

The Naked Joke

By Tim Luscombe

Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* reimagined

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Representation:
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Characters

Lyndon	38
Marty	34
Kel	30
Colin	70
Tris	40
Ed	35
Stuart	53
Ferdinand	35
Bob	35
Gregory	20
Clinton	17
Fireman	Young

The parts of Clinton and the Fireman can be played by the same actor

Ages are given for a character's first appearance

The set remains the same throughout

Lyndon, a good-looking young man, is naked in a spotlight

Lyndon: Two muffins are baking in an oven. One muffin turns to the other and says, 'Bloody hell, it's hot in here!' The other muffin says, 'Bloody hell, a talking muffin'.

An appreciative crowd laughs and groans good-humouredly

A man goes into a pub. Barman says, 'What'll it be?' Man says, 'A pint of lager, please'. While the barman's pouring the lager, the man helps himself to some peanuts from the bar. He hears a voice. "You're looking hot tonight". "Mmm, great aftershave". "Cute hair-do". Mystified, the man asks the barman, 'Where are those voices coming from?' The barman replies, 'Oh, the nuts are complimentary'. The man takes his lager and goes to buy some cigarettes in the machine. Again he hears voices. "Wanker". "Do you have to have a licence to be that ugly?" "Don't play hide and seek – no one'll look for you". The man, bemused, looks back at the barman. 'Well, the nuts are complimentary', says the barman, 'but the cigarette machine's out of order'.

Audience reaction fades as lights come up on a house in the North West of England

Eleven years later

Downstage is a spacious, ramshackle, ill-maintained living-room area, where old armchairs and a decrepit sofa are spread about

Upstage, and half separated by some old furniture, is a crumbling dining area, with a large dining table

Further upstage, is the beginning of an enormous garden

In the communal area, downstage, Marty is online and Kel's got half an eye on the TV

Lyndon comes in with flowers and unceremoniously plonks them on the dining table

Lyndon: It was a year ago today that Barry died. Your birthday, Kel.

Kel: No, today's my birthday.

Lyndon: It was miserable, do you remember? Sleeting, freezing. You wouldn't remember – you were out cold. Dead to the world. It's as if it happened yesterday. We thought we'd lost you both. I imagined I'd feel more churned up about it, but I'm not too bad. And you look fabulous. You do.

On the mantelpiece above the fireplace, an antique clock strikes twelve

Midnight. After everyone had gone, we were alone for the first time. God, it was like something out of Lorca. So portentous.

And that awful music he'd chosen. I couldn't get it out of my head. Now I can't remember it.

Hardly anyone bothered to come and see him off. Well, the weather was hellish, but –

Kel: Are you gonna rehash the entire thing?

Lyndon: The boys had to do all the food. I couldn't lift a finger. I was...

Tris, Colin and Ed come in with a large pot of food etc and prepare the table upstage. They talk among themselves

But today's gorgeous. A proper spring day at last. The maples are about to do their thing. The air seems so pure, it's almost crackling. Bright sunshine; blue sky – like one of those Sundays in New York, when you'd wake up, and you'd have the whole day ahead of you. We'd fly off down to the river, breakfast out of a paper bag, white buildings, huge sky, air humming... Downtown, a show to do, and then we'd party all night coz we'd have Monday free. People say you don't appreciate it till it's gone. But I did. I appreciated every minute of it. I was aware, alive. And this morning when the light flooded my room, it was like, for a minute, I remembered –

Colin: Crapola.

Tris: As usual. Utter horse gush.

Marty plays something on iTunes.

Lyndon: What is that?

Marty: The music Barry chose for his funeral.

Lyndon: Turn it off, for God's sake. Why would you want to –?

Marty: You were trying to remember it.

Lyndon: Even today, I've got work to do. If I don't get these [*students papers*] marked by tomorrow, they'll crucify me. This is why I've got a constant headache – I don't get any breaks. I've got my head like this, bent over, like this – look – all day, every day. That's all I do. 'Recycle' is spelled with a 'y'. I've told them a hundred times. They do it deliberately. I caught sight of myself in the mirror. Christ. How the hell did this happen? Stooped and podgy, flabby, weak. The only thing that's still strong is the ambition. To find a new vehicle, to get away, get out of here –

Kel: Flush this toilet, sell this dump, leave it all behind –

Lyndon: To get back to New York. To get back home.

Colin and Tris laugh

Kel: Ferdinand will come with us. Well, he'll be our impresario now, won't he? So the only question is, will Marty be able to tear himself away and come too?

Marty: You're joking.

Lyndon: Once we're settled there, Bob could visit.

Marty: Very funny.

Lyndon: He can stay for the summer, or the winter, whichever's more fun.

Marty: You think I'd even tell him where I'd gone?

Kel: We've got to make it happen.

When I was lying in bed this morning, I had a kind of flashback – I mean a good one. You know – that awareness you sometimes get – of the aliveness of everything like when you're on acid. You see the life force in a leaf. In your mind you see air pumping through your lungs, blood whizzing it round your body, filling you with light, and love! Normally, when I lie in, I end up catastrophising till I'm old and alone, or homeless, or something. But today, when it dawned on me it was my birthday, I felt really grateful. I guess I mean I felt truly connected to my Higher Power. Sorry. Waffle. I don't expect you to get it.

Lyndon: You do! You look like you're full of light! You're exactly like you were in New York. You've de-aged eleven years. It's a miracle. While I've gone the other way... I think what it is, is that my bones have actually shifted in my neck somehow. They feel wrong... Because if I was with someone who didn't care whether I had a job or not, I'd definitely work at it, rather than complain all the time. If it meant I could do something a bit less stressful. Like sit around all day surfing the net. I'd love that. I'd definitely find a way to love him.

Marty: You're welcome to him.

Lyndon: I don't mean Bob especially –

Tris: *(To Ed)* Put a sock in it. It's drivel. What the fuck...?

He joins Lyndon, Kel and Marty

The guy I was telling you about, our new boss-man, he's coming for lunch. That ok?

Lyndon: What's he like then?

Kel: Young? Old?

Tris: Married. Too early to tell what he's really like – he hasn't begun shooting yet. He's contracted for this series with an option to renew. He's bought his wife and kids with him, so he believes he's here for the long haul. *She* sounds like a real crackpot. Manic, or bipolar or – actually she sounds completely psychotic from what he told me. Apparently pontificates about the meaning of life and suicides at the drop of a hat. He'll tell you too. He tells anyone who'll stand still long enough. Why he doesn't dump the bitch is beyond me. Just hangs on in there, moaning.

Ed drops a dumbbell

Ed: I can bench ninety, sometimes a hundred. But I can only curl thirty, so I guess my bicep is a third as big as my pecs. But actually that's not correct, because with an arm curl you only use one arm, so maybe my pecs are the same as my biceps. Course, if I did steroids, the whole equation would change – though I hear they're bad for your liver, and your kidneys, and you get uncontrollable rages. But I'd like to have a go.

Colin: If your hair falls out there's practically nothing you can do about it.

He switches TV channels

Kel: I was watching that.

They play fight for the remote. Kel ends up on Colin's lap being cuddled

Why do I feel so happy one day and so miserable the next?

Colin: Biology - the moon - what did you eat?

Kel: Today I'm a seagull flying over the East River under a Hart Crane sky, at one with a sharp wind from the north, flowing with the current – my blue dominion; the slender white buildings, my home.

Colin: My beautiful seagull. Get off – you're too heavy.

Colin is forty years older than any of the others

Kel: I had a dream about farming.

Lyndon: About what?!

Kel: I woke up with the complete certainty that the only way forward is for all us to get back to the land.

Marty laughs

No, seriously. It's true. We live in farming country, and I don't do anything. What am I waiting for? Someone to come and rescue me? Bollocks to that. I should be productive. I should farm –

Lyndon: Really?

Kel: Organically.

Marty: Hallelujah.

Kel: It was like a message from God. We've got to, or else we're fucked. Realer than waking. We have to get our hands dirty in the earth again. To remember who we are. I suddenly knew deep down, the only way we're ever going to be happy is by growing our own food and farming our own land. That longing you feel for a cigarette after a really good fuck – that's how much I long to farm. You've got to make me get up early, and get out there, and do it.

Colin: I'll come round with a whip.

Lyndon: He wakes up early but then he just lies there looking all cross.

Kel: I think about things. I'm not allowed to think about things? I'm thirty years old.

Lyndon: Not just a pretty face.

Marty: Well, not any longer.

Tris: I get you, Kel. I reckon you're right. If I've been to the Three Kings, I won't walk home alone in the dark, because I'm a city boy, and I'm frightened of it! I'm frightened of nature. It's true – these days, most kids don't know what a leek is, or broccoli, or an onion. Have no idea that there's a connection between the pretty furry things we see in the fields and what we eat off our plates. The modern world's mad. Literally mad. I fly, I drive, and I don't take a bag to the shops – I'm a terrible person. I'm in a TV so-called-drama that's been running for over twenty years, and recycling plots for nineteen. Maybe I'm normal, but that doesn't make me any less part of the problem, does it? Christ! What do I contribute? I'm an insignificant character in a show about a never-was England, full of stock, sentimental characters, watched by the Songs of Praise crowd in over-heated, un-insulated houses, eating their machine-made dinners and exfoliating half a kilo of un-biodegradable waste. And that's just the tip of the melting iceberg. Things have got to change, I'm afraid. We've all got to. Our whole way of living and thinking. Because if we don't snap out of our complacency and selfishness and greed, within two or three decades we're going to be the victims of a titanic, cleansing storm of revenge sent by an abused, angry planet – an ecological apocalypse which we'll have brought on ourselves.

Ed drops a dumbbell

I'm with you, Kel. I'm going to make a change. *(To the others)* And if you've got the tiniest sense of responsibility or gratitude for the world you live in, you will too.

Colin: Don't think I will.

Tris: Gosh, no, you don't have to. You'll be fine, because you're very special.

Ed: In two or three decades you'll be dead, thank God. Two or three *years*, more like. You'll bore yourself to death, or I'll put a bullet through your head.

He continues to do arm curls

Colin: You think your life is pointless? I've done nothing. Not a sausage since I got kicked out of drama school. Nowadays, I can't even open a book. Just watch the box like a moron.

His phone bleeps

Ooh, me, me! It must be... Won't be a tick. Don't go anywhere.

Totters out

Marty plays another song on iTunes, this one less controversial

Kel: What's he up to?

Tris: I think he's got you a bit of a present.

Kel: Oh, no, he doesn't have to do that.

Lyndon: If he keeps spending his money like this –

Kel: What is it, do you know?

Lyndon: I don't know what we're going to do with him. He's not getting any saner.

Marty: I had a dream I was in a Tarkovsky film. You know the one – with the boy and the bell. What's it called? Somebody's name. I can't shake it. I can't stop the images replaying. All those grand Russians on horses, all that mud – the ambition and the despair.

Lyndon: Oh, lighten up, Marty.

Marty throws a woolly scarf round his neck

Where are you going?

Marty: Home.

Kel: Why?

Tris: But we've made lunch for everyone.

Marty: Whatever.

Tris: For Kel's anniversary and for Stuart, and –

Marty: You won't miss me. Anyway, I'll probably come back this evening. That's enough, isn't it? (*Takes Kel's hand*) Darling, I'm very proud of you. Really. It's an amazing achievement.

In New York there was a party to go to every night, wasn't there? More than one. Even here, when Barry was alive, he'd manage to drag some people up from London for a 'do' now and then – make things a bit festive for us. These days we've got one-and-three-quarter lodgers, and it's bleaker than a dentist's waiting room. I'm in a foul mood. You don't need me like this. Exiting left. Laterz.

Kel: Why do you have to be like that?

Lyndon: But he's right. This place is a dump.

Ed stops Marty with an impression of Heath Ledger as The Joker

Ed: 'What does it take to make you want to join in?'

Marty: What are you like, you weirdo?

Ed: 'Come nightfall, this city is mine, and anyone left here plays by my rules. If you don't want to be in the game, get out now!'

Pause

Marty: Get a tissue, Lyndon, and blow your nose. You sound like some kind of fucking Chinese teenager.

Kel's phone bleeps. It's a text

Kel: Oh.

Tris: Who's it from?

Kel: No one. A townie. Remembered my birthday. Larry.

Marty: Larry? Larry who works for Arts North West? Waste of space.

Lyndon: No, I can't bear him.

Kel: Awful man. (*Deletes the text*) Gone.

Colin staggers in, attempting to carry a huge framed oil painting: a head-and-shoulders of a distinguished-old-man-of-the-theatre

Lyndon: God, what have you done?

Tris: I told you!

Lyndon: Colin, we don't want, we don't need –!

Tris: Where on earth are you going to put it?

Kel: It's much too much!

Colin: Help me get it up here.

Ed and Tris help him prop it up above the fireplace

Lyndon: But we don't want him staring down at us like that. (*About Colin, under his breath*) Wretched old man – become a complete fucking liability. (*Removes himself upstage*)

Colin: It's for Kel. His birthday. I had it done from a photograph.

Marty: You can't afford it, Colin.

Colin: But I have afforded it.

Marty: How? You don't have any –

Colin: I'm seventy years old. I'm lonely and useless – I am. I shouldn't be alive. I should have died with everyone else, but somehow I'm still hanging on. The undead – a zombie. All I've got is memories I drag around. And you. You're my family. Yes, you are. You three are the only good thing about me, the only thing that keeps me going. Let me spoil you while I can –

Marty: But you can't –

Colin: You're all there really is to remind me of him.

Ed: Not any longer.

Colin: I loved him. Despite everything. The bugger.

Kel: You're a crazy old man.

Pause

Stuart, good-looking, early 50s, comes in

Stuart: I hope you don't mind. I just –

Tris: Stuart! Ah, here he is.

Stuart: I tried the doorbell, but it doesn't seem to –

Kel: No, it doesn't.

Marty: Nothing does! You must be the new director we've been hearing all about.

Stuart: Ah! For my sins.

Tris: Have a seat. Like a drink? We'll be eating in a minute.

Stuart: Just a coffee would be nice.

Tris: These are our 'landladies'. This is Kel and Marty...

Stuart: Stuart. It's so good to meet you again.

Kel: Again?

Stuart: There were three of you. Are there still?

Kel: You know us?

Tris: Stuart was in New York at the same time as you.

Kel: You saw us? (*Calling*) Lyndon! Stuart saw us in New York!

Stuart: We met in your dressing room.

Marty: But I don't remember you at all.

Stuart: We even went to some parties together, and you don't remember me.

Tris: This is Lyndon.

Stuart: Yes, it is! Stuart.

Lyndon: That's so weird. I thought I remembered everyone we met.

Tris goes out to get coffee

Kel: Were you working there too?

Stuart: Directing a revival of a fairly obscure Strindberg at the Lincoln Centre.

Marty: Then why don't I remember you?

Stuart: I'm afraid my production didn't make it any less obscure. I was a student of Barry's a lifetime ago. That's why I came to see your show. To support him.

Kel: And you remember it...?

Stuart: Of course. It was so, well, it was so...itself – you know what I mean? Small. That's to say, intimate. And utterly unpretentious. Really fresh then - that kind of thing. It was a while ago. You took New York by storm.

Kel: I can't believe you saw us there.

Lyndon: It's so wonderful when people saw what we did, and can remember it –

Stuart: (*Spotting the new oil painting*) Wow. That's a super picture of him. Really does him justice. He was a great man, a great teacher – a real man of the theatre. One of those forces of nature, wasn't he? I personally owe him a huge amount. He was extremely supportive of me when I was starting out. I guess you must feel the same. He was the powerhouse behind you, wasn't he –?

Lyndon: We're going back.

Kel: To New York.

Stuart: You are?

Kel: Yes, we should be there as early as the autumn. To us it's home, we call it home.

Lyndon: It's just a case of waiting for Ferdinand to come up with a new idea.

Stuart: Ferdinand?

Kel: You must have met him too.

Lyndon: He's Barry's son.

Kel: He's working with us on concepts. He's been writing stuff. He's a bit of a genius.

Marty: I've got it! I know who you are! You remember, Lyn. This is the guy we used to call the Schlong Meister.

Stuart: The Schlong Meister, that's me. Yep, I had a fairly hectic schedule in those days.

Marty: Jesus, you've aged.

Lyndon: Marty.

Stuart: It's alright. I used to really have it, didn't I? But I can't be bothered with the gym anymore, and –

Lyndon: Probably your hair's changed colour, that's all it is. You're not old. Don't have to be ridiculous, Marty.

Stuart: Fifty-three next birthday. Why deny it? Gravity's winning. I don't care. When were you last there?

Lyndon: Oh, we haven't been back.

Kel: It would be too desperate to go back as tourists, and we can't afford to live there without working. (*Moved*) I can't believe he remembers our show!

Marty: Whereabouts did you live when you were there?

Stuart: Morningside Heights. Near the corner of Cathedral Parkway and Amsterdam.

Kel: Morningside Heights, Cathedral Parkway! Those names alone –!

Stuart: The cathedral itself is oppressive, though. You familiar with it? A Gothic Revival monster. I felt like I was in the Spanish Inquisition every time I walked past. Burnt down in 2001, I heard.

Lyndon: But the area's marvellous. Columbia and –

Stuart: Actually, I felt pretty isolated, stuck all the way up there on the '1'. I remember, in the Subway, the express track was sunk below the local tracks, and, as it approached the tunnel, it dived down even further. I imagined it led to a kind of dystopian Gothamick hell! I never saw a train on it ever. Spooky.

Lyndon: We were Midtown, on Dover Street, right by where the South Street Viaduct sweeps up towards Brooklyn Bridge. Not far from FDR Drive. Occasionally, if you looked very hard, you could see Woody Allen and Diane Keaton shooting by in a car.

Kel: In black and white.

Lyndon: Don't be daft.

Kel: Oh, were you thinking of *Annie Hall*?

Marty: We lived on the second floor above Bridge Café. We could walk to our theatre.

Tris returns with coffee for Stuart

Stuart: I'm already loving it here. So far from anywhere. And the Lakes being so close. Only about thirty minutes, Tris was telling me.

Tris: That's right.

Lyndon: But the remoteness is unbearable.

Ed: The remoteness? Oh, it's remorseless.

Stuart: It's true, there are no trains and there aren't any motorways very near, but –

Ed has taken a small, framed photo of Barry, and is comparing it with the vast new oil

Ed: You see, in this one he's young, which makes it old. But here he's old, which makes it new. Young therefore old, old therefore new. Near therefore far, far therefore close. Let's examine the paradox.

Tris: Ed's the joker in the pack. Don't worry – he's fine on set.

Lyndon: I remember you, I do. You were always shagging someone new.

Stuart: It must have been... When did Barry...? How long ago was it...?

Lyndon: A year ago.

Colin: He was a saint.

Stuart: I wanted to come up, but... It's such a long way, and...

Colin: I mean, he was no *saint*. None of us were.

Marty: We scattered his ashes over Lake Windermere.

Colin: God love him.

Marty: Well, we all have to go sometime, don't we? Life's short. In a minute we'll all be dead, and maybe no one will come to our funerals either. No one'll remember us.

Stuart: That's absolutely right, Marty. And all the things that seem so important to us now will be gone forever. Our voices won't carry across the generations. Our possessions, our passions, our careers. Me and my TV show. You and your New York plans. It'll be as if none of it ever happened. All forgotten. But those things aren't really important, are they? On the other hand, the thing that *is* important – we don't give it any thought at all! We take

it for granted. We're reckless with it. Gamble it away or abandon it, wasting our precious efforts making our vital plans, crossing our little achievements off our little lists – thought, thought, want, want, ego, ego. Don't you think the only thing worth putting any effort into is striving, in stillness, for acceptance of who we really are; for the ability to be in touch with the 'I am' inside. With our essence, our life force. To strive to reconnect, through ourselves, with, well, whatever you choose to call it – God, Nature, the Universe. That's my opinion, anyway. Not 'I want'. Not even 'I do'. But 'I am'. Who among us can say he's really in touch with that?

Pause

Tris: That's Buddhism, is it?

Stuart: Well, I read eclectically.

Tris: Yeah, well, no, I mean, you've got a point, and that's great to an extent. But you take that to its logical extreme, and it sounds like you'd have us all dream our lives away. Because what I'd say, what *I'd* say, at such a critical juncture in the evolution of the species – when our very survival is threatened by global warming and the impossible demands on very finite resources – is that the time is ripe for *action*. We're capable of surviving, but only if we take action. Responsible, ruthless, radical –

Ed: Rabbit rabbit rabbit rabbit rabbit... He loves to talk, doesn't he – bless his cotton socks.

Tris: Why don't you back off?

Ed: Rabbit rabbit.

Tris: I mean, it's true – some people, of course, have already taken action. I mean, by creating sustainable houses and farms, for example – even factories. It seems to be the only way forward, in the face of endless international dithering. We as individuals have to take responsibility – don't you think? – and honestly face what we've done to our planet – squarely own up to the consequences of our own greed, and figure out what we can do to –

Stuart: Ah, yep. Yep.

Colin: 'We're capable of survival'? What do you reckon, Stuart? You're only saying that to make me feel better. I'm fucked, that's for sure. Look at me. Fucked.

Stuart smells weed

Stuart: Interesting smell.

Marty: That'll be Ferdinand.

Stuart: He lives here too?

Kel: He's in there. 'Bit by bit, putting it together, piece by piece'. Creating our next 'work of art'.

Marty: Barry entrusted him to finish it for us. They even talked about it on Barry's very last day.

Lyndon: Poor Ferdinand. We've given him a bit of a rough time this morning.

Marty: He's in love.

Kel: It's all very new.

Lyndon: With a townie, for God's sake.

Marty: Who's far, far too young for him.

Lyndon: Whoops! Sorry, Marty!

Marty: And with absolutely no class.

Kel: A chav, in fact.

Lyndon: We think Ferdinand's doing it to piss us off – as a protest.

Marty: The news is, this kid is in fact dating somebody else.

Kel: Really?

Marty: I heard yesterday. Well, ok, if not dating, then pursuing.

Lyndon: Who?

Marty: Larry.

Kel: Arts North West Larry?

Marty: That's what I heard. (*Calls*) Ferdinand, come out here! Just for a mo. Be a love.

Ferdinand comes in from his adjoining room, with a joint on the go

Lyndon: This is Ferdinand.

Stuart: Stuart.

Ferdinand: Hi. You're the new guy on 'Daffodils and Daisies'.

Stuart: Twenty-six eps.

Ferdinand: Great.

Stuart: Just comfy old TV for me these days, but –

Ferdinand: I remember you.

Kel: Yes. From New York. He saw ‘Naked Men Make Jokes’ at the Orpheum.

Ferdinand: Oh no. Look out, mate, they won't leave you alone.

Stuart: Don't worry, I've already bored them with my –

Marty: Stuart did a Strindberg.

Ferdinand: (*Noticing the portrait*) Jesus Christ, what's that?

Kel: Colin's present to me.

Ferdinand: Fuck.

Kel: (*To Stuart*) Look. This is the little picture frame Ferdy made for me today! He made it himself.

Stuart: Ah, yes, that's tremendously, um...

Kel: He made all the ashtrays too. This one's brilliant, isn't it? Look.

Ferdinand goes back to his room

He's clever with his hands, he speaks millions of languages, he's encyclopaedic on all things theatrical – he knows everything about everything. Come back, Ferdy! He always runs away. Glued to his keyboard, like Prometheus to his rock.

Marty and Kel drag Ferdinand back into the room, laughing

Marty: Come on. Be polite.

Kel: ‘Let's be having you’.

Ferdinand: Let me go. Come on.

Marty: We used to call Stuart the Schlong Meister, and he never complained.

Stuart: If the cap fits!

Marty: You're more like boring old Romeo.

Lyndon: (*Singing stupidly*) ‘Ferdy and Gregory

Sitting in a tree...

Kel and Marty join in

'K.I.S.S.I.N.G.
First comes love, then comes marriage
Then comes something in a baby carriage!'

Colin embraces Ferdy, refuses to release him

Colin: (*Singing*) 'If I loved you,

Ferdinand: Don't be...

Colin: 'Time and again I would try to say...

Kel, Marty and Lyndon join Colin, singing

All: 'All I'd want you to know...'

Ferdinand: (*Wrenching free*) Enough, that's enough! I'm breathless, I can't...
It's the first anniversary of my Dad's –

Stuart: Yes...

Ferdinand: I feel like I'm about to have a heart...I couldn't sleep. I read. I counted, you know... Nothing worked. I couldn't stop my brain. Thoughts, thoughts... I intend to translate an Alfred Jarry play. Dad and I talked about it... I've been chain-smoking this shit for a year now.

Stuart: You read French?

Ferdinand: I ought to be grateful, oughtn't I? Dad mostly taught me himself. Everything from Humanities to Languages, Art, Theatre – you name it. A truly broad education.

Marty: None of us were exempt.

Stuart: He was a natural educator.

Marty: That's why he bought us up here.

Ferdinand: Yep. Well, after New York, everything dried up for us, and coming here seemed like a good idea at the time.

Lyndon: Everso Greek.

Kel: An artistic commune.

Stuart: Yes, I vaguely remember him disappearing, but it's difficult to keep track when people drop off the map like that –

Lyndon: Barry's idea was we were going to bring culture to the people.

Ferdinand: I think that was his idea. I wasn't ever really completely sure.

Lyndon: But the people didn't want it.

Kel: Or we weren't very good at giving it. And without him, we've not been very communally-spirited.

Lyndon: We've taken in lodgers to pay the bills.

Ferdinand: And now all this stuff we know seems completely useless. Pointless.

Stuart: No. It's all good.

Ferdinand: It's self-indulgent wank, is what it is.

Stuart: We do what we can, Ferdy, don't we? Self-indulgent? But what you have is priceless. We bring what we can to any given situation, don't you think? We build what we can. We wield our influence. Without having any idea what that will be – whether great or small. How can we? We just humbly and doggedly do the work. Right? And even if it destroys you, your legacy will be felt around these parts –

Kel: No, no, that's not the point. We don't want to do our stuff here. We want to go back to –

Marty: He's not talking about that. Are you?

Stuart: Everything starts with 'I'. But then it must move outward if it's to mean anything or be of any use. Whether it's art or culture or education, even if we're talking about spiritual growth, it starts with one. Someone who knows, who realises something. Then there'll be four, twelve – pretty soon there'll be hundreds of people whose lives have been influenced for the better. You talk about evolution, Tris – the evolution of the species. Yes. I believe the species is evolving. It's raising its spiritual consciousness. That's what it has to do if it's to avoid destroying itself. Not only taking us to a better and higher place *within*, but also resonating *out* and reflecting the energy of true transformation – if you like, of evolution. You said last night you were plagued with thought, Ferdinand. That's because you're totally identified with the voice in your head, with a stream of involuntary and incessant thinking. You're identified with your mind. If we continue to be slaves to our minds, we'll never achieve spiritual consciousness, or find inner peace. But in fact, people are starting to loosen the shackles that keep them in bondage to their minds. By ones, fours, twelves, hundreds. And in two or three hundred years, enough of us will be sufficiently evolved for there to be an arising of a new consciousness! That is

when our species will fulfil its role in the world: to enable the divine purpose of the universe to unfold! Then we will live good lives! Truly good lives! We will be on the road to global enlightenment! (*Laughs*) And you talk about self-indulgent wank...

Marty takes off his scarf

Marty: I might as well stay, as I'm here.

Ed: I think this new series might be more intense than usual.

Kel: Did someone get that down?

Ferdy has gone off, unnoticed

Tris: You say in two or three hundred years we'll live good lives, but can I ask you, how do you think that will be possible? If we don't stop intensifying our carbon footprint, there'll be no... So *what* if we live good lives in the future?! We'll be back to hunting and gathering!

Stuart: Those trees are stunning. They know what they are. They're not identified with thought. These are great digs. You're lucky guys to have snagged digs here.

Tris: You get the cottage. Handily situated within the actual location. Director's perks.

Stuart: Well, I've got to put my family somewhere.

Marty: You've brought your family with you?

Stuart: The contract's a year, so it made sense for us to all come. My wife wanted to... Well, that's really why I took the job. I've spent my career freelancing, sacrificing material comfort so I can do interesting projects. Hence spending most of my time away from home, in swirly carpet hell, among the knick-knacks of cramped, old-lady digs. Or alone in barren hotel rooms. Mostly alone. I'm envious of you all, living together. A commune. How brilliant. These flowers are fantastic. She's not well, my wife. Not fully. It's difficult. The kids need... I have two daughters. They're amazing. It's how it's worked out. We strive for acceptance.

I have sanitary wipes. Would anyone...?

Tris: Maybe you think I'm just some kind of double-barrelled idiot, a kind of throwback, like Zach Goldsmith or Prince Charles, or Otis Ferry. I know I'm posh, but that's irrelevant. I understand what it's like to work. This isn't some airy-fairy, new age –

Stuart: Yes, yes. Because I often wonder what it would be like if we were allowed to start again. To treat this incarnation as a dress rehearsal. To live

our lives over, and this time to put into practise all the lessons we'd learned, and yet at the same time abandon all identification with one's history. To actually live an entire lifetime relinquishing mental and emotional resistance to the such-ness of the present moment. One would be fully conscious, but free from the mind-significance of one's thoughts. One would see love flower everywhere. One would be genuinely enlightened. I tell you what. I'd live like this. Like you do. With each other, and with trees, and with this mass of light. I wouldn't marry. That's for sure. *(Pause)* Well, not...

Bob comes in. He's good-looking and he sports a beard

Bob: Hello everyone. Happy birthday, Kel. A little birdie told me. *(To Stuart)* Hi. I'm Bob.

Stuart: Stuart. I'm working on 'Daffodils'. The new series director.

Bob: Ah, we do plays at school. I direct them. I'm a director too.

Stuart: Oh.

Bob: It'll be interesting to compare notes with you.

Stuart: Ah-hah.

Bob: This is for Kel.

Kel: Oh, Bob...

Bob: Just a little gift. Nothing much. Just something I slaved over for ages. No, seriously. It's a sort of pictorial record of all the boys and girls who were in the play last year. There are two shots of each student. One in normal clothes and one in costume. And below each one is a review of their performance. Look, I wrote something for each one. Tried to make it sound like it actually came from a newspaper. Quite clever, see? And then there's their SATs result. Nothing very special I know, but I thought you'd like to have it. Read it, and then write a review of it! *(To Marty)* Hello pet lamb *(Kisses him)* Ooo... *(Snugly noises)*

Kel: You gave me this for Christmas, Bob.

Bob: Did I? No. Did I? I'm going mad. The old grey cells. Give it back then. No, give it to him. *(Meaning Stuart)* You have it. Give it the once over. It's a nice record of my students. For when you've got nothing else to do.

Stuart: Thanks. Well, listen, I'd better be going.

Lyndon: You're not leaving.

Kel: No, you're staying for lunch.

Stuart: I didn't realise it was a birthday party. I'm sorry, I had no idea.

Kel: It's not! The boys have made all this food for you.

Lyndon: Come on.

Lyndon ushers Stuart to the table

Bob: Isn't it marvellous to relax? Have a day off. Do nothing. I dream of it all week and then, when it comes round, I find hundreds of little things to do. You know – stupid things. Repainting behind the boiler, fixing the printer, the tool shed's falling down. And the day goes by, and then it's back to work, and off we go again. So, now I structure my relaxation time. I force myself to relax and do nothing. Absolutely nothing. If it hasn't been done by the end of Saturday, it doesn't get done. And, if I find myself doing something, I force myself to stop – and I carry on doing nothing. It's quite difficult. Not as easy as it sounds, switching off completely. Even rest needs structuring. Structure is everything. Structure leads to freedom, said Goethe. *Arbeit macht frei*. Or was that the Nazis? Anyway the point stands. (*Hugs Marty*) My little Marty loves me. He's so lovely and I love him so much. I've said yes to a walk with Flora and Jeremy. Four o'clock, on the dot.

Marty: Oh no. No no no.

Bob: Why not? You like them.

Marty: I don't *like them*... Alright, alright! But stop pawing me.

Bob: Flora's suggested dinner at theirs after. I haven't given her a definite yes, because I didn't know your plans. So it's more like a pencilled arrangement at this stage. They're a lovely couple. Terribly open minded about us. It's just not an issue for them. And she's a wonderful head teacher. Isn't she? Flora? So human. Yesterday she said, you won't believe this, she said, 'If you don't get your PPA time sorted out, Bob, we'll have to downgrade you to an HLTA!' Hahaha! Your clock's seven minutes fast.

Marty: Someone turn it back to before he came in.

Bob: (*Going to the table*) 'Downgrade you to an HLTA!'

Lyndon: Come on everyone – sit down. Let's start. There's tons.

Bob: (*To Lyndon*) You know, I was completely manic yesterday. I found things to do all day and all evening, and now I feel fine. My stomach's not a hundred percent solid, but that's not so unusual. And I've noticed my sleep patterns have slightly shifted over the last ten days. Which is quite interesting.

Colin turns off the TV

Colin: There's tons. That's good news.

Kel: Don't overdo it.

Colin: You monitoring me?

Kel: No, but...

Colin: Christ sake – what does it matter?

Marty: Another Sunday with Flora and Jeremy.

Tris: Don't go.

Colin: You don't have to go. You can stay with us.

Marty: How do people do it? How do other people do it? Just shoot me now.

Ed mimes shooting himself, and collapses on the floor

(Stepping over Ed) Fucking awful life.

Colin: My cherub, don't you worry...

He follows Marty to the table

Ed: Rabbit rabbit rabbit.

Tris: Please. Please don't do that. Especially in front of –

Ed: Arse licker. Toady.

Tris goes to move to the table, but Ed jumps up and won't let him past. He aims the 'gun' at Tris. He lowers the gun, goes to kiss Tris

Tris: Get off. You animal.

Ed goes to the table

Stuart: This looks great.

Bob: Yummy. *(To Stuart)* Can I pour you some of this? Yes, so I'm a Maths teacher in actual fact, but I'm also a director. Of plays. And I'm a husband. Not legally, but you know what I mean. To Marty. Who is, you will find, a bloody marvellous chap.

Stuart: It's wonderful to come upon you three like this again.

Lyndon: Well, welcome to the neighbourhood.

Stuart: What are the chances? Up here, of all places.

Only Kel and Tris remain downstage in the living room area. Ed observes them, hawk-like, from the table upstage, though he probably can't hear what they say

Tris: Marty's depressed.

Kel: It's a hopeless situation. Old Bob just follows wherever Marty goes... I reckon the only reason he stays with him down there is he hates it up here even more.

Lyndon: (*Calling*) Ferdy! Come on! We've started!

Ferdinand: (*Out of sight*) Coming!

Ferdinand comes in and crosses to the table

Tris: What's on your mind?

Kel: Nothing. Ed's being a complete pain. What's his problem?

Tris: He's alright.

Kel: That metaphysical angst routine is so old. Who does he think he is? Hamlet?

Tris: Don't go.

Kel: He's watching us.

Tris: Stay till they've all settled.

Kel: He behaves like he owns you. You don't stand up for yourself.

Tris: I felt sorry for him when he first arrived, and now he –

Kel: Big mistake.

Tris: What are you thinking now?

I love you.

Kel: Why don't you behave like a normal queer, and go and fuck your way to a partner who actually likes you? Leave me alone.

Tris: We could achieve so much together. We're so alike, deep down. I'm a decade older, but... You make everything beautiful, Kel, and everything possible. Now what are you thinking?

Kel: You think everything's beautiful and everything's possible? I used to be able to see the life force in a leaf. Now I just see the leaf, if I notice it at all.

We know about Tarkovsky and Hanneke and Malle. We were so full of dreams and brilliant ideas. And the only thing we ever made work, that actually paid us any money...

I don't think it was even Ferdy's idea actually. To be honest, it wasn't any of ours. There'd already been *Naked Men Singing Songs*, so we took our clothes off and told jokes. It didn't seem absurd at the time. We were younger – what needed to be pert was pert. And it worked. We had one glorious idea and we did it, like children or terrorists. Then fashion shifted, and now we're stuck up here, like those dead people in Pompeii, ossified and hollow. And nothing seems beautiful and nothing seems possible.

He smiles

What does it matter, eh? The ice sheets are melting. I'm not averse to work. I'd honestly rather contribute than –

Gregory comes in. He's a lean, sexy, 20-year-old local lad

Gregory: Whassup? Ferdy-Birdy said it was your B-day. (*Screams*) Fuck, there's a lot of peeps. (*To Tris*) 'Sup, your highness. (*To Kel*) So how old are you today? If that's not rude.

Kel: I'm one.

Gregory: What are you on? You mean twenty-one?

Kel: You're sweet. More like thirty-one. No, I'm one. It's my sobriety birthday.

Gregory: What's that mean? That mean you don't drink?

Kel: Right.

Gregory: For a whole year? That's something you celebrate? That's whack.

Lyndon approaches

Lyndon: Gregory. We're so pleased you could come. Ferdy said you might pop over. Come and join us.

Gregory: No, no, I'm cool.

Lyndon: No need to be nervous. It's just the lodgers and us... (*With quiet horror*) Oh my God.

Kel: (*Realising*) Oh.

Gregory: What?

Lyndon: Gregory, you can't – we can't – you'll have to –

Gregory's T-shirt bears a large swastika design

Gregory: You gettin' up in my grill over this?

Lyndon: It's impossible, Gregory.

Gregory: It's just a T. 'S dope. Don't mean nothin'.

Lyndon: Not in our house, I'm afraid. Not at our table. I'm sorry.

Gregory: Alright, 's cool.

He takes his shirt off

Better?

Pause

Perplexed lustful caving

Tris: Um.

Lyndon: Much.

Kel: Yep.

Lyndon leads them all to the table

This is Gregory, everyone.

General greetings

Ferdinand: Why aren't you wearing a shirt?

Gregory: They made me take it off.

Ferdinand goes hurriedly to his room

Bob: *(To Kel, over the general hubbub)* So, now – what do they say? There are rules, correct? You can start dating after one year, so –

Kel: No. After one year, you can get a plant. Then after two, a pet. And then if, after three, the plant and the pet are still alive, *then* you can start dating.

Marty: Good luck with that.

Ferdinand returns with a shirt for Gregory

Bob: Let's drink to two more years of abstinence!

Kel: One day at a time.

Lyndon: To Kel's resurrection.

All: Cheers! (*Etc*)

Lyndon: And welcome to Stuart.

All: Cheers! (*Etc*)

Marty: Give me some. I want to make a toast. To all our dreams of a happy future. May we dream and dream and never wake up.

Bob: Black mark for bad behaviour. See me afterwards. 'Cheese', everyone! (*Takes photos*)

All: Cheese. (*Etc*)

Lyndon: Isn't it lovely to have so many people here?

Stuart: Is this real black pudding?

Tris: What do they put in it?

Ed: Black widow spiders, black magic chocolates and black and white minstrels.

Kel: You know we could evict you at any time.

Lyndon: Tonight I'm going to do one of my famous pasta efforts. Everybody stay – everybody's welcome.

Stuart: Me included?

Lyndon: Of course!

Bob: Wait! We're thirteen at table! Who's superstitious?

Colin: Thirteen at table? That means someone's in love.

Bob: Colin, own up. You're in love!

Colin: Me? No! Last time I fell in love, Jim Callaghan was still Prime Minister. But I can't for the life of me understand why that half-naked youth has gone as red as a beetroot! (*Sings*) 'Oh-woh-oh-oh-OH-klahoma...!'

The table has become raucous

Ferdinand: Shut up. Shut up, all of you. Enough!

Silence

I guess Dad would have approved of this.

Stuart: Here here.

Ferdinand: Here's to him. To Dad.

All: Barry.

They drink. Bob takes another photo

Silence

Marty: Somebody's got to remember. There's a boy, a teenager – his father died, and now he's in charge of making this enormous bell. He's training to be an iconographer or something, so he knows nothing about bells: the founding and the cladding and all that. But he has this irrational faith that it'll work out ok. What happens to him? I can't remember the end. Doesn't anyone remember? It's driving me mad. It's by Tarkovsky. You know, Gregory? Tarkovsky. Know him? Greg? Do you?

Gregory: Tark what?

Marty: Tarkovsky. Soviet filmmaker.

Everyone's looking at Gregory

Gregory: I don't know what you're talking about.

He gets up and leaves the table, coming downstage. Ferdinand follows

What the hell?

Ferdinand: Try and understand them – they're just being friendly.

Gregory: They're raisin' my roof – gettin' on my last nerve, man. I told you, I should never've come.

Ferdinand: Stay.

Gregory: They think I'm retarded.

Ferdinand: They love you.

Gregory: They what?

Ferdinand: I love you.

Gregory: Do ya?

Ferdinand: You're so young and so beautiful, and you don't know who Tarkovsky is – you're perfect. I thought I'd never feel anything ever again. And then you came. Please stay. Be here with me. Love me too.

Gregory: Stay here? This dump?

Ferdinand: Please Gregory, you're everything I want and everything I need.

Gregory: You're talking shit because of your Dad. You're pemsy, you're blue.

Ferdinand: I'm happy. I'm glad he died. I hated him.

Gregory: Say what?

Ferdinand: He only *had* me to prove he wasn't gay. Then he ditched Mum and came out when I was ten. I became a terrible reminder of his closeted past. He couldn't bear to look at me. He had to make me into something he could accept. He rammed Art and Theatre down my throat. But it's not who I am. I can't say any of this in front of them. They won't hear it. They revere him. But you understand. Say you understand.

Pause

Gregory kisses Ferdinand. Ferdinand responds hungrily, desperately

Lights out

The Orpheum again

Marty, naked, in a spotlight

Marty: A man goes into a bar, and asks for a pint of lager. Pouring the lager, the barman can't help noticing that the man has a small amphibian sitting on his shoulder. 'Is that a newt?', asks the barman. 'Indeed, it is a newt!', says the man. 'And would your little friend like a drink too?' 'Yes he would', says the man. 'He would like a bitter lemon with a straw'. 'Okidokey', says the barman. And as he's pouring the bitter lemon, the barman asks, just to be friendly like, 'What do you call your pet newt?' And the man says 'Tiny, I call my pet newt Tiny'. And the barman says, 'Why do you call him Tiny?' And the man says, 'Because he's my newt'.

While members of the audience express bafflement, or let out drunken yelps, lights come up on the communal living area. It's cleaner and better ordered than before

Eighteen months have passed

It's mid-evening

There's a fierce wind outside

Someone's playing pop music in a distant room

Gregory comes in. He wears jeans and a brightly coloured Fred Perry shirt, he carries a handful of final demands, and will speak in a much more educated way

He puts the bills down and moves around the room, humming 'You've got to be carefully taught' from South Pacific, and turning off and unplugging lights, computer, TV, etc. If there are windows, he closes them

Gregory: *(Horrified)* What's this doing here? *(Calling)* Birdy?

Ferdinand: *(Out of sight)* What, love?

Gregory waits for Ferdinand to emerge from his room

He indicates an unused mug

Not guilty, your honour.

Gregory: I'm putting it in 'mugs of shame'. They'll get the idea in the end. And if they don't, I'm going to start labelling them. At the end of the day, I'll find out whose this is, don't you worry. People have to learn to stop just leaving things lying around all over the place. All the lights on in here, as usual. All the windows open upstairs. We're heating the whole North West of England. Am I the only one who takes any responsibility for anything? What's the time?

Ferdinand looks at the clock

Ferdinand: Quarter past eight.

Gregory: Well, where have Lyndon and Kel got to? I told Kel he's overdoing it. He doesn't have to work those hours. He *can* say no. There are rules. But at the end of the day, he doesn't listen to me. Are you sure it's quarter past eight? Doesn't seem right. I'm worried. Bokkety-Bok's not himself. He's cold all the time. Yesterday he was hot, and today he's cold. Something's wrong. Should we go and see the doctor?

Ferdinand: He's fine, Greg. That's what they're like.

Gregory: I'm going to put him on a macrobiotic diet. I read –

Ferdinand: Greg.

What's up?

Gregory: Tell me who these people are who are coming?

Ferdinand: Oh, they come every year on Guy Fawkes Night. It's a tradition.

Gregory: They didn't come last year.

Ferdinand: Last year we were in Burma buying Bok, weren't we? It's just some of the regular crew from 'Daffodils'.

Gregory: Well, I don't want *crew* marauding all over the house. They'll bring in mud for a start.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ THE REST OF THIS PLAY PLEASE CONTACT
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