

Divorce Sale
By Linda Stockham

CHARACTERS

(in order of their appearances)

BERNICE ROSENBLUM: Formerly an Army nurse in Vietnam, presently she works as a nurse at a community hospital. Fifty-three years old.

LENA HILL: Tall, attractive but an unsure woman of thirty-eight.

KAY BRITMAN: Successful, responsible, and a stunningly beautiful woman in her late thirties to early forties.

TROY ROSENBLUM: BERNICE'S computer expert husband. He is in his early fifties.

CHLOE: Aerobic instructor. She is the "air brain" of the neighborhood. CHLOE is in her late twenties.

OZZIE ROARKE: Huge, comical. He is KAY'S husband, and a one-time actor who never really made it "big." Forty-five to fifty-five.

JOYCE: An exuberant woman. Late thirties to early fifties. (*Cameo role.*)

WILLARD: JOYCE'S philandering husband, whom she is divorcing. He can be anywhere from his late thirties to late fifties. (*Cameo role.*)

WILMA: CHLOE'S eccentric but likable mother-in-law. She is nearly seventy.

MADAM SZENDREI: Hungarian palmist, in her late sixties or early seventies

TIME

Spring, Early 1990s.

PLACE

The action takes place in a double-car garage.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Scene One: Early morning.

Scene Two: That afternoon.

Scene Three: That evening.

IN MEMORY OF

Patrick K. Houtchens

[Scene One: The interior of a double-car garage. The front of the double-car garage opens to the audience. There is a door leading into the house, with a workbench extending to one side of the wall. The workbench is neat and well-organized. A stool sits to one side. The garage is empty of the vehicle that usually occupies it and contains in its place a dress rack, a card table, and four folding chairs. Furthermore, there is a straight-back dining room chair and a typewriter stand with a small cash box sitting on top of it. Next to the chair is an old-fashioned cigarette stand. There are several cardboard boxes, the contents of which are unseen. Additionally, the audience is not able to see a dog sleeping in a large basket in one corner. AT RISE: BERNICE enters the garage from the house carrying a coffee urn. She places it on the workbench and plugs it into a wall outlet. She goes back into the house but returns immediately carrying a small tray of six coffee mugs, a large container of non-dairy creamer, and a small box of low-calorie sweetener. She places the tray on the workbench. Looking around, she spies the dog sleeping in the basket and takes a step toward it.]

BERNICE: Slip? *[Grumpy]* Stupid, useless animal.

[LENA enters from the drive, moving up to the workbench with a covered tray, which she places next to the coffee urn.]

BERNICE turns away from the dog and faces LENA.]

BERNICE: Doesn't that dog sleep a lot?

LENA: Yes. Kay says he's fifteen years old now. *[She looks at SLIP.]* Poor old guy.

BERNICE: Poor? Ha! That *couch potato* dog is as lucky as they come. *[A slight pause]* I can't see that he's breathing.

[They both look down at the dog. They study him for a moment, and straighten up.]

LENA: He's breathing. It's shallow breathing but he's breathing.

BERNICE: *[With continued crotchiness]* I can see that. I'm the nurse, Lena.

LENA: *[Looking toward the door into the house]* Where's Kay and Ozzie?

BERNICE: Kay's inside. *[Peeping under the cloth napkin that covers the tray LENA brought]* Jeez! You'd think Joyce could have handled her own garage sale.

LENA: Well, we did volunteer to do it for her. It can't be easy —

BERNICE: Hell, she's going to Cancun for four weeks. That should ease of the pain of "divorce." *[Dropping the end of the napkin back over the tray]* You must have been up all night baking this stuff?

LENA: No. I picked it up at that new bakery in the mall.

[LENA moves over to the dress rack, shuffles through the suit coats and slacks, several sports coats, and a couple of windbreakers. There is no female clothing on the rack, only male clothing.]

LENA: Joyce certainly kicked Willard out with only the clothes on his back. *[Amazed]* Can you imagine: a "divorce sale."

BERNICE: *[Mockingly]* Another one of Ozzie's brilliant ideas.

LENA: He thinks it'll tease the curious.

BERNICE: We'll see how "good" at the end of the day. He's putting up another sign, this one on the corner streetlight. Can't miss the neighborhood's answer to *Moby Dick*.

[LENA crosses to the card table and sits on one of the folding chairs. She opens a pack of cards on the table and shuffles them several times.]

LENA: Kay is so sensible.

BERNICE: Yeah. A real *Father Knows Best* among women.

LENA: You're telling your age, Bernice.

BERNICE: I never thought I was keeping it a secret. I'm fifty-three. You think I should be ashamed of being fifty-three?

LENA: No. But it is hard for some women—

BERNICE: Not for me. How long have you got, Lena? *[Snickering]* Twelve more years 'til you're fifty-three?

LENA: *[Ignoring question]* Why do you think Kay married Ozzie?

BERNICE: As close as you two are, you've never asked her?

LENA: She's only mentioned that they were bosom buddies for years. I guess she must love him —

BERNICE: That *dork*? I doubt it. *[Cuttingly]* Ah, it's a marriage of convenience.

LENA: I sometimes think they're the ones that work.

BERNICE: For someone who has never been married, you seem to know what makes the perfect marriage.

[LENA deals out a hand of solitaire. BERNICE looks askance.]

LENA: Ozzie's funny.

BERNICE: Sure, if you like listening to those damn stories of when he was an actor!

LENA: He doesn't seem to mind being a "househusband," though.

BERNICE: Househusband! Sounds like some kind of animal husbandry job with the Department of Agriculture. What annoys me most is when Ozzie first comes into a room, strikes that streetwalker-pose and announces: "Love's here, you wild women!"

LENA: *[Laughing]* Chloe loves it.

BERNICE: *[Mimicking her]* "Chloe loves it." Hell, Chloe loves everything.

LENA: Oh, come on, Bernice. Don't be such a grump. She's cute.

BERNICE: You and my computer genius husband. *[She scoffs]* “Oh, she’s so innocent, Bernie.” Troy has to tell me that every single time he sees her flaunting around the neighborhood in those skimpy clothes she wears.

LENA: I’m not sure it is “flaunting.”

BERNICE: Jeez, Lena.

[KAY enters from the house.]

LENA: Hi, Kay.

KAY: *[Looks under napkin]* Lena’s been at it again.

BERNICE: No. She got those at the new Mexican bakery.

KAY: *[teasingly]* Isn’t that cheating, Lena?

[LENA quickly gathers up the cards and scoots the deck to the middle of the card table. Snickering, BERNICE comes up alongside LENA and nudges her with her free hand.]

BERNICE: Caught you in the act, huh?

[BERNICE returns to the work bench and takes one of the pastries from the tray. Before biting into it, she looks in the direction of the dog.]

BERNICE: Is this dog okay?

KAY: *[Going over and looking at the dog]* Yes, he’s fine. Aren’t you, Slip?
[Reaches down and pats him fondly, gently] I remember the first night I brought him home from the pet store, I slipped over him, fell against the refrigerator, and broke my left wrist. I thought “Slip” was an appropriate name for him.

BERNICE: Why’s life so damn simple for you, Kay?

KAY: *[Not biting]* I didn’t know it was.

[KAY stands to face BERNICE, BERNICE lights a cigarette.]

KAY: Did you see where Ozzie has gone?

BERNICE: He’s putting up another sign.

[KAY steps to the apron and looks out. LENA and BERNICE come up behind her]

KAY: Oh, g'd grief! He's wearing that ghastly green shirt with the big yellow flowers all over it. I put that thing in the *Goodwill* bag last week.

[KAY takes some money from her pocket and puts it into the cash box.]

LENA: It's like a cowboy hat my father used to have. It was a dirty old thing that my Mom tried throwing out again and again, but he always found it. They'd get into a fight, not speak to each other for a week, then everything would be forgotten, until Mom decided to chuck that hat again. When she died, he burned it in the fireplace.

KAY: I'm not going to say anything about it to him.

BERNICE: Men have got the strangest quirks! Look at that gym crap Willard had. In the middle of the night, Troy and I could see Willard on their patio wrestling with those weights.

KAY: *[Laughing]* And during the day he was wrestling in a downtown motel with that cocktail waitress.

[KAY crosses to the work bench and pours herself a cup of coffee. LENA re-sits at the card table as TROY enters]

TROY: *[Perplexed]* Kay, is Ozzie feeling all right these days?

KAY: Why? What's he doing?

TROY: He's talking to one of the trees on your parkway.

[ALL, including KAY, step to the apron and look out.]

TROY: What kind of hang up do you call that? A *bark* fetish?

LENA: Didn't the Druids believe that trees had special magical powers?

BERNICE: Magical powers?

KAY:*[Yelling off-stage]* Ozzie, what are you doing?!

LENA: What did he say?

TROY: Something about one of the limbs, I think. Here comes Chloe.

BERNICE: Hell, she's talking to the tree now.

TROY: Yip. It could be a tree spirit.

[BERNICE gives him a look that could kill. TROY shrugs and crosses to the work. He pours himself a cup of coffee, then peruses the tray of Mexican pastries.]

BERNICE: I hope she doesn't go on today about her damn visits to that "Romanian palmist."

TROY: Hungarian. The palmist is Hungarian.

BERNICE: Oh, for Christ's sake, Troy! *[She snubs the cigarette butt out in the cigarette stand.]*

KAY: It's something Chloe enjoys.

BERNICE: I've never known anyone so damn superstitious. And when Ozzie gets going about having been Oliver Hardy in his other life!

LENA: Ozzie does have a way of picking out gullible people –

KAY: An impish talent for it –

LENA: I think it's kind of fun when the two of them get on the supernatural and reincarnation –

KAY: Good. Here's Chloe.

CHLOE: *[Enters. Enthusiastically]* The cutest little kitten you've ever seen.

KAY: *[Yelling]* Ozzie, does it have a collar on?!

OZZIE: *[offstage]* Yeah. A pink one with a bell!

KAY: Good! Leave it and come in here for your cup of coffee!

[KAY goes and sits at the card table, LENA sitting opposite her.]

TROY: Hi, Slip? I wish I could sleep like that.

BERNICE: You do, except the dog doesn't snore!

TROY: I don't snore.

BERNICE: No? Who tells you you don't snore?

TROY: Well, if I snore as bad as you say, don't you think I'd wake myself up?

[OZZIE enters and immediately sticks some last minute price tags on some of the coats on the rack.]

OZZIE: It's a kitten in distress

KAY: It got up there, it can get down.

OZZIE: But, my love, I'm always willing to help a pussy in distress.

CHLOE: *[Giggling]* Oh, Ozzie, You're awful.

OZZIE: Ah, but you love it, my little rosebud.

TROY: *Citizen Kane*

OZZIE: *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial.*

TROY: Michael Caine.

OZZIE: Cane and Abel.

TROY: Walter Abel.

OZZIE: Abel and Heloise.

TROY: What? That's not right. Hey, Kay! Ozzie's cheating again.

BERNICE: Why do you two do that? It is annoying as hell.

[CHLOE giggles again. OZZIE winks at her. JOYCE enters.]

JOYCE: *[Gushing, but sincere]* You have everything organized. I knew you could do it so much better than I.

OZZIE: All setup and ready for the onslaught!

JOYCE: I feel at odds, what with the house in such a disarray with the carpenters at work in the kitchen and garage, and the decorator tearing down all the drapes to get ready for the painters. G'd, something about having a house redecorated that puts one out emotionally as well as physically.

KAY: Then it's best you're going away for a few weeks, Joyce.

JOYCE: Life saving, in fact. Willard's been phoning me, but hanging up when I pick up the receiver, I've seen him driving up the street a couple of times in the last few days. The pin-head! What's he up to?

LENA: A car has just pulled up. I'll take care of them.

[LENA exits]

OZZIE: It's hard for some men to break loose, even if they've got someone else in the nest.

KAY: You've been reading *Dear Abby* again.

OZZIE: No. Only my *ornithology* magazines.

KAY: [to JOYCE] If the painters and decorator haven't finished up when I get back, you know you're welcome to stay here.

JOYCE: I hope it won't be necessary, Kay. They said four weeks. I can't see it'd take any longer than that. But thanks. You and Ozzie are angels.

OZZIE: Yes, our halos hang high over our taintless heads!

Joyce: Kay, here's the deposit slip for all the loot you'll be raking in for me. There was no way I could get over here last night. What with the packing...I've always been guilty of waiting until the last minute to do things! Remember: Cash, no checks. What a wonderful thing to have such friends, and my neighbors to boot.

OZZIE: It beats doing what Kay and I usually do on Saturdays.

TROY: Cleaning house? It's what Bernie and I do.

KAY: We're glad to help out, Joyce. You know that.

JOYCE: Yes, I know. But one should never make assumptions about the generosity of one's friends. Never. Of course, it doesn't do to make assumptions about the loyalty of one's husband either, as I found out. That bastard!

OZZIE: Well, Ol'Willard is learning his lesson! Beware the scorned woman.

BERNICE: I think a better word would have been "screwed."

OZZIE: Oh, no Bernice. It was the other woman who was being screwed by Ol'Willard. The sly dog! Oh, sorry, Slip.

JOYCE: Well, need we say anything more about Willard? I'm off now, "to catch that midnight train from Alabama ..." Except in my case, it's the noon plane for Cancun. *Adios, amigos!*

[JOYCE exits.]

KAY: Have fun, Joyce!

OZZIE: Don't forget to send us post cards!

CHLOE: Bring me back a souvenir! One of 'em crunch shells!

BERNICE: It's *conch* shell. Jeez, you're stupid sometimes.

CHLOE: Sorry, Bernice. You got to remember I haven't traveled like you have.

BERNICE: Where have I traveled to, for God's sake? I'd like to know where I've traveled?

CHLOE: Well, you were in Vietnam. And you must have been to other foreign countries when you were in the Army?

BERNICE: Yeah, but who says you see anything? Unless you want to call a field hospital a tourist attraction?

CHLOE: Gee, Bernice. I guess I've kind of been protected, huh?

[LENA enters.]

LENA: Joyce is sure keyed up and ready for a fling, isn't she?

[She slips money into cash box.]

OZZIE: You really think so?

LENA: Let's have a pool. I bet she's married within a year.

TROY: What about Ol'Willard?

BERNICE: Oh, he'll be married before that.

TROY: Why?

BERNICE: Men can't take care of themselves. That's why.

OZZIE: No haggling, Lena. I spent two days doing those price tags.

[LENA exits.]

BERNICE: In calligraphy, I suppose?

OZZIE: Tot, tot, Bernice. You could have taken that adult education course with us, too. Right Chloe?

CHLOE: Oh, I wasn't any good with the stiletto.

OZZIE: Stylus.

CHLOE: Ozzie is the real artist.

BERNICE: Knock it off, Chloe. This isn't your aerobics class. Besides, all that excessive energy of yours drives me nuts.

OZZIE: Can you see Hamlet as an aerobics instructor?

TROY: Lady Macbeth.

OZZIE: Dracula.

TROY: Mrs. Danvers.

OZZIE: Captain Ahab.

TROY: *[Whooping]* With the wooden leg?!

OZZIE and TROY: *[together]* One-2-3-4.

[Laughing and limping about, OZZIE and TROY move into a non-coordinated aerobics routine.]

TROY: Knee lift, stomach in. Get that back straight, Starbuck! One-2-3-4—

OZZIE: Left side, stretch out. *[Fakes and injury]* Aah, Captain Ahab, I can't do that!

TROY: The plank! To the plank, you totter!

BERNICE: Will you two idiots stop being so damn childish! *[She starts to light up a cigarette but doesn't.]* Men reach sixteen, then they never go beyond that!

TROY: Come on, Bernie. It's a game.

BERNICE: Then, for God's sake, Let's get on with playing bridge.

[They take their places at the card table, As the cards are dealt out, LENA enters counting out more money, which she puts into the cash box.]

KAY: Another quick sale?

LENA: Like water off a duck's back. The chain saw.

OZZIE: Looking good.

TROY: Chain saw?

OZZIE: *[He bids]* One heart.

KAY: Two diamonds.

TROY: H'm. I suppose Ol'Willard used it on his competitors.

BERNICE: Pass

OZZIE: Out for blood, huh?

TROY: Five diamonds.

OZZIE: Double.

BERNICE Shit!

TROY: *[Giggling]* I can see Ol'Willard running amok with a chain saw.

KAY: Pass.

BERNICE: Pass

TROY: I'm dummy. Throw out a card, Bernie.

BERNICE: Don't start telling me how to play.

TROY: I never do. *[To OZZIE.]* You should have seen the way she played poker in Nan. A real killer-diller.

[TROY leans over to BERNICE to try and give her a kiss but she tilts her head away from him. He simply sighs.]

BERNICE: Christ! Kay's gonna make a slam. Why did you double, Ozzie?

OZZIE: Don't bring out the white flag yet, Bernice. I could have a few tricks up my sleeves.

BERNICE: Not with the shitty cards I've got.

TROY: There is probably a lot of things up your sleeves, Ozzie.

[TROY attempts to peer up one of OZZIE'S shirtsleeves.]

BERNICE: Will you two pay attention.

OZZIE: Boy, I bet your patients tow the line, Bernice.

TROY: They're scared not to.

BERNICE: You think I'm not a good nurse?

BERNICE: You don't see me fiddling my time away playing games on the computer.

TROY: It's data processing, involving a lot of analytical and statistical stuff. Hardly games.

CHLOE: Gee, I'd be afraid being a nurse. You know, all those people's lives in my hands.

OZZIE: As well as their bedpans.

KAY: Nurses haven't done that in years, Ozzie.

OZZIE: No wonder I had so many problems with my kidneys the first time I was in the hospital.

KAY: You had an in-grown toenail. And besides, you were an out-patient.

OZZIE: Oh.

BERNICE: People think shit of nurses, especially them holier-than-thou doctors!

OZZIE: Like Chloe inferred, the pressure must be terrible. Uh-huh. It takes a special type of person to go into that kind of work. A Nightingale with nerves of steel. I played a nurse, once. Dinner theatre outside Chicago. A ten week run, terrific reviews!

BERNICE: Listening to you, Ozzie, one would think you'd played every role ever written for an actor.

OZZIE: Well, nearly.

LENA: *[To the front]* Battle stations! Willard just pulled up.

TROY: *[To the front]* I can see the whites of his eyes.

[WILLARD enters in a huff. He starts yanking clothes off the rack.]

WILLARD: I saw the ad in the newspaper. My neighbors doing this to me.

OZZIE: Former neighbor, Willard. You moved. Remember?

WILLARD: I didn't move. I was thrown out. Where is she off to? The taxi driver carried out four suitcases.

OZZIE: You were spying on Joyce?

LENA: Kind of late to be so interested in what Joyce is doing, isn't it?

WILLARD: I was parked up the street, if you want to know. I waited until the taxi driver drove off. Where was she going in that taxi?

KAY: She's taking a long holiday in Cancun.

WILLARD: Cancun?! I should have known. Cancun. She was always rattling on about wanting to go to Cancun.

TROY: Well, she's got her wish now.

WILLARD: And everything I own. *[Hugging his clothes angrily, possessively.]* She didn't leave me with a damn thing!

OZZIE: Oh, I thought she let you keep the cocktail waitress?

WILLARD: She didn't wait long to the gut the house!

TROY: She's having it redecorated.

WILLARD: What's wrong with the way it was?

KAY: Change, Willard. She wants things changed.

WILLARD: So the house don't remind her of me, is that it?

OZZIE: Sounds logical. Joyce says you've been calling her, then hanging up.

WILLARD: That's crazy. Why'd I call her?

OZZIE: Been cruising the block, too.

WILLARD: All right damn it! I've got every right to find out where she's going!

BERNICE: What right? You're the one who was stepping out on her.

WILLARD: I'm still her husband!

BERNICE: Oh, God! How typical of your kind!

WILLARD: My kind?

BERNICE: Narrow-minded, sexist pig!

WILLARD: Oh, don't give me that damn women's lib stuff. It's out of date now.

BERNICE: You're out of date, Willard!

OZZIE: Be careful, Bernice! He might have a chastity belt hidden in his back pocket!

WILLARD: Okay, so I might have some old-fashioned ideas about men and women but I sure know it isn't decent to live off one's wife!

KAY: That's quite enough, Willard. You have no idea about Ozzie's and my marriage. You've known us only as long as we have lived in this neighborhood, which is just under three years.

WILLARD: Yeah! Which gives you no right to butt into Joyce's and mine marriage!

[OZZIE stands, facing WILLARD.]

OZZIE: But gives us the right to kick you off our property.

WILLARD: You're only big and fat, Ozzie! Not in the least bit threatening!
[Willard turns to go but LENA puts out a hand to him.] What's this?

LENA: Gotta pay for the stuff, Willard.

WILLARD: It's my stuff!

LENA: Shall we round it off to \$300.00?

WILLARD: *[Shoving money into LENA'S hand without counting.]* You must be enjoying this to no end, Lena. Sweet revenge. Isn't that what they call it?

[Willard exits as LENA turns away from him, embarrassed by his remark. Neither KAY nor BERNICE miss this. As WILLARD exits, he is temporarily blocked by WILMA, who enters flustered and rather bedraggled.]

WILMA: Chloe, honey?

CHLOE: What's the matter, Wilma?

WILMA: It's all right. I swept up all the glass.

CHLOE: Glass?

WILMA: I can't find the plant food.

CHLOE: It's in the lathe house. What did you break?

WILMA: Well, it was the fault of your rowing machine. But never mind, honey. I'm sure we can get the rubber grip back on the handle. *[To everyone in the garage:]* It flew out of my hand like a bat flying out of hell! It was quite unnerving. Scared the daylights out of me. One doesn't expect things like that to go flying off without a warning.

CHLOE: You could have been hurt, Wilma. You ought to let me be with you when you use my exercise equipment.

WILMA: I know, honey. Imagine: my little boy marrying such a physically fit girl. No one in the family ever cared about the abdominal muscles! Now that you've told me where the plant food is, I needn't bother you children anymore today. *[As she turns to exit, she turns and addresses KAY.]* Oh, Kay. There's a kitten in one of the trees out front.

KAY: We know. Thanks, Wilma.

[WILMA is escorted out of the garage by CHLOE.]

OZZIE: Think we ought to call the fire department?

KAY: It's exploring. It'll come down from that tree when it gets bored.

LENA: And go home, wherever that is, when it gets hungry.

[LENA exits quickly.]

OZZIE : Such practical women, Alas...

[The first hand is finished.]

BERNICE: Christ! A grand-slam.

OZZIE: *[Moaning.]* And I doubled.

KAY: I had honors, too.

OZZIE: You didn't bid right. Too conservative.

[BERNICE rises and goes to pour herself another cup of coffee.]

BERNICE: Conservative? Kay's a saint. How'd you ever meet such a saint, Ozzie?

OZZIE: Well, it weren't in the jungles of Vietnam. More like the jungles of Manhattan! Was it St. Patrick's, my dear?

KAY: Try the Prussian Coffee Shop.

OZZIE: Oh, yeah. I was having lunch at the table behind you.

KAY: More like you were serving lunch at the table behind me, and telling two young women how to stew an armadillo the *Irish* way!

OZZIE: Uh, huh. Chorus girls.

KAY: Working actresses.

OZZIE: I keep forgetting you have a good memory.

KAY: Only because my agency handled both of them.

OZZIE: Yeah.

[CHLOE re-enters.]

CHLOE: Guess who was out there?

OZZIE: Ludwig van Beethoven?

CHLOE: My palmist!

KAY: Like Willard, she probably saw the ad in the newspaper.

CHLOE: She'd been looking for a bowling ball and when she got up this morning, one of her special voices told her to drive up our street.

OZZIE: What's she going to do with a bowling ball? Use it as a substitute crystal ball?

CHLOE: No. She's gonna bowl with it. New ones are no good.

OZZIE: How do you know when a bowling ball is no good?

KAY: *[Straight]* When it runs with bad pins.

[OZZIE gives KAY a double-take. LENA enters, holding a fancy liquor bottle.]

LENA: We need help out here. They're pulling up in droves.

[TROY stands and goes out.]

OZZIE: Don't tell me someone is bartering with booze?

LENA: You've a two dollar tag on this. I'm buying it.

BERNICE: You would buy an empty bottle.

LENA: This is an old Jim Beam bottle. You know how much this is worth?

CHLOE: I don't drink.

LENA: Seventy-five dollars.

BERNICE: I forgot. You collect bottles.

LENA: My father started with old medicine bottles he found in Montana. I sold six of them to an antique dealer two months ago for three hundred and thirty dollars. The value of this one will continue to go up.

[LENA goes and puts it on the work bench.]

OZZIE: Maybe I should start checking over the glass bottles at the recycle station? You never know what you might find.

BERNICE: Well, you didn't know the value of that bottle.

OZZIE: Don't be hard, Bernice. *[To LENA]* How many books have you got on bottles?

LENA: Dozens.

BERNICE: Great! Dozens of books on bottles but no husband.

LENA: *[Angrily.]* Bernice, you've had a chip on your shoulder since I've known you, but since I came in here this morning, you've been worse than usual... You've been bitching about one thing after another. I don't know what your problem is, but the fact that I'm not married is none of your business!

[TROY re-enters. He puts money in the cash box, then retreats up to the work bench.]

BERNICE: *[Returns with equal anger]* What do you know about life? You've never had to worry about anything. Hell, you've lived with your parents all of your life, never had to worry about a roof over your head. What knocks in life have you had?

LENA: Sure I've been lucky. I realize that. I'm also realistically happy —

BERNICE: What does that mean?

LENA: It means that I've never wished for more than I have. What do you have, Bernice? You have misery. Misery you have obviously created for yourself. And, in spite of Troy's efforts, you've made a decent man very unhappy.

BERNICE: What did Willard mean by your "sweet revenge"?

LENA: *[Lying, her anger retreating to embarrassment]* I don't know.

BERNICE: You're lying. You're acting as guilty as sin —

LENA: It's none of your damn business, Bernice! Stop trying to worm out of your own shortcomings by making up something about me.

BERNICE: What kind of stuff would I make up about you, Lena? Tell me. What are you so guilty about?

LENA: *[Backing off]* Nothing. Just keep off my frame.

KAY: Leave her alone, Bernice.

BERNICE: She's hiding something —

TROY: [*Stepping up to his wife*] Bernie —

BERNICE: Didn't you see how embarrassed she was by what Willard said? The look on her face was a damn give-a-way!

TROY: Don't get so uptight —

BERNICE: Why are you defending her? I can understand Kay stepping in — them being so damn close. Oh, I get it. What's between you two? Joyce isn't the only wife on this block who's got a husband screwing another woman —

TROY: What're you saying, Bernice?

LENA: She thinks you've been carrying on behind her back.

CHLOE: Oh, my Lord. When do you have time, Troy?

OZZIE: Hey, we haven't finished the rubber!

KAY: I don't think that was quite the right thing to say, Ozzie.

OZZIE: Huh? What's going on, Kay?

BERNICE: You've been messing around behind my back, not with Lena, but with Chloe?

TROY: Bernie, you should know me better than that. But how could you? Stupid of me, isn't it, when all you've ever cared about was that brother of yours. Maybe you should have married him?

BERNICE: That's sick, Troy!

KAY: Troy, Bernice. I think you should sit down and cool off.

BERNICE: Butt out of this, Madison Avenue!

KAY: Don't start on me, Bernice. I've a little more ammunition than you could ever cope with.

BERNICE: Oh, is that so? You know what you are? You're a frustrated martyr.

OZZIE: Bernice, are you going through the *change*?

[*All freeze. Dead silence.*]

TROY: Come on, Bernie. Lighten up.

BERNICE: No one has ever given a damn about me. You think I became a nurse cause I had some shitty notion of helping people?

TROY: Well, you used to believe that's why you became a nurse —

BERNICE: When? When did I ever say that?

TROY: In Vietnam.

BERNICE: In Vietnam! If I had any ideals, what was happening in Vietnam put a short end to them.

CHLOE: Gosh, this is some *divorce sale*.

KAY: Chloe, would you get Bernice a glass of water?

CHLOE: Sure.

[CHLOE goes into the hours and quickly returns with a glass of water.]

OZZIE: Sit down, Bernie. You're getting all worked up over nothing —

BERNICE: Get your fat hands off me, you damn has-been!

KAY: That was uncalled for, Bernice.

OZZIE: Yeah. To be a has-been, you've had to have been a *somebody* once.

BERNICE: Oh, aren't you the noble one now! You're all lousy hypocrites. None of you gives a damn about me! You're too caught up with your faces! Your crappy little fronts!

CHLOE: Here you go, Bernice.

[Stepping forward, CHLOE hands BERNICE the glass of water.]

BERNICE: You little whore!

[BERNICE throws the water in CHLOE'S face. TROY quickly steps between BERNICE and CHLOE.]

BERNICE: Protecting your little snatch?!

[CHLOE goes to the workbench to grab a paper towel from a container hooked to the wall. She wipes her face, then the front of her blouse.]

TROY: *[Controlled anger]* Let me tell you something, Bernie. She's not my "little snatch." Nor is Lena. They're friends. Good friends, like Kay and Ozzie here. Joyce, too, or none of us would be doing what we're doing today for her. *[Now cautiously concerned]* I don't know, Bernie. Nowadays, you get so worked up over the littlest thing.

BERNICE: Then why in the hell don't you leave me if you can't take it?

TROY: I don't have the energy to do that, Bernie.

BERNICE: Maybe you'd have the energy if Willard found you a cocktail waitress?

TROY: *[With despair]* Oh, for heaven's sake, Bernie. What's ticked you off?

[CHLOE has been kneeling by the basket in which the dog is lying. She looks up and over at the others, distressed by what she has discovered.]

CHLOE: Kay, it's Slip. *[In tears]* He's dead!

[KAY, OZZIE, LENA, and TROY rush to CHLOE and the basket, leaving Bernice alone.]

BERNICE: *[Absolute frustration]* Damn you, Slip! Damn you all!

[BERNICE quickly exits.]

BLACKOUT

END OF Scene One

[Scene Two: Setting: The same. Afternoon. The dress rack is now empty and pushed against the wall, along with the odd-man out straight-back chair, typewriter stand, and the cigarette stand. The cardboard boxes are gone, too. There is, however, a table lamp without a shade sitting alone in the garage. SLIP'S basket is nowhere in sight. The card table and four folding chairs have been pushed to the side. AT RISE: KAY is sitting at the card table counting out a respectable amount of money, making notes in a notebook as she counts. The cash box sits in the middle of the table, along with two stacks of playing cards and three coffee cups. Two other coffee cups sit on the workbench. Sitting across from her is OZZIE, looking like a man recently put through hell. CHLOE, at the workbench, is packing the large coffee urn into a box balancing precariously on the wooden stool. After successfully folding down the flaps of the cardboard box, she puts the box on the workbench and shoves it back against the wall. As she does this, she knocks over a soda pop can sitting on the edge of the workbench. She quickly rights it. She grabs the last of the paper napkins sitting on the work bench and wipes up the small amount of pop and discards the wet paper napkins in a wastepaper basket near the kitchen door.]

OZZIE: [*Overly dramatic sigh*] This has been the worst day of my life!

KAY: Haven't you always said that was the day you were born?

OZZIE: That was my mother who said that. Bless her little Irish soul.

KAY: [*Very dramatically*] The big spotlight in the ceiling of the delivery room went out and they had to deliver you in the dark.

OZZIE: Semi-dark. The nurses had flashlights.

KAY: They were former girl scouts.

OZZIE: At least I wasn't born in a trunk in the Palace Theatre in the sticks.

KAY: If was the office in my Grandfather's gas station in Monk Cove, California.

OZZIE: Still the sticks. Whoever heard of Monk Cove, California?

KAY: No one, now. It doesn't exist anymore.

[*KAY laughs and continues counting. CHLOE enters the house.*]

OZZIE: Four years ago I would never have thought we'd up and move out of Manhattan and I'd be cast as a suburban homebody. [*Announcing:*] I'm up to my ears in home economics!

KAY: Do you regret it?

OZZIE: What?! Fighting rats, mice, stray cats, and other ragtailed beings for my meals? No way!

KAY: But you regret not being the actor you wanted to be?

OZZIE: I do work in the local community theatre. *[Confessing]* Yes, I feel guilty...

KAY: Why?

OZZIE: I made a promise to a little kid once. I told him I'd grow up to be a big Broadway and movie star. It didn't happen. I've disappointed that kid. That's why I feel guilty.

KAY: *[Seeing into this]* I'm sure that kid knows by now that our most precious dreams rarely come true.

OZZIE: Yeah. Still I can't help feeling guilty.

KAY: I'm sure that kid forgives you. Don't you, Ozzie?

OZZIE: I should know better than to try and be cryptic with you.

KAY: Were you being cryptic, Ozzie, or just plain and simple honest? One of the first things we decided upon, in entering this marriage of ours, was absolute honesty between us.

OZZIE: "Born of friendship." Remember that, Kay? You saved my life. You came riding up in that yellow taxi and pulled me from that murky-mouthed dragon.

KAY: What happened to the fire-spitting dragon of yore?

[A beat as she shivers.]

KAY: You haven't talk about this for quite a long time. Troy and Bernice's little spat upset you a little more than it should have.

OZZIE: Bernice is under some sort of crisis. In spite of everything, I feel sorry for her.

KAY: You're a "push-over."

OZZIE: Yeah.

KAY: Well, you might have been right when you asked her if she was going through the change.

OZZIE: You think she is?

KAY: Partly. Have you noticed that since we moved here and gotten to know Troy and Bernice, she has consistently shunned any sort of close friendship, she can't be rejected?

OZZIE: If she has no close friendships, she can't be rejected?

KAY: Yes.

OZZIE: She was probably hurt once and has never wanted to chance being hurt again. Thus, the mask of hostility is something of a protection.

[KAY stands behind OZZIE, putting her hands on his shoulders.]

KAY: My own little Sigmund Freud. *[A slight pause.]* Ozzie, I want you to remember that this marriage of ours is sacred to me.

OZZIE: G'd heavens! You're not suggesting that I'm a Holy Quest?!

KAY: *[Laughing]* You're good for me, Ozzie. You know why?

OZZIE: I can't think of one logical reason.

KAY: It's because you never let me take myself too seriously.

OZZIE: Then it is I who has the *Holy Quest*.

KAY: Really?

OZZIE: To make of our marriage your armor.

KAY: Oh, Ozzie. You don't know how right you are.

[She gives him an affectionate kiss on the forehead. Then she steps around in front of him and gives him a quizzical glance.]

KAY: You know, you still haven't taught me how to stew an armadillo the *Irish* way.

[CHLOE re-enters from the house. She is carrying another roll of paper towels, which she puts on the workbench.]

OZZIE: Remind me never to host another yard sale as long as I live.

CHLOE: *[Gently correcting him]* Divorce sale, Ozzie.

OZZIE: A yard sale by any other name will ever be mud to me, henceforward. Phew! What a day! There must have been a couple hundred people here today.

KAY: *[Sitting, she checks the notebook.]* According to Lena's nose-count, one hundred and thirty-three.

OZZIE: Seemed like more.

CHLOE: It sure did —

OZZIE: It goes to prove that people will buy anything if they think they're getting a bargain!

CHLOE: *[Pointing to the shade less lamp]* Except for that poor lamp. No one seemed interested in it. I wonder why? It works.

OZZIE: They're out of season.

CHLOE: It seems a shame to throw it away.

OZZIE: Why don't you adopt it?

KAY: I'm sure Joyce wouldn't mind.

OZZIE: I hope Troy's okay. Think I ought to give him a call?

KAY: We should stay out of it, Ozzie.

CHLOE: Bernice won't do anything desperate, will she?

OZZIE: Some scene, huh? *[He reaches over and pats his wife on the hand.]* Sorry about Slip, honey. He was with you a long time. Perhaps we should get a puppy soon?

KAY: Not for a while, Ozzie. If ever.

OZZIE: It wouldn't be like you were trying to replace him.

CHLOE: Why'd Bernice get so upset with the dog dying? She never liked him.

OZZIE: It took the wind out of her sails. Like scene-stealing in a bad play.

[WILMA enters in a fit of hysteria, screaming out:]

WILMA: It's Harry, Harry! Oh, Chloe! It's terrible! Terrible! What am I going to do?

CHLOE: What's happened, Wilma? What's happened to "Harry"?

WILMA: I put him on the patio wall to let his water drain through, I was in the house only a few minutes. *[To OZZIE and KAY]* That kitten in the pink collar that was in your tree this morning, went to the bathroom in the pot, then uprooted Harry. His leaves are torn, his stalk is broken, his roots are exposed! What if he dies, again! *[A sudden thought]* Vitamin B-One! That's it. That should snap him out of it! *[Quickly to CHLOE]* I'll re-pot him! Yes, yes! I'm coming, Harry! *[WILMA exits.]*

OZZIE: What in heaven's name was all that about, Chloe? What's gotten into her?

CHLOE: *[Over a heavy sigh]* She thinks that Harry has come back as a plant?

OZZIE: Plant? Your father-in-law? What kind of a plant?

CHLOE: One of those house plant-type of plants. The big leafy ones.

KAY: *Dieffenbachia?*

CHLOE: That's it. Oh, I don't know. Wilma has had some weird ideas in the past, but a human coming back from the dead as a plant?

KAY: What's that husband of yours say about this?

CHLOE: He seems to think that by ignoring it all, it'll clear up and disappear in time like acne.

OZZIE: Well, that's a political economist for you. I suppose you've talked to that Hungarian palmist of yours about this? What's Madam *Serengeti* say?

CHLOE: *Szendrei.*

OZZIE: Why don't these people have names like Smith or Jackson?

KAY: Probably for the same reasons you wanted to call the garage sale a *divorce sale.*

[OZZIE gives her a mockingly weak grin.]

CHLOE: Wilma keeps the plant by her bedside when she goes to sleep at night.

OZZIE: Can you imagine all that mulch up her —

KAY: Ozzie!

[Stuffs the counted money and notebook into cash box]

CHLOE: She carries it into the kitchen during the day. Even sets it in Harry's favorite chair when she watches TV.

OZZIE: Any particular shows?

CHLOE: Huh? Gosh, I don't know.

KAY: It's not important, Chloe.

OZZIE: Where'd this plant come from?

CHLOE: The grocery store on Wednesday. She was walking down the aisle and as she was looking over the air ferns, this plant got her attention.

OZZIE: What did it do? Whistle at her? What do you mean, "It got her attention"?

CHLOE: Wilma was drawn to it.

OZZIE: Was there some sort of magnetism between them?

CHLOE: She doesn't know. She said it was like being stared at. She turned and there it was, looking at her.

KAY: Plants don't look at you, Chloe.

CHLOE: Well, Wilma said it was looking at her.

OZZIE: *[Without taking a breath]* This sounds like something out of those scandal rags you read when you're standing in the checkout counter at the grocery store. "Elderly Woman Seduced by Leafy Don Juan and Gives Birth to a Hedge." *[Now he takes a breath]* Chloe, plants don't try to pick you up for a quickie at the local sleazy motel!

CHLOE: Why would Harry want to pick her up and take her to a motel?

OZZIE: Why would he want to come back as a plant?

KAY: You should take her to the doctor.

CHLOE: You ought to see this plant. It's the weirdest potted plant I've ever seen. Unruly!

OZZIE: Well, Harry did have that head of hair that stood on end. I always thought he looked a little like Albert Einstein.

KAY: Or Don King.

[LENA enters from the house carrying a shovel, which she leans in a corner.]

LENA: I buried him under the plum tree.

OZZIE: He liked that plum tree.

LENA: How do you know?

OZZIE: He always pissed on it.

[LENA steps down to the card table. She stands behind KAY, putting her hands on KAY'S shoulders.]

KAY: Thanks, Lena. I didn't have the heart to do it.

OZZIE: And I don't have a license to operate one of those things. *[Pointing to the shovel.]*

LENA: No problem.

[LENA walks around behind OZZIE to the workbench where she picks up the can of soda pop, shakes it with a puzzled look, and then takes a sip of it.]

CHLOE: I thought one couldn't bury their pets in their yards?

KAY: *[Passionately]* I don't give a damn if it's illegal. He stays here, in his own yard.

OZZIE: Right! But don't tell anyone, Chloe.

CHLOE: Oh, no. *[Fervently]* Never.

OZZIE: They might put us all in jail.

CHLOE: Huh?

OZZIE: You'd be included as an accessory.

CHLOE: *[Distressed]* They wouldn't, would they?

LENA: *[Reassuringly]* Don't worry, Chloe. I'll tell the judge you were an innocent bystander.

OZZIE: You can visit us in prison.

CHLOE: Oh, yes. Faithfully.

OZZIE: You'll bake cakes for us, with lots of iron in them.

CHLOE: Cakes? I don't know how to bake cakes.

KAY: Don't listen to them, Chloe. We would probably be fined or simply reprimanded by a dour-faced law official.

CHLOE: No prison?

KAY: No.

CHLOE: Thank, God. I remember what Zsa Zsa said about women in prison.

[TROY enters the garage through the kitchen door. He looks pretty wretched.]

LENA: Troy. Are you all right?

TROY: Can I get something to eat over here?

[KAY stands and goes to him.]

KAY: Sure thing. What do you want?

TROY: Oh, I don't care. Sandwich, soup. Anything. *[He sits at the card table.]*
Bernice locked the refrigerator.

OZZIE: A desperate act.

TROY: *[Confused]* I never knew that refrigerator could be locked.

OZZIE: Just when you think they've done about all they can do to the kitchen refrigerator, they come up with a new feature. What's next?

TROY: She's not talking to me.

LENA: You stood your ground today, Troy.

TROY: I don't know what's going to happen.

LENA: The next move is up to her.

OZZIE: *[Emphatically]* She locked the refrigerator!

KAY: Lena...Chloe...come and help me in the kitchen.

[After KAY, LENA, and CHLOE exit:]

OZZIE: Bernice was a bit hard on Kay.

TROY: Resents her self-confidence. Bernice resents anyone with a sound ego.

OZZIE: Weak self-esteem.

TROY: I suppose. Yes. I guess so. The root of her problem seems to be her older sister. Attractive, talented, and reasonably successful.

OZZIE: I see. What Bernice felt was the ideal and that she would never realize?

TROY: You know, I never met her older sister until we had been married something like twelve years.

OZZIE: Lived out of town?

TROY: Yes, but not out of state. Not on the other side of the country.

OZZIE: Why didn't she want you to meet her? Afraid the sister might take you away from her?

TROY: Something like that. Yeah.

OZZIE: Talk about a lack of self-confidence.

TROY: Not resilient at all.

OZZIE: Personal survival depends on it.

TROY: I finally met her sister at the brother's funeral. What a way to meet people. It was such a straining time.

OZZIE: What about friends?

TROY: Friends? I've never known her to run around with anyone — it worries me that she keeps to herself so.

OZZIE: Has your whole married life with Bernice been a straining time?

TROY: Only when her family was involved. I've never understood Bernie, maybe because I've never understood that closed-off family of hers. But Bernie and I have had some fun times. You've got to hold to those memories if you believe in a relationship. And you should have seen her in Vietnam. As much as she disclaims the whole experience, she was in her element there, no matter how awful it was. She made us feel indestructible in her presence. *[Heavy sigh]* Now...? I don't know what she feels. And nothing I do is right. God, I'm drained.

[LENA re-enters carrying a bottle of wine and five wine glasses, which she places on the card table. The bottle is open and she pours out three glasses of wine. She puts the cork back into the bottle and takes one of the glasses of wine.]

OZZIE: At least you're not confronted with the problem of a plant that is the reincarnation of someone's dead husband.

TROY: *[Lost]* Plant? Dead husband?

LENA: *[Suspiciously]* You've been watching anthropological documentaries again, Ozzie.

OZZIE: *[Flippantly]* A man must have his hobbies. *[Over shoulder to kitchen door]* No, it's Chloe's mother-in-law.

LENA: Sometimes I think Chloe is fortunate. Blissful ignorance. What are you talking about, Ozzie?

OZZIE: *[Overly dramatic]* A mother-in-law obsessed by a fatal attraction for a wild Dieffenbachia!

TROY: Spell it out, Ozzie.

OZZIE: Chloe says that her mother-in-law believes Harry has come back as a plant. She's obsessed by the idea.

LENA: *Obsessed or possessed?*

TROY: And I was worried about not knowing that the refrigerator could be locked.

LENA: I think I'll go see if Kay and Chloe need any further help.

OZZIE: Not on your life?

[OZZIE grabs LENA'S arm and pulls her back down into the chair. KAY and CHLOE enter through the kitchen door with several plates. One contains a couple of sandwiches, the other some sliced carrots, celery, cheese, and crackers. They put the plates on the table. There is more than enough for all of them.]

OZZIE: We're going to call in Madam Szendrei. We'll have her put on a séance and have her contact Harry.

KAY: Hasn't today been enough of a strain, Ozzie? You want to contact the dead, too?

OZZIE: Chloe, call Madam Szendrei and see if she will do it. *[To KAY]* If she won't or can't, then we'll play more bridge or watch my Laurel and Hardy videos.

KAY: *[Quickly surrendering]* All right, all right. *[To CHLOE]* Why don't you see if Madam Szendrei can come over later this evening.

[CHLOE exits into the kitchen]

KAY: I hope you know what this means, Ozzie?

OZZIE: Yeah. But someone will have to go to the liquor store and get the Bulgarian *Merlot* for Madam Szendrei!

KAY: You realize, Ozzie, that this is a woman who believes seriously in what she does?

OZZIE: Oh, it'll be a fun evening!

KAY: There are no spirits, Ozzie, even if Madam Szendrei, Chloe, Chloe's mother-in-law, and millions of other people believe there are.

OZZIE: Sure, sure. I respect their beliefs.

KAY: It's no joking matter to them. It's the way they cope with their mortality.

OZZIE: Don't get philosophically maudlin on me, honey.

KAY: You're using the wrong objective, darling. Your interest in a séance is purely mischievous.

[Standing, LENA goes to KAY.]

LENA: Can it do any harm, Kay?

OZZIE: That a'girl!

KAY: It could, to Chloe. She's very impressionable. It isn't a healthy idea. It's bad enough she has a nutty mother-in-law. *[OZZIE stands, kicking back his chair and going to KAY. He takes his wife by the shoulders and looks her directly in the eyes. She does not flinch.]*

OZZIE: Nothing will happen. Besides, it'll keep Troy's mind off his marital problems.

TROY: Oh, great, Ozzie. Pass the buck!

[OZZIE turns back to the card table and grabs the sandwich TROY is about to bite into. TROY makes another selection.]

OZZIE: *[To TROY]* It'll be just a couple hours of distraction. *[To KAY]* Please, baby?

KAY: *[To LENA]* "Baby," he calls me. *[To OZZIE and TROY]* The responsibility for any trouble is on your shoulders!

OZZIE: I know, I know. "The fault, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."

KAY: Well, we all know what happened to Julius Caesar.

[KAY exits back into the kitchen, leaving LENA and TROY with OZZIE.]

TROY: I'm not sure I understand Kay's analogy.

LENA: *[Pouring more wine into her glass]* Caesar refused to heed the warning of the Soothsayer.

LENA: *[Saluting OZZIE]* "Beware the Ides of March."

TROY: What's it got to do with Madame Szendrei?

[A pause, OZZIE quivers with feverish happiness. LENA takes a carrot stick and crunches into it. TROY takes another bite of his sandwich.]

OZZIE: Lena, you go and get the Bulgarian *Merlot*.

LENA: Why Bulgarian *Merlot*?

OZZIE: Because it is Hungarian and Madam Szendrei claims to be Hungarian!

LENA: Bulgarian *Merlot* has nothing to do with being Hungarian, Ozzie. *[With sudden realization]* You do know that Bulgaria and Hungary are two separate countries? At least, they were yesterday. They may have split into five different countries today.

TROY: It's hard keeping track of what's going on over there.

LENA: Sure you're not thinking of Budapest? The capital of Hungary?

TROY: I read in the newspaper that college students can't find the city they live in on a map.

OZZIE: *[Dryly]* Very interesting, Troy.

LENA: Can we get this Bulgarian *Merlot* at our local Liquor store?

OZZIE: Where else would I have seen it? *[He takes the glass of wine from her and puts it on the card table.]* And it's cheaper than domestic wine.

LENA: That doesn't make any sense, Ozzie.

OZZIE: Did I ask you to analyze international trade laws, as well as to so cruelly expose my ignorance of geography in front of my best friend's here?

LENA: *[Giving in]* Well, I have to take the garage sale money and slip it in the night drop at the bank. I might as well stop by the liquor store and get your Bulgarian *Merlot*. *[A quick double-check]* You're sure it's not *Merlot* from Budapest?

OZZIE: Yes, yes.

LENA: What if they don't have it?

OZZIE: They have it, they have it!

[LENA outs up her hands in friendly surrender. Then she picks up the cash box and exits through the kitchen door.]

OZZIE: I like Lena, but she can be frustrating at times.

TROY: Like catching you in an error? *[OZZIE gives TROY the evil eye.]* She's devoted to Kay, isn't she?

OZZIE: I think she's in love with her in the way one idolizes another. It must be pretty dull being a salesgirl...rude customers bitching at you day after day. Let's face it...Kay's got an attractive job, running a talent agency. She's got some important clients. To Lena, she's really sort of bigger than life. In fact, Kay is bigger than life. Lots of people should be in love with Kay. Kay...well, Kay reminds me of the heroic figures in classical literature: overcoming obstacles when the odds seem against her—

TROY: *[Cutting him off]* You're a phony, Ozzie!

OZZIE: *[Appalled]* Great Hollyhock, Troy! Do you think that Kay and I are "the passionate couple"? Look at me: I'm huge, comical-looking, helpless. She's beautiful, elegant, a female knight-in-shining armor.

TROY: This heroic business needs tending to, Ozzie. What did she do to win such an impressive badge? Kill the dragon that was going to devour you?

OZZIE: If it wasn't for Kay coming into my life so many moons ago, I'd be where many unfortunates are today: homeless, forgotten, dismal, dead.

[As OZZIE sits, KAY opens the kitchen door and sticks her head into the garage.]

KAY: How many bottles of wine do you want Lena to get?

OZZIE: Whatever it takes to send a Hungarian-gypsy to the spirit world.

KAY: I see. A wild number huh?

OZZIE: A magical number.

[KAY exits, then quickly reappears.]

KAY: Why *Merlot* from Budapest?

OZZIE: Because gypsies love it!

KAY: I didn't know you were such an authority on gypsies?

OZZIE: I'm not.

[KAY exits back into the kitchen.]

OZZIE: *[Shouting over his shoulder after her]* And it's from Bulgaria! *[Mumbling to himself]* I can see it'll be a long time before I live this down. *[To TROY]* Women love to latch onto things like this.

TROY: What did she do?

OZZIE: *[Back over his shoulder to kitchen door]* As a child, my parents couldn't afford to have an atlas in the house!

TROY: *[Grabbing OZZIE'S arm]* What did she save you from, Ozzie?

[KAY pops back in, announcing:]

KAY: And your city library had world globes so old, they were flat! *[She exits.]*

OZZIE: See what I mean?

TROY: Come on, Ozzie. What did she do?

[KAY re-enters, gives him a raspberry, and again, exits. OZZIE jumps up, returning the raspberry.]

TROY: *[At wit's end, yells:]* Ozzie, I was never a kid who liked cliffhangers! In fact, I wouldn't go to Saturday matinees because of them! I had to know everything right then and there! I won't watch *Masterpiece Theatre* unless it's one complete episode. Do you hear me?!

OZZIE: *[Matter-of-factly]* Does your Rabbi know this?

TROY: I don't go to the Temple.

OZZIE: That's right. You aren't orthodox. I always figured it was because Bernice wasn't Jewish. But I never had any idea it stemmed from some phobia regarding movie serials.

TROY: *[Through gritted teeth]* You're not going to tell me right off, are you? You're going to make me suffer?

OZZIE: *[With a fiendish grin]* Y-e-s!

[TROY drops his head onto the table]

BLACKOUT

END OF Scene Two

[Scene Three: The same. That evening. A sheet covers the dress rack and the items that have been slipped under it. The shadeless lamp now resides on top of the workbench. The card table remains on-stage with four folding chairs and the old straight-back chair. In addition, there are now two patio chairs present. AT RISE: KAY is opening up and placing two TV trays on opposite sides of the card table. OZZIE enters through the kitchen door. They have changed clothes, though they are still dressed informally.]

OZZIE: Nine o'clock.

KAY: I know.

OZZIE: Not here yet.

KAY: I know.

OZZIE: Where is she?

KAY: On her way, I should think.

OZZIE: She should be here by now.

[TROY enters through the kitchen door, eating an apple.]

TROY: It's nine o'clock.

OZZIE: *[To TROY]* Think she got lost?

KAY: *[Patiently]* She found her way here to the yard sale this morning without any problem.

OZZIE: Oh, yes. But the bowling ball was calling to her.

[TROY steps up to the shade less lamp.]

TROY: *[Matter-of-factly]* We need a light for that. Where do you keep 'em?

KAY: Linen closet in the hallway.

TROY: One bulb coming up.

[Before TROY exits back into the house, he hands OZZIE the half-eaten apple.]

OZZIE: Does the refrigerator lock?

[OZZIE places the apple on the edge of the card table. KAY picks it up and puts it on the top of the work bench, next to the lamp.]

OZZIE: I'm not sure Madam Szendrei will find our garage conducive to a séance.

KAY: I don't want any ectoplasm spilt on our new living room rug.

OZZIE: I thought we bought a stainless proof rug?

KAY: It's a warm spring night. The garage will be fine.

[TROY returns holding a light bulb up as if he were displaying a trophy.]

TROY: Let there be light!

[TROY goes over and screws the bulb into the socket, connects the plug to the outlet, and switches on the lamp.]

TROY: *Voila!*

KAY: Thanks, Troy. Ozzie is scared of anything electrical.

[As TROY re-discovers his apple, LENA enters with several bottles of wine and places them on the work bench. CHLOE comes in behind her with a tray of wine glasses and places them on the workbench, next to the bottles of wine. LENA and CHLOE have also changed their clothes.]

LENA: It's after nine.

CHLOE: I hope nothing has happened. She insists on punctuality.

TROY: It might be she decided to stand us up and go bowling.

CHLOE: Think I should call her?

OZZIE: What? And make her think we're that eager to reach out and touch the ethereal world?

KAY: If she's the professional she claims to be, she already knows that you're straining at the seams.

OZZIE: Why must your figures of speech always be so... *[He stops.]*

KAY: Well-conceived?

OZZIE: Trite?

KAY: Ticklish?

OZZIE: *[Conceding]* Truthful.

[KAY pats him affectionately on the cheek. He throws up his arms in despair.]

OZZIE: Oh, tale of woe!

TROY: *A Tale of Two Cities.*

OZZIE: A...er...God, I can't think of anything. I'm boggled!

KAY: That's a first.

LENA: It must be the expectation, Ozzie.

OZZIE: Where's Wilma?

CHLOE: At home watching reruns of *The Golden Girls*.

OZZIE: But this séance is for her benefit.

[The DOORBELL rings, catching OZZIE off-guard. He gives out a startled squeal.]

TROY: There she is!

CHLOE: I'll let her in.

[CHLOE exits eagerly through the kitchen door.]

OZZIE: I hope she isn't wearing a turban.

[CHLOE re-enters with MADAM SZENDREI. MADAM SZENDREI is a rather normal-looking and physically fit woman in her late sixties or early seventies. In fact, there is really nothing outlandish or exotic about her. After CHLOE steps around the Hungarian, MADAM SZENDREI smiles warmly at everyone and at the same instance sizes them up. OZZIE and TROY freeze, KAY steps forward and shakes MADAM SZENDREI'S hand.]

CHLOE: *[Making the introductions]* Madam Szendrei, this is Kay Britman, and her husband, Ozzie Roarke; Lena Hill, from across the street; and Troy Rosenblum, who lives in the two-story house on the corner.

SZENDREI: *[To OZZIE]* A Sagittarian born of two Leos.

OZZIE: *[Thrown, for the moment]* A...er... well, yes, Madam Szendrei.

SZENDREI: Ilona. Call me Ilona.

[MADAM SZENDREI studies their faces.]

SZENDREI: Rather interesting. *[Decisively]* It'll keep things simple.

KAY: What?

SZENDREI: You're all only children.

KAY: Yes, I guess we are.

TROY: I had a younger brother. He died at birth.

SZENDREI: It never counts, unless it's an identical twin.

KAY: None of us have been through this sort of thing before, so you may want to do something different to the furniture —

SZENDREI: Oh, not at all, Kay. I will take the head of the table, however. Would it be too much to move the straight-back chair up here? *[Looking over at the shadeless lamp on the work bench.]* And the lamp. H'm... I think we can turn it down once we get going. But you'll need to put a 3-way bulb in it.

[LENA moves the straight-back chair to MADAM SZENDREI, while CHLOE rearranges the other chairs.]

KAY: Troy?

TROY: I put a 150-watt in it. *[He tries, and the switch clicks twice, then off.]* You got any 3-ways, Kay?

KAY: Yes

[TROY exits. SZENDREI, hooking her sling purse over the back of the straight-back chair, sits.]

SZENDREI: Yes, This will do. I've never done a séance in a garage before. Done several in barns and one in a derelict *caboose*.

KAY: After the yard sale today, we haven't gotten back to normal.

SZENDREI: Oh, I'd say you are all as normal as can be expected. *[To OZZIE]* Some perhaps a little histrionic. Wrong time, wrong place for you, Ozzie. It will come, in another life. *[Beat]* And you're wrong to think you're Oliver Hardy reincarnated. Not even close.

KAY: Of course, you must know quite a lot about us from Chloe?

SZENDREI: *[To KAY]* Some things. Yes. It would only be natural that Chloe would talk about those around her. But does Chloe know everything about you? *[A beat]* Interesting former lives, my dear. Yes. Trying not to let them influence your actions in this life, however. Very difficult.

[TROY re-enters with a 3-way bulb. He replaces the 150 watt in the lamp with it, then puts the 150 watt bulb in the very corner of the work bench.]

SZENDREI: Please put the light at the lowest level. Troy. *[He does so.]* Thank you.

CHLOE: We want to find out why my dead father-in-law has come back as a plant, Ilona.

SZENDREI: *[Not batting an eyelid at this]* You sit next to Kay. Troy, please sit there, next to Chloe. I should like Ozzie at this end.

[They settle in around the card table.]

SZENDREI: Yes, No. Wait. Chloe, please change with Ozzie. *[They do.]* Yes. That's it.

KAY: Would you like a glass of wine before we start?

LENA: It's a Bulgarian Merlot. *[Not looking OZZIE'S way]* The liquor store didn't have any Hungarian wine.

SZENDREI: Bulgarian Merlot? Oh, yes. From the Haskovo region of Bulgaria. I used to drink it when I lived in Budapest, Hungary. It's a nice dry wine. *[Eyeing OZZIE]* But, no. Not a drop before my work is done. I need a clear mind when I go into a trance.

KAY: *[Businesslike]* Anything we should know first?

SZENDREI: I've never had any problems and I'm quite healthy. What will happen, once I've gone into the trance, is that I contact my helper.

LENA: Helper?

SZENDREI: My *control*. That's what many mediums call them. In this day and age people aren't clear as to what you might be talking about. "Helper" seems a more appropriate descriptive.

TROY: Will we see this helper?

SZENDREI: No. Not unless, of course, you have hidden qualities.

TROY: Hardly.

SZENDREI: *[A gentle scolding]* Don't degrade yourself, Troy. Be strong: then all will be okay. *[Looking around at the group, she puts her hands out before her, palms up.]* All I ask is that you be quiet until I make contact, then you can ask questions. Remember: be relaxed.

[MADAM SZENDREI closes her eyes. All look to her, then each other. They remain quiet.]

SZENDREI: *[After a few moments]* Ah, there you are. *[She opens her eyes.]*

OZZIE: The "control"?

SZENDREI: A former meter man for the city. He's quite reliable. I always use him as my control. Poor man. He was killed at State and Elm when a car jumped the curb and hit him. Unfortunate accident.

TROY: There is no Elm now. *[Peering around]* They closed it off when they built the inner city mall.

OZZIE: Yes, well. Being a meter man isn't without its dangers.

SZENDREI: Yes? Oh, yes. It is Chloe who wishes to talk to her father-in-law. Chloe?

CHLOE: I don't know...Oh, Ilona. How do you talk to a meter man?

SZENDREI: Don't waste words. Be direct. Get right to the point. He could be drawn back any moment.

CHLOE: Where is he?

SZENDREI: He's moved over there. *[She nods to the invisible control.]*

CHLOE: What's his name?

SZENDREI: Arnold Jones. But he likes to be called "Arnie." He appears to be looking at the garage door opener... for some odd reason. He doesn't usually dawdle about, peering at things. All right. You have his attention now.

CHLOE: *[Turning in her chair]* It's Harry Garver Wheeler, Jr. He's dead and my mother-in-law thinks he has come back as a plant. Can you ask him if he has, why?

OZZIE: That should send him over to the other side pronto.

TROY: The question is: Will he come back with an answer?

[There is a slight groan from the garage door mechanism, which hangs out of sight and above the card table. All look up at it.]

SZENDREI: I'm sure you had those things when you were alive. No? Well, I'm not certain when they came in. Late Fifties or early Sixties, I think. Please, try to restrain your curiosity and answer Chloe's question. *[A slight pause]* I see. Yes. Is it absolutely important? Well, if it is to you. What kind of plant? *[The garage opener groans again, but a little louder this time.]*

OZZIE: *[Impatiently]* A dieffenbachia! *[To MADAM SZENDREI]* And tell him to stop fiddling with our garage door opener

[The light in the lamp on the work bench begins to flicker, on and off in rapid succession.]

OZZIE: What is it?

SZENDREI: Most odd.

LENA: [Under her breath] Odd is an understatement.

SZENDREI: He is always so even tempered. [Listening] No. It is.... [Beat] Ah. Well, that explains it.

CHLOE: Explains what?

SZENDREI: The wine bottles.

LENA: He drank?

SZENDREI: The man who hit him with the car had been swerving to try to avoid hitting a wino that had wandered into the street.

TROY: They're still wandering into the streets down there, even after the revitalization program eleven years ago.

SZENDREI: The wino dropped a full bottle of Muscat getting out of the way of the car. [To them all, deeply earnest] He remembers the smell. Can't escape it. Even to the other side.

OZZIE: The smell of Muscat is a little hard to escape, particularly if it's a cheap brand.

LENA: We can move the bottles back in to the kitchen?

SZENDREI: No, he says it's quite all right. It was simply the shock of smelling the wine in here.

OZZIE: Bulgarian.

LENA: If it's going to disrupt anything, Chloe and I can quickly take them out of —

SZENDREI: You mustn't move from the table. He'll stay away from that area of the garage.

OZZIE: And that garage door opener?

SZENDREI: The name of the man we want to contact is Harry Garver Wheeler, Jr. [MADAM SZENDREI slips into silent gear and the others follow suit.]

SZENDREI: *[After a long pause]* He says he can't deliver the message.

KAY: *[Amused]* Why not?

SZENDREI: Too many emotions disrupting the field.

LENA: Emotions?

OZZIE: What emotions?

[WILMA comes into the garage from the house. CHLOE looks up and sees her.]

CHLOE: Oh, it's only Wilma.

WILMA: I don't mean to interrupt your game playing, but that kitten has been back and I don't like the looks of it. I've got Harry tucked safely away in the lathe house but I'm not certain that kitten isn't out to get him.

CHLOE: Sit down here, Wilma.

[CHLOE looks at MADMA SEZNDREI who gives her a nod of "okay."]

WILMA: Oh, can I play, too? What is it that you're playing?

OZZIE: Night of the living dead.

KAY: Perhaps Wilma would like a glass of....er.....a coke, or something before we continue?

WILMA: Well, I would like to know the rules of the game?

TROY: I don't think there are any, Wilma.

SZENDREI: It's rather a mental thing, Wilma. I may call you Wilma?

LENA: This is Madam Szendrei.

WILMA: Oh, you're the palmist Chloe sees.

[MADAM SZENDREI shakes WILMA'S hand, then guides her to the chair next to her. She doesn't let go of her hand, and CHLOE takes the other. All interlock their hands and hold them on top of the table.]

WILMA: *[After a few seconds pass]* What's Arnie Jones doing here?

[They all look at WILMA.]

SZENDREI: Sees him.

WILMA: He's by the garage door. I remember when he was born. His father, our ice man, was so proud. Had to tell us first thing when he delivered the ice that day....But... *[After a beat]* But Arnie's dead. Been dead for years.

SZENDREI: Yes. Quite dead.

WILMA: Oooh, I think I know what the game is now.

OZZIE: You wouldn't give us away to the Water Department, will' ya, Wilma?

WILMA: No, no, no.

SZENDREI: Shall we continue? *[A slight pause]* Pain. Yes. There is pain.

WILMA: I cut my finger on the newspaper this morning. Paper cuts can be —

CHLOE: Shoosh!

WILMA: Sorry. *[Whispering to CHLOE]* It's all right, though. I put a bandage on it.

SZENDREI: A pain. *[TO LENA]* Your pain.

LENA: *[Flabbergasted]* My pain? I'm perfectly all right.

SZENDREI: That is not so. He feels it but is confused by it. *[A trifle perplexed]* Perhaps because you are confused by it, too.

LENA: I'm at a loss. I have no idea what he could mean.

SZENDREI: *[To the Meterman]* What? Oh, I see. Yes.

LENA: See what?

SZENDREI: More of a delicate discomfiture.

OZZIE: *A delicate discomfiture?*

SZENDREI: *[Consolingly to LENA]* He's going to overlook it.

OZZIE: He isn't very helpful, is he? He tells her she's in pain then wants to drop it!

[LENA is disturbed; perhaps, she is slightly vexed.]

LENA: Why bring it up then?

OZZIE: Just like a meter man!

SZENDREI: But the turmoil? The turmoil left dandling in the air here. The shouting. It's stirred up pains...a sense of guilt from the past.

KAY: The fight. *[Making this statement, she could slap herself for responding.]* This is ridiculous. Letting myself get caught up in this business.

SZENDREI: I know. But it becomes infectious, doesn't it? Like the laughter some people have. You don't know what they're laughing at, but their voices are so full of irresistible glee that you can't help laughing with them.

KAY: Is it the same thing?

SZENDREI: Very much so.

WILMA: *[Over a whisper]* This is fun.

LENA: I haven't the faintest idea what's going on.

SZENDREI: H'm.

OZZIE: Does anyone?

SZENDREI: Interesting.

TROY: The fight, between Bernice and me today.

SZENDREI: Old pain, and not so old pain.

TROY: It's what he is talking about? *[To MADAM SZENDREI]* It is the pain from that? This is what disturbs him?

SZENDREI: Yours and the pain of others in this room. *[A beat]* He wants to know about your wife.

TROY: My wife? *[Desperately]* God, tell him not to call up the brother!

SZENDREI: Don't worry, Troy. Just a simple statement. It is all that's needed. It'll satisfy him.

OZZIE: This guy asks a lot to be so simply satisfied.

[MADAM SZENDREI listens for a moment.]

OZZIE: What's his problem now?

CHLOE: Don't make him mad, Ozzie. He might go away.

SZENDREI: He's referring to something or someone. I'm not certain what he is saying, what he's asking. *[To the Meterman]* You're running your words together. *[To the group]* He's upset. Quite upset. Frightened. *[Back to the Meterman]* Calm down. Hush. Yes? *[Stumped]* What woman in white?

[MADAM SZENDREI turns in her chair, looking back at the kitchen door. BERNICE appears, dressed in her white nurse's uniform, glaring suspiciously at the group. WILMA lets out a blood-curdling scream, and OZZIE slumps forward.]

LENA: *[Jumping to her feet]* Oh, my God! Ozzie's fainted!

[TROY, KAY, and LENA quickly rush to OZZIE, keeping him from slipping out of his chair. A momentary BLACKOUT. During the BLACKOUT, everyone is heard scurrying about, all in a frazzle over OZZIE'S fainting. Over the scurrying about, we hear:]

CHLOE: *[V.O.]* I'll get wet towels!

KAY: *[V.O.]* Ozzie?! Ozzie can you hear me?!

TROY: *[V.O.]* God, he hasn't had a heart attack...Has, he, Kay?

KAY: *[V.O.]* Ozzie, speak to me!

TROY: *[V.O.]* Chloe, hurry with those towels!

KAY: *[V.O.]* Ozzie, you better not be playing wolf.

LENA: *[V.O.]* Oh, no, Kay. He's dead out —

KAY:*[V.O.]* Don't say that, Lena! It's bad enough I lost the dog today! I don't think I could stand losing Ozzie, too!

[When the LIGHTS COME BACK UP, CHLOE is rushing from the workbench with some paper towels, wetting them down with wine. BERNICE steps forward, grabs the wine drenched towels from CHLOE and slaps them to the nape of OZZIE'S neck and with the other hand quickly takes his pulse.]

BERNICE: What the hell is going on here?!

CHLOE: We're trying to contact the dead.

BERNICE: The dead?! *[Dropping OZZIE'S wrist as he fights back his dizziness.]* Oh, I Jeez! Not the dog?!

SZENDREI: *[Shaking her head at BERNICE]* Suck anger and doubt —

KAY: *[Over OZZIE'S groaning]* You think Ozzie is all right, Bernice?

BERNICE: Yeah. He'll be fine. Keep your head between your legs, Ozzie.

OZZIE: That's easy for you to say.

SZENDREI: Such defenses.

BERNICE: Who is this woman?

TROY: This is Madam Szendrei, Bernice. She came over tonight to help Chloe solve a... er... a slight family problem. *[Aside to MADAM SZENDREI]* This is my wife: Bernice Roseblum.

BERNICE: *[Suspiciously]* Family problem? Jesus Christ, Troy! What have you been saying?

TROY: She's not talking about us. It would take more than a fortune-teller to let me know what's wrong with us.

BERNICE: Yeah? I can tell you in one word what's wrong: Boredom

TROY: Boredom? With me? With our marriage? Boredom with what?

BERNICE: Nothin' has been has been happening with us for years. That's what's wrong!

TROY: Because you don't talk to me!

BERNICE: I talk to you all the time. You just don't listen! You spend more time talking to that damn computer of yours than anything else.

TROY: Why'd you lock the refrigerator?

BERNICE: Lock the...? I didn't lock the refrigerator. It doesn't even have a lock on it.

TROY: It's locked. I couldn't get it open this afternoon.

BERNICE: Oh, for God's sake, Troy! The second shelf is off the hooks again. It's jammed against the inside of the door's shelves. I'll fix it in the morning. Is that why you came over here...? To beg food and sympathy off Kay and Ozzie?

[LENA crosses to the work bench and fills her glass from the open bottle of wine.]

TROY: If I can't talk to my friends about what worries me, then who can I talk to?

BERNICE: Griping about me, you mean?

OZZIE: Oh, God. Don't start fighting again. *[Still a little dizzy, he starts to put the wine soaked towel onto his forehead.]* I'm bleeding!

LENA: It's only wine.

TROY: *[Simultaneously to BERNICE]* Why wouldn't you answer me when I called up from the kitchen?

OZZIE: Well, at least it's at room temperature.

[OZZIE puts the wine-soaked towels onto the floor next to his chair.]

BERNICE: I haven't been home.

TROY: You haven't?

BERNICE: No. Didn't you bother to go upstairs?

TROY: No. Where'd you go?

BERNICE: To get a prescription filled.

TROY: For what?

BERNICE: Something to help me through what I didn't know was going to be such a damn difficult time.

TROY: You were gone all afternoon to get a prescription filled?

BERNICE: Yeah. But do you really care?

TROY: Yes. You know why? Because I want to know what's wrong! Because we've been married over twenty-some years.

BERNICE: Twenty-three years.

TROY: And because I love you! *[A slight pause]* You're not open with me, Bernie. Now that I think about it, you never were. It was interesting when we first met and the first couple years of our married life, it was kind of "mysterious" ... But through the years... I don't know. Something got lost. *[With frustration]* Do you love me? Have you ever really loved me?

OZZIE: *[To BERNICE]* So I was right, huh?

BERNICE: Yeah. I saw my doctor a couple of months ago about it. Stupid of me to think I could ease through it. Tell me something, Ozzie, since you've taken it upon yourself to be Troy's priest... how'd you get so lucky getting tied up with Kay?

OZZIE: The luck of the Irish, I guess.

BERNICE: Luck?

KAY: I'm the one who lucked out, Bernice. There's more here than, as you have often put it, "a marriage of convenience."

OZZIE: Kay. It isn't necessary to —

KAY: I think it is, Ozzie. I think it's time that our friends here knew the truth. *[To the group]* Ozzie and I were friends for a long time. True. Then one day, he disappeared. I didn't see him for two years. I heard from a casting director that she had seen a disheveled Ozzie begging money off passers-by across from Lincoln Center. Several months later, when I was coming into the City from LaGuardia, I saw Ozzie from the taxi. I made the driver stop, there on the Queensboro Bridge, and the both of us jumped out and pulled him back into the cab. I took him immediately to emergency and later he came home with me.

OZZIE: Kay saved me from jumping into the river.

KAY: It was only coincidence, maybe not, but my happening to be crossing the bridge at that moment when Ozzie was about to jump, helped me right an old wrong.

BERNICE: Old wrong? You? Ha!

KAY: The problem between you and I, Bernice, is that from the moment Ozzie and I moved into this neighborhood you judged me to be something more than I am. I'm just Kay Britman... Just Kay. I'm nothing more than an ordinary human being like the rest of you... with foibles... with weakness... with guilts.

LENA: *[Carefully]* What kind of guilt, Kay?

KAY: Oh, many minor ones, and one big one. In being on the bridge at the same time Ozzie was going to jump, I not only saw a friend desperate but someone I knew years ago when I was in college, who needed my understanding and help. I thought he was "play-acting" — I refused to be drawn into his game. *[To the others]* You see, I believed he threatened to kill himself for the attention...my attention. He telephoned me, and he said he was going to kill himself if I didn't get to his apartment right away...I refused to go. The next morning they found him dead, he had swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. His death was with me for years. I just couldn't escape that sense of guilt. *[Back to BERNICE]* You call me a saint...a frustrated martyr. Perhaps old guilt has made me seem such. But I'm not. Everyone has something to hide...some inner fear they don't want anyone to know about...It can sometimes be a secret one carries with them for all of their life. Every human being has at least one secret.

CHLOE: Gosh, Kay.

BERNICE: Kay's not including you, Chloe. You have no secrets.

CHLOE: *[With an edge of defiance]* I hide Oreo cookies in my gym bag.

[The tension eases as all but LENA laugh. LENA turns away, crying.]

KAY: Lena, what is it?

LENA: It's that...Nothing. It's nothing.

SZENDREI: It's the pain. I was right. Wasn't I, Lena? But it's really misunderstood, on your part.

LENA: What about the panic that goes with it?

BERNICE: It's got something to do with Willard, doesn't it? What did that *scuzzball* try, Lena?

OZZIE: I wish someone would tell me why Joyce ever married a jerk?

BERNICE: *[To LENA]* What did Willard mean by “sweet revenge”?

SZENDREI: *[Quite motherly]* Sit down, my dear.

[LENA sits, and MADAM SZENDREI pats her hand in a motherly fashion.]

LENA: It’s just that... I’ve always lived at home and dad was always strict about boys. I’ve never... I just felt trapped. Even after my parents had died, I felt trapped. One gets trapped in an endless routine... an endless but at the same time a safe routine. Willard came into the store one day, wanting to buy a bottle of perfume. I knew it wasn’t for Joyce. He must have been cheating on Joyce for years... that poor cocktail waitress only one of many. He got to talking to me... more than I to him... Something about how sorry he was that I had been so tied to caring for aged parents but now that they were both gone, I should kick up my heels and experience some of life’s better offers.

OZZIE: Namely, Willard?

BERNICE: That bastard!

[KAY retrieves the bottle of wine and refills LENA’S glass. At the same time, she refills her own glass.]

WILMA: I hope you called the manager and had him kicked out of the store?

LENA: *[Guilty]* No... I didn’t say anything.

KAY: When did the other shoe fall, Lena?

LENA: The next night. He came over. We went into the bedroom —

BERNICE: What?!

LENA: He was right, Bernice. I didn’t know anything... I wanted to but when the time came for us to... I panicked. I couldn’t do it, he called me an “idiot” and left.

BERNICE: And because you couldn’t do it with Willard you got some idea you can’t do it with any man?

SZENDREI: Why don’t you take up bowling, my dear? I have met some very nice men at the bowling alley. Men with character.

BERNICE: I’ve never seen men with character at the bowling alley... only construction workers with beer bellies and poor handicaps!

OZZIE: Perhaps Ilona doesn’t bowl on the same astral alley as you.

SZENDREI: Quite good, Ozzie.

BERNICE: Yeah. A wit that never stops. Tell me something, Ozzie: After Kay pulled you off that bridge and brought you back into the world of the living, why didn't you take up acting again?

OZZIE: Because Kay may have happened along at the right place at the right time but she couldn't create a miracle. I'm not a very good actor. I'm also not very responsible.

BERNICE: Most artists aren't.

OZZIE: I didn't fall on bad times simply because I couldn't find work as an actor. Heaven only knows there are plenty without any talent working on the stage and in the movies. No. I...er... I guess I lost a taste for life. I'd been kicked out of my apartment...couldn't find work...not even as a dishwasher. I took to the streets...then I took to the bridge. Wouldn't Thomas Hardy have loved the coincidence on the Queensboro Bridge?

BERNICE: Thomas Hardy?

OZZIE: *Return of the Native*.

BERNICE: I don't know what you're talking about.

OZZIE: Coincidences. Improbable coincidences. Like the ones in *Return of the Native* —

BERNICE: I never read *Return of the Native*.

OZZIE: I have a copy, if you'd like to read it —

KAY: Ozzie, I don't think Bernice is interested in literary recommendations at this particular moment.

BERNICE: What's Madam Szendrei doing here?

CHLOE: We're trying to contact my father-in-law, Bernice, to find out why he's come back as a plant.

BERNICE: [*Uncertain*] Plant?

OZZIE: You know, there is something we haven't considered. A houseplant doesn't have much of a life span.

LENA: At least, the survival rate for the ones in my house isn't very long. I seem to always be killing them off.

SZENDREI: Too much water.

LENA: Yes. Now that you think about it, it's really odd that he should have decided to come back as a plant.

TROY: What do you know about *Dieffenbachia*?

LENA: They can get out of hand.

BERNICE: [*Definitely*] They can kill you!

KAY: Perhaps it has more to do with the supposed spiritualistic side of plants.

OZZIE: What'ya mean? *Dieffenbachia* has some sort of supernatural operative power?

KAY: Don't know. Just a dubious person throwing some thoughts into the ring.

CHLOE: Wilma may have gotten the idea out of one of those occult books I read.

WILMA: Oh, I don't touch your books, Chloe.

OZZIE: Only her rowing machine.

SZENDREI: It can't be said to have ever been connected to spiritual goings-on...not like so many plants prehistoric and historic times.

CHLOE: What about *mistletoe* at Christmas and on New Year's Eve?

LENA: It's a *fungus*, isn't it?

TROY: A parasite that needs a host tree to grow off of. We had a problem with *mistletoe* in our California sycamore two years ago. Finally sent the cub scouts up it. They cut the stuff out and I had someone come in and spray the tree.

OZZIE: Not with the scouts still in it?

TROY: Nope. Industrious little fellows. They set up a stand outside a grocery store and sold all the *mistletoe* in two hours.

LENA: Well, no matter what plant Harry has come back as, it is obviously a short-term visit. The life cycle of most houseplants suggests he isn't planning to stay around very long.

WILMA: *[To herself]* He never did when he was alive.

KAY: We're assuming one can be reincarnated and can come back in whatever form one desires.

OZZIE: It's not very kind if it's just an eat and run visit.

TROY: H'm. We could be missing the real point here.

OZZIE: *[Dumfounded]* Point? What point?

TROY: He doesn't know any better.

BERNICE: *[At wit's end]* Will someone tell me what in hell this is all about?

TROY: A séance, Bernice. We were just getting into it when you came in.

OZZIE: And scared the shit out of me!

LENA: *[To Bernice]* You scared us all.

CHLOE: Dressed all in white, Bernice...we thought you were a ghost.

BERNICE: Ghost? I'm going on duty.

KAY: How'd you get in the house?

BERNICE: The front door was wide open. *[Suspiciously]* I was listening at the garage door —

OZZIE: It doesn't have a keyhole.

BERNICE: There was someone else in here. *[To MADAM SZENDREI]* She was talking to someone other than you six.

SZENDREI: The meterman.

BERNICE: On a Saturday night?

OZZIE: You don't see dedicated workers like that anymore.

BERNICE: What the hell was a meter man doing in here?

OZZIE: Playing with the garage door opener.

SZENDREI: He is my *control*.

BERNICE: Control?

CHLOE: All mediums have them.

BERNICE: You sound like my Aunt Dora! She reads cards, too. Didn't get her any place.

SZENDREI: Are you sure?

BERNICE: Yeah. Damn sure.

SZENDREI: Such fear, Bernice.

BERNICE: What have I got to be afraid of?

SZENDREI: Loneliness.

BERNICE: [*Uncomfortably*] Loneliness?

SZENDREI: You need not be embarrassed by it.

BERNICE: That's *bunk!* I'm not lonely.

SZENDREI: The fear of loneliness troubles you. To deny it is unwise. You needn't be so unhappy. You need to free yourself. You did well with the bit about facing up to the *change* by going and getting the prescription, but —

LENA: And worming that business about Willard out of me. I feel so much better. I didn't realize how it was bothering me.

OZZIE: This is going to sound trite, but didn't someone once say that "confession is good for the soul"?

BERNICE: *[To MADAM SZENDREI]* Are you a gypsy fortune-teller or a head shrink?

SZENDREI: *[Laughing gently]* A little of both, I should guess. Yes. A little of both.

LENA: How many stages of denial are there until you reach the point when you wholly believe in the unbelievable, Ozzie?

KAY: Doesn't it really have something to do with the stages towards the final acceptance of death?

OZZIE: Don't get technical. *[He stands but quickly sits back down.]* It makes my ears buzz.

BERNICE: It's your high blood pressure.

OZZIE: Don't drag my blood pressure into this. It's fine. Well, nearly fine.

BERNICE: Knock off some of that fat, it'd be normal.

OZZIE: How like a nurse: honing in on a man's only weakness.

CHLOE: Oh, Bernice, Ilona is so tied into the spiritual world.

TROY: Pretty good with character analysis, too.

BERNICE: Jesus Christ! I've never known such a bunch of idiots! And I'm surprised at you, Kay.

KAY: I'm along for the ride, Bernice.

LENA: We didn't give her much of a choice.

[LENA clicks her wine glass against Kay's glass.]

BERNICE: Kay without a choice? Don't make me *puke!*

LENA: She was absolutely out numbered.

BERNICE: Hell!!! That's more fantastic than trying to call Chloe's father-in-law back from the dead!

[MADAM SZENDREI sits in the straight-back chair, quiet and introspective. She is moving into a trance.]

KAY: They convinced me it'd be fun.

[A high-pitched squeal resounds offstage]

CHLOE: *[Startled]* What's that?

KAY: It sounds like our smoke alarm

OZZIE: That's all we need: a fire!

KAY: I'll go take a look.

LENA: I'll do it.

[LENA hands her glass of wine to OZZIE. He drinks it down.]

LENA: If it's like the one in my house, it goes off when I toast bread.

[LENA exits through the kitchen door.]

BERNICE: I ripped ours out of the ceiling.

OZZIE: That must have shaken up the bats in the belfry.

[KAY takes the empty wine glass from OZZIE and puts it on the work bench.]

TROY: It cost us twelve-hundred dollars to have the ceiling replastered and a new smoke alarm put in. A must for insurance purposes.

BERNICE: *[Bitterly]* Another damn scam!

TROY: We had to cash a bond to pay the electrician.

[MADAM SZENDREI starts singing under her breath.]

OZZIE: I didn't realize you had such expensive habits, Bernice.

BERNICE: *[Motioning to MADAM SZENDREI]* What the hell is she doing now?

[KAY refills LENA's glass and tops hers.]

OZZIE: The smoke alarm is upstaging her.

TROY: *[Spooked]* Are you sure that's all it is?

[The smoke alarm stops. LENA re-enters the garage. KAY hands her the full glass of wine.]

KAY: Thanks, Lena.

LENA: No problem. I just unhooked the battery.

OZZIE: *[Aghast]* Battery?

LENA: A 9-volt.

OZZIE: Oh.

LENA: You really ought to get the kind that's hooked up with your electrical unit.

KAY: Nothing else Ozzie and I should know?

OZZIE: Yes, yes. Like if there's a fire in the back den or in the guest bedroom?

LENA: I didn't see anything, smell anything. *[To KAY]* Sometimes they act up when they need a new battery.

[MADAM SZENDREI lifts her head and sings louder and clearer, "After the Ball."]

TROY: *[Nodding to MADAM SZENDREI]* She's singing, all right.

WILMA: It was Harry's favorite song.

OZZIE: Who would have believed Harry would have killed that old Charles Harris song.

TROY: Only you would know who wrote it.

WILMA: *After the Ball!* Yes. That's the one Harry liked!

KAY: *[With sudden realization]* I thought if we moved from the table the magic circle, or whatever it is called, would be broken? I got the distinct feeling she meant that nothing would work.

TROY: I see. Or would stop working?

LENA: Something has gone wrong.

OZZIE: The whole day has been going awry.

BERNICE: And you haven't contacted "Harry," have you? [*Scoffingly*] Where's this meter man supposed to be?

TROY: Don't know. Madam Szen... Ilona is the only one who sees and talks to him.

WILMA: Oh, I can see him, too.

CHLOE: I wish you hadn't said that, Wilma.

BERNICE: I'd expect Wilma to see him.

WILMA: Over there. Behind you, Bernice.

OZZIE: He's not going to fiddle with the garage opener again?

[*BERNICE lets out a grunt. OZZIE jumps slightly. SZENDREI stops singing and addresses them.*]

SZENDREI: He's made contact with Harry. Harry is here.

CHLOE: Where?

SZENDREI: He hasn't materialized yet.

OZZIE: Materialized? Don't you mean sprouted?

BERNICE: [*The thread was worn thin*] All right, what the devil gives?

OZZIE: Yep! There's no beating around the bush with you tonight, Bernice.

BERNICE: [*Challenging OZZIE*] Is that supposed to be more of your wit? Like the business with Thomas Hardy?

OZZIE: In some quarters, perhaps.

LENA: It was meant to be a pun, I think.

BERNICE: Okay, okay. So I'm not as clever as the rest of you but I do know something stinks here.

OZZIE: *(To the unseen)* Ecto-gas! Harry, how could you?

BERNICE: *[This is too much for her.]* I have to go on duty!

TROY: *[Assertively]* You don't go on duty until eleven o'clock. It is a ten-minute drive to the hospital. There's plenty of time. Sit down, Bernice.

KAY: Join the séance.

OZZIE: Stick around and see what happens. Who knows? Perhaps Arnie Jones here will call up one of your distant relatives.

BERNICE: *[Shocked]* Arnie Jones? Not Arnold Jordan Jones?

SZENDREI: Yes, Bernice. Arnold Jordan Jones.

[Shaken, BERNICE sits]

BERNICE: Oh, my God...

TROY: You all right, Bernie? You look like you've seen a ghost.

SZENDREI: No...not seen a ghost — a memory. Am I right, m'dear?

BERNICE: I don't know how you know about Arnie.

[OZZIE shakes his head: he is as dumfounded as LENA, KAY, TROY, and CHLOE are puzzled.]

OZZIE: Now, I'm lost.

LENA: You're not the only one.

SZENDREI: An odd occurrence, I must admit. But a real occurrence anyway. And sometimes we must accept them simply as that without question, as Kay did on the Queensboro Bridge. However, in our hunt for Harry Wheeler, an old friend has touched Bernice. *(Directly to BERNICE)* Am I right?

TROY: You knew this Arnie Jones?

OZZIE: You grew up in here?

BERNICE: Yeah. Sort of... The other side of town. That's when I knew Arnie Jones... When I was a kid. He was a friend of my father's. *[She stands, facing them all.]* He was the only person I was ever able to talk to. The day he got killed, I lost the only real friend I ever had as a child. He understood about everything. About loneliness... I could tell him everything. And, for a while, I wouldn't be lonely.

CHLOE: Come on, Bernice. Stick around.

LENA: You've got plenty of time.

TROY: Why give the hospital the extra time when you can give it to us?

CHLOE: You don't get paid for it, do you?

OZZIE: Do they appreciate you coming in early?

KAY: Do the other nurses come in early?

LENA: What about the doctors who might be around? Do they care if you get in an hour or two early before you have to?

BERNICE: *[Uncertain]* I don't know.

CHLOE: We're friends, aren't we? Now, really friends?

TROY: I'll try to do better, Bernie.

LENA: What's it gonna hurt?

KAY: What do you do at the hospital when you check in early?

BERNICE: *[Weakening against their onslaught]* Get a cup of coffee from the vending machine.

TROY: See?! A cup of coffee.

CHLOE: From the vending machine.

OZZIE: We'll get you a cup of coffee.

BERNICE: *[Confessing]* It is sometimes bitter.

OZZIE: A good cup of coffee! How about pecan cream, or chocolate almond?

KAY: Ozzie buys all the fancy stuff when he goes to the grocery store.

BERNICE: Lots of times the machine is out of coffee altogether and no one has bothered about seeing that another canister has been brought in. Then I have tea, or the chicken soup.

CHLOE: Ugh! Vending machine chicken soup!

KAY: Do you visit with anyone?

BERNICE: No. I...er... *[She stops.]*

CHLOE: The coffee room is empty, isn't it?

KAY: Sit down, Bernice.

OZZIE: Kill the time with us.

CHLOE: Yeah.

LENA: It's better than drinking bitter coffee.

OZZIE: Or no coffee at all.

CHLOE: Alone

SZENDREI: In an empty room.

[BERNICE hesitates.]

TROY: *[Motioning to the card table]* Bernie?

[Suddenly, the garage door opener groans. BERNICE quickly sits. TROY, KAY, OZZIE, LENA, and CHLOE join BERNICE, WILMA and MADAM SZENDREI at the card table.]

BERNICE: *[After a slight pause; pronouncing:]* We're nuts, you know?

[TROY affectionately slips his hand into BERNICE'S. She makes no move to pull away. And as the LIGHTS DIM and a greenish-blue light appears and hovers near the card table, WILMA yells:]

WILMA: Harry! There you are! Oh, m'dear. What's that all over you?

OZZIE: It looks like potting mix.

[BERNICE, TROY, KAY, CHLOE and LENA: [Together] It is potting mix!

[There is a sudden orchestrated intake of breaths when OZZIE, KAY, BERNICE, TROY, CHLOE and LENA realize, to their surprise and disbelief, that they see Harry's ghostly form.]

BLACKOUT

END OF Scene Three

END OF PLAY

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