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A Day in the Death of Joe Egg

A play

Peter Nichols

Samuel French — London
New York - Toronto - Hollywood



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NOTE: This text is a slightly revised edition of the original
French's Acting Edition published in 1967

A DAY IN THE DEATH OF JOE EGG

First produced at the Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, on 9th May 1967. Subsequently produced at the Comedy Theatre, London on 20th July 1967, with the following cast:

Bri	Joe Melia
Sheila	Zena Walker
Joe	Elaine Mileham or Susan Porter
Pam	Phyllida Law
Freddie	John Carson
Grace	Joan Hickson

Directed by Michael Blakemore
Setting by Robin Pidcock

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(See also page ii)

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CHARACTERS

Bri
Sheila
Joe
Pam
Freddie
Grace

The action of the play takes place in the living-room of
Bri's and Sheila's home

ACT I
An evening in winter

ACT II
Later the same night

Time — the present

ACT I

The living-room in Bri's and Sheila's home

The room is pleasant and comfortable, furnished with a gallant collection of junk-shop bargains and HP modern. On the walls, which are plain, two paintings of cowboys are conspicuous. There is a Thalidomide Kid picture DL. A door UC leads to the hall and stairs, which can be seen when it is open. Another door UR leads to the kitchen. There is a window R (optional). A bird in a cage is UR, a tank containing fish UL, and around the room are plants in pots

When the CURTAIN rises, only the forestage is lit by a spot, and the room is invisible. Bri comes on without warning, and shouts at the audience. He is thirty-three but looks younger, and is hardly ever at rest. He acts being maladroit, but the act is skilful. Clowning may give way to ineffectual hectoring and then self-piteous gloom

Bri That's enough! *(He pauses, then almost at once shouts louder)* I said enough! *(He pauses, staring at the audience)* Another word and you'll all be here till five o'clock. Nothing to me, is it? I've got all the time in the world. *(He moves across without taking his eyes off the audience)* I didn't even get to the end of the corridor before there was such a din all the other teachers started opening their doors as much as to say what the hell's going on there's SOMEBODY TALKING NOW! *(He pauses, staring again, like someone facing a mad dog)* Who was it? You? You, Mister Man? ...I did not accuse you, I asked you. Someone in the back row? *(He stares dumbly for some seconds, relaxes, moves a few steps, shrugs)* You're the losers, not me. Who's that? *(He turns on them again)* Right—hands on heads! Come on, that includes you, put the comb away. Eyes front and sit up. All of you, sit up! *(He puts his own hands on his head for a while, watching for a move, waiting for a sound, then takes them down and suddenly roars)* Hands on head and eyes front! YOU I'm talking to! You'll be tired by the time I've finished. Stand on your seat. And keep your hands on your heads. Never mind what's going on outside, that joker at the back. Keep looking out here. Eyes front, hands on heads. *(He moves across)*

A bell rings

Who said MOVE? Nobody. Said move. Hands on heads ... Next one to groan stands on the seat. We're going to have one minute's perfect silence before you go. *(He looks at his watch)* If we have to wait till midnight. *(He stands watching for some seconds)* That's nice. I like that. Now try to hold it just like that till I get to this machine-gun over here. *(He moves upstage, turning his back, then turns round again at once)* My fault, all right. Little joke. No more laughing. Eyes front, hands on heads. *(He waits for silence, then looks at his watch, moving across. Suddenly he looks up, very angry again)* Who was that? Whoever did—that—can open the window before we all get gassed ... Wait a minute! Three of you? What are you—a group? One go—one nearest the window. All the others, eyes front, hands on heads. Right. *(He looks at his watch)* That characteristic performance from our friend near the window means we return to Go. *(He looks up sharply)* Shall I make it two minutes? *(He looks down again. Ten seconds pass)* We could have had this sooner. Then we shouldn't be wasting time sitting here when we might be ... well ... let's all—think—what we might be doing—'stead of sitting here when the rest have gone home—we could be ... *(He is speaking quietly now, absently staring into space. A few more seconds pass. When he speaks again it is as if in a reverie)* Yes—eyes front ... hands on breasts ... STOP the laughter! WHO wants to start another minute? *(He looks at his watch, then up again)* And whatever the great joke it is that has so tickled your Stone Age sense of humour—when all my efforts have failed—save it till you're outside. I'm going to get my coat from the staff-room now. And you will be as quiet as mice—no, fish—till I get back. All right? I don't want to hear a sound. Not a bubble.

He exits

The Lights come up on the room

Sheila, wearing trousers and pullover, enters from the kitchen with tea on a tray. She is thirty-five, generously built, serious and industrious. When dressed for society, she can be captivating. She puts the tray down and runs back to the kitchen door, pushing with her foot, keeping out an animal

Sheila Back, back, no, no. *(She shuts the door and moves back)*

A door slams off

(She starts pouring tea. She shouts) Bri?

Bri *(off)* No.

Sheila *(shouting)* Just got tea.

Bri enters UC, and moves to Sheila

Sheila offers him a kiss. He takes it, then stands close, looking at her. Sheila goes back to pouring tea and offers him his cup. He doesn't take it, so she looks at his face, then screams, nearly spilling the tea

What's that?

Bri What?

Sheila On your face!

Bri Where?

Sheila Near your eye.

Bri What is it?

Sheila A black thing.

Bri For Christ's sake——

Sheila A spider——

Bri Shall I touch it?

Sheila A great black—get it off!

Bri How?

Sheila Knock it off!

Bri takes it off, smiling

Ugh!

Bri (*putting it on the back of his hand and showing it to her*) I confiscated it.

Sheila knocks it away angrily

From Terry Hughes.

Sheila Vicious sod!

Bri He is. For thirteen.

Sheila You, I mean.

Bri In Religious Instruction.

Sheila It's not funny. (*She turns away from him*)

Bri What I told him. (*Seeing he has done wrong, he approaches her from behind and kisses her neck*)

Sheila Get away!

Bri Oh look——

Sheila Why d'you do it, Brian, honestly? You knew that would upset me and the first thing you do——

Bri Sorry, love.

Sheila I even kissed you——

Bri Sorry.

He takes his tea and drinks it. Sheila also drinks her tea. Bri puts his cup down and kisses her again, then caresses her

Oh, love, if you knew how I'd been thinking of you——

Sheila You'll spill this tea.

Bri Let's go to bed, come on.

Sheila Ow! ... Don't——

Bri What?

Sheila Your hands are cold, you've just come in——

Bri Let's go to bed.

Sheila At quarter to five?

Bri I came home early specially.

Sheila The usual time.

Bri Yeah, but I was *going* to keep them in.

Sheila Who?

Bri Four D.

Sheila Did you *say* you would?

Bri Yes.

Sheila Then why didn't you?

Bri I kept imagining our bed, our room, your legs thrashing about——

Sheila When *are* you going to learn?

Bri (*at her again*) My tongue half-way down your throat——

Sheila You must carry out your threats.

Bri —train screaming into tunnel——

Sheila They'll never listen to you if you don't——

Bri —waves breaking on rocky shore.

Sheila moves out of his reach. Pause. He sips his tea and winces

Sugar. (*He helps himself*)

Sheila You want bromide.

Bri I want you. It's you I want. (*He turns, making a joke of it, pointing to her like the advertisement*) I want you. Kitchener, look. I want you.

Sheila smiles. Bri sits and drinks

Sheila You should have kept them in.

Bri I did for a bit. Then I left them with their hands on heads and went to fetch my coat, and suddenly couldn't face them anymore, so I never went back. Wonder how long they sat there.

Sheila Brian—

Bri Terry Hodges, Fatty Brent ... Glazebrook, the shop-steward—he's got a new watch. And of course Scanlon—(*shaking his head at the idea*)—the Missing Link. Pithecanthropus Erectus.

Sheila Has he flashed it lately?

Bri Not at the teachers anyway.

Sheila Only that once.

Bri That once was the only time it was reported.

Sheila Poor girl.

Bri Some of the older women might keep quiet. Hope for more.

Sheila What happened to that girl?

Bri Never heard of since.

Sheila Not surprising.

Bri Shortest teaching career on record. Thirty-five minutes.

They drink

No, I don't hate Scanlon any more. That's all a thing of the past. I just stare at him and wonder—is he only a monster of my own imagining? (*He puts on his Mad Doctor voice, not for the last time*) "Certainly, Nurse, he strangled a little girl, but that only means he's lonely. We must make him a mate."

Sheila smiles. Bri drinks again

No, you take this morning. I was on playground duty sipping my Nescaff, dreaming of a sudden painless road accident that would put an end to it all. Suddenly aware of the silence—too quiet for comfort. Few of the wilder elements sniggering and casting crafty glances. Whipped round in time to spot Scanlon sidling into the girls' bog. Went to the door and shouted, "That boy, out of it!" Saw this figure zipping up his flies in a panic. Not Scanlon at all.

Sheila No!

Bri No. This new supply teacher.

Sheila Oh, no.

Bri Yes.

Sheila Funny that way?

Bri Not a bit. He didn't know it was the girls'. Only *looks* about twelve even from the front. (*He rises and takes a biscuit*) Dresses like them too. Why can't he wear the right bloody uniform—tweedy jacket and leather elbows—so we'd know whose side he's on? (*He pauses and eats his biscuit*)

Sheila Never mind. You break up in two days.

Bri I broke up years ago.

He puts down his cup and embraces Sheila. She disengages. He looks at his hands

Shall I put my gloves on?

Sheila What's the point of starting *now*? Anyway, my rehearsal's at seven and I promised to paint some scenery before that.

Bri moves away, kicks off his shoes and sprawls in an armchair. Sheila gives him some more tea

I shouldn't be late, but your dinner's in the oven. On automatic.

Bri takes out a cigarette and matches

Take it out any time after seven. You'd never believe the job I had finding a miniature bottle of Kirsch. In the local off-licence they offered Spanish Van Rose instead. Luckily I was going into town so I got it there. I had to take those old clothes into the Unmarried Mothers. They were only collecting moths.

Bri (*lighting the cigarette*) Collecting moths? The Unmarried Mothers?

Sheila The clothes. So I got the Kirsch at the same time. Oh, and all the wildlife's fed—the cats, the guinea-pigs, the goldfish, the stick-insects ...

Pause

Bri The ginger-beer plant?

Sheila All the plants. Oh, remember not to let the cats in. I found a flea in here again today. And this afternoon I did my Oxfam collection and looked after Jenny's children while she got her coil fitted. (*Pause*) Quite a day one way or another. What are you thinking?

Bri Wondering if we could have our guinea-pig fitted with a coil. Or guinea-sow, should it be? (*He scratches himself, then jumps up*) I've got one now. (*He looks closely at the chair for fleas*)

Sheila If you've had a bad day, why don't you come with me?

Bri Bad day? You ought to see the staff-room! Christmas Spirit nearly at breaking point. Excuse me, I was under the impression that was my soap you're using—sod off!—I beg your pardon?—Sod off, matey—come outside and say that—grow up—no, I insist—come on—I sang: "Great tidings of comfort and joy." But it fell on stony ground. (*He moves to the sofa, sits, and takes her hand*) I said to my class, "Right—Christmas

decorations—paper-chains.” Deep voice from the back said, “Kids’ stuff”. I frowned at him and realized I’d never seen him before. Turned out he was the elder brother of one of the more backward boys. On the dole, he’d come in out of the cold, been sitting in classes all day, nobody’d noticed.

Sheila Did you throw him out?

Bri What for? (*He smiles at the recollection*) When he brought me up his paper-chain, he said, “You’re not much good at teaching, are you, mate?”

Sheila Oh, I should have hit him.

Bri He meant it nicely. (*He smokes*) I must find something else.

Sheila Come with me to rehearsal. Do you good to get out, see some people.

Bri What people? Freddie?

Sheila Plenty of whisky afterwards.

Bri I should want the whisky first——

Sheila All right, first.

Bri —if I had to talk to Freddie.

Sheila All right.

Bri If I had to watch you caper about with muck on your face.

Sheila Shall I ring Mother and see if she’s free?

Bri Bloody hell! What a swinging prospect! My mother, Freddie——

Sheila I seem to remember——

Bri —and all that Kirsch bubbling away down there.

Sheila —I seem to remember it was *you* who introduced me to Freddie in the first place.

The doorbell rings. Bri rises and moves to the door UC

Remember that. (*She shouts after Bri*) And at least I don’t just sit about coining epigrams—wallowing in self-pity! At least I *do* something about it!

Bri You and Freddie together—yes ...

He exits UC, leaving the door partly open

Sheila (*shouting*) At least I try to make life work instead of——(*She breaks off and sighs, deeply, almost as though doing an exercise in relaxation*) Honestly. (*She puts the cups on the tray, picks up a saucer, puts some milk in it, takes it off to the kitchen. To an invisible cat outside*) Get away from the door then you won’t get stepped on.

She exits to the kitchen

Bri enters UC, wheeling Joe in her invalid chair

Joe is ten, physically normal but for the stiffness of her legs and arms. Her legs, at this stage, are covered with a blanket. She cannot support herself properly and has to be propped wherever she is put; for the most part she lies supine. In her chair, she sits with the upper part of her body forward on the tray in front of her chair, as though asleep. Her face is pretty but vacant of expression, her voice feeble. Bri carries a small grip marked BOAC. He pushes her to the centre of the stage

Bri There we are then, lovely. Home again. *(He moves away, puts down the grip on the sofa, then looks at Joe)* Safe and sound. You been a good girl?

Joe A-aaah! *(This is her closest approach to speech)*

Bri *(locking the invalid chair)* Really good?

Joe Aaaah!

Bri The lady in the bus said you'd been good. Sat by the driver, did you?

Joe Aaaah!

Bri There's a clever girl!

Joe Aaaah!

Bri *(as though he understood)* Saw the Christmas trees?

Joe Aaaah!

Bri And the shops lit up?

Joe Aaaah!

Bri What d'you say? Saw *Jesus*? Where was he, where was Jesus, you poor softy?

Sheila enters

Joe Aaaah!

Bri I see.

Sheila My great big beautiful darling home at last? *(She kneels by the chair)*

Got a great big beautiful kiss for Mummy? *(She kisses Joe)*

Joe Aaaah!

Sheila I'm lovely, she says.

Bri Mad, she says, but lovely.

Sheila She's been a good girl, Dad. Did the lady say?

Bri Very good, Mum. Sat by the driver.

Sheila *(mock amazement)* Did you sit by the driver? Did you, lovely?

Bri and Sheila act as parents do receiving home a child of two from the Infants' School

Bri Saw the Christmas trees, Mum.

Sheila Did you see the Christmas trees? *What a clever girl!*

Bri And Jesus.

Sheila Jesus?

Bri Bathed in light, in the sky.

Sheila (*speaking aside to Bri*) She got a screw loose, Dad?

Bri No, Mum.

Sheila Seeing Jesus?

Bri On top the electricity building.

Sheila (*relieved*) Oh, yes! Thought she was off her chump for a minute, Dad.

Bri Seeing Jesus in a dump like this? No wonder, Mum. But no, she's doing well, they say.

Sheila Daddy's pleased you're trying, love. What with your eleven-plus on the way.

Bri gives a short burst of laughter then resumes

Bri You want to get to a decent school.

Sheila I don't want to be shunted into some secondary modern slum, she says—— (*She kisses Joe again*)

Bri Like the one where Daddy works ...

Sheila Share a room with forty or fifty council-house types and blackies.

Bri No, I've had enough of them, she says, at the Spastics' Nursery. You want to go on to the Training Centre, help to make those ballpoint pens. (*He rummages in the grip*)

Joe Aaaah!

Sheila I'm trying my hardest, she says.

Bri You keep it up, my girl. (*He takes out a note*) Here's a note from Mrs——

Sheila From the Nursery?

Bri A school report, Mum. (*Reading*) "Thank you for the present for Colin's birthday." Which is Colin?

Sheila Little boy who had meningitis.

Bri Never stops whimpering?

Sheila That's him.

Bri Did you send him Many Happy Returns?

Sheila I sent a card. And a cuddly bunny.

Bri It's the thought that counts. (*He reads*) "Quite a few of the parents remembered and the kitchen ladies made a lovely cake with seven candles and we held up Colin so he could see them burning, then we all helped him "blow them out."

Without looking at each other, Sheila and Bri make the "Aaaah!" sound of a cinema audience at being shown a new-born lamb

"The physiotherapist lady came and looked at us all today and said Josephine's shoulders show some signs of improvement. She says keep on with the exercises."

Sheila Do your homework like a good girl. Daddy help.

Bri (*to Joe*) She won't be able to help. She's going out for a bit on the side.

Sheila Let me call your mother. Please.

Bri (*ignoring her, reading on*) Hallo, hallo, what's *this* I see? What's this?

"She's had a few fits today but I think it must have been the excitement over Colin's cake." (*He moves about, acting the cross father*)

Sheila (*stopping the comedy and beginning to be seriously concerned*) Oh dear, now why's that, I wonder?

Bri Just you listen to me, my girl——

Sheila I thought we'd got them under control.

Bri How are you to raise yourself above the general level if you keep having fits?

Sheila This is the first for weeks—except an occasional *petit mal*.

Bri Those council-house types down there, what d'you think they say? (*He goes into a heavy village rustic act*) "She puts it on, a voice you could cut with a knife—Lady Bleedin' Muck and no mistake! But look at her, she's no better than the likes of us, just another raver."

Sheila Poor kid, poor blossom. (*She caresses Joe*)

Bri Spare the rod spoil the child, Mum.

Sheila I don't know why they've started.

Bri Welfare State. Life's all too easy these days—free milk, showjumping. Physiotherapy. Singing and candles. What singing and candles did we have at her age? Air raids and clothing coupons, and if we didn't like that, my mother used to say, "That's all you're getting, my sonner."

Joe's head turns slowly from one side to the other

Sheila Hallo.

Joe's body tenses. Sheila and Bri watch silently. Joe remains staring towards her left. Her right arm stretches out as though commanding attention, her mouth begins to open and shut spasmodically, her eyes close, her head slowly and tensely turns from left to right. Her legs are pulled up in the seizure. The opening and shutting of the mouth causes a distinct and explosive sucking sound

(*Taking the note from Bri's hand and reading it*) That's great, that is. Explains it.

Bri What?

Sheila They've run out of anti-convulsant suspension again.

Bri Again?

Sheila (*reading*) "... excitement over Colin's cake. Or perhaps because we've used up all her yellow medicine."

Bri Call themselves a day nursery.

Sheila How many times is this?

Bri Why don't they keep a few spare bottles in the fridge? Nearly all the kids need it.

Sheila The amount they use, they should have it on draught.

She exits to the kitchen

Joe's fu finished, she rests on the chair-shelf

Bri (*excited by Sheila's suggestion*) Yes! Drawn to the nurseries and day-centres in barrels by a dirty great fleet of dray-horses. (*He acts the commentator with an awestruck voice, as if holding a hand-mike*) And here—in the City Pharmacy—you can stand—as I'm standing now—in the nerve-centre of this great operation of mercy—and watch the myriad craftsmen at their various chores.

Sheila enters with two bottles, one of pills and one of yellow medicine, and a spoon

Sheila (*giving the pills to Bri*) Give her the phenos. (*She unlocks the chair and turns it so that Joe is facing upstage*)

Bri Or something less trad? (*He takes two pills from the bottle and moves upstage*)

Sheila shakes the other bottle

Bit more in keeping with our forward-looking technological society? A central pumping station and a vast complex of underground culverts and sluice-gates.

Sheila (*to Joe*) Soon be better, my flower.

Bri forces Joe's jaws apart and puts the pills into her mouth

Bri No, but they'll never stand for it.

Sheila Who?

Bri Bristol's ratepayers. Cost a fortune.

Sheila Here, my blossom, lovely orange. (*She spoons it in*)

Bri Too fond of the ceremonial, the bullshit.

Sheila There's a clever girl.

Bri (*holding Joe's jaw shut*) New life to dying crafts. Horse-brasses in the sun, tang of cooper's apron. (*He makes the sound effects of horse-hooves and whinnying*) Dagenham Girl Pipers.

Sheila stoppers the bottles and kisses Joe

Sheila And for a special treat, Mummy got her favourite ice-cream for tea.

Bri (*releasing Joe's jaw*) Gone down now.

Sheila Tell Mummy—are you wet?

Bri looks in the grip

(*Putting her hand under Joe's blanket*) Soaking.

Bri (*taking a nappy from the grip*) This nappy's dry.

Sheila (*indignantly*) Honestly! They've started *doing* that again this week. Leaving the one I send in the bag and letting her sit like Joe Egg in the damp all day. Her parts get spreaded.

Bri Perhaps she *was* dry before the fit.

Sheila She could hardly have gone all day without a wee.

Bri No.

Sheila (*looking at her watch*) Will you change her? I must go and get ready.

Bri throws the nappy on Joe's chair-shelf and takes the bottles from Sheila

If she's spreaded, there's ointment in the cupboard.

Bri nods, with a cheesy smile

And if I were you, I should put her on the kitchen floor to change her.

Bri (*putting the bottles and spoon in the grip and hooking it on the chair*) I'm not the new nanny.

Pause

Sheila No. Course not, but——

Bri (*wheeling Joe towards the kitchen*) I've done it before. Once or twice. In the last ten years.

Sheila Brian.

Bri turns

Shall I call your mother?

Bri What for?

Sheila So we can go out.

Bri Tuesday night there's nowhere much to go. The zoo's shut. There's a Western at the Odéon.

Sheila Come and see the rehearsal. Get drunk if you like. But not too drunk to bring me home and have me.

Bri (*pointing towards Joe*) *Pas devant*——

Sheila What?

Bri *Pas devant l'enfant*.

Sheila Aitch-ay-vee-ee me.

She comes forward. He leaves the chair and meets her. She embraces him

Seriously. Shall I?

Bri kisses her, buries his face in her hair, then emerges

Bri Hey listen! What's it like with Freddie?

Sheila stiffens, then struggles to break free

(*Holding her*) No, come on, you've told me about the others. Not all, of course——

Sheila Let go——

Bri ——but a sampling——a cross-section——

Sheila I shall bite.

Bri ——the ones that because of some exceptional feature stand out from the crowd.

Sheila They were all before I met you.

Bri But Freddie's *now*.

Sheila Let go.

Bri What's his speciality?

Sheila Even if he wanted to——which he doesn't——

Bri You must think I'm soft——

Sheila ——Freddie would run a mile from a breath of scandal, you know that!

Bri No, but I mean——what's his gimmick?

Sheila Come and ask him.

Bri For instance——

Sheila Why don't you?

Bri —all your four Americans, you said, made you——

Sheila What? Where'd you get that?

Bri What?

Sheila Four Americans.

Bri Wrong?

Sheila Two Americans.

Bri Oh.

Sheila One Canadian.

Bri Ah. (*He releases her*) Well. They made you lie across a pillow. I think they got it out of Hemingway. Then the Welshman—the stoker——

Sheila He wasn't a stoker. He was a policeman.

Bri Oh yes. He was shocked because you used bad words in a posh accent.

But when it came to getting off your frock, he was so ravenous he tore it.

Sheila I wish I'd never told you anything. You said we would be *honest*. You told me all about yours first.

Bri (*nodding*) All three. That took an hour. Then for the next few weeks you made a short-list.

Sheila You *made* me.

Pause

Joe Aaaah!

Bri You must have enjoyed those fellows at the time.

Sheila No!

Bri One or two.

Sheila I've told you.

Bri Why go on with it then?

Sheila Once you get to a certain stage with a man, it's hard to say no.

Bri Most women manage it. With *me*, at any rate. *Three* out of God knows how many tens of thousands I tried ...

Sheila They didn't know a good thing when they saw it.

Bri That's true.

Sheila You were the only one who gave *me* any pleasure.

Bri When you first told me that I was knocked out. I walked round for days feeling like a phallic symbol. I thought well, perhaps I didn't ring the bell very often but at least I rang it loud.

Sheila smiles

She'll stick with me, I thought happily, because I've got magic super-zoom with added cold-start.

Sheila You have, yes.

Bri Tell Freddie——

Sheila O ye Gods.

Bri Of all people!

Sheila He's never been near me.

Bri I think we should still be honest. Even about him.

Sheila He leaves me cold.

Bri And yet you'd rather spend the evening with him than with me.

Sheila You pushed me into this drama lark. You said I should get out——

Bri What's his speciality? His forte? Does he keep his mac on?

Sheila faces him for several seconds. Then she rises and exits UC

Bri shrugs, then sighs. Joe sneezes

Bless you.

Joe sneezes again, falls forward on the tray and bumps her face

Oops.

She begins crying feebly. He goes to her

Did she hurt? Did she bump her nose? (*He props her up*) Better? (*He looks at her closely*) You look pale, Joe. Is it those nasty fits? Never mind. (*He fondles Joe's hand*) Lovely soft hands you've got. Like silk. Lady's hands. They've never done rough work. (*Crouching by the chair*) Now Mum's gone to take her part. Practise her acting. So we'll have a bit of a chinwag round the oil heater. Chew the fat, watch the jumping.

Her crying has stopped

I expect there's jumping, there usually is. (*He looks in a copy of Radio Times*) No, no jumping.

Joe sighs heavily and wearily, an aftermath of the cry

There's a film about an eminent surgeon and his fight against injustice in London's EastEnd. (*He shows her*) I know you can't resist a doctor. (*Aside, to the audience*) When you think what they did to her! (*He turns back to Joe*) But before that, Daddy get her a lovely tea. Joe and Daddy have a

lovely tea then Joe have a nice hot bath? Play with her ducks? *(He returns the Radio Times to its place)* Hear that noise? That's Mummy in the bedroom. Probably taken her dress off now. Might be putting her stockings on. Even changing entirely. Every stitch. Naked, looking at herself in the glass, thinking have I kept my figure? *(He pauses, dwelling on the image)* But I'm not running up those stairs three at a time and falling into the bedroom and cringing on the carpet begging her not to go. No fear! I've done all I can without total loss of dignity. I might have known once I got her started on amateur theatricals she'd turn up at every bloody practice. Terrible sense of duty, your mum. *(He looks at Joe lolling in her chair)* What am I doing, talking to you? *(He moves down front and talks to the audience)* Might as well be talking to a wall. *(He talks like a front-cloth comic)* No, but she is a wonderful woman, my wife. That girl upstairs. In the bedroom—*(moving down L)* off in the wings—*(returning C)* wherever she is. No seriously. *(He drops his act and continues as himself)* A truly integrated person. Very rare, that is, as you know. Give you an example: she's disturbed by anything, she's not just mentally upset about it, not only miserable, no actually grows *ill*. Boils, back-ache, vomiting. Not pretence. Real sickness. She works as a whole, not in parts. Unlike me, for instance, I'm Instant Man. Get one for Christmas, endless fun. I'm made up as I go along from old lengths of string, fag-ends ... magazine cuttings, film-clips ... all stuck together with wedges of last week's school dinner. What I mean, she couldn't *pretend* a passion she doesn't feel. Whereas I can't sustain a passion to the end of the sentence. I start to cry—aaaooooow! Then I think: are you mad? Who do you think you are, God? And things go clang and wheels fall off and people get hurt—terrible. You must have felt like this—catching yourself in the mirror hamming away. Or somebody says, "My wife's just been run over," and you want to burst out laughing. Well, you may say, why not—if that's the way you feel? But other people don't like it. So I pretend. You saw me pretend with Sheila. I try to guess which emotions appeal to her and then I sink my teeth in. I don't let go until they're bone-dry. Like with Joe there—*(He waves at her)* All right, are you? Good. I felt all doomy at first but—well—ten years! I just go through the motions now. Sheila—how shall I put it in a way that will prevent a sudden stampede to the exit-doors? Sheila—embraces all living things. She really does. She's simple, so simple she's bound to win in the end. She's a sane enough person to be able to embrace all living creatures. She sits there embracing all live things. I get my hug somewhere between the budgerigar and the stick-insect. Which is the reason for all this smutty talk. Calling attention to myself to make sure I get more than my share. Otherwise I'd have to settle for eyes-front-hands-on-heads and a therapeutic bash once in a blue moon. And I'm too young to die, I tell you!

Joe Aaaah!

Bri What's the matter, crackpot?

Joe Aaaaah!

Bri Language? You think this is language! I'll introduce you to Scanlon. He'll let you hear some language. (*Aside*) What a madam! Well. Let's see what she's left for tea.

Joe Aaaaah!

Bri pushes Joe's chair towards the kitchen, making revving noises. As he goes, he struggles with the cats

Bri Get back, you flea-bitten whores! Get back!

He exits into the kitchen with Joe, closing the door behind him

There is a pause of at least five seconds

Sheila enters from a corner downstage of the set. She has changed into a dress and is brushing her hair

Sheila One of these days I'll hit him. Honestly. (*She brushes her hair, looking at the audience*) He thinks because he throws a tantrum I'm going to stay home comforting him and miss the rehearsal and let them all down. He thinks he's only got to cry to get all he wants. I blame his mother. She gave him the kind of suffocating love that makes him think the world revolves around him, but because he's too intelligent to believe it really, he gets into these paddies and depressions. And when he's in one of those, he'll do anything to draw attention to himself. That beetle on his face—you saw that. And all this stuff about Freddie. And yet it was Brian who made me join these amateurs in the first place; he said I needed to get out more, have a rest from Joe. But she's no trouble. It's Brian. I don't know which is the greatest baby. Watching somebody as limited as Joe over ten years, I've begun to feel she's only one kind of cripple. Everybody's damaged in some way. There's a limit to what we can do. Brian, for instance, he goes so far—and hits the ceiling. Just can't fly any higher. Then he drops to the floor and we get self-pity again ... despair. I'm sure, though, if he could go farther—he could be a marvellous painter. That's another reason I said I'd join the amateurs: the thought that he'd be forced to go upstairs several nights a week and actually put paint on canvas. And even if he *isn't* any "good, he seems to need some work he can be proud of. Something to take his mind off his jealousy of anyone or anything I talk to ... relatives, friends, pets ... even pot plants. I'm sure it's because they take up time he thinks I

could be devoting to him. And Joe, most of all, poor love ... (*She puts her brush down. A thought brings her back*) Look, you mustn't assume I feel like this in the ordinary way. And even when I *am* a bit down, I shouldn't normally talk about it to a lot of complete strangers. But all this childish temper over Freddie—this showing-off—it's more than I can stand. It makes me boil, honestly! Wouldn't you feel the same? (*She checks her appearance in an imaginary full-length glass*) That's why I'm telling you all this. A lot of total strangers. But wouldn't it make you boil? Honestly! A grown man jealous of poor Joe——(*She breaks off when she sees Bri*)

Bri enters from a downstage corner

They look at each other in silence

Bri What are you telling them?

Sheila What?

Bri I heard you talking.

Sheila picks thread from her clothes

I heard you mention Joe.

Sheila does not answer

(*To the audience*) Sheila's got a theory about Joe's birth. She doesn't blame the doctors. She blames herself.

Sheila I don't say that. I say it wasn't *entirely* the doctors.

Bri (*nodding*) It was because she choked it back.

Sheila It was partly that.

Bri Because she's slept around.

Sheila I think it was partly because I'd been promiscuous, yes, and my subconscious was making me shrink or withdraw from motherhood, all right!

There is a pause. Bri looks away. Sheila goes on titivating

Bri That vicar said it was the devil's doing. Why don't you believe that? It's about as brilliant.

Sheila (*shrugging*) It comes down in the end to what you believe.

Bri I'll tell you what I believe.

Sheila I *know* what you believe.

Bri (*pointing at the audience*) They don't. (*To the audience*) I believe the doctor botched it. There was no other cause. (*To Sheila*) That specialist said as much, he said it had nothing at all to do with the way you'd lived or whether there was a nut in the family ... or what kind of fags you smoked ...

Sheila He didn't say the doctor did it either.

Pause. He looks at her

Bri No. You've got a good point there. He didn't mention that, quite true. He didn't say, "Yes, he's a shoddy midwife, my colleague, always was, I'll see he gets struck off the register." Very true. Weakens my argument, that.

Sheila Oh, you're so *clever*!

Bri He'd only say for certain that it was a chance in a million it could happen again.

Sheila Mmm. We haven't had an opportunity yet to check on that.

Pause

Bri It's due to this of course that Joe lives at home with us.

Sheila She's our daughter.

Bri (*to the audience*) She was on the way before we married. That feeds the furnace of guilt.

Sheila No need to tell them everything.

Bri It was a white wedding.

Sheila For my Dad's sake. He was a bell-ringer and always looked forward to the day he'd lead the peal as I left the church. You said you didn't mind.

Bri I didn't. At the reception afterwards the ringers were the only people worth talking to. All twisted and crippled. Picture them bouncing up and down at the end of their ropes. (*He moves to Sheila and tries a guess at it*)

Sheila We might have taken them for an omen. The baby came six months later. I'd done my exercises and read the antenatal books—mostly the ones that made it seem as simple as having a tooth filled.

Bri But more spiritual.

Sheila Oh yes, a lot about you sitting by the bed holding my hand and looking sincere.

Bri (*doing this*) Giving the lead with shallow breathing. (*He acts shallow breathing*)

Sheila (*to the audience*) I don't know whether any of you are like me, but I half-expected to hear snatches of the Hallelujah Chorus.

Bri I was sympathetic but queasy. The idea of sharing the birth seemed irrefutable *qua idea* ... but not so gay when it came to the blood and fluid.

Sheila As it happened, you needn't have worried.

Bri No. *(To the audience)* How long do your labours last? Two, three hours?

A day? Dilettantes! *(He points at Sheila)* Five days!

Sheila Yes. From the first show on the sheets to the last heave on the forceps. Five days.

Bri You'll all be saying, "He should have *done* something," but I didn't *know* at the time. You don't, do you?

Sheila You'll know *now*.

Bri Oh, yeah. It was all good experience.

Sheila *(to the audience)* This doctor kept on drugging me.

Bri You were stoned.

Sheila I couldn't remember the exercises.

Bri Couldn't even tell me. Just kept crying.

Sheila *(explaining)* I couldn't make anyone understand! I couldn't salivate or swallow so I stayed hungry ... also I kept hoping you'd be there when I opened my eyes, but it was always the midwife or your mother.

Bri Not always.

Sheila Nearly always. You were getting drunk outside.

Bri What else could I do?

Sheila *(to the audience)* My speech faculties seemed to have gone, so I couldn't tell them to stop the dope so that I could manage the birth.

For the rest of the act, Sheila and Bri hold a dialogue with each other and the audience. No further indication is given, unless essential to the sense

Bri Then the GP would pop in to see me with his boyish grin ... "Tell the truth I've got the feeling this young shaver's none too keen to join us." And I'd say, "All this trouble getting out and he'll spend the rest of his life trying to get back in." And we'd all piss ourselves at that and have another scotch.

Sheila You never thought it was going on too long?

Bri Yes, but you leave it to them, don't you? My mum taught me to believe in doctors and during the labour she set an example of quiet faith.

Sheila And afterwards—when Joe was ill—she said she knew all along it was lasting too long.

Bri She always knows afterwards.

Sheila The pain was shocking but the worst was not being able to speak.

Bri By the last day I thought she was going to die. And—I've never told you this, love ...

Sheila What?

Bri You'll find it hard to credit this. Though not normally a religious man ... for everyday purposes making the usual genuflections to Esso Petroleum and MGM—I don't mind admitting it, I prayed—

Sheila Did you really? Not another joke?

Bri (*taking her hand*) No, honestly. I went down on my knees and I prayed to God. I said, "God, I've only just found her. The baby doesn't matter. If it's a question of a swap ..."

Sheila Aaaah! (*She kisses him*)

Bri Then I found I was so drunk I could hardly get to my feet again.

Sheila But never mind, your prayer was answered.

Bri Yes, he heard all right. (*To the audience*) I see him as a sort of manic-depressive rugby footballer. He looked down and thought to Himself, "I'll fix that bastard." (*He shakes his fist at the roof*) And he did!

Sheila By the time the damage was done, they took me to hospital. The next thing I knew, they handed me this hairless yellow baby with forceps-scars all over her scalp. She was gorgeous. By the time I got her home, the scars and jaundice were gone and she was in working order. You had a cold.

Bri That's right, yes.

Sheila I had to look after you. It was better than having you turn up in the ward every day moaning and sniffing.

Bri More than a cold. Flu. A delayed reaction I think it must have been. I was quite poorly.

Sheila smiles, then turns to the audience

Sheila Soon I began to notice these funny turns. We asked our friends who'd had babies but they said it was most likely wind. So in the end we took her to our new GP.

The upstage part of the set dims to semi-darkness. Bri fetches a tubular cushion from the set behind them, the size and shape of a swaddled baby. Bri gives Sheila the cushion, which she nurses

Bri Baby. (*He points to himself*) Doctor. Nice, bone-headed.

In the sketches which follow, Bri plays the funny men and Sheila herself. They do it as they might repeat the dialogue from a favourite film. Sometimes they improvise, surprising or "corpsing" each other. Bri mimes opening a door at the side of the stage. Sheila wanders off to the opposite side and waits

Bye-bye, Mrs—um—you rub in that you'll soon be as right as rain. (*He mimes closing the door, returns C and shouts*) Next, please!

Sheila moves in. Bri bends over, writing and putting away the last patient's card

Evening, Mister—um—feeling any better?
Sheila It's morning, Doctor. (*To the audience*) Not very reassuring.
Bri Course it is.
Sheila And I've never been before.
Bri No?
Sheila We're new to the district.
Bri (*moving to Sheila*) What seems to be the trouble?
Sheila I don't really know. Funny turns. Face-making.
Bri Say "Aaah!"
Sheila Not me. The baby.
Bri (*looking at the cushion*) Nothing much wrong with this little laddie.
Sheila Lassie.
Bri Lassie. Funny turns, you say. How would you describe them?
Sheila Frightening.
Bri No, I meant, what form do they take?
Sheila Blinking with her eyes, working with her tongue, shaking her head, then going all limp.
Bri (*tickling the baby, talking to it*) Funny turns indeed at your age! Saucy beggar. We are not amused.
Sheila But what d'you think it is?
Bri Wind.
Sheila That's what our friends said.
Bri Always wise to get a second opinion. Have you tried Gripe Water?
Sheila Yes, of course.
Bri My old mother used to swear by it. Cure anything, she used to say. Well, let's see what we can find in here.

He mimes opening a drawer, finding medicine and reading the label. He returns to Sheila

Ah yes, this'll put a stop to it. Came in the post this morning. The makers praise it very highly.
Sheila Doctor—I wish you could *see* one of these turns.
Bri Oh, I've seen them, dear. Got three great monsters of my own.
Sheila I am sorry.
Bri What?
Sheila All your children being—um—
Bri No, I mean great thriving brutes. Not monsters, no. Silly girl. Your first, is it? First monst— um, baby?
Sheila Yes.
Bri Well, dear, it's like this. You're throwing an awful lot of gubbins down the old cake-hole there. It's like running in a new car. Till all the tappets

and contact breakers get adjusted to the absolute thou, you take it easy, give 'em a chance. Same with these chaps. *(He tickles the cushion, then looks again at the medicine)* Let's see. Three times daily after meals. How often are you feeding?

Sheila Every four hours.

Bri Four into twenty-four goes six. So six times a day——

Sheila Look. This may be one now.

They watch the cushion for ten seconds. Bri looks at his watch

Bri I've got a waiting-room full of people, dear. *(Leading Sheila to exit)* You try her with this and come back if there's no improvement in—say—a week. Make sure you wind her well. And don't fret. They're hardy little devils, you know. Bye-bye, Mrs—um ... *(He mimes seeing her out and shutting the door)* Three days later. *(He mimes opening the door)* Next please.

Sheila comes back at once with the cushion

Hallo, Mrs—um ...

Sheila *(urgently)* Doctor——

Bri Just a minute, I'll get your card.

Sheila But this child——

Bri Sit down, please. *(He seats her and looks at a "card")* Didn't I say come back in a week? *(Moving to her)* Why so soon?

Sheila She's gone into a coma.

Bri D'you try the medicine?

Sheila She won't take anything. She hasn't fed for two days.

Bri looks at the cushion, listens to it, claps hands by it and finally shakes it like a piggy-bank

Bri *(as much as to say "so far, so good")* Ah-ha! Mm-hum. *(He goes humming back to the "table" and mimes telephoning)* Get me the Children's Hospital—quick! No panic, dear, just a routine enquiry. Your husband with you?

Sheila In the waiting-room. Is she ...?

Bri *(into the "telephone")* Look—I'd like you to take a shufti at a baby—uh—*(to Sheila)* girl?

Sheila Yes.

Bri Baby girl ... Off her chow and failing to respond to any stimuli whatever. *(To Sheila)* Got a car?

Sheila No.

Bri Hallo? ... No car. Any chance of an ambulance? ... Understood. (*He puts down the "telephone" and returns to Sheila*)

Sheila (*rising*) There's something seriously wrong, isn't there?

Bri Don't start worrying, dear. Look at it this way. You know when you get a starter-motor jammed? Seems serious at the time, but put it in second gear and rock the whole shoot back and forth, she's soon as right as rain.

Sheila We haven't got a car, I——

Bri What I want you to do—you know the kiddies' hospital?

Sheila nods

(*He leads her to the "door"*) You and your old man go along there—not forgetting to take the baby—you catch a bus from the end of the street. And—*nil desperandum*. (*He sees her to the "door", opens it and pushes her through. He is about to close it again when he remembers something and shouts after her*) Thirty-two.

Sheila (*returning*) What?

Bri The bus. Number thirty-two.

Sheila Oh.

Bri (*closing the "door", taking out his handkerchief and mopping his brow*) Streuth.

Sheila (*turning to the audience*) On the bus I said to Brian, "I've got a feeling we shan't bring her back." But, as you know, we did. Eventually.

Bri Every cloud has a jet-black lining.

Sheila I stayed in hospital with her for a few weeks, then left her there having tests and came home to look after Brian, who'd contracted impetigo.

Bri, in the shadows, lights a cigarette

It was painful not feeding so Brian knelt in front of me and tried to express it orally.

Brian You should have seen that—like the Kama Sutra.

Sheila In the end, a woman from the clinic drew it off with a sort of glass motor-horn.

Bri gets a coffee-table from the set, puts the cushion on it and stands behind it "

Few weeks later they called me to collect Joe from hospital, by which time we'd gathered she wasn't ever going to amount to much. But I was determined to know the best we could expect. And the worst. The

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