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Act One

Scene One

A book-lined tutorial room on the first floor of a Victorian-built university in the north of England.

There is a large bay window with a desk placed in front of it. There is also another desk or table covered with various books and papers. On one wall there hangs a good and striking print of a nude, religious scene.

Frank, *who is in his early fifties, is standing holding an empty mug whilst pondering his shelves.*

Frank Now where in the name of God . . . Eliot, Eliot . . .? (*He goes to one of the bookshelves and starts to remove books. He is puzzled.*) Eliot? Emerson? E, E, E, Euripides . . . (*With sudden enlightenment.*) Ah! Eureka, D, D, D, D, Dickens! (*He replaces books and moves to another section of shelving jubilantly removing a couple of Dickensian tomes.*) One can always rely on Dickens. (*He lifts out the books to reveal the bottle of scotch which has no more than about three or four fingers left in it; this he pours into his mug which he then raises in salute.*) To my dear Charlie Dickens, genius and keeper of the scotch. (*He raises the mug to drink.*)

The phone rings, startling him slightly. Hurriedly he replaces the now empty bottle and the books before taking a gulp of the scotch and answering the phone.

Julia, Juliaa! . . . Well yes, obviously I'm still here . . . Because I've got this Open University woman coming this evening, haven't I? . . . Tch . . . Darling, I did tell you, of course I did . . . Well, then you shouldn't have prepared supper, should you? Because I said, darling, I distinctly recall saying that I would be late . . . Yes, yes, I probably *shall* go to the pub afterwards – I shall no doubt *need* to go to the pub afterwards if only to mercifully wash away some silly woman's attempts to get into the mind of Henry James or Thomas Hardy or whoever the hell it is we're supposed to study on this course . . . Christ, why did I take this on?

. . . Yes, darling, yes, I suppose I did take it on to pay for the drink . . . Oh, for God's sake, just leave it in the oven . . . Julia, if you're trying to induce feelings of guilt at the prospect of a charred dinner you'd have been better cooking something other than lamb and ratatouille . . . Because, my perfect poppet, I like my lamb cooked to the point of abuse and even a culinary ignoramus such as I knows that ratatouille is a dish that is impossible to overcook . . . Darling, you could incinerate ratatouille, radiate it, cook it in the ovens of hell, napalm the bloody stuff and still it wouldn't be overcooked! . . . Determined to go to the pub? When did I need determination to get *me* into a pub . . . ?

There is a knock at the door.

Look, I'll have to go . . . there's someone at the door . . . Yes, yes . . . I . . . all right, I promise . . . just a couple of pints . . . (*Sotto voce.*) four . . .!

Further, more insistent knocking at the door.

(*Calling in the direction of the door.*) Come in! (*He continues into the phone.*) Yes, I prom— all right . . . yes, yes!

More knocking from the door.

Come in! (*Into the phone.*) Absolutely, darling, absolutely . . . yes . . . bye-bye . . . (*He replaces the receiver.*) Come in! COME IN!

The door swings open, revealing **Rita**.

Rita I *am* comin' in, aren't I? It's that stupid bleeding handle on the door. Y' wanna get it fixed!

Frank Erm, yes. I erm . . . I er . . . I suppose I always meant to.

Rita Well, that's no good, always meaning to, is it? Y' should get on with it. Because one of these days you'll be shouting 'come in' and it'll go on for ever and ever because the poor bastard on the other side of the door won't be able to come in. An' you won't be able to get out!

Frank Now, you are?

Rita What am I?

Frank Pardon?

Rita What?

Frank (*prompting her now*) You are?

Rita I'm a what?

Frank *busies himself with the papers on his desk.* **Rita** *is looking at the nude print. She becomes aware that* **Frank** *is watching her.*

Rita It's nice, isn't it? The picture, it's nice.

Frank Erm, yes, yes . . . I suppose it is, erm 'nice'.

Rita It's very erotic.

Frank Erm, well, I . . . you know, I don't think I've actually really looked at it for the past ten years or so (*He switches the picture light on.*) but . . . yes, I suppose it is.

Rita There's no suppose about it – look at those tits.

Frank *again busies himself with the papers on his desk.*

Rita Is it supposed to be erotic? (*She's being quite genuine here – truly believing that those she regards as 'educated people' can and do converse in such a way.*) Like, when he painted it, do y' think he like, like meant it to be a turn on, y' know, sexually stimulating?

Frank (*fascinated as much as he is fazed by her*) Erm . . . probably . . .

Rita I think he did, y' know. You don't paint pictures like that just so that people can admire the brush strokes, do y'?

Frank (*amused*) No. No, you're probably right.

Rita Because this was like the porn of its day, wasn't it? Y' know, before they had the videos; so this . . . this is the sort of thing they would have perved over in those days, isn't it? But back then they had to pretend there was nothing erotic

about it at all so that's why they made it religious, didn't they? Do you think it's erotic?

Frank I think it's very beautiful.

Rita I didn't ask you if it was beautiful.

Frank No. I know. But the term 'beautiful' covers the many feelings I have about the picture; including the feeling that yes, it is really rather erotic. (*He switches off the picture light.*)

Rita D' y' get a lot like me?

Frank I beg your pardon?

Rita Do you get a lot of students like me?

Frank Not exactly, no.

Rita I was dead surprised when they accepted me. But I don't suppose they would have done if it had been a proper university, would they? It's different though, isn't it, the Open University? I suppose anyone can get in, can't they? D' y' think they must be desperate?

Frank I . . . really couldn't say. I've not had much more experience of it than you have. In fact this is the first Open University work I've done.

Rita Oh, great! I end up with a beginner!

Frank No no, you misunderstand me; I work here at the university – I was just making the point that I haven't done this kind of extracurricular Open University work before.

Rita It was a joke!

Frank I am a bona fide lecturer but with . . .

Rita A joke!

A beat.

Frank Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, of course, 'a beginner', yes . . . (*He laughs now.*)

Rita Quick? He's like lightnin'! So what y' doin' this for? D' y' need the money?

Frank Actually I do as a matter of fact.

Rita Oh.

Frank Erm . . . would you like to sit down?

Rita No. Can I smoke?

Frank Tobacco?

Rita What?

Frank (*almost bashful*) A joke.

Rita (*not quite sure for a second*) Ogh. You mean was I gonna whip out the wacky-backy? I hate drugs. They just cover everything up. I hate them.

She produces a packet of cigarettes and offers one to **Frank**.

Frank (*hands aloft as if trying to physically ward off the temptation*) Ah ah . . . I'd love one.

Rita Well, have one!

Frank No, no really, I've given up.

Rita Everyone has. They're all afraid of gettin' cancer. But they're all cowards. You've got to challenge death an' disease. I read this great poem about fightin' death . . .

Frank Ah, Dylan Thomas.

Rita No, Roger McGough! It was all about this old man who runs away from hospital and goes out on the ale. He gets pissed and stands in the street shoutin' an' challengin' death to come out an' fight. It's brilliant.

Frank Mm. I don't think I'm familiar with the actual piece you mean.

Rita I'll bring y' the book; it's fantastic.

Frank Good, good. That's very kind of you.

Rita Mind you, you probably won't think it's any good at all.

Frank Why not?

Rita Because it's the sort of poetry you can understand.

Frank (*not quite sure*) Ah. Yes. I see. So you think it's important then, that poetry should be understood?

Rita (*shrugging*) Yeh. That's part of the reason I came here. Because there's loads that I don't understand.

Frank You mean poetry? A lot of poetry you don't understand?

Rita (*beginning to move around and scan the books on the shelves*) Yeh. All kinds of things.

Frank (*watching her for a second or two*) Look, can I offer you a drink?

Rita What of?

Frank Scotch?

Rita You should be careful with that stuff; it kills your brain cells, y' know.

Frank But you'll have one?

Rita (*going to the bookcase*) Yeh. All right. It'll probably have a job even finding my brain . . .

Frank (*scratching his head as he ponders the bookshelves, thinking out loud*) Now now now . . . thinks, thinks . . . F, F, F, Faulkner, Fielding . . . ah, Forster . . . Forster!

As he pulls away a couple of volumes of Forster, leaving them on the table desk, he reaches in and takes out another bottle of scotch which he then takes across to the small table.

Rita *is silently gobsmacked for a second.*

Rita My aunty's got a drinks cabinet like that!

Frank Water?

Rita No, I'll have the whisky. (*She picks up one of the Forster volumes.*) What's this like?

Frank (*bringing the drinks across and looking at the book*) *Howards End*?

Rita Yeh. Sounds filthy, doesn't it? E.M. Foster.

Frank Forster!

Rita Forced her to do what?

Frank (*watching her for a second before breaking into real and appreciative laughter*) Forster, E.M. Forster; and it's doubtful that he would have forced 'her' to do anything. Forster was a committed homosexual.

Rita Was he? Oh? So is that what his book's about, being gay?

Frank No, not at all. Actually it's about – but look, here . . . (*He hands her the book.*) Borrow it. Read it for yourself.

Rita OK. Thanks. I'll look after it. If I pack the course in I'll post it back to y'.

Frank Pack it in? You've not even started yet. Why should you pack it in?

Rita I don't know. I just might. Might decide it was a stupid idea.

Frank If you're already contemplating the possibility of 'packing it in', then why did you enrol in the first place?

Rita Because I want to know.

Frank *What*? What do you want to know?

Rita Everything.

Frank Everything? That's rather a lot, isn't it? Where were you thinking of beginning?

Rita Well . . . I'm a student now, aren't I? I'll have exams to do, won't I?

Frank Well, yes, eventually.

Rita So I'll have to learn about it all, won't I? It's like, y' sit there, don't y' – watchin' something like the ballet or the opera on the telly – an' y' just, y' know, call it rubbish because that's what it looks like, because y' don't understand – y' don't know how to see it – so y' just switch over or switch off an' say, 'that's fuckin' rubbish'.

Frank You do?

Rita Yeh. But I don't want to. Because I want to be able to see it. An' understand. Do you mind me swearin'?

Frank No, not at all.

Rita Do you swear?

Frank When I need to, yes, of course. I've never subscribed to the idea that there's such a thing as bad language – only bad *use* of language.

Rita See, the properly educated, they know it's only words, don't they? It's only the masses who don't understand. But that's because they're ignorant; it's not their fault, I know that, but sometimes they drive me mental. I do it to shock them sometimes; y' know if I'm in the hairdresser's – that's where I work – I'll say somethin' like 'I'm as fucked as a fanny on a Friday night!' and some of the customers, they'll have a right gob on them just 'cos I come out with something like that.

Frank Yes, but in the circumstances that's hardly . . .

Rita But it doesn't cause any kind of fuss with educated people though, does it? Because they know it's only words and they don't worry. But these stuck-up ones I meet, they think they're royalty just because they don't swear. An' anyway, I wouldn't mind but it's the aristocracy who swear more than anyone, isn't it, they're effing and blinding all day long; with them it's all, 'I say, the grouse is particularly fucking lovely today although I'm afraid the spuds are a bit bollocks, don't you think?' (*She sighs.*) But y' can't tell them