

SAUL. I can't stand to see a woman defiled. It was the same when I was younger and used to run an agency making flats in West London affordable to young Eastern European girls.

PERCHIK. How d'you do that then?

SAUL. By helping them sublet by the hour to businessmen from the Home Counties.

VANESSA. Ever so charitable you are, aren't you, Saul?

SAUL. It's just my character, dearest. Now, what about some supper for Perchik?

VANESSA. Um. There's your stew, Saul...

SAUL. Perfect! A fine introduction to our customs. The way to a country's heart is through its stomach. No, no, wife. *I shall fetch it!*

*SAUL exits with ceremony.*

VANESSA (*fondly*). My husband is a very keen cook.

PERCHIK. Ay? What's his speciality then?

VANESSA. Well... he's very good at brown things. Not like me, I'm shocking, I'd burn a banana split! It comes of not having had a mum for very long I think, there's a certain kind of knowledge that gets passed down isn't there certain things like how to choose a good tomato and pricking sausages with a fork though that said I do make very good pastry, cold hands you see goodness listen to me banging on about myself! I'm sorry, er, Perchik, was it? Saul's right, it is a funny name, isn't it – I don't mean that in a horrible way – so what are you doing in our shop then, Perchik?

PERCHIK (*not missing a beat*). I've come to fix your pianoforte, Lady Hamilton.

*As VANESSA spins round sharply, SAUL enters bearing a stockpot and ladle. VANESSA and PERCHIK break gaze as VANESSA rushes out to the back.*

SAUL. Ta-da! This'll put some strength in you, Perchik! Are you handy with a spade?

PERCHIK. Dunno. Never used one.

SAUL. You'll soon pick it up. Foundations must be laid!

PERCHIK. Foundations for what?

SAUL. For the extension! I'm expanding my Empire out back.

*SAUL tucks his hankie into his shirt-neck. VANESSA enters with bowls and cutlery, and starts laying the table.*

And you are going to help me!

PERCHIK. Vanessa and I were just havin' a wee chat about –

*VANESSA quickly holds out a salt-shaker and a pepper-grinder.*

VANESSA. Saul! Condiments to the chef!

*SAUL stares at the salt and pepper for a moment, then they both roar with laughter.*

SAUL. Condiments to the – !

VANESSA (*giggling*). You will be careful, won't you? Out back?

SAUL. Of course we will.

VANESSA. Only, I wouldn't want Perchik to leave like Frankie.

SAUL. Not now, Vanessa.

PERCHIK. What happened to Frankie?

SAUL. Nothing happened to him. Who said anything happened to him?

PERCHIK. I just meant – why did he leave, like? Did he find another position?

SAUL. Yes. He found another position. At a more... grass-roots level.

VANESSA. But, Saul, he didn't –

SAUL. I'm trying not to frighten the boy, Vanessa.

VANESSA. But he should know...

PERCHIK. Know what?

SAUL. It's a sad story. A very sad story.

VANESSA. Oh, ever so sad, Perchik.

PERCHIK. What happened?

SAUL. Oh, I couldn't possibly say. No, it's too sad. I couldn't. No. I'd sooner die. Not even if you begged me on hand and knee I couldn't. Not in a million trillion billion –

PERCHIK. Please?

SAUL. He fell.

VANESSA. Into the cement mixer, Perchik.

SAUL. It was dreadful, I can't deny it, but entirely consonant with the laws of gravity, as I understand them. We were out back. Expanding the Empire. The boy was blind as a bat – he was a foreign as well, like you, no papers, barely spoke a word of English.

VANESSA. Saul is very socially minded.

SAUL. Thank you, wife. I appreciate that.

VANESSA. He's always taking people in, giving them a job.

SAUL. Even in these lean times, an Englishman must behave as an Englishman.

VANESSA. Oh, but so few do.

SAUL. Yes, so few do.

VANESSA. Go to the lengths you go to.

SAUL. I can't say it's not a daily struggle.

VANESSA. I mean, he's not a wealthy man himself.

SAUL. Never aspired to be.

VANESSA. But what he does for these poor foreign blind boys.

SAUL. Just a little education.

VANESSA. And don't they love him for it!

SAUL. They're like sons to me.

VANESSA. Like family.

SAUL. That's enough, wife. One lump or two?

*SAUL starts to dish up stew for himself and VANESSA. It is indeed a stew of indistinguishable fleshy lumps (see Delia Smith's Cookery Course (1981), p.332).*

VANESSA. Little Francesco. Two please, Saul.

SAUL. Dig in, Perchik.

PERCHIK. I'm. Ah. I'm no' that hungry.

*Pause.*

SAUL. You're 'no' that hungry'?

VANESSA. But everyone is hungry, Perchik.

PERCHIK. I don't have a very big appetite.

SAUL. Do you know the lengths I go to to put meat on this table? You think it's easy? Essex underwater and Dorset dissolving into the sea like sherbet. There's no pasture any more, no grazing, and here I present you with a delicious stew and you turn up your nose!

VANESSA. Frankie never used to eat much either. The amount of work he did on the food you gave him, Saul. The boy was a real treasure.

PERCHIK. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but –

VANESSA. Actually, Perchik reminds me a bit of Frankie, Saul.

SAUL. If you don't mind me saying, you're being very short-sighted.

VANESSA. Ah, see, Frankie was long-sighted.

SAUL. How long do you think this heat can continue? Only those with enough food stores about their person have any hope of making it through the winter we will have.

PERCHIK. I'm just not –

*As SAUL talks, he lifts out a ladle of stew. Sitting on top is a pair of NHS spectacles. VANESSA panics. SAUL and PERCHIK are oblivious.*

SAUL. We must make ourselves into living larders, that is what we must do, for, to paraphrase the late, great / Charles Darwin –

VANESSA. Um... Saul –

SAUL. 'The human race will soon boil down to little more than survival of the / fittest.'

VANESSA. Saul –

SAUL. And you, you scrawny runt, won't last a minute!