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JANET AND JOHN

By Michael Percy

(Janet and John are both in their late forties. In the course of this piece we learn about their lives and their relationship through monologues to the audience. Occasionally they interact.

There are no entrances or exits and ideally, the two characters should be discovered on stage at the beginning. Although both characters are present at all times, neither should be shown listening to the other during the monologues.

The setting should suggest a living room with two arm chairs.

At the start both are sitting. Janet is reading a book. John is reading a train magazine.)

JANET **(Janet comes forward towards the audience. After a few thoughtful moments she confides to the audience.)** John's taking me out to dinner tonight. And it was his idea, all on his own. I don't want to sound ungrateful but when he takes me out it's usually my idea. I let him think it's all his own work but it never is - never has been, before. So you'll understand that I'm a bit on edge. Not sure what to expect. Or why.

Another thing... it's Friday night. A good night to go out you might say and I'd agree. But Friday night? Friday night is club night- John's Club Night. It's a railway society so you'll understand why I'm so taken aback. He's not missed a Friday night by choice for twenty years. John is very passionate about his Friday nights - they all are - and yet here he is suggesting, insisting really, that he takes me out on a Friday night. So I'm curious, to say the least - confused even. Wouldn't you be?

(John comes forward as Janet withdraws. John has an A4 envelope with him. He peers inside the envelope and then looks pleased with himself as he speaks to the audience.)

JOHN I told her last weekend - been as sweet as pie since. Especially when she realised it was my club night. That's what really got her: Friday night I could see her thinking - Friday night. I'm sure she almost asked me if I'd got the date wrong but she seemed to bite her tongue just in time. Very satisfying it was, seeing Janet flummoxed, unsure of her ground.

But this is my message - I'm sending a signal. I don't need to amplify it or explain - the message should be clear: things are changing. Friday night is different from now on. Friday night is accessible, available, not a fixture around which the weekly world rotates. 'Dad's Club Night' - not any more. Friday night is... Friday night. A night full of potential, a night that could lead anywhere - not just to Saturday morning but to Istanbul, Rome, Paris.

Paris.

I've booked that little French place in the High Street. Janet is always saying how pretty it looks. Now she's going to be inside, with me, on a Friday night. Passers-by will look in and we will be part of the atmosphere they envy. I've booked a table by the front window. Insisted on that.

Of course, the fact that it is a Friday night on this occasion is just a symbol of how things will be from now on. A symbol. It's not that I'm giving up every Friday. As I say, Friday night is now a night full of potential so I can go to my club - if I want to.

(Janet takes over. John recedes.)

JANET Something's up, I know it. He caught me on the hop when he told me. Just came out with it.

(John swoops past, still holding the envelope, speaking to Janet.)

JOHN Keep next Friday free, we're going out to dinner.

JANET I was taken-aback, flattered as well, but there was a distinct element of shock. It was like finally being asked out by a boy you'd been chasing. They can be a bit dense can't they. You pile on all your girlie charm but it still takes ages for the penny to drop - in his case it's taken twenty-seven years.

My first thought was - that's nice, and it's a Friday night. He must love me. Then I thought - what's he up to? What's he want? What's he planning? Bastard. I wasn't going to ask, no chance. But I spent all this week checking out a few possibilities.

It's not my birthday and it's not his. Felicity is not pregnant - although I wish she'd get on with it before I'm too old to enjoy having grandchildren. Our Peter's not lost his job again or announced he's gay. We haven't finished the mortgage and the cat is still alive.

It's not our anniversary, although he may think it is. I'll kill him if he's got the date wrong again. Twenty-seven years it will be - in January.

(She casts her mind back, remembering.) Twenty-seven years. It's flashed by. I can remember our wedding day and then my life has been like one of those speeded up sequences in a film. Whoosh and here I am - piles, stretch marks and three kids. Yes, that's right, three kids - I didn't mention little Harry did I.

Little Harry.

We thought we'd finished that part of our lives. We had the two kids we'd planned for then, suddenly, I'm pregnant again.

(We flash back. John is without the envelope. They interact.)

JOHN Are you sure, I can't believe it.

JANET You may not want to but it's a fact.

JOHN How could we be so stupid. We're supposed to have all this birth control business under...control.

JANET You mean me don't you. You say we but you mean me. It's my fault according to you.

JOHN What I mean is we've got two kids. We can cope with that. We can manage financially - birthdays, christmas, holidays, their education - all that. We planned for two. This is a... complication. Unexpected.

JANET Are you asking me to get rid of it?

JOHN I'm not saying that. I'm not saying it.

JANET What are you saying then?

JOHN I'm saying... think about... the impact.

JANET I've done nothing but think about the impact. It's here, in me. That's where the impact is.

JOHN Let's not decide now - not decide anything just now.

JANET What are you getting at - decide between what and what?

JOHN We've only just got the confirmation so it's not the best time to decide

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anything.

JANET With Felicity and Peter there were no decisions - I was pregnant: I had the baby.

JOHN We just need to get used to this new situation- think it through. Any decision - keep it, not keep it - it's wrong to make it now."

JANET But what....what are you saying?"

(Janet recedes leaving John holding our attention.)

JOHN Janet kept on asking me that question. Pressing me. I didn't know what I was saying - what I was meaning. Abortion is a big thing. It's a horrible word. I thought about it but it was not something I could say, not something I could ask for. I was a bastard coward. If Janet had done it I wouldn't have stopped her but she made it so I had to ask. Ask her to arrange to have our child murdered. And I didn't have the guts. Half of me wanted it; wanted Harry murdered because he didn't fit the plans we'd made. But the other half... What a bastard I was.

(Our attention comes to Janet.)

JANET I knew what was at the back of his mind. It was the same for me - wanting it, not wanting it. I wanted him to ask, bring it out into the open, make an issue of it - take the responsibility. Take the blame- if we did anything.

I've seen feminists on TV talking about a woman's right to control her own body - abortion is a woman's decision they say. Easier said than done. I guessed how John's mind was working because mine was working in the same way. End it, keep it. Stick to our plan. Two children - cope. Three children - who knows.

But all that was in the land of logic. Harry was not in the land of logic - Harry was inside me. And I couldn't betray him by sitting at the kitchen table and discussing our options - item one: abortion.

In the end, we never discussed it - out loud. It was a cloud hanging over us: do it, don't do it. But we didn't discuss it - just thinking about it was enough betrayal.

(John takes over.)

JOHN It was me who found him. I came home late from work and went up to say goodnight. Harry would be asleep in his cot, I knew that, but I always said goodnight. Even when they're asleep they know you're there.

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He was so still. From ten feet away I could tell he was...

So still.

I don't know if I actually called out but someone did: No. No. Not Harry. Please.

(John sits and returns to his magazine.)

JANET We would have coped. Somehow. People do. I think we killed Harry. I don't mean we actually took his life but we did not embrace him unquestioningly, right from the start - when he was just a few cells struggling to get going. Harry sensed our hesitation. He felt he wasn't wanted. So he left.

We got through it but you don't forget. There is a little pellet of sadness in the corner of my heart - it's about what Harry could have been, and how we betrayed him.

(Janet sits and reads her book.)

(After a pause, in which they both read, comes forward. He has the A4 envelope again and as he moves he changes the mood.)

JOHN I know she's curious about tonight but she's not asked so I've said nothing. But she'll love it. She will, love it.

(Janet takes over.)

JANET He keeps grinning, it is driving me mad. I've tried to think of everything - birthdays, anniversaries... It's not Christmas, not even he could get that wrong. Easter is over with. It's got to be some kind of announcement. Promotion...no, unlikely. Birth, death, marriage, divorce. Divorce, there's an idea. He wouldn't, would he - take me out for a meal and tell me he's leaving? No, he'd phone or write - from as far away as possible.

But divorce; how do I feel about that?

Marriage: make a home, have children; feed them, clothe them, educate them: set them adrift in their own little worlds. Then what?

Divorce: fresh start, clean slate, new beginning, begin again, start afresh, begin anew, from the top, one more time. Sounds good. Sounds like a lot of hard work. Dating. Oh god, I can't bear the thought. All that

being nice to each other, getting to know each other and for what? Just so you can get married and spend the rest of the time comfortably ignoring each other. I've got that now.

There is another possibility and he could be planning to spring that on me tonight. God forbid, I think I'd rather get divorced.

(John, without the envelope, joins Janet but they do not interact.)

JOHN Janet was a bit cautious at first. But I took it easy with her at first – eased her into it, you know. Trying new things can be tricky in a relationship. But we did it several times when the kids were small and after a couple of goes she had to admit she loved it. The freedom of the waterways, really friendly people - it makes a fantastic holiday and it's getting more popular. Long term, we plan to buy a canal-side tea shop. We just need a tiny second mortgage on this place so we can buy a going concern and we're set for life.

No more bosses, fantastic. We can live by the canal in the summer months when we make our money and then come back here for the winters. Janet is as keen as me on the canal boat tea shop plan and now we've got the kids off our hands there's nothing to stop us. A new lease of life.

JANET I hope it's not that. I've always managed to steer him away from it without a big bust up. It would be just my luck to end up having a row on our first spontaneous night out in twenty-seven years.

JOHN It will give us a new lease on life. I need to do something - make a change of some kind. I've been servicing photocopiers for over twenty years. It gets you down. All the skill's gone out of it - I suppose that can be said for most jobs - but photocopier servicing has reached ridiculous heights of low skill. I used to be a technician, someone who knew how to repair a machine on site. Now I'm just a module exchange operative. I just swap the bits over. And they don't even repair the modules. They throw them away - can you believe that - they throw away perfectly good broken modules.

JANET The most worrying thing is that John's never managed to keep a secret from me in all the time I've known him. Honest I suppose you'd say. So why didn't I spot this coming? Why don't I know what's behind it? Maybe I've misjudged him. Maybe he's a perfectly accomplished liar and all this time he's managed to make me think that I can see right through him. The cunning bastard. He could have a second wife and a whole second family living in a town not ten miles from here. He could have been having a string of affairs. And I never guessed.

(Her mood changes.) I had an affair you know. Nineteen years ago. That is what you call keeping a secret - I bet he can't match that. I went to a night class - conversational French it was. Not that there was much call for French on the Staffs and wotsit canal but I lived in hope. Etienne was the teacher. He was French and his teaching schedule meant he had several afternoons free. Peter was at school and Felicity at playgroup so I had a few spare hours - a window of opportunity.