

Synopsis

Set in a quaint tearoom in the Cinque Port town of Rye, *Jam First* is a contemporary comedy about belonging, identity, and jam protocol. When anxious London financier Oliver arrives to meet a mysterious online date, he faces interrogation from sharp-eyed proprietor Margot and formidable local Dotty. As scone etiquette becomes a moral battlefield, Oliver reveals he's come seeking love and escape. The twist is Dotty is "Marina," who has catfished him as part of an unofficial community audition to protect Rye from the wrong newcomers. Warm and witty the play explores who truly earns the right to belong, and what a community will do to protect its identity.

Title: Jam First

Written by Tanya Reddin

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Characters:

- **MARGOT** – Late 50s. Proprietor of "The Salty Scone" tearoom. Brisk, watchful, proudly Ryese.
 - **OLIVER** – Early 30s. Visiting from London. Overdressed for a coastal town (wears loafers without socks). Slightly anxious energy.
 - **DOTTY** – Mid 70s. Local. Razor-sharp, floral hat, permanently installed at the corner table.
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Scene

A quaint tearoom in Rye, East Sussex. chalkboard reads:

THE SALTY SCONE – Est. 1987

*Proud to be in the Ancient Cinque Port of Rye
Jam First. Always.*

A bell tinkles as the door opens.

MARGOT (*without looking up*):

If you're from Hastings, we're fully booked.

OLIVER (*hovering at the door*):

I'm not from Hastings.

MARGOT (*looks up, assessing him*):

Oh. London then.

OLIVER:

Is it that obvious?

DOTTY (*without looking up from her crossword*):

You're wearing loafers without socks in February.

OLIVER:

Right. Yes, guess that's fair.

MARGOT:

So, table for one?

OLIVER:

Actually, I'm meeting someone.

(Margot and Dotty exchange a microscopic look.)

MARGOT:

We don't allow influencers.

OLIVER:

I'm not an influencer.

DOTTY:

He looks like he influences.

OLIVER:

I work in, well, finance.

DOTTY:

Oh posh.

(Margot gestures to a small table center stage.)

MARGOT:

Sit, before the tide turns.

OLIVER:

The tide?

MARGOT:

Metaphorical..mostly.

(Oliver sits and studies the menu.)

OLIVER:

What's a "Cinque Port Cream Tea Experience"?

MARGOT:

Two scones, jam, clotted cream, tea, and a brief lecture on medieval maritime confederations.

OLIVER:

I'll have that, but without the lecture.

(Margot exits briefly. Dotty eyes him.)

DOTTY:

You can't opt out of history in Rye.

OLIVER:

I think I'll risk it.

DOTTY:

You're early.

OLIVER:

Sorry?

DOTTY:

For whoever you're meeting. You've checked your watch six times.

OLIVER:

Is it that obvious?

(Margot returns with tea things.)

MARGOT:

Pot for one. It's leaves, not bags. We're not savages.

OLIVER:

Thank you.

MARGOT:

So, who are you meeting?

OLIVER:

Someone.

DOTTY:

Oh, a someone.

MARGOT:

Romantic someone or solicitor someone?

OLIVER:

Rom....I mean.... It's complicated.

(Margot places a tiered stand in front of him with ceremony.)

MARGOT:

Now, important, you must put the jam first.

OLIVER:

Actually I usually...

(Both women freeze.)

DOTTY:

Careful.

OLIVER:

...do cream first.

(A long, terrible silence.)

MARGOT:

This is a Cinque Port.

OLIVER:

Yes, I saw the chalkboard.

DOTTY:

We defended the realm in 1377.

OLIVER:

Against...?

MARGOT & DOTTY (together):

The French.

OLIVER:

Right, of course.

MARGOT:

Jam must go first.

(She folds her arms. Oliver, sweating, complies.)

OLIVER:

OK Jam first.

DOTTY:

Good, then you might live.

(Oliver takes a breath.)

OLIVER:

Have you both lived here long?

DOTTY:

Since 1952.

MARGOT:

Since birth.

OLIVER:

So you know everyone.

(Another small look passes between them.)

DOTTY:

Yes I would say so.

OLIVER:

Right.

(He checks his phone.)

MARGOT:

Signal's dreadful in here.

OLIVER:

Yes, I noticed.

DOTTY:

We like it that way.

OLIVER:

Of course.

MARGOT:

You're not here to buy anything are you?

OLIVER:

Buy?

DOTTY:

House. Shop. Quaint little fisherman's cottage you'll turn into an "artisanal concept space."

OLIVER:

No! God no. I'm not...I mean...I live in London.

MARGOT:

They all do.

OLIVER:

I'm not relocating.

DOTTY:

Visiting then?.

OLIVER:

Yes.

MARGOT:

For love?.

(Oliver nearly chokes on tea.)

OLIVER:

I didn't say..

DOTTY:

You've buttoned your shirt wrong.

(He looks. She's right.)

MARGOT:

Is she local?

OLIVER:

I...I don't know.

DOTTY:

You don't know?

OLIVER:

We met online, on a dating app.

(Margot gasps as if he said "in prison.")

MARGOT:

Online?.

DOTTY:

Does she have a name?

OLIVER:

Of course she has a name.

MARGOT:

And that name is?

(He hesitates.)

OLIVER:

Marina.

DOTTY:

Marina what?

OLIVER:

Just... Marina.

MARGOT:

Just Marina?.

OLIVER:

Yes, like Beyoncé.

DOTTY:

There is no Beyoncé in Rye.

OLIVER:

She said to meet here at two o'clock. "The tearoom with the blue door."

MARGOT:

There are three tearooms with blue doors.

DOTTY:

Four if you count Ethel's but she's colourblind.

OLIVER:

She said “The one that survived the great TripAdvisor incident.”

(Margot stiffens.)

MARGOT:

Ah.

DOTTY:

Oh ok.

(Silence.)

OLIVER:

What?

MARGOT:

Nothing.

DOTTY:

So, this Marina, you’ve never met her?.

OLIVER:

No but we’ve been messaging for months, she seems really nice.

DOTTY:

And you’ve come all the way from London to see her?.

OLIVER:

Yes.

MARGOT:

On purpose.

OLIVER:

Yes.

DOTTY:

Without confirming which tearoom to meet her?.

OLIVER:

Well...she seemed very certain.

OLIVER:

She said she’d be wearing green.

(Margot glances down at her own green cardigan. Dotty looks at the sleeve of her green blouse.)

DOTTY:

That narrows it down, enormously.

OLIVER:

Look, I know this sounds mad...

MARGOT:

It does.

OLIVER:

...but we've really connected. She understands me.

DOTTY:

Does she now?.

OLIVER:

She hates London, loves history and has strong opinions about scones.

(Margot leans against the counter.)

MARGOT:

Does she?.

OLIVER:

Yes she says jam first is a moral issue.

(Dotty coughs to hide a smile.)

OLIVER:

What?

DOTTY:

Nothing.

OLIVER:

She also said...this might sound odd...she said if I passed "the test," she'd tell me something important.

DOTTY:

Test?

OLIVER:

About Rye.

(Silence settles, heavier now.)

MARGOT:

What test?

OLIVER:

She said I had to come here, order a cream tea and say... *(he checks his phone)*...“The sea remembers.”

(Dotty’s crossword book closes softly.)

DOTTY:

Did she now?

OLIVER:

Yes. It’s probably just a joke.

MARGOT:

Say it.

OLIVER:

What?

MARGOT:

Say the phrase.

OLIVER *(awkwardly):*

The sea remembers?

(Dotty stands for the first time.)

DOTTY:

Margot.

(Margot nods once.)

OLIVER:

What’s happening?

MARGOT:

You passed.

OLIVER:

Passed what?

DOTTY:

The first part.

(Margot flips the chalkboard sign from “OPEN” to “CLOSED.” Locks the door.)

OLIVER:

Excuse me?

MARGOT:

We need privacy.

OLIVER:

This is slightly alarming.

DOTTY:

Good.

(Margot removes her apron. Underneath, pinned to her cardigan, is a silver badge of a ship.)

OLIVER:

Is this some kind of historical reenactment society?

DOTTY:

Oh, it's much older than that.

MARGOT:

Rye isn't just a town.

OLIVER:

I know, it's a Cinque Port.

DOTTY:

And do you know what that means?

OLIVER:

Medieval naval defence obligations in exchange for privileges?

(Both women pause.)

MARGOT:

Ah, you did read the leaflet.

OLIVER:

Well no, it was on Wikipedia.

DOTTY:

Close enough.

(Margot steps closer.)

MARGOT:

The privileges still stand.

OLIVER:

I'm sorry?

DOTTY:

We still protect the realm.

OLIVER:

From France?

MARGOT:

From erosion.

DOTTY:

From developers.

MARGOT:

From TripAdvisor.

OLIVER:

Right.

DOTTY:

And from men like you.

OLIVER:

Men like me?

MARGOT:

London finance. Looking for something quaint to buy.

OLIVER:

I'm not buying anything!

DOTTY:

No?

OLIVER:

NO!

(Margot studies him carefully.)

MARGOT:

Then why are you here?

(He hesitates. The energy shifts.)

OLIVER:

Because... I'm tired.

I'm tired of spreadsheets and glass buildings and pretending I like small plates that cost thirty pounds. Marina talked about tide tables and crooked streets and knowing your neighbours. It sounded... really lovely.

DOTTY:

So you came.

OLIVER:

Yes.

MARGOT:

Willing to put jam first.

OLIVER:

Yes.

(Long pause.)

OLIVER:

So... where is she?

(Silence. Dotty removes her hat. Underneath is a small phone. She holds it up.)

DOTTY:

Hello, Oliver.

(He stares.)

OLIVER:

Nooo!.

MARGOT:

Oh yes.

OLIVER:

You're...?

DOTTY:

Marina.

OLIVER:

But...your profile picture...

DOTTY:

It was from 1978.

OLIVER:

You said you were 42!

DOTTY:

Emotionally I'm 42.

OLIVER:

You said you liked paddleboarding!

DOTTY:

I like watching it.

OLIVER:

You...you sent me a photo of a hand holding a latte!

DOTTY:

That was Margot's hand.

(Margot waves.)

OLIVER:

This is insane.

DOTTY:

Is it?

OLIVER:

Yes!

DOTTY:

You said you were six foot.

OLIVER:

I am six foot.

DOTTY:

(she looks him up and down)

Err doesn't look like it.

(He falters.)

MARGOT:

You said you “loved the sea.”

OLIVER:

I do!

DOTTY:

When were you last in the sea then?

OLIVER:

Cornwall, 2014.

DOTTY:

Body boarding for a week doesn't count Oliver.

OLIVER:

So what, this was all a joke?

DOTTY:

No.

(She steps closer, unexpectedly steady.)

DOTTY:

It was an audition.

OLIVER:

For what?

MARGOT:

For residency.

OLIVER:

You said you didn't want Londoners moving here!

DOTTY:

We just don't want the wrong ones.

OLIVER:

And the right ones are...?

(Dotty looks at his half-eaten scone.)

DOTTY:

Jam first. No photograph. No complaints. No request for oat milk.

(Margot nods approvingly.)

OLIVER:

So you catfished me to... what? Recruit me?

DOTTY:

To test you.

OLIVER:

That's unhinged.

MARGOT:

It's called community screening.

OLIVER:

You could have just put up a sign!

DOTTY:

And invite anyone here? Like from Tunbridge Wells?

(He laughs despite himself.)

OLIVER:

This is absurd.

DOTTY:

Yes.

OLIVER:

So what now?

(Margot unlocks the door but doesn't open it.)

MARGOT:

Now you choose.

OLIVER:

Choose what?

DOTTY:

You can go back to London. Tell your friends about the "mad women of Rye."

MARGOT:

Or...

DOTTY:

...you can stay for the high tide meeting tonight.

MARGOT:

We discuss sea walls, and Ethel's blue door.

DOTTY:

And whether to allow sourdough on the menu.

(He looks at them and around the tea room)

OLIVER:

If I stay...

DOTTY:

You don't get Marina.

OLIVER:

I didn't have Marina did I?.

(looking deflated)

DOTTY:

True.

OLIVER:

Do I at least get honesty?

MARGOT:

Yes, we promise

DOTTY:

And lots of cream teas.

(Long pause.)

OLIVER:

Jam first?

MARGOT & DOTTY:

Always.

(He considers. Then slowly, deliberately, he takes the second scone. Spreads jam. Then cream.)

OLIVER:

The sea remembers.

(Margot flips the chalkboard back to OPEN.)

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai

DOTTY (*placing her hat back on*):
Welcome to Rye.

(The bell tinkles as Dolly exits. The sound of distant gulls.)

Blackout.

The song 'Jam First' plays out.

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai

Mille & Mai