. I did one or two jobs up at your hotel for your father. Painting and decorating. I was apprenticed to Wanston's back then.

MURRAY Oh, yes, probably. Sorry, it's been a bit of a while...

KARA And of course, you know our lady mayor, don't you?

MURRAY Yes, yes, of course. *(Slightly more restrained)* Alice.

ALICE *(coolly)* Murray.

MURRAY How goes it, then?

ALICE Still going, thank you. Just about.

MURRAY Yes. Great. That's good. Good. That's good. Good.

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