

**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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## 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.

ELIZABETH: I thought they were delivering it this afternoon.

EDITH: Well, you better let him in, dear. Put it somewhere. In the sitting room.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO MR PARKER IN THE HALLWAY.

ELIZABETH: Sorry. Er – would you bring it into the sitting room, please.

PARKER: Right ho.

ELIZABETH: This way.

PARKER: (AS HE CARRIES THE TELEVISION SET TO THE SITTING ROOM): I tried to phone, say I was coming. Only I couldn't get through.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith sometimes takes it off the hook. Too many calls. I'm sorry.

PARKER: No trouble.

PARKER CARRIES THE TELEVISION SET INTO THE CLUTTERED SITTING ROOM.

PARKER: Where you want it?

ELIZABETH: Well, I don't know.

PARKER: It has to be near a wall socket.

ELIZABETH: Er – I think there's one over here.

PARKER: Right ho.

PARKER CARRIES THE TELEVISION SET TO THE WALL SOCKET TO SET IT UP.

MEANWHILE: EDITH HAS MANAGED TO GET OFF HER BED AND IS WALKING TO THE SITTING ROOM.

EDITH: Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: (TO PARKER): Excuse me.

ELIZABETH GOES TO THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: What are you doing? It's the television man.

EDITH: I want to see.

ELIZABETH HELPS HER TO WALK INTO THE SITTING ROOM.

EDITH: (SEEING THE TELEVISION SET WHICH SHE DOESN'T LIKE THE LOOK OF): Good God.

PARKER: Good morning.

EDITH: (GRACIOUS): Good morning. It's Mr -?

PARKER: Parker. Barry Parker.

EDITH: Thank you very much for bringing the television set, Mr Parker.

PARKER: My pleasure, Dame Edith. Best test the picture. You want a decent picture.

EDITH: Oh, yes.

PARKER: There we are. (REFERRING TO THE PICTURE ON THE SCREEN): That's the test card.

EDITH: Oh, yes?

PARKER: Shows me if it's coming through all right. Everything fine and dandy.

EDITH: Is it?

PARKER: What's that?

EDITH: Fine and dandy?

PARKER: Oh yes. Very nice. All set. I'll switch it off now, shall I? The programmes start in the afternoon after one o'clock..

EDITH: (DOUBTFUL): Maybe we'll switch it on in the afternoon then. Is it easy?

PARKER: Just push this knob here and Bob's your uncle.

EDITH: Good old Bob.

ELIZABETH: I wonder if Mr Parker would be kind enough to help me with the table in the hallway.

EDITH: Oh yes.

ELIZABETH: (TO PARKER): I wonder – the table in the hall – if you'd help me with it in here.

PARKER: No trouble at all. My pleasure.

ELIZABETH: Where are we going to put it?

EDITH: Goodness me, I don't know.

ELIZABETH: What about by the sideboard?

EDITH HAS NO OPINION – IT COULD BE ON THE CEILING FOR ALL SHE'D NOTICE.

PARKER: If we move those chairs a bit.

ELIZABETH: Yes.

PARKER: Tuck it next to the sideboard. Right?

ELIZABETH: Yes, very good. Is that all right, Edith?

EDITH: Oh yes. Yes. Too much furniture, Mr Parker.

PARKER: Well, over the years one tends to accumulate, don't you?

EDITH: One does.

PARKER AND ELIZABETH EXIT TO PICK UP AND CARRY IN THE TABLE.

EDITH: (AS THEY BRING IT IN – REFERRING TO THE TABLE): I can't think why we had that sent down. I was under the mistaken impression that this place was larger than it is. I've just recently moved in.

PARKER: Nice place.

EDITH: (IMPLAUSIBLY): Do you need any help with that?

ELIZABETH: We're doing all right. It's not heavy.

PARKER: Over here then.

PARKER AND ELIZABETH MOVE THE CHAIRS OUT OF THE WAY. THEY CARRY THE TABLE INTO ITS PLACE. THEY MOVE THE CHAIRS BACK INTO THEIR PLACE.

EDITH: (WATCHING THEIR MANOEUVRES AND REFERRING TO THE TABLE): It used to be in my bedroom at Renishaw. The family home in Derbyshire.

PARKER: It'll be your first time living in London, will it?

EDITH: Oh no. I left home years ago. (WITH MEANING): I got out of there.

PARKER: (THE CHAIRS HAVING BEEN MOVED ASIDE, HE REFERS TO THE TABLE): Right – this in there then.

ELIZABETH: Thank you.

PARKER AND ELIZABETH BEGIN TO MOVE THE TABLE INTO ITS CHOSEN PLACE.

EDITH: I've been living for the last twenty years at the Sesame Club in Grosvenor Street. Do you know it, Mr Parker?

PARKER: No, I can't say I do.

EDITH: I had to move out, of course. They started building. The property next door. Converting it to office premises. Quite appalling. I can't tell you.

PARKER: (REFERRING TO THE POSITIONING OF THE TABLE): There we are. In we go.

EDITH: It was absolute hell – night and day, incessant and unrelenting banging, drilling, walls falling down. It was a battlefield, Mr Parker. It drove me completely mad. Didn't it, Elizabeth? The noise was so bad it damaged my hearing. I contracted a disease in the middle ear. I can't hear a thing in my left ear. And of course it effected my walking – I couldn't walk, not at all at first, not for a long time, you know.

ELIZABETH: It was dreadful.

EDITH: I had to have a wheelchair.

PARKER: (AS HE AND ELIZABETH CONTINUE TO REPLACE THE FURNITURE): Well, I must say, it all sounds terrible.

EDITH: It was. I did everything I could to get them to stop it – or at least reduce the hours at which they were out there making all that noise. I wrote to the contractors, didn't I, Elizabeth? Every day. I wrote to John Connelly of the Noise Abatement Society, who, of course, was most sympathetic, made a number of representations on my behalf, not that they took any notice of them – I wrote to the press, I wrote to Harold MacMillan, the Prime Minister - didn't make a jot of difference. Of course, it was money. Money rules. A brand new office building. Who cares about an old woman being sent round the bend. Money, Mr Parker.

ELIZABETH: Well, you're all right now, aren't you, Edith. She's got a home of her own.

EDITH: Rather on the small side.

PARKER: It's very nice. You'll get it all sorted out in time. Eh?  
(REFERRING TO THE TABLE): That'll be all right there then, will it?

EDITH: What? Yes. I can't see we can put it anywhere else.

ELIZABETH: I'm sure it's all right there at least for the time being.  
Thank you very much.

EDITH: I wonder. I expect you're very busy, but do you think you might do me a very great favour and help Elizabeth to hang one of my pictures?

ELIZABETH: I don't think we can ask Mr Parker to do that, Edith.

PARKER: No, no. No trouble. My pleasure. Can't be easy moving into a new place. An upheaval.

EDITH: Yes. Well, you're very kind. Thank you very much. It won't take long. I'm afraid it's in my bedroom.

ELIZABETH: (TO PARKER): Are you sure?

PARKER: Yes, yes. As I say, no trouble.

EDITH: (LEADING THE WAY TO THE BEDROOM): This way. (TO ELIZABETH WHO IS TRYING TO HELP HER KEEP HER BALANCE): I'm all right. I'm all right.

THEY ENTER THE BEDROOM.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE PAINTING AGAINST A WALL): It's down there.

ELIZABETH PICKS UP THE PAINTING.

EDITH: We'll need a hammer and a hook. In the kitchen drawer.

ELIZABETH: I'll get it.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE PAINTING): Give it to me. Thank you.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO GO TO THE KITCHEN.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE PAINTING): It's a portrait of me by Pavel Tchelitchew. He painted it in 1935.

PARKER: Oh yes.

EDITH: (THE PAINTING IN HER HANDS): It's my favourite he did of me. Dear Pavlik, he died absolutely penniless. His work is worth thousands of pounds nowadays. We met at Gertrude Stein's in Paris before the war. I've always thought him to be as important as Picasso and Rouault. Russian. Had to flee the Revolution. Quite dreadful. The first time I met him, he was leaping in the snow, clapping his hands. Such enthusiasm. Such excitement. I knew as soon as we met he was a great artist. I'm afraid he was frightfully unpredictable. One minute he'd be so happy, full of fun, and the next he'd be in an altogether frightening rage – I never knew what about – these sudden volcanic explosions, and furniture and pictures flung madly all over. On one occasion, he was painting me, he was in such a terrible rage I thought he was going to kill me, Mr Parker.

ELIZABETH RETURNS WITH HAMMER AND HOOK.

EDITH: Here you are.

ELIZABETH: (TO PARKER): This is very kind of you. (TO EDITH): Where do you want it?

EDITH: (POINTING TO A WALL): I think over there, don't you. Where I can see it from my bed.

PARKER: (TO ELIZABETH): If you give me the hammer – and you hold it up.

EDITH: That's it. Thank you very much.

ELIZABETH: How about here?

EDITH: That's it. A bit higher perhaps. Let me sit on the bed. Oh, yes. A bit to your left. Bit lower. No, higher. That's it. Thank you.

PARKER: You hold it there – I'll make a small mark with my pencil. Then we'll see what's what. That's it. So we need it about an inch down, don't we – the hook and inch down would you say?

EDITH: Thank you very much.

AS ELIZABETH HOLDS UP THE PICTURE, AND PARKER MAKES HIS PENCIL MARKS – AND THEN HAMMERS IN THE HOOK:

EDITH: I arranged his first Parisian exhibition, at the Galerie Vignon – and later in London his exhibition at the Claridge Gallery.

PARKER: Right – bang in the picture hook, eh?

EDITH: Lord Berners was a great admirer of his work. So was Sam Courtald and Peter Watson, the latter of whom Pavlik painted a portrait in blue armour. I'm not sure Mr Watson liked it very much. I thought it quite splendid. Absolutely stunning.

THE PORTRAIT IS IN PLACE.

PARKER: There we are.

EDITH: It's lovely there. What do you think of it?

PARKER: It's very impressive.

EDITH: Can you see the likeness?

PARKER: (NOT WISHING TO OFFEND): Oh, yes – yes.

ELIZABETH: Thank you very much.

PARKER: (ABOUT TO LEAVE THE BEDROOM): I see you got a lot of books.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith is a poet.

EDITH: I'm very fond of books.

PARKER: So I see.

EDITH: How about you, Mr Parker? Do you read a lot?

PARKER: I like a good crime novel.

EDITH: Oh, yes. Agatha Christie. I read a lot of Agatha Christie.

PARKER: Sherlock Holmes is the one I like. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories.

EDITH: Oh yes, I agree – a wonderful writer. On the other hand, Agatha Christie is so easy to read, and sometimes, in the afternoons especially, I feel so tired, so absolutely worn out, I'm afraid she's the only writer I can manage.

PARKER: You'll enjoy watching the television then.

EDITH: Oh, will I? Good. Miss Salter writes crime novels. Very good. Have you read *The Will To Survive*? Terrifically suspenseful. You should try it, shouldn't he, Elizabeth? A rich old man slowly dying, his greedy relatives waiting eagerly and apprehensively to find out what he's left them in his will. One of the relatives can't wait for him to die a natural death. He or she poisons the old man. But who, Mr Parker? But who? Read it.

PARKER: I'll make sure I do.

EDITH: It's located in Australia – where Miss Salter comes from.

PARKER: Sounds engrossing.

ELIZABETH: It's the way you tell it, Edith.

EDITH: You must remember the name: Elizabeth Salter.

PARKER: I certainly will. Thank you.

EDITH: Thank you so much for your help this morning. Wait a minute. Elizabeth – where's my purse?

PARKER: No, no – there's no call.

EDITH: Oh, I insist. I do wish I knew where I put my purse. Quite dreadful. I can't have you go away without something. To show my appreciation, Mr Parker.

PARKER: Really -

ELIZABETH: It's all right, my bag's in the hall.

EDITH: No, no – here we are. Got it. (SHE TAKES OUT SOME COINS – A GENEROUS SUM - AND HANDS THEM TO PARKER): Thank you so much, Mr Parker. Apart from anything else, you've been a breath of fresh air.

PARKER: Thank you.

EDITH: You've livened up the place.

PARKER: Well, thank you very much again – most generous. You really needn't have – but it's most kind of you. Best get on my way, eh?

EDITH: Lots of other televisions to deliver this morning?

PARKER: That's right. And repairs. Always being called out to do repairs.

EDITH: Gracious.

ELIZABETH: Well, thank you again, Mr Parker. I'll see you out.

PARKER: Thank you very much. Goodbye, Dame Edith.

EDITH: Goodbye.

ELIZABETH: This way.

ELIZABETH SEES PARKER OUT OF THE FRONT DOOR.

ELIZABETH FOLLOWS FOR A FEW PACES, THEN TURNS AND RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: Goodbye.

PARKER: Goodbye.

EDITH IS IN THE BEDROOM.

EDITH: (AS SHE WALKS TO THE BED, LOSING HER BALANCE):  
Dear Jesus.

**SHE FALLS AS ELIZABETH ENTERS.**

ELIZABETH: Oh my God. Are you all right?

EDITH: I'm all right.

ELIZABETH: What happened?

EDITH: I fell.

ELIZABETH SITS ON THE FLOOR NEXT TO HER.

ELIZABETH: I know that. Is it your legs? The physiotherapist is coming tomorrow morning. We'll get her to have a good look at you.

EDITH: She's not.

ELIZABETH: What?

EDITH: She's not coming.

ELIZABETH: Why?

EDITH: I've cancelled her.

ELIZABETH: Why?

EDITH: She's a bore. I hate bores.

ELIZABETH: She's a physiotherapist.

EDITH: That's no excuse.

ELIZABETH: She's not here to entertain you, Edith.

EDITH: She sent me mad with a prolonged account of her wretched holiday in Spain. I loathe holidays. No one in his right mind could enjoy going on holiday. It's unnatural.

ELIZABETH: Do you want to go back to bed.

EDITH: Of course I want to go back to bed, I've got work to do.

ELIZABETH RISES, AND THEN HELPS EDITH TO RISE.

EDITH: Thank you. (AS SHE RISES): Throughout towns and cities all over the world, women are going to bed to work. Did you know that, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH: So I am told.

EDITH: (AS ELIZABETH HELPS HER ONTO HER BED): Would you be so kind as to get me that large martini. I suggest you have one yourself. You do look as if you need it.

ELIZABETH: I have to go.

EDITH: You've got to get back to the writing. You don't do enough.

ELIZABETH: No.

EDITH: Your publishers will get cross with you.

ELIZABETH: Mm.

AS ELIZABETH PICKS UP EDITH'S AND HER OWN EMPTY MARTINI GLASSES BEFORE EXITING TO THE KITCHEN, EDITH STARTS TO SORT THROUGH THE REST OF HER MORNING MAIL.

EDITH: I've a letter from David Lutyens.

ELIZABETH STOPS TO WAIT AT THE DOOR FOR EDITH TO DIVULGE THE CONTENTS.

EDITH OPENS THE LETTER.

EDITH: He's coming to my birthday celebration. He says he can't wait.

ELIZABETH: Wonderful.

EDITH: I didn't know people have been told already.

ELIZABETH CONTINUES TO THE KITCHEN.

EDITH PICKS UP A PARCEL CONTAINING A MANUSCRIPT.

EDITH: Oh, my God. We all know what this is.

SHE OPENS THE PARCEL AND EXTRACTS THE MANUSCRIPT.

EDITH: (CALLING): I've received another unsolicited manuscript, Elizabeth. Elizabeth. Five hundred pages. This is the fifth this week. Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: (CALLING FROM THE OFFSTAGE KITCHEN):  
Coming.

EDITH: People don't seem to understand I cannot be expected to read unsolicited manuscripts. Look at this. (CALLING): 'The Wind In The Attic' by Alexandra Tatum. 'The story of two sisters in love with the same man.'

ELIZABETH ENTERS **THE SITTING ROOM** WITH A PLATE OF SALAD. SHE PROCEEDS TO POUR EDITH'S MARTINI.

EDITH: (*CONT'D*): At least she's enclosed a stamped addressed envelope. (SHE PUTS THE MANUSCRIPT BACK INTO THE ENVELOPE). Are you there? Have you got my martini?

ELIZABETH: Coming.

ELIZABETH ENTERS THE BEDROOM WITH THE MARTINI AND THE PLATE OF SALAD.

ELIZABETH: Here.

ELIZABETH PLACES THE MARTINI ON EDITH'S BEDSIDE TABLE. SHE THEN PLACES NEXT TO IT THE PLATE OF SALAD.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE SALAD): What's that?

ELIZABETH: Your lunch. Ham. Tomatoes. You don't have to eat the cucumber.

EDITH: I don't like cucumber.

ELIZABETH: You don't have to eat it.

EDITH: Why are you giving me cucumber? You know I never eat it.

ELIZABETH: I put it on without thinking.

EDITH: We'll be having to get someone in to look after you.

ELIZABETH: Yes.

EDITH: What a nuisance I am.

ELIZABETH: Not at all. Eat it.

EDITH: Who do these people think I am, Elizabeth? Look at this. A letter from a woman – Mrs Celia Evans – Evans – we don't know any Evans, do we? Mrs Celia Evans wants me to introduce her to London Society. God help us, my poor mother had to go through all this. Social climbers pestering the poor woman. (REFERRING TO THE LETTER): It never ceases to amaze me.

ELIZABETH HAS DECIDED TO SIT WITH EDITH A LITTLE LONGER.

EDITH: (READING THE LETTER): 'Dear *Miss* Sitwell.' The poor deluded woman doesn't even know how to address one. Where's she come from? Welwyn. That probably accounts for it. (OPENING AND READING ANOTHER LETTER): The editor –Life Magazine want to do a special feature on me.

ELIZABETH: Do it. It all helps.

EDITH: (WITH ANOTHER LETTER): Oh, my God, it's another letter from the leper's stepmother. (SHE REACHES OUT FOR A PAIR OF GLOVES AND PUTS THEM ON). It's from the leper's stepmother, Elizabeth. This is the second letter this week. (*Edith cont'd next page*):

*(Edith Cont'd)*: (READING THE LETTER): Oh, my God, the poor woman's husband has been undressing himself in public again. The police have arrested him. And he has lost his employment as a night watchman, and she has only £12 left in the world.

ELIZABETH: This can't go on, Edith.

EDITH: We best telephone Harrods, send her a food hamper.

ELIZABETH: You sent her a food hamper just a few weeks ago.

EDITH: The poor woman's husband has been exposing his genitals, Elizabeth. This'll be the last one. I'll write and tell her. (HAVING OPENED ANOTHER LETTER – READING): It's from the British Ramblers Association. 'Dear Dame Edith, on behalf of my committee I would very much wish to interest you in the British Ramblers Association of which I am chairman, in the hope that you may decide to become a member of the Association and perhaps to join us on some of our most interesting rambles.'

THE LETTER AND EDITH'S REACTION TO IT MAKES BOTH ELIZABETH AND EDITH LAUGH UNCONTROLLABLY.

EDITH: My dear – who are these extraordinary people? Can you see me rambling, dear? Lord forbid. (SHE PUTS THE LETTER ASIDE) I shall write to them.

ELIZABETH: Oh no, perhaps you better not.

EDITH: I shall take great pleasure in responding to their kind if misguided request. (TAKING ANOTHER LETTER): Next. (HAVING OPENED THE LETTER): Another poem from Mrs Carter. One-a-week Carter. I'll give her this, she is prolific. But that is not sufficient, Mrs Carter. Thank you. (PUTTING IT ASIDE AND TAKING ANOTHER LETTER AND OPENING IT): What have we here? The Reverent A.J. Jenkins – actually I can't tell if it is Jenkins – his handwriting is quite dreadful. Would I – he wants me to add my name to a petition to the Home Office demanding that the law against homosexuality be changed. Yes, yes, well, of course, the law should be changed –

*(Edith Cont'd next page):*

*(Edith Cont'd)*: well, I suppose I best sign, Mr Jenkins – what good it'll do. Later. (SHE PUTS THE LETTER ASIDE. SHE TAKES ANOTHER AND OPENS IT AND RESPONDS TO THE CONTENTS WITH A SHARP SQUAWK OF RECOGNITION): Aah! It's from Canon Collins again! About banning the Bomb. Another demo – Houses of Parliament – picket my MP. (APPEALING FOR ASSISTANCE): Elizabeth, dear -

ELIZABETH: I'll write to him, tell him you've gone away.

EDITH: Yes.

ELIZABETH: He can't really expect you to stand in a picket line.

EDITH: No, well - not until I've done a bit of rambling. Next. No, no more. Not now. Oh, dear. You must go, dear. Go. Go. Write. Bye, bye.

ELIZABETH: I'll phone you at four.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE MARTINI): Top me up first, will you, dear.

ELIZABETH TAKES THE MARTINI GLASS AND EXITS WITH IT TO THE SITTING ROOM WHERE SHE WILL 'TOP UP'.

EDITH: (SEEING LETTER /ENVELOPE): Oh. Ossie. Ossie's written. (SHE OPENS THE LETTER): A brief communication from Ossie, Elizabeth. He wants me to read Choric Song at the Royal Festival Hall. Oh dear. Dear Ossie. Not a good idea. I'll sound dreadful. Awful. (SHE TRIES A FEW LINES OF CHORIC SONG):

'The Red Woman, like the glittering  
Dark red cedar tree  
Or the sun when its fires are low –  
The Esquimau, black as the ancient cold with her hair like the long dull  
ropes of snow  
Let down from the creaking cloud –'  
Huh. Ghastly. They'll throw eggs. The dear boy.

SHE PUTS ASIDE OSBERT'S LETTER AND TAKES ANOTHER, OPENS AND BEGINS TO READ IT.

EDITH: (CALLING TO ELIZABETH): A plumber has written to me. Mr George Thomas, Plumber, No Job Too Small. He's read about my birthday celebration at the Royal Festival Hall, and he wishes me 'a very happy birthday, Dame Edith.' Thank you!

ELIZABETH ENTERS THE BEDROOM WITH THE TOPPED UP MARTINI.

ELIZABETH: Here we are.

EDITH: Thank you. Isn't that lovely! Mr Thomas, the plumber, wishes me a happy birthday. He says he saw the performance of Façade at Oxford. He writes: 'It was an unforgettable experience.' And he has been a fan ever since. Well, thank you, Mr Thomas, Plumber, No Job Too Small. Isn't that terrific, Elizabeth. It's lovely.

AS EDITH CONTINUES: ELIZABETH EXITS TO GET HER HAT AND COAT FROM THE HALLWAY.  
SHE RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM.  
SHE PUTS ON HER COAT AND HAT.

EDITH: If he's as good at plumbing as he is at appreciating Facade, we must have him round to see if he can do something about the woman next door and the alarming noise her lavatory makes when she flushes it, which is at least twenty times a night, and the sound of which is not unlike what one might expect to hear should one be lying on one's bed and be ineffectively attempting to get to sleep beneath the Niagara Falls.

ELIZABETH: (REMINDING EDITH): Your ham.

EDITH: I'm what?

ELIZABETH: Don't forget to eat your ham?

ELIZABETH BEGINS TO EXIT.

EDITH: Don't forget to write to Mr Coward, will you?

ELIZABETH STOPS SHORT – LOOKS AT EDITH.

EDITH: Invite him to the Festival Hall. My birthday celebration.

ELIZABETH: What on earth for?

EDITH: Well, George Cukor said he very much enjoyed my *The Queens* and *The Hive*, didn't he? You suppose that he may have come to appreciate some of the rest of my work?

ELIZABETH: People don't change, Edith. He's hurt you once. He'll hurt you again. Why are you doing it?

EDITH: Doing what?

ELIZABETH: You know what I mean. Inviting him. Hernia Whittlebot. It's asking for trouble.

EDITH: I've just told you. I need to know what he thinks.

ELIZABETH: You know what he thinks. You don't need him –

EDITH: (BREAKING IN): About the work, the work! The truth! About what he thinks.

ELIZABETH: Your friends, people who love you, people who come to hear you, buy your books, admire you, they tell you the truth. *I* tell you the truth. Always.

EDITH: Yes, dear, but you aren't Mr Coward. He has no reason other than to view my work at arm's length – shall we say dispassionately. That, one might suggest, is his expertise. Stop pulling faces. Go and write your book.

ELIZABETH: Please, please – eat something, won't you? For me. Thank you.

ELIZABETH EXITS FROM THE BEDROOM – RETURNS.

ELIZABETH: (GOING TO THE TELEPHONE TO PUT IT BACK ON THE HOOK): Oh. The phone. Back on hook. I'll give you a ring at four.

EDITH: There's no need. (CALLING AFTER ELIZABETH AS SHE LEAVES THE BEDROOM): You're an angel.

ELIZABETH LEAVES THE BEDROOM AND GOES OUT OF THE FRONT DOOR.

EDITH IS ALONE. SHE REACHES OUT AND TAKES A VOLUME OF HER POEMS.

EDITH: (TRYING TO RECALL THE WORDS AND AS IF PRACTISING FOR THE CELEBRATION CONCERT – ANNOUNCING THE TITLE): ‘His Blood Colours My Cheek’.

His Blood colours my cheek.

Ah! Were but those Flames the tongue wherewith I speak

Of the small ambitions I have seen

Rise in the common street

Where the bell that tolls in Bedlam tolls the hour.

SHE STOPS – IT’S NOT RIGHT. SHE TRIES AGAIN):

Yet still great flowers like violet thunders break

In air, and still the flower of the five-petalled senses

Is surely ours.

I, an old woman, tied –’

No.

‘I, an old woman, tied

To the winter’s hopelessness.’

Dear Jesus.

SHE GIVES UP AND SELECTS ANOTHER POEM.

EDITH: (READING FROM THE CANTICLE OF THE ROSE):

The Rose upon the wall

Cries – ‘I am the voice of Fire:

And in me grows

The pomegranate splendour of Death, the ruby garnet almandine

Dews: Christ’s Wounds in me shine.

SHE IS DISSATISFIED WITH HERSELF AS READER.

EDITH: (TRYING OUT A FEW VOCAL EXERCISES AND TONGUE TWISTERS):

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper.

Did Peter Piper pick a peck of pickled pepper?

EDITH: (OVER ENUNCIATING FROM 'OLD LADY FLY-AWAY):

Old Lady Fly-Away

Lost her temper, night and day,

Took the bright moon's broom-

Swept round the attic room.

SHE SILENTLY EXECUTES MOUTH STRETCHING EXERCISES.

EDITH: (AGAIN TESTING HER DICTION): 'Don't take a bath in Jordan, Gordon'

THIS LINE NEVER FAILS TO AMUSE HER, CAUSING HER TO GIGGLE.

SHE TURNS THE PAGES OF HER BOOK.

SHE BECOMES AWARE OF THE BUZZING OF THE BLUEBOTTLE. SHE AGITATEDLY LOOKS ABOUT TO SEE WHERE IT IS. SHE LIFTS HERSELF FROM THE BED, GRABS AT THE HAMMER WHICH IS NEAR AT HAND, WITH THE INTENTION OF TAKING A SWIPE AT IT.

EDITH: (CALLING TO ELIZABETH WHO, AS EDITH KNOWS, HAS LEFT): My God, he's back. Elizabeth! Get out! Go away!

SHE TAKES A SWIPE AT IT.

AS SHE SWINGS AT IT AGAIN, SHE OVERBALANCES, AND FALLS TO THE FLOOR.

EDITH: Dear God.

THE BLUEBOTTLE CONTINUES TO BUZZ.

EDITH IS UNABLE TO RAISE HERSELF.

EDITH: Dear, dear God.

AFTER A MOMENT OR TWO, THE TELEPHONE RINGS, AND RINGS.

EDITH: (ON THE FLOOR): Oh bugger.

**END OF SCENE ONE.**

## SCENE TWO

**THE AFTERNOON OF THE 9<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 1962.**

**THE STACKS OF PAINTINGS HAVE GONE.**

**EDITH IS SITTING IN A CHAIR IN THE SITTING ROOM  
WATCHING TELEVISION.**

**SHE IS WEARING HER NIGHTCLOTHES.**

**ELIZABETH ENTERS THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR.**

ELIZABETH: (CALLING): Hello. It's me.

ELIZABETH ENTERS THE SITTING ROOM WITH HAT, COAT  
AND A CARRIER BAG CONTAINING MILK.

ELIZABETH: There you are. Are you all right?

EDITH: I'm hoping Mr Hancock might come on.

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

ELIZABETH: This is your big day. The beauticians are due at half past  
four.

SHE RETURNS TO THE SITTING ROOM DOORWAY.

EDITH: Velma at the Sesame Club said Mr Hancock was very good -  
very funny. Only one never knows when he's coming on.

ELIZABETH: We'll have to get the Radio Times.

EDITH: Once you start on this sort of thing, the expenditure is never  
ending.

ELIZABETH: (INDICATING THE CARRIER BAG): I bought some  
milk.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE OFFSTAGE KITCHEN WITH THE BOTTLE OF MILK IN THE CARRIER BAG.

EDITH: Dear God.

EDITH CONTINUES TO WATCH THE TELEVISION.

ELIZABETH HAS Poured A GLASS OF MILK IN THE KITCHEN. SHE BRINGS IT INTO THE SITTING ROOM WHERE SHE ADDS TO IT AN ESPECIALLY LARGE BRANDY WHICH SHE THEN PUTS ON A SIDE TABLE NEXT TO EDITH'S CHAIR.

ELIZABETH: Here we are.

EDITH: Do I have to?

ELIZABETH: Extra special today.

EDITH SIPS THE MILK AND BRANDY.

EDITH: It'd have been better without the milk.

ELIZABETH: How are you?

EDITH: I've been up all night. I keep having to go. I went as nearly as frequently as that woman next door. Although I assure you I was a darn-sight quieter.

ELIZABETH: I expect it's nerves.

EDITH: It may be nerves with her next door – with me it's the Asiatic flu.

ELIZABETH GOES INTO THE BEDROOM TO COLLECT THE WHEELCHAIR AND WHEELS IT INTO THE SITTING ROOM.

ELIZABETH: Come on. It's half past four. They could be here any minute.

EDITH: Oh God. (REFERRING TO WHEELCHAIR: That ruddy thing.

SHE BEGINS TO GET EDITH INTO HER WHEELCHAIR.

ELIZABETH: Big effort.

EDITH: Into the pillory.

ELIZABETH: That's it.

EDITH: Dear God.

ELIZABETH: It's the concert, Edith. The celebration of your life's achievements. There we are. Great excitement. (WHEELING HER OUT OF THE SITTING ROOM): Has the physiotherapist been?

EDITH: She's broken every bone in my body.

ELIZABETH: She's supposed to be very good.

EDITH: What as? (AS ELIZABETH WHEELS HER INTO THE BEDROOM): I said to her, 'you be careful, I've got the Asiatic flu'. She said 'Oh, well, we'll soon do something about that'. She pushed and pulled me about so violently she's left me with a migraine. And sciatica.

ELIZABETH STARTS TO TIDY THE BEDROOM IN PREPARATION FOR THE ARRIVAL OF THE BEAUTICIANS.

EDITH: Did you write to Noel Coward? Did you invite him to come this evening?

ELIZABETH: Yes. Why, don't you trust me?

EDITH: I'm going to talk with him afterwards. You did ask him to come to see me after?

ELIZABETH: What do you want to talk about? Specifically.

EDITH: I'm not too sure about The Canticle And The Rose anymore. I think I'm going to read 'A Girl's Song In Winter' instead. Do you think that'll be all right?

ELIZABETH: 'A Girl's Song In Winter' – yes, of course – terrific.

EDITH: I'm reading 'His Blood Colours My Cheek' then 'A Girl's Song In Winter', 'Choric Song', and 'Prothalamium', which I wrote for the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Kent. I want Noel Coward to hear Peter Pears sing Still Falls The Rain. I want him to hear my 'His Blood Colours My Cheek'.

ELIZABETH: If you want my opinion, having anything to do with that man, it'll all end in tears. It's because you've not been feeling well, all this. That's what I think. Look at your birthday celebration – the interest it's causing. Isn't that enough?

EDITH DOESN'T REPLY.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO TAKE A CUP AND PLATE BACK TO THE KITCHEN.

EDITH FINDS 'A GIRL'S SONG IN WINTER' IN A BOOK.

EDITH: (RECITING A FEW LINES FROM 'A GIRL'S SONG IN WINTER'):

'That lovely dying white swan, the singing sun,  
Will soon be gone. But seeing the snow falling, who could tell one  
From the other? The snow, that swan-plumaged circling creature, said  
'Young girl, soon the tracing of Time's bird-feet of snow  
Will be seen upon your smooth cheek. Oh, soon you will be  
Colder, my sweet, than me!'

(DISSATISFIED): You best make sure the microphone's a good one.

ELIZABETH: The best that money can buy.

THE FRONT DOORBELL RINGS.

ELIZABETH: They're here.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE FRONT DOOR AND OPENS IT.

ELIZABETH: Good afternoon. Do come in. It's Miss –

ALISON: Alison Fenning. This is Carrie.

CARRIE: Hello.

ELIZABETH: I'm Elizabeth Salter, Dame Edith's personal assistant. Do come in.

ALISON FENNING AND CARRIE ROBERTS HAVE ENTERED THE HALLWAY, CARRYING THEIR MAKE UP CASES. THEY ARE 21 AND 19 YEARS OF AGE RESPECTIVELY AND YOUTHFULLY ATTIRED.

ELIZABETH: We're in the bedroom.

ELIZABETH LEADS THEM INTO THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith – this is Alison Fenning and Carrie – what's your surname?

CARRIE: Carrie Roberts.

ELIZABETH: And Carrie Roberts.

ALISON: How do you do.

CARRIE: How do you do.

EDITH: How do you do. My goodness, look at you! How lovely you look. May I call you Alison and Carrie?

ALISON: Yes.

CARRIE: Yes.

EDITH: What a pretty top.

ALISON: Do you like it?

EDITH: Oh yes. You both look terrific. Thank you so much for coming.

ELIZABETH: It's the Big Day. A celebration - in Dame Edith's honour.

ALISON: Lovely.

CARRIE: Exciting.

EDITH: Such a hullaballo about nothing.

AS ALISON AND CARRIE SET UP AND OPEN THEIR MAKE-UP CASES:

ALISON: (REFERRING TO A CHAIR): Can I put my stuff here?

EDITH: Oh, yes.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO A CHAIR FOR CARRIE): You'll want a chair, won't you?

CARRIE: Thanks very much.

ELIZABETH: (GETTING CHAIR CARRIE): You're going to be with us at the Royal Festival Hall this evening, aren't you?

ALISON: Oh, yes.

CARRIE: Oh, yes.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO THE CHAIR): Where shall I put it? All right here?

CARRIE: Thanks very much.

ELIZABETH: Once Dame Edith has gone on stage, we can go round the front – I've had seats reserved for us.

CARRIE: Lovely.

EDITH: I do feel very spoilt, you know.

ALISON: Have you a towel?

ELIZABETH: Yes. In the bathroom.

ELIZABETH HURRIES OUT TO THE BATHROOM.

CARRIE SITS ON THE CHAIR FACING EDITH, WITH HER MAKE UP CASE ON THE FLOOR BESIDE HER.

ALISON: Can we just put this net over your hair – to keep the make up off.

CARRIE: All right? I'll remove your nail varnish, is that all right?

EDITH: Oh yes, thank you.

CARRIE: Little filing of your nails and tidy up a bit, eh? Then I'll varnish them again.

EDITH: Thank you.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM WITH TOWELS.

ELIZABETH: (HANDING OUT TOWELS): Here you are.

ALISON: Thanks.

CARRIE: Thanks.

ALISON PLACES THE TOWEL ROUND EDITH'S SHOULDERS.

ALISON: We'll have a little face cream, shall we? It'll make you feel very nice. Is that ok?

EDITH: Oh yes, thank you.

ALISON APPLIES THE FACE CREAM (MOISTURISER), AND CARRIE BEGINS WORK ON EDITH'S NAILS.

ALISON: Then we'll apply the foundation cream. Do you know what the lights are going to be like? It makes a lot of difference what the lighting's like. We'll give you a bit of colour, shall we?

EDITH: I really much prefer to be pale. It suits me best, being pale.

ELIZABETH: Perhaps we should stick to Dame Edith's usual foundation cream.

ALISON: Oh. Right.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE BATHROOM.

ALISON: (AS SHE APPLIES THE FACE MOISTURISING CREAM):  
There we are. How's that feel?

EDITH: Very soothing.

ALISON: Yeah. It's nice. Very nice.

CARRIE: You don't want a bit of colour in your cheeks, Dame Edith?  
We don't want you to look washed out.

EDITH: Very pale. I've found that I look at my best when very, very  
pale.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO THE BEDROOM WITH EDITH'S  
MAKE-UP.

ELIZABETH: (HANDING ALISON EDITH'S FOUNDATION): Here  
we are.

ALISON: Oh. Right. That looks nice.

ALISON CONTINUES TO APPLY THE MOISTURISING FACE  
CREAM.

ELIZABETH SITS ON THE SIDE OF THE BED.

ALISON: You've a beautiful face.

EDITH: Alice B. Toklas wrote I had the most beautiful nose she had ever  
seen. I inherited it from my maternal grandmother, Lady Londesborough.

ALISON: Oh, that's nice.

EDITH: My father didn't like my nose. He hated it.

ALISON: No?

EDITH: He was convinced it was crooked. He insisted I wore a facial  
brace at night. To straighten it. I was twelve.

ALISON: Well – I don't like the sound of that. Anyway, you've got a  
lovely nose now, that's for sure.

EDITH: In my opinion, it was no different then to what it is today.

ALISON: It's beautiful.

EDITH: My father was obsessed by my nose, Alison. When John Singer Sargent painted the family portrait, my father told him 'paint Edith's nose as it is – crooked'.

ALISON: Oh dear.

CARRIE: (CONTINUING TO ATTEND TO EDITH'S NAILS): That wasn't very nice, was it?

EDITH: Mr Sargent, I'm pleased to report, ignored his instruction. Instead he painted my father's nose crooked. And he painted mine straight. And, despite my father's remonstrations, he refused to change it.

ALISON: (HAVING FINISHED APPLYING THE DAY MOISTURISING CREAM): There we are.

EDITH: That feels nice. Thank you.

ALISON PREPARES TO APPLY EDITH'S FOUNDATION CREAM

EDITH: I regret to say when I was a gal, I was a great disappointment to my mother and father.

ALISON: No. Were you? No.

CARRIE: No.

EDITH: From my earliest childhood, my physical appearance didn't conform to their expectations. In the first place, I was too tall. Six foot one.

CARRIE: Wow.

ALISON: (BEGINNING TO APPLY EDITH'S FOUNDATION CREAM): Wow.

EDITH: And being tall, I tended to stoop. Alarmed and embarrassed, my parents called in an orthopaedic surgeon, and I was obliged to wear an orthopaedic brace that stretched from my ankles to the top of my head. At night the whole beastly contraption was locked to the soles of my feet. I was quite unable to move.

CARRIE: How horrid.

EDITH: It was my penitentiary. Custom made. I was unable to brush the flies from my face. My nurse held my wrist, and forced me to kill them with a matchbox in my hand.

BOTH ALISON AND CARRIE ARE SO ALARMED BY THIS, THEY STOP THEIR WORK AND STARE AT ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH: (REASSURING THEM): It was a long time ago.

ALISON RETURNS TO APPLYING THE FOUNDATION CREAM.

EDITH: I'm afraid I wasn't an easy child, Alison, dear.

ALISON: (DISAGREEING): No. I'm sure you were.

EDITH: I'm afraid not. My mother was at a complete loss as to what to do with me. As far as she was concerned, I was from another planet. Poor woman. Well, for one thing, I read. I was reading Swinburne by the age of ten.

ALISON: That *was* early. Just move your head back a bit. I like this foundation cream. You're going to look lovely.

CARRIE: You're going to look lovely.

EDITH: Thank you. As far as mother was concerned, a young lady reading at all was something to be fervently discouraged. But Swinburne at ten! My dear! And later, all those young gentlemen mother dragged along by the hair to meet me, young Grenadier Guards and so forth, I mean, Carrie, frankly who wants to pay court to a young lady, who is over six feet tall and stoops? And who wishes above all to discuss the likes of Mr Swinburne and Lord Byron and William Wordsworth? And

*Edith cont'd over page:*

EDITH: (*Cont'd*): who refuses to flutter her eyelids and shoot rabbits? Mrs Patrick Campbell was a friend of my mother. Mrs Patrick Campbell, the actress. Have you heard of her?

ALISON: No, can't say I have.

CARRIE: No.

EDITH: The actress. She used to visit us at Renishaw Hall when I was a child. I couldn't have been more than four years old. I was lying in my perambulator, and Mrs Patrick Campbell lent over to peer at me, to have a look at this infant, whom my mother had told her, as she had told all her friends, was such a difficult and disappointing child, and Mrs Patrick Campbell lent right over into my perambulator and said: 'hello, difficult little baby', and I hit her.

ALISON: I'm not surprised.

CARRIE: I'm not surprised.

EDITH: I'm talking too much. I'm gearing myself up. It's the thought of tonight. I'm not going to get through it.

ALISON: You'll be wonderful. (HOLDING UP A MIRROR FOR EDITH TO SEE THE FOUNDATION SHE HAS APPLIED): There we are. How's that?

EDITH: Oh, yes. That's just the ticket.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith likes her face very pale.

ALISON: You want a little rouge? Just a little on your cheeks?

EDITH: No. No, thank you.

ALISON: (WHILE POWDERING EDITH'S FACE): What colour eye shadow do you like?

ELIZABETH: Green. Dame Edith's eye shadow. (HANDING ALISON EDITH'S USUAL EYE SHADOW): Try this.

EDITH: Green, Alison. Green emphasises the depth of my eyes.

ALISON: (REFERRING TO THE EYE SHADOW): This is nice.

ALISON CONTINUES TO POWDER.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith will be reading some of her poems.

CARRIE: Oh.

ALISON: That's nice.

CARRIE: Is there going to be any music or anything?

ELIZABETH: Peter Pears is singing Benjamin Britten's setting of Dame Edith's 'Still Falls The Rain'. Then we're going to hear Façade. William Walton conducting it, and Irene Worth and Sebastian Shaw are going to read it.

CARRIE: Lovely.

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith and her brothers first performed Facade nearly forty years ago.

EDITH: 1923. At the Aeolian Hall. The audience hated it. Noel Coward is coming tonight. You've heard of Noel Coward?

CARRIE: (UNCONVINCINGLY): Oh yes.

ALISON: (UNSURE): Yes. He's the one what sings 'Birds Do It', isn't he?

EDITH: And 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen.'

ALISON: Yes.

CARRIE: Oh yes.

EDITH: 'Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun,  
The Japanese don't care to, the Chinese wouldn't dare to,  
Hindus and Argentines sleep firmly from twelve to one  
But Englishmen detest-a siesta. In the Philippines they have lovely  
screens to protect you from the glare. In the Malay States, there are hats  
(*Edith cont'd next page*)

EDITH: (*Cont'd*): like plates which the Britishers won't wear. At twelve noon the natives swoon and no further work is done, But mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.'

CARRIE: Is your Façade what's-it-called anything like that?

EDITH: Not entirely, no.

ALISON: (REFERRING TO THE EYE SHADOW): There we are.

EDITH: Do you know of them? Irene Worth and Sebastian Shaw?

CARRIE: No, I don't think so.

ALISON: Have they been on the tele?

EDITH: I'm sure they must have been.

CARRIE: What's it about?

EDITH: That's rather hard to say, Carrie dear. It's made up of several short abstract pieces of verse. Moods, fancies, rhymes, assonances, patterns, rhythms. Anyway, it's a feast. There's one you may like. It's called 'Fox Trot'. Let's see:

SHE RECITES FROM 'FOX TROT', WHICH CAUSES ALISON TO DISCONTINUE POWDERING FOR THE DURATION OF THE POEM:

Old

    Sir

        Faulk,

Before the honeyed fruits of dawn were ripe, would walk

And stalk with a gun

The reynard-coloured sun,

Among the pheasant-feathered corn the unicorn has torn, forlorn the

Smock-faced sheep

Sit

    And

        Sleep

Periwigged as William and Mary, weep ...

'Sally, Mary, Mattie, what's the matter, why cry?'  
The huntsman and the reynard-coloured sun and I sigh;  
'Oh, the nursery-maid Meg  
With a leg like a peg  
Chased the feathered dreams like hens, and when they laid an egg  
In the sheepskin  
Meadows  
Where  
The serene King James would steer  
Horse and hounds, then he  
From the shade of a tree  
Picked it up as spoil to boil for nursery tea,' said the mourners.

EDITH FALLS SILENT. SHE APPEARS DEFLATED.

CARRIE: Gosh!

ALISON: It's unusual, isn't it?

ALISON CONTINUES POWDERING.

ELIZABETH: (AFTER A WHILE): Would you like another glass of milk?

EDITH: Yes. But without the milk. You can't drink milk before a recital, Elizabeth. Milk causes catarrh. You know that.

ALISON HAS FINISHED POWDERING. SHE NOW PREPARES TO APPLY THE GREEN EYE SHADOW.

EDITH: A martini. That's what I'd like. What about you, Alison and Carrie?

ALISON: Oh, no thank you.

CARRIE: I'll have one. If that's all right.

EDITH: It certainly is. Change your mind? Martini?

ALISON: No, thanks. Too early for me.

EDITH: It's never too early, not for me.

CARRIE: And it's never too late, eh?

EDITH: No. That's right, Carrie.

(SINGS FROM THE BOYFRIEND): 'It's never too late to have a fling, the Autumn is just as good as Spring, and it's never too late to fall in love, boopydoop, boopydoop, boopydoop.

ALISON: Is that from Façade?

EDITH: No dear, it's from Sandy Wilson's The Boyfriend.

ALISON BEGINS TO APPLY GREEN EYE SHADOW.

CARRIE: (HAVING REMOVED THE OLD VARNISH AND ATTENDED TO THE NAILS): Would you like me to wax your hands – it's very nice – very nourishing – and then I'll put on the new varnish.

EDITH: Thank you.

ELIZABETH: How about if I made a few sandwiches? We've got some cheese and some tomatoes. You must have something, Edith. You can't go out there and perform in front of three thousand people without anything inside you.

EDITH: I never eat before a recital - you know that, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: What about you, Alison, Carrie?

ALISON: No, thank you. Really, I couldn't.

CARRIE: I'll have a sandwich.

ELIZABETH: Good for you. Cheese and tomato ok?

CARRIE: Lovely – thanks.

ELIZABETH: Tea, coffee, Alison?

ALISON: No, thanks very much.

ELIZABETH: Two martini's, one cheese and tomato sandwich. I'll have one too.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE KITCHEN TO MAKE THE SANDWICHES, AND THEN TO THE SITTING ROOM TO POUR THE MARTINIS.

AS ALISON CONTINUES TO APPLY THE EYE SHADOW AND CARRIE WAXES EDITH'S HANDS:

EDITH: You know, Alison, looking back, I suppose my poor mother had a pretty rotten time with me.

ALISON: No, of course she didn't.

EDITH: I was such a frightful worry to her. I was. I remember – oh dear – I was about 14 – it was at one of mother's luncheon parties, which, despite my protests, she insisted I attend – in order to make up the numbers – otherwise there would have been 13 at table. My God, 13 at table, impossible. Quite the end of the world and life as we know it. It was at one of these luncheon parties, one of her philistine friends said to me: 'what are you going to be when you grow up, Edith?' And I replied: 'a genius.' And everyone was appalled. Poor mother didn't know where to put herself, Alison. I was sent to my room. Which, of course: was what I had intended should happen all along.

ALISON: (REFERRING TO EYE SHADOWING OF ONE EYE): There we are. You're a genius.

EDITH: Thank you, dear. Perhaps one might say on that occasion, so as to survive, one had to be.

ALISON PREPARES TO APPLY EYE SHADOW TO THE OTHER EYE.

CARRIE: (WAXING EDITH'S HANDS): You've lovely hands. You've such lovely long fingers.

EDITH: Thank you. Some people have said they're my best feature. When I left home and was living in Pembridge Mansions in Bayswater I started the fashion of painting my nails silver. Silver and gilt.

Carrie: That must have been terrific.

EDITH: It was quite daring in those days. In the 20's.

ALISON STARTS TO APPLY THE EYE SHADOW.

EDITH: I was the first to do it. Did you know, I can play a tenth – two notes above the octave.

CARRIE: Wow.

EDITH: When I was a gal, I wanted to be a concert pianist, Carrie.

CARRIE: I'm not surprised.

EDITH: I was very keen. But I'm afraid my father insisted I took up the cello instead. I couldn't get on with the cello. But, you see, Carrie dear, it was father's opinion that I was much too good at the piano and that I should take up something to which I was less suited – it being his belief that one should always attempt that which one finds the most difficult.

ALISON HAS FINISHED APPLYING THE EYE SHADOW.

ALISON: Oh dear. There we are. Mascara now.

ALISON PREPARES TO APPLY MASCARA.

EDITH: Just a little then, thank you. My father wanted a son, you know. Well, of course, Ossie and Sachie came along eventually. But he never really got over the disappointment he felt when I was born.

ALISON: That's not nice.

EDITH: Dear old Ginger – Ossie, Sachie and I used to call him Ginger – he sported a reddish ginger beard – which made him look as if he was living in the fourteenth century, which he very likely was – or at least we thought so.

ALISON: Close your eyes now.

ALISON APPLIES MASCARA TO ONE EYE.

EDITH: Thank you.

CARRIE: What's he do?

EDITH: What?

CARRIE: Your father.

EDITH: My father – well, let's see – I suppose he divided most of his precious time between landscaping the park and gardens at Renishaw - our family home - and writing. He wrote numerous extended accounts of medieval social history – The Barons of Fulford, Marriage Chests in the Middle Ages. He wrote a long unfinished book called The Pilgrim about one of our ancestors Walter de Boys who rode off to join the crusades – and with whom old Ginger clearly identified. He also wrote The History of The Two Pronged Fork.

ALISON: (REFERRING TO APPLYING MASCARA TO EDITH'S OTHER EYE): Next one.

EDITH CLOSES HER EYES.

ALISON: That's it.

EDITH: (AS ALISON APPLIES MASCARA): Old Ginger – father – was very proud of having invented a musical toothbrush on which he would play Annie Laurie. And a gun with which to shoot wasps. Although I never saw him fire it.

CARRIE (HAVING FINISHED WAXING): It's nice, isn't it? I'll put on the nail varnish now. Red. You like red? It's the same red as you had on before.

EDITH: Is it? Yes. Thank you very much. A book Ginger wrote, which was very highly thought of, was called On Making of Gardens. The park and gardens at Renishaw were his great passion. He was forever erecting statues and mock gothic battlements, and sinking wells, and building dams in the Eckington woods - and redesigning the golf clubhouse. It was never ending.

ALISON HAS NOW FINISHED APPLYING MASCARA.  
SHE PREPARES TO APPLY THE EYE LINER.

EDITH: And all in the service ‘of those who shall come after us, Edie’ – for our descendants. Patrimony, you know, Alison, dear. He was rather keen I remember at one time on getting rid of the cows in the park and replacing them with cows made from porcelain. Which he argued would be so much more aesthetic. And, of course, a lot more economical. The porcelain variety, though not milk producing, at least not costing anything to feed.

ALISON: (LEANING IN TO APPLY THE EYE LINER): Eye liner. Try and keep still.

ALISON FINISHES APPLYING THE EYE LINER.  
SHE PREPARES TO PENCIL IN EDITH’S EYEBROWS.

ALISON: Eyebrows. Just a little.

EDITH: Oh, yes, thank you. I’m afraid Ginger and mother didn’t always hit off, you know.

THE EYEBROW PENCIL NEEDS SHARPENING. ALISON BREAKS OFF TO SHARPEN IT, GIVING EDITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO CONTINUE TO SPEAK.

EDITH: Poor Ginger, he absolutely hated mother’s ruinous extravagance and her friends whom he thought dreadful – he called them The Fun Brigade. There he was, wearing his fingers to the bones to leave something worthwhile to his descendants and there was mother – quite dreadful – in London, the heart and soul of the London Season, attending all the parties and balls, and getting herself mixed up with corrupt money lenders and financial advisers she couldn’t hope to repay. It all ended in disaster. The poor woman was tricked, Alison – she didn’t have a clue what she was doing, what was happening to her – she landed up in Court – fraudulent practices or some such thing – sent down – three months - Holloway prison. It nearly killed her. It nearly killed all of us.

CARRIE: I can’t believe it – that’s awful.

ALISON: That must have been awful for you.

CARRIE: Your poor mother.

EDITH: One tries not to think about it.

ELIZABETH ENTERS THE **SITTING ROOM** FROM THE KITCHEN WITH TWO SANDWICHES AND PROCEEDS TO POUR TWO MARTINIS.

ALISON: That's a horrible thing to happen. Really horrible. I'm so sorry. Just put your head back. There.

ALISON PENCILS IN EDITH'S EYEBROWS.

ALISON: Nearly done. (HAVING FINISHED EDITH'S EYEBROWS): That's it. They look very nice. It's coming on fine.

ALISON CHECKS THE MAKE-UP SO FAR.

CARRIE: You're going to be wonderful. Nails nearly done.

EDITH: Thank you.

CARRIE: You're going to be the belle of the ball.

EDITH: I certainly hope so. The fuss I'm being made of. It's lovely having you both here. One of my father's major projects was moving the lake, Alison. It was a huge operation.

ALISON: I can imagine.

CARRIE: Cor, I didn't know you could move a lake. Not like that.

ELIZABETH ENTERS THE BEDROOM WITH THEM.

EDITH: I'm telling Alison and Carrie about Renishaw.

ELIZABETH: Huge place. Wonderful gardens. A little forbidding, if I may be allowed to say so.

ELIZABETH BEGINS TO HAND OUT A MARTINIS TO EDITH AND CARRIE, AND A SANDWICH TO CARRIE, KEEPING ONE FOR HERSELF.

ELIZABETH: (TO EDITH): Here we are – martini.

EDITH: Thank you, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: (HANDING A MARTINI TO CARRIE): Carrie.

CARRIE: Oh, thanks very much.

ELIZABETH: (HANDING CARRIE A SANDWICH): Sandwich.

CARRIE: Oh, yes – thanks very much.

ELIZABETH SITS ON A CHAIR AND EATS HER SANDWICH:

ALISON: Lipstick. Do you like this?

EDITH: Oh yes.

CARRIE: It's the same red as your nails.

EDITH: Oh, yes. Lovely. (TO ELIZABETH): I'm telling them about Renishaw.

ALISON: Better have your martini first, then do your lips, all right?

THEY DRINK AND EAT.

EDITH: Unfortunately, Carrie dear, father's new lake leaked into the coal mines. Coal mines that are underneath the park at Renishaw. And then we had a dreadful court case all about it that went on for years.

CARRIE: Oh dear. What a business.

ALISON: You mean you had coal mines under where you lived?

EDITH: Oh yes. The coalmines were very important to us – essential at one time, I'm told – on account of the rent paid by the miner owners. I suppose we didn't really think very much about the mines. They were part of our lives. It was quite normal – all my childhood. The only thing that really made us aware of them was the soot that got all over the statues and so on, and which sent poor mother absolutely mad. It'd get on her gloves. And then her hand would go to her face, and then she'd discover there was soot all over her – and she'd go mad, and scream at us children a great deal – and wish she was dead – or at least hadn't married Ginger. Heigh ho, what a to-do. So you're lucky not to have coal mines under you, Carrie.

CARRIE: Yeah. All those miners under you.

EDITH: Good gracious, yes, that wouldn't do. I sometimes, as a small girl, used to walk down to the edge of the park and watch them coming off their work shift. When I was very young, I couldn't understand why they were so dirty. And why they stared at me. Rather embarrassing. I remember I said to my father, 'why do they stare at me like they do?' And he said – I remember – 'I expect it's your hair, Edie.'

ALISON: You've got nice hair.

CARRIE: I bet you had lovely hair.

EDITH: Well, my father and mother didn't think so. But still, there we are.

ELIZABETH: I think we should let Alison do your lipstick now, don't you?

EDITH: Oh , yes. Oh dear, I always talk too much. This dreadful celebration.

ALISON APPLIES THE LIPSTICK.

EDITH: Do you know, I was once kissed by a gorilla

CARRIE: No!

EDITH: It was very, very moving.

ELIZABETH: I bet.

CARRIE: I wouldn't want to be kissed by a gorilla, thank you. Nails done.

EDITH: Oh, thank you, Carrie.

CARRIE: Give them a minute to dry. (TO ELIZABETH): What do you think?

ELIZABETH: Just the ticket.

CARRIE: They look lovely.

ALISON: (HAVING FINISHED APPLYING EDITH'S LIPSTICK):  
That's it. All done. You want to look?

EDITH: Thank you.

EDITH TAKES THE MIRROR ALISON HOLDS OUT TO HER.

CARRIE: (REFERRING TO EDITH'S WET NAIL VARNISH): Careful.

EDITH: VIEWING HERSELF IN THE MIRROR): Good gracious. Well done. Thank you, Alison. Some people used to say I looked like Nellie Wallace. You won't remember her. She's well before your time.

ALISON STARTS TO BRUSH EDITH'S HAIR, AFTER WHICH SHE'LL PACK UP HER MAKE UP CASE.

CARRIE STARTS PACKING UP HER MAKE UP CASE

EDITH: A comedienne in the Music Hall and in pantomime. I was standing outside the Finsbury Park Empire with a friend – I think it was Helen – and someone came up to me and said: 'Are you Nellie Wallace? And I said 'no, but I wish I was.' I loved the music hall. There they were, up on the stage. They either like you or they don't. They liked her, no mistake. Of course there's none of it left now. Artistes like Marie Lloyd, Vesta Tilley, Gus Ellen, Eugene Stratton.

ELIZABETH: Little Titch.

EDITH: Little Titch, the dancer with the enormous shoes. Florrie Forde. The New Bedford at Camden Town. Nellie Wallace used to sing The Blasted Oak.

EDITH SINGS THE BLASTED OAK.

EDITH (SINGING):

The other day I broke my watch –

A screw I could not find!

I met this nice young gentleman

And oh – he was so kind.

He said his occupation

Was mending jewelry –

He took my watch and said that he would see

What he could do for me –

He asked me to meet him up at Hampstead Heath  
By the old Blasted Oak.  
I toddled up the hill in my Sunday gown –  
And oh – Gor blimey – how the rain came down!  
I got wet through – I didn't know what to do –  
The rain through my clothes began to soak –  
I've lost me blinkin way –  
I've lost me bloomin watch –  
And I can't find the Blasted Oak.

THEY ALL APPLAUD.

CARRIE: (CLAPPING): You're great. I never heard that one before.  
Great.

ALISON: That was lovely.

CARRIE: More. More.

ALISON: More. More.

CARRIE: I tell you what – all these people you've met and that, you  
ought to write your memoirs, Dame Edith.

EDITH: Good gracious, no. I haven't the time.

ELIZABETH: She has been asked.

EDITH: No, no, no. Out of the question. It'd kill me. Do me in once and  
for all.

ELIZABETH: It's time we got you dressed. Are we ready?

CARRIE: That's it. You're going to look lovely.

ALISON: (AS ELIZABETH FETCHES OUT EDITH'S RED VELVET  
DRESS): I'll tell you what – they ought to have you on the tele. Ought to  
have your own show.

ELIZABETH: She's been asked to appear on This Is Your Life.

ALISON: This is Your Life?!

CARRIE: Great.

EDITH: I'm not going on This Is Your Life.

ALISON: No, you ought to.

CARRIE: Yeah. You get all your friends and that there.

EDITH: Please, please. I am not doing it. Thank you. (SEEING HER RED VELVET DRESS): Ah.

CARRIE: Oh, that's lovely.

ALISON: Lovely.

ELIZABETH: In you get.

EDITH: Put Façade on, Elizabeth. I need to get in the mood, dear.

CARRIE: (AS ELIZABETH PICKS UP THE RECORD OF FACADE AND PUTS IT ON THE GRAMOPHONE – ADMIRING THE DRESS): Look at this.

ALISON: It's lovely. Love the colour. Goes with your lips.

CARRIE: I could look good in this.

EDITH: You could.

CARRIE GIVES THEM A TWIRL. EDITH AND ALISON APPLAUD.

CARRIE: Better on you though.

FACADE IS PLAYING QUIETLY ON THE GRAMOPHONE.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO THE RECORD / TO THE VOLUME): All right?

EDITH: Not too loud.

ELIZABETH TURNS THE VOLUME DOWN A LITTLE.

EDITH: There we are.

ELIZABETH: Come along. The ambulance will be here soon.

CARRIE: Ambulance?

ELIZABETH: Dame Edith travels by private ambulance.

EDITH: Those taxis break one's bones, dear.

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 SCENE 2.**

## SCENE THREE

EDITH IS TRAPPED IN HER WHEELCHAIR ON STAGE AT THE ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL

SHE IS READING FROM 'A CHORIC SONG'.

EDITH:

The Red Woman, like the glittering

Dark red cedar tree

Or the sun when its fires are low –

The Esquimau, black as the ancient cold with her hair like the long

Dull ropes of snow

Let down from the creaking cloud –

The White Woman, the huge lightning in the dark of the great

World –

The Negress black as thunder, the dead woman upright in the

Spring's shroud –

They shout to their loves across the ocean, the glittering seas of

Delight –

'Mine is the only love in the world, the first beginning of sight!

Of you, the hour when the work of the world, the hunt for food,

Is done –

Love me, my ultimate Darkness, kiss me, my infinite Sun!'

THERE IS TUMULTUOUS APPLAUSE, WHICH SHE MODESTLY ACKNOWLEDGES.

THE EVENING IS A TRIUMPH

**END OF SCENE THREE.**

## SCENE FOUR

IT IS AN AFTERNOON SOME DAYS AFTER EDITH SITWELL'S 75<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS AT THE FESTIVAL HALL.

THE BEDROOM CURTAINS ARE CLOSED AND THE LIGHTS ARE OUT.

(THE PHONE IS OFF THE HOOK).

(THE TELEVISION SET IN THE SITTING ROOM IS MISSING).

EDITH IS IN BED.

ELIZABETH SALTER ENTERS THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR.

ELIZABETH: (AS SHE ENTERS THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR):  
Hello. It's me.

ELIZABETH PICKS UP THE LARGE QUANTITY OF POST ON THE DOOR MAT.

SHE ENTERS THE BEDROOM.

SHE IS CARRYING HER HANDBAG AND A COVERED PLATE OF SALMON SANDWICHES, A PACKET OF BISCUITS AND A BOTTLE OF MILK.

SHE STARES INTO THE DARKNESS.

ELIZABETH: Edith.

SHE SWITCHES ON THE LIGHTS.

SHE PUTS DOWN THE POST, HER HANDBAG AND THE SANDWICHES, BISCUITS AND MILK ON A SIDE TABLE.

ELIZABETH: Are you all right? It's nearly three o'clock.

ELIZABETH: (OPENING THE CURTAINS. THEN TURNING OFF THE LIGHTS): The traffic – Hampstead High Street – it gets worse by the day.

EDITH: I am exhausted.

ELIZABETH: Of course you are. You were marvellous, Edith. It was a wonderful, wonderful evening. Everyone is still talking about it.  
(PICKING UP THE POST AND BRINGING TO THE BED): Here we are – letters. It never stops. Every day this week. Loads of congratulations – you can bet on it. There we are. (SITTING ON THE SIDE OF THE BED). How's the chest?

EDITH: What time is it?

ELIZABETH: Coming up to three o'clock.

EDITH: I must have fallen asleep. Had to come back to bed.

ELIZABETH: Noel Coward'll be here any time now.

EDITH: Noel Coward.

ELIZABETH: He's coming to tea.

EDITH: It's today.

ELIZABETH: Would you like me to put him off? I'll tell him you're not well enough.

EDITH: No.

ELIZABETH: We can invite him for another time. I'm sure he'll understand.

Edith: No, no. I must get up. You're not to send him away.

ELIZABETH: Are you sure?

EDITH: For God's sake. Get me out of here.

SHE STARTS TO SIT UP IN BED.

ELIZABETH: You're dressed.

EDITH: I dropped off. My chest. Sciatica. I took a couple of Paracetamol.

ELIZABETH: How many?

EDITH: Two. Two!

ELIZABETH: Right. You want a wash?

EDITH: I've washed. Stop your nagging. Get me up.

ELIZABETH HELPS EDITH TO SIT ON SIDE OF BED.

ELIZABETH: I've brought some sandwiches. Salmon. And milk. He'll want a cup of tea. And who knows, he might be hungry. One can't just say have a cup of tea. I knocked them up before coming out. Would you like a drink? Martini? Right.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE KITCHEN WITH THE SANDWICHES AND BOTTLE OF MILK. EDITH, DAZED AND ILL, REMAINS SEATED ON THE SIDE OF THE BED.

ELIZABETH RETURNS FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE SITTING ROOM, WHERE SHE POURS EDITH A MARTINI, AND, CHECKING THE ROOM IS TIDY ENOUGH FOR THEIR VISITOR, SHE BRINGS IT TO HER IN THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: Just the one. Here we are.

EDITH TAKES THE MARTINI.

ELIZABETH: David Higham phoned.

EDITH: I've taken it off the hook.

ELIZABETH: Yes.

ELIZABETH BEGINS TO TIDY THE BEDROOM – PUTTING AWAY EDITH'S NIGHTGOWN, DISCARDED GARMENTS, PLUMPING PILLOWS AND CUSHIONS, PICKING UP BOOKS OF CHAIRS AND PUTTING THEM ON A TABLE.

EDITH: Too many calls.

ELIZABETH: I know. What can you expect? You were triumphant. David phoned me. He told me to tell you that he's negotiating with Austin University in Texas – they want to buy your notebooks. Isn't that terrific. Lots of lolly.

EDITH: How much?

ELIZABETH: He's negotiating. It's good news.

EDITH: What are you doing?

ELIZABETH: Tidying up a bit. You want the flat to be tidy for him.

EDITH: I'm not receiving him in here. You're not bringing him into my bedroom.

ELIZABETH: Just tidying up. David Higham says can you bear to do another interview? The Daily Telegraph.

EDITH: I've already done the Telegraph.

ELIZABETH: No.

EDITH: Yesterday.

ELIZABETH: No. The day before yesterday: Daily Sketch. They're very keen - the Telegraph apparently. David said. He'd quite like you to do it. If you can bear to. If you feel up to it. (GOING TO THE CUPBOARD IN THE HALL): Strike while the iron is hot, he said.

EDITH: Not today.

ELIZABETH: Not to day. We'll phone him.

EDITH: Not now.

ELIZABETH: Not now. Later.

ELIZABETH HAS BROUGHT A HOOVER OUT OF THE CUPBOARD AND HAS BROUGHT IT INTO THE BEDROOM WITH THE INTENTION OF PLUGGING IT IN.

EDITH: What are you doing?

ELIZABETH: I'm just giving it a quick hovering. Here and in the sitting room.

EDITH: You're not hovering. I absolutely forbid you to Hoover. You put that Hoover away or we're finished, Elizabeth. You can pack your bags and bugger off back to Australia. Do you hear me, it's either me or that Hoover.

ELIZABETH LOOKS FROM ONE TO THE OTHER, MAKING HER CHOICE. SHE PUTS THE HOOVER BACK IN THE CUPBOARD.

ELIZABETH: I'll put the kettle on.

EDITH: What for?

ELIZABETH: Tea. Noel Coward's coming for afternoon tea. Does he like salmon sandwiches?

EDITH: How the blazes should I know? We haven't met for forty years.

ELIZABETH: Well, I hope you don't regret this.

FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS.

ELIZABETH: Oh, my God. He's here. Quick.

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH STARTS TO GET HER INTO HER WHEELCHAIR.

ELIZABETH: Come on.

EDITH: Don't push me about. You're not going?

ELIZABETH: What?

EDITH: You're not leaving me alone with him.

ELIZABETH: Oh. No. Right. In you go.

EDITH: Bloody thing.

ELIZABETH: That's it. Coat. Where's your coat? Here we are. On we go. That's it.

EDITH: Hat. Hat. Not that. The blue one.

ELIZABETH: Here.

EDITH: The green. Green.

ELIZABETH: You said blue.

EDITH: I've changed my mind. Green. That's it. How's it look?

ELIZABETH: Very good. Splendid. (ELIZABETH STRAIGHTENS THE HAT): Even better.

THE FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS AGAIN.

EDITH: No, no – brown. I want to wear the brown.

ELIZABETH: He's waiting at the door.

EDITH: I want the brown.

AFTER A WORDLESS MOMENT OF CONFRONTATION,  
ELIZABETH GETS THE BROWN. HELPS TO PUT IT ON EDITH'S  
HEAD.

ELIZABETH: Brown. Come on.

THE FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS AGAIN.

EDITH: Where we going?

ELIZABETH: Sitting room.

SHE HURRIEDLY WHEELS EDITH INTO THE SITTING ROOM  
AND POSITIONS HER IN THE WHEELCHAIR READY TO  
RECEIVE NOEL COWARD.

EDITH: How do I look?

ELIZABETH: (RE THE HAT): I think it's the wrong way round. No, it isn't. Looks fine. Splendid.

ELIZABETH RUSHES TO THE FRONT DOOR AND OPENS IT.

MR PARKER STANDS OUTSIDE. HE IS CARRYING THE TV SET.

ELIZABETH: Oh. Good afternoon.

PARKER: Television. All fixed up and working again.

ELIZABETH: Ah, yes. Thank you. How nice. Do come in.

SHE LEADS HIM INTO THE SITTING ROOM.

ELIZABETH: (TO EDITH): It's the television, Edith. Mr –

PARKER: Parker.

ELIZABETH: Mr Parker with the television.

EDITH: Oh.

PARKER: Good afternoon, Dame Edith. Sorry to trouble you.

EDITH: Oh, no, you're not troubling us. You're bringing it back, are you?

PARKER: All mended and working nicely again.

ELIZABETH: (INDICATING PLACE FOR TV SET): Here.

PARKER: Saw your picture in the paper, Dame Edith. On stage Festival Hall.

EDITH: Oh.

PARKER: Went well, I gather.

ELIZABETH: It was terrific.

PARKER: I showed the wife. Said I met you.

EDITH: Oh good.

PARKER: (WITH REFERENCE TO THE TV WHICH REMAINS IN ITS PLACE THROUGHOUT THE SCENE AS A SILENT, INTRUSIVE REMINDER OF THE MODERN WORLD): That's it. Should be all right. You'll be able to watch it again now, eh? Looks nice there. Sets the room off.

EDITH: You think so? My purse.

PARKER: No, no, it's all right. Please, no bother.

EDITH: Elizabeth, have you your purse?

PARKER: No, really. My pleasure.

EDITH: Well, thank you.

PARKER: It go wrong again, you just call the shop, I'll come round – see to it.

ELIZABETH: Thank you.

EDITH: Would you like a copy of my A Notebook on William Shakespeare. MacMillan has just reprinted it.

PARKER: Well, that's very good of you – very generous.

EDITH: Elizabeth, there's a copy on my bedside table. (ELIZABETH EXITS TO BEDROOM THE GET THE BOOK). Your wife may like to have a look at it.

PARKER: Thank you, thank you very much.

ELIZABETH: (RETURNING WITH THE BOOK): Here you are.

PARKER: Thank you. Very kind. I wonder if it'd be too much to ask you to autograph it.

EDITH: Oh. Well, no. Of course not. Er – I need my pen.

PARKER: (OFFERING HIS PEN): Would you like to use this?

EDITH: Oh, yes. (TAKING THE PEN): Thank you. Such a nice pen.

EDITH OPENS THE BOOK.

PARKER: Thank you very much.

EDITH: (SIGNING): Not at all.

PARKER: I'll treasure it.

EDITH: Yes. Thank you. There we are.

SHE HANDS THE BOOK AND PEN TO PARKER.

PARKER: Thank you very much. Very nice of you. Well, I won't say, hope to see you again, cos that'll mean your tele gone wrong again, doesn't it, eh?

EDITH: Indeed.

PARKER: Right. Well, goodbye. Thank you.

EDITH: Thank you again.

PARKER: Thank you. For the book and all that.

ELIZABETH: I'll see you out.

ELIZABETH AND PARKER EXIT TO THE FRONT DOOR.

ELIZABETH: Thanks again.

PARKER: Righto.

PARKER EXITS.

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO EDITH IN THE SITTING ROOM.

SHE STRAIGHTENS A CHAIR, CHECKS THE SITTING ROOM.  
CHECKS THE TIME.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO THE TV SET): Do you get the feeling we're  
being spied on?

ELIZABETH: I'll put the kettle on, shall I?

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE KITCHEN.

EDITH: I think I'd like another martini.

THE FRONT DOOR BELL RINGS.

ELIZABETH HURRIES BACK INTO THE SITTING ROOM.

ELIZABETH: It's him. Do you think it's him?

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.

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.

NOEL: I had heard.

EDITH: It's such a trial for him. His mind, thank God, is as sharp as ever. But his poor legs. He staggers so. Once he starts moving, he can't seem to know how to stop.

NOEL: I am sorry - quite horrid.

EDITH: However, Sachie's in excellent health

NOEL: Please do convey my heartfelt best wishes to them.

EDITH: Oh, yes. Thank you, Noel.

NOEL: As I say, Edith, one must never give up the struggle, don't you think? Battles are lost and won, but the war is never done. That magazine of yours – you and your brothers - and you all so young – Wheels – wonderful. Look what you have achieved. The whole world flocking to your Saturday afternoon teas at Pembridge Mansions. Façade itself. Never ending. You and your brothers triumphantly challenging the establishment of Georgian Poetry that had been for so long so in vogue. What was it someone wrote – was it Middleton Murray? 'Georgian Poetry is like the Coalition Government of that time. The poetry published in Wheels by the Sitwells was like –

BOTH: - the Radical Opposition.'

EDITH: Yes.

NOEL: So there we are.

EDITH: We've just heard that Little, Brown is bringing out *The Queens* and *The Hive* in the *States* later this year.

NOEL: Well, there you are then! Terrific. Congratulations, Edith. It's a splendid book. As I say, I enjoyed it tremendously.

EDITH: It's been selling terrifically well here.

NOEL: Most deservedly.

EDITH: Do you think so?

NOEL: Indisputably.

EDITH: I wanted to ask you – I wonder - it may seem a little odd my asking -

ELIZABETH ENTERS WITH TEA THINGS ON A TRAY. BUT NOT THE SANDWICHES AND BISCUITS.

ELIZABETH: Tea. Sorry I've been so long. Here we are. Tea, Mr Coward? Milk?

NOEL: Thank you. Most kind. Do call me Noel.

ELIZABETH: Ah. Well, that is nice and friendly. Thank you. I'm Elizabeth.

EDITH: My agent David Higham tells me my book of poems *The Outcasts* is doing terrifically well. It's coming out in the States next year.

NOEL: That's wonderful news. I'm so pleased.

ELIZABETH: (HAVING Poured HIS CUP OF TEA): There.

NOEL: Thank you.

ELIZABETH: Do you take sugar?

NOEL: No, no. Thank you.

ELIZABETH: Oh, right you are. Edith? Tea?

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: Tea. I've made tea. (SHE IS POURING EDITH'S CUP OF TEA).

EDITH: Would you prefer a martini, Noel?

NOEL: Ah, I regret martinis, and indeed all alcoholic beverages have been proscribed at this time. Professor Niehan's unequivocal directive. But please don't let me discourage you from having one.

EDITH: No, no. Tea, it is.

ELIZABETH: (HANDING THE CUP TO EDITH): There we are. A nice cup of tea. I'll go and get the sandwiches. Shan't be a jiffy.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO GO TO KITCHEN.

EDITH: Where's she gone now?

NOEL: To get the sandwiches. It's marvellous to see you again.

EDITH: And you, Noel.

NOEL: You were wanting to ask me something, I think you said.

EDITH: What?

NOEL: You wanted to ask me. Before Elizabeth came in with the tea.

EDITH: She's gone for the sandwiches.

NOEL: Yes. You wanted to ask me something, did you? What was it you wanted to ask me?

EDITH: No – no, I don't remember. Yes, there was -. No, perhaps it'll come back to me. Did I tell you Little, Brown is bringing out *The Queens* and *The Hive* in the *States* later this year?

NOEL: You did. As I say, I enjoyed it greatly, Edith.

EDITH: That man Dr Leavis, Noel. Do you know him? He's written such a great amount of offensive nonsense about me and my work. He has no love for Milton, Keats, Swinburne, no. He dismisses the lot of us out of hand.

NOEL: Pay him no attention, Edith. Let me assure you there is no living poet but yourself who has or will have their 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrated with a special concert at the Festival Hall.

EDITH: I expect you know that appalling man Wyndham Lewis deeply offended both my brothers and myself by depicting us in his almost totally unintelligible work of fiction entitled 'The Apes of God.' Of course he thought he was being frightfully amusing, awfully satirical. The fact is, Noel, he only wrote about us in that way because at the time he was painting his atrocious portrait of me I instructed him to take his sticky paw off my leg. Such a filthy man.

NOEL: As I've said on probably what has been numerous occasions, the only way of responding to such creatures is to ignore them. Now you take my musical *Sail Away* at the Savoy Theatre. A terrific success.

EDITH: So I've read.

NOEL: Thank you. It is apparent that the British theatre-going public love it. It is in fact playing to full houses. The critics on the other hand have taken a very different view. They have, on the whole, been far from enthusiastic. Take that fellow at the *Daily Mirror*. He has pronounced *Sail Away* as being long, tedious and gloomily becalmed. It is, he maintains, musically trite and scenically uninspired. Never mind what the public think, he continues to dismiss this hugely successful and wonderful show, as you say, out of hand. And I, Edith, continue to maintain that the only action one can take about a fellow like him and his arbitrary and self-opinionated associates is to ignore them. Even old *Darlington* at the *Daily Telegraph* has been decidedly grudging about the whole thing.

EDITH: I am sorry. It reminds me, after we did *Façade* at the Aeolian Hall in Bond Street, a very angry and totally mad woman attacked me with her umbrella.

NOEL: Good gracious. That must have been rather exciting.

EDITH: It was. When one comes to think of it, Noel, life without enemies would be frightfully boring. *Sail Away* does sound great fun – quite wonderful.

NOEL: Thank you, Edith. Elaine Stritch is marvellous in it. Absolutely stunning. I am delighted to report the show has made her into a huge star. When you feel better, I'd be honoured if you would permit me to arrange tickets for you and for Elizabeth.

EDITH: Oh, that's nice, thank you.

NOEL: You must come as my guests. And should I be in London, we can all go off and have supper together afterwards.

EDITH: How splendid. How generous. Thank you.

ELIZABETH ENTERS WITH THE SANDWICHES AND BISCUITS.

ELIZABETH: I've made some sandwiches.

EDITH: Noel has most kindly invited us to see Sail Away.

ELIZABETH: Oh, that'd be terrific. I've already seen the show, but I'd love to see it again.

EDITH: You didn't tell me you'd seen it.

ELIZABETH: No. Well, I didn't think to, Edith. Salmon sandwich, Noel?

NOEL: Well, not for me, thank you. As I say, I fear Professor Neihans has placed severe restrictions on the enjoyments of life. On account of my wretched arteries, no alcohol, no tobacco, no sugar, and, alas, no lovely, lovely sandwiches, no fun whatsoever. It's all quite beastly.

ELIZABETH: Oh, dear I am sorry.

NOEL: So am I. They look delicious.

ELIZABETH: Are you sure? It's a special occasion.

NOEL: I'm so sorry, but I daren't.

EDITH: He doesn't want one, Elizabeth.

NOEL: Do forgive me. And you've been to so much trouble.

ELIZABETH: No, no. Of course you mustn't. Edith?

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: Salmon sandwich?

EDITH: No. Thank you. I would have thought you'd have told me you'd seen *Sail Away*. Especially as you say you enjoyed it so much.

ELIZABETH: Yes. Well, I am sorry – I don't know why I didn't, Edith. Well - if no one minds, I think I'll have one.

NOEL: Oh, yes, do. It'd be such a waste if you didn't.

ELIZABETH: Have you told Noel Benjamin Britten has commissioned Malcolm Williamson to write an opera for the Aldeburgh Festival next year – it's based on Edith's book *English Eccentrics*.

NOEL: Oh, dear, no. I hadn't heard. Well, that is something to shout about, Edith. Terrific news. Congratulations.

EDITH: Geoffrey Dunn is writing the libretto and it's going to be produced by Robert Helpmann.

NOEL: Dear Bobbie Helpmann – no one better for the job. It'll be a huge success. I'm sure of it.

EDITH: Paul Hindemith came to see me. Do you know him? He's asked me if he may set my poem *Dirge For A New Sunrise* to an aria for baritone and orchestra.

NOEL: Splendid, Edith. Again wonderful news.

EDITH: I was telling Noel about the woman who attacked me with her umbrella when I did *Façade* at the Aeolian Hall. Elizabeth was with me when we performed *Façade* at Oxford which, as it turned out, was terribly well received. Although we thought it was going to be a disaster, didn't we? The dress rehearsal, as I recall, was chaotic. The screen behind which we were to perform fell down half way through, didn't it? Couldn't get it to stay up. And then we discovered that we were to be preceded by a performance sung by Hedli Anderson of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. The most extraordinary piece. Notes all over the place, up here, down there, round about everywhere – extraordinary.

ELIZABETH: (ANTICIPATING WHAT FOLLOWS): Edith – no.

EDITH: Elizabeth does a wonderful imitation of Miss Anderson's performance.

ELIABETH: No, I don't.

EDITH: Do a bit for Noel.

ELIZABETH: No, Edith. She's getting back at me for forgetting to tell her I've seen Sail Away.

EDITH: You must do it. Do it for Noel.

ELIZABETH: No, no. I'd die of embarrassment. You're being dreadful.

EDITH: What a spoil sport, you are. Dear Ben Britten – you know he wasn't able to be at the Festival Hall. I'm afraid he's not at all well.

NOEL: Oh dear, I am sorry. I hear Antony and Violet Powell were there.

EDITH: Yes. Were they? And of course dear, dear Allannah Harper and Veronica Gilliat. Carson McCullers flew all over from the United States especially.

NOEL: How wonderful. Carson – such a splendid writer.

EDITH: The poor woman is in a dreadful state. I barely recognized her. She has to walk with the aid of a stick. And her mind's going you know. She keeps clutching at people. We were about to drive back afterwards, and there she was, Noel, outside, sitting on the pavement, like a down and out. I said to her, what are you doing? She said she was waiting for a taxi to take her to her hotel. She wasn't drunk. Perfectly sober. The author of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* hunched up on the pavement like a vagrant. (THERE ARE TEARS IN HER EYES) I said to her, you're not stopping here, Carson. And we dragged her inside the motor, took her to her hotel.

NOEL: Of course.

ELIZABETH: Would you both like some more tea? I could pop to the kitchen and make a fresh pot.

EDITH: Would you like more tea, Noel?

NOEL: Well, not for me, Edith. But if you think you might like some more.

EDITH: No. (TO ELIZABETH): No, you stay where you are, Elizabeth, dear – and enjoy the sandwiches.

ELIZABETH: Thank you, I shall.

EDITH: George Cukor was there, wasn't he? He's still hoping to make my Fanfare For Elizabeth into a movie. Dear lovely George. He'll never do it, of course.

NOEL: Ah, well, you never know, Edith dear, not with the movies. All of a sudden, when you think the thing's truly dead and buried, it rises from the ashes like Lazarus – it is made. Quite probably not as one might have wanted it made but it is made. Did George tell you he came to stay with me this summer in Les Avants.

EDITH: Yes, yes – perhaps he did, did he? Yes.

NOEL: I'm resident there now, did you know? I am a tax exile, Edith dear. I have worked hard for what I have and I feel that I should be permitted to enjoy a great deal more of the fruits of my efforts than this British government is prepared to allow.

EDITH: Those wretched tax people, Noel.

ELIZABETH: They've been pestering Edith for years.

EDITH: They've made me sell everything. Even the Pavliks. Have you seen his retrospective in New York? We hear it's a great success. His paintings are going for thousands. He died penniless, needless to say. If the Tax people have their way, *I'll* end up without a penny to my name as well. It's scandalous.

NOEL: Well, there you are. My advice is: join the rest of us. Come and live in Les Avants. It's charming there. I pay the Swiss government just under eight per cent of my income, which, considering everything, I think is pretty fair to all concerned, and I have quite delightful neighbours - David Niven and Joan Sutherland and Victoria Eugenia the Queen of Spain. Furthermore, I am permitted to visit and stay in Britain six months  
(*Noel cont'd next page*)

NOEL (*Cont'd*): of the year, which of course is essential. I've come over on this occasion so as to audition for my new musical *The Girl Who Came to Supper*. What do you think of the title? It's based on *The Sleeping Prince*. Harry Kurnitz has written the book. And Cecil Beaton is designing the set and costumes, so, whatever else, the show will *look* lovely.

EDITH: Cecil was at the Festival Hall, wasn't he?

ELIZABETH: Yes.

EDITH: Father Caraman was there, at the Festival Hall. He told me afterwards he sat in the stalls praying for me throughout. That was probably what got me through it all in one piece. Carson McCullers was there. Poor woman, terribly ill. It's all quite infuriating. Who else? So many old friends and acquaintances. Alec And his wife Merula were there. Alec Guinness, he was there.

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  
(*Noel Cont'd next page*)

NOEL: (*Cont'd*): 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 –

EDITH: She was at my birthday celebration – the Festival Hall.

NOEL: She was. She told me you were marvellous. She was absolutely divine in my play, *Waiting In The Wings*. She was prostrated by the press. She couldn't believe that they were so completely blind to the play's attributes. I said to her, Sybil, I said, it's not the play they hate, it's me. They think to themselves that fellow Noel Coward has been too successful for far too long. It's unnatural. And frightfully unBritish. The cad needs putting in his place. The fact is, they seem to think that everyone, the entire nation should exclusively favour 'dustbin plays'. When the truth is the Nation does not, thank you. The theatre, they proclaim, must now throw off the cloak of artifice, of elegance and glamour and engage solely with the nitty gritty of life. It should 'hold a mirror as it were up to nature', but really much of the Nation is rightly of the opinion that there are certain aspects of nature which are best unreflected, at least publicly. Did you know, Edith, in Arnold Wesker's play *Soup With Barley* one of the characters defecates in his trousers on stage. Terrific, the critics cry. Let's have more of that, they yelp. You can have more if you like, we're staying away, the Nation coolly and wisely  
*(Noel Cont'd next page)*

NOEL: (*Cont'd*): replies. Before we know where we are, an evening at the theatre will be comprised of nothing more than a relentless tidal wave of four letter words.

ELIZABETH: Oh dear, I do so hope it won't come to that.

EDITH: What?

ELIZABETH: I was saying I do hope it won't come to that. Plays made up of four letter words. Noel was speaking about what we might expect plays to be like in the future, Edith.

EDITH: Yes, I know what he was speaking of. Now then, Noel, your *Sail Away* – it sounds terrific. We're so much looking forward to seeing it. But when are we going to see you on the stage again?

NOEL: Well, we have no plans as yet. But you can see me next year when it comes out in George Axelrod's movie. It's called *Paris When It Sizzles*. Starring Audrey Hepburn, who's quite, quite lovely and frightfully talented, and Tony Curtis, who is, when one comes to think of it, also lovely and equally talented, and dear, dear Bill Holden, who, mercifully, is no longer on the dreaded bottle. And we filmed my scenes in the wonderful restaurant in the Eiffel Tower.

EDITH: Oh, I know it. Eiffel Tower. Frightfully expensive, as I remember.

NOEL: I must tell you – and then I'm going, Edith -

EDITH: No, no.

NOEL: - you must rest, isn't that so? - for the entire three days of filming I wore, for my role, a white and gold satin tunic. A white and gold satin tunic and a magnificent scarlet and gold cloak.

EDITH: You must have looked splendid.

NOEL: I did. A white and gold satin tunic and a magnificent scarlet and gold cloak. And on my feet I wore lace up gold boots, and on my head an absolutely stunning wreath of gilt leaves. As you may imagine, I was in paradise. I looked quite out of this world.

EDITH: I'm sure you must have.

NOEL: I wanted to take the costume home with me. I could have worn it today. But they wouldn't let me.

EDITH: How disappointing. It wouldn't really matter in what you were dressed up, Noel, underneath it would always be you.

NOEL: Thank you. Irrefutably. And now I shall leave and thank you for your kind hospitality, including the tea, and the offer of the no doubt delicious salmon sandwiches.

EDITH: Oh, do you have to? I've got a present for you. My Notebooks on Shakespeare.

NOEL: Ah, thank you very much. How very kind.

EDITH: It's on the bedside table, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH: You gave it to Mr Parker.

EDITH: Oh. I've given it to the television repair man, Noel. I'll have to have Macmillan send you a copy.

NOEL: Thank you so much.

EDITH: In the meantime – where is it? – I'd like to you accept a copy of *Born Free* by Joy Adamson. Her adventures with lions in Africa. Wonderful reading.

NOEL: Thank you very much.

ELIZABETH: I'll get it.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE BEDROOM FOR THE BOOK.

EDITH: I do hope you'll enjoy it. It's very moving. We must look after the animals, Noel.

NOEL: Yes, indeed, absolutely.

EDITH: So much cruelty in the world. This factory farming. These unnecessary scientific procedures. It's got to stop.

NOEL: I've been re-reading your Street Songs They have a majestic assurance, a noble and unassailably simplicity.

EDITH: Ah, you have also read the Times Literary Supplement blurb on the back of the paperback cover.

NOEL: It's a view with which I readily concur.

ELIZABETH ENTERS WITH THE BOOK.

ELIZABETH: Here we are.

EDITH: Oriel has died, you know.

ELIZABETH: Her cat.

NOEL: Ah.

EDITH: The poor little thing. She was a stray. Turned up out of the blue one day. Poor neglected little lady. She was in a terrible state. Quite obviously the victim of some dreadful abuse. And so affectionate. I'd four, you know, hadn't I Elizabeth? Now there's just the three. Leo, Bellaker and Shadow.

ELIZABETH: And that's going to be the lot, isn't it?

EDITH: She's such a bully.

NOEL: (REFERRING TO BORN FREE): I very much look forward to reading it.

EDITH: I shall also send you a copy of my Memoirs when I finish them.

NOEL: Oh, do. Thank you. I didn't know you were writing them.

EDITH: Oh, yes. I'm going somehow to have to fit them in with my anthology of William Blake for Messrs John Lehmann, you know.

NOEL: Well done. That's the spirit.

EDITH: We had planned to do the William Blake – when would it have been? – in the early fifties – but there just wasn't the time. So we're going to have to fit it in now. David Higham tells me Austin University, Texas are interested in buying my notebooks. So many of them, you see. We're sticking out for a good price.

NOEL: You're quite right to do so. Actually, Edith, I've brought you a little present. I hope it'll meet with your approval. I'm not wasn't sure you'll do me the honour of accepting it. It's a copy of my Collected Short Stories. A small token of my sincere appreciation and affection.

EDITH: Oh, Noel. Thank you. You shouldn't.

NOEL: The book is in my coat pocket.

ELIZABETH: I'll get it – your coat – shall I?

NOEL: Thank you.

ELIZABETH EXITS.

EDITH: How absolutely wonderful. You've been a gust of fresh air. You will come to see me again?

NOEL: Thank you. I shall. I do most sincerely apologize for the inexcusable offence I gave you, Edith. Those utterly silly parodies.

EDITH: Oh, no.

NOEL: It was quite, quite wrong of me.

EDITH: (QUOTING FROM CHELSEA BUNS): 'Call back the cattle, Mary, dear, Like aged festering potentates, Their horns as posters on a hoarding, Flaunting their tattered nonchalance. The Hermits on their caves of glass. My breasts are round and square and green, Clorinda's cracked the soup tureen.'

NOEL: Oh dear, oh dear.

EDITH: That was yours.

NOEL: Quite, quite dreadful.

EDITH: Pretending to be mine.

NOEL: I burn with shame.

EDITH: (QUOTING FROM COWARD'S REVUE LONDON CALLING): 'Your mouth is my mouth, And our mouth is their mouth, And their mouth is Bournemouth.' From you revue London Calling, spoken by one Miss Hernia Whittlebot, whom you describe as most strangely attired and with a white and weary face with a long chin and nose and bags under her eyes.

NOEL: I am full of remorse – I'm appalled. I can only say in my defence, if any defence is at all possible, that I was very young, and very headstrong, and really far too ambitious and eager for attention.

EDITH: It was 40 years ago, Noel. You mustn't give it another thought. Like me, you must dismiss it from your mind.

NOEL: That's most generous and forgiving of you.

EDITH: 'Our names shall be forgotten in time, and no man shall have our works in remembrance.'

NOEL: I have to confess, Edith dear, that is not my most favourite passage from the Old Testament.

ELIZABETH ENTERS WITH HIS COAT.

ELIZABETH: Your coat.

NOEL: Ah, thank you. (AS ELIZABETH HELPS HIM ON WITH HIS COAT): Thank you. (TO EDITH): Have you remembered what it was you wanted to ask me? You wanted to ask me something.

EDITH: Yes, I know I did. It was ... just some silly nonsense.

NOEL TAKES THE BOOK FROM A POCKET.

NOEL: My Collected Short Stories.

NOEL HANDS THE BOOK TO EDITH.

EDITH: Thank you. I am looking forward to reading them with great interest. I shall start tonight. How considerate. Born Free – I meant to give you a copy.

ELIZABETH: You've already given it to him.

EDITH: Oh, yes.

NOEL: Thank you, thank you. Goodbye.

EDITH: Goodbye, dear man. Cover up those eyes now.

NOEL: Oh, yes.

NOEL PUTS HIS DARK GLASSES BACK ON.

NOEL KISSES HER HANDS.

EDITH: Exit Mr Noel Coward. Don't bump into the furniture.

HE AND ELIZABETH EXIT TO THE FRONT DOOR.

SHE OPENS THE FRONT DOOR FOR HIM.

NOEL: Thank you.

ELIZABETH: I feel I've been part of a historic occasion, Noel.

NOEL: Make no mistake, you have, Elizabeth. Goodbye.

NOEL COWARD HAS EXITED

ELIZABETH RETURNS TO EDITH IN THE SITTING ROOM.

ELIZABETH: There we are. Didn't that go well.

EDITH: Get me to bed.

ELIZABETH: Come on then.

AS ELIZABETH WHEELS HER BACK INTO THE BEDROOM:

ELIZABETH: You got on so well. It was wonderful meeting him. He was older of course. I thought he was lovely. You want to get in.

ELIZABETH LEAVES EDITH IN HER WHEELCHAIR BY THE SIDE OF THE BED, WHILE SHE TURNS THE BED DOWN READY FOR HER.

ELIZABETH: You must be tired. You want to get inside?

EDITH: Sit.

ELIZABETH: We must go to see Sail Away. When you feel better. Isn't it nice? He's going to arrange tickets.

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

ELIZABETH: You'll love Sail Away. I'll get the cast recording. You can listen to it. I'm so glad you're not a tax exile. Going to live abroad.

EDITH: It'd kill me.

ELIZABETH: Yes. Up we go. There we are.

ELIZABETH HAS EDITH SEATED ON THE SIDE OF THE BED.

ELIZABETH: You'd not prefer to get in?

EDITH: No. Martini, dear.

ELIZABETH IS ABOUT TO EXIT.

EDITH: Do you think he likes my work?

ELIZABETH: Oh, yes.

ELIZABETH EXITS TO THE SITTING ROOM TO POUR EDITH A MARTINI.

ELIZABETH: (CALLING): I'll have one too.

SHE RETURNS WITH THE MARTINIS TO THE BEDROOM.

ELIZABETH: Here we are.

EDITH: Thank you.

ELIZABETH SITS WITH HER MARTINI.

ELIZABETH: What's this about your memoirs? This is news to me. You're going to write them?

EDITH: I'm going to have to now. I suppose there'll have to be photographs. Do you think?

ELIZABETH: Autobiographies usually do.

EDITH: So difficult to choose. Pavlik of course. Ossie, Sachie and me when we were young - when we turned the world upside down. There's a good one taken of us together in Carlyle Square. God knows where it is. I ought to have one of the park and gardens at Renishaw, should I? Cecil's photograph of me with the harp. That's fun.

ELIZABETH: You're going to be busy. You didn't tell me you were doing an anthology of William Blake.

EDITH DOESN'T REPLY.

EDITH: (REFERRING TO HER MARTINI): This is nice.

ELIZABETH: We needed it. You want to get in bed?

EDITH: Thank you.

ELIZABETH PUTS DOWN HER MARTINI. SHE TAKES EDITH'S MARTINI AND PUTS IT ON THE BEDSIDE TABLE.

ELIZABETH: I just think it's such a pity you and Noel hadn't met for such a long time.

SHE HELPS EDITH INTO HER BED. SHE PULLS THE COVERS UP TO HER CHEST.

EDITH: Thank you, Angel.

ELIZABETH: You want to look at your mail – the afternoon mail?

EDITH: Thank you.

ELIZABETH PICKS UP THE PILE OF LETTERS SHE EARLIER  
REMOVED FROM THE BED AND PLACES THEM BACK ON THE  
BED NEAR EDITH.

EDITH: My goodness. Dear God, look at this lot.

EDITH HALF-HEARTEDLY SHUFFLES THROUGH SOME OF THE  
MAIL.

ELIZABETH HANDS EDITH HER GLASS OF MARTINI.  
THEN SHE RETURNS TO HER OWN GLASS.

EDITH: I suppose I'm going to have to do the BBC programme. What's  
it called?

ELIZABETH: What?

EDITH: The BBC programme.

ELIZABETH: Hancock's Half Hour.

EDITH: No. The one they want me to do.

ELIZABETH: This Is Your Life?

EDITH: I suppose I'm going to have to do it.

ELIZABETH: This Is Your Life?

EDITH: We must make sure we have the right people on it.

ELIZABETH: They're supposed to be a surprise.

EDITH: Well, dear, as long as the viewing public think they are, that's all right, isn't it? They'll come on, presumably one by one, and I'll be surprised. I'm very good at surprise. You've got to go. You've got to do your writing.

ELIZABETH: (REFERRING TO EDITH'S MARTINI): Finished?

ELIZABETH TAKES HER OWN EMPTY GLASS OUT TO THE KITCHEN.  
SHE RETURNS TO THE HALLWAY TO COLLECT HER HAT AND COAT.

SHE COMES BACK TO THE BEDROOM WITH HER HAT AND COAT.

EDITH: You're not writing about me, are you?

ELIZABETH LOOKS AT HER AS IF TO SAY: 'AS IF I WOULD'.

AS SHE PUTS ON HER COAT AND HAT:

ELIZABETH: Do you want a sandwich? Anything?

EDITH: No. Before you go, the Hedli Anderson singing Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire

ELIZABETH: No.

EDITH: Thirty seconds worth. Fifteen seconds. Ten.

ELIZABETH: Very well.

ELIZABETH LAUNCHES INTO AN OUTRAGEOUS IMPERSONATION OF HEDLI ANDERSON SINGING THE SCHOENBERG, WHICH BOTH FIND HILARIOUS.

EDITH: Oh dear, oh dear. Oh Elizabeth, you're wicked. How could you?

ELIZABETH: I'm never going to do it again.

EDITH: Oh dear. You're a star, dear. You'd make a fortune.

ELIZABETH: Going. Phone?

EDITH: Leave it off.

ELIZABETH: I'll see you this evening. Seven o'clock.

EDITH: You don't have to.

ELIZABETH: I do.

THEY KISS CHEEKS.

EDITH: Put on some Façade. Thank you.

ELIZABETH PUTS A RECORD OF FACADE ON.

EDITH: Too loud.

ELIZABETH TURNS DOWN VOLUME.

EDITH: Better.

ELIZABETH PICKS UP HER BAG.

ELIZABETH: Bye.

ELIZABETH EXITS THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR.

EDITH IS ALONE, LISTENING TO FACADE.

SHE CASUALLY SHUFFLES THROUGH SOME OF HER  
AFTERNOON MAIL.

EDITH: Oh my God – it's the leper woman again.

THE MUSIC CONTINUES.

FACADE IS PLAYING SOFTLY.

**THE END**