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# The Lady in the Van

By Alan Bennett

The smell is sweet,  
with urine only a minor component,  
the prevalent odour suggesting  
the inside of someone's ear.  
Dank clothes are there, too,  
wet wool and onions, which she eats raw,  
plus, what for me has always been  
the essence of poverty,  
damp newspaper.

Miss Shepherd's multi-flavoured aroma  
is masked by a liberal application  
of various talcum powders,  
with Yardley's Lavender always a favourite.  
And currently it is this genteel fragrance  
that dominates the second subject,  
as it were, in her odoriferous concerto.

But as she goes, the  
original theme returns,  
her own primary odour  
now triumphantly restated  
and left hanging in the house  
long after she has departed.

Tell her.

- Miss Shepherd.

- Hmm?

In future, I would prefer  
if you didn't use my lavatory.  
There are lavatories at the bottom  
of the High Street. Use those.

They smell.

And I'm by nature a very clean person.  
I have a testimonial for a clean room,  
awarded me some years ago.

And, do you know, my  
aunt, herself spotless,  
said I was the cleanest  
of all my mother's children,  
particularly in the unseen places.

The writer is double.

There is the self who does the writing,  
and there is the self who does the living.

And they talk. They argue.

Writing is talking to oneself.

And I've been doing it all my life,

and long before I first saw this house  
five years ago.

- Fifteen?

- Number 10 fetched 17.

Come on. I thought you had  
a play on in the West End.

These houses have got so much potential,  
once you get rid of the junk-.

There you have it. Gloucester Crescent.

Good street. On the up and up.

Big motor, have you? Loads of room.

Watch out...

- Just be a few minutes.

- All right, governor.

You're not Saint John, are you?

Saint John who?

Saint John, the disciple  
whom Jesus loved.

No. The name's Bennett.

Oh, well, if you're not Saint John,

I need a push for the van.

It's conked out.

The battery, possibly.

I put some water in. Hasn't done the trick.

Well, was it distilled water?

It was holy water, so it doesn't  
matter if it's distilled or not.

'Course, the oil is another possibility.

That's not holy, too?

Holy oil? Well, in a van,

it would be far too expensive. Now.

I want pushing around the corner. So...

Are you wanting to go far?

Possibly. I'm in two minds.

I'm turning left!

Oh, is that it?

I need... I need the other end.

Well, that's half a mile away.

I'm in dire need of assistance.

I'm a sick woman.

Dying, possibly.

I'm just looking for a last resting place,  
somewhere to lay my head.

Do you know of anyone?

Hmm?

Bye-bye, madam. Mind how you go.

A proper writer might welcome such an encounter as constituting experience.

Me, I have to wait and mull it over.

She saw you coming.

She's old.

You wouldn't get Harold Pinter pushing a van down the street.

No, unlike me.

But then I'm too busy not writing plays and leading my mad, vigorous creative life.

Yeah, you live it, I write it.

- Welcome.

- Hello.

- All moved in?

- Hello. Yes.

- Was the move good?

- Yes, thank you.

Well done.

It's a pretty house.

Not as big as ours, of course, but then you're unattached.

No, it's attached to the house behind.

I mean you. You're single.

Oh.

Sickert once lived in the street, apparently. Dickens' abandoned wife.

Now it's the usual North London medley.

Advertising, journalism, TV.

People like you, writers, artists.

Anything in the pipeline?

Well, I have got a play on in the West End.

Of course you have, yeah.

Dare one ask?

Uh, thirteen five.

- Oh, my God.

- Yes, I know.

We're twice as big,

so what does that make ours worth?

Mind you,

our new neighbour won't help the prices.

Yes, we've met.

Last year she was

in Gloucester Avenue. Now it's our turn.

She seems to have settled at 66.

- Will they mind?

- I hope not.

We like to think we're a community.

Well, it's nice to talk to you.

So, what play has he got on?

We saw it. That domestic thing.

Gone.

Hmm.

- That's litter, Mummy.

- Those are her things.

We thought you might like some pears.

They're from our garden in Suffolk.

Pears repeat on me.

Ah.

Were you planning on staying long?

Not with that din going on.

I know what you're thinking.

Still, it's nice to feel

we're doing our bit for the homeless.

I'd like to keep it like this. Simple.

- Monastic.

- Quite.

- This is my bedroom.

- Nice.

So, do you like being in the play?

Love it. Love it.

So English. Just what people want.

Bed looks comfortable.

Well, maybe you could come around

and give me a hand with the decorating.

Sure. My girlfriend's a dab hand

at the painting.

Hello, darling.

You look a character.

Yes. This is Camden Town.

Oh, yes! I'm here most days.

I teach. And the pavement is my blackboard.

Now, I also sell pencils.

A gentleman came by the other day.

He said the pencil he bought from me

was the best pencil on the market

at the present time.

You're against the common markets, I see.

Me? Who said it was me?

- You're not the writer?

- Not necessarily.

But I'll go so far as to say this.

They're anonymous.

And they're a shilling!

You've only given me sixpence.

Well, it says there,

"Saint Francis hurled money from him".

Well, yes, but he was a saint.

He could afford to.

Sodding beggars!

I'm not a beggar! I'm self-employed,

and this gentleman is my neighbour.

Oh!

On the move again? You didn't stay long.

No. Because it was non-stop music.

Lucy is doing her O levels.

It's the noise levels I'm worried about.

Wave, darling.

Bye, darling.

Don't stay up too late.

Bye, darling.

Sorry about all this.

- Glyndebourne.

- Così.

Oh, lucky you. Have fun.

Oh. Look out. Madam's on the move.

So, whose turn will it be now?

- Slow down.

- I don't want to miss the curtain.

- Mrs Vaughan Williams?

- No. The Birts.

No!

Sixty-two.

No. Who?

No! No!

- No, darling, that's us!

- Stop the cab!

Sorry! Sorry!

Sorry!

Sorry, you can't park here.

No, I've had guidance.

This is where it should go.  
Guidance? Who from?  
The Virgin Mary. I  
spoke to her yesterday.  
She was outside the post office in Parkway.  
What does she know about parking?  
Rufus, tell her we're  
going to Glyndebourne!  
I need a ruler.  
I must measure the distance  
between the tyres and the kerb.  
See, one and a half  
inches is the ideal gap.  
I came across that  
in a Catholic motoring magazine  
under "Tips on Christian Parking".  
This isn't Christian parking.  
It's a fucking liberty.  
Rufus.  
You try to be nice,  
and where does it get you?  
Darling.  
Well, you didn't stay long outside 66.  
Not with that din.  
They're not musical, are they?  
Who?  
You know, 61.  
No. They go to the opera.  
Are you all right?  
What with all this to-do,  
I think I'm about to be taken short.  
Can I use your lavatory?  
No! The flush is on the blink.  
I don't mind.  
Where is it?  
Where is it?  
Thank you.  
I've got a meeting at the BBC.  
What about?  
It's just something I'm writing.  
I thought you were coming up.  
In a week or two.  
I'm on my own.  
I know you're on your own.

We're all on our own.  
Well, can I come down there for a bit?  
Is it a big house?  
Not really. You wouldn't like it.  
It's too many stairs.  
They have these chairlift things now.  
Are you still there?  
Yes.  
Oh!  
The foot feller came today.  
- Who?  
- The foot feller.  
Do you mean the chiropodist?  
- You've written that down.  
- I haven't.  
Hey, I've given you some script.  
I'm just raw material.  
- No, you're not.  
- Hmm.  
Mam.  
Are you all right?  
Yeah. It's the van.  
- It gets very close.  
- I imagine.  
You're tall.  
My husband was tall.  
I'm Mrs Vaughan Williams.  
I won't shake hands. Gardening.  
What, the composer'? Greensleeves?  
Among other things.  
Why? Are you musical?  
I don't even know your name.  
It's Miss Shepherd.  
But I wouldn't want it bandied about.  
I'm in an incognito position, possibly.  
Safe with me.  
Shepherd. Drove ambulances  
in the war, apparently.  
Well, where did she spring from?  
- And a nun once.  
- A nun?  
In the convent up the street.  
Still, everybody's got something to hide.  
My brother-in-law's a policeman.



That's Camden!

People wash up here. Like me.

- Oh.

- Oh!

- She'd be a good subject.

- What for?

You. One of your little plays.

Remember, I planted the seed!

No. No.

I'm writing about Mam half the time  
as it is. One old lady's enough.

I live, you write. That's how it works.

- Yeah, except you don't much.

- Don't what?

Live. Put yourself into what you write.

How? We're both so fucking tame.

Miss Shepherd? I'm Lois. The social worker.

I don't want a social worker. I'm about  
to listen to the repeat of Any Answers?

I brought you some clothes.

You wrote asking for a coat.

Not during Any Answers? I'm a busy woman.

I only asked for one coat.

I brought three,  
in case you fancied a change.

Where am I supposed to put three coats?

Green is not my colour.

Have you got a stick?

The Council have that in hand.

It's been precepted for.

Will it be long enough?

Yes. It's one of our special sticks.

I don't want a special stick.

I want an ordinary stick, only longer.

Shut the door.

If I want to get in touch with you,  
whom should I call?

Well, you can try Mr Bennett at 23.

Only don't take any notice of what he says.

He's a communist, possibly.

Well, have you tried  
the people opposite? They're nearer.

Well, they said they don't relate to her.

You were the one she related to.

Is that what they said? "Related to"?

No, that's me.

They said you were her pal.

- She was your girlfriend.

- Oh, Jesus.

Does she use your lavatory?

Well, only in an emergency.

That might give her squatter's rights.

We'd be much happier if she moved on.

"We"?

Camden.

All right, I've got everything.

The sherbet lemons, Cup-a-Soup,  
the miniature whisky.

Mmm.

That's medicinal.

Well, she seemed very understanding,  
the social worker.

Mmm-hmm. Not understanding enough.

I mean, I ask for a wheelchair,  
and what does she get me?

A walking stick.

And she says I don't get an allowance  
unless I get an address?

Look, "The Van, Gloucester Crescent".

Isn't that an address?

No! It needs to be a house.

A residence.

Anyway, I might be  
going away soon, possibly.

How long for?

Broadstairs, possibly.

Why Broadstairs? Have you family there?

No. No.

Have you got any family?

I just need the air.

I saw a snake this morning.

It was coming up Parkway.

A long grey snake.

- It was a boa constrictor, possibly.

- No.

It looked poisonous.

It was keeping close to the wall,  
and I have a feeling

it was headed for the van.  
No, Miss Shepherd...  
I thought I'd better warn you,  
just to be on the safe side.  
I've had some close shaves with snakes.  
Listen to me, Miss Shepherd, there are no  
boa constrictors in Camden Town.  
What, are you calling me a liar?  
I know a boa constrictor when I see one.  
You all right, my love? Looking  
especially lovely today, sweetheart.  
Don't "sweetheart" me.  
I'm a sick woman! Dying, possibly.  
Well, chin up, love, we  
all gotta go sometime.  
Smells like you already have.  
I do not believe  
in the snake, still  
less that it was en  
route for the van.  
Only next day, I find there has been  
a break-in at the local pet shop.  
So, there may have been a snake on the run.  
Good God.  
So, of course, I feel guilty.  
Giles! Giles! Giles!  
A real writer would have asked her  
about her close shaves with snakes,  
only she seems to have cleared off.  
Quick as you can, love.  
I'm getting off.  
Don't rush me! Don't rush me.  
Nightie?  
This is not a nightdress.  
This style can't have  
got to Broadstairs yet.  
And I know the law. You can't be  
arrested for wearing a nightie.  
What're you doing in Broadstairs?  
I am minding my own business!  
Alan! Come out here!  
What for?  
There's some massive birds on the wall.  
There never are.

There's nothing on the wall.  
You're imagining things.  
There are.  
And there were,  
lined up on the garden wall,  
four peacocks from the Hall.  
So, boa constrictors in the street,  
peacocks on the wall.  
It seems that both at the northern  
and southern gates of my life  
stands a deluded woman.  
- Except you just said they aren't.  
- Aren't what?  
- Deluded.  
- Well, not in this particular instance.  
And they're not the same, Alan.  
Mam and Miss Shepherd.  
No, Alan, they are not.  
But they are both old ladies.  
That appears to be my niche apparently.  
Whereas my contemporaries  
lovingly chronicle  
their first tentative investigations  
of the opposite sex,  
or their adventures  
in the world of journalism,  
I'm stuck with old ladies.  
All right. I'm keeping a sodding notebook.  
But only on the off chance.  
She's not a project. She's  
not in the pipeline.  
I don't want to write about her. She's...  
She's just something that's happening.  
So, what do you want to write about?  
I want to write about spies.  
Spies?  
Yeah, you see?  
You think that's barmy. Spies, Russia.  
I can't always be writing about the North.  
"I was born and brought up in Leeds,  
where my father was a butcher."  
"And as a boy, I would often go out  
on the bike with the orders."  
It's not Proust. It's not even J.B.

Priestley.

The houses in the Crescent  
were built as villas  
for the Victorian middle class.  
And their basements are now being enlarged  
by couples who are liberal in outlook,  
but not easy with their  
newfound prosperity.

Guilt, in a word.

Which means that in varying degrees,  
they tolerate Miss Shepherd.  
Their consciences absolved by her presence.

Merry Christmas!

Shut the door!

Shut the door.

I'm a busy woman. I'm a busy woman.

Oh.

Crme brule.

What was your first play about?

Public school. Which, more accurately,  
is what you Americans call private school.

But you didn't go to public school.

No. But I read about it.

And what was your next play about?

Sex. I read about that, too.

Very good.

Stop it! Stop it! Just...

Get away from us! It's her!

Do you have a problem?

- They were making the noise!

- They're children!

I am a sick woman!

You certainly are!

Get off the road!

Go ahead! Road hog.

Mr Bennett. I've worked out a way  
of getting on the wireless.

What?

I want to do  
one of those phone-in programmes.

Something someone like you  
could get put on in a jiffy.

You see, I could be called  
the "Lady Behind the Curtain",

or "A Woman of Britain, you see.  
You could take a nom de plume view of it.  
And I see the curtain as being here.  
You see, some greeny material would do.  
I thought this was a phone-in.  
Yeah, well?  
Well, it's the radio.  
There's no need for a curtain at all-.  
Yes, we can iron out these hiccups  
when the time comes, you see.  
And when I come in,  
I can catch up with some civilization.  
"Civilization"? What,  
you mean the television?  
Yeah, you know, wild life.  
Famines, you know.  
Sheepdog trials, possibly.  
I mean, I do watch.  
I watch in Currys' window,  
but it's not ideal.  
Oh.  
Yes. Uh, oui.  
What guerre?  
I was studying incognito Paris.  
But what were you studying?  
Music.  
The pianoforte, possibly.  
Have you got an old pan scrub?  
I'm thinking of painting the van.  
You know, one of those little mop things  
they use to wash dishes with would do.  
- Well, how about a brush?  
- I've got a brush.  
It's just for the first coat.  
Okay, she's been a nun.  
Only now it turns out  
she's been a musician besides  
and seemingly with fluent French.  
She's certainly no painter,  
because today, rain notwithstanding,  
she moves slowly around her mobile home,  
thoughtfully touching up the rust patches  
with crushed mimosa,  
always a favourite shade.

Morning.

She's using the wrong paint.

Cars have special paint.

Not this one. It's Catholic paint.

- And she smells.

- That's because she's poor.

You'd smell if we were poor.

Oh. Morning, Ursula.

- Oh. Hello, love.

- Hello, darling.

Oh!

Telling me about paint.

I was in infant school.

I won a prize for painting!

- But it's all lumps. You have to mix it.

- I have.

I have mixed it.

Only I got some Madeira cake in it.

Cake or no cake,

all Miss Shepherd's vehicles ended up  
looking as if they'd been given a coat  
of badly made custard,  
or plastered with scrambled eggs.

Divine!

Still, there were few occasions  
on which one saw her genuinely happy,  
and one of these

was when she was putting paint on.

Jackson Pollock himself

could not have done it better.

Even with a pan scrub.

What're you doing? Get off my van!

- Yellow lines.

- Sorry?

Parking restrictions.

- Oh, what a bore.

- She'll be illegally parked.

She'll have to move.

Look. Look.

It's a removal order.

I know it's a removal order.

Well, it means

you'll have to drive on somewhere else.

But I'm disabled!

I don't always use a walking stick.  
That pulls the wool over people's eyes.  
But I am a bona fide resident of Camden!  
And I had rheumatic fever as a child,  
and mumps.

I still think you'll have  
to move on. Go somewhere else.  
It won't move. There's not enough juice.  
- Well, I'll get you some up the road.  
- I don't like their petrol!  
I don't know. It could be, it could go.  
It just might need a bit of coaxing.  
What I'm...

What I'm worried about particularly  
are the wheels.

They're under divine protection.

If I do get this other vehicle,  
I'd like the wheels transferred.

- What other vehicle?  
- They may be miraculous, the tyres.  
They've only had to be pumped up once  
since 1964.

- What other vehicle?  
- They only cost me a fiver.

Miss Shepherd,  
you said about another vehicle?

Hmm? Yeah, a van.

Another van?

Mmm.

Well, a newer model.

A titled Catholic lady says  
she may get me one, as an act of charity.

It's Lady Wiggin.

Only she'd prefer to remain anonymous.

I'll bet she would. So, why don't  
you park it outside her house?

- It's out of the question.  
- There's plenty of room.  
- I have neighbours!  
- So have I.

So, should I not buy her another van?

- Please your fucking self.  
- What?

Mr Bennett, I've worked it out.



Mr Bennett.

The ideal solution

would be off-street parking.

You know, a driveway, possibly.

So, what are you going to do?

Play it by ear.

Oh...

Lady?

Are you there?

Is this a bad moment?

Have you got something for me?

Ow!

You bad bitch!

You dirty, lying bitch!

Can I help you?

Good evening to you, sir!

I'm finding myself in the vicinity.

I'm taking the opportunity

to pay my compliments to Margaret.

Margaret?

An old friend from way back.

You mean Miss Shepherd?

Shepherd, is it? Very good.

- Well, she'll be asleep.

- Of course.

I'll bid you a good night, sir.

I'll call again when my schedule permits.

Thank you.

Are you in there? Rise and shine!

- Get out, you old witch!

- What a smelly bitch!

Come on, darling! Come on!

Excuse me. Excuse me, lads.

Who the fuck are you?

Never mind who I am.

I've got your number!

Just clear off!

I live here, and I've got your number!

An old lady lives in there. Just shove off!

Miss Shepherd?

Miss Shepherd?

Miss Shepherd, are you all right?

Yes, yes. I think so.

What was it about?

It wasn't the police, was it?  
No. They were louts, but if you choose to live like this, it's what you must expect. I didn't choose. I was chosen.  
Well, that settles it.  
You think?  
I can't always be looking out for her. I'm not her keeper.  
I mean, what happens to work?  
- I think she should either go or...  
- Or what?  
Or bring the van into the drive, where we can forget about her.  
Actually, that's why some men marry. So they don't have to think any more about their wives.  
- That's not bad.  
- Yes, except it's Proust.  
Oh, yes.  
And it'll only be for a few months, until she decides where she's going. It'll be easier, but it's not kindness.  
No.  
"Good nature, or what is often considered as such," "is the most selfish of all virtues."  
"It is nine times out of 10 mere indolence of disposition."  
That's not you.  
Hazlitt. And it's will. Pure will. She's known what she's wanted all along. The soul in question did confess though in guarded terms in Rome in Holy Year, though I'm not sure the priest understood English.  
Do I look like a joy rider?  
My child, you have already been given absolution for this particular sin. I have given you it myself on several occasions. Have faith. Absolution is not like a bus pass.

It does not run out.

Christ.

There's air freshener  
behind the Virgin.

I thought we'd  
finally got rid of her.

He's a saint.

Ralph was the same.

Some people are just kind.

- Kind?

- This is London, Ursula. Nobody's kind.

Yeah, that's true.

And now the old cow

has got a foot in the door. He's a fool.

- Who else would do it?

- Yes.

We might. It's just the girls-.

Pauline.

I'm just an unemployed actor, and I don't  
know the lady, but can I ask something?

- What makes her Alan's problem?

- Quite.

Darling, she's a human being.

Only just.

Changing the subject.

When are we going to find Alan a girl?

Oh! Josephine's pregnant again.

Oh, no! Actually, I'm just trying to think  
who Josephine is.

- The hamster.

- Jesus.

- Here we are.

- Ah!

We were just saying how grateful she'll be.

Yes.

Put the van in your drive?

That never occurred to me.

I don't know. I don't know.

It might not be convenient.

No, I've thought it over.

Believe me, Miss Shepherd, it's all right.

Just till you sort yourself out.

Well, not convenient for you!

Convenient for me.

You're not doing me a favour, you know.  
I have got other fish to fry.  
A man on the pavement told me  
if I went south of the river,  
I'd be welcomed with open arms.  
I was about to do her a good turn,  
but, as ever,  
it was not without  
thoughts of strangulation.  
She would come into the garden, yes,  
but only as a favour to me.  
That's it.  
Have you put on the handbrake?  
I am about to do so.  
Whereupon she applies  
the handbrake with such determination  
that, like Excalibur,  
it can never afterwards be released.  
Are you all right?  
Now she is on the premises,  
I sometimes get a glimpse  
of Miss Shepherd praying,  
and it is seldom a tranquil  
or a meditative process.  
I hunger and thirst for fulfillment...  
The fervour of her intercessions  
rocking her to and fro.  
In possible light received.  
What is it  
she's wanting forgiveness for?  
I used to pray myself  
when I was young, but never like this.  
I'd never done anything,  
but what has she done?  
Who's the old bat?  
Oh. She's a friend.  
A friend?  
Well, someone I know.  
Weird.  
Yeah, maybe.  
Actually, I think I better be off.  
You don't want to stay  
for coffee or anything?  
No.

Bye.

Mr Bennett?

That young man,  
did he have an earring?

He did.

You want to be careful.

She'll be wanting to move in next.

Said my mother,  
who's been in London on a state visit.

Why didn't you tell me  
she was in the drive?

I forgot.

I got a whiff of her  
when I first came. Whew.

Right nasty bad dishcloth smell.

Well, she's in the garden.

Next, it'll be the house.

What will folks think?

This is London. Nobody thinks anything.

It's with her being a  
nun, not having got off.

They get thwarted.

An educated woman, and living like that.

Mind you, you're going down the same road.

Me?

No cloth on the table.

No holder for the toilet roll.

Given time, I could have  
this place spotless.

You've got a home.

You won't want to live here.

On.

Where does she go to the lav?

It has something to do with plastic bags.

What sort of plastic bags?

Stout ones, I hope.

- You've not met her. Do you want to?

- Oh. No.

No. With her being educated

I wouldn't know what to say.

Oh.

- Oh. Give us a kiss!

- Oh.

- When will you be coming up next?

- Soon.  
The thing is.  
I keep seeing a car in the car park.  
That's slightly to be expected, isn't it?  
At night. Watching.  
You taking your tablets?  
When I remember. Hmm.  
She should be in a home.  
- Where does she go to the lav?  
- I told you.  
Looked after.  
A place where they'd wash her  
and make her presentable.  
I'm surprised they let  
her roam the streets.  
It's like a fairy  
story, a parable...  
Good morning.  
In which the guilty  
is gulled into devising a sentence  
for someone innocent...  
Hello.  
Only to find it is their own doom  
they have pronounced...  
King's Cross, please.  
Because my mother  
is much closer to being put in a home...  
- Got your purse?  
- Yes.  
.-.Than Miss Shepherd.  
I do miss your dad.  
Give me a kiss.  
I asked our Gordon, when he was a pilot,  
did he go behind the clouds?  
- Did he?  
- I can't remember.  
He's a love, though. I know that.  
- Bye, Mam.  
- Bye.  
Good afternoon.  
Does Jesus Christ dwell in this house?  
No. Try the van.  
Thanks.  
Clear Off!

Mr Bennett?  
These men who come late at night,  
I know what they are.  
Oh, Jesus.  
They're communists.  
Else why would they come at night?  
We constantly come back to the same point.  
Argentina was the invader. The Argentine...  
I like the new vehicle.  
Not a mark on it.  
Not a bloody scratch!  
What's your name now, Margaret?  
My name's Mary! Go away!  
Mary, is it now? Mary what?  
Mary what?  
- I'll call the police!  
- Call the police?  
I don't think you will,  
you two-faced pisshole.  
'Cause calling the police  
is just what you didn't do.  
Apropos of which,  
I think another contribution is due.  
Can I help you? What's all this din?  
No din, sir.  
Margaret and I were just taking a stroll  
down memory lane.  
No. Don't "Margaret" me.  
That name is buried to sin.  
You came before.  
Of course, this isn't the van, is it?  
She had another one.  
Kind of you.  
A homeless woman.  
A thankless soul.  
And not over-salubrious.  
Good-bye, Margaret.  
I thought you said your name was Mary.  
- It is.  
- So, why does he call you Margaret?  
He's taken too much to drink  
on an empty stomach, possibly.  
It is your name? Mary Shepherd.  
Subject to the Roman Catholic Church

in her rights and to amendment.  
It's obviously not her name.  
But although years have passed  
since she drove her van into the garden,  
I'm still too polite to ask who she is,  
let alone what this fellow wants  
who materializes at regular intervals  
and comes braying on the side of the van.  
Music has something to do with it.  
But is it just the noise, or music itself?  
I can hear the music.  
I can hear it!  
Why must you play that?  
I can hear it!  
How can you dislike music?  
You used to play the piano.  
How do you know that?  
You told me.  
I didn't say I didn't like it.  
I don't want to hear it, that's all!  
Should she speak now?  
Should she explain?  
Well, she never lets on. Never explains.  
Well, maybe she should.  
Well, I...  
I was once left alone in a room  
in the convent.  
They didn't leave novices alone normally.  
And there was a piano there.  
I tried it, and it was open.  
It needed tuning.  
Some of the notes were dead.  
But it sounded more beautiful to me  
than any of the pianos I'd ever played.  
And then  
suddenly, the mistress  
of the novices came in.  
Crept in, possibly, 'cause I  
didn't hear her. She said...  
It's God's will.  
That was what God wanted.  
And that I'd been told before.  
And don't argue.  
I said,



couldn't I just play some hymns  
for us to sing to?  
And she said that was arguing.  
And I'd never make a nun if I argued.  
So, with painful symmetry,  
my mother ends up in a home  
in Weston-super-Mare  
while her derelict counterpart  
resides in my garden.  
Putting my mother in a home,  
I see as some sort of failure.  
And giving the other a home,  
that's a failure, too.  
Oh, Jesus.  
She's got herself a three-wheeler.  
Where will you park it?  
In the residents' parking.  
- You haven't got a permit.  
- Yeah, I have. Yes, I got one yesterday.  
Well, you never told me.  
Well, you'd only have raised objections  
if I had.  
Have you insured it?  
I don't need insuring.  
It's like the van, I'm insured in heaven.  
So, who pays if you have an accident,  
the Pope?  
I shan't have an accident.  
Well, what if you run into something?  
I shan't run into anything.  
I'm an experienced driver.  
I drove ambulances in the blackout.  
Well, what if someone runs into you?  
Miss Shepherd,  
what if someone runs into you?  
You have no business saying that.  
Why do you say that?  
No one is going to run into me!  
Where's the key?  
- What key?  
- The car key. I put it down.  
Well, I haven't got it.  
- You had to have taken it.  
- I have not.

You're lying! You don't want me  
to have the car, so you've taken the key.  
- Don't shout!  
- I have to shout because of your ignorance.  
People coming and going  
all hours of the day and night.  
I'd be better off in a ditch!  
Give me the key!  
I haven't got your sodding key!  
What's that around your neck?  
This is the key. The sodding key!  
Having fun?  
Shouldn't you say sorry?  
I've no time for sorry.  
Sorry is for God.  
This was the only time  
I ever touched her,  
and not because she was calling me a liar,  
but because she seemed mad.  
It was my mother.  
It's always Mam you compare her with.  
They are not the same.  
I don't like them  
even sharing the same sentence.  
These days, it's almost  
as if we're married.  
"How's your old lady?" They say.  
Which is what people call a wife.  
Your old lady.  
How's your old lady?  
Well, she's still there. I'm still here.  
Your mother died, didn't she?  
No, she's still here, too.  
She's in a home.  
Except she's not all there.  
She's not anywhere.  
Shouldn't we make that plain in the play?  
No. It's classified information.  
Years ago,  
Mam wanted Miss Shepherd put in a home.  
But she's still on the loose.  
Of course, whether she's all there or not  
is anyone's guess.  
Mr Bennett!

You know, I don't like  
the three-wheeler standing in the street.  
You see, if you pushed the van  
in front of your window,  
I could get the Reliant  
in there on the drive.  
There's tons of room.  
So, I have the van and the Reliant.  
Yeah, I've had guidance  
that's where it should be.  
You know, in terms of vandals.  
Guidance from whom?  
I'm not at liberty to speak.  
I think I may contact my new social worker.  
What for? You always say  
you don't want the social worker.  
I've had guidance she might help.  
I don't want a used car lot.  
- Mary says.  
- Mary who?  
MEW-  
Your Lady in the Van.  
Didn't you know her name was Mary?  
Well, I suppose I did.  
I always call her Miss Shepherd.  
We all have names.  
Perhaps if you called her by her name  
and she called you by yours,  
"Alan!!! "Mary",  
you never know, it might be easier  
to talk things through.  
Through? There is no through.  
How do you talk things through  
with someone  
who has conversations with the Virgin Mary?  
You talk things through  
with Isaiah Berlin, maybe,  
who, in comparison with Miss Shepherd,  
is a man of few words.  
You do not talk things through with her  
because you don't get through.  
Alan, I'm getting a bit of hostility here.  
I realise for you this may be  
a steep learning curve.

No. It is not a steep learning curve.  
I've never been on a  
so-called learning curve.  
I'm about as likely to be found  
on a learning curve  
as I am on the ski slopes at Zermatt.  
And besides, her name isn't Mary.  
Oh?  
Some people seem to think it's Margaret.  
You know, it isn't even Shepherd.  
Well, I have her down as Mary.  
Yes, and you presumably have her down  
as a rational human being.  
Ugh...  
Ugh...  
Hello!  
Mummy!  
Back in half an hour.  
Hello, Margaret.  
Hail Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.  
What are you doing there? Come on!  
What's happened to Stirling Moss?  
Haven't seen her at the wheel recently.  
Taking a well-earned break, I imagine.  
The Dordogne, possibly.  
- Really?  
- Pauline.  
Her car's back.  
But I haven't seen her around for a bit.  
I wonder if she's all right.  
Am I right in thinking  
that large, many-contoured stain at the  
back of her frock denotes incontinence?  
I don't think it's a fashion statement.  
Oh, darling.  
What you must be hoping is that  
one of these days she'll just slip away.  
Don't you believe it.  
That's what happens in plays.  
In life, going downhill is an uphill job.  
How's your mother?

Oh, same. Sits. Smiles. Sleeps.

Oh.

Are you all right?

Me? Yes, why? I'm just going to the theatre.

- Not upset about your play?

- No.

I read a good review the other day.

- I was told they were all good.

- They are, I'm sure.

We enjoyed it.

Though I hadn't realised it was just going to be you and nobody else.

Well, yes. It's a monologue.

Yes, I suppose.

I'm just amazed how you remember it all.

The review I read was particularly perceptive about you.

Really? Saying what?

That you couldn't make your mind up.

- About what?

- Anything, really.

It meant in a good way!

Thanks.

Actually, I couldn't make it out at all.

What was it about?

Him, as usual. Not coming clean.

- What about?

- What do you think?

Oh.

And when I came down again, she's still sat there, hat and coat on.

She said, "Graham, my one aim in life is for you to be happy."

And execute 45.

"If I thought that by dying it would make you happy, I would."

Go.

I said, "Mam", "your dying wouldn't make me happy.

In fact, the reverse."

"It would make me unhappy.

Anyway, Mam, you're not going to die."

She said, "No, I'm not going to die."

"I'm going to get married."

"The honeymoon is in Tenerife."

"Have one of your tablets."

BENNETT. So, for the umpteenth time,  
I biked back from the theatre  
where I'd been talking about my mother.  
Well, at least I know where my mother is.  
Miss Shepherd.

Miss Shepherd?

I don't like it.

- So, look in.

- No.

- Are you scared?

- No.

Not of the body.

Scared this may be the end of the story,  
and now I'm going to have to write it.

Still, now she's gone.

I can make it up.

Narrative freedom. Whoopee.

Miss Shepherd.

- Miss Shepherd?

- Go on.

What are you doing?

Looking at my things?

I thought you might be ill or dead.

- Dead? Me?

- I was concerned.

You were nosy!

I haven't seen you. I'm sorry.

I'm not dead! You'll know when I'm dead.

I'm sorry.

Dead? Me?

I shan't die in a hurry, I can tell you.

Dead?

Don't make me laugh.

She didn't die then,  
and nor did my mother.

But as the years passed,  
both of them were beginning to fade.

As you can appreciate,  
it's difficult to take a history.

But I'm right in thinking  
she hasn't been a smoker?

- No.

- Not been a smoker, doesn't drink.

All things considered,

a very healthy woman.

You think?

This is a woman who's broken her hip.

And of course, in someone younger

and in better circumstances,

we'd give them antibiotics.

But at your mother's age,

and in her state of mind,

one wonders if this is altogether kind.

And if you don't give her antibiotics,

what will happen?

She may recover.

Or not.

She could just sleep away.

You mustn't reproach yourself.

You've done

more than can be expected.

Thank you.

Oh.

Mr Bennett.

- Where have you been?

- Seeing my mother.

Oh. How is she?

The same. She doesn't remember me now.

Well, I'm not surprised.

She doesn't see you very often.

Will you write about me?

I don't know.

She never said this.

So?

Oh. I've heard you. On the wireless.

Does she know that?

Well, how can she?

She doesn't know who she is.

Yeah, that's what you think.

Using your mother.

You should be ashamed of yourself.

She didn't say this.

No. But why shouldn't she?

You write about her all the time,

one way or another.

You use your mother.  
That's what writers do.  
Me next, I suppose.  
Anyway, now you're here,  
I need some shopping done.  
You ought to go yourself.  
You should try and walk more.  
- I do walk.  
- I never see you.  
Well, that's 'cause you're not around  
in the middle of the night.  
I want some batteries.  
And some sherbet lemons.  
- Mr Bennett?  
- Yes?  
Would you like to push me up the street?  
Not particularly, no.  
This'll do. Turn me 'round. Turn me 'round!  
All right.  
Whee!  
Careful!  
Are you all right?  
Yes, I think so.  
Would you like me to make you  
a cup of coffee?  
No.  
No, I don't want you to go to all that  
trouble. I'll just have half a cup.  
Oh!  
I have to go to mass.  
- Well, you're not fit.  
- Here.  
It's an anniversary and  
a day of obligation.  
Oh? Who for? A saint?  
No. A young man.  
Oh? Someone you loved?  
No! Certainly not. Just someone I...  
Someone who died.  
He'd be in his 50s now.  
Was he a Catholic?  
Possibly, possibly. Only he's in purgatory.  
He needs my prayers.  
What was his name?



No, I never bother with names.  
The body of Christ.  
The body of Christ.  
- Yes?  
- I live down the street.  
I've seen you.  
It's you that has the van.  
Yes.  
Difficult woman.  
A Catholic.  
One of the sisters remembers her.  
I've been told she was very argumentative.  
Is that why she was made to leave?  
Disputatious, she was.  
I've had her pointed out to me  
on that account, hankering after the piano.  
She always thought she was right.  
She wasn't right. God is right.  
End of story.  
Anyway, what do you want to know for?  
- She's ill.  
- Who? The woman?  
I wondered if there was a nun available who  
could talk to her, do her some shopping.  
We don't have shopping nuns.  
It's a strict order.  
I've seen them shopping.  
I saw one yesterday at Marks & Spencer.  
She was buying meringues.  
The Bishop may have been coming.  
Well, does he like meringues?  
Who are you, coming 'round,  
asking if the Bishop likes meringues?  
Are you a communist?  
She's ill. She's a Catholic,  
and I think she might be dying.  
Well, they can pray for her,  
only you'll have to fill in a form.  
She'll probably pull her socks up  
once your back is turned.  
That's been my experience  
where invalids are concerned.  
This way out!  
I don't want you bumping into the sisters.

Oh!

Another parcel on the path.

If... When I write about all this, people will say there's too much about shit. But there was a lot about shit. Shit was in the forefront. Caring, which is not a word I like, caring is about shit.

- I've talked to Mary.
- Or Margaret.

Or Margaret.

Miss Shepherd, anyway.

She tells me you don't encourage her to get out and lead a more purposeful life, and put obstacles in her way. I don't encourage her to think she can become prime minister. I do encourage her to try and get to the supermarket. Yes. A carer will often feel that... Excuse me, may I stop you? Do not call me the carer. I am not the carer. I hate caring. I hate the thought. I hate the word. I do not care, and I do not care for. I am here, she is there. There is no caring. Alan, I'm sensing hostility again. You see, I'm wondering whether having cared for Mary, as it were, single handed for all these years, you don't understandably resent it when the professionals lend a hand. No, though I resent it when the professionals turn up every three months or so and try to tell me what this woman, whom I have coped with on a daily basis for the past 15 years, is like. What is she like? Mary, as you call her, is a bigoted, blinkered, cantankerous, devious, unforgiving, self-serving, rank, rude, car-mad cow.

Which is to say nothing  
of her flying faeces  
and her ability to extrude  
from her withered buttocks  
turds of such force that they land  
a yard from the back of the van  
and their presumed point of exit.  
Though, of course,  
you didn't say any of that.  
People will think it's  
because you're too nice.  
It's actually because you're too timid.  
Yes. Though this being England,  
timid is good, too.  
Well, this has been very helpful.  
I'll see about getting her a doctor.  
Is it a man doctor?  
Yes.  
I don't want a man doctor.  
Don't they have a woman?  
Sorry. Miss Shepherd,  
I only want to take your pulse.  
- Which hand? Do you have a preference?  
- No.  
Ah.  
It's normally cleaner than that.  
Miss Shepherd, I'd like to take you  
to hospital for a day or so,  
just to run some tests.  
No, I've always had great faith in onions.  
Yes.  
But onions can only take you so far,  
medically speaking.  
She won't go to hospital.  
- How do you know?  
- Ask her.  
Would she go to the day centre?  
She could be looked at there.  
And she could stay for a few days.  
She won't go to the day centre.  
Are you sure?  
Have you asked her?  
She will not go to the day centre. I know.  
Of course I'll go.

They won't make me stay in?

No, they're going to give you a bath  
and put you in some clean clothes  
and do some tests.

Will they leave me to it?

- Where?

- In the bath.

I know how to bath myself.

I've won awards for that.

Yes, I remember.

- Mr Bennett.

- Yes?

It won't look

as if I'm being taken away, will it?

Taken away where?

Where they take people  
because they're not right.

Do they do that still?

Well, sometimes,

but you need a lot of signatures.

But they pretend things  
to get you there sometimes.

That's the danger with next of kin.

It's one of their tricks.

They might be pretending it's a day centre.

- No.

- Well, I...

I've been had like that once before.

Alan.

Miss Shepherd.

Now, I'm a bit behindhand with things,  
so there may be a bit of a...

- Put your arm around my neck.

- Oh!

There we go.

I've not gone in for  
this kind of thing much.

I note how,

with none of my own distaste,  
the ambulance driver does not hesitate  
to touch Miss Shepherd,  
and even puts his arm around her  
as he lowers her into the chair.

I note, too, his careful rearrangement

of her greasy clothing,  
pulling the skirt down over her knees  
in the interest of modesty.  
I'm coming back, you know.  
This isn't a toe in the water job.  
Is there anything you'd like us to take  
and have us wash?  
Well, why? Most of my things are clean.  
Not ill, your friend?

- No.

- Not going?

- Only to the day centre, apparently.

- Oh.

The children always ask after her.  
They used to be so frightened of her  
when they were young.  
One's in Washington now. The World Bank.  
How long has it been? Ten years?

- More like 15.

- A lifetime.

Mr Bennett. Mr Bennett.  
That social worker wanted to know  
my next of kin.  
I don't want my next of kin broadcast,  
so I said I didn't have any.  
Only, they're in this envelope.  
And you keep it under your hat.

Do you know  
I was an ambulance driver myself once?  
During the war.

I knew Kensington in the blackout.

- Oh. Really?

- Mmm.

The chair goes up on a lift.  
And in this small ascension,  
when she slowly rises  
above the level of the garden wall,  
there is a vagabond nobility about her.  
A derelict Nobel Prize winner, she looks,  
her grimy face set  
in a kind of resigned satisfaction.

Could we do that again?

I'd like another go.

When you come back.

Ooh.  
Here we go.  
You smell lovely.  
- You okay?  
- Yes.  
Good.  
There. Your M.O.T.  
There you go.  
Hello, Margaret.  
Fourteen years?  
You must be a saint.  
She's a difficult woman, my sister.  
Edith won't have her in the house.  
I used to help her out when I could.  
It's what Mother would have wanted.  
I'm not a saint, just lazy.  
- I know she was an ambulance driver.  
- Yes.  
And she was a nun. Twice over.  
Till they got rid of her.  
Tipped her over the edge.  
She spent some time in an asylum.  
Banstead.  
Which was my fault.  
No.  
Mind you, she's a difficult woman.  
Such a bully.  
Did she bully you? She bullies me.  
Well, I had her put away.  
Incarcerated.  
Sectioned is what you'd call it today.  
Mind you, she got away from them, too.  
- Oh!  
- Gave them the slip, ended up in the van.  
Does she still play? Piano?  
No.  
Oh.  
That is sad.  
Have you heard of Cor-tot?  
Alfred Cortot, the virtuoso pianist?  
Yes.  
Margaret was his pupil.  
Yeah, she had to go over  
to Paris for lessons.

It wasn't easy in those days.  
And practice. Oh. My word,  
she used to practice all daylong.  
Well, the nuns put a stop to that.  
Test of obedience.  
I was a vet in Africa, and when I came  
back, the music was out. Finished.  
Practicing had become praying.  
Hmm.  
Played at the Proms once.  
Miss Shepherd?  
Miss Shepherd?  
I just tried to visit you.  
I wasn't stopping there.  
A woman said my face rang a bell.  
Was I ever in Banstead?  
And she would not stop.  
They gave me some mince and she said,  
"You'll find the mince here  
a step up from the mince in Banstead."  
I don't know about the...  
The mince in Banstead,  
or anywhere else, for that matter.  
That's just where they put people  
when they're not right.  
Well, you look nice and clean.  
Yeah, well, that'll be the bath.  
They let me do it myself.  
The nurse came and gave me  
some finishing touches.  
She said I'd come up a treat.  
I bought you these.  
Flowers?  
What do I want with flowers?  
They... They only die.  
I've got enough on my  
plate without flowers.  
Why, you won't often  
have been given flowers.  
Who says'?'  
I've had bigger flowers than these.  
And with ribbons on.  
These don't compare.  
Music.

How are people  
supposed to avoid it?  
You see, I had it at my fingertips.  
I had it in my bones.  
I could play in the dark.  
Had to sometimes.  
And the keys were  
like rooms.  
C major and D minor.  
Dark rooms and light rooms.  
Just like a mansion  
to me, music.  
Only it worried me,  
that playing came easier than praying.  
And I...  
I said this, which may have been an error.  
Said it to whom?  
My confessor.  
He said  
that was another vent  
the devil could creep through.  
So, he outlawed the piano.  
Put paid to music generally.  
Said dividends would accrue in terms of  
growth of the spirit.  
Which they did.  
They did.  
How's your mother?  
Oh. The same.  
Still in the coma?  
No.  
She's just getting a bit of shut-eye.  
People do.  
Well, good night.  
Mr Bennett?  
Hold my hand.  
It's clean.  
So much of what  
this woman's life had been,  
I found out only after her death.  
So, to tell her story,  
I have occasionally had to invent,  
though much of it one could not make up.  
And I do not make it up when I say



that it was on the morning after this talk,  
when she lay in the van  
with her hair washed,  
that on that same morning  
comes the social worker into the garden,  
bearing clean clothes, linen and ointment  
and knocks on the door of the van.  
It is a van no longer.  
It is a sepulchre.  
Can I use your phone?  
Yes. Yes, of course.  
Even now, I do not venture  
into this evil-smelling tomb.  
But I feel cheated that the discovery  
of the body has not actually been mine  
and that having observed so much  
for so long,  
I am not the first to witness her death.  
Now, in quick succession,  
come the doctor,  
the priest and men from the undertaker's  
all of whom do what no one else has done  
for 20 years.  
Namely, without pause  
and seemingly without distaste,  
step inside the van.  
Lord grant her everlasting rest  
and let perpetual light shine upon her.  
Present her to God the Most High.  
She's gone, then, the lady.  
He'll know. She'll have told him.  
Only they got to keep mum, vicars.  
No helping the police with their enquiries.  
Did you know she was on the run?  
Miss Shepherd?  
Miss whatever you call her, yeah.  
Stationary at a junction,  
a young lad on a motorbike  
comes 'round a corner too fast...  
And smashes into her vehicle.  
Not her fault.  
Only here's a dead boy on the road  
who she thinks she's killed.  
Does she call the police?

Flag down a fellow motorist? Oh, no.  
She clears off pronto.  
Thereby putting herself  
on the wrong side of the law.  
So, you blackmailed her.  
I'm a policeman, Mr Bennett.  
Retired, of course.  
We don't do things like that.  
Well, it's a cut above  
her previous vehicle.  
All those years,  
stood on my doorstep,  
she was outside the law.  
A life, this is what I keep thinking,  
a life beside which mine is just dull.  
Left to my own thoughts at the graveside,  
one of the undertaker's men takes the eye.  
Not an occupation one drifts into,  
I imagine, undertaking.  
Mr Bennett. Excuse me.  
I'm supposed to be the centerpiece here.  
But I'm forgetting  
that the dead know everything.  
You should be fighting back the tears,  
not eyeing up the talent.  
Well, it's a thought.  
She's dead now.  
I can do what I want with her.  
Yes, you can.  
I'm dead. Feel free!  
Oh. Hello.  
There are two of you now.  
Is that because you're in two minds?  
- Yes.  
- No.  
Where are you going, Miss Shepherd?  
I was wondering, would either of you object  
if the van became a place of pilgrimage?  
- No.  
- I'm getting rid of the van. The van is going.  
Healing could take place, and any proceeds  
could go towards the nuns.  
The nuns?  
What did the nuns ever do for you?

Well, not much,  
but when the donations start rolling in  
they'll realise  
what a catch I would have been.  
It was the same with Saint Bernadette.  
They didn't realise with her  
until it was too late.  
This way.  
There's someone I want you to meet.  
That's something you could do.  
This thing you're trying to write,  
well, you could pump it up a bit.  
If it were on the lines of  
The Song of Bernadette,  
it would make you a packet.  
I mean, why? Why did you just let me die?  
I'd like to go up into heaven.  
An ascension, possibly.  
A transfiguration.  
That's not really my kind of thing.  
Oh. There you are.  
This is my new friend.  
- Hello.  
- Hello.  
It's the young man who  
crashed into the van.  
Hi.  
I thought it was me that killed him.  
Turns out it was his own fault.  
So, one way and another,  
we've got heaps to talk about.  
Goodbye.  
Mr Bennett?  
Yes.  
I came into your drive for three months...  
And I stayed for 15 years!  
- Mr Bennett?  
- Yes?  
- Do you know what that is?  
- No.  
It's the last laugh.  
Well, she wanted an ascension.  
Let's answer her prayers.  
Stand by, Miss Mary Teresa Shepherd,

late of 23 Gloucester Crescent.

UP You go.

Starting out as someone  
incidental to my life,  
she remained on the edge of it so long,  
she became not incidental to it at all.

As home bound sons and daughters  
looking after their parents  
think of it as just marking time  
before their lives start,  
so, like them, I learned there is  
no such thing as marking time  
and that time marks you.

In accommodating her  
and accommodating to her,  
I find 20 years of my life has gone.  
This broken-down old woman, her delusions,  
and the slow abridgment of her life,  
with all its vehicular permutations,  
these have been given to me to record  
as others record journeys  
across Afghanistan or Patagonia  
or the thighs of a dozen women.

You wanted me to make things happen.

And I never have much,  
but it doesn't matter.

Because what I've learnt,  
and maybe she taught me, is that  
you don't put yourself into what you write.  
You find yourself there.

I never wanted to write about her.

If there'd been a bit more in your life,  
I wouldn't have had to.

Maybe I will now.

What?

Have a bit more in my life.

I might even start living.

Good day?

Not bad. You?

Oh. These came.

Hmm. Very good.

- Coming down?

- All right.

That's the end of the story.

It might make a play.

What do you think?

Now I'm here, I think you should  
stop talking to yourself.

Hi.

Hi, Alan.

Okay, nice and quiet,  
please. Here we go. And let's turn over.

- B.

- Mark it.

Okay, take 14.

And, action!

Gloucester Crescent

has had many notable residents,  
but none odder or more remarkable  
than Miss Mary Shepherd,  
to whom we dedicate this blue plaque today.