

SORRY / JE M'EXCUSE

by Nicolas Ridley

Cast of characters

Daniel – 50's / 60's

Kate – 50's / 60's

Hugo – 50's / 60's

Alison – 50's / 60's

Setting

Exterior: balcony, terrace or garden.

Interior: lights & sounds of a 'gathering', chatter and light music.

Kate is standing downstage right, looking out. Daniel enters upstage. At first, he doesn't see Kate and moves downstage left to stand by himself.

Daniel *(now catching sight of Kate)* Hello.

Kate *(unenthusiastic)* Oh, hello.

Daniel Lovely evening.

Kate Is it?

Daniel Not especially, but it's what one says to break the ice, isn't it?

Kate Do you mind if we don't?

Daniel Don't?

Kate Break the ice.

Daniel Not in the slightest. *(pause)* I'll leave you to it, shall I?

Kate To what?

Daniel To whatever you'd like to be left to.

Kate I'm sorry. I was up hideously early this morning to catch a flight and I'm feeling a touch tetchy.

Daniel I'm feeling a touch tetchy myself. Reunions really aren't my thing.

Kate No?

Daniel I went to one of these things twenty years ago. No one I wanted to see turned up, and people I hoped never to see again were swarming about like bluebottles. I vowed not to attend another.

Kate And yet you're here.

Daniel I was persuaded by a friend.

Kate Yes. So was I. *(beat)* Tell me, is there anyone here you know? Apart from your friend, of course.

Daniel I'm not sure. I'm reluctant to ask people directly who they are in case we once knew each other intimately and they've aged so much I no longer recognise them.

Kate You may have aged yourself.

Daniel I'm certain I have.

Beat.

Kate Do you mind if I smoke?

Daniel I'd prefer it if you didn't.

Kate Then I won't. No one smokes in England anymore, do they?

Daniel Not many. Do you live abroad?

Kate France.

Daniel Really ...?

Hugo enters upstage.

Hugo Well, well, well. As I live and breathe. If it isn't the old Squelcher. You're very the last person in the world I expected to see at a do like this. I heard you were still roaming around Asia making pots and pots of dosh. Manila wasn't it? Or Kuala Lumpur? Somewhere in that neck of the woods. But here you are. Large as life and twice as ugly. *(to Kate)* You must be Mrs Squelcher. I'm Hugo Pottinger. 'Potty' to my friends. I expect the old Squelcher's told you all about me. Don't believe a word of it. All true though. Sorry. Must dash. Badger Buckley's buying me a beer. Catch up with you later, Squelcher, old chum. Tickled pink to see you in the flesh after all this time. Never thought I would. Not in a million years.

Hugo exits.

Kate Squelcher?

Daniel Not guilty.

Kate Hugo Pottinger?

Daniel The name rings a bell, but I can't place him.

Kate Neither can I.

Daniel You don't think we're at the wrong reunion, do you?

Kate Possibly. *(beat)* Sorry. This is just a bit awkward, but do you know who I am?

Daniel Isn't that what local bigwigs ask the police when they've been pulled over for speeding?

Kate Ha-ha. Very good. *(beat)* Well, do you?

Daniel Know who you are? Honestly? No. Give me a clue.

Kate I graduated with a 2:1 in modern languages thirty years ago. You?

Daniel Exactly thirty years ago?

Kate Yes.

Daniel Then there's a good chance we know each other.

Kate So, who are you?

Daniel You first. Who are you?

Kate We're not getting very far with this, are we? Why don't I fetch us a drink to see if that helps?

Daniel I'll go.

Kate I'm perfectly capable of carrying a couple of drinks.

Daniel I'm sure you are.

Kate Sorry. Still feeling a bit tetchy. Red?

Daniel A glass of red would be lovely. Thank you.

Kate exits. A brief pause before Alison enters.

Alison I'm so glad you came. I thought you might have changed your mind.

Daniel I've really no idea why I'm here, Alison.

Alison To mix and mingle like the rest of us.

Daniel I've just been accosted by an oaf called Hugo Pottinger. Do you know him?

Alison Oh, dear. Is Hugo here?

Daniel Who is he?

Alison Hugo lives near Tewkesbury, twice divorced, no children, votes UKIP or Tory, has a black Labrador called 'Maggie' and is known locally as the Severn Bore.

Daniel He called me 'Squelcher' and clasped me to his bosom like a long-lost brother.

Alison Squelcher is, or was, Simon Welch, Hugo's very best buddy. Both scraped third class degrees. Inseparable during their time at uni but after graduation, Simon disappeared. Last heard of a month or two ago in Johor Bahru.

Daniel You remember everything about everyone, don't you, Alison?

Alison It's an affliction not a gift.

Daniel Well, I think I've had enough of this bun-fight. There's no one here I want to mix and mingle with and ...

Alison I think you'll find there is, Dan.

Daniel Who?

Alison You'll see.

Daniel You're being very mysterious.

Alison I am, aren't I? But I promise you I'm right.

Daniel Give me a clue.

Alison Aix.

Daniel Ex?

Alison No, Daniel. Aix. Aix-en-Provence. A certain postcard ...

Daniel A postcard? Aix-en-Provence? Not ...?

Alison I picked her up at Stanstead Airport this morning.

Daniel Good God! You've kept in touch?

Alison You know me, Dan. I keep in touch with everyone. Oh, look. There's Harriet Cooper. I must go and say hello. I'll catch up with you later.

Daniel Hold on, Alison ...

Alison exits. A brief pause. Hugo enters.

Hugo (*furious*) Come on then. Tell me. What's the game?

Daniel I'm sorry?

Hugo What are you playing at?

Daniel I've no idea what you're talking about.

Hugo You're not Simon Welch, are you?

Daniel No ...

Hugo Then why did you say you were?

Daniel I didn't.

Hugo Claiming to be my chum, Squelcher, and now I find you're not. I don't follow the news myself – no time for it, too busy – but I've been reliably informed by a chap at the bar that poor old Squelcher's in clink in Singapore, or Saigon, or Shenzhen. Somewhere like that. Caught drug-smuggling and now he's facing a life sentence. Or is it a death sentence? Either way, it's no joking matter.

Kate enters with two glasses of red wine.

Kate (*handing a glass to Daniel*) Sorry to have taken so long. I was held up by couple of art historians who swore they knew me, but it turns out they didn't.

Hugo And you're just as bad, madam, claiming to be Mrs Squelcher.

Kate What are you talking about?

Hugo I'm talking about deception, deceit, betrayal. You're no more Mrs Squelcher than I'm the Queen of Sheba.

Kate Oh, do go away you odious buffoon.

Hugo Don't you ...

Kate (*frighteningly fierce*) Go away!

Hugo exits.

Kate Okay. If you're not Squelcher, who are you?

Pause.

Daniel I waited for you.

Kate I'm sorry?

Daniel All afternoon, in the Beau Rivage. Half-an-hour. Then another half-hour. Then another. I still thought you'd come, you see. Ridiculous, wasn't it? At four o'clock the waiters took pity on me. A young man lost in his misery. They brought me a cognac. And then another. All on the house. Handshakes and comradely pats on the back. "Alors. C'est l'amour, pas vrai?" And I stumbled out of the restaurant, onto Hampstead High Street and into the rest of my life.

Kate Daniel?

Daniel Yes, Kate. Daniel.

Kate I would never have recognised you.

Daniel It's been a very long time.

Kate But now, looking more closely, I can see you there. The eyes. The nose. The set of the chin.

Daniel Less hair.

Kate Oh, yes. Much less hair. (*beat*) Don't look at me too closely, will you? Sunshine and smoking. Both very ageing.

Pause.

Daniel I took my grandmother's engagement ring to the restaurant.

Kate Did you? (*gently*) I never said I'd marry you, Daniel.

Daniel You said you'd think about it.

Kate I did think about it. But we were both very young. Besides, I was already engaged to Benoît.

Daniel Who's Benoît?

Kate A man I met during my year abroad. I should probably have told you about him.

Daniel But you didn't.

Kate No, I didn't. I'm sorry. I did write to you.

Daniel A postcard. A picture of the Cours Mirabeau. I still have it. Not that it said much. "Je m'excuse, Love K." It's an interesting French construction, isn't it? "I excuse myself." Very different somehow from "I'm sorry."

Kate What can I say, Dan? I am sorry. And just a little bit ashamed. But it's all so very long ago.

Daniel Did you marry Benoît?

Kate Things didn't work out.

Daniel But you stayed on in Aix?

Kate I had a job at the university which suited me. But now – since retiring – I've begun to wonder if it isn't time to come home.

Daniel You still think of England as home?

Kate That's what I'm here to find out. (*pause*) It really is very nice to see you again, Dan.

Daniel Even with less hair?

Kate Even with less hair.

Pause.

Daniel I can see Hugo Pottinger plucking up the courage to launch a second assault. I think I'll be on my way.

Kate (*suddenly*) How about lunch tomorrow?

Daniel Lunch?

Kate The lunch we didn't have.

Daniel All right. If that's what you'd like. (*beat*) Shall we say the Beau Rivage in Hampstead at twelve-thirty?

Kate Jusque là.

Daniel exits. A brief pause. Alison enters.

That was ...

Alison Daniel. Yes, I know. I persuaded him to come. I thought it might be good for the two of you to meet again.

Kate You and Daniel have kept in touch?

Alison Yes, Kate. We're quite close. We have been for some time, in fact. (*beat*) You broke his heart, you know.

Kate Nonsense.

Alison Yes. You did. He recovered. It's what we do, isn't it? But it left a scar. I thought seeing you again might help him put the past behind him.

Kate I see. Well, I hate to break it to you, Alison, but this hasn't worked out quite as you planned.

Alison Hasn't it?

Kate Dan and I have arranged to meet for lunch. Tomorrow. At the Beau Rivage.

Beat.

Alison He won't be there.

Kate I think you'll find he will.

Alison No, Kate, he won't. The Beau Rivage in Hampstead closed down many, many years ago. It's now a shop selling pre-loved clothes. Second hand clothes to you and me. *Vêtements de deuxième main* or *vêtements usagés*. Isn't that what you say in French? Oh, look. There's Harriet Cooper. Will you excuse me? I must go and say hello.

Alison exits.

THE END