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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

by Alan Ayckbourn

SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR was first produced by Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough (Round auditorium), on 8th June, 2021.

Due to the original production taking place in the aftermath of the 2021 Covid-19 lockdown, the production featured two socially-bubbled companies (Red Team and Blue Team). If a member of the Red Team received a positive Covid test, then the Blue Team would take over performances. The companies were individually directed by Alan Ayckbourn (Red) and Chelsey Gillard (Blue). The Blue Team also performed in a limited number of shows within the original schedule. The cast was as follows:

Red Team

ROB (ROBERT) HATHAWAY.....Bill Champion
ALEX HATHAWAY.....Alexandra Mathie
ALF TINDLE.....Linford Johnson
LILY TINDLE.....Naomi Petersen

Blue Team

ROB (ROBERT) HATHAWAY.....Michael Hobbs
ALEX HATHAWAY.....Eliza McClelland
ALF TINDLE.....Tayla Kovacevic-Ebong
LILY TINDLE.....Georgia Burnell

Director: Alan Ayckbourn (Red Team)
Associate Director: Chelsey Gillard (Blue Team)
Design: Kevin Jenkins
Lighting: Jason Taylor
Sound: Alan Ayckbourn
Sound Associate: Paul Stear

Company Stage Manager: Fleur Hill-Beeley
Deputy Stage Manager: Sue Volans
Assistant Stage Manager: Rachel Stevens

CHARACTERS

ROB (ROBERT) HATHAWAY – Sixty, an actor

ALEX HATHAWAY – Sixty two, his sister, a government financial adviser

ALF TINDLE – Twenty six, a soldier

LILY TINDLE – Twenty four, his wife

SETTING

The partial view of adjoining terrace houses and back gardens of numbers fifteen and seventeen Maple Street, Canonbury, London N1.

TIME

The date is 5th August for both locations but for number fifteen it is 2020 whilst for number seventeen it is 1942, some seventy-eight years earlier.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Early one fine August morning in London.)

(A composite setting comprising the partial view of two adjoining terrace houses, numbers 15 and 17 Maple Street, Canonbury, London N1. Visible are their respective back kitchens and small rear gardens with a hedge dividing them. Both gardens are in marked contrast. The garden of number 15 consists mostly of an unkempt lawn surrounded by overgrown flowerbeds. Whilst at number 17 the garden has been transformed into a rudimentary allotment.)

(The respective kitchens, too, could not be more contrasting. At number 15, home of today's modern Hathaway family, it is thoroughly modern and up to date with every labour-saving device imaginable. Whereas at number 17, the 1942 home of the Tindles, in the midst of surviving the onslaught of World War Two, it is a far more spartan affair, although scrupulously maintained.)

(At the start, **ROB***, an actor aged sixty, casually dressed in a T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, is sitting in his kitchen at number*

15 gazing gloomily out of the window into his back garden.)

(After a moment, next door at number 17, **LILY**, *a woman in her twenties comes out of the back door into her own garden carrying a washing basket. She goes down the path to the end and disappears out of sight.)*

*(***ROB**, *catching sight of her through his window, frowns.)*

ROB. *(Muttering to himself.)* Hello. Who the hell are you, young lady? What might you be doing there, I wonder?

(He cranes his neck to watch her further without getting up.)

*(***ALEX**, *his sister, a couple of years his senior, enters from the hall. She is incongruously dressed. Whilst her top half is dressed for the office, suit jacket and crisply ironed shirt, make up, jewellery, et cetera, below the waist she is still wearing her pyjama bottoms and slippers.)*

ALEX. *(As she enters.)* Sorry. Stuck upstairs in the office. These early morning zoom meetings, quite unnecessary. I don't know why she insists on holding them at the crack of dawn, we're all of us stuck at home, anyway. She could hold them any old time. Have you had any breakfast, yet?

ROB. I managed to grab a slice of cold pizza we had left over from last night.

ALEX. God, Rob! I keep telling you, you need a proper meal, darling…

ROB. Yeah, yeah, yeah! The most important meal of the day, I know. So you keep telling me every single morning.

ALEX. It's true!

ROB. And I keep telling you, these days I don't need hearty breakfasts. They're only important if I'm going somewhere to build myself up to face the day. But if the day only consists of me sitting here, bored to death staring at the same piece of wall, week in, week out, till it's supper time, I can't see what I'm supposed to be building up for... what the hell are you wearing anyway?

ALEX. I was running late this morning, got dressed in a hurry. It's alright, nobody sees your bottom half at these meetings, do they? I'm convinced half of them aren't wearing anything at all. Gives some of the junior officials some sort of vicarious thrill, sitting there half naked at a Treasury meeting with all their bits showing...

ROB. I hope you don't intend to do that...

ALEX. God, no. You've only got to nudge the web cam a fraction for all to be revealed... whoops, beg your pardon, Chancellor, you weren't meant to see that, sorry.

> *(Under the last,* **ALEX** *has located a bowl and spoon, together with a packet of cornflakes. In passing, she switches on the kettle to make them both tea.)*

You want some of these...?

ROB. No, thanks.

ALEX. *(Serving herself.)* You don't need to stare at a wall there, surely? I keep telling you, you need to find a nice fulfilling hobby...

ROB. Oh, right, what a good idea! I'll start a stamp collection...

ALEX. I'm sure other people in your position find plenty to do...

ROB. ...make a scale matchstick model of the House of Commons and then set fire to the bloody place...

(During the next, **ALEX** *completes preparing her cereal and proceeds to eat it.)*

ALEX. ...I mean you're not the only one, are you? You're hardly unique. There must be hundreds of actors who've suddenly found themselves out of work... I'm sure most of them don't sit and sulk all day. I'm sure most of them are finding things to do...

ROB. I hear most of them are getting extremely inventive. Shakespearean sonnets performed by glove puppets, reciting favourite soliloquies while sitting on the toilet... I'm sorry, Alex, I'm slowly going mad here. I'm just about at my wits end, I really am. Another month of not seeing another living soul...

ALEX. Well, please spare a thought for me, Rob, stuck here with you. I never chose to be here, did I? I'd far sooner be back home with Janice, I really would. I miss her terribly. Only she's got her wretched mother to cope with, of course...

ROB. ...whilst you're stuck here with your wretched brother, of course...?

ALEX. No, sorry I didn't mean it that way. But I do worry for you, really. All on your own here. Now you don't even have June to look after you. If you hadn't had that row and kicked her out –

ROB. Only after I'd been asking her for weeks in a most civilised manner to keep her squalid little extramarital affairs away from the gutter press. But, of course, she chose to stay, continuing to live off my slender earnings –

ALEX. Yes, I know, I know, I know. She behaved disgracefully. I told you, you should never have married her. She was far too young for you. She wasn't worthy of you, Rob.

ROB. The writing was on the wall wasn't it, when I even started getting letters from my fans warning me about her… "Dear Mr Hathaway, I am an old age pensioner and a long-standing fan of yours. I was so sorry to read of your wife's appalling behaviour…" I've still got that letter framed on the lavatory wall, haven't I? In all its ghastly pink paper and nauseous purple ink glory. I put it there as a reminder to my errant wife. Anyway. Water under the bridge. Divorced and gone for ever. Good riddance. *(Slight pause.)* Sorry to go on, Alex, but you have to admit I've good reason to be depressed, haven't I? Second marriage up the spout, my career's smashed into a brick wall. Now, on top of that, all this lockdown bollocks. I can't even leave the bloody house, go for a pint. Trapped…

ALEX. You're hardly unique, you know. It's the same for everyone. Mostly everyone, anyway.

*(**ALEX**, having finished her cereal, puts the bowl and spoon into the dishwasher, already filled with the dirty dishes from the night before.)*

(During the next, she finishes making the tea.)

ROB. At least you've still got a job. Providing you keep your knickers on…

ALEX. For the time being, anyway. I think they're soon going to start cutting back, you know…

ROB. …at least you can go upstairs and type out your reports and your projections – hold your zoom meetings… It's different for us actors – we need – human contact – fellowship. People. A bloody audience for God's sake. Just the touch of another person… Another sentient human being, you know. I might be reduced to investing in one of those sex dolls. I could order one online…

ALEX. If you do that, Rob, I promise you I'll be straight off. Lockdown or no, I refuse to share a house with you and a garish inflatable woman… can you imagine the three of us, sitting here at mealtimes trying to make small talk, her with her mouth wide open…? I'm sorry, I couldn't be doing with that…

*(***ROB** *sits gloomily.)*

(Studying him anxiously.) I hope we're not about to go into one of your lows again, are we? I couldn't cope again, Rob, not after the last time.

(A silence.)

You barely remember, do you? It was a nightmare for the rest of us. You were in the most dreadful state – day after day, hopelessly drunk, punching your fellow actors, setting fire to valuable props, threatening that poor young producer…

ROB. *(Muttering.)* Little bastard never liked me. Right from the off. From the minute he tiptoed out of Cambridge. Precocious little shit…

ALEX. I don't know why you stayed as long as you did, quite frankly. You'd been saying for years you wanted to leave the series. *(Placing the tea beside him.)* Here you are.

ROB. Yes, but not like that! I didn't expect to leave like that! After six years of loyal service, I expected more than that. The least they could have done was to give Tiger a dignified exit. The man was a hero, for God's sake, a national hero! George Tiger Jennings. A living legend amongst fire-fighters. At least they could have arranged it so that he died, whilst single-handedly saving St Paul's Cathedral from incendiary bombs or rescuing two hundred sick kids from Great Ormond Street from a V2 rocket. Some act of gallantry worthy of a World War Two legend. But what did they dream

up instead, that pack of subhuman Neanderthals? Tiger jumping off to rescue a dog from a bomb crater and being accidentally run over by his own bloody fire engine. What way is that for a hero to go?

ALEX. Oh, come on, there'll be other jobs, surely? That's what you always say, isn't it?

ROB. After years of being, as my absentee agent so tactfully puts it, 'currently unavailable', I somehow doubt it. Half the general public, the ones over fifty, the ones who can still remember, still believe I am Tiger fucking Jennings, anyway.

ALEX. Oh, by the way there was a rather nice article in the *Guardian* online this morning about heroes. I ran it off for you. *NFS* gets a mention. It's quite nice about you. Lovely photo. Hadn't seen it before. Here.

(She pushes across the piece of paper with the printed off article.)

ROB. Thanks. These you have loved, eh?

(A brief glum pause.)

ALEX. Sorry. I need to get on.

ROB. Westminster calls.

ALEX. Well, someone's got to keep the country going.

ROB. I wouldn't rely on this current mob.

ALEX. Rob, darling, do try and cheer up a little.

ROB. Yes, big sister.

ALEX. Every single morning, you're the same. Watch television or something.

ROB. *(With a sustained groan.)* Oh, God! The choice of another bloody boxset or daytime TV! Spare me!

ALEX. *(Hovering in the doorway.)* See you later. I'll check on you at lunchtime. As usual. I warn you, though, if you're still in this mood I'm going straight up again.

ROB. I meant to tell you, there was a strange woman in the next-door garden just now…

ALEX. What, the Jessops' garden?

ROB. Hanging out her washing, down at the end there…

ALEX. I thought the Jessops were in Dorset? They opted to isolate in their country place, surely? Odd. Better see who it is, I suppose. Be on the safe side. They may have let it to someone, of course…

ROB. What, those two? I can't imagine them letting their precious little show home to anyone common enough to hang out their washing, appalling pair of right-wing snobs.

ALEX. I'll give their keyholder a ring, anyway. Check they haven't let it and not told us. They left his number somewhere. A nephew. Ian – something. I think.

ROB. If I see the woman again, I'll have a word. She looked harmless enough. Fairly young –

ALEX. Yes, well, behave yourself. Remember to keep your social distance. Keep your side of the hedge.

*(***ALEX** *goes out.)*

*(***ROB** *studies the newspaper article.)*

ROB. Even spelt my bloody name wrong, as well. Robert Hadaway and fellow members of BBC One's popular 90s series, *NFS*.

(He tosses the paper aside.)

(In the other garden, **LILY**, *her washing basket now full of clean washing, returns towards the house.)*

*(**ROB** rises rapidly and goes through his kitchen door into his own garden. On the hopeful assumption that he will be recognised, he adopts his public persona, a mixture of easy genial charm and quiet masculine confidence.)*

(Calling as he goes.) I say! Hello! Hello there! I say.

LILY. *(Smiling.)* Oh, hello.

ROB. Can I help you?

LILY. Beg your pardon?

ROB. Can I help you at all?

LILY. No, that's very kind of you, thank you. It's not heavy, I can manage.

ROB. No, that's not quite what I –

LILY. Thank you for asking. I thought I'd better fetch it in. Just in case.

ROB. Sorry?

LILY. My washing. Just in case.

ROB. Oh, yes?

LILY. They said it might rain later. The man on the wireless. He warned us it might…

ROB. Did he now?

LILY. …mind you, he usually gets it wrong, doesn't he? More often than not. For all we know, could be in for a heatwave, couldn't we, eh? *(She laughs.)* I'm Mrs Tindle by the way. Lily. How d'you do?

ROB. Oh, yes? Hello! I take it you're looking after the place, are you?

LILY. Beg your pardon?

ROB. I assume you're looking after the house for them? For the Jessops?

LILY. For the what?

ROB. The Jessops. While they're away? Carol and Tony Jessop. While they're in Dorset?

LILY. No, I've never heard of them. They live in Dorset, do they?

ROB. No, no, no, they live there. In that house.

LILY. What, here? At number 17? This is our house.

ROB. *(With a smile.)* With due respect, I have to tell you that we – I've lived here for nearly ten years and I've never seen you before.

LILY. With respect, we've lived here seven years, ever since we were married and I've never seen you before, neither.

ROB. *(A bit stumped.)* Yes. Well. *(He laughs.)*. Bit of an impasse, eh?

LILY. Beg your pardon?

ROB. Your move. As they say in chess. Your move. *(He laughs again.)*

LILY. I'm not moving.

ROB. You don't recognise me at all, do you?

LILY. No.

ROB. But you're thinking, aren't you, I know the face from somewhere? I definitely know his face. That's what you're thinking.

LILY. No.

ROB. Go on, have a guess, then. Who am I?

LILY. *(Hesitantly.)* I think – I think you're from next door. From Mrs Doggett's. You must be staying with

Mrs Doggett. Are you a relation of Elsie's, then – Elsie Doggett's? She never mentioned you at all.

ROB. *(Slightly taken aback.)* I take it you don't watch TV much, then?

LILY. *(Shaking her head, puzzled.)* Sorry?

ROB. Television? You're not a keen viewer, it seems?

LILY. I've no idea what you're talking about, sorry.

ROB. NFS. You must have heard of NFS? It's repeated endlessly, practically every night.

*(***LILY** *looks blank.)*

NFS. National Fire Service.

LILY. *(With sudden realisation, her face brightening.)* Oh, them! You're part of them, are you? That's amazing!

ROB. Ah, you have heard of it?

LILY. Yes, of course I've heard of them! The firemen, of course I've heard of the firemen! I think they're the bravest people I know. They're my heroes! You're one of my heroes!

ROB. Oh, yes? Here we go…

LILY. Actually if you must know, all us girls round here, we have a thing about you. You know, nothing serious. You know about being rescued, and all that…

ROB. *(Who's heard it all before.)* Yeah, yeah, yeah…

LILY. …being carried down a ladder, you know…

ROB. …in your frilly nightie, yes all of that. Actually, if you want the truth, Lily – Lily, is it –?

LILY. Lily, yes…

ROB. …in actual fact, Lily, most of it's vastly exaggerated. Just for the programme. Flights of fancy by the writers – so as not to depress the viewers. In reality,

it was all a damn sight grimmer. Nightmarish times, those were...

LILY. Yes, dreadful...

ROB. ...over thirty-one thousand Londoners killed or seriously injured over that period...

LILY. ...oh, as many as that, I'd no idea...

ROB. ...three million and a quarter properties destroyed by German bombs...

LILY. ... I didn't realise, they don't tell you that, do they...

ROB. ...fifteen hundred fires burning in one single night, most of them out-of-control...

LILY. ...that's terrible, they never tell you any of this, do they...?

ROB. I mean, let's face it, *NFS*, it's just a pre-watershed, watered down family show, isn't it? A bit of harmless entertainment. All a bit of a laugh basically, isn't it? I mean, at the end of the day, us lot from Equity, we all had a shower, quick drink in the club bar and then off home safely to our cosy little beds, didn't we?

LILY. *(Staring at him admiringly.)* You're so casual about it, aren't you? Risking your life and laughing about it like that. I just can't get over your bravery...

ROB. *(Modestly.)* Yes, well, thanks. *(Smiling.)* It takes a lot of courage, working for the Beeb, occasionally. *(He laughs.)* Seriously, Lily, all I'm saying is, it's different for us today. I mean, we continually describe these as difficult times but really and truly we should count ourselves lucky, shouldn't we?

LILY. Quite right, we should! Very lucky! Last year, it got really bad. Mind you, we're still here, aren't we? Won't let 'em get us down, will we? Not us Londoners!

ROB. Aha! That's the spirit!

(A pause. They smile at each other.)

(Slightly awkwardly.) Listen, Lily, I hate to break this up – it's been great talking to you – and so on – and – *(Laughing.)* – now you've remembered who I am – if you – want an autograph – a signed picture of Tiger perhaps – I'm happy to oblige – but the point is, I really ought to be seeing you on your way, you know. I mean frankly, by rights, you've no business being here, have you?

LILY. Oh, no! I shouldn't be here at all! Thanks for reminding me! It's my Gladys morning. It's my morning for Gladys.

ROB. Your morning for what?

LILY. Auntie Gladys. It's my morning with her. We take turns. Me and my sister-in-law, Margaret. When she's not driving her ambulance. I must be going…

ROB. *(A trifle bemused.)* Have you far to go?

LILY. No, only just round the corner. In Pelham Street. Number eleven. My parents' old house.

ROB. I see.

LILY. I wonder – I wonder if you'd mind – giving me a hand…?

ROB. Yes. Right. Ready and willing. Anything you want carrying. Happy to help. So long as we keep our distance, eh?

LILY. No, it's just the kitchen tap in there…

ROB. Kitchen tap?

LILY. …it's stuck again, wretched thing. I can't turn it off proper. Not strong enough, I'm afraid…

ROB. *(Uncertain.)* Yes… I'll have a go for you. I'll come over there to you, shall I?

LILY. You'd better. Unless you got very long arms. *(She laughs.)*

*(***ROB** *laughs with her. He then steps through the hedge onto her side.)*

ROB. … I think it should be safe enough…

LILY. *(As he does so.)* No, it's not dangerous, at all. It just needs a plumber. But it's impossible to get hold of one, these days.

ROB. Right. Tell me about it.

LILY. I mean, I can't even get hold of my brother William and he's qualified…

ROB. Absolute pain, isn't it, this social distancing it's – *(Noticing the garden for the first time.)* My God! What's happened here? What's all this? It's like a ploughed field.

LILY. Careful! You're standing on the beetroots.

ROB. *(Jumping aside.)* Oh, sorry.

LILY. My pride and joy, those are…

ROB. Where the roses used to… What have you done with the lawn? Where's their lawn gone?

LILY. Oh, we had to get rid of that. Dug it up last year. Took up too much growing space. Besides, we never used the grass that much. Once the children were…went away. And we all need to do our bit, don't we?

ROB. How do you mean?

LILY. These days?

ROB. Oh, I see what you mean. Food shortages, yes. Well, you know, I think that was all greatly exaggerated. Once all the panic buying died down. It doesn't seem to be too serious…

LILY. Well, it may be all right for you firemen, you probably get special rations, don't you? I should think you're taken care of because you're special, aren't you? But for the rest of us, with all this rationing, it's not easy, you know, these days, making ends meet at all. We all of us need to get our heads down, don't we? Dig for victory.

ROB. *(Uneasily.)* Dig for…? I see.

(He stares down the end of the garden.)

(Tentatively.) Tell me – Lily – I can call you Lily, may I …?

LILY. Course.

ROB. That metal – construction – at the end there – the big thing covered with earth…?

LILY. Oh, Alfie, my husband, he put that together for us before he went away.

ROB. …correct me if I'm wrong, but that's a – isn't that a –?

LILY. That's our shelter, yes.

ROB. An Anderson Shelter?

LILY. Anderson Shelter, that's right. You never seen one before? You must have done, surely? In your line, you must have done?

ROB. Oh, sure. Yes. We featured one in Season Two when I had to rescue a couple of kids who were… *(He tails off.)*

LILY. What's that? You rescued someone, did you?

ROB. Let's take a look at this tap of yours, shall we?

LILY. *(Leading him indoors.)* I'd appreciate it. Thank you so much, Mr – oh, look I never did get your name, did I? Mr –?

ROB. George. Jennings.

LILY. Do come in, Mr Jennings –

ROB. George.

LILY. George.

ROB. They tend to call me Tiger.

LILY. Tiger George. That's nice. Do come in, please...

(There is something clearly developing between them.)

*(***ROB** *follows her in, never taking his eyes off her. She does the same.)*

You'll have to pardon the muddle, it's a bit untidy, I'm afraid. I wasn't expecting company this morning.

ROB. That's alright, I'm used to –

(He catches his first glimpse of the room.)

(Softly.) Oh, my God... *(Staring round, taking it in.)* This is remarkable...

LILY. Do you like it?

ROB. ...quite remarkable... This isn't – this isn't some sort of film set, is it?

LILY. Pardon?

ROB. *(Shaking his head, incredulously.)* Some sort of windup?

LILY. *(Proudly.)* No, it's all custom-built. My husband, Alfie, fitted it himself – most of it. He's clever with his hands.

ROB. What is he? A prop man? *(Examining more closely.)* It all seems perfectly authentic, too.

LILY. *(With a sudden gush of enthusiasm.)* Oh, yes, it's all up-to-the-minute, you know, with Alfie's family being in the business, of course. I mean, we had contacts

through the family firm, Tindle's. They're very well connected are Tindle's. In the trade. We could get hold of practically anything through Alf's dad, Reg. In the old days, of course. No, I must say, it's paid off for us being Tindle's. When we were setting up house, seven years ago, we could get anything we wanted, practically. At least, we used to. Different now of course, these days. Still. What do they say? We must all tighten our belts, mustn't we?

ROB. *(A little taken aback by this onslaught.)* Quite so. Yes. We need to beat this thing, don't we?

LILY. Yes, the bastards! *(Warming to her subject.)* I mean, this stove for instance, seven years since we bought it, I can't count the number of meals I must've cooked on it, it's still as good as new. It's a joy to clean, sheer joy. How much do you think we paid for it? Go on, have a guess?

ROB. No idea.

LILY. Guess.

ROB. Well. Fifty quid?

LILY. Fifty? Did you say fifty? What, pounds? Fifty pounds?

ROB. Well, possibly a bit more, collectors' item. Seventy-five, perhaps?

LILY. *(Laughing.)* Where have you been living, Tiger? Come down off your ladder, Mr Fireman, into the real world. I'll tell you. Five pounds, ten shillings.

ROB. Good God!

LILY. And that came ready connected and all.

ROB. Amazing.

LILY. They did that for free. And that's all thanks to Tindle's, that is.

ROB. This Tindle's. I'm not sure I'm familiar with them…?