

THE BOX

A play

by

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ACT I

SCENE 1

A LARGE, PRETTY DRAWING ROOM, LIGHT AND AIRY, AND BEAUTIFULLY DECORATED. THE FURNITURE IS A MIX OF COMFY ARMCHAIRS AND SOFA, WITH SOME HEAVY OAK TABLES AND AN OAK DRESSER, ON WHICH THERE IS A WEDDING PHOTO OF NICK AND ESTHER BLAKE. ON ONE SIDE OF THE ROOM, THERE IS A PAIR OF FRENCH WINDOWS, WHICH ARE OPEN, THE CURTAINS BILLOWING GENTLY IN THE BREEZE. ON THE OTHER SIDE A DOOR LEADS TO THE REST OF THE HOUSE. THERE IS A CHAIR BY THE DOOR.

NICK IS SITTING IN A CHAIR FACING THE FRENCH WINDOWS, BATHED IN EARLY MORNING LIGHT. HE IS WEARING PYJAMAS, DRESSING GOWN, SLIPPERS, ALL VERY EXPENSIVE. WE CAN HEAR BIRDSONG, AND PERHAPS A GENTLE BREEZE BILLOWS THE CURTAINS A LITTLE. NICK IS IN A REVERIE, STARING AT THE VIEW. THE DOOR BEHIND HIM OPENS, AND ESTHER PEEPS IN. SHE SEES NICK AND CREEPS BEHIND HIM AND THROWS HER ARMS AROUND HIM. NICK JUMPS.

NICK: Bloody nora!

ESTHER: Sorry.

NICK: You trying to kill me?

ESTHER: No.

NICK: Bloody hell.

HE SITS. SHE SITS ON HIS LAP AND THEY KISS, TENDERLY. THEY GAZE AT THE VIEW.

ESTHER: Isn't that amazing?

NICK: Yeah. And all mine. Ours.

ESTHER: How long have you been sitting here?

NICK: Not long. Don't know. What time is it?

ESTHER: Nearly nine.

NICK: Must've dozed off. After I saw the sunrise.

ESTHER: Sunrise?

NICK: I can't help it. I think it's going to take a while to break the habit.

ESTHER: Not too long, I hope.

NICK: Me too.

ESTHER: I wish I could have seen it with you.

NICK: It was beautiful. I've never really looked at one before.

ESTHER: You must have done. You were always up at the crack of dawn.

NICK: Doesn't mean I saw it. Anyway, what time did you come up to bed?

ESTHER: Late. Probably not long before you got up.

NICK: Blimey.

ESTHER: Well, you were sparko, and I wanted to make at least one room habitable.

NICK: Where are all the boxes?

ESTHER: Well, we won't be dining in the dining room for a while.

NICK: Right.

ESTHER: And you'll need to watch your step in the kitchen.

NICK: OK.

ESTHER: The study's fine. Unless you want to sit down. And you sort of need to shuffle in sideways.

NICK: I shall just stay in here. It looks wonderful.

THEY KISS.

NICK: There's no hurry, you know.

ESTHER: I know.

NICK: We've nothing else to do. Anyway, I'm not sure I like the idea of you humping all those boxes on your own in the dead of night.

ESTHER: I don't mind.

NICK: No. Not the thing at all. Downright unseemly. You're the lady of the house. Standards must be maintained. No more humping for you.

ESTHER: You're quite right. What was I thinking? This is what I should have been born to. I always thought the stork had dropped me at the wrong house.

NICK: We can afford to pay people to do all that. Maybe we should get a butler.

ESTHER: Oh no. I've always been rather afraid of butlers.

NICK: How many have you met?

ESTHER: I haven't met any. But they always seem so posh on the telly. Disapproving. I'd never be able to relax.

NICK: No, I can just see myself with a butler. It'd be good.

ESTHER: Supposing I wanted to walk around the house with nothing on? I couldn't do that without a butler around.

NICK: (PAUSE.) Who on earth wants a butler in this day and age?

ESTHER: Exactly. If it helps, I don't mind dressing up as a maid Every now and then. (YAWNS.) How soon after one gets up in the morning is it considered decent to take a siesta?

NICK: You should have come to bed earlier.

ESTHER: I know. But I told you, I wanted to sort things out. I was nesting.

NICK: I distinctly remember you saying you were cream-crackered and would be up in five minutes.

ESTHER: Did I say that?

NICK: You know you did.

ESTHER: If you say so.

NICK: So what happened?

ESTHER: I got a second wind.

NICK: You're such a crap liar.

ESTHER: Who says I'm lying?

NICK: I have ways of making you talk.

ESTHER: Oh yes?

HE STARTS TO TICKLE HER.

ESTHER: No! Stop it! Alright, alright! Mercy! I'll tell you.

NICK: Well?

ESTHER: Do you promise not to be cross?

NICK: Esther!

ESTHER: Promise?

NICK: Of course.

ESTHER: You're not allowed to laugh, either. I pottered for a few minutes, and then I did come up. You were completely out for the count. I was so happy, getting in to bed with you, I want you to know that. Our first night in our first house together. So happy, completely exhausted and a bit drunk. I think I must have dropped off straight away, in spite of the peculiar snuffling noises you were making.

NICK: I beg your pardon?

ESTHER: (DOES SNUFFLING.) Like that.

NICK: Well, pardon me.

ESTHER: No, I like it. It reminds me of the dog we had when I was little.

NICK: Do you want to be tickled again?

ESTHER: Don't you dare.

NICK: Well?

ESTHER: I don't know what happened, but I was suddenly awake, sitting bolt upright and scared out of my wits.

NICK: Why?

ESTHER: I think I was woken up by the quiet. I'm so used to police sirens and planes and lorries and dogs barking all night, but it was so deathly quiet.

NICK: Presumably I must have stopped snuffling.

ESTHER: Shut up. I lay there absolutely terrified. It was so dark, and so silent, I started wondering if this was what being dead felt like and then I found myself having all these lurid thoughts that we were a million miles from anywhere and that anyone could come and murder us and no-one would be able to hear our cries for help, and our bodies wouldn't be discovered for weeks. I knew I was being silly, but I couldn't reason myself out of it. Then an owl hooted which finally reduced me to a gibbering wreck.

NICK: You should have woken me.

ESTHER: I tried. Nothing doing.

NICK: I know what you're like. I expect you were too gentle.

ESTHER: I bit your face.

NICK: You did what?

ESTHER: Well, vigorous shaking didn't do any good, and I was panicking.

NICK: You bit my face?

ESTHER: It was more of a nibble. I didn't draw blood or anything. Don't be so wet. Didn't hurt enough to rouse you, did it?

NICK: I suppose not.

ESTHER: You just grunted and rolled over. Hoicked all the bedclothes off me. So there I was, cold and frightened and desperate for light and noise, so I got up and came downstairs and finished off in here. It's funny, really. When I first moved to London, I couldn't sleep for the noise. I daresay I'll get used to it.

NICK GETS UP AND GOES TO A MIRROR ON THE WALL.

NICK: I think I can actually see tooth marks.

ESTHER GOES TO HIM AND KISSES HIM.

ESTHER: Don't worry. It only gets really bad during a full moon.

NICK: I'll try to bear that in mind.

THEY KISS. PAUSE.

NICK: It is quiet, isn't it?

ESTHER: Oh, in the sunshine, it's wonderful.

NICK: Hmmm.

ESTHER: What?

NICK: Nothing.

ESTHER: Oi. I told you mine. You tell me yours.

NICK: (PAUSE.) Ever since I can remember, I've been determined to be so loaded by the time I hit forty that I'd never have to work again.

ESTHER: And you have.

NICK: I had by the time I was thirty. I wasn't ready to give it all up then. I'm still not sure.

ESTHER: But I thought this was what you'd always wanted.

NICK: It was. It is. It's just..twenty odd years I've spent, getting up at five, working till ten, getting by on coffee and adrenaline, feeling like a filthy rich hamster in a gilded wheel, too addicted to the

rush to get off. Now I have, and we've done the wedding and all that stuff..well, part of me can't help looking at that view and thinking, 'Is that it, for the rest of my life?'

ESTHER: I thought you were happy.

NICK: So did I. I am. I'm just..look, if I hadn't met you, I'd probably still be on the treadmill, pointlessly making money I'd never have had the time to spend, snorting God knows what and sleeping with disposable women.

ESTHER: Nice.

NICK: And then suddenly, you show up out of nowhere, sweep me off my feet. Six months later my life has been turned upside-down, and I'm a happily-married gentleman of leisure.

ESTHER: I don't understand why that's a bad thing.

NICK: It's not a bad thing. I'm..I think I'm doing cold turkey. I'll get over it. I'll just need a little time to get used to doing nothing.

ESTHER: You won't be doing nothing. I intend to keep you very busy. Indeed.

NICK: Really?

ESTHER: Yes. We've got an awful lot of humping ahead of us.

NICK: Well, in that case, let's crack on.

ESTHER: Off you go and get dressed then.

NICK: Eh?

ESTHER: You can't hump in that clobber. You'll snag something. Besides which, it's getting on for ten.

NICK: So what? I never need to take off my dressing gown again, if I don't want to.

ESTHER: Oh yes you do. I expect we'll be having a steady stream of visitors from the village, all eager to find out who's bought the big house. We don't want to give the wrong impression.

NICK: I'm willing to bet there's never been a more expensive dressing-gown within five miles of that village.

ESTHER: That may well be so, my love. But I would still like to gain the respect of our new neighbours. If I'm sitting here drinking Lapsang Souchong with Mrs Hilloughby-Willoughby of the W.I., I can't have you lolling about with your..part and parcel liable to break free at the drop of a hat.

NICK: My what?

ESTHER: I'm not going to risk having you expose yourself, inadvertently or not.

NICK: Part and parcel?

ESTHER: I mean, I should think they'll want you to be a church warden at the very least, and they'll probably shoe-horn you onto the parish council. I rather fancy myself as a governor of the village school. So do as you're told, and go and make yourself decent. I'll make coffee.

NICK: You're assuming they're not hostile. We might very well be the only people around here who aren't cousins. There's probably a dead crow nailed to the front door, even as we speak.

ESTHER: The people we met on our trips down to view the house have all been very pleasant. Either way, they still don't need to see that. Off you go upstairs.

HE DOESN'T MOVE.

ESTHER: What?

NICK: You've got it all mapped out, haven't you?

ESTHER: What do you mean?

NICK: We're going to throw ourselves into village life and become permanent fixtures in the heart of the community.

ESTHER: What's wrong with that?

NICK: What, apart from the fact that it sounds like hell on earth? How do you propose to explain our circumstances? I mean, we can't tell them the truth. Everyone'll go quiet when we walk into the pub, and we'll get that freezing civility I get from your Mother.

ESTHER: Mummy likes you a lot.

NICK: She does not. No one could be that polite to someone they liked. No. Your Mother thinks I'm a ruthless, amoral crook.

ESTHER: She doesn't!

NICK: I heard her use those very words to your Dad.

ESTHER: You shouldn't have been listening to their private conversations.

NICK: They don't have private conversations. He's deaf as a post and she never speaks in anything less than a bellow.

ESTHER: You're being very mean, all of a sudden.

NICK: I'm not saying the old girl's wrong, by the way. I'm just pointing out that the rustic idyll you dream of won't be possible if the locals find out I'm a ruthless, amoral crook.

ESTHER: Oh, don't be so melodramatic. You were a successful banker, not the head of an international crime syndicate.

NICK: A lot of people wouldn't make the distinction. We should probably say I was an arms dealer, or a people trafficker.

ESTHER: But you weren't a crook, were you?

NICK: (LAUGHS.)

ESTHER: What?

NICK: I don't mean to be rude, but that's a really stupid question.

ESTHER: Thank you.

NICK: That village down there is probably stuffed full of retired generals and headmistresses who've lost their savings because of people like me.

ESTHER: Stupid or not, you still haven't answered the question.

NICK: Be better for them if I had been a crook. Then they could come after me. But I think you're confusing legal and ethical.

ESTHER: Don't patronize me, Nick.

NICK: I'm not. I'm trying to explain why I'm not keen for people to know about me. I've made my enemies. It would quite nice to make some friends.

ESTHER: But if you've done nothing wrong, you've got nothing to be ashamed of.

NICK: Who says I'm ashamed? I couldn't give a toss. I just want an easy life. Not everybody shares my world view, sadly. When people find out I'm a banker they tend to get uppity. Expect me to justify myself. Why should I?

ESTHER: Why shouldn't you?

NICK: Because it's none of their bloody business. People lose money, they want someone to blame. We're just convenient bogeymen. Oh, they all love us when the money's rolling in. No one wants to ask questions, then. As soon as it stops, we're suddenly evil incarnate. And people don't like it if you tell them the truth.

ESTHER: Which is?

NICK: That they're victims of their own greed.

ESTHER: Explain that.

NICK: Well, it's quite simple. Why do people invest money?

ESTHER: To make money.

NICK: Trouble is, banks aren't there to make money for people. Primarily, they exist to make money from

people. You'd be just as likely to make a profit if you took it all to a casino.

ESTHER: That's not really true.

NICK: It is mostly. The main difference is that everyone knows that casinos are stacked against them. Apart from that..

ESTHER: If you're just going to wind me up, I think I'll go and empty some boxes.

NICK: I'm not winding you up. All I'm saying is that in a casino, there is a small element of chance. We don't do chance.

ESTHER: Are you talking about insider dealing?

NICK: Certainly not. That's against the law.

ESTHER: What are you talking about?

NICK: Alright. Let me paint you a hypothetical picture: you have a company you want to float on the stock market. You come to me and I invest in it. I'm one of the big boys, so my involvement sends the share price up. More big boys climb aboard. The share price sky-rockets. We plant lots of jolly PR in the pink pages about what a cracking investment this is. Up goes the price. We keep things moving by flogging a few shares to some of the other big boys, who flog them back. Eventually, it'll flatten out a bit, so we open it up to the smaller investors. This is still a cracking investment, remember, so they climb over each other to buy a slice of the action. They blow pots of cash, buying at the top of the market, we make a thumping great profit, which we use to bet that the share price will collapse. A few well chosen words in the right ears, some bad PR planted with our pet monkeys in the pink pages, and hey presto, the share price collapses, we win our bet, the small investors panic and sell to cut their losses, and who do they sell to? And then we start all over again. They've got no recourse, as they went into it knowing that their investments can go down as well as up. If the share price starts climbing again, all well and good, you're laughing. If the company collapses, then you're still laughing. You've already spent the

original investment money, so there's nothing left for the creditors. You might be disqualified from running a company for a year or two, but no-one's ever been deterred by that. The company goes into administration, one of the big boys creams off any money the creditors might have got, by charging exorbitant fees and the small investors who've lost all their money have to take out loans, for which we charge obscene amounts of interest, as, of course, they've no collateral anymore. We call it having your coke and snorting it.

ESTHER: You make it sound so simple.

NICK: It is. The clever bit is making the simple complicated. I mean, it's not just a question of having big balls and a brass neck, although you do need all three.

ESTHER: Lovely.

NICK: No, no. You have to make sure that no-one's looking too closely at what you're up to, so you have to spend a lot of time taking the regulators and the Inland Revenue to dinner. And in the unlikely event that they prove impervious to that, you've got to set up front companies, PR companies, make sure there's no paper trail leading to any one person or organisation, so that if anyone starts nosing around, they can't pin anything on anyone. That takes brains.

ESTHER: If it's legal, why does that matter?

NICK: Well, sometimes it's only just legal. And it looks bad. Makes people think we can't be trusted.

ESTHER: And that would never do.

NICK: You can joke about it, but the point is that people see these things in black and white. I mean, you mentioned insider dealing. Terrible crime, committed by wicked fraudsters who deserve everything they get. Everybody agrees about that. Except that it was perfectly legal until 1980. There's stuff you can do totally above board here that would get you a ten-stretch in America. So are they right or are we?

ESTHER: I don't know.

NICK: And I don't care. We'll carry on doing this stuff until somebody stops us, and then we'll find something else. Banking is just another word for moving the goalposts. You just have to stay ahead of the Government, which, luckily, is very easy. (PAUSE.) So, to sum up, that's why I don't think that our transition from townie incomers to much-loved pillars of the community will be quite as smooth as you'd like.

ESTHER: Daddy lost a lot of his retirement money on the stock market.

NICK: And there are people starving in Africa because of the banks speculating on food prices. It's business. And if we didn't do it, somebody else would.

ESTHER: Ah. The defence of the arms dealer through the ages.

NICK: I don't know what you want me to say.

ESTHER: Sorry?

NICK: Yeah, but I'm not. As my old boss used to say: 'You go in against the big boys, you're going to get burned.' Anyway, you've ended up on the winning side, what do you care? (PAUSE.) Look, if he's that hard up, I'll bung him a few quid. No skin off my nose. I won't live long enough to spend it all.

ESTHER: You don't get it, do you?

NICK: Get what? I worked bloody hard for this.

ESTHER: Well, I hope it was worth it.

NICK: It's not personal. Financial transactions are like jokes. They're always at someone's expense. You can't afford to think too much about it.

ESTHER: I'm starting to agree with my mother.

NICK: At this rate, I might just go and ask for my old job back.

ESTHER: Are you sure they'd have you?

NICK: Are you joking? My old boss would bite my hand off. Begged me not to leave. Best trader he ever had. I made him more money than anyone he'd ever had. More than he could possibly keep track of.

ESTHER: You must be very proud.

NICK: Excuse me, Mrs Blake, but I'm not sure you're in a position to take the moral high ground.

ESTHER: I'm not!

NICK: If you'd wanted to be poor and virtuous, you could have married a social worker.

ESTHER: Call me old-fashioned, but I married for love.

NICK: I'm not saying you didn't.

ESTHER: What are you saying?

NICK: Oh, come on! This is our first morning here. Let's not do this now.

ESTHER: Yes, let's. (SHE GLARES AT HIM EXPECTANTLY.)

NICK: I look at you, and I can't believe my luck. You've it all into perspective.

ESTHER: So all this would have been empty and meaningless if you hadn't met me. Is that it?

NICK: No. I would have loved all this, regardless. You're a bonus.

ESTHER: I beg your pardon?

NICK: Let's face it, you wouldn't have looked twice at me. You know, if I wasn't..

ESTHER: Go on. Keep digging.

NICK: Well, look at me. Average height, average looks, Mr Average-bloody-everything. But you. You're amazing. I'm just saying I'm not sure you'd have noticed me if I'd been a bathroom salesman with a moderate income.

ESTHER: Do you really think I'm that shallow?

NICK: No. And I'm not blaming you, either. If I'd had the option of sleeping my way to a fortune, I'm sure I would have done. Been a hell of a lot easier.

ESTHER IS AGHAST.

NICK: That didn't come out exactly as I meant it to.

ESTHER: Oh, I'm pretty sure it did.

NICK: You said yourself you should have been born to this. So it's just as well I'm not a bathroom salesman with a moderate income. I mean, women like you don't come cheap. There's no point in owning a Bentley if you can't afford to run it.

ESTHER: Do you want to have children?

NICK: You know I do.

ESTHER: One more word out of you, and I swear we'll be forced to adopt.

LONG PAUSE.

NICK: This isn't quite how I'd imagined this morning.

PAUSE.

ESTHER: I must say, I'm surprised that with your brilliant business brain, you were taken in by such a transparent gold-digger. Assuming, of course, that you were thinking with your brain.

NICK: Oh, it all came out wrong. I didn't mean you were a ..oh God, I don't know what I meant.

ESTHER: I think we both know what you meant.

PAUSE.

NICK: Meet me halfway. I'm trying to make it better.

ESTHER: By comparing your wife to a car.

NICK: Can we forget about that?

ESTHER: And a Bentley of all things.

NICK: Sorry.

ESTHER: Big, ugly and square.

NICK: I didn't mean it.

ESTHER: Fat men's cars.

NICK: Please. I don't know what to say. What can I do?

ESTHER: I'm not telling you. You'll just have to try everything in your power until something works.

PAUSE.

NICK: We'll just have to tell people we're old money.

ESTHER: Yes. That'll work right up until you open your mouth. You can't disguise your barrow-boy tendencies.

NICK: Barrow-boy?

ESTHER: That's one thing Mummy and I did agree on.

NICK: Your Mother..

ESTHER LOOKS EXPECTANTLY AT HIM.

NICK: ..is a delightful, insightful woman, who, judging by the results, must have been a perfect mother.

ESTHER GIVES HIM THE MEREST VESTIGE OF A SMILE.

NICK: Maybe I should give it all away.

ESTHER: What?

NICK: If it's going to provoke arguments, we'd be better off without it. Yeah, I'll give it all to good causes, and we can be poor and worthy.

ESTHER: You'll do no such thing.

NICK: Go back to my roots. I might see if I can pick up a second-hand barrow.

ESTHER: (SMILES AGAIN.) I've done poor and worthy, thank you. When I was a student. I don't intend to do it again.

NICK: (MOCK COCKNEY.) Sorry, lady. I can't keep up with you, what with your book-learning and all. You'll have to go slower.

ESTHER: Come here. Now.

NICK: Yes lady.

HE DOES. SHE GRABS HIM BY THE LAPELS.

ESTHER: Gold-digger indeed.

NICK: I never called you..

ESTHER: You'll shut up if you know what's good for you. (SHE PULLS HIM CLOSER.) You're bloody lucky to have me, you washed-up old has-been. And don't you forget it. (KISSES HIM.) Do we understand each other?

NICK: Yes.

ESTHER: Good. I'm not stupid, you know. I didn't imagine that you'd made all this by running a donkey sanctuary. All the same, what the eye don't see, the heart don't grieve over, and on the whole, I think I preferred you with secrets.

NICK: I don't think you mean that.

ESTHER: Doesn't matter anyway. It's done. It's out of its box, and there's no putting it back in. We'll just have to tell everyone you won the lottery, and hope they believe us. Anyway, luckily for you, I've always found ruthless, amoral crooks rather a turn-on.

NICK: That is lucky.

ESTHER: And as you point out, the big boys have always had it their own way. Personally, I've always liked the idea of going in against the big boys.

NICK: Have you? Any particular big boys?

ESTHER: Well, I daresay if you hadn't done me, somebody else would.

NICK: You know, what with one thing and another, last night we never got round to christening the bedroom.

HE SLOWLY STARTS TO PULL HER TOWARDS THE DOOR. SHE STOPS HIM.

ESTHER: You are so painfully conventional at times.

NICK: What do you mean?

ESTHER: (WALKING TO THE WINDOW.) Look at it out there. What an absolutely glorious morning. It's far too beautiful out there to waste time indoors.

NICK: Oh.

ESTHER: I think we should go out there and christen the garden.

NICK: You what?

ESTHER: I want you to take me out there and do to me what you did to all those people's savings.

NICK: In the garden?

ESTHER: Maybe you're right. Perhaps it not such a good idea.

NICK: It's a great idea.

ESTHER: But wouldn't it be awful if Mrs Hilloughby – Willoughby suddenly came calling. Think of the embarrassment.

NICK: Serves her right for turning up unannounced.

ESTHER: It would put paid to your position on the Parish Council.

NICK: To hell with the Parish Council.

ESTHER STARTS SLOWLY TO UNBUTTON THE FRONT OF HER DRESS.

ESTHER: It's quite hot in here. Do you find it hot in here?

NICK: Stifling.

ESTHER: (STOPS.) Maybe a cold shower would help.

NICK: You should have been in the Stasi.

HE MOVES TO HER. THEY KISS. HER PHONE RINGS. IT STOPS AFTER A WHILE.

ESTHER: Ignore it.

THEY KISS AGAIN. HIS RINGS.

NICK: Oh, for God's sake.

ESTHER: Let it go. Whatever it is can wait.

NICK: Isn't half putting me off my stroke.

IT STOPS.

ESTHER: There.

HERS RINGS AGAIN. HE BREAKS AWAY AND GRABS IT.

NICK: That woman has the most uncanny timing. (HE ANSWERS.) Hello Diana. What? No, it's a great time to call. Couldn't be better. Yes. Yes, we are. You called just in the nick of time. We were just getting ready for a spot of gardening. No. Neither did I. I've only very recently got interested in it. Your daughter has been extolling the health-giving properties of a spot of vigorous horticulture. Would you like to talk to her. Yes. She's just here.

ESTHER: Hello Mummy. Yes, thank you. Yes, it's gorgeous. Oh, one or two tiny cracks, but we'll soon paper over them. Nick? Oh, yes. He's becoming quite the horny-handed son of toil. When you called, he was just about to get his little dibber out and sow some seeds. Yes. Five more minutes and we'd have been filthy dirty.

NICK: You'll pay for little dibber.

ESTHER: Oh soon. We've got some baggage to sort out, but once we've done that, we want you to be our first house-guest.

NICK: Oh dear God.

ESTHER: Oh no, he insists. Anyway, Mummy, I'd better go. We're very keen to get down to business before it

gets too hot. A lot of planting to do. And there's a morning glory which needs my urgent attention.

NICK: Will you stop?

ESTHER: Yes. Yes, I will. Love to daddy. Yes. Love you. Bye.

NICK: Have you no shame?

ESTHER: Mummy sends her love.

NICK: I bet she does.

ESTHER: Where were we?

NICK: Look, I don't mean to be rude, but talking to your mother has had a rather deflationary effect. I've gone off the boil a bit. She's the only woman I know who can transmit disapproval from six counties away.

ESTHER: Oh. Well. Maybe later.

NICK: Sorry.

ESTHER: No. It's fine. It's probably for the best. Getting on for time, anyway. We're bound to get inquisitive visitations soon. We don't want to be frightening the vicar. You go and make yourself presentable, and I'll go and make some coffee. Well, don't just stand there like a guilty schoolboy. Go on. (SHE WHACKS HIM ON THE BUM.) Go.

NICK: Alright, alright. I'm going.

HE GOES. SHE LOOKS PENSIVELY AFTER HIM, AND THEN, HUMMING GENTLY TO HERSELF, GOES TO THE FRENCH WINDOWS, SMILES DELIGHTEDLY. THE DOORBELL RINGS. STILL HUMMING, SHE EXITS THROUGH THE OTHER DOOR. SHORT PAUSE.

ESTHER: (OFF.) Oh. Hello. (LAUGHS.)

MARY: (OFF.) Hello. Good morning. I thought I should come and say hello. Is now a good time?

ESTHER: (OFF. STILL LAUGHING.) Er..yes. sorry. Do come in.

MARY: Are you sure?

MARY, A VICAR, ENTERS, SHOWN IN BY ESTHER.

MARY: If it's not convenient, do say.

ESTHER: It's fine. You're very welcome.

MARY: (TAKING IN THE ROOM.) How divine!

ESTHER: Do make yourself at home. I'm just making coffee.

MARY: Bless you. You're a life-saver. I walked up from the village. I'd forgotten what a shlep it is. It's got to be a mile and a half, and all of it uphill. I've worked up a bit of a glow. I'm Mary, by the way.

ESTHER: Esther.

MARY: Oh, lovely Biblical name.

ESTHER: Yes. Won't be a tick.

ESTHER GOES. MARY DOES THE USUAL NOSY WANDERING, AND, HAVING PEERED CLOSELY AT THE WEDDING PHOTO, FINISHES UP ADMIRING THE VIEW. ESTHER ENTERS WITH COFFEE.

ESTHER: It's wonderful, isn't it?

MARY: I think it's the loveliest privately-owned view in the county. Although we're very proud of our view from the tower of St. Petroc's.

ESTHER: How would you like it?

MARY: Oh, black without, please.

ESTHER POURS COFFEES, AND GIVES ONE TO MARY. AN AWKWARD PAUSE.

ESTHER: My husband will be down in a minute.

PAUSE.

MARY: (TOUCHES DOG COLLAR.) These things are a bloody menace. They open doors all right, but they don't half kill a conversation. Don't worry, I'm not here to evangelize or anything.

ESTHER: Oh. I was going to say, we're not really..

MARY: No, no. We do that on day one at Theological College. The English get embarrassed if you use the G-word in social situations. No, I've just popped by to welcome you and your husband to our little community, and to say that if there's anything at all that I can do, just tip me the wink. Have you got a little bit of paper?

ESTHER: Yes, I think so.

SHE OPENS A DRAWER AND TAKES OUT A PIECE OF PAPER. SHE GIVES IT TO MARY, WHO TAKES OUT A PEN AND WRITES ON IT.

MARY: There's my mobile number. Any time of the day or night.

ESTHER: Thank you.

MARY: And obviously, I wanted to come and have a good nosy, see what you've done to the place.

ESTHER: Of course. Do you approve?

MARY: Not half. You've done a bang-up job.

ESTHER: My husband did most of it.

MARY: Goodness. Clever chap.

ESTHER: I know. To be honest, I didn't think he had it in him. He used to be..I mean, he won the lottery, you see.

MARY: Really?

ESTHER: No. Sorry. I can't lie to a vicar. No, he was a banker.

MARY: Oh dear.

ESTHER: He's worried he'll get off on the wrong foot with people if they know.

MARY: He might be right. But don't worry. Your secret's safe.

ESTHER: He's determined to put it all behind him now.

MARY: Oh good. The Lord loves a repentant sinner. Which I've always thought was a bit rough on people who've spent their lives doing good. No, this is lovely. We've all been dying to know.

ESTHER: We all?

MARY: In the village. You've got us all going, you know.

ESTHER: Have we?

MARY: Oh yes. Not you personally. The idea of you. Five or six generations of the same family they've had in this house. You're the first lot in here since Sir Arthur died. Last of the line and all that.

ESTHER: So I gather.

MARY: You've been the hot topic in the Brick and Tile. Thank God. You've taken their minds off moaning about having a lady vicar.

ESTHER: Really?

MARY: Oh, it's only the old farts who never set foot in the church who bang on. Some of them would probably have me burned as a witch if they thought they could get away with it.

ESTHER: Crikey, I'd better watch my step, then.

MARY: Oh no, I'm sure you'll pass muster. I shall report back favourably. I am the first popper-in, am I?

ESTHER: Yes, you are.

MARY: Oh good. If there's one advantage of this, (TOUCHES DOG COLLAR) because, let's face it, it's not a sexy look, is it, it's that you can get away with inviting yourself into people's houses. Perk of the job. I often think it would be the perfect disguise. I mean, who'd suspect a lady vicar? I could be casing the joint, even as we speak. It's a thought, isn't it? God knows, I could do with augmenting my stipend. No, I could only dream of owning a view like that.

ESTHER: We're very lucky.

MARY: You are. I'm very jealous. I know it's supposed to be one of the seven deadly sins, but I do all the others, so what the hell.

ESTHER: I mostly concentrate on lust and sloth.

MARY: Well, they are the best ones. Oh, I can see that you and I are going to get on like a house on fire. Esther, may I be frank? I came here to say something, and I hope you won't be offended by it.

ESTHER: Oh dear. That sounds ominous.

MARY: No, no. It's just this. In recent years, we've had too many people coming and buying up property which they visit once a fortnight and they never have anything to do with village life. So I hope you and your husband are going to be an asset to our little community.

ESTHER: Nick and I were talking about that, just now. We do have a little bolt-hole in London, but this is home. We fully intend to get our hands dirty.

MARY: Music to my ears. You know, Sir Arthur was very hot on all that. Threw a big party up here for the village children, every Christmas. An odd old fish, in many ways, a bit inbred, I think, but he knew what was what. Funnily enough, the last time I was in here was the day of his funeral. He was lying in state just there. Candle in each corner, the whole shebang. It's normally the other lot who go in for all that, but apparently it was a family tradition. Having a last look at that view before they went. Something like that.

ESTHER: Lovely.

MARY: Oh, God, I am so sorry. Honestly. What must you think of me?

ESTHER: It's fine.

MARY: No, I'm sorry. What an idiot. Anyway, the point is, when you've settled in, you should come down to the Brick and Tile one evening. Put your faces about.

ESTHER: Oh, we will.

MARY: It would send out all the right signals.

ESTHER: Yes.

MARY: And any chance, at all, that we might see you in church?

ESTHER: Well, as I say, we're not really believers..

MARY: Oh, it's not mandatory. Frankly, we Anglicans are grateful for anyone we can get. Either way, you must come and have a shufti at the church. Very pretty, she is, and some her is over five hundred years old. Poor old girl's starting to show her age though. Needs a bit of love and attention. We've got an appeal going, but all my parishioners have already given and the incomers don't care..

ESTHER: Have you got a big thermometer?

MARY: Yes we have! But I'm afraid it's been stuck on 65° centigrade for a while.

ESTHER: I'm sure we can help.

WE HEAR NICK COMING DOWNSTAIRS. ESTHER GOES TO THE DOOR.

ESTHER: Are you decent? We've got company.

NICK: (OFF) Haven't got a stitch on.

NICK ENTERS. ESTHER HAS HER BACK TO HIM, AND IS LOOKING AT MARY. MARY ND NICK CLEARLY KNOW EACH OTHER.

ESTHER: This is Mary. Mary, this is Nick.

MARY WALKS UP TO HIM, SO HE HAS TO SHAKE HER HAND.

MARY: Delighted.

ESTHER: Coffee?

NICK: What? Yes.

ESTHER: Top-up, Mary?

MARY: I'll say.

NICK: I don't mean to be rude, but we do actually have plans for the rest of the morning.

ESTHER: No we don't. And I think you do mean to be rude.

MARY: IT's fine. I must be getting along anyway. The good news about our Lord Jesus won't spread itself. (AWKWARD PAUSE.) I'm joking. I haven't even got a tambourine. Anyway, Nick, I just wanted to say welcome. I'm sure you'll enjoy the peace and tranquillity down here.

NICK: Yes, I'm looking forward to that.

MARY: Yes, yes. Point taken. You'll think about what we were discussing, Esther?

ESTHER: Definitely. (TO NICK.) Mary was just saying that the Church needs some repair work. I said we might be able to help.

NICK: Did you?

MARY: It would be a shame, don't you think, not to act while there's still time? When you think of all the time, energy and sacrifice, spent year after year, building up the structure, making it watertight and safe. It would be awful to see the whole edifice come crashing down around our ears, just because we hadn't taken enough care. Do you know what I mean?

SHE KNOCKS OVER HER COFFEE.

MARY: Oh I am sorry. What a klutz.

ESTHER: Don't worry. No harm done.

NICK: You'd better get a cloth.

ESTHER: Yes, your Lordship.

SHE GOES.

MARY: Surprise.

NICK: Get out.

MARY: Don't be like that.

NICK: Is this the best you could come up with?

MARY: I thought it was rather good. It's been working pretty well up till now. But you're liable to blow the gaffe if you keep shouting. She's a little cracker. Sitting pretty, aren't you?

NICK: What do you want?

MARY: I don't want anything. I'm representing a higher power.

NICK: There's no need for this ridiculous pantomime.

MARY: Well, he does like to move in a mysterious way. I'm just the advance guard. Think of me as a female John the Baptist. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and, Nick, my dearest, the crooked shall be made straight. Prepare ye, prepare ye.

NICK: For what?

MARY: A second coming.

ESTHER BUSTLES BACK IN WITH A CLOTH AND STARTS MOPPING.

MARY: He knows.

NICK: What?

MARY: He knows everything. He sees everything. Omnipotent.

ESTHER: Do you really believe that?

MARY: Oh crikey, yes. I know it's rather an unfashionable notion, but you never know. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. There are too many people who live their lives as if there will never be a Day of Reckoning.

ESTHER: Blimey. You two have moved on a bit from the state of the church roof.

MARY: I know. And I promised I wouldn't, didn't I? Naughty girl.

NICK: What makes you think that just because you're wearing fancy dress you have the right to force your way into people's homes and hector them?

ESTHER: Nick!

MARY: It's alright. I can take a hint. I'll shove off now. I have enjoyed my little pilgrimage up here. Sorry about the mess I've left.

ESTHER: Think nothing of it.

MARY: That's another unfashionable idea, of course. In the West.

NICK: What?

MARY: Pilgrimage. Used to be all the rage in the olden days. Going on a journey, undergoing all manner of hardship in order to seek forgiveness for one's transgressions.

NICK: Rubbish.

MARY: You never know. Maybe a journey of atonement might delay the inevitable. It can't hurt. No point sitting around waiting for doomsday. (PAUSE.) Anyway. Thank you for a very jolly morning. And I hope we can count on your help with the big thermometer.

ESTHER: Yes.

NICK: Don't hold your breath.

MARY: (GOING TOWARDS THE DOOR. TO ESTHER.) Have you ever read the Book of Esther?

ESTHER: No.

MARY: You should. She was an excellent woman. Didn't take any crap from men. Ciao.

ESTHER: I'll see you out.

THEY GO. NICK LOOKS PENSIVE.

MARY: (OFF) Well, cheerio. See you soon.

ESTHER: Yes. Bye.

NICK MAKES A SUDDEN DECISION AND GOES TO THE DOOR, BUT ESTHER RETURNS AND IMPEDES HIS PROGRESS.

ESTHER: What a lovely woman. Did you have to be quite such a pig?

NICK: Don't you ever let her in here again.

ESTHER: Don't be ridiculous.

NICK: Bloody pests, the lot of them. Like pigeons. You encourage them, they just keep coming back for more.

ESTHER: You've probably put her off for life.

NICK: Good.

ESTHER: I like her. I think we'll be friends.

NICK: Believe me, that woman is no friend to either of us.

ESTHER: I don't know why you're being like this, Nick. I think it's really nice that she bothered to walk all the way here..

NICK: Nice?

ESTHER: Yes.

NICK: She didn't come here to be nice.

ESTHER: Not everyone in the world is as venal and self-serving as you, Nick.

NICK: Be very careful.

ESTHER: What's got into you all of a sudden?

NICK: Would you move, please?

ESTHER: What?

NICK: Would you get out of the way?

ESTHER: Not until you tell me why you're behaving like this. I know you profess to hate Christians, but this is a bit of an over-reaction, even for you.

NICK: It's not about her. She's just reminded me of something I need to do.

ESTHER: What? Going to confession, are you?

NICK: Oh, for God's sake! That's enough.

HE GRABS HER AND SHOVES HER OUT OF THE WAY.

NICK: Thank you.

ESTHER: Where are you going?

NICK: I've just told you. Something's come up.

ESTHER: What?

NICK: Business. Nothing to do with you.

ESTHER: Yes it is. You said you were never going to work again.

NICK: No, I didn't.

ESTHER: You did.

NICK: I said I didn't need to work again.

ESTHER: Tell me where you're going.

NICK: Will you for God's sake stop bleating at me? I have just said. Something has cropped up, and I need not to be stuck down here. So stop asking stupid questions. The sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back.

ESTHER: Oh, I can't wait.

NICK: Esther!

ESTHER: You're not leaving me on our first day here.

NICK: This is getting annoying.

ESTHER: What happened to 'we're so lucky'? What happened to 'we can do anything we want'?

NICK: And who'll be paying for it all? Not you.

PAUSE.

ESTHER: That was unnecessary.

NICK: I haven't got time to waste.

ESTHER: Tell me what's so important.

NICK: For God's sake. That's enough.

ESTHER: Is it more important than our marriage?

PAUSE.

NICK: How old are you?

HE EXITS THROUGH THE HALL DOOR. SHE COLLAPSES, WEEPING, INTO A CHAIR. HE COMES BACK HOLDING A SET OF CAR KEYS.

NICK: I don't know when I'll be back. Don't wait up.

SHE DOESN'T MOVE. HE GOES. THE FRONT DOOR OPENS AND SLAMS AND WE HEAR A CAR START UP AND GO SCREECHING OFF INTO THE DISTANCE. ESTHER REMAINS WHERE SHE IS, WEEPING GENTLY AS THE LIGHTS FADE.