PRAISE FOR JANICE HALLETT

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'This fiendishly clever book manages to be both tricksy and surprisingly moving'

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Ian Moore, author of Death and Croissants

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Tariq Ashkanani, author of Welcome to Cooper

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'It's so good. Gripping but my favourite thing is the humour – actual laugh-out-loud moments despite the shocking tale. Genius'

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The Twyford Code

The Mysterious Case of the Alperton Angels

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THE CHRISTMAS APPEAL

Janice Hallett



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For the Ghost of Christmas Past

'These are but shadows of the things that have been.'

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, 1843

To: Femi Hassan & Charlotte Holroyd

From: Roderick Tanner, KC

Date: 1 November 2023

Subject: A conundrum for you

Dear both,

I trust you are well.

While you establish yourselves in the field of criminal law, it doesn't hurt to keep the wheels of deduction turning. I have another fascinating case to run past you. Why you? Well, it seems The Fairway Players are once again at the centre of a mystery.

I've read the enclosed and think I've worked it out. I wonder if *you* can.

Here is a bundle of correspondence from the last few weeks of 2022, during rehearsals for the pantomime *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

RT

Roderick Tanner, KC (retired)

Charlotte

Warning! Incoming trigger alert.

Femi

Yes. I've just opened the six-megabyte attachment.

Charlotte

Seems he's not enjoying his retirement as much as he thought.

Femi

I'm not enjoying his retirement as much as I thought.

Charlotte

I've scrolled through the doc. It's a bundle of e-discovery scans. They do look intriguing.

Femi

Given how he's helped us in the past, we can't very well say no.

To: [Address List]
From: Celia Halliday
Date: 1 December 2022
Subject: A wonderful year!

Dear all,

Kerplunk! Another year of living, loving and laughing.

You'll excuse the round-robin email. We no longer send Christmas cards as they are so bad for the environment. More than that, we have such a vast number of friends that writing to you all individually would take far too long – so we only send personal emails to family and those we are especially close to.

Now if you're anything like us, then you faced every challenge that came your way in 2022, picked it up, gave it a wink and firmly knocked it out of the park. Here is a full and fabulous account of our wonderful year.

Firstly, our skiing holiday in Val d'Isère was almost cut short when Joel had some life-changing news . . . ta da! He was made OBE for his charity work! What a wonderful surprise and validation of his selfless sacrifice over the years. The award of Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire comes with onerous responsibility. He had to change his credit, debit, library, gym, National Trust and Waitrose loyalty cards to feature the three little letters he is legally required to place after his name.

Spring saw the first production this year by The Fairway Players. Current chair Sarah-Jane MacDonald, who insisted on retaining her post despite giving birth to baby Sammy last year, chose the so-called 'comedy' *An Evening with Gary Lineker* by Arthur Smith and Chris England. Kevin MacDonald directed and Sarah-Jane produced. Despite a few last-minute cast changes that saw the part

of Gary Lineker played by sixty-seven-year-old Joyce Walford, the play was surprisingly watchable.

Our gorgeous, beautiful and talented daughter Beth celebrated her twentieth birthday in June. She took a break from her studies at Oxford University and came home, thinking we would celebrate with a quiet family dinner – little did she know we'd organised a surprise party at the exclusive, members-only River Club in Lockley Bois, where rumour has it Joanna Lumley once dined. Beth's good friends Frankie Bridge and Rochelle Humes, from chart-topping girl band The Saturdays, put their solo careers on hold to attend and treated us all to an impromptu a cappella version of 'What About Us'.

Autumn saw us finally get our chance to direct and produce a Fairway play, *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet. It was a controversial choice, but as everyone knows, the Hallidays are always at the front of the queue when challenges are handed out. This is a stage classic that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1984, no less! Of course that was a long time ago and we felt the original script would benefit from a few tweaks, so we removed the swearing, changed the setting to Lockwood so that we could use our own accents, and gave it a happy ending. David Mamet himself sent his congratulations on a triumphant production.

Our son Gregory's property business won the contract to sell all the luxury new-builds on the area now known as Hayward Heights. The largest properties were featured in *Country Life* and appeared as 'must sees' in the property section of *The Sunday Times*. He was also a consultant for the council when they built the Grange Estate, a mix of housing-association accommodation and help-to-buy starter homes on the *other* side of Lockwood. He

celebrated with a boys' holiday (look out, girls!) to Mykonos and Santorini – the two most expensive islands in the Mediterranean.

Even Woof has had a successful year! Our beautiful rescue dog, which we so generously gave a home to, was awarded 'Mutt with the Most' at the spring fair.

Has this email reached the bottom of the page already? But we haven't even mentioned Celia's prize-winning crocheted fruit, Beth's holiday in Portugal in a luxury villa with its own butler, Joel's new car – a vintage Aston Martin – and Gregory's advanced driving course, open only to carefully selected drivers.

Phew! So before we wish you all a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year, we would just like to say: as a family, we smash through any obstacle in our path and treat every moment as if it were our last. We are prouder of both our children with each passing day.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! Celia and Joel Halliday, OBE

To: Celia Halliday From: Jackie Marsh Date: 1 December 2022

Subject: [automatic out of office reply] Re: A wonderful year!

On hols, Jackie

I USED TO COUNT EVERY PENNY NOW I COUNT MY CRYPTOCOIN MILLIONS YOU CAN DO THE SAME! CALL TOLL-FREE ON 0800-0300-000 AND WATCH YOUR WEALTH GROOOOO

To: Celia Halliday From: Joyce Walford Date: 1 December 2022

Subject: Re: A wonderful year!

Christmas comes round earlier every year. It'll be in August next.

January they put a bin near Harry's grave before he was even cold in it. Now it overflows onto his stone. February my neighbour had a biopsy, but it turned out benign. March nothing happened. April I was Gary Lineker and I've never liked him. Barry came off his bike in May, but he was all right. June and July are far too hot these days. August they put a dropped kerb in front of next door – now Nick can't park his work van there. September to now, nothing happened. A normal year really.

What about your Peter, Celia? Is he out yet? Joyce

To: Sarah-Jane MacDonald From: Carol Dearing Date: 1 December 2022 Subject: Bloody Celia!

Bloody Celia Halliday has sent out her Christmas round robin! It's December the first, for goodness' sake! And what she said about *An Evening with Gary Lineker* – I could throttle her. You and Kevin did a wonderful job with that play. No one noticed it was Joyce in the England kit. 'Surprisingly watchable', my bottom! It was a resounding success.

I feel like replying with more accurate footnotes:

- She doesn't send Christmas cards because she's as tight as a gnat's you-know-what.
- Joel was awarded an OBE because his brother-in-law is on the honours committee.
- 'Three little letters he is legally required to place after his name?' Balls! Unless it stands for Overcome By Egocentricity.
- Beth has dropped out of university, which incidentally is Oxford Brookes (NOT the centuries-old institution Celia deliberately misleads everyone into thinking it is).
- Beth is not 'friends' with The Saturdays they were paid to attend the party and were contracted to sing one song.
- David Mamet sent not his congratulations, but a lawyer's letter threatening legal action for breach of copyright.
- The advanced driving course is a speed-awareness scheme.
 Gregory (who is openly gay) was caught, along with every other resident of Lockwood, exceeding the new 20 mph limit past the big Tesco.
- 'We are prouder of both our children with each passing day?' What of middle son, Peter? His exploits haven't made the Christmas round robin since 2013 when he won a half-marathon which turned out to be at a youth detention centre, otherwise described by his parents as an 'exclusive activity camp'.
- And Woof is the mutt with the 'most' revolting habits. I
 swear she brings him to Fairways deliberately to disrupt you.
 That dog didn't come to a single Glengarry rehearsal not
 one!

Rant over. How is my lovely little big boy Harley and baby Samantha? I can't wait to have them both over on Sunday. I'll look after Sammy while you're rehearsing. We can't have the Hallidays claiming the 'most triumphant production of the year' when it's going to be your panto. If you ask me, they've never got over you and Kevin being voted joint chair of The Fairways committee. She's that competitive.

Is *your* Christmas email ready to go? You don't want to look disorganised. Mum

To: Carol Dearing

From: Sarah-Jane MacDonald Date: 1 December 2022 Subject: Re: Bloody Celia!

No, Mum, it's not, and you deserve a medal for reading to the end. It lost me at 'kerplunk'. Celia and Joel are sulking because the committee has vetoed their next choice of play. They wanted to do *When Did You Last See Your Trousers?* A *farce*, for heaven's sake! Everyone knows farce is dead. Ignore them and they'll soon get over it.

Harley is revising for his history test and Sammy is asleep at long last. Can I bring her over at five instead of six? I need to sweet-talk the vicar into removing a stud wall behind the stage to make room for the beanstalk. It's enormous, is over forty years old and has been in countless pantos, but it's by far the best beanstalk in the local area. We need a good, sturdy stem for Jack to climb up. When you can clearly see that a group has cobbled a beanstalk together and Jack mimes climbing it, well, the story loses all credibility for me.

I've tracked it down to Fowey Light Op Soc. Their chair, Jock,

is storing it in his lock-up. Mick Payne offered to collect it in his van. The Walford boys will help carry it. Kevin and Joel will meet them here and they'll all manoeuvre the beanstalk through the church hall and onto the stage. We just need the vicar's permission to take the wall down for the duration of rehearsals and performance nights. Wish me luck.

To: The Fairway Players' Committee

From: Kevin MacDonald Date: 1 December 2022 Subject: Draft Programme

Ok, folks, here's draft text for the programme. Remember, this is a one-night-only fundraising evening. The programme is a single sheet of A4, folded in two, that I run off at work, so no requests for colour photographs or gold-embossed lettering. Any mistakes or typos, let me know before the ninth – or four ever holed you're peice. Kevin

The Fairway Players present Jack and the Beanstalk

First performed at the London Palladium in 1978 All proceeds in aid of the Church Hall Roof

Cast (In order of appearance)

Jack TrottEmma CrooksDame TrottJoel Halliday

'Simple' Simon Trott Harley MacDonald

Callous Hands the Wage Snatcher John O'Dea

Mr Ugly the Village Idiot Matthew Dexter

Daisy the Cow Nick and Barry Walford

Fairy Godmother

Mr Bean Dealer

Muck Payne

Buxom Betty

Princess Jill of Cloud Land

King of Cloud Land

Queen of Cloud Land

The Giant's voice

Mick Payne

Celia Halliday

Kevin MacDonald

Non-speaking villagers and fairies, etc. Karen Payne, Marianne Payne, Denise Malcolm, Joyce Walford, Dustin Perez, Myra Briggs Director Sarah-Jane MacDonald

Producer Kevin MacDonald Music Harley MacDonald

Costumes and make-up Marianne Payne, Denise Malcolm

Refreshments Joyce Walford

Set-building and

Join The Fairway Players

If you picture yourself sweeping down a golden staircase, sweeping an adoring audience off its feet or just plain sweeping up, The Fairway Players needs YOU. We are a well-established, friendly group committed to delivering quality entertainment to the local community. We stage two theatrical productions a year, as well as our annual pantomime, in this church hall, and we're always keen to welcome new members. Contact Celia Halliday for details.

Now & Zen

Yoga with Emma Bend, stretch, breathe, let it go

John O'Dea

Retired accountant Help with tax, VAT, etc. Motto: 'it all adds up' Message posted to The Fairway Players' Committee WhatsApp group on 1 December 2022:

Celia

May I remind everyone on the committee, and especially those responsible for printed material issued on behalf of the group, that Joel's name should *always* be followed by the letters OBE, whenever and wherever it appears. Tiresome, I know, but it's a legal requirement and the law is clear.

Message exchange between Sarah-Jane and Kevin MacDonald on 1 December 2022:

14:11 Sarah-Jane wrote:

We had this with Glengarry and Gary Lineker. Do you deliberately 'forget' Joel's OBE every time you send draft programme text? Are you really that petty?

14:15 Kevin wrote:

You bet I do. And yes, I am.

14:21 Sarah-Jane wrote:

Remember, we must stand for re-election as joint chairs every year, and exhibitions of pique will only fuel the Hallidays' next campaign. I like to think we are co-chairs through our hard work, clear heads and sense of fairness. To lead, we must put away childish things.

14:26 Kevin wrote:

Well said. Joel, OBE will be described as Joel, OBE whenever Joel, OBE is mentioned. Signed, Kevin, no-BE.

To: Celia Halliday

From: Fran Elroy-Jones Date: 2 December 2022

Subject: Music

Dear Celia.

I overheard you speaking to someone at the last rehearsal about how disappointing it is that we don't have live music for the pantomime, purely because no current members are musical or know anyone who is.

I'm new and don't know how things work, but I used to play sax at uni and am still in touch with a few musicians. I could ask around. There may be someone who wants performance experience, and you only need a keyboard player, drummer and guitarist. Sarah-Jane is always so busy, I thought I'd ask you if it's worth me putting forward the suggestion, or perhaps you could mention it for me? Thank you, Fran

To: Fran Elroy-Jones From: Celia Halliday Date: 2 December 2022

Subject: Re: Music

Dear Fran,

First, may I say what a wonderful princess you make. Someone with as beautiful a singing voice as you have deserves proper accompaniment and, agreed, a live trio of musicians would make for a much better production all round.

However, on balance, we feel it's far better for Sarah-Jane to forge ahead with her creative vision for *Jack and the Beanstalk*,

even though it means the actors sing along to tracks played on Spotify by her surly teenage son. She's even chosen an opening number because it mentions 'a room without a roof', as if our audience will link that to the church-hall roof! There are no literary scholars in Lockwood.

We have no doubt that the shortcomings of that decision will be glaringly obvious to all on the night. When everyone finally realises her limitations, it will make for a less busy Sarah-Jane all round. My best advice to you, Fran, is to keep quiet and let nature take its course.

On another note, how are you settling in on Hayward Heights? Our son Gregory was the handsome dish who sold you the house. At first we wondered how someone who worked at a supermarket with Karen Payne could ever afford to live there, but then we found out you're the Regional Manager and it all made sense. If you ever fancy meeting up with Greg for a drink or a chat about property, it can be arranged! Best, Celia

To: Celia Halliday From: Dustin Perez

Date: 2 December 2022 Subject: Recruitment drive

Dear Celia,

Sarah-Jane said at the last rehearsal we need new members to increase the volume of our crowd scenes and to let you know any ideas, as you're membership secretary. I'm new to Fairways and wonder if you'd like me to distribute leaflets on the Grange Estate? Like everyone else there, I've just moved in and I'm sure many will be looking for local activities to join. I'm enjoying rehearsals so

much, I'm more than happy to let others know about the group. Dustin

To: Dustin Perez From: Celia Halliday Date: 2 December 2022 Subject: Re: Recruitment drive

The Grange Estate is on the *other* side of the big Tesco, and most people there don't have cars or much interest in theatre. Celia

To: Sarah-Jane MacDonald From: Rev. Joshua Harries Date: 2 December 2022

Subject: Money

Dear Mrs MacDonald,

Thank you so much for popping in to see me this evening and for the news that all profits from *Jack and the Beanstalk* will be donated to our roof fund. The Fairway Players are welcome to remove the partition backstage to make way for the beanstalk. I would ask, though, that you take great care of the wall panel, as the church committee simply can't afford to replace it. May I suggest you store it in the green room?

Do break a leg for the performance, and may the booing and hissing be in all the right places! Yours, Rev. Harries