

CHRIS. Ah. Now.

MARIE. (*Her world collapsing.*) Oh Chris-s.

CHRIS. Marie, the thing is -

MARIE. You said you'd bring in leftover flowers from the shop!

CHRIS. Yes. Well, much against the run of form, this week we actually sold some.

MARIE. Oh/ God -

CHRIS. We're not in a position to turn down any sales at the moment.

MARIE. The thing is you *promise* these things, Chris, and you don't deliver.

(MARIE swoops out.)

ANNIE. (*Nodding to CHRIS.*) You could put that on the side of your van. "Harper's Florists - we promise but we don't deliver."

JESSIE. May I just ask, is Brenda Hulse the one who gave us a talk on "the history of the tea towel"? 'Cause if so, I may have to commit hari kiri on my knitting needles.

BRENDA HULSE. (*Offstage.*) ...such a rush, *such* a r - , are we in here?

(MARIE returns, suddenly all sweetness and light, with BRENDA HULSE, a dull speaker.)

MARIE. Ladies, the slight delay was Brenda double-booked! She's hotfooted it over here from another engagement.

BRENDA HULSE. Yes. That's right. I was actually just down the dale at *another* Women's Institute. High Ghyll.

(*There's a little frisson goes round the room.*)

CHRIS. }  
 ANNIE. } *(Together, sotto voce.)* Boo.  
 CORA. }

MARIE. *(Frostily.)* Right, well anyway.

BRENDA HULSE. Amazing standard. Some of the autumn poems those ladies came up with were astonishing.

MARIE. As I say/ we –

BRENDA HULSE. Decorated the whole hall with bulrush lanterns.

MARIE. *(Loudly.)* We did that last year. Wherever we lead, High Ghyll tends to follow.

*(That one killed flat. MARIE turns.)*

Ladies. For our talk this harvest we are especially privileged to welcome back Brenda, who last year gave us such a fascinating talk on the history of the tea towel.

*(JESSIE starts to rise and get her coat.)*

JESSIE. Well I'd love to stay, but –

*(CELIA and RUTH on either side of her pull her back down.)*

MARIE. Brenda Hulse.

*(Some applause. BRENDA takes the projector controls.)*

ANNIE. *(To CHRIS.)* Now just shut up, OK. Whatever this is, you just shut up. I only laugh 'cause you laugh.

CHRIS. I'm not going to laugh.

ANNIE. No, you say that every time and then you laugh and it's ME that gets into trouble. You have to *promise* me –

CHRIS. *(Dead serious.)* I am not going to laugh.

*(RUTH turns off the lights.)*

*(BRENDA HULSE turns the projector on. A light shines from it on to the audience, as if we are sitting where the screen would be.)*

BRENDA HULSE. *(Attempting some theatre.)* Ladies. This harvest come with me, as I invite you into the fascinating world...of broccoli.

*(The light from the projector goes off and on again to indicate the picture changing.)*

*(CHRIS instantly starts to twitch in her effort to suppress laughter.)*

CHRIS. *(Nodding, mock "serious".)* Broccoli. Very good.

ANNIE. *(Not moving her lips.)* You promisssssed...

BRENDA HULSE. Broccoli has perhaps one of the most surprising lineages of any vegetable, and yet many persist in ranking it along merely with the carrot.

*(The light from the projector changes to orange.)*

Or sprout.

*(The light changes to green.)*

It is perhaps also the only vegetable rumoured to share a common ancestry with *this* man.

*(The light from the projector changes back to white.)*

James Bond.

*(CHRIS controls a spasm of laughter brilliantly. ANNIE is shaking.)*

*(Theatrically.)* Yes, "Cubby" Broccoli who produced ALL the James Bond f –

*(The projector cuts out with a bang, making some jump. All is darkness.)*

**MARIE.** *Oh for crying out loud – RUTH!*

*(RUTH leaps up and turns the lights on.)*

Brenda, I'm SO sorry.

**BRENDA HULSE.** Has it broken?

**MARIE.** *Ruth?*

**RUTH.** *(Attending to it.)* I don't know. It might be a fuse. My Eddie always says "fuse first"!

**BRENDA HULSE.** Well I can't do it without the slides.

**CHRIS.** *(Feigning despair.)* Oh God DAMMIT.

**ANNIE.** *(Crying, hand over face.)* Stop it-t...

**MARIE.** Brenda, I do apologize. Perhaps instead seeing as we have you here, you wouldn't mind judging OUR harvest competition?

**BRENDA HULSE.** Of course.

**MARIE.** In which case, can you all bring your entries up?

*(There is an instant cross-fire of eyelines.)*

**CORA.** *(Sotto voce.)* Did you...?

*(From the faces pulled, it appears no one else did.)*

**MARIE.** This, Brenda, was a *craft* competition which I *always* used to set at my previous WI In Cheshire.

*(MARIE looks round the group.)*

**CORA.** Sorry.

**ANNIE.** Sorry.

**CHRIS.** Sorry.

**CELIA.** Sorry.

**JESSIE.** Sorry.

*(RUTH, sitting, with the covered box, puts her arm up. MARIE sees this disaster and battles to carry on.)*

**MARIE.** The theme was "Most creative still life done with a fir cone on a theme of Autumn".

**RUTH.** "Still life"? Was it?

**MARIE.** *(Grittedly.)* Yes.

**RUTH.** Right. I've obviously slightly misunderstood that. I've done Westlife. *(She pulls the top off the box to reveal five large fir cones on "stools" in white "jackets" with "microphones".)*

**CHRIS.** That is very good, Ruth.

*(One of the fir cones drops off.)*

Is he the one who left?

**RUTH.** Marie, I'm so sorry. It's just my Eddie's been away/ on –

**MARIE.** Brenda, I DO apologize.

**BRENDA HULSE.** Not a lot of point/ carrying on –

**MARIE.** Indeed. *(Pointedly at the GIRLS.)* Not a lot of point.

**BRENDA HULSE.** No.

**MARIE.** Right, well the least I can offer, Brenda, is to lead you out of Knapeley by car so you don't get lost NEXT time.



(**MARIE** claps. The **GIRLS** all follow. **BRENDA** packs up. **MARIE** turns her death-ray glare on the **GIRLS**.)

R-right, ladies. Our final agenda point is next year's calendar, which *this* year you all know is "views of local churches". Next year I thought we could go for the twelve most beautiful views –

**CHRIS.** (*Privately to ANNIE.*) Of George Clooney.

**MARIE.** (*Approaching the end of her tether.*) – of Wharfedale Bridges, with –

**CHRIS.** Eleven fully-clothed with a little "lift-the-flap" for December.

(**CHRIS** capitalizes on this to **ANNIE**. **MARIE** advances on **CHRIS**.)

**MARIE.** Do you have a suggestion for a calendar, Chris?

**CHRIS.** (*Quietly.*) No.

**MARIE.** So "Bridges Of Wharfedale" it is then. (*Super-sweetly.*) Brenda?

(**MARIE** shepherds **BRENDA** out.)

(*There is a hangdog pause.*)

**CORA.** (*Singing.*)  
AND DID THOSE FEET  
LEAVE IN A HUFF?

**CELIA.** I think they did.

**CHRIS.** (*Singing.*)  
AS THEY HAVE LEFT SO  
OFT BEFORE.

**RUTH.** (*Starting tidying.*) Oh I feel terrible.

**JESSIE.** (*Helping her.*) Don't worry, Ruth. It's nothing a little harvest punch won't cure.

**CORA.** Yeah well what time's it turning up?

**CHRIS.** Come on, let's get this party started!

**CORA.** I need about four gallons after the day I've had.

**ANNIE.** Let's get it *STARTED*!

**CELIA.** Don't tell me you've had another bust up with Ruby?

**CORA.** I think I've had the *LAST* bust up with my darling daughter for quite a long time, Ceel. (*Beat.*) She has disappeared into Europe with some of her mates.

**ANNIE.** What?

**RUTH.** Ruby's *run away*?

**JOHN.** (*Offstage.*) Ladies of the WI!

**CORA.** THE GODS BE PRAISED. IT'S MISTER PUNCH!

(**JOHN CLARKE** (*Annie's husband*) appears, carrying quite a large glass flagon of home brew.)

(*After twenty-eight years of marriage, JOHN's appearance still makes Annie smile.*)

**CHRIS.** LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MISTER JOHN CLARKE IS IN THE HOUSE.

(**CORA** does a piano flourish.)

**JOHN.** Who's upset Marie?

**CHRIS.** Well I think you should ask your wife that. She has behaved *DESPICABLY*. She deliberately sabotaged the projector so we never got to see the end of "From Russia With Broccoli".

**CELIA.** I have to say your man's looking VERY chiselled these days. *(To JOHN.)* Not got you on a health kick, has she?

*(ANNIE and CHRIS make eye contact.)*

**RUTH.** My Eddie's joined a gym, did I tell you? For bodytone? Goes three times a week.

*(JOHN presents his lethal brew.)*

**JOHN.** Ladies! This year's vintage. "John Clarke's Knapeley Knee-trembler."

**JESSIE.** *(With a slight frown.)* Actually John, Celia's right you know? You *have* lost weight. Your *cheeks* are really/looking –

**CHRIS.** *(Leaping in.)* God I wish y'd have a word with my Rod. He's getting a right old paunch.

**ANNIE.** *(Putting her arms round JOHN.)* Works too hard, that's his problem.

**CHRIS.** Well Rod does that. In fact it's gonna get worse. You've heard they're opening a new Tesco up on Craven Park?

**CELIA.** I know! Isn't it great! *(In ecstasy.)* This town is finally getting a deli!

**CHRIS.** It's going to be selling flowers, you traitor. That's the LAST thing our shop needs.

**CORA.** WHY ARE WE NOT DRINKING?

**JOHN.** INDEED! Get your glasses, get your glasses...

*(JOHN, CELIA, CORA, JESSIE and RUTH go to the piano with some shot glasses. ANNIE scoops CHRIS to a moment of privacy.)*

**ANNIE.** Thanks for that.

**CHRIS.** No, really. He does look good, I wasn't just saying.

**ANNIE.** Yes. Well.

*(CHRIS touches ANNIE's hair, like she probably did when they were in their twenties.)*

**CHRIS.** When's he due in the doctor's?

**ANNIE.** We go on Friday.

*(The notion of "fingers being crossed" is in the air between these two old mates.)*

**JOHN.** *(Calling.)* Chris, where's me final ingredient?

**CHRIS.** *(Producing a small paper bag with a fanfare.)* Da da da DA-A!

**JOHN.** Oh hey he's a good lad, your fella.

**CHRIS.** *(Holding them up.)* Now then. Rod and I give you these sunflower seeds from our flower shop on ONE condition. That you, John Clarke, come back to this hall and give us a TALK!

*(Everyone erupts in agreement. JOHN looks round incredulous.)*

**JOHN.** Me?

**CHRIS.** Spare us from another "history of broccoli" –

**JOHN.** Do a talk? What've I ever done except work in the dales?

**CHRIS.** *(Going to "throw" the seeds.)* Suit yourself.

**JOHN.** All right, ALL RIGHT! *(Rescuing the seeds from CHRIS.)* This is me *pièce de résistance*! *(Getting some seeds out.)* You take some of these... *(Sprinkling them.)* ...little parcels of sunlight. Then get one of these – *(He takes a gas candle-lighter pen from his pocket and clicks it.)*

**CELIA.** Good God.



**JOHN.** Set fire to the top, toast the seeds – turns your mouth into liquid Yorkshire!

**RUTH.** Oh I've had one of these! My Eddie did some last Christmas. Set fire to the decking.

**JESSIE.** In light of which, might I suggest we attempt this outside.

**CHRIS.** Everyone out!

**CORA.** (*Grabbing the drink with zeal.*) I'm gone, honey, I am already gone.

(**CHRIS, CORA, CELIA, JESSIE and RUTH** bustle out.)

(**JOHN** swings **ANNIE** back.)

**JOHN.** Come here, you. (*He kisses her.*)

**ANNIE** How was your day?

**JOHN.** Thrill me. Tell me something I didn't know about broccoli.

**ANNIE.** Put it this way. I now know as much about broccoli as Chris knows about t'ai chi.

(**JOHN** laughs.)

(*Over this.*) The only difference is, I don't try to teach a class on it.

**JOHN.** Hey. Don't knock it. (*He strokes her hair.*) Thirty years ago if that woman hadn't fallen off a table trying to get a whole Chinese restaurant singing *Jumping Jack Flash*, you and I would never have met. (*He holds her face as if recalling this moment – possibly more heavily than he might normally do.*) I only plucked up courage to ask you to the cinema 'cause I was picking noodles out of your hair.

**ANNIE.** (*After a beat, stroking his hair back.*) You were up Grizedale?

**JOHN.** I was. Overseeing junior rangers putting up forest fences. God, they all look about twelve.

**ANNIE.** I know.

**JOHN.** (*After a beat.*) This afternoon I nipped in to see ol' Doc Morton.

**ANNIE.** (*Instantly turning to ice.*) Today?

**JOHN.** Now don't – (*"Get het up".*)

**ANNIE.** I thought you wanted me with you.

**JOHN.** Mrs Clarke. There isn't a day goes by when I don't. (*Beat.*) I just kind of needed to get the results on me own.

**ANNIE.** So what did it...? The blood, the cells, what was it in the end? They think it's OK. (*Telling him the answer she wants to hear.*) Fixable. With blood. It's just – transfusion, isn't it? Did he say...? What er – what it'll take?

(**CHRIS** appears in the doorway.)

**CHRIS.** **JOHN!** You'd better get out here! Cora's on fire.

**JOHN.** (*Smiling.*) Oh God.

(**JOHN** heads out, passing **CHRIS** who clings to the door frame in ecstasy.)

**CHRIS.** (*As JOHN passes.*) That – is one hell of a brew. (*Pointing.*) They've only had one glass – Celia's dancing on her Porsche, Jessie's picking a fight with a "keep left" sign... (*She knows in a micro-second something's wrong.*) What's the matter?

**ANNIE.** (*Beat, then on autopilot.*) I'm fine.

**CHRIS.** I have not put up with you for four hundred years to be batted off with an "I'm fine".

(**ANNIE** takes her time.)

**ANNIE.** John's got his results.

*(CHRIS doesn't have to ask further. After twenty-nine years "putting up", she doesn't need telling. She just goes to her oldest friend and holds her.)*

*(CHRIS guides ANNIE out.)*

*(Music starts to play: "We Plough The Fields And Scatter".)*

## Scene Two

*(The church hall. Winter.)*

*(The music mutates into ["GOD REST YE MERRY, GENTLEMEN"].)*

*(MARIE enters, dressed like something out of Dickens, carrying a candle lamp on a stick, shoulders covered in snow.)*

**MARIE.** Come on, Cora please.

*(No one's in the hall.)*

Well where is everyone? Cora!

*(CORA skulks in with a 1970s torch half-heartedly taped to an old golf club.)*

**CORA.** Yo ho sodding ho.

**MARIE.** Did you hear High Ghyll? D'you see what I mean now? THAT is why they've been asked to perform the opening "Jerusalem" at National Conference.

*(JESSIE enters with her "lantern", also covered in snow.)*

Right. I need to check this flat-bed truck Chris has organized. *(Heading out of the door.)* You two start running through the song.

*(MARIE exits.)*

**JESSIE.** May I just ask whose idea was this fake snow?