1. In the garden
(Speakers: George Smith and Mr Robinson)

Robinson Good afternoon, Smith! Out in the garden, I see! It’ll keep us all busy for the next few weeks, won’t it?

George Oh, hallo, Robinson! I’m not really what you might call ‘out in the garden’ yet. This is by way of being a reconnaissance. Just to see what the winter’s left us.

Robinson Yes. I know. I’ve been itching to get out here for weeks. But there’s been so much rain that one couldn’t get onto the soil. Fortunately, I haven’t lost any plants through the frost. I take precautions, you know. It’s a bit expensive in time and money. But it’s worth it in the long run. How did you fare?

George Well, what I’m particularly interested in at the moment is a little patch of mint I put in last year. I shan’t be at all popular with Mary if that’s disappeared. That looks rather like it over there! What do you think? Can you see over the fence?

Robinson Just a minute. I’m having to pick my way rather gingerly over the flower-bed. Oh, yes. That’s mint all right. But it’s rather badly choked, isn’t it?

George The grass, you mean? Yes. This bed gets covered with grass every year between my autumn and summer appearances. It’s an awful job digging it out every spring. And, of course, the bed gets lower and lower as I take out more and more soil. And then it floods every time it rains.

Robinson You go about it in the wrong way. You ought to dig the bed over every year in the late autumn. Tidy it up, and don’t let the grass get a hold. I never have that sort of trouble. Except, if I may say so, where a little comes through from your side of the fence.

George Oh, I am sorry! I really must be more careful about that in the future. You seem to manage to keep your garden in such a disciplined state. Nature wins hands down every time with me.

Robinson It’s a matter of time and patience, you know. You may have noticed that I’m out here most evenings when it’s light. Not to mention nearly every weekend. There’s always something to do. Something to tidy up. I enjoy just pottering about out here.

George I’m sure that’s the only way to do it. I’m afraid my gardening consists of a few violent skirmishes during the season. By the way, Mary and I’ve been intrigued by the splendid hole you’ve been digging over there for the last few days. Are you sinking a mine by any chance?

Robinson Good gracious, no! You will have your joke! I’ve been busy constructing an ornamental pond. We think it’ll be a great joy when it’s finished. Though it’s taking longer than I thought it would.

George Will you keep fish in it?

Robinson Oh, yes. Though I haven’t quite decided what sort to have. As a matter of fact, I’ve got a couple of books on the rearing and care of fish out of the local library. It’s a fascinating subject. Though I can’t say I’ve done more than scratch the surface as yet.
George  I’m sure we can look forward to having a well-behaved colony of fish next door. Didn’t I feel a spot of rain? Pity! I’ll have to postpone my inspection.

Robinson  It’s not going to be very much. Not enough to send a real gardener scurrying indoors. Before you go, you won’t mind if I mention just one thing, will you? This fence is yours, you know. And I’m afraid that in a good many places it needs attention. I did nail up one section when it blew down in November. But it was more than a temporary repair. I’ve been meaning to have a word with you about it for some time.

George  I really must apologise. I know the fence is my responsibility. And I feel very guilty for not having done anything about it before. But I promise you I’ll get some fencing contractors to come and have a look at it, and put up a new one if necessary.

Robinson  Well, if you want any help, just let me know. Now it really is coming on. Good for the young plants!

George  I must be off! I’ll see you again during the next fine spell.
2. Decorating the house
(Speakers: George and Mary Smith)

Mary You know, I think it’s about time we had the house decorated. I feel quite ashamed when people come here.

George Yes. I suppose you’re right. When you live in a place, you get used to the shabby bits, don’t you?

Mary We ought to have something done every year. And then it wouldn’t seem quite so expensive. You always put things off.

George All right. What shall we have done? The outside of the house? It really does need painting. After all, that comes under the heading of preservation of the property. I’ve noticed quite a few places where the paint’s flaked off completely. We’ll have some kind of rot setting in next.

Mary Yes, that’s a job that needs to be done regularly. Every four or five years. Or so Mrs Robinson next door was telling me.

George I wish the Robinsons would mind their own business and not always be giving us tips on how to run our house and lives.

Mary That’s not the point. They’re so spick and span and house-proud. And they like their neighbours to keep up the tone of the road. I don’t see anything wrong in that. You must admit that our house does look a bit decrepit amongst all the others, not to mention the garden.

George No, let’s not mention the garden. Let’s concentrate on the outside of the house for the moment. I suppose we’d better get Entwistle the builder to do it.

Mary It’s a pity we can’t find anyone else. His men are so old, aren’t they? I always feel they’re past it really. I get so worried when they go up the ladders.

George Oh, I think they’re quite safe. Just a bit slow. And the very old one does nothing else but hold the ladder for his mates.

Mary I’m not saying they’re not pleasant to have about the place. They’re very polite, even if they aren’t very brisk. I must remember to get some extra tea in.

George That’s settled then. It’s just a question now of when they can come.

Mary Aren’t you going to get an estimate? You really ought to get several and accept the most reasonable.

George That’s far too much trouble. No, we know the Entwistle firm, and we may as well stick to them. They weren’t too expensive last time. Shall I give him a ring now?

Mary You might as well, before your enthusiasm cools off.

George All right. Here goes! Now, what’s his number? Where’s the telephone directory? A new one came the other day, didn’t it?

Mary Yes. Now where did I put it? Isn’t it on the window-sill? No, I know. It’s on the piano. There it is! I remember I had to put it down hurriedly.

George Thanks! Entwistle. What’s his initial? He’s called ‘Bert’, isn’t he? That’ll be ‘H’ then. 288164, that’ll be it. It’s ringing now.

Hallo? Could I speak to Mr Entwistle, please? He’s not in? When d’you expect him back? About seven. I wonder if you’d ask him to give me a ring when he comes in. Well, yes. When he’s had his supper, if you think that’d be better. Yes, I get hungry too after a hard day’s work.
About eight then? That’s very kind of you. You won’t forget to mention it, will you? My name’s Smith. Of 98 Arthur Road. Oh, you remember us from the last time. Yes, poor Fred was unlucky, wasn’t he? I’ve had the hole in the path filled in now. It must have given him a nasty turn, especially at his age. I’ll look forward to hearing from your husband then. Goodbye!

Mary
That must have been Mrs Entwistle. She’s a bit of a dragon.

George
Yes, she did seem slightly hostile. But she says her Bert’ll phone when he’s had his supper.

Mary
He won’t, you know. He never does! You’ll have to ring up again tomorrow. And still nothing’ll happen. In the end, you’ll have to go round and see him. Don’t you remember? That’s what happened last time.

George
So it did! Anyway, we can at least say that negotiations have been put in hand. And we’ll have time to decide exactly what we want to do.

Mary
I wonder if we could have that rather bright colour scheme. You know. The one I thought up the last time we had the outside done.

George
But Bert doesn’t approve of that sort of thing. You know he doesn’t! He’s a stickler for what he calls good taste. And I’m sure your precious Robinsons would be horrified. No, you’ll have to quieten it down a little bit. Last time, it was the scarlet door that finally put paid to it as far as Bert was concerned.

Mary
All right. Let’s settle for some nice sober colours. But no browns, please. And while we’re about it, we’d better have the walls repainted with that white liquid cement stuff.

George
Yes, but let’s get Mr Entwistle down to figures first.
3. Shopping
(Speakers: George and Mary Smith)

Mary Will you get the car out, George? I’m off to do the shopping now.

George I’ll come with you, if you like. I could get the fruit and veg for you. I’m much quicker than you are in shops. Men always are, I suppose.

Mary You’re quicker. But you don’t always buy the right things. No, George. Thank you very much, but I’ll manage quite well by myself. You just get the car out of the garage for me. That’ll be a great help. It’s such a struggle for me to undo the top bolt on the garage door.

George All right. But I’ll finish this page of the paper first, if you don’t mind.

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George It’s no good, Mary. The car won’t start.

Mary Won’t start? It was perfectly all right the last time I took it out. You know, the other evening. When I went over to see Dorothy.

George Well. You left the lights on. Yes, you did! And now the battery’s flat. I can’t even get Mr Robinson to get his jump leads out because there’s no one in next door just now. I’ll have to ring the AA to come and recharge the battery.

Mary How long’ll that take? If we don’t get off soon, the supermarket’ll be crowded.

George You’ll just have to walk for a change.

Mary But I’ve got to get the whole week’s shopping. You’ll have to come and give me a hand. You can take these two big baskets. And I’ll make do with the smaller one and the shopping bag.

George Why on earth d’you have to buy so much all at once?

Mary I don’t see any point in going down to the supermarket every day, when we can perfectly easily buy most things at the same time and keep them in the freezer till we need them. Anyway, there’s that man from the farm who calls once a week. I get eggs and quite a lot of fruit and vegetables from him.

George I thought you said he’d stopped coming.

Mary So he has, for the time being. But I’m hoping we’ll see him again when the weather improves. Still, that’s beside the point. It’s time we were going. Pick up those baskets and let’s be off.

George The air’s quite fresh, isn’t it? We’re in for a fine day, I should think. I wish I’d put a coat on though.

Mary You’ll warm up when we’ve been walking for a bit. Not so fast, though, George. You’re not running for the train this morning.

George Sorry, I get so used to hurrying down this road in the mornings. How’s that? Is this a more reasonable speed?

Mary Yes, that’s better. I don’t expect you’ll be quite so energetic on the way home, when it’s uphill all the way. Oh, have I brought my purse? Thank goodness! But I don’t seem to have much money with me. Can you let me have some?

George Well, I’ve only got two ten-pound notes. Will that do?

Mary It’ll have to. But you’d better go to the cash machine and draw out some more money.
George: But I haven’t brought my card. No. Let’s get all the shopping we can and I’ll come down again later.

Mary: Well, since you’re so keen on the fruit and veg, you can get those. I shall want six pounds of potatoes and two pounds of onions to start with. Then a pound of carrots. Oh, and you’d better get some of those frozen beans. Two packets should be enough. The large ones. Now what else? Apples! We’ll soon have finished those we have. You choose two pounds of the kind you like best. Don’t you think you ought to write all this down, George?

George: No, no! I can remember it all perfectly well. Is that all you want in the way of fruit?

Mary: I usually buy bananas and oranges. But I doubt whether you’ll have room for them.

George: Of course I will. We may as well carry as much as we can. And what about grapes? We have some of those as a rule, don’t we?

Mary: Yes. We do. I’ll leave it to you, then. Get what you can. But don’t forget the essentials, whatever you do. I’ll meet you at the checkout.

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George: Well, here we are! All finished in no time! I met Mrs Robinson. We had quite a chat. She asked after you. Thought you must be ill. I told them you were taking the day off, and had bullied me into doing the shopping.

Mary: I wish you’d tell the truth, instead of making up these tales. It’s often most embarrassing. I can’t think what the Robinsons make of you. Anyway, have you got everything I told you to?

George: Look! I got a bunch of the most enormous grapes.

Mary: Where? I don’t see any grapes.

George: They must be underneath the other things. At the bottom of the basket.

Mary: At the bottom? They’ll be crushed. When we put them into a bag, they’ll be a sticky mess. What else have you got?

George: Bananas. Oranges. Oh, and some rather nice pears Mrs Robinson recommended.

Mary: Well Mrs Robinson doesn’t know what she’s talking about. I had some of those pears last week. They’re over-ripe inside. And the potatoes?

George: Potatoes? I knew there was something else. But there’s no room, in any case.

Mary: We need them for lunch. So it’s just as well that you’re coming down again. You can get the potatoes then. You’ll be able to buy some washing powder and one or two other things I haven’t room for. But let’s hurry home now.

George: These baskets are heavy! You were quite right. It isn’t so easy going home.

Mary: There’s no need to puff and blow so, all the same. You are making an exhibition of yourself, George. You’ve been putting on weight, you know. You ought to do something about it. What about a few exercises every morning? You might join Mr Robinson in the garden. He’s out there every morning, at seven-thirty sharp, wet or fine, doing his kneesbends. Quite a picturesque figure it makes in his shorts and T-shirt. I shouldn’t think you’d be a very prepossessing sight!
George: All right, Mary. There’s no need to be personal. I admit I’ve filled out a little in the last year or two. But I wouldn’t say I’ve put on weight. To hear you talk, anybody’d think I was corpulent. Anyway, I wouldn’t dream of exposing myself in the garden, in the way that Robinson does. All he gets as a result is a perpetual cold. . . . But you go on, if you’re in a hurry to get home. I’ll come along at my leisure and enjoy the morning air.