

EXTRACTS

SCENE ONE

A MORNING IN SEPTEMBER 1962.

EDITH SITWELL'S FLAT AT 42, GREENHILL, HAMPSTEAD. THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT EDITH HAS ONLY RECENTLY MOVED IN. THERE ARE PAINTINGS READY TO BE DELIVERED TO SOTHEBY'S STACKED IN THE LIVING ROOM AND BEDROOM. THERE ARE MORE PICTURES ON THE WALLS AND THE BOOKSHELVES ARE HEAVY WITH BOOKS. IN THE HALLWAY CAN BE SEEN A TABLE WAITING TO BE MOVED TO A SUITABLE PLACE WITHIN THE FLAT, AS WELL TWO RECENTLY DELIVERED TRUNKS CONTAINING EDITH'S MANUSCRIPTS.

IN EDITH'S CLUTTERED AND UNTIDY BEDROOM THERE IS A DOUBLE BED, BEDSIDE TABLE WITH TELEPHONE, A STACK OF RECORDS, BOOKSHELVES, BOOKS, PICTURES, CHAIRS AND A GRAMOPHONE, ON WHICH A RECORDING OF HUMPHREY SEARLE'S SETTING OF EDITH SITWELL'S GOLD COAST CUSTOMS IS QUIETLY PLAYING.

EDITH IS IN HER BEDROOM.

THE CURTAINS ARE CLOSED. THE LIGHTS ARE ON. SHE IS WEARING A LONG NIGHTGOWN, HER KNITTED BED JACKET AND CARPET SLIPPERS.

SHE HAS LEFT HER BED AND IS FRANTICALLY ATTEMPTING TO SWAT A BLUEBOTTLE WITH A ROLLED UP MAGAZINE, AND, IDENTIFYING THE INSECT WITH HER 'ENEMIES', PUNCTUATES HER ATTACKS WITH LOUD AND ANGRY VERBAL PROTESTATIONS.

EDITH: Get out, get out! Get out, Mr bloody Noel Coward! Pipsqueak! James ruddy Agate! Dr Leavis!

ELIZABETH SALTER HAS ENTERED THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR AND INTO THE HALLWAY. SHE WEARS A COAT AND HAT, AND CARRIES HER HANDBAG AND A CARRIER BAG OF PROVISIONS.

ELIZABETH: (CALLING FROM THE HALLWAY): Edith.

ELIZABETH HAS ENTERED THE BEDROOM

EDITH: Bluebottle!

ELIZABETH: Right. Where?

EDITH: Get it out!

ELIZABETH TAKES UP ANOTHER MAGAZINE, ROLLS IT AND SMACKS THE AIR WITH IT.

EDITH: (SMACKING HER MAGAZINE AGAINST THE SURFACES) The critics are here. My enemies have returned to plague me, Elizabeth. (SWATTING FRANTICALLY): Out, out, damned Noel Coward. Get it out of here!

ELIZABETH: It's gone, Edith. (OUT OF EDITH'S HEARING): If it was in here at all.

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: It's gone.

EDITH: The bastard.

ELIZABETH: For goodness sake.

EDITH, OUT OF BREATH, SITS ON HER BED.

ELIZABETH: Let's get some light in here, shall we?

SHE GOES TO OPEN THE CURTAINS A LITTLE.

EDITH: How did it get in here? The bluebottle? (WITH REFERENCE TO OPENING THE CURTAINS): Not too much. It must have come through the front door. What time is it?

ELIZABETH: Ten o'clock. Terrible traffic jams all the way up Hampstead High Street. Sorry.

ELIZABETH TURNS OFF THE LIGHTS.

EDITH: The gramophone.

ELIZABETH: You want something else?

NO REPLY FROM EDITH.

ELIZABETH TURNS OFF THE GRAMOPHONE

SHE GOES OUT TO THE HALLWAY TO HANG UP HER HAT AND COAT.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO THE TABLE AND THE TWO TRUNKS IN THE HALLWAY): When's this come?

EDITH: Seven o'clock this morning.

ELIZABETH IS HANGING UP HER HAT AND COAT.

EDITH: It's my table from Renishaw. And those trunks. God knows what's in them. I tried to give the men some money, but they wouldn't wait. I did try.

ELIZABETH OPENS THE TRUNKS. SHE LOOKS INSIDE.

ELIZABETH: My God. It's loads of your notebooks. Exercise books. (AS SHE CLOSES THE TRUNKS): We're going to have to find somewhere to put this lot.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM.

SHE PICKS UP HER PLASTIC CARRIER BAG.

ELIZABETH: Bread. Milk. Ham. Lunch.

ELIZABETH EXITS FROM THE BEDROOM AND GOES TO THE OFFSTAGE KITCHEN.

EDITH: (CALLING TO ELIZABETH FROM HER BED): I'm writing to the Managing Agents. I didn't sleep a wink all night. People coming in at all hours. Banging the lift doors, Elizabeth. That woman next door going to the lavatory all through the night. No one seems to know how to do anything quietly anymore. I've been up since six. It's the only time of day I can write without interruption. The telephone going all the time. The Press asking their stupid questions.

ELIZABETH: (CALLING FROM THE OFFSTAGE KITCHEN): We're going to have to change the number.

EDITH: Someone from the Daily Mail. Eight o'clock in the morning. 'Do I think young people today are bad mannered?' he asked. 'Not unless they telephone me at eight in the morning,' I told him.

ELIZABETH: (RETURNING TO THE BEDROOM DOOR): Edith. There's another cat in the kitchen. I've found another cat. Edith. (PERSISTENT): Edith.

EDITH: That'll be 'Belaker'.

ELIZABETH: *Three* cats, Edith. You can't be expected to take care of *three* cats.

EDITH: She's a stray, Elizabeth. I'm not turning her out.

ELIZABETH: How's she get in?

EDITH DOES NOT REPLY.

ELIZABETH: Do you want Cornflakes or Shredded Wheat?

EDITH: I don't want breakfast.

ELIZABETH: You've got to have something.

EDITH DOES NOT REPLY.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE KITCHEN.

EDITH: A woman from the Sketch or Daily Express – I can't remember which – they're all the same. She telephones me at some ungodly hour last night: 'What, Dame Edith, do you think next year's fashions might turn out to be?' she wants to know. 'Short-lived' I reply. That got her. Elizabeth. What are you doing?

ELIZABETH (CALLING FROM KITCHEN): Coming.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM WITH TEA AND CORNFLAKES FOR EDITH, WHICH SHE WILL PLACE ON EDITH'S CLUTTERED BEDSIDE TABLE.

ELIZABETH: Tea. Cornflakes.

EDITH: I don't want cornflakes.

ELIZABETH: I tried to 'phone you before I set out. Couldn't get through.

EDITH: I've taken the telephone off the hook.

ELIZABETH: I don't think that's a very good idea. Do you?

EDITH: (REFERRING TO ELIZABETH WHO IS WITH DIFFICULTY TRYING TO MAKE A PLACE FOR THE CORNFLAKES BOWL AND CUP AND SAUCER – IRRITABLY): What are you doing?

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO CORNFLAKES): Do have a go at it. Edith. Breakfast.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO KITCHEN.

EDITH STARES DISAPPROVINGLY AT HER BREAKFAST. SHE HAS A RELUCTANT TASTE OF IT.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM WITH TEA AND CORNFLAKES FOR HERSELF, WHICH SHE DRINKS AND EATS.

ELIZABETH: Do you need the bathroom?

NO REPLY FROM EDITH.

ELIZABETH: (CONTINUING TO EAT HER CORNFLAKES): You should tuck in – they're delicious. Full of calcium. Your nephew phoned.

EDITH: Francis?

ELIZABETH: He phoned last night. Late. He didn't want to disturb you.

EDITH: I was awake. I'm always awake.

ELIZABETH: (CONTINUING TO EAT HER CORNFLAKES): He says it's all arranged. Jolly good news. Your 75th birthday celebration. It's been set for the 9th of October. Festival Hall. Isn't that wonderful. The Festival Hall. He sends his love. Francis.

EDITH: I don't want a birthday celebration.

(Cont'd)

ELIZABETH SHOWS NOEL COWARD INTO THE SITTING ROOM.

NOEL COWARD IS WEARING DARK GLASSES. HE IS IMPECCABLY ATTIRED AS EXPECTED OF HIM. YET HE APPEARS TO BE NOT AT ALL IN THE BEST OF HEALTH.

ELIZABETH: Here we are. It's Mr Coward, Edith.

EDITH: (FINDING THE ENERGY TO BE WELCOMING): Mr Coward.

NOEL: Dame Edith. How wonderful to see you again. And my congratulations on your birthday celebrations at the Festival Hall. Sybil Thorndike tells me you were absolutely marvellous. Wonderful Façade. I read the Times – it was, as expected, hugely enthusiastic.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith has had a terrific press.

NOEL: So I gather.

ELIZABETH: She's had dozens of calls and telegrams and letters. She's the talk of the town.

NOEL: Absolutely no doubt about it whatsoever.

EDITH: Thank you. I'm afraid the whole thing has completely finished me off.

NOEL: I'm sure it has. It would anyone.

EDITH: Won't you sit down?

NOEL: Thank you. Do please excuse these dark glasses. I have conjunctivitis. My poor eyes for the time being are best kept hidden away from public view.

EDITH: How tiresome for you.

ELIZABETH: I'll get the tea. You'll take tea?

NOEL: Thank you, Miss Salter.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE KITCHEN.

NOEL: I do very much regret not having been able to attend your wonderful celebration, which, as I say, Dame Edith, everyone I meet tells me was a huge success and at which you yourself was absolutely marvellous. It appears that I have hardening of the arteries. In my right leg.

EDITH: Oh dear. I am sorry.

NOEL: Such a nuisance. And I have to say really quite painful. I've been obliged to spend five days in Professor Niehans's clinic in Lausanne, during which the professor administered eight injections of placenta into my buttocks.

EDITH: That must have been most unpleasant for you, I imagine.

NOEL: I assure you it was. An altogether dreadful procedure. The idea of the injections is that after a few months new cells form and these help to create new arteries. It's all really rather magical. I don't know whether you have heard of Professor Niehans. He is all the rage just now. Quite the man to know. A number of one's friends and acquaintances have been to him. Most of them to receive his renowned rejuvenation injections, which are said to take years off one. Gloria Swanson has been to him. As

has Willie Maughan. Although in Willie's case I suspect that, for any significant improvement to be effected in the fellow's physical appearance, the poor fellow will have to endure a regime of rejuvenation injections that may take years to complete and quite possibly bring him to an early demise. I thought if Willie and Gloria can have rejuvenation injections, while I'm having my leg seen to, I might as well take my chance and have them as well.

EDITH: No doubt in the course of time you will notice some significant change, do you think?

NOEL: I rather expect I shall. Although quite possibly, Dame Edith, not that for which I am hoping.

EDITH: Well, we shall have to keep our fingers crossed for you, won't we? Shall we dispense with the formalities? Do call me Edith.

NOEL: Thank you, Edith. And I'm Noel.

EDITH: Yes, I know you are. Would the light hurt your eyes, Noel?

NOEL: No, no, I don't think so, Edith.

EDITH: Then do please take off those spectacles. You look as if you've been sent by the Mafia. (HE DOES SO). Ah, yes, there you are. It's Noel Coward.

NOEL: Thank you.

EDITH: I'm afraid you find *me* a little under the weather.

NOEL: I'm very sorry to hear that, Edith.

EDITH: In fact I'm falling to bits. My eyes, they're giving up altogether. I can't read for any length of time, not now, not for as long as I used to. I've had to arrange for that thing there to be installed in here.

NOEL: Ah, yes.

THEY ARE STARING AT THE TELEVISION SET.

EDITH: It's a television set.

NOEL: Yes. Some say it's the future, you know.

EDITH: Between you and me, Noel, I don't greatly care for it. I find it intrusive. And not a little threatening.

NOEL: Yes. Well, I suppose one can say that of so much of what we are told is modern life. Don't you think? Don't give up, Edith. We mustn't give up. I remember you and your brothers Osbert and Sachevell all those years ago – young poets, writers turning the world on its head, cocking a snook at the old brigade. Your names on everyone's lips.

EDITH: Poor Ossie, he has Parkinson's Disease.

(Scene cont'd)

END OF EXTRACTS.