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The Exorcism

A play

Don Taylor

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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CHARACTERS

Dan

Edmund

Margaret

Rachel

The action takes place in the living/dining-room of Edmund and Rachel's cottage

ACT I Afternoon

ACT II A short while later

Time—the present

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Exorcism was written in 1971, at a time of great affluence in England, and when famine was raging in Biafra and Bangladesh. The play must be produced as a ghost story, but with the horrific realities that underlie it and were its starting point borne always in mind.

The first professional performance of this definitive text took place in Krakow, in a Polish translation in May 1976, and the first English performance at the Arts Theatre Belfast in 1979.

To my wife, Ellen Dryden, with love and thanks

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(See also page ii)

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ACT I

The living/dining-room of Edmund and Rachel's cottage. Afternoon, Christmas Day

The play begins in darkness. There is a faint suggestion of harpsichord music, distant, only just audible. The Lights come up slowly, and we see the interior of a small seventeenth-century cottage, set in the English countryside, East Anglia, Hampshire, or Wiltshire perhaps. The first thing that becomes clear is that the building has been most beautifully renovated and converted, with an almost ideal combination of money and good taste. It contains every modern convenience and aesthetic refinement, but its essential nature has not been changed. It is convenient and comfortable, but still quite clearly a small labourer's cottage, not Hampstead transported to the countryside

We see the whole ground floor of the cottage, which has been divided into two quite distinct areas. The smaller is the dining-area, which at the moment contains a table completely set for Christmas dinner for four, lacking only the food. The rest of the ground floor contains the main living-area, and its point of focus is a large inglenook fireplace. The living-area is furnished with a comfortable sofa and armchairs, occasional tables, a drinks table and wall units filled with books, records, stereo equipment, built-in TV set etc. There is also an asymmetrical corner which has been completely devoted to music, with a large number of scores neatly in shelves, and with a small harpsichord as its central feature. Tasteful watercolours and prints decorate the walls, together with one or two carefully blended modern pictures, and there is a cunning arrangement of angled and free-standing spotlights and lamps to light the whole area. There is a beautifully decorated and illuminated Christmas tree, and the fire is lit, adding to the air of comfort and warmth. The main point about the set is its comparative smallness. This is a labourer's cottage, not a tenant farmer's farmhouse

Up stage, we can see through into the kitchen, which has clearly been built on to the main building. It is very brightly lit, and in keeping with the rest of the house, contains all the most practical and modern cookery equipment and labour-saving machinery, although most of this is not on view. Next to this is the front door. DL there is a small wooden door which opens on to the narrow staircase leading upstairs

As the play begins, the stairs door is open, and a low rumbling and creaking sound comes from above. Gradually we realize we are hearing footsteps from the upstairs room. The footsteps move to the staircase, and begin to come down the stairs

Dan enters the room from the stairs door, followed by Edmund. Dan is a large man, just knocking forty, carrying a little too much weight, and

dressed in a slightly sober version of a modern safari-jacketed suit. Edmund is a smaller, dark-haired man, a year or so younger. But his hair is receding at the temples, and a customary preoccupied expression sometimes makes him look older than his age. He too is dressed in a suit, more conservatively than Dan, but still not too square.

Dan Of course, finding the right cottage is the most important thing.

Edmund Yes, we were very lucky.

Dan Did someone put you on to it?

Edmund No, we came across it purely by chance.

Dan How sickening!

Edmund We were out for a drive one Sunday afternoon, that's all. We parked the car in a lay-by on the main road—it's well over a mile from here you know, and with the trees you can't hear a sound . . .

Dan I know how far it is my dear fellow, your primitive trackway did wicked things to my suspension.

Edmund Well, we had to have that built you see, you couldn't get a car anywhere near the place.

Dan Well, you can tell your road-builder from me that it might do well for jeeps in Ghana or Mali or some such God-benighted hole, but for the home counties it leaves a lot to be desired. I advise him to emigrate.

Edmund Anyway, it was a beautiful evening, so we decided to go for a walk. We followed a footpath across the fields—about three-quarters of a mile over the back there—and then we saw the cottage, half-hidden in the trees. It looked so completely isolated—no other house in sight for miles—that we decided to go across and investigate. We'd always said that if we ever did manage to get a week-end cottage in the country, we'd make damn sure it really was in the country, surrounded by fields and trees and emptiness, not twenty yards from a main road. So we climbed a stile, crossed a ditch, scratched our legs to bits, and had a look.

Dan It's getting harder and harder. All the decent ones get snapped up in no time.

Edmund It wasn't much more than a ruin really. Doors and windows boarded up, and nettles three feet high, right up to the door. But we liked the area, it's reasonably convenient for London, and anyway, Rachel fell in love with it.

Margaret enters from the stairs door, followed by Rachel, who closes the door behind her. Margaret is a slightly scrawny blonde in her late thirties, with a quiet voice and an ironic turn of phrase. She wears a long and exotic dress, adorned with all kinds of ornaments, and several large rings on her fingers. Rachel is a dark and rather intense woman of thirty-five. She wears a simply cut dress in a sombre shade, which at the moment is protected by an apron. She still has about her something of the intensity and simplicity of the music student she once was, a certain quality of concealment all the more noticeable in the company of extroverts like Dan and Margaret

Margaret Rachel, it's lovely, really it is. I do envy you. Dan, I hope you're taking copious notes?

Dan I don't need to my darling, when it comes to excuses for spending money, you have a photographic memory.

Rachel It's funny about houses, isn't it. It's friendly here. You know how a house sort of welcomes or repels you as soon as you open the door.

Margaret We've been looking for years on and off. But Dan seems to think that beautifully decorated cottages just sit there in idyllic surroundings, waiting for him to take out his cheque book. Don't you, darling.

Rachel I felt it the very first time we came inside: almost as though something were saying: "You're welcome here."

Edmund (*to Margaret*) I was just telling Dan, the place was completely derelict. Been standing empty for years and years.

Dan Yes, well it's a bit off the beaten track, isn't it.

Edmund We had a hell of a job finding out who owned it. Took my solicitor the best part of six months, and then it was the land, not the building. As far as we can tell, the house itself doesn't seem to have any trace of an owner, even by descent. We drew a complete blank.

Dan Well, whoever owned it, farm labourers must have lived here. Family after family of them, right back into the eighteenth century.

Margaret Earlier than that.

Edmund That's what my father said. Ten generations of men who lived on bread and cheese. And now us. He sees it as symbolic.

Margaret Of what?

Edmund Oh, he didn't go into details.

Margaret No, they never do.

Dan And I suppose you got it for about fifty pounds, didn't you!

Edmund A bit more than that. Not too much more though.

Dan It's absolutely typical you know, these things never happen to me! If I'd bought it, it would have turned out to be a medieval pigsty built on a bog. I'd have ended up the owner of a very expensive fourteenth-century slum, not something out of *Homes and Gardens*.

Edmund I think you'd better have a drink. (*He goes to the drinks table*)

Dan (*following him*) I thought you were never going to ask. We've been here nearly twenty minutes . . .

Edmund pours Dan a drink

Margaret Did you have the kitchen built on?

Rachel There was a sort of shed thing. But we had to rebuild it almost completely and the loo and the bathroom, of course, that's all new.

Margaret Well, if you are going to live in the country, even at week-ends, you must provide for the creature comforts. I can't bear those dreadful people who lead civilized lives in offices and suburbs all week, and then go back to nature and live like cavemen at the week-end. They deposit their dung in piles under your bedroom window, because it's good for the soil, and when they give you a cup of tea, it's full of boiled newts.

Rachel Don't worry, we're very civilized here.

Edmund returns towards the two women. Dan follows with a drink in his hand

Edmund I should have asked you first Margaret, but Dan was desperate. What'll you have?
Margaret What have you got?
Dan Everything. They've got everything.
Margaret *Campari?*
Edmund With soda? (*He returns to the drinks table*)
Margaret Please.
Dan They've even got stereo in the bedroom!
Edmund (*to Rachel*) And you'll have a sherry?
Rachel Yes please, a small one.
Dan I hate to think how much it must have cost you.
Edmund So do I. (*He hands Rachel and Margaret their drinks*)
Rachel There was so much that had to be done you see, there didn't seem much point in half-measures. We thought we might as well get it as we wanted it straight away.
Edmund (*pouring himself a drink*) I'm mortgaged to a quite lunatic extent. But it's worth it, I think.
Dan Always spend other people's money in preference to your own, that's rule number one.
Edmund Well, of course. I couldn't have afforded it any other way.
Margaret The only thing we can possibly do in the circumstances Dan, is despise them for the shallowness of their bourgeois values.
Dan Quite right. When you can't afford something, moral superiority is the next best thing.
Rachel You're at the beginning of a very long story there Dan, so if I were you, I'd forget it.
Dan Oh, I'll drop it Rachel, it would depress me even more than it would Edmund, I'm sure.
Edmund I've got some photos somewhere, how it was just before the builders moved in. Where are they Rachel, can you remember?
Margaret Oh, spare us, Ed, please! I don't think we could bear it!
Rachel We'll find them after dinner.
Edmund (*looking through a drawer in the wall units*) It's all right, they're prints, not slides.
Dan That's the price of the meal, you see. A two-hour illustrated lecture, on the house, and how they made it so beautiful!
Rachel No, that I shall absolutely forbid!
Margaret I warn you, Christmas with Dan is usually ghastly. You don't know what you've let yourself in for.
Rachel Margaret, you're biased.
Margaret It's the same every year. He overeats like a pig at dinner, and fills himself up with gallons of red wine, then snores and groans his way through till Boxing Day. It's a memorable experience.
Dan Red wine! That reminds me! Margaret, where's the bag?
Margaret Oh, I think I put it down in the kitchen.

Dan Right.

Dan exits into the kitchen

Edmund What's up with Dan?
Margaret Oh it's nothing, Ed, he's brought a bottle of red wine, I do apologize.
Edmund Oh don't apologize. We've got a couple of bottles of Burgundy, but nothing very special.
Margaret Oh, with Dan it'll be *very* special, I can assure you! Dan is a wine bore. You'll get the whole decanting bit if you're not careful. (*Shouting*) Bring the bag with you, darling! . . . We've got a little present for you, if you don't mind.
Rachel Oh, well actually we've got one for you too.
Margaret Thank God for that! There's nothing quite like the frozen smiles you get when you give someone a present and they haven't got one for you.

Dan enters with a bag and a bottle of Burgundy

Dan Now that, my dears, is a truly magnificent bottle of Burgundy; as our little contribution to the celebration.
Edmund I know nothing at all about wine I'm afraid, Dan, it's wasted on me.
Dan Well, you can take my word for it, it's fantastic. I get it from a little place I know just near Covent Garden, the chap's a friend of mine, and he usually manages to . . .
Margaret All right darling, that'll do, it's a bottle of wine, that's all. We'll drink it and it'll taste nice and it'll probably put us to sleep.
Dan My wife is a barbarian. Where shall I put it?
Edmund It doesn't matter really. The temperature's more or less the same everywhere.

Dan puts the wine in the hearth

Rachel Where did you put the present, darling?
Edmund By the tree.
Rachel Oh yes, of course.

Rachel looks through the presents by the tree, while Margaret rummages in the bag

Edmund It's a grotesque business, Christmas, isn't it. It always strikes me, every year.
Dan If you're going to start talking about the commercialization of spiritual values Ed, I shall laugh out loud.
Edmund No, just the changes it's gone through. A primitive ritual, then a Christian sacrament. What is it now?

Rachel finds a small, flat parcel and hands it to Margaret

Dan The great festival of the belly, and none the worse for that.

Rachel There's still something in the present-giving, though, surely. As a mark of friendship?
Edmund Cases of champagne and bottles of scotch, for services rendered?
Rachel Not in business I don't mean. Among friends.
Edmund I suppose so.

Margaret begins to unwrap the parcel

Dan (*watching Margaret*) Now what's all this? It looks very exciting.
Rachel Anyway, Happy Christmas. I'm so glad you could come down.
Dan It was either that or enduring each other's company for forty-eight hours, so . . .
Margaret (*unwrapping a framed print*) Oh! It's lovely. Eighteenth-century, isn't it?
Edmund Yes. An original.
Margaret Yes, I can see. What's the house?
Rachel Well, that's the point. It's the local Hall. As it was in about seventeen-sixty.
Edmund It's not there at all now. Pulled down in the twenties.
Margaret Thank you very much, it's beautiful.
Rachel We saw it in a print shop in Charing Cross Road, and couldn't resist it. As a sort of memento.
Dan That's the life you see. All that elegance. I like the peacocks on the terrace.
Margaret And the ornamental lake.
Edmund Filled in, alas, probably with the debris from the house.
Dan I can't help feeling we've lost something, you know. Everybody ought to live like that. On second thoughts I suppose you two are having a pretty good try.
Edmund We lack the peacocks.
Dan Give it time.
Margaret My husband, you see, beneath his progressive, nay, radical exterior, is the most hardened reactionary. His ideal life style is the eighteenth-century *rentier.*
Dan Not at all. Nothing is too good for the people, that's my philosophy. Quite different.
Margaret (*giving Rachel a wrapped square box*) Anyway, this is our little offering. Happy Christmas, and thanks for the invitation.
Edmund What is it?

Unwrapping the box, Rachel brings out a small African carved figure, a woman giving birth to a child. It is ugly, distorted, both woman and emerging child have agonized expressions on their faces

Rachel (*a little taken aback*) Oh!
Margaret Sorry if it's a bit primitive and violent.
Edmund A woman giving birth.
Margaret A bit distorted. My friends who are mothers tell me it's not quite that bad.
Rachel No, no, it's beautiful!

Margaret Or indeed, ugly, but I know what you mean.
Dan It's genuine, you know, none of your Harrod's rubbish. Carved by a real live African out in the bush.
Edmund Where did you get it? (*He takes the carving from Rachel and examines it*)
Dan There's a shop just behind Knightsbridge, specializes in genuine tribal stuff.
Rachel They're ritual objects really, aren't they, these things?
Dan Well, fertility, I suppose, yes. Probably for rain.
Edmund But don't they make them specially for the tourists now?
Dan I'm sure they do, but not this one. This was carved by someone sitting in front of a hut after a day in the fields. Probably in a time of drought, or something like that.
Edmund It's a beautiful object though. Thanks a lot.
Margaret It's the psychology that fascinates me. You want something to happen to the weather, so you make an object which symbolizes your wishes. You use your imagination to create a fact.
Rachel All artists do that. When you imagine a thing, it becomes true.
Margaret Not only artists either.

Slight pause

Edmund Where shall I put it?
Rachel Oh, prominent on the shelf I should think. Clear a space. If you'll excuse me now, it's time I was seeing to the dinner, if we're ever to eat today . . .

Edmund places the carving on one of the shelves

Dan Good good! I'm starving.
Margaret I'll give you a hand.
Rachel Thanks.
Margaret Or at least, keep you company.

Rachel and Margaret exit into the kitchen

Dan What she really means is they'll have a good old gossip behind our backs. Got any dirt on you has she?
Edmund Not as far as I know. No more than usual.
Dan Nor me, as far as I know.

Pause

Edmund Is it worth it then, Dan? All this?
Dan Worth it? Of course it's worth it. Financially, once it's done, you can't lose. And who'd live any other way than in maximum comfort, if they had the chance?
Edmund Yes, I suppose so.
Dan But what I really want to know . . .
Edmund Yes?
Dan Is what does your old dad make of it all?
Edmund Well, yes. That's a bit of a sore point.

Dan I thought it might be. That's why I asked. Has he seen it? I gathered from what you said earlier . . .

Edmund Yes, we had him down for a week-end about a month ago. Rowed non-stop for forty-eight hours.

Dan On the lines you might expect?

Edmund Exactly on the lines you might expect.

Dan I can't help admiring your old man. I must do an article about him one of these days.

Edmund (*taking Dan's glass*) Do you want another sherry? (*He goes to the drinks table*)

Dan Yes please . . . It'd be nice, wouldn't it, if we could all keep our simple beliefs, regardless of the facts.

Edmund (*handing Dan his sherry*) Cheers.

Dan What did he say?

Edmund Asked me if I hadn't got anything better to do with my money—which is blood money anyway, as far as he's concerned. Advertising, public relations, market research, any of the selling professions, all out! Get over there with the goats!

Dan I should have been here and put the whole lot on tape. The working class and its wealthy sons! Worth a page or two in the *Statesman* any day of the week!

Edmund He fixed me with his branch meeting look, and said, "Eddie my son, it's no way for a Socialist to live."

Dan Did he indeed!

Edmund So I told him in that case I wasn't a Socialist. (*He drains his glass*)

Dan What did he say to that?

Edmund Nothing much. I think he was pretty shattered. (*Wryly*) So was I.

Dan The blackmail that goes on between parents and children!

Edmund And the other way round. (*He refills his glass*)

Dan After all, if one is forced to live in a bourgeois society, against one's will, as it were, I don't see why one shouldn't enjoy its legitimate rewards. I think we should be concentrating on how to be Socialists and rich!

Edmund No Dan, you can't escape the old man's logic. You can't think one way and live another. I've chosen to live like this, so I suppose the rest follows.

Dan Bad news for the Labour Party's millionaires.

Edmund Well, they live with their consciences, I live with mine. (*He smiles rather weakly and drinks his sherry*)

Margaret enters from the kitchen

Margaret Politics are forbidden at Christmas. Don't let him tempt you, Edmund. He's only collecting material for an article.

Dan I've already told him that.

Edmund *Campari* again?

Margaret Please . . .

Rachel enters from the kitchen

Edmund pours out Margaret's drink, and another sherry for Rachel

Edmund How long will it be, darling?
Rachel Not long. Time to finish the drinks.
Margaret Well, we're both green with envy.
Dan Shh, darling. Edmund's having an attack of guilt. They had a traumatic week-end with his father.
Rachel Oh, it wasn't that bad. They get into those two chairs and go at each other like hammer and tongs. They enjoy it.
Margaret The poor old boy's probably lonely. Likes nothing better than to come to his son's place for a good old row now and again.
Rachel Yes, I think that's right . . .

The two women smile, but Edmund nurses his own thoughts. The Lights begin to fade very slowly as dusk falls. Dan wanders over towards the harpsichord, and stands looking at it

Dan I can no longer contain my curiosity, Ed, about this beautiful machine in the corner. What is it, another affluent indulgence?
Rachel Oh, that's my Christmas present from Edmund . . .
Edmund Except that it arrived a bit too early.
Margaret Not new today then?
Rachel No, I've already been playing it for hours and hours. It's beautiful.
Dan I can see that, but what is it exactly?
Margaret Really, is there no end to my husband's ignorance! It's a harpsichord, darling, an early eighteenth-century piano!
Dan Oh yes, I know! Sounds like a drawer full of old spoons.
Rachel The way some people play it, it does, yes!
Edmund It is an indulgence really. But I love the sound. A piano seems out of place here.
Rachel I think it's a trick to lure me down here more often. He knows how much I adore baroque music.
Edmund And she does need something to keep in practice when we do come down, so . . .
Rachel Actually, of course, it requires a quite different technique from the piano, and the central heating doesn't do it much good, but still—
Edmund I'm afraid I'm not up with all the technicalities.
Rachel —it is a beautiful instrument.
Margaret Play us something.
Rachel What now? In the middle of getting the dinner?
Dan Why not? Something gentle and civilized, to usher in the feast!
Margaret You are pompous, how do I endure you?
Dan Play madam, play, ignore the interruption.
Rachel Well, let me see . . . (*She sits down, and almost without thinking she begins to play at once, a rather wistful and haunting minor key melody, with very simple and transparent figuration, in mid-eighteenth-century style*)
Margaret Oh, what a beautiful sound . . .
Edmund Just right for the cottage. Small-scale. Intense.
Margaret Lovely.

They all listen with genuine pleasure, moving to different parts of the room, to savour the sound, and leaving Rachel alone at the instrument, Rachel plays with all the concentration and musicality of a trained professional but suddenly she stops dead, in mid-phrase, and sits absolutely still, her hands still on the keyboard. Her tension immediately communicates itself to the others

Edmund What is it?

Rachel looks mystified, rather frightened. She remains absolutely still, and intensely abstracted, as though trying to remember something

Rachel This music . . . Something . . . In the back of my mind.
Edmund Darling . . .?

Rachel stands up, and remains still, by the keyboard, as though listening

Rachel What was it? . . . That piece, do you know?
Edmund No.
Dan No.
Margaret Never heard it before.
Rachel No. Neither have I.

There is a silence. They look at one another, wondering what she means. Then she seems to recover herself a little

Sorry . . . I don't know where that came from at all . . . I can't think what it is, or why I played it . . . Funny.

Margaret Something lodged in your memory from years ago.
Rachel I suppose so.
Edmund You must have played hundreds of pieces like that. You could never remember them all.
Rachel Sorry to make such a fuss. For a moment I was quite frightened. I don't know why.
Edmund Frightened?

Pause

Dan *Déjà vu.*
Margaret What?
Dan *Déjà vu*, that's what it was: that strange feeling of having said or done something before; or when you recognize a place you're quite sure you've never been to. It happens to everyone. Like when a goose walks over your grave.
Margaret You can't beat him, can you. Always on hand with a superficial explanation.
Dan No, it's true. The wires get crossed in the mental computer, and it comes up with the wrong answer. Rachel's head, for instance, is full of music, but for a moment, her filing system's gone wrong.
Margaret Oh do shut up, dear man, or I shall begin to feel embarrassed!
Rachel Well . . . I'd better go and get the dinner out, if you'll excuse me. Pour some more drinks, darling, and put the lights on. It's almost dark.

Still troubled, Rachel exits into the kitchen

There is a slight air of uncertainty between the other three. Edmund switches on one or two lights and gets the sherry bottle to top up Dan's glass and his own. Dan watches Rachel go, and follows her a few steps towards the kitchen, then turns back to the others

Dan (*smiling*) Hm . . . Hm . . .! Wasn't that interesting!
Edmund I don't know. Was it?
Dan Yes. Marvellous. Delightful! The slightest nudge of the irrational, elbowing its way into our ordered lives!
Margaret You are a journalist, you know. You're a journalist from your bootlaces to the centre of your tawdry little soul! Why the hell I go to bed with you I can't imagine!
Dan Now what have I done to provoke such a brutal outburst!
Margaret The irrational indeed!
Dan What else do you call it? It was something that happened to Rachel that she didn't understand.
Edmund She's not really like that at all usually. I mean, of course, she's a passionate person. But she doesn't go in for—well, you know . . .
Dan Otherness! Not the world we live in, the world that lives in us!
Margaret That's all a load of mystic rubbish, Dan, and you know it! Just an easy way out for people like you who can't be bothered to think things through.
Dan All right then. Tell me. What really happened to Rachel then, at the harpsichord?
Margaret She forgot the title of a piece of music.
Edmund (*quietly*) But why did it frighten her?
Dan That's right! . . . So let's be honest, we haven't a clue what went on in Rachel's mind there, except that something did, and it caused fear. You won't find anyone who can give you a convincing explanation of it.
Edmund But that doesn't mean it can't be explained, does it. Just that no-one has explained it yet.
Margaret Don't deprive him of his thrilling little mystery, Ed, or he'll have to fall back on his own intellect. And that will be a disaster!
Dan No, I'm sorry, my dears, but I won't be jeered into silence. There's masses and masses of evidence by now, and it increases every year, that the mind possesses other powers beyond the normal rational ones.
Edmund What powers do you mean?
Dan Oh, transference, survival, all kinds of things.
Margaret Show biz, darling, pure show biz.
Dan Not at all, there are countless authenticated stories: for instance, of people being separated by thousands of miles being aware of the death of someone close to them. If mind can be projected through space like that, why not through time?
Margaret If.
Dan Haven't you ever stood on a battlefield and felt the presence of the dead?

Margaret That's just imagination. You see a bleak field, and because you happen to know a lot of men died there, you people it with ghosts. Your mind colours the facts to suit its own preconceptions.

Edmund There's more to it than that, Margaret, isn't there. It's amply proved, for instance, that the mind can have a positive physical effect. I mean, hysterical paralysis, and things like that.

Margaret But your proving my point, not his! The whole point about hysterical reactions is that they do have rational explanations. They depend on cause and effect, not the supernatural!

Dan The point is, my sweetheart, that the reason alone can't be trusted, that's all I'm saying. It can look at the facts, and because of its own preconceptions, it can come up with the wrong answers.

Margaret That may be true, but it doesn't mean . . .

Dan In fact, it's particularly noticeable in your case, in spite of all this arrogant pretence of rationality. I've never known anyone colour facts to suit preconceptions quite as shamelessly as you do!

Margaret Why is it that with you, Dan, sensible discussion always ends up with frivolous personal abuse.

Dan I lack intellectual fibre, that's all. Thank God for it too, or life would be unliveable.

Margaret It's like being married to Coco the Clown. Ask him a sensible question and he pours whitewash down your trousers.

Dan I have to steer her into the shallows of frivolity now and again, Ed, or we would become permanently becalmed in a Sargasso Sea of fruitless intellectual speculation!

Margaret Ugh!

Edmund Listen, do you remember that dreadful party game, Nelson's Eye? It always frightened me to death.

Margaret No, I couldn't bear little girls' parties, hardly ever went to them.

Dan I remember it, but I wouldn't have thought it was your scene at all. Very middle-class.

Edmund Oh well, we rough children were occasionally pulled in to make up the numbers you know.

Margaret What was it all about?

Edmund Anyway, it was a great favourite at all the parties *I* was ever invited to. I can't remember the details, just the traumatic bit.

Dan It's quite revolting.

Edmund You're blindfolded, and then you have to touch certain objects and guess what they are. At the end they plunge your finger into a raw egg, and tell you you're poking it into Nelson's blind eye.

Margaret Ugh!

Edmund It still makes me shiver when I think of it.

Dan It's a perfect example of what I was saying. And while we're on the subject, I've just thought of an even better one. Sit still darling, and close your eyes.

Margaret What? . . . Oh, what are you up to now?

Dan Are they closed?

Margaret Yes . . .

Dan No, I don't think I trust you. A blindfold will be better.

Dan takes off his silk neckscarf, and blindfolds her from behind

Margaret Oh . . . What . . . Dan! What's going on?
Dan That's better. Now stay there for a moment. (*He goes to the drinks table and begins to search among the bottles*)
Margaret What is he doing?
Edmund I don't know.
Margaret You know the trouble with Dan? He got to the age of thirty, and then started going backwards. God help me when he's fifteen!

Dan finds what he is looking for—the ice bucket. He picks up one cube and crosses back to Margaret, carrying it in his hand

Dan Eyes still closed?
Margaret Yes . . .
Dan Right. Keep them closed. And Edmund, you say nothing. Just watch.
Margaret Dan, what *are* you doing . . .?

Dan approaches her, holding the ice cube between thumb and finger. When his face is very close to hers, he speaks quietly and menacingly

Dan I have in my hand an open razor.
Margaret What?
Dan An old-fashioned cut-throat razor. It's very, very sharp.
Margaret Really, you'd never believe what some married people get up to.
Dan Quiet! Concentrate! I'm coming very close to you, and with this open razor I'm going to cut open your cheek.
Margaret Oh, are you. Charming.
Dan I'm getting closer. The razor's wide open. It's so sharp, I daren't even feel the edge. It would lay open my finger at the slightest touch.
Margaret My husband is quite mad!
Dan Still! Concentrate! Make the most of the last few seconds before the pain. I'm very close now. The blade is about two inches from your cheek. Can you feel how near it is?
Margaret Dan . . . What is this?
Dan I told you. With this razor, I'm going to cut your cheek open . . . There!

With a sudden movement, he draws the corner of the ice cube down her cheek. Margaret screams, and puts her hands to her face. Dan whips off the blindfold and shows her the ice cube

Dan An ice cube, melting. No damage done. (*He throws it on to the fire*)
Margaret My God, that did frighten me!
Dan Point proved, I think.
Margaret It was the coldness, and then the wetness on my cheek.
Dan You can kill a man with a drop of water on the back of his neck, if you tell him it's a guillotine.

Rachel enters from the kitchen

Rachel What was that noise?
Edmund Don't worry, darling. A little practical psychology from Dan.
Margaret My husband frightening the life out of me. Quite normal.
Dan (*kissing Rachel on the cheek*) Party games, darling, no need to get alarmed.
Rachel Well, dinner's ready now, so if you'd like to carry the turkey through, Ed, Margaret will help me with the vegetables and things. Oh, Dan, light the candles for me, would you?

Edmund exits into the kitchen, followed by Margaret and Rachel

Dan lights the two large candles set on the table, half-calling to the kitchen, half-talking to himself

Dan Oh yes, I'm all for that kind of thing, Rachel. There's a certain ritual about eating I should be very loath to lose. I admit, it's difficult to feel very close to the Great Spirit opening cans of luncheon meat and fruit salad in a kitchen full of washing up. But when it's turkey with all the trimmings, the candles are absolutely essential.

Edmund enters, carrying a very large turkey, just out of the oven, already set on a large carving dish. Rachel and Margaret follow him, carrying between them sprouts, potatoes, bread sauce, cranberry jelly, etc.

Edmund There we are then!
Dan Good God! That's not a turkey, it's an ostrich!
Margaret Isn't it a beauty?
Rachel Carve please, darling. Would you like to sit here, Margaret? And Dan, you here?

Edmund moves to the wall and switches on a spotlight, carefully angled to shine directly where he has placed the carving dish

Margaret Oh, you've gone much too far, Rachel, really you have.
Dan I warn you, I'm a terrible pig, I shan't leave any of this.
Margaret I've already made your excuses.

Edmund begins to carve as they all sit. Dan whispers exaggeratedly to Margaret

Dan My dear, have you noticed the carving light—neatly on the dish?
Edmund A little idea of the architect's.
Dan It's the little things that count you see, that's real style!
Edmund You're beginning to embarrass me.
Dan "You can't be a Socialist with a spotlight over your carving dish, lad!"

Dan laughs aloud, and they all join in as the holiday atmosphere and the presence of a beautifully cooked meal begins to take effect

Rachel No, really, we shouldn't laugh.
Margaret What's he doing for Christmas, the old man?
Rachel He's gone to Auntie Laura's.

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