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Krapp's Last Tape

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Written in English in early 1958. First published in *Evergreen Review* (Summer 1958). First performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 28 October 1958.

A late evening in the future.

KRAPP'S den.

Front centre a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience.

Sitting at the table, facing front, i.e. across from the drawers, a wearish old man: KRAPP.

Rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed.

White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair. Unshaven.

Very near-sighted (but unspectacled). Hard of hearing.

Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation.

Laborious walk.

On the table a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes.

Table and immediately adjacent area in strong white light.

Rest of stage in darkness.

KRAPP remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table. He stoops, unlocks first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a reel of tape, peers at it, puts it back, locks drawer, unlocks second drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a large banana, peers at it, locks drawer, puts keys back in his pocket. He turns, advances to edge of stage, balts, strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, puts end of

banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he bites off the end, turns aside and begins pacing to and fro at edge of stage, in the light, i.e. not more than four or five paces either way, meditatively eating banana. He treads on skin, slips, nearly falls, recovers himself, stoops and peers at skin and finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over edge of stage into pit. He resumes his pacing, finishes banana, returns to table, sits down, remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, takes keys from his pockets, raises them to his eyes, chooses key, gets up and moves to front of table, unlocks second drawer, takes out a second large banana, peers at it, locks drawer, puts back keys in his pocket, turns, advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, tosses skin into pit, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he can muster backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds. He comes back into light carrying an old ledger and sits down at table. He lays ledger on table, wipes his mouth, wipes his hands on the front of his waistcoat, brings them smartly together and rubs them.

KRAPP: *[Briskly.] Ah! [He bends over ledger, turns the pages, finds the entry he wants, reads.] Box . . . three . . . spool . . . five. [He raises his head and stares front. With relish.] Spool! [Pause.] Spooooo! [Happy smile. Pause. He bends over table, starts peering and poking at the boxes.] Box . . . three . . . three . . . four . . . two . . . [with surprise] nine! good God! . . . seven . . . ah! the little rascal! [He takes up box, peers at it.] Box three. [He lays it on table, opens it and peers at spools inside.] Spool . . . [he peers at ledger] . . . five . . . [he peers at spools] . . . five . . . five . . . ah! the little scoundrel! [He takes out a spool, peers at it.] Spool five. [He lays it on table, closes box three, puts it back with the others, takes up the spool.] Box three, spool five. [He bends over the machine, looks up. With relish.] Spooooo! [Happy smile. He bends, loads spool on machine, rubs his hands.] Ah! [He peers at ledger, reads*

entry at foot of page.] Mother at rest at last . . . Hm . . . The black ball . . . [He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.] Black ball? . . . [He peers again at ledger, reads.] The dark nurse . . . [He raises his head, broods, peers again at ledger, reads.] Slight improvement in bowel condition. . . . Hm . . . Memorable . . . what? [He peers closer.] Equinox, memorable equinox. [He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.] Memorable equinox? . . . [Pause. He shrugs his shoulders, peers again at ledger, reads.] Farewell to—[he turns page]—love. [He raises his head, broods, bends over machine, switches on and assumes listening posture, i.e. leaning forward, elbows on table, hand cupping ear towards machine, face front.]

TAPE: *[Strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp's at a much earlier time.] Thirty-nine today, sound as a—[Settling himself more comfortably he knocks one of the boxes off the table, curses, switches off, sweeps boxes and ledger violently to the ground, winds tape back to beginning, switches on, resumes posture.] Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old weakness, and intellectually I have now every reason to suspect at the . . . [hesitates] . . . crest of the wave—or thereabouts. Celebrated the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the Wine-house. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks. Jotted down a few notes, on the back of an envelope. Good to be back in my den, in my old rags. Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth. Fatal things for a man with my condition. [Vehemently.] Cut'em out! [Pause.] The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [Pause.] In a way. [Pause.] I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to . . . [hesitates] . . . me. [Pause.] Krapp. [Pause.]*

The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean . . . [hesitates] . . . I suppose I mean those things worth having when all the dust has—when all my dust has settled.

I close my eyes and try and imagine them.

[Pause. KRAPP closes his eyes briefly.]

Extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. Old Miss McGlome always sings at this hour. But not tonight. Songs of her girlhood, she says. Hard to think of her as a girl. Wonderful woman though. Connaught, I fancy. [Pause.] Shall I sing when I am her age, if I ever am? No. [Pause.] Did I sing as a boy? No. [Pause.] Did I ever sing? No.

[Pause.]

Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check in the book, but it must be at least ten or twelve years ago. At that time I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business. [Pause.] Not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly saw them again. [Pause.] Incomparable! [Pause.] Ah well . . . [Pause.] These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them—[KRAPP switches off, broods, switches on.]—a help before embarking on a new . . . [hesitates] . . . retrospect. Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! [Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.] And the resolutions! [Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.] To drink less, in particular. [Brief laugh of KRAPP alone.] Statistics. Seventeen hundred hours, out of the preceding eight thousand odd, consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20 per cent, say 40 per cent of his waking life. [Pause.] Plans for a less . . . [hesitates] . . . engrossing sexual life. Last illness of his father. Flagging pursuit of happiness. Unattainable laxation. Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it's over. [Pause.] False ring there. [Pause.] Shadows of the opus . . . magnum. Closing with a—[brief laugh]—yelp to Providence. [Prolonged laugh in which KRAPP joins.] What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?

[Pause.]

When I look—

[KRAPP switches off, broods, looks at his watch, gets up,

goes backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Pop of cork. Ten seconds. Second cork. Ten seconds. Third cork. Ten seconds. Brief burst of quavering song.]

KRAPP: [Sings.]

Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh-igh,
Shadows—

[Fit of coughing. He comes back into light, sits down, wipes his mouth, switches on, resumes his listening posture.]

TAPE: —back on the year that is gone, with what I hope is perhaps a glint of the old eye to come, there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity [KRAPP gives a start] and the—[KRAPP switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on]—a-dying, after her long viduity, and the—
[KRAPP switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of 'viduity'. No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on table, sits down and looks up the word.]

KRAPP: [Reading from dictionary.] State—or condition—of being—or remaining—a widow—or widower. [Looks up. Puzzled.] Being—or remaining? . . . [Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.] 'Deep weeds of viduity.' . . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver-bird . . . Black plumage of male . . . [He looks up. With relish.] The vidua-bird!
[Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture.]

TAPE: —bench by the weir from where I could see her window. There I sat, in the biting wind, wishing she were gone. [Pause.] Hardly a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids, infants, old men, dogs. I got to know them quite well—oh by appearance of course I mean! One dark young beauty I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator, most funereal thing. Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her—not having been introduced—she threatened to call

a policeman. As if I had designs on her virtue! [*Laugh. Pause.*] The face she had! The eyes! Like . . . [*besitates*] . . . chrysolite! [*Pause.*] Ah well . . . [*Pause.*] I was there when—[*KRAPP switches off, broods, switches on again.*]—the blind went down, one of those dirty brown roller affairs, throwing a ball for a little white dog as chance would have it. I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last. I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. [*Pause.*] Moments. Her moments, my moments. [*Pause.*] The dog's moments. [*Pause.*] In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. [*Pause.*] I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. [*Pause.*] I might have kept it. [*Pause.*] But I gave it to the dog.

[*Pause.*]

Ah well . . .

[*Pause.*]

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that . . . [*besitates*] . . . for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—[*KRAPP switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*]—great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller, clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—[*KRAPP curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*]—unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire—[*KRAPP curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*]—my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

[*Pause.*]

Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.

[*Pause.*]

Here I end—

[*KRAPP switches off, winds tape back, switches on again.*]

—upper lake, with the punt, bathed off the bank, then pushed out into the stream and drifted. She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed. Sun blazing down, bit of a breeze, water nice and lively. I noticed a scratch on her thigh and asked her how she came by it. Picking gooseberries, she said. I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [*Pause.*] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—[*Pause.*]—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [*Pause. Low.*] Let me in. [*Pause.*] We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! [*Pause.*] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

[*Pause.*]

Past midnight. Never knew—

[*KRAPP switches off, broods. Finally he fumbles in his pockets, encounters the banana, takes it out, peers at it, puts it back, fumbles, brings out envelope, fumbles, puts back envelope, looks at his watch, gets up and goes backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. Sound of bottle against glass, then brief siphon. Ten seconds. Bottle against glass alone. Ten seconds. He comes back a little unsteadily into light, goes to front of table, takes out keys, raises them to his eyes, chooses key, unlocks first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside, takes out reel, peers at it, locks drawer, puts keys back in his pocket, goes and sits down, takes reel off machine, lays it on dictionary, loads virgin reel on machine, takes envelope from his pocket, consults back of it, lays it on table, switches on, clears his throat and begins to record.*]

KRAPP: Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. [Pause.] The eyes she had! [Broods, realizes he is recording silence, switches off, broods. Finally.] Everything there, everything, all the—[Realizes this is not being recorded, switches on.] Everything there, everything on this old muckball, all the light and dark and famine and feasting of . . . [hesitates] . . . the ages! [In a shout.] Yes! [Pause.] Let that go! Jesus! Take his mind off his homework! Jesus! [Pause. Weary.] Ah well, maybe he was right. [Pause.] Maybe he was right. [Broods. Realizes. Switches off. Consults envelope.] Pah! [Crumple it and throws it away. Broods. Switches on.] Nothing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool. [Pause.] Revelled in the word spool. [With relish.] Spooooo! Happiest moment of the past half million. [Pause.] Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known. [Pause.] One pound six and something, eight I have little doubt. [Pause.] Crawled out once or twice, before the summer was cold. Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone. Not a soul. [Pause.] Last fancies. [Vehemently.] Keep 'em under! [Pause.] Scalded the eyes out of me reading *Effie* again, a page a day, with tears again. *Effie* . . . [Pause.] Could have been happy with her, up there on the Baltic, and the pines, and the dunes. [Pause.] Could I? [Pause.] And she? [Pause.] Pah! [Pause.] Fanny came in a couple of times. Bony old ghost of a whore. Couldn't do much, but I suppose better than a kick in the crutch. The last time wasn't so bad. How do you manage it, she said, at your age? I told her I'd been saving up for her all my life. [Pause.] Went to Vespers once, like when I was in short trousers. [Pause. Sings.]

Now the day is over,
 Night is drawing nigh-igh,
 Shadows—[coughing, then almost inaudible]—
 of the evening
 Steal across the sky.

[Gasping.] Went to sleep and fell off the pew. [Pause.] Sometimes wondered in the night if a last effort mightn't —[Pause.] Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. [Pause.] Leave it at that. [Pause.] Lie propped up in the dark—and wander. Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. [Pause.] Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning, in the haze, with the bitch, stop and listen to the bells. [Pause.] And so on. [Pause.] Be again, be again. [Pause.] All that old misery. [Pause.] Once wasn't enough for you. [Pause.] Lie down across her. [Long pause. He suddenly bends over machine, switches off, wrenches off tape, throws it away, puts on the other, winds it forward to the passage he wants, switches on, listens staring front.]

TAPE: —gooseberries, she said. I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [Pause.] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—[Pause.]—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over to get them in the shadow and they opened. [Pause. Low.] Let me in. [Pause.] We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! [Pause.] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. [Pause. KRAPP'S lips move. No sound.] Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited. [Pause.] Here I end this reel. Box—[Pause.]—three, spool—[Pause.]—five. [Pause.] Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back. [KRAPP motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.]

CURTAIN