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opening extract from

The Caretaker

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The action of the play takes place in a house in west London.

ACT I A night in winter
ACT II A few seconds later
ACT III A fortnight later

A room. A window in the back wall, the bottom half covered by a sack. An iron bed along the left wall. Above it a small cupboard, paint buckets, boxes containing nuts, screws, etc. More boxes, vases, by the side of the bed. A door, up right. To the right of the window, a mound: a kitchen sink, a stepladder, a coal bucket, a lawn-mower, a shopping trolley, boxes, sideboard drawers. Under this mound an iron bed. In front of it a gas stove. On the gas stove a statue of Buddha. Down right, a fireplace. Around it a couple of suitcases, a rolled carpet, a blow-lamp, a wooden chair on its side, boxes, a number of ornaments, a clothes horse, a few short planks of wood, a small electric fire and a very old electric toaster. Below this a pile of old newspapers. Under ASTON*'s bed by the left wall, is an electrolux, which is not seen till used. A bucket hangs from the ceiling.*

Act One

MICK *is alone in the room, sitting on the bed. He wears a leather jacket.*

Silence.

He slowly looks about the room looking at each object in turn. He looks up at the ceiling, and stares at the bucket. Ceasing, he sits quite still, expressionless, looking out front.

Silence for thirty seconds.

A door bangs. Muffled voices are heard.

MICK *turns his head. He stands, moves silently to the door, goes out, and closes the door quietly.*

Silence.

Voices are heard again. They draw nearer, and stop. The door opens. ASTON *and* DAVIES *enter,* ASTON *first,* DAVIES *following, shambling, breathing heavily.*

ASTON *wears an old tweed overcoat, and under it a thin shabby dark-blue pinstripe suit, single-breasted, with a pullover and faded shirt and tie.* DAVIES *wears a worn brown overcoat, shapeless trousers, a waistcoat, vest, no shirt, and sandals.* ASTON *puts the key in his pocket and closes the door.* DAVIES *looks about the room.*

ASTON

Sit down.

DAVIES

Thanks. (*Looking about)* Uuh . . .

ASTON

Just a minute.

ASTON *looks around for a chair, sees one lying on its side by the rolled carpet at the fireplace, and starts to get it out.*

DAVIES

Sit down? Huh . . . I haven't had a good sit down . . . I haven't had a proper sit down . . . well, I couldn't tell you . . .

ASTON

(*placing the chair*) Here you are.

DAVIES

Ten minutes off for tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there . . . they had me working . . .

ASTON *sits on the bed, takes out a tobacco tin and papers, and begins to roll himself a cigarette.* DAVIES *watches him.*

All them Blacks had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that's what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt. When he come at me tonight I told him.

Pause.

ASTON

Take a seat.

DAVIES

Yes, but what I got to do first, you see, what I got to do, I got to loosen myself up, you see what I mean? I could have got done in down there.

DAVIES *exclaims loudly, punches downward with closed fist, turns his back to* ASTON *and stares at the wall.*

Pause. ASTON *lights a cigarette.*

ASTON

You want to roll yourself one of these?

DAVIES

(*turning*) What? No, no, I never smoke a cigarette.

Pause. He comes forward.

I'll tell you what, though. I'll have a bit of that tobacco there for my pipe, if you like.

ASTON

(*handing him the tin*) Yes. Go on. Take some out of that.

DAVIES

That's kind of you, mister. Just enough to fill my pipe, that's all.

He takes a pipe from his pocket and fills it.

I had a tin, only . . . only a while ago. But it was knocked off. It was knocked off on the Great West Road.

He holds out the tin.

Where shall I put it?

ASTON

I'll take it.

DAVIES

(*handing the tin*) When he come at me tonight I told him. Didn't I? You heard me tell him, didn't you?

ASTON

I saw him have a go at you.

DAVIES

Go at me? You wouldn't grumble. The filthy skate, an old man like me, I've had dinner with the best.

Pause.

ASTON

Yes, I saw him have a go at you.

DAVIES

All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of pigs. I might have been on the road a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up. That's why I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week, I took the lid off a saucepan, you know what was in it? A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That's when I left her and I haven't seen her since.

DAVIES *turns, shambles across the room, comes face to face with a statue of Buddha standing on the gas stove, looks at it and turns.*

I've eaten my dinner off the best of plates. But I'm not young any more. I remember the days I was as handy as any of them. They didn't take any liberties with me. But I haven't been so well lately. I've had a few attacks.

Pause.

(*coming closer*) Did you see what happened with that one?

ASTON

I only got the end of it.

DAVIES

Comes up to me, parks a bucket of rubbish at me, tells me to take it out the back. It's not my job to take out the bucket! They got a boy there for taking out the bucket. I wasn't engaged to take out buckets. My job's cleaning the floor, clearing up the tables, doing a bit of washing-up, nothing to do with taking out buckets!

ASTON

Uh.

He crosses down right, to get the electric toaster.

DAVIES

(*following*) Yes, well say I had! Even if I had! Even if I was supposed to take out the bucket, who was this git to come up and give me orders? We got the same standing. He's not my boss. He's nothing superior to me.

ASTON

What was he, a Greek?

DAVIES

Not him, he was a Scotch. He was a Scotchman.

ASTON *goes back to his bed with the toaster and starts to unscrew the plug.* DAVIES *follows him.*

You got an eye of him, did you?

ASTON

Yes.

DAVIES

I told him what to do with his bucket. Didn't I? You heard. Look here, I said, I'm an old man, I said, where I was brought up we had some idea how to talk to old people with the proper respect, we was brought up with the right ideas, if I had a few years off me I'd . . . I'd break you in half. That was after the guvnor give me the bullet. Making too much commotion, he says. Commotion, me! Look here, I said to him, I got my rights. I told him that. I might have been on the road but nobody's got more rights than I have. Let's have a bit of fair play, I said. Anyway, he give me the bullet.

He sits in the chair.

That's the sort of place.

Pause.

If you hadn't come out and stopped that Scotch git I'd be inside the hospital now. I'd have cracked my head on that pavement if he'd have landed. I'll get him. One night I'll get him. When I find myself around that direction.

ASTON *crosses to the plug box to get another plug.*

I wouldn't mind so much but I left all my belongings in that place, in the back room there. All of them, the lot there was, you see, in this bag. Every lousy blasted bit of all my bleeding belongings I left down there now. In the rush of it. I bet he's having a poke around in it now this very moment.

ASTON

I'll pop down sometime and pick them up for you.

ASTON *goes back to his bed and starts to fix the plug on the toaster.*

DAVIES

Anyway, I'm obliged to you, letting me . . . letting me have a bit of a rest, like . . . for a few minutes.

He looks about.

This your room?

ASTON

Yes.

DAVIES

You got a good bit of stuff here.

ASTON

Yes.

DAVIES

Must be worth a few bob, this . . . put it all together.

Pause.

There's enough of it.

ASTON

There's a good bit of it, all right.

DAVIES

You sleep here, do you?

ASTON

Yes.

DAVIES

What, in that?

ASTON

Yes.

DAVIES

Yes, well, you'd be well out of the draught there.

ASTON

You don't get much wind.

DAVIES

You'd be well out of it. It's different when you're kipping out.

ASTON

Would be.

DAVIES

Nothing but wind then.

Pause.

ASTON

Yes, when the wind gets up it . . .

Pause.

DAVIES

Yes . . .

ASTON

Mmnn . . .

Pause.

DAVIES

Gets very draughty.

ASTON

Ah.

DAVIES

I'm very sensitive to it.

ASTON

Are you?

DAVIES

Always have been.

Pause.

You got any more rooms then, have you?

ASTON

Where?

DAVIES

I mean, along the landing here . . . up the landing there.

ASTON

They're out of commission.

DAVIES

Get away.

ASTON

They need a lot of doing to.

Slight pause.

DAVIES

What about downstairs?

ASTON

That's closed up. Needs seeing to . . . The floors . . .

Pause.

DAVIES

I was lucky you come into that caff. I might have been done by that Scotch git. I been left for dead more than once.

Pause.

I noticed that there was someone was living in the house next door.

ASTON

What?

DAVIES

(*gesturing*) I noticed . . .

ASTON

Yes. There's people living all along the road.

DAVIES

Yes, I noticed the curtains pulled down there next door as we came along.

ASTON

They're neighbours.

Pause.

DAVIES

This your house then, is it?

Pause.

ASTON

I'm in charge.

DAVIES

You the landlord, are you?

He puts a pipe in his mouth and puffs without lighting it.

Yes. I noticed them heavy curtains pulled across next door as we came along. I noticed them heavy big curtains right across the window down there. I thought there must be someone living there.

ASTON

Family of Indians live there.

DAVIES

Blacks?

ASTON

I don't see much of them.

DAVIES

Blacks, eh?

DAVIES *stands and moves about.*

Well you've got some knick-knacks here all right, I'll say that. I don't like a bare room.

ASTON *joins* DAVIES *upstage centre.*

I'll tell you what, mate, you haven't got a spare pair of shoes?