Literary Fiction audiobook scripts

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Tell Me Like You Want It

Marriage, kitchen table · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

She tells him about the job on a Tuesday, at the kitchen table, in the voice she uses for dentist appointments.

"It's in Aberdeen. It would be three years."

He goes on buttering the toast. He butters right to the edges, always has, and she has loved this about him and lately has wanted to scream.

"Three years is a long time," he says.

"Yes."

"The winters up there."

"I've looked at the winters, Paul."

"Have you said yes?"

"I said I'd talk to my husband."

He sets the knife down across the plate, very straight. Outside, next door's boy is kicking a ball against the fence.

"And what does your husband say?"

"He's talking about the weather."

He laughs, once, not happily. Then he does something she has not planned for. He pushes the toast across to her side of the table, the piece he has buttered so carefully, and says, "Eat something. Then tell me again, and this time tell me like you want it."

The Slowing

Family, father and daughter · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The first time I drove my father anywhere, he was seventy-eight, and he held the door handle the whole way like I might take the car into the sea.

"You're close to the line."

"I'm in the middle of the lane, Dad."

"The middle is close to the line."

The doctor had taken his license in March. I found out from the neighbor, and then from the dent in the garage.

"There's a stop sign. You're not slowing."

"I'm slowing now. Feel that? That's the slowing."

We passed the hardware store, the bank, the corner where he had taught me to parallel park by shouting.

"You taught me to drive, you know. So if I'm terrible, whose fault is that?"

He was quiet for a block. Then he let go of the door handle, one finger at a time, and folded his hands in his lap.

"You signal too early," he said. It was the nearest thing to thank you I was going to get, and I took it.

Ten Minutes Fast

Grief, funeral reception · Adult (40-55) · Irish · 1 minute

My mother's funeral was at eleven, and by half past one my sister and I were fighting in whispers over a plate of egg sandwiches.

"You'll not take the clock, Declan."

"I never said I wanted the clock."

"You looked at it."

"It's a clock, Maeve. I've eyes."

Mrs. Feeney came by to say she was sorry for our trouble. We thanked her in our church voices. She moved on to the ham.

"You weren't here," Maeve said, lower. "Four years of Tuesdays and Thursdays and every second Sunday. You sent cards."

"I sent money."

"She put it in a drawer. She wouldn't spend it."

That went in under the ribs. I looked across the room at the clock, which had been ten minutes fast all my life so nobody would miss mass.

"I don't want the clock," I said. "I want to have been here. I can't have that, so I'm looking at the clock."

Maeve said nothing. After a moment she put a sandwich on my plate.

Snow Makes a Sound

Immigrant story, first winter · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Nobody told me that snow makes a sound. In the films it falls silently, and I had believed the films.

My first December here, I woke at four to a kind of hissing against the window, as if someone were pouring sugar. By morning the car was gone. There was only a white shape where I had left a car.

I went out in my good shoes. This was a mistake, and my neighbor watched me make it from her porch.

"You'll want boots," she called.

"I have boots. They are inside."

"Then you'll want them outside." She came down her steps with two shovels, an old woman in a man's coat. "Where are you from?"

"Kumasi. In Ghana."

"Hot?"

"Very."

"I'm from here. Seventy-four winters. I've hated every one." She began to dig out my car, without being asked. "You'll get used to it, and then you'll complain about it. That's how you'll know you live here."

In March I heard myself complain. I telephoned my mother to tell her.

Not the Box

Work, a teacher's last day · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

On her last afternoon Mrs. Adeyemi cleaned out the desk she had sat behind for thirty-one years, and found she could fit the whole of it in one shoebox.

A stapler. A mug. Eleven red pens, nine of them dry.

At the back of the bottom drawer there was a folded note, confiscated in some lost October. She opened it. In pencil, in a child's careful hand: Mrs. A is not as scary as she thinks.

She read it twice. She had no idea who had written it. Thirty-one years, perhaps four thousand children, and one of them had seen straight through her and had the manners not to say.

She put it in her coat pocket, not the box.

Fish and Chips, Twice

Friendship, forty years · Mature (55+) · Australian · 1 minute

Bev and I have had lunch every Thursday for forty years, and in all that time neither of us has once ordered what we actually wanted.

"I'll have the salad," she said.

"Same."

The waiter went. Bev lined up her knife with the edge of the table. She does that before bad news. She did it before Ron's diagnosis.

"Kylie's found me a unit. Near them. In Perth."

"Perth's four hours on a plane, Bev."

"I know where Perth is, Jan."

I looked out at the car park. Forty years. She had held my hand at two funerals and one wedding she didn't approve of. She had never once told me I was right when I wasn't.

"When?"

"After Christmas."

"Right." I waved the waiter back. My voice came out odd, and I let it. "Scratch the salads, love. We'll have the fish and chips, twice. And the pavlova."

Bev stared at me.

"Well," I said, "we haven't got forty more years to be sensible, have we?"

Twelve Times, Actually

Friendship, a small betrayal · Adult (40–55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

It took me about four seconds to betray my oldest friend, and I did it to get a laugh from people I did not even like.

We were at the Hendersons'. Someone was talking about embarrassing jobs, and there was a gap, and I filled it. I told them about Nora and the audition. The one where she forgot the words and sang the same line eleven times, and the pianist finally just closed the lid.

It is a very funny story. She told it to me in tears, on my bathroom floor, and made me promise.

They roared. Nora laughed too. She is good at that. She said, "It was twelve times, actually," and everyone roared again.

In the car she drove with both hands on the wheel.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what? It's a good story. You tell it well." She put the turn signal on, though there was nobody behind us. "I just wondered when you'd started telling it. That's all. I wondered how many times."

If It Doesn't Work Out

Caregiving, a long marriage · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

My wife proposed to me last Tuesday, which was kind of her, as we have been married for fifty-one years.

I was cutting up her chicken. She watched my hands, and then she said, "You're very good at that. Are you married?"

I have learned not to flinch. You go where she is, the nurse told me. You don't drag her back to where you are.

"I am," I said.

"Oh." Her face fell, the way it did when she was a girl and missed a bus. "That's a pity. Is she nice?"

"She's the best person I ever met. Bossy, though."

"I'd be bossy. If I had a husband as good at chicken." She leaned in. "If it doesn't work out with her, you come and find me."

"I'll do that."

"Promise."

"I promise, Dottie."

She frowned at the name, as if she had heard it somewhere. Then she ate her chicken. I went and stood in the pantry, with the light off, and then I came back.

A Blue Door

Second person, a return home · Adult (30–45) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

You go back to the town where you grew up, and the first thing you notice is that it has had the nerve to carry on without you.

The bakery is a phone shop. The phone shop is already closing down. Your school has a new wing, and your old house has a blue door, which is wrong, and a child's bike on the lawn, which is worse.

You park across the street. You tell yourself you are only checking the gutters.

A woman comes out and looks at your car. She is polite about it. She is wondering who you are, on her street, and the honest answer is that you are nobody here now. You wave. You drive on.

Of Course You Do

Strangers, an evening train · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

A woman on the evening train told me she was leaving her husband, and I was the first person she had told, because I was nobody.

"I'm telling you because you're nobody," she said. "No offence."

"None taken."

We were an hour north of the city, in the dark. I had a sandwich I no longer felt able to eat.

"He isn't cruel," she said. "I'd like that understood. People will want him to be cruel."

"He's kind. He brings me tea I don't drink. Twenty-two years of tea, going cold on the bedside table." "I told him once that I don't take it in the mornings. He said, of course you do."

"I keep thinking it isn't enough. You can't leave a man over tea."

I am not wise. I sell commercial flooring. But I had sat across from my own wife that morning, and I could not have told you, under oath, how she took hers.

"I don't think it's the tea," I said. "I think it's the of course."

She looked at me then, properly, for the first time. The train slowed. The sign said Harrowby.

"This is me." She got her case down herself. At the door she turned. "You're not nobody. I'm sorry I said so."

"No, I think I was. It's all right. It was useful."

I got home at ten. I asked my wife how she took her tea. She told me. It was not what I would have said.

Who Is Graham

Workplace, quiet comedy · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 1 minute

A leaving card came round the office on Friday for someone called Graham, and it became clear by eleven o'clock that not one of us knew who Graham was.

"Is he Accounts?" said Priya.

"Accounts is Gareth."

"Then who have I been calling Graham?"

"That's also Gareth. He's too polite to say."

The card had a cartoon sloth on it. Fourteen people had already signed. "Good luck Graham!" Somebody had written "Legend" and underlined it twice.

"Dev signed it," I said. "Dev, who's Graham?"

Dev did not look up. "No idea. I put a fiver in as well."

"You put in a fiver for a stranger?"

"Everyone else had. I panicked."

I held the pen over the card for some time. Twenty-six years, it said on the front. Twenty-six years in this building, and a sloth.

In the end I wrote, "Sorry we never talked. I think you fixed my chair once. It's still good." It was the only true thing on there. I hope he found it.

Hold the Sleeve

Elderly narrator, home help · Mature (55+) · Scottish · 45 seconds

The worst of being ninety-one is not the knees. It is that everyone has decided you are sweet.

I was never sweet. Ask anyone, though you would need a shovel now. I ran a fish shop on the harbour for forty years, and I could gut a customer as quick as a haddock.

The girl who comes on Mondays calls me my darling. "Shall we pop your cardigan on, my darling?"

"We shall not. I shall. You may hold the sleeve."

She laughs. She thinks I am being a character.

But she held the sleeve. And last week she asked what I thought she should do about her mother, and she listened to the answer. So she may yet be worth the trouble.

Tire Pressure

Grief, two brothers · Adult (40–55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

We are supposed to scatter my father from the end of the pier, and my brother has brought him in a coffee can.

"You couldn't find anything else?"

"The urn was four hundred dollars, Neil. He'd have haunted me."

That's true. Our father reused tea bags. He once drove forty minutes to return a lemon.

The wind is coming straight in off the water. I point this out. Marty says it'll be fine, in the voice he used at eleven to say the ice would hold.

"Do you want to say something?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. You're the one who went to college."

I look at the can. I try to find a sentence for a man who never said one to me that wasn't about tire pressure, and who checked mine, every visit, without being asked, for thirty years.

"He checked my tires," I say.

Marty nods. His chin is doing something. "Yeah. Mine too."

We wait for the wind to drop. It takes a while. Neither of us minds.

How to Leave a Party

Second person, instructions · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

You will know it is time to leave the party when you find yourself reading the spines of your host's books.

Do not announce it. An announcement invites argument. Find your coat under the others, like a miner. Tell one person, the kindest, that you have an early start. This is not a lie. Every start is early if you did not want to be there. On the street the air is cold and belongs to no one, and you are yourself again by the corner.

We Are Not at Home

Grief, a widow · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

My husband's voice is still on the answering machine, and I have let the telephone ring out eleven times this week so that I can hear him say we are not at home.

We. He says it so easily. I stand in the hall with my coat on. The beep comes, and then whoever it is breathes for a moment and hangs up, and I think, you fool, you had the chance to talk to him and you said nothing.

Very Atmospheric

Friendship, quiet comedy · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Our book club has met on the first Monday of every month for six years, and between the nine of us we have finished two books.

Nobody mentions it. We bring wine and opinions. Carol says a thing was "very atmospheric," which means she read the back. I say I found the ending earned, which means I read the ending. It is the most honest friendship I have. We have all agreed, without a word, never to check.

Most Promising

Hometown, a piano teacher · Adult (40-55) · Southern US · 30 seconds

Miss Lucille taught piano to every child in our county for fifty years, and she told each one of us, in private, that we were her most promising.

I found that out at her funeral. Sixty grown people on a church lawn, comparing notes, and slowly going quiet. I ought to have been angry. But I drove home and played for the first time in twenty years, badly, with the windows open, and I will tell you, I played like somebody promising.

For the Dog

Marriage, a separation · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

We divided eleven years in an afternoon, quite politely, and then we got to the dog.

"He's mine," said Tom. "I chose him."

"You chose him. I walked him. Six a.m., Tom. In sleet."

"He sleeps on my side."

"Because your side is nearer the radiator. He's a dog. He isn't making a statement."

Biscuit lay between us on the rug, looking from one to the other like a child at a tennis match.

"We could share," Tom said. "Week on, week off."

"So I'd see you every Sunday."

"Just at the door."

I looked at him. He had clearly thought of this before I had.

"Fine," I said. "For the dog."

"For the dog," said Tom.

Not So Cold

Immigrant story, mother and daughter · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Every Sunday my mother and I talk on the telephone for twenty minutes, and for twenty minutes we lie to each other with great tenderness.

"You are eating?" she says.

"I'm eating, Ma. I made the lentils."

I had cereal, standing up, over the sink.

"And the job is good?"

"The job is good." They cut my hours in January. "How is your knee?"

"My knee is nothing. I walk to the market every day."

My cousin has told me she has not left the flat in a month. I can hear the television behind her.

"It is cold there?"

"Not so cold."

It is eleven below. There is ice on the inside of the window.

A pause travels across two oceans. "You sound tired, beta."

"I'm not tired."

"No," she says. "I am not either."

And that is the closest we come. We hang up. Each of us, I think, sits for a while afterward, holding the true things, keeping them from getting cold.

A Dollar Forty

Strangers, a hospital corridor · Young adult (18–25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

At three in the morning in a hospital corridor, a man I had never met lent me a dollar forty, and I have thought of him every day since.

The machine had taken my last coins and given nothing back. I hit it. Then I put my forehead on the glass.

"It does that," he said. He was in a chair by the elevator, with a coat over his knees. "You have to press it twice. Here."

He fed it his own change. Tea came out, gray and scalding.

"Who are you here for?" I asked.

"My wife. You?"

"My dad."

He nodded. That was all. We drank the terrible tea in silence, two chairs apart, and it was the best company I have ever had.

One Inch Lower

Neighbours, quiet comedy · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

For nineteen years Mr. Pettifer and I conducted a war over a hedge, and we never once raised our voices, because we are English and it would have spoiled it.

He would trim his side on Saturday. I would trim mine on Sunday, one inch lower. The following week his would be lower still. By 2011 it was a foot high and we could see into each other's kitchens.

"Morning, Mrs. Lowe."

"Morning, Mr. Pettifer. Hedge is looking tidy."

"One does one's best."

Then in April he did not trim it. His side grew out ragged, and I stood at my window with the shears and found I had no heart for it.

I went round. I had never been round. His daughter answered.

"He's had a fall. He keeps asking about some hedge."

"Tell him," I said, "that I've done both sides. Tell him I did his badly, and he'll want to get well and see to it."

She did not understand. He would. That was rather the point.

A Lot of Words to Carry

Immigrant story, a child translator · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

At twelve, Linh was the best liar in her family, because she was the only one who spoke English.

The doctor had kind eyes and spoke slowly, which did not help. "Tell your father his kidneys are working at about thirty percent."

Linh turned to her father. In Vietnamese she said, "He says your kidneys are tired."

"Tired," said her father. "From the factory?"

The doctor went on. "He will need to change his diet, and we need to talk about dialysis."

"He says no more sweet coffee. And you must come back many times."

Her father laughed. "Tell him I'd rather be sick."

"What did he say?"

"He says thank you."

The doctor looked at her a moment too long. He pulled his stool closer, so that he was level with her.

"That's a lot of words to carry," he said. "Would it help if I drew some of it?"

She had not cried in front of an adult since she was seven. She nodded. He took out a pen.

Practice on Me

Workplace, a layoff · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

I was thirty-four the day I had to fire the man who taught me how to do my job, and he made it as easy for me as he had made everything else.

"Close the door, Katie. You look like you're going to be sick."

"Walt, I have to..."

"I know what you have to. I saw the email before you did." He sat down across from my desk, which had been his desk. "Have you got the folder?"

I had the folder.

"Good. Now, you're going to want to apologize. Don't. It makes them think they can argue. Say the date, say the severance, slide it over. Then stop talking. You always did fill a silence."

"Walt."

"Go on. I'll be the difficult one. Practice on me."

So I said the date. I said the severance. I slid it across the desk to him, and I stopped talking.

He let the silence go a full ten seconds. Then he nodded, like I had finally gotten it right.

The Letter D

Late learning, a library · Adult (30-45) · Southern US · 1 minute

Mr. Odom was seventy-three years old when he walked into the library and asked me if it was too late to learn to read.

"It's not too late," I said.

"You don't know how slow I am."

"I've got Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'm not in a hurry."

He had gotten by. He had memorized the shapes of road signs. He ordered what the man ahead of him ordered. For fifty years his wife had read him the mail, and he let the whole town think his eyes were bad.

In March he brought in a shoebox.

"She wrote me when I was overseas. Forty-one letters." He set it on the table like it might go off. "I had a buddy read them to me. He skipped parts. I could tell. He'd go red and skip."

"Mr. Odom..."

"She passed in the fall. I want to know what he skipped."

"Then we'd better get to work," I said. "Open your book. We're on the letter D."

Square

Friendship, an old debt · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

I lent my best friend three thousand dollars in 2009, and we have been excellent friends ever since, provided neither of us mentions it.

It sits at the table with us. It orders nothing. When the check comes, Pete grabs it too fast, every time, and I let him, and we both understand that this is a kind of interest.

Last month he said, "I've been meaning to..."

"Don't."

"I could do five hundred."

"Pete. Don't."

Because here is the thing. If he pays me back, we are square. And I have known him since we were six. I don't know what he and I would be, square.

Forty Pounds for the Frames

Marriage, a widow's secret · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

The man from the auction house was very gentle about it, which was how Edith knew, before he spoke, that her husband's paintings were worth nothing at all.

He had been through all sixty. Now he stood in the spare room turning his pen over, and her grandson, who had arranged the visit, watched him like a boy watching a kettle.

"Mrs. Calloway, they're accomplished. There's a real feeling for light."

"But," said Edith.

"But there isn't a market, I'm afraid. One might get forty pounds for the frames."

"The frames?" said Josh. "He painted every single day for fifty years. He had an exhibition!"

"In the library, darling. In 1987. We sold one. I bought it."

Josh stared at her.

"I used a different name. He was so pleased. He talked about that sale until the week he died." She crossed to the nearest canvas. It was the estuary, again. Arthur had painted that estuary perhaps two hundred times and never, in her private opinion, quite got the water.

The auctioneer hesitated. "If I may ask. You knew?"

"Oh, from about the second year."

"And you never said."

"Said what? That he wasn't good?" She straightened the frame a quarter inch. "He wasn't good, Mr. Vane. He was happy. Every morning for fifty years a man went up those stairs whistling. I should like to know what your auction house would give me for that."

Nobody answered her.

"No," said Edith. "I thought not. Josh, put the kettle on. We're keeping them all."

It'll Be Thursday

Hometown, an old flame · Adult (40-55) · Irish · 90 seconds

I had been home four hours when my car broke down outside Brogan's garage, and I would like it noted that I did not plan it.

Cathal Brogan came out wiping his hands. Twenty years had gone into his face and settled there quite comfortably. He looked at the car, and at me, and at the car.

"It's yourself."

"It is."

"You'd want to have rung ahead. I'd have put a better shirt on." He lifted the bonnet. "What's she doing?"

"A noise. Then no noise. Then this."

"That'd be the alternator." He said it into the engine, not to me. "How's London?"

"Expensive. How's here?"

"Still here."

I stood on the forecourt where I had stood at nineteen, with a suitcase, telling him I would write. I did write. Twice. He never answered, and I had held that against him for two decades, quite happily.

"You never wrote back," I said.

"I did."

"You did not."

"I did. I wrote eleven pages." He straightened up. "Then I read it over, and it said the one thing eleven different ways, and the one thing was don't go. You'd already gone. So what was the use in posting it?"

A lorry went by. Neither of us looked at it.

"Have you still got it?"

"I have a garage, Aoife. I've got everything. I've got your father's fan belt from 1994." He shut the bonnet. "It'll be Thursday for the part."

"I'm only here till Wednesday."

"I know," he said. "I heard. That's why it'll be Thursday."

Table Nine

Work, a teacher and a former student · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

The waiter at table nine was a boy Harold Brandt had failed in tenth-grade English, and Harold knew him at once, by the ears.

Everything else was new: the gray at the temples, the easy way he held four plates.

"Evening, folks. Can I start you with... Mr. Brandt?"

"Hello, Danny."

"It's Dan now. Mostly." He set the water down carefully. "You remember me."

"You wrote an essay on a book you had not read. Four pages. It was the most confident thing I ever graded."

Harold's wife kicked him under the table. Dan laughed.

"You gave me a thirty-one. I had to do summer school."

"I know. I taught it. You didn't come."

"No, sir." Dan looked at his order pad. "My dad left that June. I was working at the car wash. I never told anybody at school."

Harold opened his mouth and found nothing in it. Forty years of red ink, and nothing. He had written LAZY on that boy's report card. He remembered the capitals. He remembered being pleased with them.

"Dan," he said. "I owe you..."

"You don't owe me anything, Mr. Brandt. I own this place." He grinned, and the ears went up. "Me and my sister. Eleven years. I do the books, too, and I do them straight, in case you wondered."

"I didn't wonder."

"Yes, you did. It's okay." He clicked his pen. "The fish is good tonight. And I'd read the whole menu first, if I were you. I'm told it matters."

Number One Is Crossed Out

Family, the night before a wedding · Mature (55+) · Southern US · 1 minute

The night before my daughter's wedding, the man she was marrying knocked to ask if I would look over his vows, and I very nearly said what I thought of him.

I had been not saying it for two years.

"It's just the one page, sir."

"Sit down, Kevin."

He sat on the edge of the chair like it was rented. I put my glasses on. I was expecting poetry. He's the type.

It wasn't poetry. It was a list. Number six, when you are right, I will say so the same day.

"Number one's crossed out," I said.

"Yes, sir. She said I couldn't promise things that weren't up to me."

"So what did you put?"

"It's on the back."

I turned it over. Number one, I will keep trying with your father for as long as it takes, and I will not tell him how long it has taken.

I folded it and handed it back.

"Well," I said. "You've gone and told him now. Do you drink bourbon, Kevin?"

The Nod

Strangers, an ocean pool · Adult (40-55) · Australian · 1 minute

There are six of us at the ocean pool at half past five every morning, and in eleven years I have never learned one of their names.

I know them by their strokes. There is the Butterfly, who is showing off. There is the woman in the red cap who swims as if she is late for something. There is the old bloke who walks in backwards down the steps, grumbling at the cold, and does twenty laps of the slowest breaststroke I have ever seen.

We nod. That's the arrangement. I have got through a divorce and two redundancies on those nods.

On Monday the old bloke isn't there. Tuesday, the same. By Thursday the five of us are standing at the shallow end, not getting in, and the Butterfly says, "Does anyone know where he lives?"

Nobody does. Nobody knows his name.

"Right," says the red cap. "I'm Denise."

It is the first word any of us has said to another. It sounds enormous.

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