

THE MOST TERRIFYING NOVEL EVER WRITTEN.

THE SCARIEST MOVIE EVER MADE.

THE EXORCIST

– 50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION –



WILLIAM PETER BLATTY





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Born in New York City in 1928, **William Peter Blatty** went to Georgetown University and was a comic novelist before he embarked on a four decade career as a Hollywood writer, penning the screenplays for *A Shot in the Dark*, *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* and *The Ninth Configuration* (which he also directed), among many other films. But it is for his 1971 novel *The Exorcist* that he is best known, and which he adapted for the 1973 film. Directed by William Friedkin, *The Exorcist* won the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Blatty's subsequent novels included *The Ninth Configuration*, *Legion* (a sequel to *The Exorcist*) and *Dimiter*. He died in 2017.

Also by William Peter Blatty

Fiction

Which Way to Mecca, Jack?
John Goldfarb, Please Come Home!
I, Billy Shakespeare!
Twinkle, Twinkle, “Killer” Kane
The Ninth Configuration
Legion
Demons Five, Exorcists Nothing
Elsewhere
Dimiter
Crazy

Non-fiction

I'll Tell Them I Remember You
William Peter Blatty on 'The Exorcist': From Novel to Film

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THE DEFINITIVE EDITION



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For Julie

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A brief note by William Peter Blatty
about this final and definitive version of
THE EXORCIST

In January 1968, I rented a cabin in Lake Tahoe to start writing a novel about demonic possession that I'd been thinking about for more than twenty years.

I'd been driven to it, actually. I was a writer of comic novels and farcical screenplays, with almost all of my income derived from films; but because the season for 'funny' had abruptly turned dry and no studio would hire me for anything non-comedic, I had reached James Thurber's stage of desperation when comedy writers take to 'calling their home from their office, or their office from their home, asking for themselves, and then hanging up in hard-breathing relief upon being told they "weren't in".' My breaking point came, I suppose, when at the Van Nuys, California unemployment office, I spotted my movie agent in a line three down from mine.

And so to the cabin in Tahoe, where I was destined to resemble the caretaker in Stephen King's terrifying novel *The Shining*, typing my version of 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy' hour after hour, day after day, for over six weeks as I kept changing the date in my opening paragraph from 'April 1' to April something else, because each time I would read the page aloud, the rhythm of the words seemed to change. This maddening cycle of emptiness and insecurity continued until I gave up the cabin and moved my efforts back 'home', a clapboard guest house in the hills of Encino owned by a former Hungarian opera star. Once there I almost immediately overcame this creative block by realizing I had been starting in the wrong place – Georgetown – as opposed to northern Iraq. Almost a year later I completed a first draft.

But barely a week or two before completion, and out of almost desperate financial need, I shouted 'Yes!' to

an offer from Paul Newman's film company to adapt Calder Willingham's *Providence Island* for the screen. At the request of my publisher, I did make two quick changes to that draft of the novel – cleaning up Chris MacNeil's 'potty mouth' and making the ending 'less obvious' – before I leaped immediately to work on the screenplay.

For most of these past forty years I have rued not having done a further draft of the novel. But now, like an unexpected answer to an ancient prayer, this fortieth anniversary edition has given me not only the opportunity to do that second draft, but to do it at a time in my life – I am 83 – when it might not be totally unreasonable to hope that my abilities, such as they are, have at least somewhat improved.

And so what have I changed? With respect to the plot, the novel's structure and the characters, the answer is nothing. Well, *almost* nothing. There *is* a new character who functions within a totally new six-page scene that I imagine, by the way, many readers will find the most hauntingly chilling in the book; and there are touches of new dialogue as well as changes to make the ending more obvious. But most of the change in this draft amounts to a very careful polishing of the rhythms of the dialogue and prose throughout. And for this blessed chance to have done so, I happily smile as I think, '*Deo gratias!*'

William Peter Blatty, Maryland, August 2011

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And as [Jesus] stepped ashore, there met him a man from the city who was possessed by demons . . . Many times they had laid hold of him and he was bound with chains . . . but he would break the bonds asunder . . . And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" And he answered, "Legion, for we are many."

—MARK 5:9

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JAMES TORELLO: Jackson was hung up on that meat hook. He was so heavy he bent it. He was on that thing three days before he croaked.

FRANK BUCCIERI (giggling): Jackie, you shoulda seen the guy. Like an elephant, he was, and when Jimmy hit him with that electric prod . . .

TORELLO (excitedly): He was floppin' around on that hook, Jackie. We tossed water on him to give the prod a better charge, and he's screamin' . . .

—EXCERPT FROM FBI WIRETAP OF COSA NOSTRA
TELEPHONE CONVERSATION RELATING TO MURDER
OF WILLIAM JACKSON

There's no other explanation for some of the things the Communists did. Like the priest who had eight nails driven into his skull . . . And there were the seven little boys and their teacher. They were praying the Our Father when soldiers came upon them. One soldier whipped out his bayonet and sliced off the teacher's tongue. The other took chopsticks and drove them into the ears of the seven little boys. How do you treat cases like that?

—DR. TOM DOOLEY

DACHAU
AUSCHWITZ
BUCHENWALD

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Prologue

Northern Iraq . . .

The blaze of sun wrung pops of sweat from the old man's brow, yet he cupped his hands around the glass of hot sweet tea as if to warm them. He could not shake the premonition. It clung to his back like chill wet leaves.

The dig was over. The tell had been sifted, stratum by stratum, its entrails examined, tagged and shipped: the beads and pendants; glyptics; phalli; ground-stone mortars stained with ocher; burnished pots. Nothing exceptional. An Assyrian ivory toilet box. And man. The bones of man. The brittle remnants of cosmic torment that once made him wonder if matter was Lucifer upward-groping back to his God. And yet now he knew better. The fragrance of licorice plant and tamarisk tugged his gaze to popped hills; to reeded plains; to the ragged, rock-strewn bolt of road that flung itself headlong into dread. Northwest was Mosul; east, Erbil; south was Baghdad and Kirkuk and the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. He shifted his legs underneath the table in front of the lonely roadside chaykhana and stared at the grass stains on his boots and khaki pants. He sipped at his tea. The dig was over. What was beginning? He dusted the thought like a clay-fresh find but he could not tag it.

Someone wheezed from within the chaykhana: the withered

proprietor shuffling toward him, kicking up dust in Russian-made shoes that he wore like slippers, groaning backs pressed under his heels. The dark of his shadow slipped over the table.

“Kaman chay, chawaga?”

The man in khaki shook his head, staring down at the laceless, crusted shoes caked thick with debris of the pain of living. The stuff of the cosmos, he softly reflected: matter; yet somehow finally spirit. Spirit and the shoes were to him but aspects of a stuff more fundamental, a stuff that was primal and totally other.

The shadow shifted. The Kurd stood waiting like an ancient debt. The old man in khaki looked up into eyes that were damply bleached as if the membrane of an eggshell had been pasted over the irises. Glaucoma. Once he could not have loved this man. He slipped out his wallet and probed for a coin among its tattered, crumpled tenants: a few dinars; an Iraqi driver's license; a faded plastic Catholic calendar card that was twelve years out of date. It bore an inscription on the reverse: WHAT WE GIVE TO THE POOR IS WHAT WE TAKE WITH US WHEN WE DIE. He paid for his tea and left a tip of fifty fils on a splintered table the color of sadness.

He walked to his jeep. The rippling click of key sliding into ignition was crisp in the silence. For a moment he paused and stared off broodingly. In the distance, shimmering in heat haze that made it look afloat like an island in the sky, loomed the flat-topped, towering mound city of Erbil, its fractured rooftops poised in the clouds like a rubbed, mud-stained benediction.

The leaves clutched tighter at the flesh of his back.

Something was waiting.

“Allah ma'ak, chawaga.”

Rotted teeth. The Kurd was grinning, waving farewell. The man in khaki groped for a warmth in the pit of his being and came up with a wave and a mustered smile. It dimmed as he

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looked away. He started the engine, turned in a narrow, eccentric U and headed toward Mosul. The Kurd stood watching, puzzled by a heart-dropping sense of loss as the jeep gathered speed. What was it that was gone? What was it he had felt in the stranger's presence? Something like safety, he remembered; a sense of protection and deep well-being. Now it dwindled in the distance with the fast-moving jeep. He felt strangely alone.

By ten after six the painstaking inventory was finished. The Mosul curator of antiquities, an Arab with sagging cheeks, was carefully penning a final entry into the ledger on his desk. For a moment he paused, looking up at his friend as he dipped his pen-point into an inkpot. The man in khaki seemed lost in thought. He was standing by a table, hands in his pockets, staring down at some dry, tagged whisper of the past. Curious, unmoving, for moments the curator watched him, then returned to the entry, writing in a firm, very small neat script until at last he sighed, setting down the pen as he noted the time. The train to Baghdad left at eight. He blotted the page and offered tea.

His eyes still fixed upon something on the table, the man in khaki shook his head. The Arab watched him, vaguely troubled. What was in the air? There was something in the air. He stood up and moved closer; then felt a vague prickling at the back of his neck as his friend at last moved, reaching down for an amulet and cradling it pensively in his hand. It was a green stone head of the demon Pazuzu, personification of the southwest wind. Its dominion was sickness and disease. The head was pierced. The amulet's owner had worn it as a shield.

"Evil against evil," breathed the curator, languidly fanning himself with a French scientific periodical, an olive-oil thumb-print smudged on its cover.

His friend did not move; he did not comment. The curator tilted his head to the side. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

No answer.

“Father Merrin?”

The man in khaki still appeared not to hear, absorbed in the amulet, the last of his finds. After a moment he set it down, then lifted a questioning look to the Arab. Had he said something?

“No, Father. Nothing.”

They murmured farewells.

At the door, the curator took the old man’s hand with an extra firmness.

“My heart has a wish: that you would not go.”

His friend answered softly in terms of tea; of time; of something to be done.

“No, no, no! I meant home!”

The man in khaki fixed his gaze on a speck of boiled chickpea nestled in a corner of the Arab’s mouth; yet his eyes were distant. “Home,” he repeated.

The word had the sound of an ending.

“The States,” the Arab curator added, instantly wondering why he had.

The man in khaki looked into the dark of the other’s concern. He had never found it difficult to love this man. “Good-bye,” he said quietly; then quickly turned and stepped out into the gathering gloom of the streets and a journey home whose length seemed somehow undetermined.

“I will see you in a year!” the curator called after him from the doorway. But the man in khaki never looked back. The Arab watched his dwindling form as he crossed a narrow street at an angle, almost colliding with a swiftly moving droshky. Its cab bore a corpulent old Arab woman, her face a shadow behind the black lace veil draped loosely over her like a shroud. He guessed she was rushing to some appointment. He soon lost sight of his hurrying friend.

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The man in khaki walked, compelled. Shrugging loose of the city, he breached the outskirts, crossing the Tigris with hurrying steps, but nearing the ruins, he slowed his pace, for with every step the inchoate presentiment took firmer, more terrible form.

Yet he had to know. He would have to prepare.

A wooden plank that bridged the Khosr, a muddy stream, creaked under his weight. And then he was there, standing on the mound where once gleamed fifteen-gated Nineveh, feared nest of Assyrian hordes. Now the city lay sprawled in the bloody dust of its predestination. And yet he was here, the air was still thick with him, that Other who ravaged his dreams.

The man in khaki prowled the ruins. The Temple of Nabu. The Temple of Ishtar. He sifted vibrations. At the palace of Ashurbanipal he stopped and looked up at a limestone statue hulking *in situ*. Ragged wings and taloned feet. A bulbous, jutting, stubby penis and a mouth stretched taut in feral grin. The demon Pazuzu.

Abruptly the man in khaki sagged.

He bowed his head.

He knew.

It was coming.

He stared at the dust and the quickening shadows. The orb of the sun was beginning to slip beneath the rim of the world and he could hear the dim yappings of savage dog packs prowling the fringes of the city. He rolled his shirtsleeves down and buttoned them as a shivering breeze sprang up. Its source was southwest.

He hastened toward Mosul and his train, his heart encased in the icy conviction that soon he would be hunted by an ancient enemy whose face he had never seen.

But he knew his name.

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The Beginning

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Chapter One

Like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that registers dimly on blind men's eyes, the beginning of the horror passed almost unnoticed; in the shriek of what followed, in fact, was forgotten and perhaps not connected to the horror at all. It was difficult to judge.

The house was a rental. Brooding. Tight. A brick colonial gripped by ivy in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Across the street was a fringe of campus belonging to Georgetown University; to the rear, a sheer embankment plummeting steep to busy M Street and, just beyond it, the River Potomac. Early on the morning of April 1, the house was quiet. Chris MacNeil was propped in bed, going over her lines for the next day's filming; Regan, her daughter, was sleeping down the hall; and asleep downstairs in a room off the pantry were the middle-aged housekeepers, Willie and Karl. At approximately 12:25 A.M., Chris looked up from her script with a frown of puzzlement. She heard rapping sounds. They were odd. Muffled. Profound. Rhythmically clustered. Alien code tapped out by a dead man.

Funny.

For a moment she listened, then dismissed it; but as the rappings persisted she could not concentrate. She slapped down the script on the bed. **Copyrighted Material**

Jesus, that bugs me!

She got up to investigate.

She went out to the hallway and looked around. The rappings seemed to be coming from Regan's bedroom.

What is she doing?

She padded down the hall and the rappings grew suddenly louder, much faster, and as she pushed on the door and stepped into the room, they abruptly ceased.

What the freak's going on?

Her pretty eleven-year-old was asleep, cuddled tight to a large stuffed round-eyed panda. Pookey. Faded from years of smothering; years of smacking, warm, wet kisses.

Chris moved softly to her bedside, leaned over and whispered. "Rags? You awake?"

Regular breathing. Heavy. Deep.

Chris shifted her glance around the room. Dim light from the hall fell pale and splintery on Regan's paintings and sculptures; on more stuffed animals.

Okay, Rags. Your old mother's ass is draggin'. Come on, say it! Say "April Fool!"

And yet Chris knew well that such games weren't like her. The child had a shy and diffident nature. Then who was the trickster? A somnolent mind imposing order on the rattlings of heating or plumbing pipes? Once, in the mountains of Bhutan, she had stared for hours at a Buddhist monk who was squatting on the ground in meditation. Finally, she thought she had seen him levitate, though when recounting the story to someone, she invariably added "Maybe." And maybe now her mind, she thought, that untiring raconteur of illusion, had embellished the rappings.

Bullshit! I heard it!

Abruptly, she flicked a quick glance to the ceiling.

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There! Faint scratchings.

Rats in the attic, for pete's sake! Rats!

She sighed. *That's it. Big tails. Thump, thump!* She felt oddly relieved. And then noticed the cold. The room. It was icy.

Chris padded to the window and checked it. Closed. Then she felt the radiator. Hot.

Oh, really?

Puzzled, she moved to the bedside and touched her hand to Regan's cheek. It was smooth as thought and lightly perspiring.

I must be sick!

Chris looked at her daughter, at the turned-up nose and freckled face, and on a quick, warm impulse leaned over the bed and kissed her cheek. "I sure do love you," she whispered. After that she returned to her room and her bed and her script.

For a while, Chris studied. The film was a musical comedy remake of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. A subplot had been added that dealt with campus insurrections. Chris was starring. She played a psychology teacher who sided with the rebels. And she hated it. *This scene is the pits!* she thought. *It's dumb!* Her mind, though untutored, never took slogans for the truth, and like a curious bluejay she would peck relentlessly through verbiage to find the glistening, hidden fact. And so the rebel cause didn't make any sense to her. *But how come?* she now wondered. *Generation gap? That's a crock; I'm thirty-two. It's just stupid, that's all, it's a . . . !*

Cool it. Only one more week.

They'd completed the interiors in Hollywood and all that remained to be filmed were a few exterior scenes on the campus of Georgetown University, starting tomorrow.

Heavy lids. She was getting drowsy. She turned to a page that was curiously ragged. Her British director, Burke Dennings. When especially tense, he would tear, with quivering, fluttering

hands, a narrow strip from the edge of the handiest page of the script and then slowly chew it, inch by inch, until it was all in a wet ball in his mouth.

Crazy Burke, Chris thought.

She covered a yawn, then fondly glanced at the side of her script. The pages looked gnawed. She remembered the rats. *The little bastards sure got rhythm*, she thought. She made a mental note to have Karl set traps for them in the morning.

Fingers relaxing. Script slipping loose. She let it drop. *Dumb*, she thought. *It's dumb*. A fumbling hand groping out to the light switch. *There*. She sighed, and for a time she was motionless, almost asleep; and then she kicked off her covers with a lazy leg.

Too hot! Too freaking hot! She thought again about the puzzling coldness of Regan's room and into her mind flashed a recollection of working in a film with Edward G. Robinson, the legendary gangster movie star of the 1940s, and wondering why in every scene they did together she was always close to shivering from the cold until she realized that the wily old veteran had been managing to stand in her key light. A faint smile of bemusement now, and as a mist of dew clung gently to the windowpanes. Chris slept. And dreamed about death in the staggering particular, death as if death were still never yet heard of while something was ringing, she gasping, dissolving, slipping off into void while thinking over and over, I am not going to be, I will die, I won't be, and forever and ever, oh, Papa, don't let them, oh, don't let them do it, don't let me be nothing forever and melting, unraveling, ringing, the ringing—

The phone!

She leaped up with her heart pounding, hand to the phone and no weight in her stomach; a core with no weight and her telephone ringing.

She answered. The assistant director.

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“In makeup at six, honey.”

“Right.”

“How ya feelin’?”

“Like I just went to bed.”

The AD chuckled. “I’ll see you.”

“Yeah, right.”

Chris hung up the phone and for moments sat motionless, thinking of the dream. A dream? More like thought in the half life of waking: That terrible clarity. Gleam of the skull. Nonbeing. Irreversible. She could not imagine it.

God, it can't be!

Dejected, she bowed her head.

But it is.

She padded to the bathroom, put on a robe, then quickly pattered down old pine steps to the kitchen, down to life in sputtering bacon.

“Ah, good morning, Mrs. MacNeill!”

Gray, drooping Willie, squeezing oranges, blue sacs beneath her eyes. A trace of accent. Swiss. Like Karl's. She wiped her hands on a paper towel and started moving toward the stove.

“I’ll get it, Willie.” Chris, ever sensitive, had seen the housekeeper’s weary look, and as Willie now grunted and turned back to the sink, the actress poured coffee, then sat down in the breakfast nook, where, looking down at her plate, she smiled fondly at a blush-red rose against its whiteness. *Regan. That angel.* Many a morning, when Chris was working, Regan would quietly slip out of bed, come down to the kitchen to place a flower on her mother’s empty plate and then grope her way crusty-eyed back to her sleep. On this particular morning, Chris ruefully shook her head as she recalled that she had contemplated naming her Goneril. *Sure. Right on. Get ready for the worst.* Chris faintly smiled at the memory. She sipped at her coffee and as her

gaze caught the rose again, her expression turned briefly sad, her green eyes grieving in a waiflike face. She'd recalled another flower. A son. Jamie. He had died long ago at the age of three, when Chris was very young and an unknown chorus girl on Broadway. She had sworn she would not give herself ever again as she had to Jamie; as she had to his father, Howard MacNeil; and as her dream of death misted upward in the vapors from her hot, black coffee, she lifted her glance from the rose and her thoughts as Willie brought juice and set it down before her.

Chris remembered the rats.

"Where's Karl?"

"I am here, Madam!"

He'd come catting in lithely through a door off the pantry. Commanding and yet deferential, he had a fragment of Kleenex pressed to his chin where he'd nicked himself shaving. "Yes?" Thickly muscled and tall, he breathed by the table with glittering eyes, a hawk nose and bald head.

"Hey, Karl, we've got rats in the attic. Better get us some traps."

"There are rats?"

"I just said that."

"But the attic is clean."

"Well, okay, we've got *tidy* rats!"

"No rats."

"Karl, I heard them last night."

"Maybe plumbing," Karl probed; "maybe boards."

"Maybe *rats!* Will you buy the damn traps and quit arguing?"

Bustling away, Karl, said, "Yes! I go now!"

"No not *now*, Karl! The stores are all closed!"

"They are closed!" chided Willie, calling out to him.

But he was gone.

Chris and Willie traded glances, and then, shaking her head,

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Willie returned to her tending of the bacon. Chris sipped at her coffee. *Strange. Strange man*, she thought. Like Willie, hard-working; very loyal, very discreet. And yet something about him made her vaguely uneasy. What was it? That subtle air of arrogance? No. Something else. But she couldn't pin it down. The housekeepers had been with her for almost six years, and yet Karl was a mask—a talking, breathing, untranslated hieroglyph running her errands on stilted legs. Behind the mask, though, something moved; she could hear his mechanism ticking like a conscience. The front door creaked open, then shut. “They are closed,” muttered Willie.

Chris nibbled at bacon, then returned to her room, where she dressed in her costume sweater and skirt. She glanced in a mirror and solemnly stared at her short red hair, which looked perpetually tousled; at the burst of freckles on the small, scrubbed face; and then crossing her eyes and grinning idiotically, she said, *Oh, hi, little wonderful girl next door! Can I speak to your husband? Your lover? Your pimp? Oh, your pimp's in the poorhouse? Tough!* She stuck out her tongue at herself. Then sagged. *Ah, Christ, what a life!* She picked up her wig box, slouched downstairs and walked out to the piquant, tree-lined street.

For a moment she paused outside the house, breathing in the fresh promise of morning air, the muted everyday sounds of waking life. She turned a wistful look to her right, where, beside the house, a precipitous plunge of old stone steps fell away to M Street far below, while a little beyond were the antique brick rococo turrets and Mediterranean tiled roof of the upper entry to the old Car Barn. *Fun. Fun neighborhood*, she thought. *Dammit, why don't I stay? Buy the house? Start to live?* A deep, booming bell began to toll, the tower clock on the Georgetown University campus. The melancholy resonance shivered on the surface of the mud-brown river and seeped into the actress's tired heart.

She walked toward her work, toward ghastly charade and the straw-stuffed, antic imitation of dust.

As she entered the main front gates of the campus, her depression diminished; then lessened even more as she looked at the row of trailer dressing rooms aligned along the driveway close to the southern perimeter wall; and by 8 A.M. and the day's first shot, she was almost herself: she started an argument over the script.

"Hey, Burke? Take a look at this damned thing, will ya?"

"Oh, you *do* have a script, I see! How nice!" Director Burke Dennings, taut and elfin and with a twitching left eye that gleamed with mischief, surgically shaved a narrow strip from a page of her script with quivering fingers, cackling, "I believe I'll have a bit of munch."

They were standing on the esplanade that fronted the university's main administration building and were knotted in the center of extras, actors and the film's main crew, while here and there a few spectators dotted the lawn, mostly Jesuit faculty. The cameraman, bored, picked up *Daily Variety* as Dennings put the paper in his mouth and giggled, his breath reeking faintly of the morning's first gin.

"Oh, yes, I'm *terribly* glad you've been given a script!"

A sly, frail man in his fifties, he spoke with a charmingly broad British accent so clipped and precise that it lofted even the crudest obscenities to elegance, and when he drank, he seemed always on the verge of a guffaw; seemed constantly struggling to retain his composure.

"Now then, tell me, my baby. What is it? What's wrong?"

The scene in question called for the dean of the mythical college in the script to address a gathering of students in an effort to squelch a threatened sit-in. Chris would then run up the steps to the esplanade, tear the Gull from away from the dean and then

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point to the main administration building and shout, “Let’s tear it down!”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Chris told him.

“Well, it’s perfectly plain,” Dennings lied.

“Oh, it is? Well, then explain it to me, Burkey-Wurky. Why in freak should they tear down the building? What for? What’s your concept?”

“Are you sending me up?”

“No, I’m asking ‘what for?’ ”

“Because it’s *there*, love!”

“In the script?”

“No, on the *grounds!*”

“Oh, come on, Burke, it just isn’t her. It’s not her character at all. She wouldn’t do that.”

“She would.”

“No, she wouldn’t.”

“Shall we summon the writer? I believe he’s in Paris!”

“Hiding?”

“Fucking!”

He’d clipped the word off with impeccable diction, his fox eyes glinting in a face like dough as the word rose crisp to Gothic spires. Chris fell to his shoulders, weak and laughing. “Oh, Burke, you’re impossible, dammit!”

“Yes.” He said it like Caesar modestly confirming reports of his triple rejection of the crown. “Now then, shall we get on with it?”

Chris didn’t hear him. Checking to see if he’d heard the obscenity, she’d darted a furtive, embarrassed glance to a Jesuit in his forties standing amid the cordon of spectators. He had a dark, rugged face. Like a boxer’s. Chipped. Something sad about the eyes, something grieving, and yet warm and reassuring as they fastened on hers and as, smiling, he nodded his head. He’d heard it. He glanced at his watch and moved away.

“I say, shall we get on with it?”

Chris turned, disconnected. “Yeah, sure, Burke. Let’s do it.”

“Thank heaven.”

“No, wait!”

“Oh, good Christ!”

She complained about the tag of the scene. She felt that the high point was reached with her line as opposed to her running through the door of the building immediately afterward.

“It adds nothing,” said Chris. “It’s dumb.”

“Yes, it is, love, it is,” agreed Burke sincerely. “However, the cutter insists that we do it,” he continued, “so there we are. You see?”

“No, I don’t.”

“No, of course you don’t, darling, because you’re absolutely right, it *is* stupid. You see, since the scene right after it”—Dennings giggled—“well, since it begins with Jed coming *into* the scene through a door, the cutter feels certain of a nomination if the scene before it ends with you moving *off* through a door.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Oh, I agree with you, love. It’s simply cunting, puking mad! But now why don’t we shoot it and trust me to snip it from the final cut. It should make a rather tasty munch.”

Chris laughed. And agreed. Burke glanced toward the cutter, who was known to be a temperamental egotist given to time-wasting argumentation. He was busy with the cameraman. The director breathed a sigh of relief.

Waiting on the lawn at the base of the steps while the lights were warming, Chris looked toward Dennings as he flung an obscenity at a hapless grip and then visibly glowed with satisfaction. He seemed to revel in his eccentricity. Yet at a certain point in his drinking, Chris knew, he could suddenly explode into temper, and if it happened at three or four in the morn-

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ing, he was likely to telephone people in power and viciously abuse them over trifling provocations. Chris remembered a studio chief whose offense had consisted in remarking mildly at a screening that the cuffs of Dennings's shirt looked slightly frayed, prompting Dennings to awaken him at approximately 3 A.M. to describe him as a "cunting boor" whose father, the founder of the studio, was "more than likely psychotic!" and had "fondled Judy Garland repeatedly" during the filming of *The Wizard of Oz*, then on the following day would pretend to amnesia and subtly radiate with pleasure when those he'd offended described in detail what he had done. Although, if it suited him, he would remember. Chris smiled and shook her head as she remembered him destroying his studio suite of offices in a gin-stoked, mindless rage, and how later, when confronted by the studio's head of production with an itemized bill and Polaroid photos of the wreckage, he'd archly dismissed them as "obvious fakes" since "the damage was far, far worse than that!" Chris did not believe he was an alcoholic or even a hopeless problem drinker, but rather that he drank and behaved outrageously because it was expected of him: he was living up to his legend.

Ah, well, she thought; I guess it's a kind of immortality.

She turned, looking over her shoulder for the Jesuit who had smiled when Burke had uttered the obscenity. He was walking in the distance, head lowered despondently, a lone black cloud in search of the rain. She had never liked priests. So assured. So secure. And yet this one . . .

"All ready, Chris?"

"Ready."

"All right, absolute quiet!" the assistant director called out.

"Roll the film," ordered Burke.

"Rolling!"

"Speed!"

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