

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*) Then 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"

Marie The "VAN"?

Annie enters with a Victorian lantern

Annie Good GOD Almighty.

Marie NO! Rod! Hold on — (*Pointing accusingly at Chris*) Your wife clearly promised me a flat-bed "truck".

Marie races out, past Rod

Rod (*following*) What?

Rod exits

Annie That's never the outfit you bought for our Millennium party?

Chris And I'm still in it, babe. I am STILL IN IT!

John (*off; singing*) Deck the halls with boughs of —

John enters, dressed as Santa

The girls give him a warm welcome

YO ho ho — oh NOW then! (*Indicating Chris*) THAT is what I call a stocking filler.

Annie (*hitting him*) D'you mind?

John (*to Chris*) Have you been a good little girl this year?

Chris I have, Santa.

John Oh that's a shame.

Annie You'll scare the children.

John Eh I can do that already. (*He removes his hat to reveal a head bald through chemotherapy. Spookily*) Wooo ...

Annie drags the hat back on

Annie It's not scary at all. I actually think it's quite sexy.

Chris (*to Celia*) Hey, nice coat, Ceel. Very demure. D'you want to start a book on who gets most coins in her bucket?

Celia Oh Chris, Chris, Chris. Collecting money has nothing to do with your dress. It's about the rapport you build up with the public using the spirit of your character.

She removes her coat to reveal she has an even shorter Santa baby doll than Chris's

I mean the outfit HELPS, but —

Chris (*pointing*) NO. That is NOT FAIR.

John D'you know what? I love Christmas.

Rod bursts back in

Rod Someone stop me before I kill that woman. God help me, I only have gladioli but I will find a way —

Marie careers in

Marie (*wailing*) CHRIS ...!

Rod (*mimicking the intonation, as a "stop me" to John*) JOH-HN...!

Marie You promised me a "truck" and that is in NO sense oh — (*seeing Celia*) — oh for GOD'S SAKE.

John WHOA whoa whoa ...!

Frenzy all calms

We'll be fine. We'll walk and sing.

Annie We can't do that.

John 'Course we can. Long history, isn't there, Cor? (*Putting his arm around Cora*) New Orleans? Jazz and religion?

Cora Oh god, our band at college — that's all we did, me and Ruby's dad. Gospel/ blues —

John "Gospel"! There you go! We'll be "The Knapeley Rhythm and Blues Choir"!

Annie We can't.

Marie We don't have much CHOICE/ Annie —

Annie John can't walk that far.

This creates a hole in the room

* **John** Ohh God that's it. I knew it'd happen. I've turned into the third person.

Marie (*remembering*) Right. Sorry. (*Beat*) How's the — ?

John My treatment's going fine, love. And you know what cheers me up? That WI calendar with your lovely photos of Yorkshire churches. (*Putting his arm round Marie*) Being able to mark my chemotherapy appointments under images of misty graveyards.

Chris really smiles. Even Annie does

John Serious. I'd taken it in and one of the guys at the hospital, porter, Lawrence, great lad, *great* photographer — (to Annie) God you should see some of the ones he's done of his parents —

Annie (smiling) Finish your story.

John (nodding at Marie) About your calendar. Very complimentary. *

Marie Really?

John (putting his arm out) Lead on, my little elf. (For Annie's benefit, wryly) Remember "he" can't walk that fast.

Marie can't do anything but lead him out

The others follow

Rod (privately, to Annie) One day, tell your husband he prevented the world's first gladioli homicide.

John (off, calling back) Hey are we jingling or not?

Cora Two three ... (Singing) JINGLE BELLS! JINGLE BELLS ...

Celia

Cora

Jessie

Rod

(leaving; singing together) Jingle all the way!

Oh what fun it is to ride

In a one horse open sleigh ...

Celia, Cora, Jessie and Rod exit

Chris turns back to her oldest friend and knows what's going on in there

Chris How does he do it? How did such a beautiful man end up with an old git like you?

Annie manages a smile

Annie He'll freeze. Where's that blanket Ruth knitted for Africa and they sent back?

Chris ("I'll get it") How was today?

Annie Fine. Long as it's not septicaemia, we're always fine.

Chris Right. That's ...?

Annie Septicaemia means the chemo stops working. (Beat) Mind you it's me who's gonna get septic off that bloody settee in the relatives' room.

Chris Oh God thank GOD you've said that. I thought it was just me putting on weight. It's lethal isn't it? Bloody prongs ... They're gonna need another wing soon, for relatives of people who got injured in the bloody relatives' room.

There's a car horn outside

Chris Did I ever show you where it scratched me?

Annie (re. Chris's dress) No, love. But one gust of wind tonight —

Chris Get OFF!

They fall into the usual banter and scrapping. Music starts to "Jingle Bells!"

Annie and Chris tumble out

The random jingling of Christmas bells sharpens to the synchronized jingling of morris dancer bells

SCENE 3

The church hall. Spring

The seasons have passed. Christmas has given way to spring

Jessie enters with flowers and a half-hearted "basket". She starts to arrange them

Jessie No, I'm sorry, Ruth, I know it's a very sad state of affairs but I have come to dread this Spring Fête, I REALLY have.

Ruth bounds in, all excited in a costume — passionately homemade — of a brown animal. The ears hang down round her face

Ruth Oh come on, Jess, it's fantastic, having it on home soil! It's *always* up at High Ghyll! AND we've got a full turnout! Annie's baking one of her cakes, Cora's doing "Tea Tray Decorated on an International Theme"...

Jessie Precisely. The events are completely ridiculous. I mean for a kick off — and I know you don't like bad language but you are dressed as a bloody mouse!

Ruth I'm a rabbit. I was up all night making this. I just need some coathangers to keep me ears up. (She goes to look in the mirror) What's your event?

Jessie (bitterly) "Arrangement of Flowers Inspired by a Song". Shoot me now.

Ruth I think Marie in fairness just wanted to make sure we had an entry in each category because —

Jessie Because she's *toadying*, Ruth. Because the judge is Lady Cravenshire. She's got me decorating baskets for a landowner's wife.