

TICK TICK

One Act

by

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CHARACTERS

GEORGE

CURLY

JAMES HAFNER

S C E N E

CURLY and GEORGE, in their mid-thirties, share a bleak tenement-flat in a town with neither character nor centre near an airport. They work at the airport, GEORGE in the hangar and CURLY driving an airport-trolley.

The wall facing us is covered with multiple blown-up photographs of girls in all states of undress, overdress and party-jollity. Sometimes they are seen with GEORGE and/or CURLY. It all looks the greatest, if too deliberate, fun: at least acontrast to the long unsmiling faces of GEORGE and CURLY as we see them.

Background-sound is in the form of jet-engines. They tend to accompany GEORGE's and CURLY's movements, rising and falling as they raise cups of tea to their lips etc, and filling some of the pauses in the conversation. These two products belong to their work in more ways than one.

When they talk about their 'birds'---Double Glance, The One with the Voice---they refer to her by pointing to her photograh on the wall.

GEORGE's 'First World War skit' is spoken with terrible earnestness, his 'tick tick' corresponding to a fearful jerk of his face or body. He---like HAFFNER later---speaks these lines with his lips only, in an unpunctuated flow.

CURLY is a fat unanxious man with a bright rosy face and staring, rather dreamy eyes. His hair is like his name, and may be something of a clown's wig. He is in a white coat.

GEORGE is thin and anxious, dressed in overalls. He has lines of anxiety painted grotesquely on his face. He winces, winks and twitches with bad nerves.

HAFFNER is like a terrible repetition of GEORGE: he is dressed in black, or even a battered top hat and tattered tails. His face is painted deathly pale, with almost black lips. His hands tend to hang like a skeleton's. He sits or stands absolutely rigid, fixing the other man with a cold stare. His lips move terribly fast but his face not. He is Death. Or rather, GEORGE's idea of Death.

There is a table and hard-backed chairs, with a sink and stove. The door is on the actor's left.

At curtainrise CURLY is alone, preparing tea for both of them. His preparations are punctuated by various jet-sounds. Just when he is sitting down with an idler's satisfaction to enjoy his cup of tea, GEORGE comes in from work

GEORGE: No birds then?

CURLY: You should know.

GEORGE: Well I didn't fix anything up like.

CURLY: Well then we shall have the silence—and the rent man, won't we?

GEORGE: I've put the money out.

CURLY: So I see.

GEORGE: I think it's right.

CURLY: I've never known a man look so worried over money.

GEORGE: Well I'm not always sure of the sum. All right take the piss. I've been on airscrews for eight hours.

CURLY: Two of 'em at double time, eh?

GEORGE: Well I'm not swanning all over the tarmac in an electric trolley, I mean it's on your nerves all the time, the scream of the jets.

CURLY: They're not screaming all the time. In fact they 'ardly scream at all in your hangar. It's your nerves that scream.

GEORGE: Well how much is it exactly then?

CURLY: Eight pounds, ten shillings and threepence it's been for well nigh two years.

GEORGE: I get confused about your contribution, which isn't much in all conscience.

CURLY: I'll tell you your weakness---you believe in circumstances. When a bird comes in that door it brings you to life but it don't me. So when they stay away you feel a terrible let-down, don't you?

GEORGE: Well I like things to be decently organised---not that really but you know what I mean, settled, so you know who's calling, I mean something you can look forward to every night, sort of cosy.

CURLY: Sounds like a family man talking.

GEORGE: Not on your life. Still, now and again. I've been jittery all day. Come on, tell us a joke. Better still, prove God exists. You always say you can but never do.

CURLY: Listen, if I could prove it there'd be some doubt about it and there isn't.

GEORGE: I wish my mum and dad was alive. They took me to the park every Sunday it was fine, I used to smell the flowers—

CURLY: Dreaming of the airscrews on a superjet, I know.

GEORGE: Not far wrong either. It was sex or love as you'd say that got me into aircraft.

CURLY: How do you make that out?

GEORGE: My dad put the question to me, will you carry on at school bringing in clothes money which your mum spends on curtains, or go out to work and feel some money in your pocket? I was in the park every evening with a bird—this was some years after my mum and dad took me and I smelled the flowers—and the image of the pocket did it, it got mixed up necessarily with the bird. At school my pocket would have been empty in all senses. And I was no celibate. Hence I went into an aircraft factory where I now feel identified with the jet in every way.

CURLY: And you won't marry. That's going to lie heavily against you when you're drinking char with the Almighty.

GEORGE: Not entirely. His only Son said you should be a eunuch if you could manage to hold it.

CURLY: You're no eunuch. You have a different bit every night.

GEORGE: Just a little jet of energy is all that's left of me after the eight-hour stint, you can't build a married life on that. I'm very clear about that.

CURLY: No, it's deeper than that. The way you wash yourself. That's not normal. You take a bath a day and wash your privates separately every morning on top of that, I've never seen a man scour like you, now that's not normal.

GEORGE: Clean habits?

CURLY: But they can't get dirty in that short time, unless you're determined to think of them as dirty. That's

why there's so much sexual licence at this moment of our island-history, because of the generations of dirty thinking that went before.

GEORGE: I admit that when they sigh and breathe all over me and the word love comes in I scatter and my mind fills with the sound and scream of engines all the way home. It doesn't embarrass me so much as paralyse me.

CURLY: You're permanently paralysed if you ask me. All the word love does is to spread the paralysis all over your body from a certain place. The paralysis then engulfs your whole life until you see that everything you ever did and ever thought about was useless, ending in the production at Hangar D of one small and not even important-

GEORGE: But essential---

CURLY: ---element in a super-jet engine. But you can't turn that into a shiny instrument however much you wash it, not that.

GEORGE: Is God a skilled or an unskilled worker?

CURLY: You've got me there.

GEORGE: You know sometimes it does seem you've got a little light in your eye. They're always intrigued by you.

CURLY: It's my tea does it.

GEORGE: Jill said last night, is that nice bloke still in digs with you?

CURLY: You see George I look at 'em right at the centre, not on the outside any more. I used to. Gave it up.

GEORGE: I said why don't you keep your voice down? She has got a voice that one. I said to her one day, I said, you'd get up on your own sound-vibrations if I had you in my hangar.

CURLY: And she said?

GEORGE: She said you're not having me in your hangar tonight mate, your car's too draughty. Life's all bits and gadgets and odds and ends isn't it, really? None of it adds up, does it really?

CURLY: Not if you look at it like that.

GEORGE: Of course I worry too much. Always did. My dad had a face unlined with worry. He went out as early as I do and he was on night shift two months of the year yet he looked as if he was dreaming it up all the time, do you know what I mean? It didn't seem to touch him.

He had to punch his ticket of a morning like me but he always looked as if he was doing it for the sound of the bell, do you know what I mean?

CURLY: He was a nice man, by your descriptions.

GEORGE: Yet those were the pioneers of our present technical society.

CURLY: And they had no techniques at all, did they? Whereas you're so damned skilled it's eaten into your life. After you there's nothing, George.

GEORGE: No children, no image of an unlined face to pass on.

CURLY: And nightmares every night. That you're getting older, which you are. Or in a prison. No wonder you want to play cards at four in the morning, and hate cards.

GEORGE: And none of 'em loves me.

CURLY: They love you for your instrument. They want to see what it's like, just to appease their curiosity, that's all.

GEORGE: Listen, how do you stand driving that absurd little electrical van from one hangar to another in rain and sun, without a line appearing in your face, Curly?

CURLY: It's skill makes lines. I've told you that before.

GEORGE: But sometimes a thought must pass through your brain. You were educated up to masturbation level as you always say. Now what happened after that? What did your mind do? How did it make the necessary understanding not to trouble itself any more?

CURLY: Easy. Ceasing to be employed, it laid itself open to natural influences. It never had such a wonderful time in its life.

GEORGE: I often think I might be able to invent something. I think about it on the train. I have to think of something.

CURLY: I don't think of anything. The weather to start with gives us such variety. It's never the same twice. There was a wind this morning in which I could smell the sea.

GEORGE: All I smelled was diesel.

CURLY: There's always something you can get out of life.

If I was in Hangar D with my head inside a jet-case I'd get something out of that. But I know it's hopeless to talk.

GEORGE: I bet you never talk to the birds like that. Too busy, eh?

CURLY: That and the fact that they understand anyway. You rarely get a technical woman.

GEORGE: Do they ever talk to you?

CURLY: Sometimes.

GEORGE: About me?

CURLY: The description would have to be technical, mate—so long and so thick, and running time an hour and twenty minutes, but that's not interesting for me to hear. Jill was insulted that you disliked her voice, and happy that I seemed to revel in it, not that I said a word about it.

GEORGE: That bird with the double glance, she kept glancing back as if she thought you'd scatter, what do you make of that?

CURLY: These are all deep experiences underneath, mate, if you only try and understand them. All the men she ever had did scatter. Even you did.

GEORGE: Yes, well, there is a limit. I was eating celery like a maniac but too much wasn't half enough for her.

CURLY: But I didn't have to run away. In fact she ran away from me.

GEORGE: Yes but you do nothing all day—in the open air too.

CURLY: No I simply turned the scales on her.

GEORGE: Meaning?

CURLY: Instead of letting her jump on me like a bus and drive me away I looked at her because I thought her curious, and she saw how curious she was from the way I looked at her. That's all. She's still my friend but not for that.

GEORGE: And now your hands are empty.

CURLY: What about yours?

GEORGE: I stopped a bit in the canteen and she said she might call our number but it's not certain because her mum's been taken bad.

CURLY: I suppose we're really family men underneath when you come to look at it. We've got a wife but she's different every night, with a different name, but she's still the wife, when the blinds have been drawn and the radio switched off. And one night she don't come we feel a big let-down and wonder if she's all right, all five or six of her, and then we're even lower when we realise that in her not being one person we can't wait for her at the gate downstairs or ask how she is.

GEORGE: You'll be crying in a minute.

CURLY: I've got all the love in the world but they always go away. The one I thought would stay was Double Glance and she was the first to go, skitting apart.

GEORGE: You won't mind me saying this, it's a technical remark: but if you found your birds yourself you might get the one you wanted.

CURLY: I'll tell you why that is, without shame or forethought. As an unskilled worker I feel passed over.

GEORGE: Do you remember that one who worked in cabaret or said she did anyway? I tried to book her for the Boxing Day rag but she'd gone by then. We get a better time than family men, that's one thing.

CURLY: I wouldn't say better time but God shines the lights for us every evening, which is more than he does if--- but p'raps I'm wrong.

GEORGE: That cabaret girl tried to seal a bargain with me, did I tell you that? She said, sort of squeezing up to me, made me feel funny, why don't we get married George? I nearly succame. But she had a catch. She had show business in blood and mind. I did my First World War patter. She cried and put her little fists on my face like a baby, wanted me to stop. Do you remember?

CURLY: Out of three hundred evenings a year how can I remember one?

GEORGE: It influenced her mind all week, did that grotesque little bit of patter which I thought up with my head inside a super-jet frame. I seem to hear these voices like as if I was only the receiving plant. It appealed to her no end, do you remember? 'My two friends had been with me over two weeks and four days. We ad ad many conversations in the trenches but now they was

conducted in silence. We ad exchanged many glances some loying some not but now they were all an absorbed stare, from dawn when they woke up until the darkness closed them from my sight, again, tick tick. Their hands were used to rough work bpt now tick tick at the edge of this dug-out tick tick they were idle and never seemed to move and even began to take on an alabaster look such as suggested children or young bearing mothers in a new purity tick tick. And their breathing which had been hard and stentorian because of heavy duties and smoking black shag was now tick tick so slow, in fact hardly discernible, that you couldn't say it was at all, tick tick. And whereas before they always moved on this job or that tick tick they never stirred themselves now as if too lazy or not in the mood any more tick tick. They only seemed to want to stare tick tick in that valley where the rain came every day and the mud tick tick and the rats in the water tick tick and the dirty bits of white tape tick tick that had been used tick tick to mark out paths between the tick tick tick mines all came floating by and took a personal belonging tick tick with them perhaps a letter sodden now or a stub of pencil it might be tick tick or a little piece of skin and we did nothing to retrieve it tick tick we went on sitting and if tick tick the flood tick tick moved us a little why we shifted our positions and stayed tick tick and went on staring and sitting tick tick and never moving tick tick tick tick our hands tick tick our lips tick our eyes tick tick tick tick tick---we were dead! DEAD!!

CURLY: What's the idea of that tick tick?

GEORGE: She said it put a cold bloody hand down her spine, you know that raw way she had of speaking. What's that? Oh the tick tick is the tick tick of death.

CURLY: That was the night they complained downstairs. I was very sorry about that. He said he had nightmares and seemed to blame them on to us. Well I saw his point, our faces probably grinned through his sleep, not a happy thought. It always seems very silent down there now. Have they gone away?

GEORGE: Which reminds me, the rent man's coming (counting the money) It seems a lot for two bedrooms and one kitchen, plus a hole in the ground.

CURLY: He's changed, I see.

GEORGE: Who?

CURLY: The rent man. Goes by the name of James Haffner now. Bought up this and fourteen other houses along the same street.

GEORGE: What end collects his own rent?

CURLY: So they tell me.

GEORGE: What, that bloke with the little taz isn't coming any more?

CURLY: He was a paid hireling. My mother used to hate rent men. But this one collects his own, so they say.

GEORGE: Hasn't he got work of his own then?

CURLY: He looks on that as his work, so they say.

GEORGE: Sounds a German name. Of course they have these sweeping ideas, don't they, the Germans? I'll tell him the rent isn't ready because I ran out of Deutschmarks and see how he takes it.

CURLY: I wonder if that's why they moved out downstairs. He took over last week and they haven't been seen or heard since, at least by me.

GEORGE: I wish I could think of that bird's name—she thought I was lined up for show business, wanted to know what I was doing getting people's bottoms off the ground at speed, as she put it. Don't you remember that raw way she had of speaking?

CURLY: No.

GEORGE: That's the marvellous thing about your mind, how it casts everything out like garbage.

CURLY: All things being for the glory of God, I don't have to retain them in the mind. For what plan? what technique? what human assembly?

GEORGE: But you don't even remember how you frightened her out of her wits by making your heart stop beating?

CURLY: No.

GEORGE: Well I call that rejection—I mean fear. Of the past.

CURLY: I can remember smiles and some handshakes, a sentence here and there but whole situations never stay with me.

GEORGE: Did you say he was German?

CURLY: According to the sound of his name, anyway.

GEORGE: All Double Glance gave me was a double glance after that

First World War patter, I don't think she really got it you know. You see that's half the trouble---they haven't got the brains, at least not on my side of the tarmac. I said to this new bird this morning, what about tonight, here's my card, and she said may be. Sometimes I think that visiting card isn't a good idea. Too skilled. It frightens some.

CURLY: Not on your life. They like the hard, steel-instrument approach. I found that out with Jill. That's why she has to shout. And grab. I've never seen man or beast grab like her.

GEORGE: I have to admit they seem peaceful when they come from you.

CURLY: I'll tell you why, because there's no first time with me, a woman's the same whoever she is, whereas you lie down with a new experience every time and of course it makes them nervous, they feel you're waiting to find out what they're like and that's unsettling. Whereas they feel I know them already.

GEORGE: A chap on the drawing boards asked me today how about children.

CURLY: What about 'em?

GEORGE: Well, if none of us married.

CURLY: Oh, that.

GEORGE: Don't you even remember her saying that a mind like mine had more than jets to give?

CURLY: No.

GEORGE: Because of these voices that entered it? And how I said no, you need a mind and a half for jets and how?

CURLY: No.

GEORGE: That's just wilful. You must be jealous.

CURLY: What of, your mind or your money?

GEORGE: I often wonder if she was right.

CURLY: That Jill said you gave her a thrill but she felt terribly empty afterwards, you know that daft way she talks.

GEORGE: Oh so they do say something.

CURLY: A thrill don't last but secrets in the dark do.

GEORGE: Meaning?

CURLY: Never mind.

GEORGE: Always never mind. Like your proof ab'out God.

CURLY: Me prove him? A grain of sand prove a ~~million~~ deserts? As soon as you know you're a grain of sand and love it, you'll know he's there. By the way, the rent's short.

GEORGE: What?

CURLY: There you are. Dashing ab out. Go on, look at it again, count it out, that's right. You counted it out a couple of minutes ago but anybody can knock you off your perch can't they? Now a grain of sand feels cosy, with all the other ones. Sits in the sun all day. Not you. You've lost your creator, mate, so you're frightened of all the surprises he might spring!

GEORGE: No come on, is this all right, because we won't be paid for two days—?

CURLY: But you just counted it out.

GEORGE: Well just tell me how much the rent is!

CURLY: But don't you know?

GEORGE: It makes me nervous to think of a new rent man, that's all.

CURLY: Everything makes you nervous.

GEORGE: Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I seem to be somebody else. I've got somebody else's smell and way of thinking. I sit up and think, who is it now? who am I being identified with?

CURLY: I'll tell you: all the people you could be if you weren't a super-jet craftsman, that is no person at all. The ghosts come back from pre-technical society to haunt you, mate.

GEORGE: They're realer than the real me. I mean, I could do fantastic things as some of these other people. My body seems to come into existence for the first time. I seem to sweat more.

- CURLY:** That's what Double Glance said. He seems to have a thicker and harder body than most, she said. As if him and his body wasn't the same. And he sweats a lot.
- GEORGE:** Go on, she said that?
- CURLY:** Sometimes I think if you died I don't know what I'd do---come in of an evening and make a cup of tea and sit down and then plonk, what's on the programme tonight? There's a new crowd down at Hangar B, mate, they go out at night and you know rouse up a bit of trouble. Wanted me to join them for a lark.
- GEORGE:** They ought to be too tired at night, I reckon they get it easy down your hangar.
- CURLY:** Not exactly my buddies. Dangerous lot sometimes.
- GEORGE:** You getting a friend of violence all of a sudden then? That's another thing I get: I see the whole country overrun by barbarians. Really I'm happy to work as I do. The jest-case the way it gleams is a comfort.
- CURLY:** Well they want a new sort of deal. I can see their point up to a point.
- GEORGE:** They've got money in their pockets, what more do they want? Are you serious? I noticed you wasn't in for Barbara two nights off.
- CURLY:** No/ it isn't that but I mean sometimes I think it's the family men holding us back. Some of these blokes go out in the woods on Saturdays and stay the night and learn to be grains of sand, which it isn't easy to do in Hailey Street.
- GEORGE:** I like my routines.
- CURLY:** They take guns to fetch down an odd bird which I don't hold with but it's a mixed world. It's good to feel the rain on your face. I wouldn't mind that, lying out under all of God's moods for a couple of nights. Do you get a sense of force in me, sometimes, when I've been out to the end of the road where the waste field is and taken the air a bit? I can't stand being hedged in any more but as one of the blokes said that's an attitude not a fact.
- GEORGE:** If you ask me you're getting bored on that job.
- CURLY:** I don't think of it as a job.

- GEORGE:** There must be unskilled jobs in Hangar B within your scope.
- CURLY:** And go back to school again? No thanks. It's no use taking present human organisation seriously, it won't last all that long. When I get in that soft leather seat every morning and whine my way across the tarmac I have a great sense of happiness.
- GEORGE:** You could get twice the money, and find your own birds instead of using mine.
- CURLY:** Then I'd have nightmares about being somebody else. I don't want to dispose of my identity, thanks.
- GEORGE:** May be I could invent something. I went to the patents office and got the particulars straight. Something we all need which would exploit jet-action. My mind keeps turning on a jet-fired gun but I wouldn't approve of that. But I can't help it forming in my mind a bit more every night, in the train. We're much less big than our destiny, aren't we?
- CURLY:** I reckon we should break out a bit. I was talking to these new Hangar B blokes and they seem all right. We could put them on the right path. I mean that's why the birds trail off like they do because you're mean at entertaining. I mean with eighty quid or so we could have a real big do, according to what we was saying this morning. Not beer and sandwiches I mean but we could take a hall, something like that, hire a band, run a few surprises, skits and stuff like that where the boys come in in masks and the lights go out, you know what I mean. These evenings get me down. That's the basic trouble, you're mean, and the birds feel it. If you really spread yourself one night it'd last the whole year in terms of generosity felt and appreciated.
- George:** And how much would you contribute?
- CURLY:** Well, the just amount.
- GEORGE:** That wouldn't be much. Even a lot from you wouldn't be much.
- GEORGE:** I just thought that with your technical brain you would want to finance it, I mean you're the one who impresarios and leaves the dirty work of catering and sweeping up to me.
- GEORGE:** But not if I'm going to be considered mean and you take all the credit and the birds too. Behind your drowsy nature-face there's a brain working, Curly, you've got a way of working things so that my hand always dips in

my pocket, in the end.

CURLY: But you are mean. It's one of your problems. You know it is.

GEORGE: Yes but I'm not forking out the best part of eighty quid in order to be called mean. And come to that, as I said before, you could easily rouse yourself and get a skilled job for twice or three times the screw, instead of being looked down on as a sack of tripe.

CURLY: Oh, a sack of tripe!

GEORGE: If I'm a mean technical brain, that's what you are.

CURLY: Just because I don't see life as jet-propelled? and don't run round all day wondering if I signed a wrong check or left the ignition on? I haven't got a check book or a car. It simplifies matters.

GEORGE: It does for you, because you use mine. And it's you who leaves the ignition on.

CURLY: Once. If we had seventy or eighty quid, thought and a hall full of birds, and Hangar B personnel getting up a lark and all that, with the lights turning a different colour, they'd sit here and wait for us all day, and cook our meals for us.

GEORGE: It's a funny thing, sometimes I think I'm inventing that gun to protect myself. I get this sense of foreboding all the time.

CURLY: If you landed yourself a nice unskilled job driving a trolley at a top speed of fifteen miles an hour apart from little accelerations up to twenty when in a hair-raising state of mind you'd be better off it seems.

GEORGE: I thought of moving into a bigger city, might be more going on.

CURLY: It's up to us to make it. The nights have been duff the last few weeks. It happens like that.

GEORGE: I remember the way my dad used to come in one night with his cheeks burning from the cold, and the wink he gave us before he kissed mum, and he didn't have to think anything up. I got quite frightened when Jill said she couldn't and Double Giance wasn't at the Powder Puff. Then if they are there and they do come round I start worrying if they're my level, I mean whether I shouldn't be studying something up or getting on with that damned gun that comes in all my dreams and even when I'm on the job, did I tell you that, even

then?

CURLY: Sometimes I think you've got a war sort of mind.

GEORGE: I'll never forget her face when I did that skit. She was trembling all over. I was suddenly---

A knock on the door.

CURLY: Sounds like the rent men. That authentic rat-tat.
(Opens the door) Ah, Mr Haffner?

JAMES HAFFNER appears.

HAFFNER: That's right.

GEORGE: You're the new owner?

HAFFNER: That's right.

CURLY: Well come in.

HAFFNER: Thanks.

GEORGE: What happened to the little bloke with the ~~ink~~ tax?

HAFFNER: Bought him out. Cost me a cool ten thou. Half the street though. That's apart from what I own near the nick.

GEORGE: Oh you've ^{got} property up there?

HAFFNER: Yes but it's valueless. The presence of a nick is a kiss of death residentially. It isn't easy, my work. I don't exactly get the best expressions of face when the door opens and I stand revealed as what I am. People with the best hearts in the world don't feel active joy to pay the rent, especially if there happens to be arrears.

CURLY: That's right.

HAFFNER: And I'm not the type of man who can let it all roll off him and then count his money tranquilly at home with his fond and avaricious wife looking on. I haven't got a wife, to start with. No, the trouble is I remember every face, every little twitch here and involuntary frown there, and there lies the undoing of my nervous system.

CURLY: You must develop a certain eye for the species.

HAFFNER: That's right.

CURLY: A very telling eye.

HAFFNER: Oh yes. I know if I'm going to be paid the minute the door opens.

CURLY: Are you going to be paid now?

HAFFNER: Oh yes. In full.

CURLY: How do you mean, in full?

HAFFNER: We'll come to that. And don't think I want more than I've a right to, will you? I hand out a lot of money one way or the other but it doesn't seem to alter the reputation I have among certain people for being on the tight side. And unlike the people who can go blandly their way and even believe in God I find every word leaves its wound, until I don't know hardly where I stand or who I am.

GEORGE: I can sympathise there.

HAFFNER: Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night---

GEORGE: Yes?

HAFFNER: ---and wonder who I am. As if my real self had been stolen from me and I was only a sort of print for other people's dirty negatives. Sometimes I'd like to possess a shiny instrument with many small parts that clicked though I'm not partial to any sort of explosion---

GEORGE: No, like me.

HAFFNER: I even enjoy the click of this bag and I think one of the main reasons I plod from door to door is the click and rustle of the money as it goes in. I always tell tenants to prepare a cheque if possible because it weighs me down less but I think the weight of the bag is beginning to become a strange technical pleasure. And then when I get home it isn't as if counting it out once will be enough for me, I have to do it a dozen times and that's quite a considerable sum when you think of three long streets, a warehouse and a number of shops. Am I boring you?

GEORGE: No you're not.

HAFFNER: You seem to be staring at me.

GEORGE: Am I?

HAFFNER: I remember being stared at.

GEORGE: Oh?

HAFFNER: I mean one sees a lot of unusual faces in this job and some remain in one's head---two weeks and four days was the longest.

GEORGE: Oh?

HAFFNER: There, you seem to be staring at me again.

GEORGE: Not that I was conscious of.

HAFFNER: This is a street for arrears, it had a very bad reputation with the little bloke with the tax. Mind if I sit down?

CURLY: No, not at all. This is only a kitchen.

HAFFNER: Yes, well, you didn't want the bigger flat upstairs, did you, otherwise you could have a nice big sitting room as well.

GEORGE: Oh, so you know all about us, then, eh?

HAFFNER: That's right tick tick.

GEORGE: What was that you said?

HAFFNER: When?

GEORGE: Just now.

HAFFNER: I said about this sitting room upstairs. He only wanted ten bob a week more I believe.

GEORGE: No, after that.

HAFFNER: After what?

GEORGE: Didn't you say something after that?

HAFFNER: About the flat upstairs, you mean? Do you still want it then?

GEORGE: No I didn't mean about that. You're not from Germany by any chance, are you?

HAFFNER: No.

GEORGE: No, well, I just thought, the name you know---I took one of those cross-Channel day trips once and heard them talking away gutterally on the other side, I was glad to get back. It all seemed very strange and alien if you know what I mean.

HAFFNER: Oh yes.

GEORGE: No forbears?

HAFFNER: Eh?

GEORGE: No German forbears?

HAFFNER: Not that I know of tick tick.

GEORGE: Oh lord.

HAFFNER: Eh? There's just one thing, I don't like mentioning this but a lot of girls seem to come up here on the quiet, I mean it's all right by me, in fact I like a night-out myself but a feast is a feast and there seems to be a regular procession up them stairs tick tick according to the people on the ground floor. You don't mind me saying that, do you?

GEORGE: Saying what?

HAFFNER: About the girls.

GEORGE: Why are you wearing black?

HAFFNER: Just left the estate office, any objections?

CURLY: Oh, you've got an office then?

HAFFNER: That's right.

CURLY: And how is it you collect the rent yourself, Mr Haffner? Times have changed in that respect: thirty years ago a landlord was never seen.

HAFFNER: Well I enjoy the feel of the money as I say. Like all people born poor I like to see it grow door by door. And why should I be robbed by an underling, and resented into the bargain?

CURLY: That's right.

HAFFNER: Anyway about those girls---

CURLY: It isn't as if we make any noise.

GEORGE: Any bird who passes that groundfloor flat gets an inspection from behind a curtain and I'm fed up with it. And more than one bird an evening don't come up, is that right, Curly?

CURLY: Well we sometimes have a little crowd but not a romp.

GEORGE: No music. Sometimes a skit, a bit of fun, but nothing anybody else could hear, except in nightmares. And we go home early because we're often on early turn the next day and if I'm on late turn I'm not here so what are they talking about?

HAFFNER: All right, all right, keep your shirt on. I think it's more the morals of the thing that worries them. He's a family man down there.

CURLY: Oh, one of them.

HAFFNER: Nothing to do with me. I take the rent and then my leave as I always say. I just put it to you, to try and keep a happy home.

GEORGE: Yes, well, that's reasonable.

CURLY: He's sometimes up late with his invention, working on complicated graphs and all that, but graphs make no noise do they?

HAFFNER: Oh are you an inventor? What is it?

GEORGE: Well it's not really formed yet.

HAFFNER: Big or small?

GEORGE: Biggish. You seem very interested.

HAFFNER: You're staring at me again-

GEORGE: No I'm not, you're staring at me.

HAFFNER: I was just curious that's all, I used to have a mania for guns.

GEORGE: Guns? I---

HAFFNER: So how much are you kind gentlemen about to pay me for the privilege of these three rooms?

CURLY: Give him the lolly, mate.

GEORGE: I hope it's right. I counted it out.

HAFFNER: Thanks tick tick.

GEORGE: What's that?

HAFFNER: Five, six, seven, eight pounds, five, ten shillings, one, two, three pennies. About time they gave up these pennies isn't it, they only weigh. And

where's the rest?

CURLY: What rest?

HAFFNER: It's written in my book, eleven weeks at least.

CURLY: Eleven weeks what?

HAFFNER: Arrears.

CURLY: What?

HAFFNER: Can't you stop him staring at me?

CURLY: Here, George, you remember paying that little bloke with the tax, don't you? I know I put my whack on the dresser like I did tonight, I was on late turn so you must have paid.

HAFFNER: He don't seem to agree, does he?

GEORGE: Why are you tall and ——— pale? Eh?

HAFFNER: Eh?

GEORGE: And that's a funny way you're sitting. Look at him, Curly! Look! I'm frightened!

HAFFNER: What's the matter with this bloke?

CURLY: What's the matter, George?

GEORGE: I don't know, I feel funny, here your mouth seems all droopy, Here look---look Curly---he's got a dirty piece of white tape---look!

HAFFNER: That's a handkerchief. So would yours be dirty if you had to ~~use~~ use it as a towel, you don't think I'd wipe my hands on their towels do you, some of these tenants, I take a bath a day, so there's no doubt about my clean habits.

GEORGE: I'm sorry, I've had a long stint today.

HAFFNER: And so have I tick tick. Now suppose we return to the subject in hand?

CURLY: It's quite impossible, about that arrears.

HAFFNER: Have a look at it yourself. Either you've not been paying or the little bloke with the tax hasn't been entering. Either way I didn't get my money.

CURLY: Well that's not our responsibility if he don't pay it in, is it?

HAFFNER: I'll sit here all night if I have to.

GEORGE: No don't do that.

HAFFNER: What's that? I want the sum---wait a minute, eight by eleven is eighty-eight and eleven ten shillingses is five pounds ten and eleven threepences is anybody's guess, I'll let you have that as a bonus. So it's the paltry sum of ninety-three pounds and ten shillings.

CURLY: No!

GEORGE: Here, you're not sticking us up for that.

HAFFNER: Yes I am tick tick.

GEORGE: Stop saying that will you?

HAFFNER: I should never have got caught up in this racket only poverty drove me to it tick tick. I go from door to door and if I'm not paid you know I come for the last time---

GEORGE: Here!

HAFFNER: ---the bailiffs move in after me, not the kindly little bloke with the taz any more, because I've got bleak and terrible experiences behind me.

GEORGE: And what about me?

HAFFNER: I've sat in the rain in my life tick tick and had the water flowing past me tick tick taking any little personal belongings of mine---

GEORGE: Here!

HAFFNER: ---such as little bills that were never paid and letters I'd written tick tick to the girls at home and my hands were used to rough work but now tick tick enforced by poverty they seemed to get an alabaster look---

GEORGE: No!

HAFFNER: ---such as babies and young mothers have tick tick and my breathing which used to be stentorian tick tick came in frail little shafts tick tick in fact hardly discernible and whereas I always used to stir myself a lot tick tick I never did now tick tick as if too lazy or not in the mood any more tick tick in that valley---

GEORGE: No!

HAFFNER: ---where the rain came every day tick tick---

GEORGE: Stop him Curly! Curly!

HAFFNER: ---and the mud tick tick and the rats in the water---

GEORGE: Give him the money!

HAFFNER: ---and the dirty bits of white---

GEORGE: No!

HAFFNER: ---sodden handkerchief tick tick came floating by tick tick and I went on sitting---

GEORGE (clutching his heart) Give him the money---Curly!
Give him---

CURLY: Here you'd better go, mate!

HAFFNER: ---never moving my hands tick tick or my lips tick my eyes tick---

GEORGE (grabs a chair) Please! Please!

CURLY seizes the wallet being offered frantically by GEORGE, and pays out the ninety-odd pounds.

HAFFNER: ---seventy tick---seventy-five tick tick---eighty tick---ninety---

GEORGE: Pay him! Pay him!

HAFFNER: ---ninety tick---one tick---two tick---three tick---

HAFFNER dashes out with the money.

CURLY: Here George---I'm sorry---it's George!

GEORGE no longer moves.

CURLY: Here George, George---it was Jimmy Haffner a bloke from Hangar B---it was a bloke from Hangar B George! (dashes to door) Jim! Jim! He's passed--- passed---

HAFFNER comes back.

HAFFNER: What's up?

CURLY: He's---I think he's---

HAFFNER: Are you all right mate?

CURLY: He's a nervous---type.

HAFFNER: It's OK now mister, you can have your money, it was
Curly's idea---here (making him)!

CURLY: You talked me into it! You did! You corrupted me!

HAFFNER: Give him his money back go on, he'll be all right,
he's fainted (holding out his bag).

CURLY: You.

HAFFNER: Here you are mister, here's the tush back, come on
take it mate---

He flings it gingerly at GEORGE,

A ring at the bell.

CURLY: It's a bird!

HAFFNER: Come on!

CURLY: Wake up George, it's a bird! George!

HAFFNER: He's dead mate, you can see that! Dead!

He leaves.

CURLY: George I told 'em about your skit, I didn't know he'd
be so heartless. George. I didn't.

GEORGE remains slumped, covered
with bank notes, while the bell
continues to ring.

CURLY (subsiding into a chair) Here you're staring at me George.

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