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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

NO KNOWING

by Alan Ayckbourn

SAMUEL FRENCH

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NO KNOWING

First performed at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, in the McCarthy auditorium on 6 December 2016, with the following cast:

ARTHUR THROKE	Russell Dixon
ELSPETH THROKE	Jacqueline King
ALISON THROKE-DAVIES	Laura Matthews
NIGEL THROKE	Bill Champion

Director Alan Ayckbourn
Designer Kevin Jenkins
Lighting Mark "Tigger" Johnson

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR THROKE – a retired council official, sixties
ELSPETH THROKE – his wife, late fifties
ALISON THROKE-DAVIES – their daughter, early thirties
NIGEL THROKE – their son, late thirties

SETTING

The Throkes' semi-detached suburban family home.

PART ONE

KNOWING HER

August. The front room of the Throkes' semi-detached suburban home. It is Arthur and Elspeth's fortieth wedding anniversary. An informal gathering of family and friends.

As the lights come up, a burst of chatter. **ARTHUR**, *a man in his sixties, is standing with his two offspring,* **NIGEL** *and* **ALISON**, *both in their thirties. All of them are holding glasses. In a moment,* **NIGEL** *hits his glass with his pen. The chatter dies down.* **ARTHUR** *steps forward.*

ARTHUR Ladies and gentlemen, thank you, all of you, for coming out today to help Elspeth and me to celebrate our forty years. Whilst it's our celebration, we want you all, friends, neighbours, family to enjoy yourselves and to have a really good time. Before I start, we'd like, both of us, to give special thanks to our son and daughter, Alison and Nigel, for laying on this surprise for us. Even though me and Elspeth have known about it for ages. You can't keep a secret for long, not in our family. But I can't let this moment pass without saying a few words about my wonderful wife, over there. As her husband and junior partner, I think it's fair to say, although you're all of you close family or friends, that I probably know her better than most of you. So anyway, here goes...

He pauses to retrieve some crumpled notes from his inside pocket and puts on his reading glasses. **NIGEL** *and* **ALISON** *seat themselves behind him, at first respectfully listening, but as* **ARTHUR** *proceeds with his oration, barely concealing their incredulity.*

(having finally got himself sorted) You know, it's been said marriage is a funny thing. You start off making a lifetime promise to someone you barely know – well you *think* you

know them, of course you do, but then at that age you think you know everything, don't you? But of course you don't. You can't possibly. I mean. After all, what was I? Twenty-three? How could I know everything there was to know about anyone at twenty-three? Specially not a woman! But there I was, promising my life away to a virtual stranger. Let's face it, at twenty-three, I barely knew myself. Mind you, that's not to say I didn't love her. Of course, I was in love with her. I was mad about the girl. I felt I couldn't live without her. But, if I'm honest, I knew bugger all about her. And she barely knew me. But as the years passed, we grew into each other, as it were. Till we were like a couple of pot plants. Couple of busy Lizzies. Couldn't tell where one of us started and the other one finished. How do they put it? Inseparably entwined. As years went by, we both faced life as one. And between us we saw it off together. While I was up there slaving away at the town hall, Ellie's been back here. Keeping things straight. Making sure these two grew up good and strong with the right values.

And I'm proud to say – between us, Ellie and me, we didn't do a bad job, did we?

He briefly favours **NIGEL** *and* **ALISON** *with a smile.*

Well, the years have rolled by, water's flown under the bridge and we're still here. Clinging on for dear life. I think it's only right to take this occasion publicly to say thank you to her. In public. I've said it plenty of times to her in private, but in public. Thank you, Ellie, for forty years. Forty years of love, comradeship and friendship. I'm not saying we haven't had our moments. There were days, specially early on, when the kitchen china was flying about. Days when I did well to keep me head down. But, as I say, that was the early days. Later on, we both got things into proportion, once we got to know each other better, we learnt to sense each other's needs. To sense the times when we needed to be there for each other – and, just as important, the times when we needed to keep our distance. Allow each other space to breathe. We

grew to sense that. In the end it became – symbiosis – yes, yes, I had to look that up as well – for your information, George, "symbiosis – meaning 'interaction between two different organisms'" – no, organisms, Janice, not what you're thinking, woman – Jeff, control your wife please – "meaning 'interaction between two different *organisms* living in close physical association, especially to the advantage of both.'" Which, when you think about it, sums it all up really, marriage. She's a wonderful woman and dare I say it, a perfect wife. To have known Ellie is to love her. To have known her as well as I do, makes me the proudest, most privileged man in the world. Ladies and gentlemen, may I give you the toast, to Elspeth, Jane, Elizabeth, my lovely, loving wife, thank you and God bless you!

OTHERS *(variously)* To Elspeth! Ellie!

They raise their glasses and toast.

The lights fade, briefly.

*Party music and a burst of chatter as the gathering resumes.**

The lights come up on the kitchen. Two doors, the back door and one to the rest of the house and the front door.

It is two weeks before Christmas of the previous year.

ARTHUR *is sitting at the table, finishing his tea.* **ELSPETH** *is pottering round him, starting to clear away.*

ARTHUR Very nice.

ELSPETH Yes, it was nice. Very nice.

ARTHUR Very nice indeed. Tasty.

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ELSPETH Yes it was, tasty. I might go there again. He has good meat, that man.

ARTHUR He knows his meat.

ELSPETH He does.

ARTHUR What man's that?

ELSPETH The new one. You know, on the far corner. Used to be Wicksteed's.

ARTHUR Wicksteed's?

ELSPETH Wicksteed's. That deli that came and went.

ARTHUR I don't remember that. I don't remember there being a deli.

ELSPETH It was only there three months. Less than that. Before that it was Gravewood's.

ARTHUR Gravewood's.

ELSPETH Luggage.

ARTHUR Luggage?

ELSPETH Leather goods and luggage.

ARTHUR Oh, that place. Gravewood's. Did that close, then?

ELSPETH Been closed for over a year. Until it became Wicksteed's. Now it's this new butcher's. Cattershaw's.

ARTHUR Well, there you go. Everything changes given time. Most of it for the worse.

ELSPETH Right.

A pause.

Mind you, it was never a pleasant shop, was Gravewood's. I never liked it. They weren't a particularly nice couple. He was offhand and she was downright rude, most of the time. Very overpriced, too, their luggage. I never went in there at all, not if I could avoid it.

ARTHUR I never did go in. Never bought anything in Gravewood's. Not a single suitcase.

ELSPETH What would you be doing, buying a suitcase? You never go anywhere.

A pause.

Still. He's a good butcher, this Mr Cattershaw, I'll say that for him. We're long overdue for a good butcher's round here, aren't we?

ARTHUR He certainly knows his meat.

ELSPETH Time will tell.

ARTHUR So far, so good. *(making to rise from the table)* Well…

ELSPETH Had enough, have you?

ARTHUR Yes, I'd better get back.

ELSPETH Back to your shed?

ARTHUR Just for a moment or two.

ELSPETH Moment or two? Come on, you'll be in there for hours –

ARTHUR No, I won't –

ELSPETH You always are. On that computer. Hours on end. God knows what you get up to.

ARTHUR I tell you, once you get on to the Internet, Ellie, you've got the world at your feet. At your command. Whatever you want to know. Whatever you need to see. Wherever you want to go. No need for suitcases.

ELSPETH Not the same though, is it? As going there?

ARTHUR Far cheaper. Quicker, too. Don't like the look of a place, press a button, back you come.

ELSPETH *(unconvinced)* Well, each to his own.

ARTHUR *hovers by the back door.*

I'll be out for a couple of hours.

ARTHUR *(uninterested)* Oh yes?

ELSPETH I'm meeting up with Janice.

ARTHUR Oh, yes?

ELSPETH Just for a chat. Perhaps have a drink.

ARTHUR I don't know. Gallivanting around.

ELSPETH I'd hardly call sitting in Trudy's Wine Bar with half a glass of Chardonnay, gallivanting. She needs to get out, poor woman. Her husband's worse than you are. Sitting in front of a screen for hours.

ARTHUR What, Jeff? I didn't know that. On the Internet?

ELSPETH No, he watches videos, never stops. Morning, noon and night.

ARTHUR Why can't he and Janice watch them together?

ELSPETH He only watches westerns. John Wayne movies. Over and over again. Round and round. Knows them all by heart. Janice says he sits there with the sound turned down, muttering the dialogue under his breath. What sort of evening's that for her, poor woman? Night after night?

ARTHUR Ah, well. Each to his own. *(restlessly, anxious to leave)* Well...

ELSPETH Yes. Look at the time. I must change. I'll be late for her, otherwise... See you later.

ARTHUR Right. See you later.

ELSPETH *goes into the hall.*

ARTHUR *is about to leave through the back door when, after a moment, the front doorbell chimes.*

ELSPETH *(off, calling)* Arthur, could you see who that is?

ARTHUR I'll go!

He goes off to the hall.

(offstage) Hallo, Nigel, what brings you round here?

He returns, followed by **NIGEL** *in his coat.*

Didn't know we were expecting you. Nice surprise.

NIGEL No, I just wanted a word, Dad. You know, a private word. I thought you might be, you know, out in your shed. Where you usually are, you know.

ARTHUR Yes, I was on my way out there. Only just finished my tea.

NIGEL Ah, right.

ARTHUR Get back on the computer.

NIGEL Still trawling, then, are you?

ARTHUR Still trawling. Amazing what you find. Amazing what's out there.

NIGEL Yes. Amazing.

ARTHUR Nothing like that when I was young. Had to go to the library, if you wanted to find out anything. Then they usually hadn't got it.

NIGEL Still using my old laptop, then?

ARTHUR Oh, yes.

NIGEL Surprised it's still going.

ARTHUR Oh, yes, it's still going. Bit slow now, by modern standards I expect. Creaks and groans a bit. But it does the job...

NIGEL So long as it can still find the porn sites, eh?

ARTHUR Sorry?

NIGEL Sorry.

ARTHUR I'm having none of that. None of that, if you don't mind, son. I wiped all that filth. The day after I got it, young man, the day after you gave it to me.

NIGEL Wiped all what?

ARTHUR You know. Don't worry I saw them. Amongst your list of "Personal Favourites." Be ashamed of yourself.

NIGEL Well, I was only young, you know…

ARTHUR Old enough to know better. *Pussies in Boots*, indeed! Could have had the police round. Son of mine. Didn't catch your sister looking at things like that, did we?

NIGEL What, Alison? She introduced me to them…she…

He trails off.

ARTHUR What?

NIGEL Nothing.

A pause. **NIGEL** *seems uneasy.*

ARTHUR Your mother's upstairs.

NIGEL Ah.

ARTHUR She's on her way out. She's getting changed. She'll be down in a minute.

NIGEL Right.

A slight pause.

Maybe this isn't a good time, then? You know…

ARTHUR A good time for what?

NIGEL For – for us to have a chat. A private chat. You know.

ARTHUR Oh, I see. Private.

Another slight pause.

Want to take your coat off, then?

NIGEL Oh, yes, right. *(taking off his coat)* Might as well. If we're planning to stop in here, you know. Might as well. Yes.

ARTHUR We can go in the front room, if you'd rather. If it's going to be that private?

NIGEL No, here's fine. Here's fine.

ARTHUR Only there's no heating on in there. We won't be switching that on till Christmas Eve. There's no point. Here, let me take that for you.

NIGEL No, it's all right, Dad, I can –

ARTHUR No, no, I'll do it, I can do it. You sit down.

He goes out momentarily.

NIGEL *looks around anxiously.*

(offstage, calling) It's Nigel, love...

ELSPETH *(offstage, calling)* Who?

ARTHUR *(offstage, calling)* Nigel. He's just popped in for a word.

ELSPETH *(offstage, calling)* Oh, lovely. Tell him I'll be down in a minute.

ARTHUR *returns.*

NIGEL *sits.*

ARTHUR *(confidentially)* She'll be down in a minute. Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about? Something private, you say?

NIGEL Yes, it was...

ARTHUR Was it to do with Christmas? Were you going to ask me what your mother wants for Christmas –?

NIGEL What? Oh, no...

ARTHUR – I bet that's what it is, isn't it –?

NIGEL No, no...

ARTHUR No, it'll be the usual, for both of us. Tokens. Can't go wrong with tokens. You know your mother, always wants the same things, every birthday, every Christmas. I always give her the same. Toiletries. Ever since we were first married, I've always given her toiletries. Till about ten years ago,

then after that, it was tokens. So she could choose her own. Toiletry tokens. She's always been perfectly content with toiletries –

NIGEL No, Dad, that's not what I wanted to talk –

ARTHUR As for me, Amazon tokens. Can't go far wrong with Amazon tokens, can you? Or possibly IKEA.

NIGEL Dad – *(rising)* Do you mind if I shut the door a minute?

ARTHUR No. You in a draught, then?

NIGEL *closes the door.*

NIGEL It's not about Christmas. It's about Mum.

ARTHUR What about her?

NIGEL It's – er... Oh, bloody hell, I don't know where to start with this, I really don't... It's difficult, you know...

A pause.

ARTHUR How's Denise keeping, then? Bearing up, is she?

NIGEL Oh, yes. She's – bearing up. She's well.

ARTHUR *(laughing)* Won't be too long before she's bearing down, will it? Eh?

NIGEL *(smiling faintly)* No, not so long now...

ARTHUR Seven months, isn't she? Bet she's crossing off the days, eh?

NIGEL *(smiling faintly)* Yes.

ARTHUR Bet you both are. Never mind, not long now. Next time you turn round he'll be a teenager.

NIGEL Yes, I suppose –

ARTHUR Are you excited, both of you? You must be excited, being your first?

NIGEL Yes, we're very excited.

ARTHUR Not before time, lad. Shame on you, letting Alison beat you to it. Your sister beat you to it by two years, what were you thinking? She and her Brian. At it like rabbits.

NIGEL Well, you know, Denise – She didn't really feel she was ready...

ARTHUR Ready? Of course she was ready.

NIGEL Well, no, it was –

ARTHUR What'd she get married for, if she wasn't ready?

NIGEL No, it's not –

ARTHUR What else does a woman get married for? To have kids. That's what women get married for. No reason to get married otherwise. Not necessarily why men get married, but it's the only reason a woman gets married. Unless he has to. Woman gets married to have children. Man gets married 'cause he has to have 'em.

NIGEL It's different these days, Dad. Women have other reasons for marrying – they have, you know, different – parameters...

ARTHUR Rubbish. Parameters! Woman's a woman. Man's a man. Fact of nature. Always has been, always will be.

NIGEL Not these days. These days, that's all changed – Denise still isn't certain, you know. She's still not really sure she wants to go through with it. "You're sure we're doing the right thing," she keeps saying. "Bringing a child into a world like this?"

ARTHUR I'll tell you something, Nigel. My grandmother on my mother's side, she had nine children. Nine in total! Lost two in childbirth, lost another aged five from TB, brought four survivors up, virtually single-handed, while my grandfather was away in the trenches fighting for his life. He came home, one leg missing, they promptly went and had two more of them! And I can tell you, God rest her soul, she died a happy, satisfied woman.

NIGEL She probably had no choice.

ARTHUR Anyway, you're not to worry about Denise. It's natural. It's an ordeal for a woman. She's apprehensive, it's her first. By the time she's had a couple more, she'll be laughing. Now what did you want to talk about? She'll be down in a minute.

NIGEL Yes, well, I don't know how to put this. Mum's been behaving – slightly inappropriately, you know…

ARTHUR How do you mean, inappropriately? What's inappropriately?

NIGEL Well, I ran into Jeff, you know, Jeff Thorpe at work yesterday. In the staff canteen. Jeff Thorpe from accounts, lives on the estate here, you know.

ARTHUR Yes, I know Jeff. Number eighteen. Married to Janice, isn't he? I forgot he worked with you –

NIGEL Well, normally I don't see much of him, me being down there in maintenance, whilst he's up there in accounts, you know. But we just happened to run into each other, just by chance and we got talking and suddenly he poured it all out to me. It's apparently the talk of this estate – you're probably the only one who doesn't know –

ARTHUR Know what? What don't I know?

NIGEL You know this estate, what it's like. What did we used to say when we were kids growing up here? Break wind at number twelve and they're fanning themselves at number sixty-five. There's no secrets around here. Not for long. All the time we were growing up, you know, Ali and me, we couldn't wait to get away from the place.

ARTHUR So what exactly are we talking about? What's this thing everyone knows except me?

NIGEL Well, it appears, you know, rumour has it, that Mum and Mrs Thorpe are conducting, you know, a relationship. You know.

ARTHUR A relationship?

NIGEL Apparently?

ARTHUR Your mother?

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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