***The Argument***   
William Boyd   
  
The First Argument

*The stage is dark.*

*We hear Frank Sinatra – or someone else with a really great voice – singing. 'You're nobody 'til somebody loves you'.*

*Music fades down and then –*

*Then we hear a door open and close. Locked.*

*And the sound of a couple in mid-argument. Voices raised. Semi-belligerent.*

*We hear it continue offstage for a few seconds.*

*Silence.*

**Woman** – No, I thought it was crap. No, worse than crap. I thought it was insulting.

**Man** Come on! I enjoyed it. It was entertaining.

**Woman** They couldn't even be arsed to join the dots. There was a hole in that plot you could … You could drive a lorry through.

**Man** Oh, yeah? For example?

**Woman** Just tell me how the hell did he know what was in the safe deposit box? Eh? There was no possibility he could have known. Absolutely no remote possibility.

**Man** Well … Ah … Maybe somebody had told him.

**Woman** Oh, yeah. Before the film started. Brilliant.

*The lights go up –*

*To reveal a Man and a Woman.*

*The couple are young – in their thirties – and attractive-looking. The man is called Pip. The woman is called Meredith. They are husband and wife.*

**Pip** Yes, I admit. Now you mention it … That is something of a … a flaw. Want a drink?

**Meredith** I'll have an extremely large glass of wine.

*He leaves the stage and comes back with two glasses of wine. He hands her her glass.*

**Pip** I must have missed that bit about the safe-deposit box. Funny. I'm usually very good on procedural stuff like that.

**Meredith** Since when?

**Pip** No. I'm very good at that sort of nuts and bolts stuff.

**Meredith** Well you weren't very good tonight.

**Pip** I must have been preoccupied.

**Meredith** Well you were so preoccupied you missed the glaring error, didn't you? Only got part of the picture.

**Pip** I got the part of the picture that I was interested in.

**Meredith** Story of your life –

**Pip** (irritated) – What do you mean by –

**Meredith** – I'm sorry, but that film was shit. Grade A, unadulterated –

**Pip** – It was a fucking movie on at the local cinema. We weren't doing anything else. I wasn't going to … to La Covent Scala to hear Cosi fan Figaro.

**Meredith** (beat, looks at him, deadpan) You think that's funny – but it's not … It's just 'whimsical'. The English disease – 'whimsy'. The easy, knowing laugh … We fall into that trap all the time. Must try harder, Pip.

*They look at each other. Darkly.*

*The mood has soured, suddenly – the banter gone.*

**Pip** Don't patronise me, all right?

**Meredith** Don't make me patronise you.

**Pip** How do you make someone patronise you? It's not something willed – it's something another pompous, self-important person does to you, whether you like it or not.

**Meredith** Pompous? You've got a –

**Pip** – Yeah. Like a, you know, pompous and self-important, self-regarding museum curator.

**Meredith** If I patronise you it's because you're so fucking thick.

**Pip** Here we go, here we go. Just because you went to –

**Meredith** – It's nothing to do with Oxford. Chip-down. Most of the people I met at Oxford were just as thick as you!

*He has to laugh at this. The mood calms again. He sips his drink. Looks at her.*

**Pip** You can just enjoy something, you know, Meredith. In an uncomplicated way … Simple pleasure. It doesn't have to be analysed to death – stand up to rigorous intellectual scrutiny. It can be fun. Easy. A bit of frivolity in your life. It's not a crime – not some nasty little secret.

**Meredith** Absolutely. I couldn't be happier. I like a bit of fun – a bit of frivolity – as much as the next person. Very happy to leave my brain at the door, like you, oh yes, but – but if people don't even make the slightest effort to be …

*(She thinks.)*

To be coherent … Then you sit there insulted … Unless you're thick, that is.

*Pause. He darkens.*

**Pip** I said don't patronise me, you bitch.

**Meredith** Jesus Christ. We're discussing a film. We disagree with each other. Don't take everything personally. Get a life, you sad fuck.

**Pip** Look to yourself.

**Meredith** What does that mean?

**Pip** I make four times what you do.

**Meredith** (laughs) I'm a curator, for God's sake. I work at the British Museum –

**Pip** – For peanuts. You monkey –

**Meredith** – And since when has a salary ever been a measure of intelligence? Museum curators aren't in it for the money, you know. Market traders make more than I do. Cab drivers make more than I do. Window cleaners probably make more than I do. Your amazing annual earnings have nothing to do with this argument … An argument that you've lost, by the way. Score another one for Meredith.