

**EXTRACTS FROM**  
**THE FIGHT TO THE FINISH**  
**(Edith Sitwell Meets Noel Coward)**

**By Christopher Owen.**

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The Fight To The Finish is about **Edith Sitwell**. Edith Sitwell was a hugely successful poet in her day, touring the **USA** with considerable acclaim in 1948/1949 and repeatedly in the 1950's. She was noted for her eccentricity, her wit and extraordinary appearance. This is a wonderful part for the right actress. The play is set in 1962. Edith is 75 years old, quite ill, and living in her apartment in Hampstead, London. She is about to attend a Celebration of her Life's Literary Achievements at the Royal Festival Hall, London. She is fighting (as she has always done) for continued recognition as a leading literary figure, fearful (as she has always been) that she herself and her work are no longer valued. After the Festival Hall celebration she is visited by **Noel Coward** who has been her 'enemy' for 40 years. He too is unwell, and is fighting for his reputation against the emergence of the new playwrights, John Osborne, Harold Pinter and 'the kitchen sink brigade'.

**Acknowledgements:**

**The content of the play has been suggested and influenced by Elizabeth Salter's The Last Years of A Rebel.**

**Noel Coward's opinions on the theatre in Scene 4 are those he expressed in his articles in the Sunday Times of 1961, and in his Diaries.**

**CHARACTERS:**

**Edith Sitwell.** 75 years old.

**Elizabeth Salter,** her secretary and personal assistant. In her late 30's.-  
early 40's.

**Barry Parker,** the television delivery and repair man.

**Alison Fenning and Carrie Roberts,** beauticians, in their early twenties.

**Noel Coward,** 63 years old.

**THE PLAY TAKES PLACE IN 1962,** the year in which **Edith Sitwell,**  
75 years old and in very poor health, attended the celebration of her life  
achievements at the Royal Festival Hall in London.

The action covers the months preceding and a few days after the  
celebration.

**SET: Edith Sitwell's flat in Greenhill, Hampstead.**

The flat is comprised of:

The book-lined bedroom and adjoining sitting room.

Partially offstage: the front door and hallway.

Offstage: the bathroom and kitchen.

## **STORYLINE:**

**Throughout the play** Edith Sitwell battles with old age and increasing infirmity, with her memories of the ill treatment she suffered as a child at the hands of her father and mother, Sir George and Lady Ida Sitwell, and her undiminished need for recognition and acclaim.

**Above all, at this time, as she nears the end of her life, she is anxious for reassurance that her life's work is and has been of significant value.**

**It is for this last that she turns to Noel Coward**, whom, on account of his ridicule of her and her brothers 40 years earlier, she has pronounced her enemy, but whom now she perceives as having the clarity of mind, and an impartiality not to be found in others of her acquaintance, to give an honest and unprejudiced response.

### **SCENE 1: Edith Sitwell's flat. A morning in September 1962.**

With the encouragement and care of **Elizabeth Salter**, Edith Sitwell prepares herself physically and mentally for her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at the Festival Hall which is to take place in a few weeks time.

She does this while continuing to deal, in her customary acerbic and witty way, with the demands of an intrusive Press, with the pestering of would-be writers and with her enemies, some of whom are the critics and one of whom is **Noel Coward, whom, however, much to Elizabeth Salter's repeated opposition, she invites (for reasons stated above) to her birthday celebration.**

### **SCENE 2: Edith Sitwell's flat. The afternoon of 9<sup>th</sup> October 1962 -** the day on which the celebration is to take place.

She is given a beauty treatment and fantastically costumed for the occasion by two young 60's make up artists. She receives a telegram from Noel Coward in which he regrets he is unable to attend the celebration. Edith insists Elizabeth Salter write to him.

### **SCENE 3: (Continuous and briefly): The stage of the Festival Hall that evening.**

She is reading one of her poems at the Festival Hall and is received with tumultuous applause.

*Cont'd / Scene 4 over page:*

**SCENE 4: Edith Sitwell's flat. Some days after the celebration.**  
She is exhausted and ill. **She is visited by 63 year old Noel Coward.**  
Their meeting is a tentative reconciliation. Edith attempts to seek  
reassurance from Noel Coward that her life's work has the value she  
hopes for it. Noel Coward attempts to advance and defend his own  
significance and position in the theatre, a world now usurped by the likes  
of **John Osborne, Samuel Becket and the Royal Court Theatre.**

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**EXTRACT FROM:  
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 75<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. It's been set for the 9<sup>th</sup> of October. Festival Hall. Isn't that wonderful. The Festival Hall. He sends his love. Francis.

EDITH: I don't want a birthday celebration.

ELIZABETH: In recognition of your contribution to twentieth century literature, Edith. A celebration of your life's achievement.

EDITH: Do you hear me? Such a fuss. All those people finding fault – pretending they think you so wonderful, so original. God knows what they say behind one's back.

ELIZABETH: It'll be wonderful. You know you're going to love it.

EDITH: If we've got to have it, we've got to have Façade.

ELIZABETH: I'll say. Terrific.

EDITH: Constant Lambert and Peter Pears to read it again.

ELIZABETH: Constant Lambert is dead, Edith.

EDITH: Yes. Of course. I know. Well, there's no point in asking him then, is there? God, what am I allowing myself to get into?

ELIZABETH FINISHES HER CORNFLAKES AND CUP OF TEA.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO EDITH'S TEA AND CORNFLAKES): Can you be persuaded to have any more of that?

CLEARLY EDITH IS NOT GOING TO EAT ANY MORE.

ELIZABETH TAKES HER OWN AND EDITH'S TEACUP AND CORNFLAKES BOWL OUT TO THE KITCHEN.

SHE RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM WITH THE INTENTION OF TIDYING UP.

SHE BEGINS TO TIDY AWAY SOME OF EDITH'S CLOTHES.

EDITH: Peter and Constant would have been marvellous. What are you doing?

ELIZABETH: Tidying.

EDITH: There's no need to tidy. For goodness sake, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH NEVERTHELESS CONTINUES TO TIDY.

EDITH: There's no one else. No one who could do it as well as Peter and Constant. (REFERRING TO BOOKS AND PAPERS ON A CHAIR): Don't move those books. Put them back. I know where everything is.

ELIZABETH: The place could do with a Hoover.

EDITH: You're not Hoovering in here. I don't want any of your Hoovering. (REFERRING TO A PAINTING THAT ELIZABETH IS ADDING TO A STACK OF PICTURES): What are you doing with that?

ELIZABETH: Putting it with the others.

EDITH: That's Pavlik. Sotheby's isn't having that. I don't have to sell every damn thing, do I?

ELIZABETH: Sorry.

EDITH: For goodness sake, put it back.

ELIZABETH LOOKS AT THE PAINTING.

EDITH: That's his favourite portrait of me. Don't you pull a face.

ELIZABETH: I wasn't.

EDITH: I'm going to hang it.

ELIZABETH: Where?

EDITH: On a wall.

ELIZABETH HAS PUT THE PICTURE BACK TO WHERE IT WAS.

ELIZABETH: Let's have you in your wheelchair while I straighten out your bed.

EDITH: You do make such a fuss.

ELIZABETH: (AS SHE HELPS EDITH INTO THE WHEELCHAIR):  
Come on.

EDITH: Oh God, do we have to?

ELIZABETH: Here we go. Up. That's it.

EDITH: If Constant can't do it, who can? I can't.

ELIZABETH: Up. There we are. All right?

EDITH: Sciatica.

ELIZABETH: Gently does it. That's it.

EDITH IS IN THE WHEELCHAIR.

EDITH: I can't do it. Façade.

ELIZABETH NOW BEGINS TO TEMPORARILY MOVE BOOKS  
AND PAPERS OFF THE BED. SHE WILL THEN PLUMP THE  
PILLOWS, AND FIRST TURN DOWN THE BED AND THEN  
REMAKE IT.

EDITH: Not now. It's been too long. Not with my chest.

(SHE TRIES OUT SOME LINES FROM FAÇADE):

'Tra la la la la la la

La

La!

See me dance the polka,'

Said Mr Wagg the bear,  
With my top-hat  
And my whiskers that –  
(Tra la la la) trap the Fair.-’  
You see. Quite dreadful. It comes out like watered down porridge. It has to be crisp. It has to be rhythmical.

ELIZABETH: Francis says, subject to your approval of course, Irene Worth and Sebastian Shaw will be very happy to do it.

EDITH: He hasn’t spoken with me about this.

ELIZABETH: He phoned me this morning – I told you.

EDITH: Irene Worth?

ELIZABETH: Sebastian Shaw. Wonderful actor.

EDITH: Are they any good? Should we audition them?

ELIZABETH: I’m not sure that would be very nice.

EDITH: It would be a good sight less nice, as you care to express it, if they did it and it all came out like porridge.

THE THOUGHT OF THIS UPSETS HER.

ELIZABETH: I’m sure it won’t.

EDITH: That over-rated self-inflated poseur Noel Coward described it as incomprehensible gibberish. As gobbledegook. Did you know that? No talent for originality himself, Mr Coward insults my brothers and myself in a third rate musical revue which the impertinent fool cobbled together, whatever it was – what was it called? Who cares? The common little man refused to apologize. Did you know that?

ELIZABETH: Yes.

EDITH: Writes a jolly lampoon, as he’d have us believe it to be, depicts me as ‘what’s-her-name’.

ELIZABETH: Hernia Whittlebot.

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: Hernia Whittlebot.

EDITH: Hernia Whittlebot. Poor Ossie and Sachie. I'll never forgive the man, making a mockery of Ossie and Sachie. If I'd had my way, I'd have sued him.

ELIZABETH: Everybody's forgotten about that now, Edith.

EDITH: I haven't. Ossie gave him the chance to apologize. More than once.

ELIZABETH: It's 40 years ago.

EDITH: If I had been a man, I'd have given him a good public thrashing.

ELIZABETH: (DISCOVERING A CAT UNDER THE BED CLOTHES): Edith. There's another cat in here. There's a cat in your bed.

EDITH: That's Orion.

ELIZABETH: Orion?

EDITH: I don't know where she turned up from. She's obviously been mistreated. Looked half starved.

ELIZABETH: That's four cats, Edith.

EDITH: The way some people treat animals – it's unbelievable. She's rather striking, isn't she? Something distinctly aristocratic about her. That's probably why she's been so mistreated. People despise good breeding. Give her to me.

ELIZABETH HANDS THE CAT TO EDITH, WHO PETS IT.

EDITH: Cat's have feelings too, you know. (TO ORION): Don't they, darling? You are a beautiful girl, aren't you? Look at her lovely coat. You don't look very bright, old thing. A bit thick, I rather think. Mother would have taken to you at once. We'll have to marry you off to some rich chinless wonder, dear – get you settled. There we are.

EDITH HANDS THE CAT BACK TO ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH: I'll put her in the kitchen, with the others.

EDITH: Bye, bye, my little Orion. Give her the rest of the cornflakes.

ELIZABETH EXITS WITH THE CAT TO THE KITCHEN.

EDITH: (ALONE): That bloody man Coward. (CALLING): Elizabeth. (NO REPLY FROM ELIZABETH.) Wasting his time with all that trivia. Hernia Whittlebot. Huh. (CALLING RE: THE WHEELCHAIR): Elizabeth, will you get me out of here!

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: You want to get back on the bed?

EDITH: Thank you.

AS ELIZABETH HELPS EDITH OUT OF THE WHEELCHAIR AND BACK ON TO THE BED:

ELIZABETH: Here we go.

EDITH: You can forget all about it.

ELIZABETH: What? The Festival Hall?

EDITH: Cancel it.

ELIZABETH: I thought you wanted it. Up you get.

EDITH: I never said I wanted it. Anyway, I'll never be ready for it.

ELIZABETH: Hold on.

EDITH: Why don't you all wait until I'm dead before you do this to me?

ELIZABETH HAS GOT EDITH BACK ON THE BED.

ELIZABETH: There we are.

EDITH: Thank you.

ELIZABETH: All done.

WE HEAR THE POST ARRIVING THROUGH LETTER BOX.

ELIZABETH: The post.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO GET THE POST FROM THE FRONT DOOR MAT.

ELIZABETH RETURNS WITH THE MORNING'S POST.

ELIZABETH: Here we are. (HANDING EDITH THE MAIL, BUT HOLDING ONTO THE BILLS): Electricity. Telephone. Shall I deal with these?

ELIZABETH OPENS AND CHECKS THE BILLS.

EDITH: Thank you. (RECOGNIZING THE HANDWRITING ON ONE OF THE ENVELOPES AND OPENING THE LETTER): My agent. David. (READING THE LETTER): The University of Texas wishes to purchase my notebooks. He's negotiating a price. Oh, look, Little Brown are to publish *The Queen and The Hives in America*. In November.

ELIZABETH: Terrific. They love you in The States.

EDITH: Oh yes. The prophet in her own country and all that, dear. (RE: THE LETTER): David says MacMillan are reissuing *Fanfare For Elizabeth*. Perhaps we can expect some much needed filthy lucre. Gracious yes. Not that the Inland Revenue will let me hold on to any of it. He says the *Swinburne Anthology* is selling well again.

ELIZABETH: That's wonderful.

EDITH: (READING THE LETTER): The BBC want me to be in *This Is Your Life*.

ELIZABETH: It's a television programme. Make you famous.

EDITH: I'm already famous.

ELIZABETH: Perhaps not among the people who watch This Is Your Life.

EDITH: What is it this programme?

ELIZABETH: A celebrated person is invited to a BBC studio where a man called Eamonn Andrews reads out all the wonderful things that person has done, and a number of people come on to recall anecdotes about him or her.

EDITH: Good God. It's sounds horrendous.

ELIZABETH: I suppose it is really. You're not supposed to know of course.

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: The person who's the subject of the programme isn't supposed to know that they are going to be before Eamonn Andrews jumps out on them and tells them they are.

EDITH: It's getting worse.

ELIZABETH: It's supposed to be a surprise. That's the idea of the programme. Famous person taken by surprise, then everyone says how wonderful they are.

EDITH: And I'm not to know in advance – before being leapt out upon? By this Irishman?

ELIZABETH: Well, I think in your case it would be best if you were given notice of the event.

EDITH: Otherwise?

ELIZABETH: Otherwise – you might not do it.

EDITH: You're absolutely right. I won't. Over my dead body. And not even then. It's a ludicrous idea. Preposterous. Aggh! The very thought of it! (EDITH RETURNS TO HER AGENT'S LETTER): David doesn't say anything about The Outcasts. (REFERRING TO THE BILLS): Are those awful?

ELIZABETH: So, so.

EDITH: (OPENING ANOTHER LETTER): Oh, my God, I've got another letter from that dreadful woman who insists on discussing with me her quite awful poetry. Oh, help. (CASTING THE LETTER ASIDE): I can't – it'll quite finish me off. Elizabeth, dear, do get me a martini, will you? Thank you. For goodness sake, have one yourself.

ELIZABETH: You wouldn't prefer a cup of tea?

EDITH IGNORES THE QUESTION.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE SITTING ROOM, WHERE SHE POURS EDITH A MARTINI.

EDITH: (PICKING UP A LARGE ENVELOPE): This, no doubt, is another unsolicited manuscript. (SHE TEARS OPEN THE ENVELOPE, READS THE LETTER): 'Dear Miss Sitwell'. The woman doesn't even know how to address me. It's Dame Sitwell, Miss – (LOOKS FOR THE NAME ON THE COVERING LETTER) – Richardson. Dame. No, no – I am not reading your unsolicited novel.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM WITH EDITH'S MARTINI.

EDITH: No stamped addressed envelope, Elizabeth. These people think I'm rolling in it. (REFERRING TO THE MARTINI): Thank you. Perhaps they should have a word with the wretched Inland Revenue. Bin it, dear. Take it away and bin it.

ELIZABETH DOES SO.

EDITH: So you don't think they ought to audition? Irene Worth and Sebastian Shaw?

ELIZABETH: (SITTING ON A CHAIR): Let's talk to Francis about it.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO A MARTINI): Aren't you having one?

ELIZABETH: No.

EDITH: It'll do you good. You look as if you need one.

ELIZABETH: Francis says it'd be marvellous if you'd read a poem. One of your own.

EDITH: I can't read one of my poems. As much as some people may like me to. (REFERRING TO ELIZABETH NOT HAVING A MARTINI): You're so damned unsociable.

ELIZABETH, WITHOUT A WORD, RISES AND EXITS TO THE OFFSTAGE SITTING ROOM WHERE SHE POURS HERSELF A MARTINI.

EDITH SORTS OUT HER MORNING MAIL.

EDITH: Which one?

ELIZABETH: (IN THE SITTING ROOM): What?

EDITH: Poem?

NO REPLY FROM ELIZABETH WHO IS POURING HERSELF A MARTINI.

EDITH: It'll be a disaster.

ELIZABETH: (IN THE SITTING ROOM): There's going to be thousands there. The Royal Festival Hall holds 3000.

ELIZABETH ENTERS THE BEDROOM WITH HER MARTINI.

ELIZABETH: They'll love you.

EDITH: Who will?

ELIZABETH: Everyone. Friends. Admirers.

EDITH: I haven't got thousands of friends. And I'm quite certain I haven't got thousands of admirers. God forbid. The thought of either is quite shocking. And not a little depressing. (REFERRING TO ANOTHER LETTER SHE HAS OPENED): Oh, it's from George Cukor. How wonderful. (SHE READS THE LETTER): Oh, George is coming to the birthday thing. Isn't that terrific. That's absolutely killing. Dear George. Isn't this lovely. He says he has never felt so honoured in his life as when Noel Coward brought it to his attention that I'd dedicated *The Queens* and *The Hive* to him. He says Mr Coward enjoyed the book very much. Do you hear that? (CONTINUING TO READ THE LETTER): Dear George – he's still fighting to get the film made. He says we may have to change the title from *Fanfare For Elizabeth* to something more catchy. He says Vivien Leigh is still nuts about the script, and he's still trying to win Larry over. Larry, very busy. But still... The dear man doesn't give up, does he? They'll never do it. It just isn't Hollywood – I've told him. Dear chap. And if they do, they'll make it into a *Cowboys and Indians*. "Hiya there, Queenie Elizabeth!" Anyway, George is coming. Are we sending out invitations?

ELIZABETH: Well, I don't think that'll be necessary. But we'll make sure everyone will hear about it.

EDITH: Cecil Beaton must come. Cecil. He may be away. We must let him know. And Henry Cecil - he must come. His wonderful book 'No Bail For A Judge' – so funny - I'm sure Henry'll come. We must invite the Snows, and Allannah Harper, the Day Lewises - Veronica Gilliat, Michael Stapleton, Stephen and Natasha Spender, Anthony and Violet Powell. We must make sure Alec and Merula Guinness know. And Father Caraman. We mustn't forget Father Caraman. I'll never go to Heaven if we forget to invite him. And Charles and Pamela Snow. You've simply got to read Pamela's *The Unspeakable Skipton*, Elizabeth – absolutely terrific – about this quite dreadful man – this appalling fake writer - bit like Dr Leavis. Hah. I must remember that. Who else is there? I don't want Terence Tiller to come. Not after the things he said in the *Tribune* about my 'The Canticle of the Rose' anthology. Or that Alan Pryce-Jones.

ELIZABETH: I don't know why you bother your head about them

EDITH: Who?

ELIZABETH: Terence Tiller, Alan Pryce-Jones.

EDITH: I'm not.

ELIZABETH: Well, you could have fooled me.

EDITH: I don't know what you're talking about.

ELIZABETH: Right.

EDITH: The sad fact is, it's only the Americans who really appreciate poetry these days – well, my poetry anyway. We don't want the Levin of the Daily Express man. But I must have Charles and Pamela Snow. Perhaps I'll write to them all myself. I haven't got the time to write to them all. We mustn't forget Cyril Connolly, and Graham Nicol at Hutchinson's, of course.

ELIZABETH: Graham Nicol is keen you write your memoirs.

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: Francis told me.

EDITH: I'm not writing my memoirs. What a ridiculous idea. Whatever has got into their heads. Are you trying to kill me?

ELIZABETH: He thinks they'll sell very well.

EDITH: What nonsense.

ELIZABETH: The much needed filthy lucre, Edith. Pay your bank overdraft.

EDITH: What utter tripe. Who's going to read them? Anyway – I haven't got anything to say. Where would I start? Can you imagine? And the work involved. I'm surrounded by people who are intent on buttering me up - one doesn't know where one is with them – everyone trying to get me to do things I don't want to do – can't do.

ELIZABETH: (WHO, WHILE EDITH HAS BEEN SPEAKING, HAS OPENED A LETTER ADDRESSED TO EDITH FROM THE INLAND REVENUE): You've got another letter from the Inland Revenue.

EDITH: Oh, my God.

ELIZABETH: They want to know who your last employer was.

EDITH STARES AT ELIZABETH IN DISBELIEF.

ELIZABETH: They seem to imagine that you have been an employee.

EDITH: I've never been employed in my life.

ELIZABETH: I'm sure your accountant has had a copy of this.

EDITH: Are they completely nuts?

ELIZABETH: Don't worry - I'll make sure he deals with it.

EDITH: Don't they know who I am?

ELIZABETH: It is possible, Edith. Education being what it is today.  
(REFERRING TO EDITH'S MARTINI): Finished?

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: Finished your martini?

EDITH: Do you want another?

ELIZABETH: No, I don't think so.

EDITH: Maybe I'll have another.

ELIZABETH: A small one.

EDITH: Yes. Thank you. You're an angel.

ELIZABETH STARTS TO GO TO THE DOOR – TO GO TO THE  
SITTING ROOM FOR EDITH'S MARTINI.

EDITH: I want you to write to Noel Coward.

ELIZABETH TURNS – SURPRISED.

EDITH: I want you to invite him. To the Festival Hall.

ELIZABETH: Noel Coward?

EDITH: Ask him to come, and say I'd like to meet him afterwards, we'll have a spot of supper.

ELIZABETH: Why don't you? – you write to him?

EDITH: It's best coming from you – on my behalf.

ELIZABETH: A formal invitation? Are you sure? I thought –

EDITH: Never mind what you thought! Elizabeth, darling – write to him. And just another little martini.

ELIZABETH IS ABOUT TO EXIT.

EDITH: No – make it a large one.

THE FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS.

ELIZABETH: Doorbell. You'll have to wait.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE FRONT DOOR. SHE OPENS THE FRONT DOOR TO DISCOVER A MAN (BARRY PARKER) WITH A LARGE TELEVISION SET.

PARKER: Good morning. Television set for Dame Edith Sitwell.

ELIZABETH: Oh. I thought they were delivering it this afternoon.

PARKER: Told to deliver it this morning.

ELIZABETH: Right ho. Er –

EDITH: (CALLING): Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: Excuse me. Come in. I won't be a moment.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO EDITH IN THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: It's a man with the television.

EDITH: What television?

ELIZABETH: We've bought a television, you remember.

EDITH: Dear God.

**END OF THIS EXTRACT FROM ACT ONE.**

**EXTRACT FROM THE SCENE IN WHICH TWO YOUNG MAKE UP ARTISTS HAVE ARRIVED AND HAVE BEEN MAKING UP EDITH BEFORE THEY ALL GO OFF FOR THE FESTIVAL HALL CELEBRATION. END OF THE SCENE:**

THEY ARE HELPING HER INTO HER DRESS.

ELIZABETH: In we go.

CARRIE: Lovely. I love the sleeves.

EDITH: It's of the same material that Pavlik Tchletchew chose for me for a recital I gave in Paris. It must be over thirty years ago. He had such a wonderful eye for colour and design. That's a portrait he did of me.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO GETTING EDITH INTO THE DRESS): Nearly there.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE PORTRAIT): What do you think of it?

CARRIE: You're more beautiful than that.

EDITH: Pavik was aiming to arrive at something different and new. (INDICATING A PICTURE OF PAVLIK TCHLETCHEW ON THE WALL): That's him there.

ALISON: He's a good looker.

EDITH: Oh, yes. He certainly was.

ELIZABETH GOES TO GET EDITH'S GOLD AZTEC COLLAR.

ALISON: He was your bloke, was he?

EDITH: No. No. I wouldn't say that.

ELIZABETH: (WITH THE AZTEC COLLAR): He never tired of painting her.

ALISON: That's quite something, isn't it? Look at that.

EDITH: This is my gold Aztec collar. I wear it on State occasions. It was give to me by Count Fulio Verdura. Pavlik and I were planning to write and design an opera together.

CARRIE: Oh.

ALISON: (REFERRING TO THE COLLAR): It's looks terrific on you. It looks medieval, doesn't it?

ELIZABETH: Now then: slippers.

ELIZABETH PRODUCES EDITH'S GOLD SLIPPERS.

EDITH: Slippers. Can't wear shoes. The feet. Am I ready?

ELIZABETH: Hat.

EDITH: Hat.

ELIZABETH: Which one?

EDITH: That one. No, that. That.

THE FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS.

ELIZABETH: The ambulance is here.

ELIZABETH PLACES THE HAT ON EDITH'S HEAD.

ELIZABETH: There.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE FRONT DOOR.

ALISON: That's a hat, all right!

EDITH: You think so?

CARRIE: You'll turn a lot of heads in that.

ALISON: That'll turn a lot of heads.

EDITH: I must say it usually does.

CARRIE: Not many women would get away with a hat like that.

EDITH: I should hope not, Carrie, dear.

CARRIE: You're terrific.

EDITH: Thank you. And both of you are very pretty.

ALISON AND CARRIE (PERFORMING A MOCK CURTSEY): Thank you, ma'am.

ELIZABETH RETURNS.

ELIZABETH: It's a telegram. Shall I? (SHE OPENS IT AND READS IT) 'Much regret no longer able to attend tonight. My sincere apologies –

THE FRONT DOORBELL RINGS.

ELIZABETH: ' – And best wishes for your wonderful celebration'. Noel Coward.

EDITH: He said he was coming.

ELIZABETH: Well, he can't. Something must have happened.

THE FRONT DOORBELL RINGS AGAIN.

ELIZABETH: That will be the ambulance.

EDITH: I want a martini.

ELIZABETH: It's for the best frankly.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE FRONT DOOR.

CARRIE: You look wonderful.

ALISON: Terrific hat.

ELIZABETH RETURNS.

ELIZABETH: Yes. It is. Come along.

EDITH: I want a martini.

ELIZABETH: Too late now. They're here.

EDITH: (RAISING HER VOICE): I want a martini!

THERE IS A MOMENT OF SILENT CONFLICT BETWEEN  
ELIZABETH AND EDITH.

ELIZABETH: They're waiting for us at the door.

EDITH: You must write to him. Tell him – ask him to come to see me as soon as he can.

ELIZABETH: We can have a martini at the Festival Hall.

EDITH: How do we know they'll have any? Write to him.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE SITTING ROOM – TAKES A BOTTLE  
OF MARTINI. RETURNS WITH IT TO THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: Here. We'll take the bottle, shall we?

EDITH: Yes, yes, yes, yes! You must write to him.

ELIZABETH: Off we go.

THEY WHEEL HER TO THE FRONT DOOR.  
THE RECORDING OF FACADE IS CONTINUING.

ELIZABETH: Hurry, hurry.

ALISON: How exciting.

CARRIE: Terrific.

ELIZABETH: (AT THE FRONT DOOR, TO THE MEN): Here we are.

ELIZABETH, ALISON, CARRIE, AND EDITH IN HER  
WHEELCHAIR, EXIT.

AS THEY DO SO, FAÇADE ON THE RECORD COMES TO AN END  
AND THERE IS TUMULTUOUS APPLAUSE.

**END OF THE EXTRACT FROM THIS SCENE.**

**EXTRACT FROM THE SCENE BETWEEN EDITH  
SITWELL AND NOEL COWARD:**

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE FRONT DOOR  
SHE OPENS IT.

ELIZABETH: Ah.

NOEL: Good afternoon.

ELIZABETH: Good afternoon. Do come in. I'm Elizabeth Salter. Dame  
Edith's secretary. She's in the sitting room.

NOEL: Howdoyou do.

ELIZABETH: I'm afraid she's not too well today. A bit of a virus.

NOEL: I am sorry. Would Dame Edith prefer me to come back another  
day?

ELIZABETH: Oh, no, no. She's expecting you. May I take your coat?

NOEL: Thank you.

ELIZABETH HANGS UP HIS COAT IN THE HALLWAY.

ELIZABETH: She's very tired after her birthday celebrations at the Festival Hall.

NOEL: I'm sure she is. Thank you.

ELIZABETH SHOWS HIM 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.

**END OF FIRST EXTRACT FROM THE EDITH  
SITWELL / NOEL COWARD SCENE.**

## **SECOND EXTRACT FROM THIS SCENE:**

EDITH: Alec Guinness was at the festival hall.

NOEL: Dear Alec. A wonderful actor.

EDITH: Oh, yes.

NOEL: He and I were in the film *Our Man In Havana* together. We were both frightfully good. He was, I have to say, terrific.

EDITH: Not as terrific as you were, I'm sure.

NOEL: Well, no, not quite of course. But not far off. He never does too much, you know. Alec is a master of understatement. Did you see him as T E Lawrence in Terrie Rattigan's play *Ross at Her Majesty's*? A beautifully constructed play and on the whole superbly acted. Alec's performance, as one has come to expect of him, was most commendably restrained. He wore a blonde hair piece and whatever foreign horrors befell the poor man during the course of the play, never for one moment had the thing a hair out of place. I don't know if you know this, Edith – Elizabeth – but Alec was sodomised by twelve Turks, every evening, Monday to Saturday, plus midweek and Saturday afternoon matinees. Bugged by twelve Turks, and his hair piece didn't budge an inch. That, in my opinion, is an authentic example of the Alec Guinness School of Acting. Dear Larry Olivier, I'm afraid, has got himself mixed up with George Devine's happy band at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square. I suppose he feels he has to move with the times. Such a mistake, don't you think? Much, much better to persuade the times to move with oneself, I've always believed.

EDITH: He was there – with Vivien. I didn't meet them afterwards although I'm told they tried to see me, but by that time I was probably rendered insensible and good for nothing. They say Vivien's not been the same since she and Larry separated. Such a tragedy.

NOEL: She came to stay with me, you know – Jamaica – I have a place there. I must say she was being frightfully brave. But you know Vivien – one day she's an angel, perfectly mannered, and the next she's unutterably impossible. Larry, as I say, I don't know what he thinks he's up to. Did you by chance, Edith - Elizabeth - see him in John Osborne's *Entertainer* at the Royal Court Theatre. I mean, Larry himself was

marvellous. Of course. He always is. In his own special way. All those looks and rolling up of the eyes and so on. Hypnotic. But the play was appallingly pretentious, quite dreadful. I don't know what he's doing in it. I fear Mr Osborne is a total fake. I had the misfortune to attend a performance of his play Luther, which was frightfully monotonous, and quite, quite baffling. And went on for ages. It appears that Mr Osborne's overwhelming concern with the Pastor Luther is the tiresome fellow's dysfunctional bowel movements.

EDITH: Not a pleasant experience, I shouldn't wonder.

NOEL: No. I regret to say it's my opinion that we are now witnessing the end to all that is stylish and elegant in the theatre. So many of our new playwrights are far, far too obsessed with the horrors of life. And with sex, and squalor and torture. And everything is so inaccessible if you take my meaning. After I came over from Broadway I girded my loins and braved a performance of a play by Samuel Becket entitled Waiting For Godot. It was absolute gibberish from beginning to end. All those interminable and meaningless pauses, signifying nothing at all. One of our poor demented theatre critics has written that Mr Becket's pauses are the symbols of the emptiness of life. But life isn't empty, Edith. It may be empty to Mr Becket, indeed the way he writes I doubt if it can be any other, but it certainly isn't to me. My life is crammed full to bursting I am delighted to say. I am never ever bored, nor have I ever been bored, other than on those occasions when I have had the misfortune of attending one of Mr Becket's misery plays. Then I am. Indefatigably. Harold Pinter is another of them, you know. Have you seen his Caretaker?

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: The Caretaker, Edith.

EDITH: He lives in one of the flats on the ground floor.

ELIZABETH: Noel means the play by Harold Pinter. It's called The Caretaker.

EDITH: Oh, yes. Of course.

NOEL: It's about Croydon, Edith. Have you been to Croydon? I happen to know from personal experience that Croydon is a place the better to visit through Mr Pinter's text than by going there actually in person. This man Davis, of whom Mr Pinter writes, wishes to go to Croydon, and,

having met Davis during the opening stages of Act One, one is eager that his wish be speedily granted. Of course the critics loved it. Critics love the incomprehensible. It gives them so much about which to appear to be expert. They quite, quite destroyed my play *Waiting In The Wings*. The inference being that they understood what the play was about, which wouldn't do at all. Poor dear Sybil Thorndike –

**END OF EXTRACTS.**

**END**