

MY SUNSINE AWAY

By Carolyn Albert

CAST:

JANET SANTOS – 28

LINDA SANTOS – 34

MIKE WILNER – Late twenties to late thirties

HELEN SILVER – Late fifties to seventies

SET:

Hearing room in Family Court. A chair and small table are at stage right. Additional chairs are slightly upstage and stage left. During the hearing, LINDA will be seated between JANET and MIKE.

TIME:

Present, a Monday afternoon before Easter.

AT RISE: JANET AND LINDA ARE STANDING DOWNSTAGE. LINDA LEANS ON TWO CANES.

JANET

(SHE IS PACING WITH AGITATION, THROWING GLANCES AT LINDA. FINALLY, SHE PAUSES)

Linda! Sit down.

LINDA

No.

JANET

Linda, you must be tired. So sit down.

LINDA

You ti'd. You si'down.

JANET

If that's the only way to get you to...Okay (SITS)....See!

LINDA

Good.

JANET

You're in pain. I can see you're in pain. Don't you think it hurts me to see you in pain?

LINDA

Mi' tell me wha' do. He say, Stan'! Waw! Iss good essercise.

JANET

Mike again! Well, Mike doesn't know you like I do. Oh, I should've brought you here in your wheelchair.

LINDA

Wee-share...I look – heplless.

JANET

Lately, everything is a struggle with you. The only good thing about today is that soon this whole thing will be over.

LINDA

Iss noh li' tha'.

JANET

We used to be so close!

LINDA

(WITH GREAT EFFORT, SPEAKS CLEARLY)

We – are – too – cose!

JANET

Things will be different around here after today.

LINDA

(CLEARLY AND EMPHATICALLY)

'Ess. 'Ess. Ve'y diffent.

JANET

At least sit down so the judge will see you are comfortable with me.

LINDA

Oh...?

JANET

So I need you to sit down.

LINDA

We too ear'y.

JANET

Well, early is better than late. B'sides, maybe we can talk to the judge a little bit before Mike gets here and let him know what the real story is.

LINDA

Nah fair.

JANET

C'mon. Sit down. We'll do something you like to pass the time. We could sing!

LINDA

Bay-bee sing.

JANET

Oh, nobody's here.

LINDA

An' no bib!

(SHE PULLS AT SCARF DRAPED ACROSS HER CHEST. IT CONCEALED A LARGE PLASTIC BIB.)

JANET

Your blouse will get wet!

LINDA

Bay-bee wear bib.

(SHE TWISTS. ONE CANE FALLS.)

JANET

(JUMPS UP TO SUPPORT LINDA BEFORE SHE FALLS)

Stubborn!...Okay! Just sit down....

(LEADS HER TO SEAT. STANDS BEHIND HER TO UNTIE BIB)

Darn. It's knotted. I'll make you some new ones using velcro instead of these ties. Y'know, Doctor Avega said singing is also therapeutic. You want to exercise muscles? Well, then sing!

(SINGS VERY SLOWLY AND BROADLY AS IF CONDUCTING A HUGE ORCHESTRA)

'You are the sunshine of my life/ That's why I'm always thinking of you....'

(PAUSES, WAITS FOR LINDA)

No? How about the other one we always sing. 'You are my sunshine/ My only sunshine/ You make me happy/...' C'mon, Linda. 'When skies are gray/ You'll never know dear/ How much I love you...'

(JANET PAUSES, WAITS)

LINDA

(PLEADINGLY)

Pee don' tay my sun-sine a-wayyyyy!

JANET

(BROADLY AND TRIUMPHANTLY)

That's it! That's the way we do it! Let's give a cheer – Yayyy! C'mon, cheer, Linda! Hurray for the Santos Sisters, that fab new duo appearing nightly at the Downtown club now thru Easter Sunday. Hey, are we gonna knock 'em dead or what? You in your new green dress. Me in my lavender suit. I'll wheel you the entire length of Fifth Avenue.

LINDA

No! I goh date!

JANET

What?

LINDA

Eesser Sun-ay. I goh date!

JANET

A date?...With Who?

LINDA

(LINDA SHE SEES HIM EVEN BEFORE HE ENTERS, SHE CALLS TO HIM)

Mi'! Mi'!

MIKE

(ENTERS, HIS BACK TO AUDIENCE)

Hi, honey.

LINDA

Hi, huh – nee.

MIKE

Hello, Janet.

JANET

Good afternoon.

MIKE

Look, Janet, this isn't against you. I wanna be friends.

JANET

(SARCASTIC)
Thanks.

HELEN

(ENTERS)
Good day.
(HELEN CHECKS FOLDER THAT SHE'S IN THE RIGHT ROOM, THEN
TURNS TOWARD MIKE WHO IS STILL STANDING. HELEN GASPS)
Ohhh! Sorry. I'm sorry.

MIKE

Forget it. – Okay? .
(MIKE TURNS AND WE SEE THAT ONE SIDE OF HIS FACE AND NECK
IS SCARRED AND TAUT FROM A SEVERE BURN.)

HELEN

I read the brief. I know about the fire and all—

HELEN

I'm sorry, I just wasn't....

MIKE

I told you, Forget it. I'm used to it!

JANET

Are you the Judge?

HELEN

I am the Arbitrator.

JANET

I know, but isn't the arbitration performed by a judge?

HELEN

Sometimes. Sometimes not. Shall we begin?

LINDA

Oh-oh. I gotta go baffoom.

JANET

Now?

LINDA

Yes. Mi', you stay wi' judge.

JANET

Excuse me. We'll be back as soon as we can.

HELEN

(TO JANET)

Is she able to go by herself?

JANET

The door might be heavy. We don't know what it's like.

HELEN

(STILL TALKING TO JANET)

Then she cannot use a public lavatory unless she has another woman with her to assist her?

LINDA

Oh....I shashe my-my.

HELEN

What?

JANET

She changed her mind. I think she wanted to give Mike the opportunity to talk to you while we weren't around.

HELEN

(TALKS WHILE UNPACKING BRIEFS AND A PORTABLE TAPE RECORDER FROM HER CASE, SHE WILL SNAP ON RECORDER)

Shall we begin, then? Today is Monday, April 9th [PUT IN YEAR]. It is exactly two p.m. My name is Helen Silver. This is an arbitration hearing in room 335, Family Court, 60 Lafayette Street, County of New York. This taped recording is a legal transcription. I will attest to its accuracy and will oversee that it be sealed, pending appeal.

(SHE READS FROM BRIEF)

Linda Santos, age 34, is currently the ward of her sister, Janet Santos, age 28.

(LOOKS UP AT JANET)

You are Janet Santos?

JANET

That is right.

HELEN

The plaintiff is—

(TURNS TOWARD HIM)

Michael Wilner?

MIKE
Yes.
HELEN
You are suing for custody of – Linda Santos.

MIKE
Yes.
HELEN
Hmmm. My notes say that –

LINDA
Meee!

HELEN
Excuse me?

LINDA
Iss abow mee!

HELEN
(IGNORES LINDA. TURNS TO JANET)
Linda didn't become independent at age twenty-one?

JANET
By keeping her my ward, she's under my medical coverage. She also gets SSI. She qualifies because of her...condition.

HELEN
Can you estimate what percentage of the household income is represented by Linda's SSI?

JANET
Around thirty percent.... Oh, wait a minute! That isn't why I don't want her to leave! Believe me, I spend much more on her than she gets!

HELEN
I'm not questioning that. I'm just establishing the basics. Now each of you has agreed to abide by the decision of this arbitration. Please respond by saying 'Yes' or 'I agree.' Janet?

JANET
I agree.

HELEN

Michael?

MIKE

Mike. It looks like I have no choice. They said that getting a real judge takes months.

HELEN

I am a qualified, experienced arbitrator – and a lawyer. Although I'm seated with you, not above you, as a judge would be – and though I don't wear formal robes or rap a gavel for order, my decisions are as binding as those of any court. Therefore, Michael – er – Mike, do you agree?

MIKE

Yes.

HELEN

Then, for the record...

(SHE SEARCHES THROUGH PAPERS)

LINDA

Hey! Whabou me! Don' I hafta greee?

HELEN

Excuse me?

JANET

She said, 'What about me; don't I have to agree?'

HELEN

Janet, can Linda respond to what's happening here today? My notes – say, uh— that, uh—

HELEN

She probably isn't able to—

JANET

Oh, she can talk! She can talk! Sometimes You gotta make her stop talking, she talks so much!

HELEN

Janet, Mike, I will state for the record that if two parents were arguing about the custody of a child, sometimes the judge will ask the child for his or her preferences. But that's not legally binding.

LINDA

I'm noh a shile.

HELEN

Got it. You're not a child. All right, Linda. So even though, technically, Linda Santos is neither plaintiff nor defendant, I shall ask her: Linda. Do you agree to be bound by my decision?

LINDA

(PAUSE)

If iss a goo' one.

HELEN

Let's hope it is. Now I have to read some material into the record.

(READS)

Linda Santos was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her throat. Oxygen deprivation to the brain either before or during birth caused motor damage, a condition known as Cerebral Palsy that often appears –

MIKE

Do you have to do this to her?

LINDA

Mi---

HELEN

To establish the condition that necessitated custody.

LINDA

Mi', iss okay.

MIKE

You ever do a custody battle before?

HELEN

Many – between divorcing parents. This is my first for an adult.

LINDA

Mi', I am okay. You said you ge' usta theens. Me too.

HELEN

To continue – where was I? I can skip this....Here. In C.P., the damage very rarely causes mental deficiency. But that's not true in this case. Is that correct, Janet?

JANET

Well, she's not retarded....

MIKE

Linda's very smart. As smart as anyone else. Look, Linda and I are consenting adults. Why do we have to go through this?

JANET

He interrupts. Is that so 'adult'? And he won't even let you establish the – the special conditions! What is he afraid of? That you'll hear the truth?

HELEN

And that is...?

JANET

That everything was fine until he came along. That he put all sorts of nonsense into her head.

LINDA

No, Shan...! No!

JANET

Shhh, baby, shhh. I know better.

HELEN

If you interrupt, we won't get finished.

(READS)

Generally, the nerves controlling muscles are affected so a victim of C.P. – I'm surprised they're still saying 'victim.'

(CONTINUES)

So a person with C.P. may appear to be –

LINDA

'Vit-tim' iss nah PC abow C.P. Tha' iss funny.

HELEN

Eh?

MIKE

'Victim' is not politically correct – not P.C. – about C.P. It's just a joke about the initials.

HELEN

A joke. Hmmm. Listen, Linda, I need you not to interrupt.

LINDA

Okay-dokey.

HELEN

(CONTINUES READING)

May appear to be severely mentally challenged by drooling, grunting instead of speaking, or by facial grimacing or spastic movements.

(LOOKS UP)

That's it. We'll begin with Mike because—

JANET

Wait! Does your report include the care needed for simple things – like preparing food or getting dressed or bathing?

MIKE

I object!...Is that the right way to say it?

HELEN

In court, yes. Here we're less formal.

MIKE

A male judge – or arbitrator – might see things more from my point of view.

HELEN

That's true. But a man might also bend over backwards to be fair to the opposite gender. Will it help you to know that in two hundred and thirty-eight hearings like this one, not a single one of my judgements has ever been reversed?

MIKE

What's the basis for that – uh – reversal?

HELEN

An error in law. In the principles and precedents, the law is clear. I go strictly according to the law!

MIKE

But – what about people? Feelings? Like love?

JANET

Love? No, no, no, no, no! Don't let him fool you with that love talk. He does NOT even intend to marry her!

MIKE

We can't now, I told you!

JANET

And she'll go along with anyone who's nice to her.

LINDA

No! No! Top! Top fi'ing!
(SHE BANGS CRUTCHES AGITATEDLY)

JANET

I thought she'd be safe at the hospital.

MIKE

I never hurt her!

JANET

No? Look at her!

(MIKE AND JANET PAUSE TO LOOK AT LINDA)

LINDA

(SEES THEY HAVE STOPPED)
I don' wan' you to fi!
(TO HELEN)
Dey bo' – dey bo' lub me.

HELEN

(ATTEMPTS TO TRANSLATE)
They...both...love you. Yes, and it comes out angry. I understand. Right now
it's Mike's turn first because he brought the suit.
(TO MIKE)

Describe how you met Linda. Where, the circumstances, and so forth.

MIKE

Physical therapy.

HELEN

You can be more explanatory. This is your opportunity to present your case.

MIKE

Okay. I work with people whose muscles need special training to respond. I'm
studying to be a physical therapist. I should graduate a year from this May.
That's when we can marry. That's when I'll start getting paid. I'm just a trainee
now – but my supervisor said I'm very good at it!

HELEN

And presently you're not receiving income of any sort?

MIKE

I get SSI – that's that supplemental security income – as well. But I'll be giving
that up once I start working. Wasn't that in your report? About the accident?

HELEN

You'll have to put the details into the transcript yourself. You brought the suit and I think you knew that the details of your own life would be examined.

MIKE

Yes.

HELEN

Go ahead.

MIKE

I was fourteen and visiting my Aunt Bella who lived in a trailer park just outside of Colorado Springs. The kerosene heater must've tipped. At the hospital where they gave me skin grafts – I'm skipping a lot of years, a lot of pain – the social worker, she got me to do volunteer work with people worse off. First, with blind kids who – at first I kept expecting them to jump when they saw me. Instead, they responded to the tone of my voice...kindness.... That was a great cure for someone who felt sorry for himself. Then I worked with slow kids...mentally challenged. Every year there's a fancy new way to say it. Anyway, I was glad I got what I still got.

HELEN

Mike, where do you live?

MIKE

Yeah, that's another plus. It's a two-family in Queens, a nice neighborhood too, safe, with my sister and her husband Ted, and the boys downstairs. And just my mom and me above. Plenty of room for Linda.

JANET

Up a flight of stairs?

MIKE

My sister'll move, we'll exchange apartments, it's my mother's house, we'll do whatever we hafta do to –

JANET

This is ridiculous!

MIKE

Now waitaminute!

HELEN

Excuse me, excuse me!

He's filling up her mind—

Is it my turn now or what?

We can't have you both—

With all kinds of false hopes –

She keeps interrupting me!

HELEN
 (YELLS, BANGS TABLE WITH FIST)
 Beee...Qui—Et! Ouch! ...I really must buy a gavel.

JANET
 He'll live with her but not marry her. That's not decent!

MIKE
 Our benefits would get cut. We both want to get married – but not yet.

HELEN
 Maybe the living together should wait until you are able to afford it.

LINDA
 (STARTS THRASHING)
 Now! Now! Now!

JANET
 Stop, Honey, you'll hurt yourself.

LINDA
 (CONTINUES THRASHING)
 Now! Now! (etc.)

JANET
 (TRIES TO HOLD HER, BUT LINDA PUSHES HER OFF)
 Please, stop.

HELEN
 (WATCHING LINDA, SPEAKS LOUDLY ABOVE STRUGGLE)
 Note for the record: Linda obviously requires constant supervision...
 (INSTANTLY, LINDA STOPS THRASHING)
 ...Or maybe she doesn't.... Mike, do you have more to add?

MIKE
 That's it...unless I think of something I forgot.

HELEN
 All right, Janet. What do you have to say?

JANET
 This is hard on Linda, raising her hopes...with pipe dreams. Reality is – a sacrifice only a blood relation would make. Every day I see her onto the mini-bus that takes her to the hospital day program. Someone has to be there to meet the bus. When she gets home, I'm always there!

MIKE

My sister, the kids, my mother, ...excuse me.

HELEN

(IGNORING MIKE)

It sounds like you don't work.

JANET

I'm a librarian at P.S. 21. Believe me, I work.

HELEN

There was no mention of your parents in the report.

JANET

They died in a car accident when I was still in college. I worked nights. I finished.

HELEN

I see you live near Columbia. Is that where you went to school?

JANET

Hah! I went to City College...uptown.

HELEN

And do you plan to get married someday?

JANET

I don't even think about such things. I have responsibilities.

HELEN

Tell me, what do you do socially?

JANET

Socially?

HELEN

You know – friends, dates, clubs, hobbies, special talents...?

(SHE PAUSES, WAITING)

JANET

Oh! I take my sister to the park! Yeah, every day, we are always together. We have a little place just off Central Park West. Okay, maybe it's just one room, but at least We have an elevator! And there's a doorman, so the building is very safe.

HELEN

The park. Every day.

JANET

That's our routine. There's always so much to see. And talk about. I tell Linda about all the things that happened in school that day. And she tells me about her day at the hospital....

HELEN

And what do you do when the weather is bad? Or evenings?

JANET

We have a VCR! The store near us rents the old movies real cheap. We play them again and again. We know all the old ones. We even act out some of the scenes. Like...we'll show you. "Here's..." C'mon, Linda: "Here's looking..."

LINDA

(TURNS AWAY FROM JANET, TOWARD MIKE)

Here'ss lun atoo, kid.

JANET

See! – Uh, you heard it! Here's looking at you, kid! You see how close we are? We do everything together! He has no right to just...disrupt our lives like this!

HELEN

For the moment, let's stay with you and Linda. You're a librarian at a public school. Do you work alone?

JANET

They can't afford two librarians, so I'm busy every minute – but I set the hours, so I can be with Linda whenever she needs me. And she does need me! We're doing just fine – without interference! That's what I have to say.

HELEN

So that wraps it up then.

LINDA

I go! I go!

HELEN

(IGNORING LINDA)

Unless either of you has anything to add...?

JANET

I don't even know why we're here. This whole thing seems – ridiculous.... No, nothing else for now.

LINDA
My turr! My turr!

HELEN
Well, this is very unusual.

LINDA
Peeze! Peeze!

HELEN
Well, we've got the time. Okay, Linda, I'll give you a chance to speak.

LINDA
Thass fair!

HELEN
(SPEAKS VERY SLOWLY TO LINDA)
Speak – very – slowly – for – me.

LINDA
(RISES, CROSSES TO CENTERSTAGE)
Mi mamee lahh.

HELEN
I'm sorry, I just don't—

MIKE
Mike makes me laugh.

LINDA
Ja –nuh trees me li' bay-bee.

MIKE
Her sister treats her like a moron. And she's bright!

JANET
If it weren't for me, she'd be in some home where they let Cripples sit around all day in their own waste!

HELEN
Please, just translate.

JANET
I'll do that!

LINDA
No, Mi'!

JANET

But that's My job!

LINDA

Mi' traslay! Peeeze!

HELEN

Linda asked Mike to assist. Now I'm trying to give Linda her say. Just translation, no commentary – from either of you.

LINDA

Wan telloo how we goh chin gayshed.

MIKE

(HE RISES, MOVES DOWNSTAGE. BOTH MIKE AND LINDA FACE AUDIENCE)

I want to tell you how we got engaged.

LINDA

Mi' sed, Mah-ree...seh, I gih—

MIKE

When Mike said, "Let's get married," He said, "I give—

LINDA & MIKE

...And ask you to return –

MIKE

Total emotional commitment.

LINDA

(SPEAKING CLEARLY)

I could die soon. My parents died young.

MIKE

That was an accident!

LINDA

So – my family is accident-prone. Look at me!

MIKE

Look at your sister. She's all right.

LINDA

You look at my sister. Maybe you should exchange emotional commitments with her!

MIKE

I love You!...Hey, I know you. Something's on your mind.

LINDA

Yes. Quite a lot. At first I worried that you would never ask me to marry you. Then I worried that you would.

MIKE

Do you think I don't love you?

LINDA

Why should I trust you? You're a man. I hear people talking. They think I'm stupid so they all talk in front of me and I hear plenty. Men boast about how they hit and run. About how many women they fool. How do I know you won't be with me for while, make me fall in love with you, and then go. And it won't even be your fault because men are taught that to be a Real Man, you cannot need somebody. Well, I am a real woman. I am very powerful. And it will terrify you because you will need me. So you will leave me.

MIKE

Look at me. Do you think I am stupid?

LINDA

You are – brilliant!

MIKE

Only a stupid man would even think of leaving a real woman.

LINDA

You will meet women who can offer you more than I can.

MIKE

Nobody, nobody in this world has more than you have to give.

LINDA

Who taught you all the right words to say?

MIKE

I'm speaking from here –(TAPS OVER HEART) so there is nothing to learn here. (TAPS HEAD)

LINDA
(SHE TURNS TOWARD HELEN)
When I am...with...him...

MIKE
(RETURNS TO HIS SEAT UPSTAGE)
...her...

LINDA

I am...li' evey-boh-dee elssss!

HELEN

Well!

(SHE TAKES A DEEP BREATH AND LETS IT OUT SLOWLY.
SHE LOOKS AT LINDA, THEN MIKE, THEN JANET, THEN BACK TO
LINDA)

Thank you. I think I finally understand what this is about. Tell me, Linda, what do you want in life?

LINDA

I ca' hab nomshin.

HELEN

Mike?

MIKE

She said, "I can have normal children."

JANET

How can she take care of children? She's a child herself! Would you like to watch her eat? The spoon goes into a special elastic device that's strapped to her hand. After, sometimes she looks like somebody hit her in the face with a custard pie! When I'm tired, and I don't want to wash her hair again, I make her eat in a shower cap! And this – This! is going to take care of babies? Diaper them? Carry them? Oh, please....

HELEN

(TO LINDA)

Have you thought about how you would take care of children?

LINDA

Theens I cou' do a lot, li' be dare...

MIKE

Things I could do a lot, like be there...

LINDA

I nee' hep, I know.

MIKE

I'll need help, I know....Look, that will be between my wife and myself. If I'm willing to do the extra work, it's nobody's business.

HELEN

I know some families where the children become much more capable because more is needed from them. In any case, if there is no more to be said, I can render a decision.

MIKE

So quickly?

HELEN

Is there more you wish to say?

MIKE

Yes. I know it's not going to be easy for us. But we deserve a chance to try. That's it.

HELEN

Janet?

JANET

Yes!...I can't say it.

HELEN

Then it won't be said.

JANET

Wait! Mike – you could be left alone with little kids.

MIKE

Huh? You're just concerned about me? Well, thanks a lot, but nobody can see the future, how much time they've got. Meanwhile, we should be free to choose who we spend our lives with.

JANET

With me, she never needed anything...anybody else! You tell that to him, right now, so we can go back to normal and he should leave her alone!

LINDA
(PIERCINGLY)
Noooooo!

HELEN
(EVEN LOUDER)
Qui-Ehhhht!!!

HELEN

Thank you. I'm not going to bang the table again. Custody of Linda Santos awarded to Michael Wilner. Court adjourned.

(SHE TURNS OFF TAPE RECORDER)

JANET
What?

MIKE
We won, baby! We won!

JANET
No, no, you made a mistake...

LINDA
Yayyyyyyy!

MIKE
C'mon, baby, let's go out to celebrate!
(TO JANET)
Don't worry, I won't get her home late.
(REALIZES)
I don't have to ask permission anymore.

LINDA
(PRODS MIKE)
Hey. Lay...Okay lay.

MIKE
(TO LINDA)
No, not late. I have to work tomorrow. We're free, okay? But we still have responsibilities. I just increased mine, so don't get me fired.

LINDA
(LAUGHING)
Okay, okay, noh so lay.

JANET
(STILL STUNNED)
Wait! Not so fast! What's going on? You can't just – just leave me like this.
(TO HELEN)
How? How did you decide this?

HELEN
The law. I followed the law.

MIKE
Thanks, Judge. Linda, say "Thank you" to the nice judge.

LINDA
(SLOWLY CHANGES HER EXPRESSION)
Mi... Don' do tha... I wih noh be taw to li a shy!

HELEN

(TRANSLATING)

Mike, don't do that. I will not be talked to like a child.

(TO LINDA)

Linda, you may be the least childish one here. You'll have to have patience with them until they catch up to you.

LINDA

Nose, noh 'bow bean grope....

HELEN

Huh?

LINDA

Mi... traslay.

MIKE

She said, it's not about being grown up.

LINDA

Is 'bow bean aler evy sec'n.

MIKE

It's about being alert...?

(LINDA NODS)

Every second.

LINDA

Evy time ahm tweed lak shy. Or nah wih r'spek. I muss remi' them. I have a bray.

MIKE

(HELEN MOUTHS AT FIRST, THEN MURMERS WORDS ALONG WITH HIM)

Every time I'm treated like a child. Or not with respect. I must remind them. I have a brain.

LINDA

Evy time. Till they ler'. Iss a big chob buh sumbohdee goh do.

MIKE

(CHUCKLING)

Every time, till they learn.

(TO LINDA)

Sorry, Baby. You keep reminding me.

JANET

He called her 'Baby'! He'll just treat her like a baby. It won't be any different with him.

HELEN

I think I do need to stay and counsel you. Off the record.

MIKE

We can leave?

HELEN

There will be some paperwork. It can be mailed to you. Be sure to return everything promptly, registered mail.

MIKE

Janet, listen, I don't want to be your adversary. If anything, I owe you a big Thank You for all you've done for Linda.

JANET

Just like that?

LINDA

Nooo, Chan. Nah li tha. We be so cose. For so long. We be cose again, but nah li' muh an' daw. Li' sis'rs. Li' two wim-min. E-kwul!

(JANET DOESN'T ANSWER)

Chan...?

HELEN

She can't really hear you right now. Maybe she will soon, but right now I think you should leave her with me.

LINDA

Okay, Mi'.

(LINDA & MIKE EXIT. SHE FALTERS MOMENTARILY WITH HER CANES. HE DOES NOT GRAB HER, BUT HE'S THERE; SHE RECOVERS AND EXITS ON HER OWN.)

JANET

See, she almost fell.

HELEN

He's there to pick her up if she does fall. But he lets her walk on her own.

JANET

You made a stupid decision. I'm going to appeal it!

HELEN

Janet, if you do, Linda will have to learn how she became your ward – that you had her declared Incompetent.

JANET

I had to. So she could receive health coverage.

HELEN

Mmm, we both know that isn't the whole truth. Okay, maybe your plan was better, more inclusive than her SSI. But you declared her incompetent!

JANET

I had to! She needed me to make decisions for her!

HELEN

I – I don't think so.

JANET

I'm still going to appeal your decision. Maybe it's time somebody broke your perfect record because this was wrong!

HELEN

No, you will not, and I'll tell you why you will not! First, can you imagine how hurt she'll be that you never even told her that you had her declared incompetent? If you appeal this decision, she'll find out and what you did is a hurt she might never get over. I've seen brothers, sisters, parents and children who didn't speak to each other for twenty years over tiny little nothings – and this was not a little nothing.

JANET

I was just doing what was best for her. I always put her needs first.

HELEN

I'm sure you did. But wait, I'm not finished. You also committed insurance fraud, which I wouldn't want to go on record noticing. You'd have to pay back a fortune, and maybe even lose your job.

(JANET SHRIVELS VISIBLY)

If you appeal my decision, just realize the can of worms you'd be opening. And you'd lose the appeal anyhow. I'm going to recommend that Linda be declared independent. No ward, no custody. She can live where she wants, and marry when she pleases.

JANET

(ALMOST CRYING)

But – what about me?

HELEN

That's what I want to talk with you about.

JANET

I didn't expect this. What law says I can't take care of my own sister?

HELEN

The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishes involuntary servitude.

JANET

What are you talking about? She wasn't my servant!

HELEN

No. You were hers. Okay, it was voluntary. But dumb. Like the kids say, 'Get a life!'

JANET

I had a life!

HELEN

Janet, nobody will ever be able to repay you for all those years that you spent caring for your sister. But giving up your own life can be more handicapping than the bad deal fate dumped on those two – and they accepted it and moved on. You're going to have to do the same. The years are gone. You did what you felt you had to do. And right now, life will feel pretty empty for a while. But not forever. Not even for long. Trust me.

JANET

You don't know.

HELEN

I know. Believe me, I know....I'll even predict that you are going to be a terrific aunt. Maybe even someday a mother yourself. Think of this period as practice for that someday when your Four kids leave home and you have to find a new life.

JANET

I didn't expect this.

HELEN

Janet, I see a lot of people coming through these rooms. Some win – some lose. Do you want to know how I see you?

JANET

– Uh – I'm not sure I do.

HELEN

That's because you think you lost. I know better. Listen to me. You're a strong woman. Look how you've survived other much more terrible losses.

JANET

Right now there's a big hole right here in my gut.

HELEN

You feel like...how?

JANET

Empty—here.

HELEN

Mozeltov! It's a girl – and you did a very good job raising her.

JANET

It was so hard. I don't know what to do now.

HELEN

I think you really need to talk to somebody trained for this sort of thing. Your terrific medical plan will cover the costs and your union can recommend someone....I've met a lot of teachers.

JANET

Yeah, thanks.

HELEN

Have you ever thought about joining a book club? Or doing volunteer work? Or singing in a choral group?

JANET

I can't! I have a lot of –
(ABRUPT PAUSE AS SHE REALIZES_
– Free time now.

HELEN

This tape has to be sealed and signed for. But I couldn't leave until we talked.

JANET

(STILL SUNKEN)
Thanks.

HELEN

I think you'll be okay.

JANET

Yeah.

(HELEN EXITS)

JANET

(FINGERS THE BIB LINDA HAS DISCARDED, SINGS SLOWLY)

You are my Sun---sine. My only sun-sine.... You made me happy...

(JANET CONTINUES SINGING SOFTLY AS LIGHTS DIM SLOWLY)

THE END

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