

BUILDING ON SAND

(A Comedy of Self Deception in Two Acts)

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CHARACTERS

Richard Jenkins	An accountant in his 30s or 40s.
Juliette	His wife. A social worker.
Dan Crisp	Richard's old school friend.
Aunt Dot	Juliette's eccentric aunt.
Berenice	An attractive young French girl.

SET

The action takes place on the beach at Littlehampton. It requires a simple set to represent an open beach. There is a raised area representing sand dunes, stage left. An inflatable dingy, some flotsam, seaweed and beach accessories complete the scene. A sandcastle required for certain scenes may be hidden behind the windbreak in scene one.

ACT ONE

Scene One

The screeching of seagulls fades up as the lights rise on Richard, Dan and Berenice. Dan, bare-chested and wearing a pair of boxer shorts, holds two deck chairs under each arm. Berenice is virtually glued to him and carries a blanket under her arm. She is sporting trendy beach-ware and a pair of over-sized dark glasses. Richard, is in expensive tracksuit and designer sun glasses. Juliette wears an Amnesty International T shirt and shorts and is carrying a picnic hamper.

Rich It's no good. Everyone stop. My trainers are full of sand.

Juli Oh, for heaven's sake, Richard. It's not going to kill you.

Bere (with a French accent) Look, Daniel. The sea! The sea!

Rich Bloody sand. Gets everywhere. (removing a shoe and pouring out sand) It's like the Gobi desert in there. Look.

Juli (looking off stage left as if to the horizon) No sign of her yet. (Dan and Berenice are cuddling) We might as well stay here. If we go much further we'll be out of sight. (to Dan) You really shouldn't have carried all those chairs, Dan. You could slip a disc.

Dan It takes more than a few deck-chairs to damage me. (as if weight-lifting with the chairs) I'm a well-honed machine.

Bere (proudly) He is strong like an ox.

Juli (under her breath to Richard) More of an ass, I'd say.

Dan O.k. Let's pitch camp then. (he and Berenice start setting up the deck chairs)

Juli How are your feet?

Rich (he presents his foot for her inspection) What do you think?

Juli You've not been using your Daktarin have you?

Rich (sniffs his foot) It's not that pongy is it?

Dan So what happens if Dot doesn't show?

Rich Poor Aunt Dot. I'd have topped myself by now.

Juli She's never been this close to the sea before.

Rich It could be the shower scene from Psycho all over again.

Juli This therapy's her best chance, Richard. God knows I've been over it with her enough times.

Bere The sea is a long, long way out.

Juli Not in Dot's head, it isn't.

Bere I think it is very sad.

Rich We live in paranoid times.

Dan Speak for yourself, Dickie. Free as a bird, me. Freedom. That's our motto, isn't it Bere?

Bere What is motto?

Dan This is motto. (he kisses her between each word) Liberté, égalité, fraternité! (they kiss passionately)

Juli They're not going to do that all week, are they?

Rich I haven't had a kiss all day.

Juli Richard, don't be so irritating.

Rich (watching Dan with envy) For God's sake, let her up for air!

Juli (looks to the distance) Ah, there she is. (waves enthusiastically) Cooie! Dot! We're over here. (excitedly to Richard) Look at the way she's struggling - willing herself on. If only I could do it for her.

Rich (fondly) You're such a softy, Pumpkin. (he quickly kisses her)

Juli What's got into you today?

Rich Sorry.

Dot (enters stage left, dressed in wellington boots, an oilskin and sou'wester. Juliette runs forward to greet her) I've been breathing, Juju. I've been breathing all the way down. You're right. Breathing makes a big difference.

Rich Good for you, Dot.

Juli (to Dot) Where are your glasses?

Dot In my pocket. There are some things that should only be seen through the mists of myopia. That fluid lurking out there is one of them. (sniffs the air) Do you smell that? (with increasing horror) Fish. Decaying fish. A hint of sewage . . . radio active waste . . . anthrax! (starts hyperventilating)

Juli No Dot, you're bigger than this. We're fighting it together.

Dot (weakly) I'm trying, Juju.

Bere The sea is a long, long way, Dot. Nothing. It is gone.

Dan It's probably reached France by now.

Dot France? Flooded! The Maginot line stormed. Invasion. Gas! Where's my gas mask, Juju? Where's my gas mask?

Juli (restraining Dot tenderly) There's no invasion, Dot. Calm down. (to Dan) Don't interfere. It can do more harm than good.

Rich Just keep breathing, Dot.

Juli Breathe in, breathe out, three, four, five . . .

Dot There's no slope. No natural defences at all. There's nothing to stop it rolling all the way back up the beach, until it reaches my feet, my knees, my thighs . . . (clutches her groin). . . and beyond.

Rich Come and have a sit down. (leads her to a deck-chair) We've made it nice and comfy for you.

Dot (pause) You think I'm mad, don't you?

Rich (total disbelief) Mad?

Others No.

Rich Definitely not mad.

Bere Batty, yes. (the others freeze her into silence)

Dot It's not my fault the polar ice caps are melting. You can hear them at night. Drip, drip, drip. . .

Juli (to Richard) You still haven't fixed that tap.

Dot They say it's the greenhouse effect. Well, my conscience is clear on that count. I've never owned a greenhouse.

Rich I'm not quite sure you've grasped the concept.

Dot With all due respect, Richard. You're not as well read as I am. That's one of the few benefits of retirement. One can keep abreast of all the disasters that threaten the human race. Southern England is sinking into the channel, you know.

Rich Is it?

Dot The Tory shires are doomed to a watery grave. Think of the political repercussions. Our nation may be ruled by a handful of Celtic communists on Ben Nevis. (to Dan) Have you read 'Cosmic Catastrophe and the Fate of the Galaxy' Mr Crisp?

Dan Don't think I have.

Dot It's an eye-opener. I lie there at night waiting to be engulfed by a Black Hole, and I think to myself: Dorothy, the future looks bleak for the universe. If only there was something one could do.

Dan There is.

Dot Really?

Dan Give us your hand. Dot. We're going sailing.

Dot (horrified) Sailing?

Juli Are you mad?

Dan (indicates a small dinghy that lies stage right) We'll be as safe as houses in there.

Dot I . . . I haven't sat in a boat for years.

Dan Well, you're going to sit in this one. If Noah's flood's on its way, you'll need some solid rubber under your buttocks (he pats her bottom).

Dot Oh!

Dan Allow me. (he lifts her and carries her to the boat)

Dot Goodness. What a firm arm. (she feels it) Good for bailing out.

Dan Has anyone ever told you, you suit a sou'wester?

Dot No. (pause) Well, do I?

Dan Knock out.

Dot (settling into the boat) Ah, this reminds me of the Serpentine, 1953. Happy, happy days.

Dan I'll cast off. (does so, singing) "I am sailing . . . I am sailing . . .

Dot (letting her hands trail overboard) Splish, splosh; splish, splosh. Oars cutting through the water. My whole life ahead of me. (she lies back dreamily) He was tall, dark and not altogether unhandsome. He was a sailor too, you know.

Dan (continues singing) . . . to be near you . . . to be free

Dot Oh, I've had my moment of carnal knowledge, Mr Crisp. There was a time when I was kissed. Kissed with such passion and frequency that all attempts to re-touch my lipstick were rendered utterly futile. (sighs deeply) He promised me everything. (sighs) In, out. In, out. (increasingly dosy remembrance) His strokes were wonderfully regular. (after a little while, she is asleep)

Rich (Juliette creeps forward to check on Dot) Brilliant, Dan. You've really got the touch.

Bere (looking at Dot) She is sleeping. Like a baby.

Rich Let's loosen her boots. That'll make her more comfortable.

Juli Don't touch her boots.

Dot (jolting awake) Don't touch my boots!

Dan No-one's touching your boots, Dorothy.

Dot One must be prepared for everything, you know. Even sharks.

Dan Sharks? You'd be lucky to have your toes nibbled by a sprat out there. (more for Berenice and Juliette's benefit) Now the great white, that's a different ball game. Had a pretty nasty tussle with one off the Great Barrier Reef.

Dot Oh my Lord.

Dan I was lucky. The Aussie doctors managed to stitch up my leg - without anaesthetic, of course.

Bere My hero.

Dan I bit on a coke can and thought of England.

Dot Is that the scar? (looking at his knee)

Dan Yes. Starts from there, goes right up to the groin. (he lifts his shorts to show her) See?

Dot (inspects it with admiration) Oh. Yes. Do come and have a look, Juju.

Rich (to Juliette) Well I had a pretty nasty moment off the coast of Mallorca, didn't I? Attacked by a huge shoal of . . . how would you describe them?

Juli Anchovies.

Rich Vicious little brutes. Homed in on the smell of my sun tan lotion. Got some pretty nasty nips on my leg, I can tell you.

Dot Ouch! (sits bolt upright)

Juli What?

Dot I've been bitten.

Juli Where?

Dot On my leg.

Dan Sandfly?

Dot Sandfly! (starts to brush herself down vigorously) Nobody move.

Dan Bere, get the germoline. (lifting Dot's plastic mac and skirt) I'm a bit of a medical boffin on the q t, Dot.

Dot You have training?

Dan (attending to Dot's insect bite) Any sailor worth his salt's got to be prepared to heave ho with a scalpel now and then. I carried out an appendectomy once in a force nine gale.

Dot Goodness.

Dan With nothing but a stapler and a pair of scissors to hand.

Dot Good Lord. Did the patient live?

Dan Sadly no. We ran out of staples.

Dot To be struck down by something so intestinal. Death can be cruelly vulgar.

Juli (pulling Dan away) Dot, you must try and confront your fears.

Dot The sea's an awfully big thing to confront, Juju. King Canute was a better man than I, but even he got his toes wet.

Dan That's because he got his tides mixed up. We could sit you down, on this side of that line of flotsam, and your toes would be dry as a nun's . . . (stops himself) . . . sorry.

Dot What did he say?

Rich He's quite right, Dot. The tide never goes beyond that point. We could build a little house around you. (inspiration) A sandcastle even. It'd be as right as rain.

Dot There's nothing right about rain, Richard. Chernobyl taught us that.

Dan A magnificent edifice, guarding the sea.

Bere Un beau chateau.

Dot (pause) Would it have turrets?

Dan Turrets. A moat. State-of-the-art portcullis. Decorated with sea shells and mother of pearl.

Dot And you say it wouldn't be swept away.

Dan The sea obeys laws, the same as we do, Dot. It'll be standing there like a rock tomorrow.

Juli Dot, let's not try and run before we can walk. (to Dan) I wish you wouldn't meddle. You don't have the training. (trying to steer Dot away)

Dot Four turrets. And a rampart. Crenellations along the top and a Union Jack planted four square on the highest point.

Juli We mustn't rush her.

Rich It'll get her right down to the water's edge. It's a brilliant idea.

Dan Come on, let's do it. Let's build Dot a castle that'll bring the ocean to its knees. (Black out)

Scene Two

The sound of two men panting fades up. The lights rise on a sandcastle stage right with Union Jack fluttering. It is a hot sunny afternoon.

Dan (jogging on stage with obvious ease) Vorchprung durch Technik, as they say in Germany. (sound of heavy panting off stage) You ok, Dick?

Rich (enters, whimpering with exhaustion) Never fitter. (starts to jog pathetically on the spot) Fit as a fiddle and lean as a cat. Eh, fatso!

Dan Fatso?

Rich What do you call this, then? (grabbing handfuls of Dan's stomach) Middle age flab.

Dan No way!

Rich Middle age flab or I'm a Dutchman.

Dan Better start planting those tulips, Johann!

Rich Ooh, extending metaphors now. Let's see you extend a bit of muscle instead. (punching at Dan's stomach affectionately)

Dan (Dan gets his fists ready) I'm warning you.

Rich (smatters Dan with ineffectual punches) Fat and flabby, fat and flabby . . .

Dan You know I always beat you.

Rich Fat and flabby . . . (Dan punches him powerfully in the stomach) Urrgh (Richard staggers clutching his stomach)

Dan Admit it, you're a Dutchman. (grabs him in a wrestling hold) Go on, what are you?

Rich O.k. O.k. I live in a windmill. I wear clogs. What else do you want me to do? Stick my finger in a dyke? (Dan raises his eyebrows suggestively. They both laugh)

Dan (clips him affectionately on the ear) I've missed you, you big bastard. (Richard groans and rubs his stomach) You ok?

Rich Bowels a bit gippy, that's all.

Dan We should do this more often. Like old times. (Richard takes a couple of Rennies) Things going alright with Juliette?

Rich (pause) Yes. Why?

Dan Just wondered.

Rich She's wonderful.

Dan Nice arse.

Rich You think so?

Dan For a social worker.

Rich She's perfect, isn't she? Perfect in every way. Even her faults are perfect.

Dan Ah, the warm glow of marital contentment. You could fry an egg on it.

Rich (leaps to his feet and starts jogging on the spot) Yes, it's good, it's good, it's bloody marvellous. (starts to jog faster) I must stay fit, fit, fit. Fit and vigilant. Fit and vigilant.

Dan (grabs hold of Richard's leg to slow him down) Hey, take it easy, Dick. What's the hurry?

Rich Sometimes I think I'm running away. Running, running away from . . . I don't know what . . . happiness I suppose. I love her too much.

Dan The marks of the beast are upon him.

Rich So you think she's sexy?

Dan All women are sexy.

Rich Even happily married ones?

Dan Especially happily married ones. (Richard looks aghast) Only joking.

Rich I can't help thinking. I think the whole time. I think about how beautiful she is, how intelligent she is, how attractive she is to other men.

Dan Let them sweat. She married you.

Rich So did Katrin. And look where that ended up.

Dan Water under the bridge, Dick.

Rich The world's crawling with creeps who'd jump Juliette at the first chance. I mean, you're probably eyeing her up yourself.

Dan (insulted) That's a bit below the belt.

Rich Below the belt is what it's all about, Dan.

Dan We're best mates.

Rich Yes, but if you thought she was keen. If she brushed up against you in the hotel lift, and it got stuck between floors, and you could feel her nipples like rivets pushing into you . . .

Dan You've been at the top shelves of W.H. Smiths again.

Rich Well, would you or wouldn't you?

Dan Would I or wouldn't I what?

Rich Have sex with her?

Dan Are you crazy?

Rich That's not an answer. I want a yes or no.

Dan Jesus, Dick. You're serious.

Rich Yes or no?

Dan No.

Rich A definite no?

Dan A definite no.

Rich (sighs with relief) That's good.

Dan (sarcastic) Glad to know you trust me.

Rich I do. I just needed to hear it. (pause) I've got a favour to ask.

Dan Just say the word, Dickie.

Rich It's a big favour.

Dan We go way back.

Rich (pause) I want you to score with Juliette.

Dan Sorry?

Rich You know. Knotch her up. Knock her off.

Dan Dick. You've lost me.

Rich You won't go all the way, obviously.

Dan Still lost.

Rich I can't risk it with any Tom, Dick or Harry. It has to be you.

Dan Lost with no bearings, Dickie.

Rich I've got this plan, right. We both know you're irresistible to women.

Dan Guilty as charged.

Rich You probably winked at the midwife while she was cutting your umbilical cord.

Dan Winked? I got her number.

Rich To my knowledge you've only had two failures in your entire career . . . (in unison with Dan) And they were both lesbians. Exactly. So, if anyone can break Juliette, it's going to be you.

Dan Look Dick, I know Katrin gave you a rough ride . . .

Rich I can never be humiliated like that again.

Dan You've got to let it go.

Rich I've got to know I'm safe.

Dan There's no such thing as safe.

Rich There is. And you're going to get it for me. You're going to get proof. Try every trick in the book. Try every method of seduction you know. Stretch her to the limit. Then if she's still faithful to me, I'm home and dry.

Dan You're as mad as a monkey's uncle.

Rich Well? Are you up for it?

Dan (long pause) I can't go at her cold like that. It's not my style.

Rich Ah! So you think you'll fail?

Dan I don't do the 'f' word, Dick.

Rich You're worried though. Worried the old magic might be wearing thin.

Dan As if. Berenice is half my age, mate.

Rich Little foreign girls your only chance of success these days?

Dan Little foreign girls are bloody hard work, I can tell you.

Rich Of course, if you haven't got the stamina . . .

Dan I'm not saying I won't do it. All I'm saying is I usually wait for a flicker of interest before I drop anchor.

Rich (joyfully) You know you're going to fail; you're going to fail, that's why you won't do it.

Dan I'm warning you. I'll give it all I've got.

Rich I don't want any half cock attempts.

Dan There's nothing half cock about me, Dickie.

Rich Have I got a deal?

Dan (spits on his hand and offers it to Richard, who does the same and shakes on it) Put it there, mate.

Rich I want it thorough. I don't want any room for doubt. I want to lay these nightmares to rest. (pause) Now this is what I suggest you try first.

Dan Don't try and teach your grandmother to suck eggs.

Rich Yes, but she's my wife. I know all her little ways.

Dan Rule number one, Dick. You never go at them down familiar routes. It's those snaking little back paths the husband doesn't know about that I'll be using.

Rich (anxiously) Right. Ok.

Dan Trust me. I'm good.

(Black Out)

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