

“BIRD FEUD”

by Troy Banyan

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“BIRD FEUD”

A ONE ACT PLAY (Approx 45 minutes in length)

Written by

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Cast

Fleur Chadwick	(early-mid 30's solicitor).....
Jim Steele	(early-mid 40's man).....
Tom Parkes	(early-mid 40's man).....
Laura Steele	(early-mid 40's woman).....
Pam Parkes	(early-mid 40's woman).....
Norman Deakin	(mid-late 50's – possibly rotund – man)..<

The whole play takes place in one set, the Steele's front lounge, on one evening. The set, however, accommodates two separate locations, with the lounge taking up the majority of it, but on one side, which is kept in the dark when not being used, is the bar area (denoted simply by a table & chairs) which is used for flashback scenes, and this change from one to the other is denoted by the lowering of lights on one side whilst the lights on the other side come up, and vica versa.

THE SCENE - LOUNGE OF THE STEELE'S HOUSE-EVENING

Stage right side is unlit. On the left side of the stage, JIM is sitting in his armchair watching TV. LAURA is flitting anxiously around behind him, tidying and straightening things that don't really need it. She then looks at her watch then walks to the window, gently peeks through the curtain then clearly sees the 'objects of her anxiety' approaching the house

JIM: *(Twisting neck)* What's wrong woman?

LAURA: *(Brusquely)* Nothing.

JIM: *(Smiling)* They're not flaring up again, are they?

LAURA: *(Sharply)* Jim ! I don't want you talking about..about things like that sort of...

JIM: What do you mean, I always discuss things like..*(seeing LAURA)* ... hang on, I know what you're up to..*(getting up)*..you've invited them around without me knowing..*(walking towards her)*.. hoping to catch me on the hop. Well, if he's coming in here..*(rolling up sleeves)*..I'm ready for him.

LAURA: Oh no Jim, not again, please let it go, please.. I'm begging you...

JIM: It's no good, you know it isn't, why don't you just let it drop?

LAURA: Because they're our friends, that's why?

(The doorbell rings. JIM goes to raise his right arm in readiness for the arrival but LAURA throws herself at him, wrapping her arms around his torso, trying to trap his arms by his sides)

JIM: Who's going to open the door then?

(LAURA, realising she needs to keep his arms down, tries manfully to do it with one arm while reaching up to the door catch, but can't. As she loses her grip the doorbell rings again. JIM moves his free left arm towards the catch and she turns anxiously to look at him, but it's happened too quickly. Whilst opening the door with his left arm he has his right arm outstretched ready with his middle finger proudly aloft. The door opens and standing there are TOM and PAM, having an identical ritual, the result being PAM is worn out like LAURA and TOM has his right arm outstretched with his middle finger aloft. Both men face each other with fingers defiantly out in front of them, as if it were the most normal thing in the world)

TOM: Mr Steele. I see the ploy didn't catch you out then?

JIM: No, as it didn't you last month Mr Parkes.

(The women look completely dejected, shrug and sigh then PAM trudges in and rubs LAURA'S arm to appreciate the effort, albeit unsuccessfully, made. LAURA closes the door behind them)

LAURA: Can I take your coats?

TOM: We're staying then, despite the trick not working?

PAM: *(Giving her coat to Laura)* Why not? *(winking knowingly to Laura)* As we're here, and if you two can at least be sociable ..despite the...you know.

LAURA: Tom? Can I take your jacket?

(TOM realises the predicament of getting the jacket off whilst still maintaining his finger up. So, he leans down to his left and wiggles his left arm until it comes out of the sleeve. He then sticks up the middle finger of his left hand while he does the same rigmarole with his right arm. He then hands the jacket to LAURA. None of the other three are at all surprised by the ritual. TOM then, while looking at JIM, sticks the right middle finger back up whilst lowering the middle left one back down)

JIM: *(Clapping awkwardly as middle finger on right hand still up)* Bravo, one of your best yet.

TOM: *(Sitting on sofa with finger still aloft)* Well, we're here, it hasn't worked...yet again, so what now?

JIM: Don't ask me..I had nothing to do with the invite, as usual.

TOM: As I never do with yours.

(LAURA and PAM look at each other expectantly, neither really knowing who should speak, so both move towards the adamant, bird-flipping men)

LAURA: We're going to be joined by someone else in a bit...

PAM: Yes, someone we know through work...

(JIM and TOM look at each other suspiciously and the two women are clearly uneasy about their announcement)

JIM: With the intention of achieving what exactly?

LAURA: Don't worry..this will be the last attempt...

PAM: Yes, definitely the last one.

(A very brief but pregnant pause is broken by the doorbell ringing three times in quick succession. JIM and TOM, without getting up but with fingers still aloft, turn to look with interest as LAURA and PAM walk pensively to the front door. LAURA opens it and standing there is FLEUR, in a black pin-striped power suit and black stockings/stilettos, with her hair up in a bun, designer glasses on and carrying a black attache case)

LAURA: Fleur?

(A car outside toots its horn then drives off. PAM has a quick look)

PAM: Taxi? But I thought you drove?

(FLEUR breezes past the women and sees the men, looking at her, with their middle fingers still in the air, and heads towards them)

FLEUR: Hello, hello, hello.. what's all this then?

JIM: Um.. um...

TOM: Uh.. it's a bit of a long story.. Fleur.

FLEUR: Mmm, it's not a very nice welcome for me.. is it *(looking at TOM)* ?

TOM: Tom, the name's Tom.

FLEUR: *(To JIM)* Ah, so you must be Jim.

JIM: That's right.. and these aren't aimed at you.. Fleur. Why are you here...by the way?

FLEUR: All will become clear. Now.. *(turning away)*..if you'd just like to put those fingers down.. we can begin.

(Both men think twice about it then look suspicious and keep them up. FLEUR then turns quickly back)

FLEUR: It was worth a try, wasn't it ladies? Now, shall we get on with it?

(FLEUR looks at the table, nods then puts her bag on it)

FLEUR: This'll do nicely. Now, would one of you men like to take my coat whilst the other gets me a drink?

(FLEUR unbuttons the jacket to show a low cut top beneath. Both men, with fingers still up, awkwardly rise out of their seats to make a beeline for her but get wedged in the gap between the sofa and the armchair)

TOM: *(To JIM)* As it's your house you'd better make her the drink.

(JIM grimaces, nods reluctantly and saunters over to the bar)

JIM: What's it to be Fleur?

FLEUR: A vodka and tonic will be fine, thanks Jim.

(FLEUR then watches in disbelief as TOM struggles, in the same way as he had done with his own, to get her jacket off whilst retaining the bird finger. JIM unscrews the vodka and tonic bottles, then pours them in the glass, whilst doing the same. She eventually just smiles and shakes her head)

TOM: *(with quiet embarrassment)* Perhaps I could explain about... about this...

FLEUR: Don't worry Tom..*(slipping arm out to help)*..you'll get your chance in a minute.

(TOM gets the jacket off, whilst retaining the bird, but looks perplexed at FLEUR. She pats him on the back as he walks away to the coat stand with the jacket. LAURA and PAM quickly go either side of her and talk in loud whispers)

LAURA: Fleur? Are you.. all right?

FLEUR: I'm fine, why?

PAM: It's just that you're...you're so...so completely different.

FLEUR: Ah, this is the out of hours, professional me. I've given a lot of thought to your predicament and have tailored my app.. appro.. approach accordingly.

LAURA: Are.. are you drunk?

FLEUR: Sshhh, I just had a few v & t's before I left...

PAM: Hence the taxi?

FLEUR: Hence the taxi.

LAURA: Do you feel that our 'situation' is best dealt with in this way?

FLEUR: I could find no precedent for a situation like this. This is what we 'lawyers' call 'journey into the unknown' territory, so I thought.. why not do things a bit different and see what happens.

TOM: *(Returning from coat stand purposefully, still with bird)* Right, that's the jacket hung up. Now what?

JIM: *(Returning from bar with drink purposefully, still with bird)* Yes, that's what I was going to ask. *(giving glass to FLEUR)*

LAURA: Where're **our** drinks?

JIM: What am I.. the waiter?

LAURA: *(Shaking head wearily)* Pam? Tom?

PAM: Just an orange for me Laura, I'm driving.

TOM: Beer for me please, I'm not.

(LAURA starts walking away)

JIM: Oh, I'll have a beer as well, while you're there.

(LAURA sighs as she almost trudges over to the bar)

FLEUR: Right, while Laura's over there let's get the seating plan sorted out..*(plonking bag down at head of table)*..I'll sit here..*(sitting in seat)*..then Tom and Pam you sit here... *(signalling two seats to her left)*..and Jim..you and Laura – when she gets back from the bar - *(calling out)*..I may as well have another one while you're there Laura love.. *(signalling two seats to her right)*..sit here.

(JIM, TOM and PAM sit in their designated seats, the two men still with their middle, right fingers up. FLEUR tries her luck with them again)

FLEUR: Now, why don't you two men just put those fingers down like good boys?

(As before the men realise it is a cheap ploy to catch either or both of them off guard)

FLEUR: You can't blame a girl for trying, can you now?

(FLEUR'S demeanour is alluring to the men but their fingers stay up. LAURA staggers back to the table from the bar with a tray, on which is two open lager bottles & three glasses of drink. She plonks the tray down and the drinks are rapaciously snatched up. She then sits down in her allotted seat)

FLEUR: Okay, so as we're all sitting comfortably...I'll begin.

(FLEUR starts rifling through her bag, rustling the many papers within it, and both JIM and TOM give their respective partners looks at disdain. She then pulls out a wad of papers and slaps them on the table and readies a pen in her hand. She then has a sip of her drink and smacks her lips)

FLEUR: Okay Jim and Tom, here's the deal. Laura and Pam have spoken with me about this... 'situation' – for want of a better word – and have asked me to help try and resolve it, if I can. Before we begin.. can I ask if you are both agreeable to me at least trying to do this?

(JIM and TOM, both shrug nonchalantly, neither prepared to give an inch and wield at all)

LAURA: That's as close as you're going to get to an agreement.

PAM: I agree, and as Laura and I are the ones suffering the most I think that should be enough.

(JIM and TOM, not looking at each other, give the slightest of affirmative nods)

FLEUR: Good, now the first stage of this mediation process – that's what it is by the way – was done during a lunchtime in work, where your wives have supplied me with this..*(holding up an A4 sheet)*..a written summary of the key issues. I will read it to you, just so that we are all working to the same hymn sheet. Okay?

(Again, JIM and TOM, not looking at each other, give the slightest of affirmative nods)

FLEUR: Right, now before we start in earnest I suggest that we have a 'finger truce'.. a bit like in World War One where the English and Germans stopped fighting on Christmas Day and played football, agree?

(Neither man speaks, flinches or shows any sign of relenting first)

FLEUR: Okay, as I'm central..*(putting arm out in front of her)*..both of you put your fingers under my arm then I will slowly lower my arm – dead straight – until your hands are flat on the table, how does that sound?

JIM: Who's England?

FLEUR: Neither of you, nor are either of you Germany, it's just a hypothetical example. Now, come on, it won't hurt.

(Both men, prompted by their wives, slowly put their right hands under FLEUR'S arm, with the bird finger touching its underside, then she slowly lowers it until their hands rest on the table. She then quickly raises her arm)

FLEUR: There, that was easy enough, wasn't it? Now..*(packing papers into a neat pile)*..in the immortal words of the funny little woman in the film

'Poltergeist'..*(packing papers into bag, using funny voice)*.."my work here is done", *(standing up)* goodnight.

(Both men jump up and immediately, and at the same time, re-raise their bird fingers)

JIM: Mine was first up.

TOM: What, like it was on that night?

JIM: You know mine was up first.

TOM: And you know mine was.

LAURA: That was a bit underhand, wasn't it Fleur?

PAM: Yes, and not very scientific.

FLEUR: Ah well, you can't blame a girl for trying..*(finishing off drink)*. In a way..*(walking to bar)*..I'm glad that just happened..*(walking behind bar)*..because it shows the depth of emotions involved here..*(pouring out another vodka)*. On the surface of it..*(stopping then carrying on pouring)*..this situation could appear to an outsider..*(topping off with just a splash of tonic)*.. with an untrained eye..*(walking back towards table)*..as being totally trivial..*(standing between the still birding men)*..and pathetically puerile, when really it's..*(forgetting)*... Where was I ? Oh, never mind. If could just resume your seats..I have accounted for this eventuality

(The men, with fingers still up, and FLEUR sit back down. She then picks up another sheet)

FLEUR: This is a treaty that you both have to sign. It basically turns this house, for the duration of this process only, into a demilitarised zone.

JIM: *(Jumping up)* Huh, demilitarised, No Man's Land, you make it seem like some sort of war.

(As the other four look up at JIM he realises that is a sort of war-like situation, so he slowly sits back down a bit embarrassed)

FLEUR: As I was saying, this treaty – when signed by both of you – will put your birding into abeyance, or limbo, until a mediation – or permanent ceasefire – is reached. Any breach of it by one of you will mean that the other has 'won' – if indeed that is possible in this case – by default. Agreed?

(Neither man wants to acknowledge or give any indication of their feelings. FLEUR snaps)

FLEUR: Yes?

(Both men look at their wives and simultaneously nod)

FLEUR: Right, when you have both signed, and I have countersigned, this will be a bird-free zone. Okay?

(Again both men nod, with great reluctance. FLEUR hands a pen to JIM)

FLEUR: As this is your territory Jim you sign first.

(JIM, who is birding with his left hand, takes the pen in his right hand while still birding, has a cursory glance at the wording then signs his name. FLEUR then takes the pen and offers it to TOM. He is birding with his right hand, so takes the pen in his left hand. He then looks around with embarrassment as he has to transfer his bird to his left hand so that he can sign with his right hand, which he does after a cursory read of the treaty. The three women shake their heads. He then hands the pen back to FLEUR and she signs her name on the treaty)

FLEUR: Right, will you now please lower your fingers...

(Neither JIM or TOM want to lower first, so after an audible tut FLEUR slams the treaty and the pen down then puts one hand on top of JIM'S finger and the other on top of TOM'S. She then slowly and carefully lowers her hands at the same time until the men's hands are flat on the table, at the same time)

FLEUR: Okay. This sheet prepares the way. It introduces the key players in the dispute..*(looking at JIM and TOM over her glasses)*..that's you two. Gives a brief history, or chronology, to the dispute.. namely that something happened a while back that has meant that every time you two now meet up – which is only ever at the suggestion of your wives - you have to.. flip each other the bird.

TOM: Huh, I would hardly call it 'suggestion'...

JIM: No, trickery more like.

(Both men nod in agreement, pointedly at their wives)

FLEUR: The issue in dispute is that both of you believe that - as a result of the aforementioned 'incident' – you both legitimately won the 'drinking game' played at your club and that, as a result of this, you both feel you are entitled to have won 'the pot' for that night. Next is.. 'any issues in agreement?' I guess the only one is that the result of the aforementioned incident was..*(slowing down purposefully)*..putting it mildly..*(looking over glasses at men)*..'not good'.

(Both men try to avoid FLEUR'S gaze and look somewhat sheepish)

TOM: I..I would just like to say that.. that..

FLEUR: Hang on Tom, the sheet goes on. 'Any previous settlement negotiations or offers?'. Well, any attempts to resolve this 'issue' have been instigated by your wives and these have mainly entailed trying to get you

two to meet up, alternately at each other's house, where the element of surprise would mean that...

JIM: Hang on, that's true, I've never really thought of it like that before.. *(looking at LAURA)*. By inviting them around this means that I will be the one surprised.. hence will lose because he knows what's happening.

TOM: *(Looking at PAM)* Yes, and the same goes for me at our place.

LAURA: *(Jumping up, upset)* Do you think either of us gives a tuppenny toss who wins? All we know is that you two have ruined what was a.. a...

(LAURA can contain herself no longer, bursts into tears and runs to the sofa. PAM then jumps up in anger)

PAM: *(To both men)* Happy now?

(PAM runs to the sofa and starts comforting the distraught LAURA, leaving an awkward silence at the table, where FLEUR just surveys the two men, still sitting with their middle fingers up, with an almost undisguised smirk on her face. She then stands up herself)

FLEUR: Well now.. *(sipping drink)*.. the only other things at this stage are one.. 'any suggestions for progressing a settlement?' .. I'm guessing there's an impasse on this; and the other is .. 'who are the participants in any mediation?'. Well..*(finishing drink)*.. I'm here – for my sins – Laura and Pam are just innocent bystanders..*(walking away)*.. which just leaves you two..*(turning back)*.. the perpetrators .. the prolongers .. *(walking to bar: calling to ladies)*..do you still want me to carry on ladies?

(LAURA, with head in hands, nods and PAM, with her arm around her shoulders, agrees)

PAM: Yes, we have to get this sorted tonight, one way or another.

FLEUR: Good..*(pouring herself another drink)*..I think, however, that sitting around a table wasn't the best of ideas, so..*(calling out to men)*..gents, why don't you each sit in an armchair?

(JIM & TOM pick up their bottles then sit in the two armchairs. FLEUR wearily walks to the table, with her replenished glass, picks up her papers then sits in the spare space on the sofa next to LAURA & PAM, putting her glass on the floor)

FLEUR: Okay, now it's on to Stage Two, where you both – separately -put forward your cases. It's all 'without prejudice', no-one judges, we just want the facts put forward by both parties as they see them. Now, I realise this has come as a surprise but are you both happy to proceed?

(Both man look at each other then at their respective spouse, both of whom they can see are willing this process to work. They both then give the tersest of nods)

FLEUR: Good. The next question is.. who wants to go first?

(There is silence as both men look everywhere bar at each other)

FLEUR: Mmm.. Would you like to flip for it then? *(giggling tipsily)* Oooh, I'm sorry about that: unintentional pun I assure you. You guys must be flipped out by now, surely?

JIM: *(Jumping up impatiently)* I'll go first...

TOM: Heh, hang on.

JIM: Look, I'm first alphabetically.. and it's in my house that this whole charade is happening. Do you really want to fl-..toss a coin for – and I use this term loosely – the **privilege** of going first?

FLEUR: Ooo – ooo - oh.

TOM: *(Presenting the floor to JIM)* Be my guest.

FLEUR: See? You two can agree, that's what's the annoying thing..*(under breath)*..well, **one** of them at least. Okay Jim, the floor's all yours.

(JIM has a slurp of beer then stands up. The lights on the side of the stage being acted on go out. TOM walks across to the other side of the stage in the dark while JIM keeps talking and when the lights come back up on the other side of the stage TOM is sitting at the table there with NORMAN, who is dressed in cricket whites and his upturned umpire's hat is on the table, filled with 'the kitty' money)

JIM: *(Voiceover: talking in dark)* Where to start? Well, I suppose I should go right back to the beginning. Mr Parkes .. um Tom.. and I really became friends because of Laura and Pam a few years back and I guess we started socialising outside of the foursome when we both joined ?? Cricket Club...

(JIM'S voiceover fades out and he drifts off stage in the dark – to pick up props)

TOM: Are you OK Norm? You look a bit peaky...

NORMAN: *(Quipping uneasily)* As Tensing said to Hillary.

TOM: Eh? Oh yes..*(humouring)*..very good.

NORMAN: *(Looking at small notebook)* This is..*(breathing deeply)*..this is the first time you two have been left in at the very end, isn't it? *(drifting a bit)* If.. if my records serve me right..*(fingering through notebook)*.

TOM: Mmm.. *(putting hand in hat and sifting cash)*..this would come in handy.

(JIM appears from upstage carrying a tray of three pints of beer. He sees TOM playing with the money at the table)

JIM: Oi, hands off, it's not yours yet..*(plonking tray on table)*.. nor is it going to be.

TOM: We'll see.

NORMAN: *(Wiping brow)* Oh Jim, I just asked for a tonic water.

JIM: Tonic waters are for non-cricket playing wimps.

NORMAN: I don't play.

JIM: *(Sitting down)* No, but you're the umpire Norm, on whose shoulders all those important decisions rest.. on the pitch and in here.

NORMAN: I guess..*(looking around)*..I must admit.. we are a bit into unknown territory tonight... there's hardly anyone left in the club.

TOM: Well, you're the birdmeister Norm...

JIM: Yeah, only you know when the call is coming.

NORMAN: *(Sighing)* That's true.

JIM: Although.. you have been going a bit slow tonight...

TOM: Yeah, and not with your usual rapier wit.

NORMAN: *(Breathing heavily)* Again that's true, but...

(Both JIM and TOM almost raise their bird fingers but realise it's a false alarm. They try not to draw attention to this and compose themselves again. NORMAN is unaware of this)

NORMAN: In my defence.. I have felt bet...

(Again both JIM and TOM almost raise their bird fingers, but again realise it's a false alarm. Again the pre-occupied NORMAN is unaware of this, as he seems in a world of his own)

NORMAN: ...ter. It's most probably the heat, perhaps I should undo another but...

(Again JIM and TOM almost raise their bird fingers but realise it's yet another false alarm. They then notice, as NORMAN shakily undoes his top button, that he isn't trying to draw a 'false bird' but is genuinely hot and bothered, out of sorts and – ultimately – not at all well. They then slowly reach for their pints with their left hands, just in case, then when they think it's safe they both simultaneously pick up their pints and start sipping them. As they do the lights dim on that side of the stage. JIM and TOM then walk back to the other side of the stage – minus their pints - and as the lights come back up they are in the same positions as they were when the flashback event started being re-lived)

FLEUR: *(Almost in shock)* What the hell was that all about?

JIM: Well, big Norm – Norman Alan Deakin – was a bit of a practical joker, the clubhouse clown really, and to liven things up a bit after a match – when the beers were flowing – one of the things he introduced was...this.. 'game'.

FLEUR: Game? Which one? Spoof? Fizz Buzz? Jet? Match Grab?

(LAURA and PAM look at FLEUR with a mixture of being surprised and impressed)

TOM: No, it was a game of his own creation.. called...

JIM: Quick On The Flip

(As LAURA and PAM sit up to listen intently FLEUR has to try and stifle a laugh)

TOM: Everyone would chip into the kitty then Norm would set the 'trigger word' for the game.

JIM: The night's proceedings would then just carry on as usual.. with Norm cranking up the suspense between his 'reveals', a bit like Alfred Hitchcock really.

FLEUR: *(Under breath)* Well, there are certainly elements of Psycho about this whole thing.

TOM: *(Carrying on)* Then, when he was ready, he would say the trigger word.. and whoever was last to flip the bird would be out. Norm was also the judge and jury on this...

JIM: Then, whoever was left at the end collected the kitty.

FLEUR: Right, and – just for the record – what was the 'trigger word' that night?

(JIM & TOM look at each other and then, in unison, with some degree of embarrassment, say)

JIM/TOM: Buttocks.

(FLEUR again tries to stifle a laugh, while the other four are deadly serious. When she realises this she takes a sip of her drink)

FLEUR: Right. Now then, Tom.. why don't you carry on the story from where Jim -

JIM: Hang on, that means he'll be the one relaying his version of 'the event' last. He'll be able to bowl a googly that, effectively, gets me out.

FLEUR: I've no idea what you mean Jim.. but we must push on with this process as I am starting to lose the will to live.

(JIM is lost for words and FLEUR presents the floor to TOM, who has a slurp of beer then stands up. The lights on the side of the stage being acted on go out. JIM walks across to the other side of the stage in the dark while TOM keeps talking and when the lights come back up on the other side of the stage JIM is sitting back at the table with NORMAN, who is looking increasingly unwell. JIM, however, is busy silently remonstrating with him about something, oblivious to his ailing condition)

TOM *(Voiceover: talking in dark)* Norm always tried to pick words that could go either way, to lull people into ‘false birding’ – which resulted in instant disqualification, but in retrospect his saying of words such as ‘but’ , but-cher and ‘bet-ter’ and ‘but-ton’ were just genuine utterances that night. Anyway, that final session just seemed to go on forever...

(TOM’S voiceover fades out and he drifts off stage in the dark – to pick up props)

JIM: I mean.. don’t get me wrong Norm.. I’m all in favour of staying out all night.. but the tension’s starting to get a bit unbearable.

NORMAN: *(Weakly)* Yes. !.. I’m sorry about that.. um.. Jim.. I don’t know what’s come over me to-

JIM: I mean.. is it because you had a long, hot day in the middle today? I hope it’s not because you’re scared to call it because you know Tom and I are good mates.. and it might cause a rift between us? Because believe you me.. *(playing with money in hat)*.. we both want to win this booty...

(TOM appears from upstage carrying three plates with heated pies on them. He sees JIM playing with the money at the table)

TOM: Oi, hands off, it’s not yours yet.. *(plonking tray on table)*.. nor is it going to be.

NORMAN: You know Jim, what you just said might not be a bad idea, you could just call it a draw now and split the kitty, then we could all get off h-

TOM: Is that what .. *(nodding at JIM)*.. **he** suggested?

JIM: No, the opposite in fact. I said if Norm was worried about calling it because the result might cause a rift in our private and social lives he should forget it.

TOM: Quite right. Now.. *(putting plates on table)*..as we’re clearly here for the duration.. *(sliding plate to JIM)*..I suggest we get these steaming hot pies down us..*(sliding plate to NORMAN)*..to give us sustenance for the final push.

NORMAN: *(With crumpled face)* Oh Tom.. I said I wasn’t hungry.

TOM: You might have said that.. but your body language was telling me something else, I saw you rubbing your stomach and smacking your lips.

(NORMAN rests his elbows on the table and buries his head in his hands)

JIM: *(Looking at NORMAN and biting heartily into pie)* Look at him, he's really having to think hard about whether to carrying on drawing false birds.. or to bring this mammoth innings to a conclusion.

TOM: Yes..*(biting into pie)*..on any other day there would have been a declaration by now.

(JIM and TOM pick up their pints and clink them together, as if to celebrate their jokey cricketing inferences. NORMAN then, with renewed vigour, drags his fingers down from his head to reveal his face and takes a deep breath)

NORMAN: Right, let's get this over and done with.

(JIM and TOM quickly put their pies and pints down on the table, rub their hands together and flex their fingers)

NORMAN: So, as I was saying earlier, W G Grace was at the crease and.. and the ball clipped off one of his bails. He said to the umpire.. "Look at that, the.. the wind has taken off the bail".. and.. and..

(NORMAN seems to drift away and JIM and TOM almost perch on the edge of their seats waiting for something to happen)

NORMAN: And the.. the umpire said, "Indeed, let's hope that same wind helps speed your return back to the pavilion".

(NORMAN seems to wait for some response to his amusing anecdote, but it's clear that JIM and TOM are too geared up for the final bird. NORMAN becomes visibly flustered again)

NORMAN: Yes, well.. as I was saying..*(faffing shirt to get air down chest)*.. is it hot in here, or is it me? Right, oh yes

(There is a long pause as JIM and TOM perch in anticipation. NORMAN then looks vacantly at them)

NORMAN: I've forgotten what the trigger word is.

(The lights dim on that side of the stage. JIM and TOM then walk back to the other side of the stage and as the lights come back up they are in the same positions as they were when the flashback event started being re-lived)

JIM: I think it was at that point we thought he was losing it mentally as well as physically.

TOM: In retrospect, I'm wondering if we should have picked up on these signs?

FLEUR: *(Sarcastically)* Do you think?

(The phone rings. There is a pregnant pause as all look at each other then LAURA looks at her watch and jumps up to go and answer the phone)

FLEUR: *(Sighing)* Perhaps this will be a good time to take a short break.

(TOM shrugs and sits back down then JIM indignantly stands back up. LAURA picks up the phone and starts talking secretly into it)

JIM: Hang on.. if we have a break here his version of events will stay freshest in the mind.

FLEUR: It's not a court of law Jim.

(As JIM goes to reply he realises that LAURA is on the phone and is clearly trying to cover up her conversation. All goes quiet elsewhere in the room)

LAURA: *(into phone)* Yes.. yes.. no it's still going on.. *(turning away slightly)*.. oh, you know...

(JIM looks over to LAURA with a suspicious look on his face)

LAURA: No, not really.. I'll ring you back later.. when it's over, okay.. bye..
(replacing phone then turning back nonchalantly)..right, where did we get up to?

JIM: Who was that?

LAURA: Eh? Oh, it was.. uh.. you know.. um...

JIM: It was Michelle, wasn't it?

(LAURA looks down to the floor)

JIM: You told our own daughter about this.. this debacle...

FLEUR: Ooo – ooo - oh.

JIM: Someone hundreds of miles away in a university.. rather than tell your own husband who lives under the same roof as you.. and who this whole.. this whole fiasco...

FLEUR: Ooo – ooo - oh.

JIM: ...directly affects.

LAURA: I couldn't tell you about it because you would have.. well, got like this before Fleur had even arrived, so we would have got nowhere at all.

JIM: You mean as opposed to where we are now, which also happens to be nowhere.. but with us half a bottle of vodka down into the bargain.

FLEUR: Do you know Jim.. I'm starting to get the distinct impression that you're starting to resent my presence here tonight.

TOM: Look, are we carrying on or not? I don't see why I should have to suffer because **they** have family issues...

PAM: Don't get smug, I also told Ben we were trying out this mediation tonight.

TOM: WHAT?

(This time TOM gets up and JIM sits back down with a smile on his face)

PAM: Yes, strange as it may seem to you but our kids don't like this whole situation either and want us to find a solution to it. In fact.. they're being more adult about it than.. than...

TOM: Than me and him.. go on say it, we know that you two just think we're being childish but it's more than that.. *(getting worked up)* ..it's ... *(looking at bird finger which is twitching to go up)*.. it's...

(JIM looks on anxiously, realising that if it goes up he will have won, but FLEUR walks up to TOM and steadies his hand, ensuring he doesn't bird)

FLEUR: Right, well I've got my second wind now.. so I suggest we push on to the denouement and, well, the event that has resulted in this whole.. *(losing interest)*.. whole.. whatever it is .

JIM: *(Clearing throat)* Okay, well.. as the night went on, Norm became...

TOM: Woah woah woah. Why is he recounting it?

JIM: Well, as we're alternating it's clearly my turn.

TOM: Yes, but there's only one episode left so to speak.

(JIM and TOM then look to FLEUR for guidance but she just holds her hands out in a derisive manner)

FLEUR: I'm almost past caring. Do what you like.

JIM: Well, I guess we could sort of recall it together...

TOM: And just let her arbitrate on it as she sees it. Fleur?

FLEUR: *(sipping drink)* Whatever.

(The lights on that side of the room slowing start going down, and as they do JIM and TOM start making their way over to the other side of the stage. FLEUR leans across to LAURA and PAM and almost slurs a drunken aside)

FLEUR: The annoying thing is that they agree with each other on things.. when it suits them.

(The lights on the other stage gradually come up as JIM and TOM make the transition across)

JIM *(Voiceover):* So, Norm eventually remembered what the trigger word was...

TOM (Voiceover): And he then, almost reluctantly, started talking again.

(By the time the lights are fully up on that side of the stage JIM and TOM are back in their original positions – perched in anticipation - and now NORMAN is sitting with a shirt virtually completely unbuttoned, rubbing his chest and taking deep breaths)

NORMAN: Okay, I remember the word now, yes.. yes..*(drifting again)*..what I don't remember, however, is.. how the hell did this game start?

JIM: Tch Norm, you really aren't on top form tonight, are you? *(in almost childlike fashion)* We all came in earlier after the game, got our, drinks sat down and-

NORMAN: *(Snapping)* Not tonight. Ever.

(JIM and TOM look at each other, behind the clearly unwell NORMAN, and shrug their shoulders, lost at his strange behaviour. They decide to humour him)

TOM: *(Almost patronisingly)* Well, Norm, because you're the resident umpire of the club, hence not averse to raising a finger or three during a game – albeit by using the more orthodox..*(lifting right index finger)* – what I mean is.. you have always given people 'out' using the more...

(TOM starts looking at the wriggling middle finger on his right hand. JIM looks on with concern, just in case he gets a head start if the trigger word is called at that moment. TOM relaxes his hand however, then so does JIM)

JIM: Yes, the more, shall we say, 'discourteous' hand gesture.

TOM: *(Smiling)* As if he doesn't know. He's lulling us into a false sense of security, that's all.

JIM: *(Punching NORMAN's right arm)* Come on you old goat, put us out of our misery.

TOM: *(Punching NORMAN's left arm)* Yeah, come on, there's money to be won here.

NORMAN: *(Holding top of left arm)* You two. Honestly, you make me sick.

(JIM and TOM look at each other in surprise)

NORMAN: What are we talking about here? A pittance. Yet you harangue me all night long so that you can get your grabbing mitts on it. What difference does it make who wins?

JIM: Well, I –

NORMAN: It was a rhetorical question.

TOM: Yes, but –

NORMAN: I'm still being rhetorical. Can't..*(rubbing upper chest)* ..can't either of..*(wincing)*.. can't either of you see..*(seizing chest)*..that I'm not feeling myself tonight?