

**PLEASE BE AWARE THAT  
THIS PLAY IS FULLY PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT**

All plays, books, music and other materials published by Heartland Plays, Inc. are fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and all countries which the United States has reciprocal relations including, but not limited to all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, The Universal Copyright Convention and the Berne Convention. All rights to the plays and materials on our website are strictly reserved including, and without limitation, professional and amateur performance rights; motion pictures; public reading; radio and television broadcasting; audio and video recording and reproduction of any type known or yet to be invented; information storage and retrieval systems of any type known or yet to be invented; and the rights of translation into any and all languages. No individual or organization whether amateur or stock may perform this or any play published by Heartland Plays, Inc. without first obtaining advance permission from Heartland Plays, Inc. and paying the appropriate fees including Royalties and Single-Use Copyright fees. Heartland Plays, Inc. collects royalties on behalf of the Playwrights whose plays it publishes. Unauthorized copying, transcribing or reproduction of this or any play or excerpt, or storage or transmittal in any form and by any means whether known or yet to be invented, is strictly forbidden except as provided by Agreement with Heartland Plays, Inc. Any unauthorized use is a violation of copyright laws and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

**FIVE SIMPLE RULES TO REMEMBER**

1. DO take advantage of the free online perusal of our plays to help you make the best choice for your particular needs or production.
2. DO enjoy the convenience of our online purchase application for performance rights and single-use copyright.
3. DO understand that this play and all plays and materials on our website are controlled by Heartland Plays, Inc. and fully protected by copyright.
4. DO NOT attempt in any way to copy, transcribe or reproduce this play by any means or perform this play or use any play or material from our website without first receiving permission from Heartland Plays, Inc. Any attempt to use this or any other work without first obtaining permission is a violation of copyright and punishable by law.
5. DO NOT rob this Author or any of the Authors we represent of their right to be paid for the use of their property. **It is a crime and it is wrong!**

# A FIELD OF DAISIES

by Rebecca Ryland

A FULL-LENGTH PLAY IN TWO ACTS

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED  
REPRODUCTION WITHOUT SPECIFIC WRITTEN PERMISSION PROHIBITED**

**Performance Rights Available Exclusively through  
Heartland Plays, Inc. at [heartlandplays.com](http://heartlandplays.com)  
[playsnow@heartlandplays.com](mailto:playsnow@heartlandplays.com)  
customer service: 406-431-7680**

**Copyright © 2008 by Heartland Plays, Inc.**

# A FIELD OF DAISIES

by Rebecca Ryland

## A FULL-LENGTH PLAY IN TWO ACTS

Setting: Act I; *A kitchen in an old farmhouse in a very rural fictitious country community*

Act II; *A courtroom in the county courthouse*

Time: *The second week of March*

Characters; 5 men/5 women:

Tom Benedict; *middle-aged, a former New York City businessman seeking a simpler life in the country*

Jennifer Benedict; *about 32, his wife of less than 2 years*

Mary Jarvis; *Jennifer's best friend in the country*

Lester Johnson; *the Benedict's closest neighbor*

Mr. ELLIOTT; *Counsel for the Prosecution*

Ms. Somers; *Counsel for the Defense*

Dr. Roberta Reed; *expert witness for the Prosecution*

Dr. Angela Hignight; *expert witness for the Defense*

Inspector Lewis Harrod; *witness for the State*

Judge Joe Martin; *the judge in the case against Tom Benedict*

# A FIELD OF DAISIES

by Rebecca Ryland

## ACT I, SCENE I

*(AT RISE: March 13. Tom Benedict alone on stage sitting at a rocking chair beside a stone fireplace in a large country kitchen in an old farmhouse; a small table in front of the chair, a partially completed model of a tall ship on the table. Along with other items found in a country kitchen, a desk under a window; on top of the desk, a notebook computer and writing materials. Jennifer Benedict approaches a screen door, her arms loaded with bags of groceries and other sundries as Tom glues a piece on the deck of the model ship.)*

JENNIFER

Hi! I'm home! Can you get the door for me?

TOM

*(Opening the door and grabbing some of the bags.)* Here, let me give you a hand with that.

JENNIFER

Thanks. *(Gives TOM a kiss.)* I thought I'd never get home. These forty mile treks into Four Corners for anything more complex than a loaf of bread are getting old. How about you? What's been going on around here all day? *(Hands TOM several items from one of the bags and they begin to unpack the groceries.)* Here, these go in the fridge.

TOM

Nothing much. I took some corn down to the feed store to get ground up with some molasses for the cows. I sent the boys home early. One of the chainsaws is down and I can't get it running again. Lester told me about a guy over in Chesterville that's got a repair shop out back. Says he charges "po' folk prices." His number is there on your desk. Mind giving him a call for me to see if he can take a look at it yet this afternoon?

JENNIFER

*(Putting some items in the cupboard.)* You know I don't feel that comfortable talking to the locals, Tom, since, well, especially about something like a chainsaw. Can't you do it?

TOM

I was just on my way out to put the saw in the truck. *(He puts on his coat and picks up the chainsaw.)* Tell him there's a screw off the top of the carburetor and make sure he's got one that will fit this saw. He'll need to know the make and model. I wrote the information under his number.

JENNIFER

Wouldn't it be easier for you to call since you're the one who knows what's wrong with it?

TOM

I don't like talking on the phone.

JENNIFER

Too many years with a personal assistant, huh? (*She laughs.*)

TOM

Never mind. I'll drive over to his place. If he's not there I'll check back in the morning.

JENNIFER

You're kidding, right? You're going to drive 15 miles to see a guy who might not be there just because I don't want to play secretary?

TOM

God you're paranoid. I'm asking you to help me out a little, that's all.

JENNIFER

I'm not paranoid, Tom.

TOM

(*Mocking JENNIFER.*) I'm not paranoid, Tom.

JENNIFER

Don't start.

TOM

Why are you so uptight?

JENNIFER

I'm not uptight.

TOM

(*Mocking again.*) I'm not uptight. Listen to you. Listen to that shrill pitch in your voice. What's wrong anyway?

JENNIFER

(*Demonstrating calm control.*) There's nothing wrong. I just got home. I'm not uptight. I'd like to finish putting away the groceries and get on with making dinner. I don't understand how my not making a phone call for you is such an issue. If you were busy doing something else, okay, but under the circumstances, I would think you could walk over there and make it yourself.

TOM

Blah, blah, blah. Of course I can walk over there and make it myself, you moron. I don't want to.

JENNIFER

Why are you calling me a moron? Do you think that will help? I would never say anything like that to you. I would never call you a moron.

TOM

Of course not, Jennifer. You're so perfect, so self-righteous, so in control. You goad me into these inane conversations and then act as if you haven't done a damn thing!

JENNIFER

I didn't goad you into anything. You're angry with me because I didn't do exactly what you wanted and you think the louder you get, the better your chances of intimidating me into doing it.

TOM

I don't want you to do a damn thing for me.

JENNIFER

Well, then it's settled.

TOM

Well, then, good. You bitch.

JENNIFER

I'm not a bitch, Tom Benedict. This is stupid! Is it worth calling me names? I don't get it. All over a silly phone call about a chainsaw I've never even touched in my life.

TOM

*(Shoving the chainsaw into her hands.)* There, now you have! Is that better? I know you don't get it, Jennifer. It's not the damn phone call.

JENNIFER

Then what is it?

TOM

Never mind. You wouldn't understand anyway. I've got chores to do out in the barn.

JENNIFER

*(As TOM starts out the door.)* I picked up some dog food in town. It's in the back of the jeep.

TOM

*(Stopping.)* You want me to bring it inside?

JENNIFER

Yes.

TOM

No problem, Jennifer. See how simple it is?

*(TOM exits.)*

JENNIFER

*(Setting the chainsaw on the counter.)* Yeah, simple. *(JENNIFER crosses to the desk and picks up the paper with the number for the repair shop. She reaches for the phone and dials the number. As it rings, she drops the note which falls to the floor.)* Hello. *(Pause.)* I'm doing well, thank you. And you? *(Pause.)* That's nice. Actually, I don't think you know me. I'm Jennifer Benedict. My husband, Tom, and I purchased the old Hensley farm about eight months ago. *(Pause.)* Yes, that's right, the folks from New York. *(Pause.)* Yes, well, we're sorry about the boy, too. Our neighbor, Lester Johnson gave us your number. He said you might be able to fix our chainsaw. *(Pause.)* It has something wrong with, something about a screw. There's a screw of some sort missing on top of it. *(Pause.)* Yes, that's right, on the carburetor. Do you have one that will fit? *(Pause.)* Uh, let's see, it's, uh, *(scrambling to find the note, then looking over the saw.)* it's a Huscavarna, Model number 1650. *(Pause.)* Good. That's good. What are your hours of operation? *(Pause.)* What time do you close today? *(Pause.)* I see. And in the morning? What time do you open in the morning? *(Pause.)* That's nice. We'll have it to you first thing. Thanks. Goodbye.

*(TOM enters with a 50 lb. bag of dog food as JENNIFER sets the phone on the desk.)*

TOM

Where do you want it?

JENNIFER

Same place we always keep it. In the back room.

TOM

You don't have to be sarcastic.

JENNIFER

You're right. I'm sorry.

TOM

Forget it.

JENNIFER

I talked to Alvie.

TOM

Alvie?

JENNIFER

The man at the repair shop. He can't look at it anymore today because he has to take his wife to some sort of church meeting or something or other. Are you sure he can fix it? He seemed a little slow to me. I asked his hours of operation and you would have thought I was speaking a foreign language.

TOM

You are. He's just some old timer who fixes shit in a shed behind his barn. He's not incorporated. This isn't New York.

JENNIFER

*(Laughing.)* Really? I hadn't noticed. Never-the-less, he starts working shortly after biscuits and gravy, the best around, mind you, made from scratch with real buttermilk. And, yes, he does have a screw that will make do. Says there aint much he don't have that'll fit yer chainsaw.

TOM

Jennifer, did you pick up my blue suit at the cleaners while you were in town?

JENNIFER

I didn't know it was there. Sorry.

TOM

You know I have to be in court Thursday.

JENNIFER

Not till 2:00. I have to go into town to drop off the story on the blue herons. I'll pick it up then and have it back to you by eleven. Will that do?

TOM

I don't want to feel rushed. I'll drive into town tomorrow morning before the boys come.

JENNIFER

What about the saw?

TOM

I'll put the boys to burning brush. Unless you want to pick up the suit?

JENNIFER

No, I can't. I promised Mary I'd watch her kids in the morning while she goes to the doctor. I won't be able to finish the story till she gets back. You know I have a deadline. It's difficult enough making a living writing for a small town paper. I can't afford to miss a deadline. It wouldn't be so hard if we could get cable here, or if we had satellite. Then at least I could e-mail the files.

TOM

You have time to baby-sit Mary's brats.

JENNIFER

They're not brats, Tom, and she's the only friend I've made since we've moved here.

TOM

Never mind. I can do it all. *(TOM takes off his coat and sits in the rocking chair. He begins to work on his model ship as JENNIFER starts dinner.)*

JENNIFER

Do you want me to go with you this time, Tom?



TOM

No. I told you. I don't want you there.

JENNIFER

I'm sorry about your suit. I wish you had let me know this morning before I went to town, or if the cell phone worked out here. It took me four hours to do the laundry, I was right there next to the cleaners. I can't wait till we get the new water line in so we can get our own washing machine. That well is such a pain. I barely have enough water to wash my hair if you take a shower first. I don't mind, really, I love the farm and I know there are adjustments to make and so much that needs done. By the time I finished the laundry and the grocery shopping, I barely had time to run over to McNichol's to catch that sale on kids' clothes. We promised Susan we'd send a new pair of shoes for Sam. Not that I could find the style he wanted, but I did my best. They were pretty high, considering the sale, but Susan said they had to be leather so they'd wear well. I'm not sure what difference it makes with how fast his feet grow! Would you like to see the shoes?

TOM

Sure.

JENNIFER

*(Pulling out a shoebox from one of the bags.)* I think he'll like them. *(She opens the box and shows the shoes to TOM.)*

TOM

He'll like them.

JENNIFER

I thought so. *(She closes the box.)* And I bought a beautiful sweater for Sadie. It cost \$45 at 20% off. Maybe I shouldn't have spent the money. It's so strange worrying about the cost of clothes for the kids. But with all the repairs and the cows and keeping two men working at even minimum wage. And I'm making next to nothing at the newspaper. And now with the—I loved having the kids here over the holidays. It was so wonderful for them to get out of the city, even though Sadie hated sleeping in a room without real heat. I love the smell of wood burning, but it's not easy getting up in the morning when the fire goes out. Brrrr! It's quite a challenge to live a simple lifestyle. Anyway, would you like to see the sweater?

TOM

I'll check it out later. *(He stands.)* I have to run into Four Corners.

JENNIFER

Now? It's after 6. You'll be there in the morning.

TOM

I need some glue for the model.

JENNIFER

Why didn't you ask me to get it for you?

TOM

I just ran out.

JENNIFER

But I'm making dinner.

TOM

I'm not that hungry.

JENNIFER

Surely it can wait.

TOM

It keeps my mind off things. *(He puts on his coat.)* Is there anything you need in town?

JENNIFER

No.

TOM

I'll be back later, then.

JENNIFER

Alright.

*(TOM exits.)*

## ACT I, SCENE II

*(JENNIFER turns off the stove. She removes the pan and dumps the contents in the trash then she sits down at her desk, opens a file on the computer and drops her head and cries. There is a knock on the screen door.)*

MARY

Hi, Jen! Mind if I come in?

JENNIFER

Of course not, Mary. *(She grabs a tissue and quickly blots her eyes.)* You'll have to excuse the mess. I was fixing dinner and then Tom had to go to town so, anyway, come on in.

MARY

You forget I have three kids. This is not a mess. A hen house after a windstorm is Martha Stewart's kitchen compared to mine. Randy brought a pizza home after work. I thought I'd slip out while someone else was guarding the roost.

JENNIFER

And you want another one?

MARY

‘Want’ is a questionable term. Habit? Perhaps. Honestly, Lisa starts kindergarten next fall. She’s the last to go. It’s the empty nest syndrome, I think.

JENNIFER

Of course, I don’t know about these things, I’m only a step mom, but it seems to me the empty nest syndrome refers to the last of your kids going off to college or leaving home or getting married.

MARY

Well, I can’t wait that long! *(MARY rubs her growing womb.)*

JENNIFER

I guess not. Want some tea?

MARY

Sure. No caffeine, please. It’s not good for the baby.

JENNIFER

So you’ve been reading the book I gave you. *(She puts on the tea kettle.)*

MARY

Cover to cover. And you’ve been using the kettle instead of the microwave.

JENNIFER

Because the steam adds moisture to the dry air when you heat with wood, right?

MARY

Right. You’ll make a fine country woman one of these days. Guess what? I got tickets to see “My Fair Lady” at the Community Theatre Friday night. You and Tom want to go?

JENNIFER

The Community Theatre?

MARY

Okay, so it’s not Broadway. But it’s a good group. They try hard. Every now and then someone falls off the stage and if you can handle Professor Wiggins played by a female in a beard. There are always more roles for men than woman and more woman than men to play them.

JENNIFER

And there lies the tragedy of drama. So, how much are the tickets?

MARY

That’s the best part, they’re free. One of Randy’s co-workers bought them to take his family but both his kids came down with the chicken pox Monday and he offered them to us.

JENNIFER

The chicken pox? Isn't there a vaccine for that?

MARY

Is there? I'll have to ask the doctor tomorrow. Oh, no. You don't think the tickets are contaminated do you?

JENNIFER

I am almost certain without a doubt that you can't get the chicken pox from theatre tickets. An upset stomach, a headache, a bad review, maybe, but never the chicken pox. *(The kettle whistles. JENNIFER removes the kettle and pours water into two cups with tea bags.)*

MARY

I'll keep them in the freezer just to be safe.

JENNIFER

I think that only preserves the virus, but what do I know. *(She hands MARY a cup of tea.)*

MARY

*(Sitting at the rocking chair behind the model ship.)* The model's really coming along.

JENNIFER

It's beautiful, isn't it? We'll put it on the mantle when it's done. When Tom was a kid, he saw the tall ships sail up the East River in celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. He sees our coming to this farm as his declaration of independence from the city and the never ending struggle for success at the expense of your health and happiness. We never anticipated that a simple life would be so difficult.

MARY

How's he doing anyway? Is it settled yet?

JENNIFER

He's got another preliminary hearing Thursday. How many preliminary hearings does it take before you get to the real thing?

MARY

I don't know. I've never even had a speeding ticket.

JENNIFER

I wish it were me dealing with this instead of Tom. He's just like this model. When it's all stuck together with glue, it seems strong enough, but it's just a bunch of fragmented pieces, and it wouldn't take much for it to come crashing down.

MARY

He's that fragile?

JENNIFER

He's that extreme. One minute he's a soothing cup of mint tea and the next he's like that steam kettle.

MARY

They say it's better when you're stressed, to let it all out, get it off your chest, throw your fist through the wall— that sort of thing.

JENNIFER

Yesterday, I read something in the paper that interested me. And there was Tom, sitting in his chair working on the model. So I'm talking about this article, expressing an opinion that didn't happen to match his. He started getting really upset when I didn't change my mind after he told me what he thought. He got mad as hell, stood up, picked up a beautiful rose bowl I'd bought at an antique store in town and smashed it on the floor.

MARY

Huh. But he didn't strike you.

JENNIFER

But he broke it, Mary. He broke my bowl, darn him. Why? Because I didn't agree with him?

MARY

It's just the lawsuit. When it's over he'll be okay.

JENNIFER

I don't know, Mary. How can I know? It could be the suit. So much has changed since we moved here. At least I think a lot has changed. In the city, we both had our careers, our friends, our obligations. We've only been married, gosh, it's barely been two years. But even back then, sometimes he would fly off the handle at what seemed like nothing at all; the doorman accidentally dropping a package, a waiter spilling a little water on the table. Now, the odd thing is, he never says anything when it happens. He goes off when we're alone and dwells on it for days on end. I assumed it had to do with the pressure he was under at work and that the move to the country would solve it. But maybe the whole situation is just making things worse. You don't mind me going on like this, do you?

MARY

I charge by the hour but my rates are the lowest in the county.

JENNIFER

I hate talking about Tom like this, I know he wouldn't like it, and I don't want you to think badly of him. But I need to see the bigger picture. I can't figure it out. We haven't enough history. I wonder what he was like when he was married to Susan.

MARY

He hasn't much good to say about her.

JENNIFER

According to him, it was all her fault. But that's not possible is it? He says she was a bitch, a moron. That's not okay, is it? She was his wife, the mother of his children. What if he said those things to her when they were married?

MARY

Maybe she is a bitch. Who knows? But it's different with you. He loves you so much. He raves about you, about your talent, your beauty, how hard you work, how proud he is that you were willing to change your whole life to be here with him. He worships the ground you walk on.

JENNIFER

Sometimes I think he hates me.

MARY

We all hate our spouses sometimes. It's a prerequisite for marriage.

JENNIFER

He blames me for things, Mary. For things that have nothing to do with me. As if he can't accept that it's okay to make mistakes himself. I think some of it goes back to his childhood. He wouldn't want me to tell you this, but his father was an alcoholic. He says he never had friends over when he was growing up because he was afraid his dad would get drunk and act stupid. He can't see himself weak and pitiful like his father. He has to be strong. He has to be in control. He can never make a mistake.

MARY

Then that's a good thing. You'll never have to worry about Tom having a drinking problem.

JENNIFER

You wouldn't think so. Tom's awfully smart, though. He can't really still be angry over something that happened when he was a kid, can he? So whatever is happening now, it comes back to me. He thinks I don't get off on him sexually.

MARY

Now that's a much more interesting topic. Do you?

JENNIFER

He's a good looking man, Mary.

MARY

Yes, but is he good in bed?

JENNIFER

Would you like him to kill me now or later?

MARY

Later.

JENNIFER

Okay, he is good in bed. No question. It's not that. I just have trouble going from all the craziness of the day to all passionate and loving at night. It's hard to get turned on when your mind is full of all the hateful things he says when he's upset. If I'm really this horrible person he says I am, why does he want to sleep with me?

MARY

Because he's a man, and a man would sleep with his dog if he had to.

JENNIFER

Thanks.

MARY

I'm kidding. Don't you see, it's a matter of him saying one thing and you hearing another. You're not a horrible person, he knows that and you know that. When we're angry and upset we all say things we shouldn't. It's nothing personal.

JENNIFER

Yes, of course, you're right. You must think I'm terrible talking about Tom. I feel ridiculous now. He's really a good man. It's just that, Mary, he says I'm frigid.

MARY

Well, are you?

JENNIFER

No! I like sex as much as anyone. More than some. I have my special interests and my fantasies just like everyone else.

MARY

Ooooo, tell me one! It will come in handy in the third trimester.

JENNIFER

What, are we 16? I thought country girls were shy about sex.

MARY

Sex is a country girl's greatest defense against boredom. Come on.

JENNIFER

Oh, I don't know.

MARY

Please?

JENNIFER

Okay, between friends, but you better not tell anyone. Since I've moved out of Manhattan, I notice truck drivers.

MARY

Truck drivers?

JENNIFER

It's a city mouse/country mouse thing. Do you want me to tell you or not?

MARY

Go on.

JENNIFER

So I stop at a truck stop, you know, one of those places with fifty semis out back. I go in, sit at the breakfast bar, order a cup of coffee, and pick out the most luscious man in the place and walk right up to him and ask him how big is his rig and if he'd like to show it to me. And we go outside and I climb up into the cab in front of him, and of course I'm not wearing any underwear so there's no mistake exactly what I want. And then I crawl into the bunk behind the seat and invite him to join me.

MARY

A truck driver?

JENNIFER

Remind me to keep my fantasies to myself. More tea?

MARY

Hot water will do, the bag is in the cup. So do you think about truck drivers when you're with Tom or without?

JENNIFER

Without, and not that often! Okay, more than usual. I admit, I haven't been the best wife lately. It's awful of me to say it, but sometimes, I have sex with him just so he'll be nice to me. Like maybe it will relax him so he'll be in a better mood and we'll get along the next day.

MARY

You mean you never screw him 'cause you want to? No wonder he thinks you're frigid.

JENNIFER

You're supposed to be making me feel better about myself, Mary.

MARY

Sorry.

JENNIFER

I used to love making love with Tom. Then one day out of the blue he tells me he's never really been satisfied with our sex life. He said he found me to be very childish and I was like a fish or something.



MARY

A fish? Ouch.

JENNIFER

I don't remember exactly, I didn't hear much after the not satisfied part. But whatever he said, it really hurt and I'm not sure I've ever felt the same since. I thought being with him was like heaven. I thought he felt the same. I feel sensual. I feel special. But I am nothing to him but ho-hum.

MARY

Did you tell him what he said hurt you?

JENNIFER

Yes. When he saw it was affecting our marriage, he tried to make up for it. He said it was just his way of trying to stimulate my imagination, to try new things.

MARY

But you never forgot.

JENNIFER

It hurt a lot. Sometimes I think we should spend some time apart, and then maybe we would both remember the good about us.

MARY

Would you go back to New York?

JENNIFER

Maybe, I don't know. The land, this house, you, even those ugly cows behind the barn, they're starting to grow on me. There's always that chance we wouldn't get back together. I can't destroy all that. And all the money we've invested and what we gave up to be here— if we could just be civil to one another long enough to enjoy it. I know I could be happy here with Tom. All I really want is for us to work it out. Maybe if I could get him to see someone with me.

MARY

A psychiatrist? He's not crazy. He appears at least as sane as the rest of us despite his city ways.

JENNIFER

I'm talking about a therapist. A counselor. Someone we could both talk to. But I know he'll never go. He doesn't want anyone to know he's human. It might damage his self image. I guess I have no alternative but to keep doing what I've been doing. Adapt to the situation as best as I can. I can do it.

MARY

Just because you can do it, doesn't mean you should do it.

JENNIFER

Yeah, it scares the hell out of me to think I'll wake up twenty years from now and nothing will have changed except me. I'll be old and worn out with nowhere else to go.

MARY

You could have a baby.

JENNIFER

Oh, yes, that's exactly what I need right now. A baby. That's the perfect solution to my problems. Besides I have two, sort of.

MARY

Not the same. Not the same a bit. Every woman should experience childbirth to put life into perspective.

JENNIFER

I was a child, and I was born, well almost. I was plucked, just like that. A month early, so I've heard.

MARY

I thought there was something unique about you. It's nice to know what it is. But, seriously, wouldn't you like to have a child of your own?

JENNIFER

I guess I assumed when I gave up my career to come here— right now I have all I can handle. Besides, Susan is flakey enough she might commit suicide over one of her car salesman boyfriends and send the kids to live with us permanently. And then Tom would die of a stress related heart attack and I'd be left to raise them all by myself. I'm barely old enough to be Sam's mother. When he was here over Christmas break I found a fistful of rubbers in his suitcase. Rubbers, Mary! I'm not ready for rubbers! I haven't even experienced pampers yet.

MARY

And that's exactly my point.

JENNIFER

*(Pointing at MARY'S womb.)* You name me as the Godmother of this one. That will do for now.

MARY

I promise. *(Raising her cup.)* To a long and happy friendship.

JENNIFER

*(Raising her cup.)* To life long friends!

MARY

And sexy truck drivers. *(They click their cups, take a sip and laugh.)* I gotta run. Randy's probably at the end of his rope, literally, by now. Can you go Friday?

JENNIFER

I'll ask Tom when he gets back and let you know tomorrow when you drop off the kids. But don't get your hopes up. He's almost impossible to get to go anywhere these days.

MARY

Then come alone. We'll have fun, the three of us.

JENNIFER

We'll see. And thanks, Mary, for talking with me. It's almost as if, now that we've talked, it's all gone. None of it seems important any more.

MARY

I'm glad. I'll see you tomorrow then. So long.

JENNIFER

Bye now.

*(MARY exits.)*

### ACT I, SCENE III

*(Smiling and humming to herself, JENNIFER rinses the dirty tea cups in the sink. Then she crosses to the fireplace, checks the fire, puts on her coat, picks up a carry-bag for wood and starts for the door. A MAN stands on the porch, looking at her through the screen door.)*

JENNIFER

Oh, Lester! You startled me half to death!

LESTER

Sorry, Jenny. Jest bringin' yer paper by. Mama's been askin' after ya.

JENNIFER

I apologize for not stopping by more often, I've been really busy lately. But she's welcome to walk over anytime and say hello.

LESTER

She don't like botherin' ya none here at the house.

JENNIFER

It's no bother, really. If I'm working I may not be able to talk too long, but don't let that keep you away. We want to be good neighbors.

LESTER

*(Laying a container covered with a newspaper on the counter. He removes the newspaper and opens the container.)* Mama baked ya a cake.

JENNIFER

Oh, that was awfully sweet of her.

LESTER

It's a Mississippi Mud Cake. Bet ya never heard a such a thing in the city.

JENNIFER

No, I never did. I'll have to get the recipe from her for it.

LESTER

She's the best cook on the Fork. Must've baked a cake for ever last one on the creek night fer last.

JENNIFER

Well, we certainly appreciate her thoughtfulness.

LESTER

Yer man home?

JENNIFER

No, he had to go into town for some supplies, but I expect him back soon. Is it important?

LESTER

I was jest wonderin' when he might want me ta bring by that ol' hay rake.

JENNIFER

What old hay rake?

LESTER

He's goin' ta plow my corn patch fer me in exchange fer it. Said he's fixin' ta git hisself a couple she mules 'n' figured on usin' 'em ta cut yer all's hay 'n' such.

JENNIFER

She mules?

LESTER

A man kin do a lot with a team a good mules on a place like this. My granpappy use ta tend corn all the way up ta the cliff with a team a mules. We didn't waste no ground back then. Couldn't ford to. That young feller who had this place fer you, he never hit a lick at nothin'. Let the whole dang blasted place grow up 'n' weeds.

JENNIFER

How soon do you need your ground worked? I noticed several farms on the creek already have their fields plowed.

LESTER

Soon as he kin git to it be fine.

JENNIFER

You have to tell us when it needs done, Lester. Tom's new at this farming business and he won't know unless you tell him.

LESTER

Radio said ta 'spect dry weather fer a day er two. If he kin git to it then, be fine.

JENNIFER

I'll let him know. Can I get you a slice of cake or something, Lester? I can make some tea if you like.

LESTER

My belly's still hollerin' whoa from supper. Mama keeps them pots hot mornin', noon, 'n' night. No one goes ta bed hungry at my house.

JENNIFER

Lester, did you get a new dog? I saw this big white animal lying on your front porch this morning on my way to town.

LESTER

That be Jimmy Lee's goat. It got otta its pen last night 'n' made such a ruckus I thought we had a prowler. Got out ma shot gun 'n' was fixin' ta surprise that low-life bastard with a round er two right there in his backside. But whin I kum round the corner of the house that ol' goat was standin' on er hine legs lookin' in the front winder. Looked like a big ol' ghost standin' there—bout scared the britches offin me. She heared me kumin' 'n' wheeled round 'n' give out a big ol' *Maaaaaaaa* 'n' then I seen what she was. I tol' 'er take 'er milkers back in 'er pen fer I give 'er somethin' ta Maaaa about. Then Mama opened the front door ta see what all the fussin' was bout and that little cheewowa of her'n ran otta the house jest yappin' 'n' a nippin' at that ol' goat. Chased her plum up the holler. Didn't come back ta this morning.

JENNIFER

*(Laughing.)* Did you ever get her back in her pen?

LESTER

Yes, mam. I picked me up a big ol' 2 x 4 n wailed 'er a good'n on the head 'n' tol' her ta git herself back where she belonged. By George she flew back ta 'er pen 'n' she aint moved since. It takes a big stick sometimes ta git a female ta lissin.

JENNIFER

Really. *(Showing LESTER to the door.)* Alright, then, Lester, I'll let Tom know you stopped in.

LESTER

You kum by 'n' jaw with us soon as ya kin.

JENNIFER

I will.

*(LESTER nods and exits.)*

## ACT I, SCENE IV

*(JENNIFER checks her watch, gets a banana, peels it half-way down and sits at her desk. She pulls some notes from a pile of papers. The porch door slams and TOM enters through the inner screen door.)*

JENNIFER

You're back quick.

TOM

Yep.

JENNIFER

Did you find what you needed?

TOM

Yep. *(TOM places a brown bag in the freezer.)*

JENNIFER

I was thinking, if I can finish the story tonight, I can go into town tomorrow afternoon and pick up your suit.

TOM

Whatever.

JENNIFER

Don't get too excited.

TOM

What do you want me to say?

JENNIFER

Nothing in particular. You're still angry, aren't you?

TOM

About what?

JENNIFER

If we can't find a way to get past these stupid arguments, we're not going to make it.

TOM

They're stupid alright.

JENNIFER

On both our parts. Don't you see, it's bad enough we get into all this petty garbage without having to spend hours and hours afterwards bogged down in the same shit.

TOM

And I suppose you're over it?

JENNIFER

I'm trying.

TOM

You're trying alright.

JENNIFER

*(Choosing to ignore the dig.)* Lester left right before you came in. I'm surprised you didn't run into him.

TOM

I saw him crossing through the field. I didn't feel like talking. What did he want?

JENNIFER

He asked when you wanted him to bring over the old hay rake.

TOM

What'd you tell him?

JENNIFER

I didn't tell him anything. What do I know about any old hay rake? You didn't talk to me about it. And he said something about you buying a couple of mules. Did you?

TOM

I'm thinking about it.

JENNIFER

Can we afford more animals?

TOM

We have eight cows, four turkeys and one dog. This is a farm. We need more animals.

JENNIFER

But a couple of jackasses?

TOM

They're not jackasses. They're called Jennies when they're female.

JENNIFER

*(Laughing.)* Jennies? Great!

TOM

Actually, a mule is a cross between a mare and a jackass. And they're sterile.

JENNIFER

Ah, you've been reading your Small Farmers Journal again. So you would like to add two sterile Jennies to our farm? What are we going to do with two sterile Jennies?

TOM

Use them to clear off the hillsides. We need to get this farm back into shape like it used to be.

JENNIFER

Like back in Lester's granpappy's day?

TOM

Yep.

JENNIFER

That was in the Middle Ages, Tom. We have already spent a bundle on equipment; a tractor and a bush hog, a plow and a disc and a post hole digger and a shredder and the log splitter—

TOM

You would bring that up.

JENNIFER

I'm sorry. I'm only saying that we should already have what it takes to get the farm working again.

TOM

But picture them grazing on the hillside. The essence of simplicity. And we can get a couple of old timey saddles and ride up and down the creek on them.

JENNIFER

Ride them? You can ride mules?

TOM

Around here they do. At least the pair I'm looking at you can.

JENNIFER

I've never even ridden a horse. Is it the same?

TOM

Probably. We can learn together. It will be fun.

JENNIFER

It would be nice to do something together. Okay, so, what's a pair of mules going for these days?

TOM

A matched pair of good working and riding mules will run about \$2500.00.



JENNIFER

\$2500.00! You're kidding! I could plant the whole hillside in daisies for a fraction of that. They'd make a pretty picture, too.

TOM

Look, I don't want to argue about this.

JENNIFER

I'm not arguing. We need to discuss it. We're pretty far out there on our budget as it is and we've got some unsettled issues we don't know what they're going to cost. Let's not make any rash decisions.

TOM

What do you think I am? An idiot? Why do you think I haven't bought them yet?

JENNIFER

I don't know, but I hope you don't. If you want to learn to ride, let's start with a couple of cheap ponies. But \$2500.00? That's a bit much, don't you think?

TOM

Whatever.

*(TOM starts to work on the model ship. JENNIFER begins to type. After a few lines, she stops.)*

JENNIFER

Lester said you promised to plow his corn field for him.

TOM

Yep.

JENNIFER

By the looks of everyone else on the creek, I'd say you're about two weeks behind.

TOM

Haven't had time to do it.

JENNIFER

I know. We don't have our own fields plowed. Do you think it's a good idea to promise other people your time when you haven't any to give? Now Lester's counting on you.

TOM

It's none of your business.

JENNIFER

But I'm counting on you, too, Tom.

TOM

I told him I'd do it and I will.

JENNIFER

But it needs done now.

TOM

If I can't get to it in a week or so I'll put one of the boys on it.

JENNIFER

We're going to pay someone to plow Lester's field? That's crazy!

TOM

We traded for the work already.

JENNIFER

What? For an antiquated hunk of worthless metal that's been cluttering up Lester Johnson's barn for years, and now it's destined to collect turkey shit in ours? He sure saw you coming! You know we'll never use it, unless you're planning on hanging a mailbox on it.

TOM

I'm going to use it to rake the hay as soon as I get a team of mules to pull it.

JENNIFER

And what about the \$3,000 hay rake we bought to pull behind the tractor?

TOM

I've got more than enough land to use them both.

JENNIFER

Whatever you say, Tom, whatever you say.

TOM

You're so damn contrary about everything.

JENNIFER

Contrary? You call me contrary because I don't agree with you? Why should I? We're two different people, Tom. We're the matched team, right? We're supposed to work together to make the best decisions for our life. For our investment. We have to be very, very careful. Especially now. I don't expect us to see eye to eye on everything—

TOM

It's a good thing. You never agree with anything I say.

JENNIFER

That's not true. We're here, aren't we?

TOM

Just once I'd like to talk to you, tell you how I feel about something, share my ideas, and hear you say, "Great idea, Tom! Great idea! I support you all the way!"

JENNIFER

I do support you, most of the time.

TOM

Oh, yeah? Give me an example. I sure wasn't there. I can't even get an entire idea out without you complaining and nagging at me and giving me all these reasons why it won't work, why I'm wrong and why I should do it another way or not at all.

JENNIFER

It's called discussion, Tom. If it's my idea, or your idea, it doesn't matter.

TOM

You've got to get your two cents in whether it's got anything to do with you or not, don't you?

JENNIFER

That all depends on who thinks I don't have anything to do with it. If it has something to do with this farm, then I have the right to express my opinion.

TOM

Don't I know!

JENNIFER

There's nothing wrong with that. I put as much money into this place as you.

TOM

You bitched for weeks because I said I was going to cut down all those worthless, scraggly pine trees on the lower hillsides.

JENNIFER

I didn't bitch, Tom. You brought it up every single day. You wouldn't let me alone about it until I finally caved in. I purely said I liked them. They weren't worthless to me. They were beautiful.

TOM

They were funky. Funky, old pine trees. The wood's worthless. It's gnarly and full of knots. We needed the grazing ground for livestock.

JENNIFER

You could have left a few. To make me happy.

TOM

Yeah, leave a few standing and two years from now the whole hillside's covered with funky baby pine saplings. I'm not going out there and bustin' my ass for nothing! The day I see you out there wielding a chainsaw you can decide what trees you're going to cut down and which ones you're not. Until then, I expect you to keep your big trap shut!

JENNIFER

Well, that's a pleasant sentiment, Tom. Lester teach you that? We need to come to an understanding, here. We're partners. And sometimes partners have different responsibilities and different opinions, but they still talk things out. Whether we agree or not isn't as important as how we treat one another. I don't care what you say as long as you don't attack me. Yelling at me and calling me names makes me feel worthless, like you said about those trees. If you just wouldn't do that. I can take our disagreeing with one another but half the time I don't even know what we're arguing about, it gets so mixed up and distorted!

TOM

You're a master at pointing out all my faults. Don't you think I know what I do? Don't you think I heard the same damn shit everyday from my pathetic father? You never say anything about yourself. It's always about me.

JENNIFER

I try to apologize when I'm wrong.

TOM

Miss Perfection! *(TOM crosses to the freezer and pulls out the bag. He removes a beer from the bag and places the remaining bottles in the refrigerator.)*

JENNIFER

Great.

TOM

Now what's the matter?

JENNIFER

Nothing.

TOM

Don't tell me that. You're forehead's scrunched up like a cow's ass.

JENNIFER

That's why you're back so soon. You didn't go into Four Corners. You went to Chesterville to buy alcohol. You didn't need glue at all.

TOM

There's not a damn thing wrong with my drinking a couple of beers.

JENNIFER

It's never a couple of beers, Tom. And it does matter. For some people, maybe not, but it does with you. You know what you say about your dad when he's drunk? It's the same with you.

TOM

Get off my ass, will you.

JENNIFER

I'm not on your— ass. It's difficult enough for us to get along when you're not drinking, not that I've had much opportunity to know lately. Do you remember when we took the kids to your mother's at Christmas? I had such a good time. We got along so well.

TOM

You were nice to me for a change.

JENNIFER

You weren't drinking for a change.

TOM

I drink because I can't stand your scorn.

JENNIFER

You drink because you want to.

TOM

I get so lonely. You're so hard, Jennifer. I can't get close to you.

JENNIFER

So, if I'm nice to you, give you a good lay, then you wouldn't drink? Is that it?

TOM

I'm not like you, Jenny, you sterile bitch! I need to feel a woman's passion. I need to know she gets off on me.

JENNIFER

What am I supposed to do? You're drinking turns me off. You of all people should understand that. Can't you see it, Tom? All day long we have to deal with all this mundane bullshit— who picked up the cleaning, what bills need paid, what trees to cut, who let the fire go out. We don't have time to be lovers. And then evening comes and all I really want to do is be with someone who I can hold and feel close to and comfort and feel comforted by— and you start drinking and it all dissolves into muck. I wish I could have a drink with you. I'd love to pull out a nice bottle of wine and lie quietly by the fire and make love with you—

TOM

No one's stopping you.

JENNIFER

What difference does it make? You'd drink every night whether I was here or not. You're an alcoholic, Tom.

TOM

I don't drink that much.

JENNIFER

You drink till you pass out. And I know you know it's a problem. That's why you don't keep it around. And yet you drive 30 miles every day to get it. I know you can't help yourself. I see how edgy you get in the afternoon and it gets earlier and earlier every day. Maybe if I didn't have to watch you. Maybe if I didn't have to witness your disintegration. Why don't you just stay in town and hang out at one of those smoky honkytonks with all the other drunks?

*(JENNIFER turns abruptly back to her writing. TOM sits down with his beer and stares at the model ship.)*

TOM

I thought you were making dinner.

JENNIFER

I was. You left. I assumed you would eat in town.

TOM

You assumed wrong like always, Jenny. So I guess I go to bed without food or sex. *(JENNIFER purposely closes her notebook computer, stands up, goes to the cupboard and pulls out a pan.)* Don't put yourself out on my account.

JENNIFER

No trouble. No trouble at all. *(As JENNIFER places two slices of bread and some cheese in the pan, TOM raises the bottle of beer and drinks it quickly. He then crosses to the refrigerator and pulls out another bottle, sits back down into the rocker and once again stares at the model.)* Have you noticed how cold it's getting in here? The fire's almost out and the wood bin is empty.

TOM

Yeah.

JENNIFER

I suppose I'll have to cook and bring in the wood at the same time.

TOM

What are you saying, Jenny?

JENNIFER

I hate it when you call me Jenny.

TOM

What are you saying, Jennifer? Are you implying I ought to bring in the wood or what?

JENNIFER

I'm not implying anything.

TOM

That's a lie. You are a master at not saying anything and meaning something else.

JENNIFER

Drop it, alright? I'll get the firewood. I meant to get it earlier when Lester came by. You just sit there and enjoy yourself. (*JENNIFER picks up the carrying bag by the door.*) I'm sure you're worn out from working yourself to death all day. (*She exits.*)

*(While JENNIFER is outside loading wood, TOM continues to stare at the model. Then he picks up one piece and places it on the deck. Then another. Then another. Finally he picks up a piece and throws it across the room. JENNIFER approaches struggling with the door. TOM makes no effort to help. JENNIFER enters, crosses to the wood bin, unloads her bag and begins to add a few logs to the fire.)*

JENNIFER

There's a cow back behind the barn raising up a storm. I couldn't see her, but I could hear her. Maybe you better check it out.

TOM

I've got a cow dying.

JENNIFER

What do you mean?

TOM

Just what I said. I've got a cow dying. She was calving and got into trouble.

JENNIFER

Did you call the vet?

TOM

No.

JENNIFER

Why not?

TOM

I didn't, that's all. She's too far gone.

JENNIFER

What happened?

TOM

I don't know. She'd been standing down in the creek. I was keeping an eye on her, I knew she was about to calf. But after I sent the boys home, I took that corn in to get ground and when I got back she was down in the water all tangled up in the electric fence.

JENNIFER

Oh, no!

TOM

The calf was lying in the water behind her. It was dead. I don't know if it drowned or what. I turned off the fence and cut the wire but there was nothing I could do for her. I thought she'd be gone by now.

JENNIFER

And you didn't call the vet? I can't believe you didn't call the vet! (*JENNIFER rushes to the closet and pulls out a coat and gloves, opens a drawer, grabs a flashlight and heads for the door.*) It's almost pitch black out there. I won't be able to see a thing. (*JENNIFER exits.*)

TOM

(*After JENNIFER exits.*) It won't do any good. She's too far gone. (*TOM rises and crosses to the stove. He turns off the heat, pulls a plate from the cupboard and places a burned grilled cheese sandwich on the plate. He takes a knife from the drawer and begins to scrape the burned part off the bread. He scrapes harder and harder and harder until the bread crumbles. He crosses back to the fireplace and pokes at the wood. Then he crosses to the refrigerator, pulls out another bottle of beer and sits down at the rocking chair, staring at the model.*)

JENNIFER

(*Entering.*) How could you let an animal suffer like that? How could you be so cruel? It's horrible! I'm going to call the vet right now.

TOM

It won't do any good. She's beyond help.

JENNIFER

Then why didn't you shoot her? The least you could have done was shoot her. Put her out of her misery. How could you let her suffer like that?!

TOM

I should have. I wanted to. I couldn't.

JENNIFER

Damn it, Tom! That's a \$2000.00 animal out there lying in the creek and you just let her die? You didn't even try to save her? I can't stand it! How could you?!



TOM

You think I like it? I've been going crazy about it all afternoon. There's nothing I can do about it. Nothing! Just leave me alone!

JENNIFER

*(Grabbing the newspaper and flipping through the pages.)* I'm going to call one of those numbers they publish in the newspaper.

TOM

What numbers?

JENNIFER

For hauling off dead stock.

TOM

*(Jumping up and tearing the paper from her hands, in a very threatening manner.)* No you're not! I don't want anyone else involved.

JENNIFER

What's the matter? Afraid your neighbors will find out what kind of city slicker you really are? If she's going to die anyway, we might as well get something out of her. Sell her for dog food. Anything! Her life has to be worth something, doesn't it? Oh, I never wanted these cows in the first place. You spend thousands of dollars on a bunch of dumb animals you don't know a damn thing about. You're not Lester. He grew up here. He understands cows and mules and plowing and all this farming shit. It sounds good, it sounds like a lot of fun, but it's work. Hard work. You tell the neighbor's you're gonna buy a bunch of pregnant cows and build some kind of big cattle operation. That's just great! Don't they look perdi out there munchin' down the grass? We invest a bloody fortune in them and you have no idea how to care for them. But those are live creatures, Tom. They depend on you. They count on you! And they're all going to die and we're going to lose our asses on them!

TOM

Keep out of this, Jennifer! You don't have a damn thing to do with this! Those are my cows and I'll take care of them the way I see fit. Just leave me the hell alone!

*(TOM crosses to a drawer and pulls out a revolver. He loads it with two bullets.)*

JENNIFER

What are you going to do?

TOM

Put her out of her misery. That's what you want, isn't it, Jennifer?

*(TOM exits.)*

JENNIFER

You better wear your coat. It's cold outside.

*(JENNIFER removes her coat and places it back in the closet. She goes to the counter and scrapes the mess from the sandwich into the wastebasket then sits on the rocking chair staring at the model ship. A single shot rings out and the wail of a cow is heard. JENNIFER places her head in her hands and cries. Moments later, the backdoor slams. JENNIFER quickly wipes her tears and stands as TOM enters through the screen door.)*

TOM

You happy now? *(TOM crosses towards her with the revolver and places it on the mantel.)*

JENNIFER

I'm sorry, honey.

TOM

I didn't feel like dealing with it.

JENNIFER

Forget it. It's over now.

TOM

I'll use the tractor to drag it up into the woods tomorrow.

JENNIFER

I feel lifeless. Empty.

TOM

When I feel your scorn, that's what does it to me, Jen. It's been there for so long. I don't want to be mean to you. I don't want to hurt you. Sometimes I think I can't take it—

JENNIFER

And sometimes you think you can take anything and I don't know which is worse.

TOM

I just want you to like me and I don't think you do. And I think you know you don't but you stay with me anyway and I don't know why.

JENNIFER

I'm here because I want to be.

TOM

I wish I could believe that.

JENNIFER

Me, too.

TOM

I need you, Jennifer. I need to feel close to you. I don't know how to get close to you.

JENNIFER

I want to be soft. I feel stupid acting soft. I don't know how to love you.

TOM

Come to bed with me, Jen.

JENNIFER

I can't just yet. I have to get your suit tomorrow and the story's not finished.

TOM

You don't want to go to bed with me, do you?

JENNIFER

Of course I do. But your suit. You need it for the hearing.

TOM

You're not listening, Jen. I need you more.

JENNIFER

I know you do. Come on. Let's go to bed.

*(Lights down.)*

## ACT I, SCENE V

*(March 14. Early evening. Lights up. JENNIFER at her computer, TOM working on his model ship.)*

JENNIFER

Do you know what I'd like to get?

TOM

No, what?

JENNIFER

A copier/fax machine. I priced one in town the other day. I can get a fairly nice model that will suit my needs for under \$300.00. I'm picking up more and more freelance work but without access to cable, and you not wanting to pay for satellite service— At least if I could fax revisions.

TOM

With the amount of money we've been going through lately, we've all but exhausted our savings. We have to run that water line up to the house and get the bathroom remodeled. We've squandered a small fortune since we've been here.

JENNIFER

I only spend money on necessities.

TOM

I'm not accusing you of anything.

JENNIFER

Then why did you say "we" squandered a small fortune? I buy groceries and do the laundry in town and spend a little now and then on the kids. I haven't had a new dress or a new pair of shoes since we came here. I already had the notebook. I need at least the bare minimum to communicate with publishers if they're to take me seriously.

TOM

At least someone takes you seriously.

JENNIFER

Look, I know I'm not making a lot of money yet. Switching from the editorial staff at Newsday with a circulation of 40,000 to freelancing for a paper that comes out twice a week in a county of less than 16,000 people is tough enough. I'm fortunate that some decent magazines are throwing a few projects my way. I'm our only source of income at the moment. I can make more money if I have the right equipment.

TOM

You wouldn't even have the opportunity to be sitting there playing at writing if it weren't for me. We've got everything we have because of me.

JENNIFER

What are you talking about? We both worked for what we have.

TOM

And what are you doing now?

JENNIFER

I'm doing what I said I would do, that's what I'm doing. You said you wanted to move out of the city. Get away from everything. Build a life of simplicity. I knew it would be difficult to establish myself as a writer from here but I was willing to accept the challenge. I told you I didn't want to farm. That's your dream. You've got two hired hands to help you. You act as if I do nothing because I'm not out there laboring alongside them. You complain I do nothing and yet it's David and Omar doing the work. Not you. They're the ones fixing up this place.

TOM

David and Omar couldn't tie their own shoe laces if it weren't for me. I tell them what to do. I run this farm. I'm the one with ideas. I'm the one who makes everything happen.

JENNIFER

I like this farm—if it had nothing on it but trees and hills and that beautiful clear blue stream that meanders through the hollow past the barn and across our front yard. That's what brought me here. And the white tail deer in the valley at dusk. I don't care about corn. I would be happy with a field of daisies. You run this place the way you see fit. Because you want to, not because you are the only one who can do it.

TOM

Don't kid yourself. You would be lost without me.

JENNIFER

You think so? Who takes care of this house? We don't have help anymore, remember? When was the last time you swept a floor or scoured the sink or scrubbed the toilet? Do you think I enjoy wiping your shit off the commode?

TOM

If you don't like it don't do it.

JENNIFER

Then who would? So you go ahead and take care of the farm. You're the big boss man. You tell the boys what to do. I do my share right here in this house.

TOM

And you'll continue to squander every last dime we've got while I'm rackin' my brain trying to figure out how to get more.

JENNIFER

I don't believe this. Last night you were ready to spend \$2500 on a couple of mules to glorify our hillsides and today it's my fault we're running out of money?

TOM

I have to spend money to make this farm work. If I don't, it will never make a profit.

JENNIFER

I don't question any money we have to put directly into the farm. Why should I? We knew it would take most of our resources to fix it up. What I can't stand is the waste.

TOM

What waste?

JENNIFER

The money we spend on things you never use, or use once or twice and then you move on to the next best thing. Or something breaks and you don't feel like fixing it. Or don't know how. You always want the best of everything when something less would do the job just as well.

TOM

What are you talking about?

JENNIFER

Well, that metal monster behind the barn for one.

TOM

The bulldozer?

JENNIFER

Yes, the bulldozer. You used it once and the track broke and it has sat there ever since.

TOM

When we finish clearing the hillsides, I'm going to use it to build a pond.

JENNIFER

I thought we were going to use it to clear the hillsides?

TOM

They're too steep.

JENNIFER

Do you know how to fix it? It's not a Tonka toy. We can't throw it in the back of the truck and haul it over to Alvie's shop.

TOM

We don't need it now. When we do I'll buy a trailer to haul it.

JENNIFER

If we don't need it now, then why don't we sell it and use the money to run the water line? Considering what it cost, we'd have enough left over to hire someone who knows how to run a bulldozer to come in and build a pond next year or the year after, when we're ready and we can afford it.

TOM

Do you not listen? I can't sell it because it's not running.

JENNIFER

How many cows have we lost, Tom?

TOM

I only lost one. I can't help it about the calves.

JENNIFER

We bought breeding stock. We have to help it about the calves. We've lost three.

TOM

Shut-up, Jennifer.

JENNIFER

We bought pregnant cows and the fence isn't finished. We try to keep them in with an electric fence. How many times now have I gone down the creek to chase them back upstream to our place? And it's going to get worse when the fields are planted. The neighbors won't like our cows tromping through their corn.

TOM

Shut-up, Jenny.

JENNIFER

Don't call me Jenny. You're doing that to get back at me because you know I'm right.

TOM

You're so perfect.

JENNIFER

I brought it up because you said I was squandering our money. I'm not.

TOM

But you think I am?

JENNIFER

I'm saying we've bought too much we could do without and we may not have enough money now for what we really need.

TOM

I've got to get out of this place. I'm going crazy here. There's nothing for me to do here. We're so far away from everything. We've got to sell the farm. Every week we sink thousands of dollars into this dump. We'll never get our money back. What are we doing here? Nothing! I'm so bored I can't stand myself. Oh, you've got your little desk and your little computer, but you can take that anywhere. What about me? What have I got? I've got to drive 100 miles to get anywhere worth going to.

JENNIFER

I don't understand you. How do you expect me to maintain my sanity when you say things like that? How am I supposed to make sense of it?

TOM

We need to advertise it right away. It could take years to sell this dump. We don't even know if anyone else would ever want it. We've got to start looking for a buyer now!

JENNIFER

Fine. Go ahead. Advertise it.

TOM

I thought you could take care of that.

JENNIFER

I don't want to sell the farm. It's not a dump to me.

TOM

It doesn't matter what I want, does it?

JENNIFER

Of course it does. I don't believe it's what you want either.

TOM

Believe it. You're the writer. Use that supernatural talent of yours for something worthwhile for a change.

JENNIFER

For pity sake, Tom, you can write an ad.

TOM

*(Mockingly.)* For pity sake, Tom. Of course I can write an ad. Anybody can write a stupid ad. But as long as you're sitting there on your ass pecking away at your little computer anyway, you might as well do it.

JENNIFER

Stop it. Alright. Stop it.

TOM

Yeah, you'd just as soon I shut up so you don't have to deal with me. I'm depressed, damn it! But I'm not supposed to bother dear, little old Jenny. No, I have to be depressed all by myself!

JENNIFER

I don't know which is worse, you when you're drunk or you when you want to be.

TOM

And you think you can stand there and bitch at me.

JENNIFER

I'm not bitching.

TOM

*(Mockingly.)* I'm not bitching.

JENNIFER

Go to hell.

TOM

I'm already there.



JENNIFER

Do you know what's wrong with you?

TOM

No, but I'm sure you'll tell me.

JENNIFER

You were great at your business, Tom, but you're spoiled. You're used to investing other people's money, making decisions and having someone else carry out your ideas. And if something didn't work, well, it didn't. And if it did, despite the incompetence you blamed on your staff, they heaped all the credit on you. But out here you have to roll up your sleeves and take responsibility for yourself. You can't throw everything away just because things don't work out the way you dreamed they would. It's okay to make mistakes, Tom, but if you make a decision and something goes wrong, there's no one to blame but yourself.

TOM

I've had to take on more responsibility than your little pinhead can comprehend, ace. What do you think I'm doing with this negligence suit? I sure as hell don't see your back up against the wall. It's all up to me to keep us from losing everything!

JENNIFER

I told you we didn't need that damn log splitter. Every farmer on the fork sells firewood. Dirt cheap. But you had to have it. You didn't know how to use it. And why would you run a powerful piece of equipment like that with a kid around?

TOM

If you thought it was so dangerous, why the hell didn't you say something?

JENNIFER

You'll find a way to blame this on me, won't you? A little boy loses his eye because you want to show off what a big man you are and you're going to blame it on me!

TOM

*(Grabbing JENNIFER by the arm and swinging her across the room.)* You bitch!

JENNIFER

Go ahead, big man. Knock me around some more. You think you're such a big, important man, well, you're not! You're just a little boy. A spoiled little brat. You ever touch me like that again, and I'll call the sheriff on you. *(There is a knock on the outside door.)* Someone's at the door.

TOM

I can hear.

JENNIFER

*(Peeking out the window.)* It's Lester.

I don't want to see anyone.

TOM

Where are you going?

JENNIFER

Upstairs.

TOM

He's here to see you, not me.

JENNIFER

Tell him I'm taking a bath.

TOM

I'm not going to lie to him.

JENNIFER

Then I'll get in the tub.

TOM

*(TOM exits.)*

JENNIFER

Damn you. *(LESTER knocks again. JENNIFER hesitates then crosses to the screen door and calls out.)* It's okay, Lester. Come on in.

LESTER

Don't mean ta bother ya none.

JENNIFER

It's no bother. Come in.

LESTER

*(Entering.)* I saw Tom's truck out front. Thought I'd kum by and jaw a bit wit him. Wasn't doin' nothin' ta home 'n' figered I might as well do nothin' here.

JENNIFER

Tom's taking a bath.

LESTER

*(Sitting in the rocking chair.)* Did ya hear 'bout that Willis gal over on ta other side a the ridge? The one live next ta the church-house?

JENNIFER

No, what about her?

LESTER

Said she got broke into last night. Heard it over the news this morning.

JENNIFER

They take much?

LESTER

Naw. They weren't after nothin' special. She claims two young fellers came ta 'er door askin' ta use the phone. Said their truck broke down. When she let 'em in, claimed they forced theirselves on 'er. She's done got a warrant out fer 'em.

JENNIFER

She knew them?

LESTER

Claims it were the Hall boys. Might be. Mama called over 'n' Missy, their mama, said they aint been home all night.

JENNIFER

Hope they catch them.

LESTER

Aint done nothin' she didn't bring on 'erself. I heard she wuz teasin' one a 'em in town the other day, makin' a point she livin' alone 'n' all. She's a wild one, that one is. Been askin' fer it a long time.

JENNIFER

Why do you say that?

LESTER

She works over in Chesterville ta one a 'em honkytonks. Aint no place fer a decent gal ta work. Goes round wigglin' that behind a 'ers all night 'n' gits mad cuz the boys foller 'er home.

JENNIFER

She let them in to use the telephone. Not get attacked.

LESTER

Ya kin only push a feller so far fer 'e's gonna snap. Young gal aint got no business workin' in a place like that.

JENNIFER

Lester, you can't justify two men raping a girl just because you don't approve of what she does to make a living. What happened to her is a crime and I hope they're caught and punished.

LESTER

My nephew, Joshua, Jr. asked ‘er to marry ‘im last year. She could a had a good man to take care a ‘er. But she wants to live by ‘erself. Tol’ ‘im she didn’t want ta take care a no man. I’m surprised he didn’t knock ‘er clean otta the county. You kin bet a year’s pick a soy beans she done somethin’ to provoke them boys. I know their daddy. He’s a good man. Takes good care a his family. Aint never touched Missy ‘cept she deservin’ it.

JENNIFER

You know, Lester. Tom’s exhausted. He’s planning on going straight to bed when he finishes his bath.

LESTER

Jimmy Lee kum home from school t’day all covered with red blotches. Mama reckons he took the chicken pox.

JENNIFER

I heard they were going around.

LESTER

His teacher said there’d been nine er ten out all week.

JENNIFER

Doesn’t the school require students to get vaccinated?

LESTER

There’s a vaccine for chicken pox? Well, I’ll be damned. Hey, Mama wanted me ta ask ya if ya got one a ‘em ‘nouncements in the mail last week? Bout gittin’ the chance ta buy a real diamond necklace fer \$4.00 plus shippin’ ‘n’ handlin’.

JENNIFER

Four dollars, huh?

LESTER

Can’t go wrong at that price.

JENNIFER

You wouldn’t think so.

LESTER

Said “layerd in solid yeller gold.” Only thing I ever had solid gold was a tooth belongin’ ta m’granpappy. Kums with a signed letter of autherenicity. They only sint ‘em ta a select group. If ya didn’t git one, she said ta tell ya we kin order up ta eight with this offer ‘n’ she be happy ta git ya one. She’s gonna git one fer ever one a our girls ‘n’ she’d like ta git one fer herself, too, but that’s only seven so she kin order one fer ya if ya want.

JENNIFER

I’ll have to think about it, Lester. We’re a little short on cash these days.

LESTER

*(Laughing.)* Now don't go messin' with me like that, Jenny. I aint never seen a man spend more money 'n' Tom. Figgered he musta won the lottery. I'm sure if ya want a necklace he'll git ya one but ya gotta let Mama know right way. Order's gotta be postmarked by March 15.

JENNIFER

I will.

LESTER

Almost fergot. *(Searching through his pocket, pulling out a slip of paper and handing it to JENNIFER.)* Mama sint this recipe fer ya.

JENNIFER

What recipe is that? *(Looking at the paper.)* Oh, yes, the Mississippi Mud Cake. Good.

LESTER

She said ta tell ya always use lard stead a oleo like it says. An' she buys them individga marshmellas 'n' melts 'em stead a usin' marshmella crème cuz it costs less.

JENNIFER

Tell her thanks.

LESTER

No need ta thank er. Jest bein' neighborly. *(It's quiet for a moment. JENNIFER fidgets with the paper.)* Main reason I kum by ta tell Tom not ta worry bout plowin' m' ground.

JENNIFER

I told him you were here yesterday. He said he'd try his best to get to it this week.

LESTER

I know he's a busy man.

JENNIFER

He said a deal's a deal.

LESTER

You tell 'em I kin git Abel Johnson's boy ta plow it fer me.

JENNIFER

If that would be better, you might go on and ask him.

LESTER

Jest as soon Tom done it, him bein' my closest neighbor 'n' all.

JENNIFER

Well, if you really need him to.

LESTER

*(Finally rising to leave.)* Even a snappin' turtle kums otta the water whin the sun goes down.

JENNIFER

Yes, well, I'm sorry, Lester. He probably fell asleep.

LESTER

You stop by now 'n' jaw with us.

JENNIFER

I will when I can. Thanks again for the recipe.

LESTER

M' pleasure, Jenny. *(LESTER nods his head and exits.)*

JENNIFER

*(Closing the door in relief.)* So long. *(JENNIFER crosses to the stairs.)* Are you up there?

TOM

*(Entering, smartly dressed.)* Where the hell do you think I am?

JENNIFER

Hiding under a rock?

TOM

What's that you say?

JENNIFER

Nothing. Going out?

TOM

What do you care?

JENNIFER

I don't.

TOM

Good. Then I'll be out of your hair.

JENNIFER

When will you be back?

TOM

What's it to you?

JENNIFER

Nothing. I'm just your mommy.

TOM

And what's that snide remark supposed to mean, Jenny?

JENNIFER

Didn't even have the balls to come out here and speak for yourself.

TOM

I have no interest in talking to Lester.

JENNIFER

And I have?

TOM

I thought you liked Lester.

JENNIFER

I do my best to accept Lester for who he is.

TOM

Which is a hell of a lot more than you do me.

JENNIFER

He came to see you, not me. You run off and hide in the bathtub and leave me to cover for you. Just like your mommy.

TOM

I have plans this evening.

JENNIFER

Since when?

TOM

Since you started running your mouth.

JENNIFER

Wonderful! Maybe you'll meet someone in one of them honkytonks really wants to play your momma. Now, wouldn't you like that? Someone who doesn't mind getting knocked around now and then.

TOM

There's plenty of them out there.

JENNIFER

Make sure you find a clean one.

TOM

Why do you care? You have to fuck me to get something. And that's never going to happen.

JENNIFER

We made love last night.

TOM

Thanks for the crumbs.

JENNIFER

You better get going, Tom. I wouldn't want you to get stuck with the leftovers.

TOM

You wouldn't care if I did hook up with another woman, would you?

JENNIFER

Why should that bother me? Just promise me you'll treat her exactly the way you do me and I promise I won't get jealous. And if you should happen to find a woman who can teach you how to love with your heart and not the back of your hand, well, all I can say is it can only benefit me because I don't have a clue.

TOM

Oh, how moving, Jennifer. You're so smart. So literate. Too bad you can't back it up. If you'd stop bitching long enough you might figure it out.

JENNIFER

*(Opening the screen door.)* Have a good time.

TOM

Don't worry, I will.

*(TOM exits. Lights down.)*

## ACT I, SCENE VI

*(Same evening. Four hours later. Lights up. JENNIFER wrapped in a blanket, asleep curled up in her chair. TOM enters the porch, slamming the outside door. As he opens the screen door, JENNIFER covers her head with the blanket. TOM, highly intoxicated, holding a bottle of whiskey in his hand, stumbles as he removes one of his shoes, throwing it against the wall. He sets the bottle on the counter, flings open the closet door, throwing his jacket inside. He slams the closet door and crosses to JENNIFER, yanking the cover from around her which in turn causes her to fall off the chair onto the floor.)*

JENNIFER

What are you doing?

TOM

*(Grabbing her left hand.)* Give me that ring!



JENNIFER

*(As TOM attempts to pull her wedding ring from her finger.) Stop it, you're hurting me! (JENNIFER struggles away and removes the ring. TOM snatches it from her hand and throws it across the room. Then he picks up the telephone, raising it over her head as if to strike her. She quickly shields her head as he slams it down next to her.)*

TOM

So you're going to call the sheriff on me, huh? You bitch! Go ahead and call him. Call 'im you lousy whore! I'm going to bash your brains in!

JENNIFER

Let me go.

TOM

*(Grabbing her by her hair and dragging her across the floor towards the door.) Get out of here! Get out of my house! You bitch! You sexless slob! I hate you! Get out of my house!*

JENNIFER

Help me! Someone help me!

TOM

*(Mockingly.) Help me! Someone help me! Do you know what you are? A slob! A fucking slob! (TOM grabs the bottle of whiskey. He stands between JENNIFER and the screen door.) Get out! Get out! I hate you, you worthless bitch! You sexless slob! Get out! (As he lifts the bottle to take a drink, JENNIFER scrambles for the stairway and runs upstairs.) Go ahead, turn your back on me! Run out of the room! (An upstairs door slams.) Slam the door in my face! That's what you always do. You bitch! I hate you! (TOM sits in his chair, his head in his hands. JENNIFER moves about on the floor above him. TOM looks up.) I hear a rat. There's a rat in my house. (TOM stands, picks up his shoe and throws it high against the wall.) Get out of my house, you rat! Get out of my house! (TOM laughs hideously. He stops and takes another drink.) You moron! I can't believe this. I'm living my life with a stupid moron! (Mockingly.) Help me! Someone help me! (He laughs again.) How could you do this to me, Jennifer? How could you do this to me? You had to know. You had to! I hate you so much! Every second of every day I feel your scorn. You can tell, Jennifer. You think you've been fooling me, but you can tell. You bitch! How could you do this to me? Why, Jennifer, why? Go out and get yourself a real man, Jennifer. One that will fuck you the way you want. You hear me, Jennifer? Do you know how much I hate you? You don't want me! How many men have there been, Jennifer? You think I don't know you're getting it from someone else? I hate you, you bitch! I could kill you for what you've done to me. Do you hear me, Jennifer? I could kill you for what you've done! You've wasted all these years. (TOM looks at his reflection in the window. He studies his face.) Oh, God. I'm getting so old. My face is so old. Why did you marry me, Jennifer? You could have walked away when I still had time to start over. (Sobbing.) How could you do this to me? You bitch! I'm so old. I hate you, Jennifer. I hate you. I hate you! (Laughing hideously.) Help me! Someone, help me!*

*(TOM laughs again as the lights fade out.)*

## ACT I, SCENE VII

*(5:30 PM, March 15, Lights up, JENNIFER listening to a recording on a digital voice recorder, "You moron! I can't believe this. I'm living my life with a stupid moron!" TOM approaches the outside door. JENNIFER hears the door slam, slips something into her pocket and quickly hides the recorder under some papers on her desk just as TOM opens the screen door. He is dressed conservatively in a suit and tie. He crosses the room without speaking, removes his suit coat folds it gently and places it over the arm of the rocking chair. Then he crosses to the cupboard, pulls out a glass, pours a shot of whiskey and raises the glass in the air.)*

TOM

Today I lost my inferiority complex towards you.

JENNIFER

I didn't know you had one.

TOM

You don't know a lot of things about me.

JENNIFER

So what else is new. How did it go?

TOM

Fine. Just fine.

JENNIFER

What did the judge say?

TOM

Not that it matters to you. He said it was a pleasure to have such a fine, upstanding, well thought of member of the community in his courtroom. Then he reached over the bench and shook my hand.

JENNIFER

Wait a minute. I don't get it. Why would he say that?

TOM

Because I am.

JENNIFER

Lucky he didn't see you last night.

TOM

*(Downing the shot.)* Wouldn't have made any difference.

JENNIFER

What happened with the suit? Did they set a trial date?

They dropped it.

TOM

They dropped it?

JENNIFER

You hard of hearing, too?

TOM

Then it's over?

JENNIFER

Yep.

TOM

JENNIFER  
(*With genuine joy and relief.*) How? Why?

TOM

Because I'm a good person.

JENNIFER

What?

TOM

Lester and some other folks on the creek got together with the kid's parents and talked them into dropping the charges. Said I'd been a good neighbor and convinced them it was an accident. It was an accident. No reason to make a man suffer and lose his farm over something he never meant to do. So, they'll accept the settlement offered by our insurance company and won't pursue any further damages.

JENNIFER

It's all over with?

TOM

That's it.

JENNIFER

I'm happy for you.

TOM

Happy for me? Be happy for yourself! Thanks to me you're not going to lose you precious house or your fancy computer or your land or anything else.

JENNIFER

Please forgive me if I don't throw my arms around you in a fit of gratitude.

TOM

You've always got some excuse for not supporting me.

JENNIFER

Do you think the judge would have patted you on the back if he knew how you treated me?

TOM

Ask Lester. He's a good judge of what men think about women around here.

JENNIFER

Don't fool yourself. Most of the people around here are sharper than you think. He would have locked you up and thrown away the key.

TOM

Whatever you think, Jennifer. You're so perfect. So beyond reproach.

JENNIFER

Those are your words, not mine. I'm just trying to get by.

TOM

You should be pleased. You can continue to get by in style all because of me.

JENNIFER

You must be proud.

TOM

I am.

*(TOM pours another shot of whiskey, crosses to his chair, looks at his model, picking up a piece to the model, and attempting to position it into place.)*

JENNIFER

*(Crossing to the refrigerator.)* I'm planning on fixing a salad for dinner.

TOM

Knock yourself out. I'm not hungry.

JENNIFER

Tends to kills the appetite, doesn't it?

TOM

What? Being with you? Where's the glue?

JENNIFER

On my desk.

*(JENNIFER searches through the refrigerator, pulling vegetables as TOM rises, crossing to JENNIFER's desk. He shoves some papers aside, noticing the digital recorder.)*

TOM

What's this? You been recording something? You been recording me?

JENNIFER

Maybe.

TOM

Plan on playing it for the judge? Sorry, you're too late.

JENNIFER

Please be careful with that. I use it for notes for my stories.

TOM

Oh, I'm not going to break your precious recorder, little Jenny. I just want to hear what you've been spreading around town about me.

JENNIFER

Look, I had no intention of playing that for anyone except you. I thought if you could hear yourself, you'd understand how I feel, what I've been trying to tell you. You never seem to remember anything you say when you're drinking.

TOM

But you never let me forget. *(TOM turns on the recorder, "I hate you, you bitch. I could kill you for what you've done to me. Do you hear me, Jennifer? I could kill you for what you've done." TOM stops the recorder. He turns on JENNIFER, threateningly.)* Who did you play this for? Who? Mary?

JENNIFER

I didn't play it for anyone!

TOM

What did you tell her about me?

JENNIFER

I didn't tell her anything.

TOM

You expect me to believe that? If not her, who? One of your boyfriends? *(TOM throws the recorder into the fire.)*

JENNIFER

Damn you! Why did you do that? Damn you! I don't have any boyfriends. Stop saying I do!

TOM

I can tell when I've hit on the truth. I'm right on target, aren't I, Jenny?

JENNIFER

Stop it! I can't stand it! I had all I can take of it last night.

TOM

I'm just warming up.

JENNIFER

Look, I'm going to leave.

TOM

Go ahead. That's your answer for everything, isn't it?

JENNIFER

Do you have any idea how insane this is, Tom? One of us has to leave. I can't go on like this. It hurts too much. Can't you see I'm suffering? I'm in pain? *(TOM blocks JENNIFER's movements as she tries to gather a few of her things.)* Do you think bullying me is the answer? Do you think that will make me stay? Let me maintain my dignity and walk away.

TOM

Oh, you maintain your dignity alright, you sterile bitch! You wouldn't show me emotion if your life depended on it. I spill my guts out to you and what do I get? Nothing! Total blasé nothingness!

JENNIFER

Just leave me alone alright?

TOM

*(Mockingly.)* Just leave me alone, alright? You moron. You wimp! I'll leave you alone!

JENNIFER

*(As he pushes further into her.)* Move out of my way.

TOM

A mouse. A god damn mouse! I may be vulgar and detestable next to you, but you! You're nothing! *(TOM steps aside and allows JENNIFER to pass. She goes to the closet, takes out her coat then opens the cupboard door, takes out a pair of glasses and a set of keys. She puts on her glasses just as TOM steps between her and the screen door. He pokes her in the face and knocks her glasses to the floor.)* Oh, poor little mouse. Did someone knock off your glasses?

JENNIFER

You poked me in the eye!

TOM

Poor little mouse.

JENNIFER

Let me go, Tom. Please, let me go. (*JENNIFER starts to cry. She reaches down for her glasses as TOM crosses to the model ship, picks it up and throws it in the fire.*) What are you doing? Are you crazy? Damn you! Damn you! It was beautiful! How could you do that? How could you destroy something so perfect? So beautiful? Damn you, Tom Benedict!

TOM

So you do have emotions, huh? I had no idea a sterile bitch like you could muster up any. Don't give yourself away, Jenny.

JENNIFER

You think I have no feelings? No emotion? Look at me! Look at my hand. Last night you attacked me. You threw my wedding ring across the room. My wedding ring! You bastard! As if it means nothing! Do you think that's love? What's happening between us—this is cruel and ugly. It's not love. For God's sake, Tom, let me go. Go find a woman with no needs of her own. One that can help you through your never ending crises, all your self-inflicted wounds! You're lack of control, it's vulgar for someone like you, someone with your intelligence and potential. Your lack of concern and sensitivity towards me, it's all part of your cruel, self-indulgent nature, your need to inflict your superiority on everyone and everything around you. I hate you for destroying my love for you! I did love you, Tom, and I could have loved you still, if you could only find the strength and wisdom to stop!

TOM

You always have an excuse why you can't love me. If you do this, Tom, I'll love you. If you do that, Tom, I'll love you. Not today, Tom, maybe I'll love you a little tomorrow. You drop crumbs at my feet to pacify my needs, hoping today will be the day you truly love me.

JENNIFER

I hate you for not understanding the true meaning of love! It's clear to me you intend to live a miserable, unhappy life no matter where you are, taking and taking and taking from those who love you to try and fill your own void, you own lack of character!

TOM

Shut up!

JENNIFER

No! I don't have to shut-up! I'm going to tell you exactly how I feel. You don't want me. You don't want love, not if you have to work for it, share some of yourself for it. If you can't have it just because you demand it, then you'd rather destroy it, pump up your ego with how great you are for seeing how worthless it was in the first place. For months I've protected you, haven't truly confided in anyone the hell I've experienced living here with you. I tried to tell Mary, but I couldn't. I didn't want anyone to know the truth. I didn't want anyone to think badly of you, to hate you. I believed someday you would see you were wrong. And you are wrong. I no longer have faith in you. I know now, the man I thought I married is dead.

TOM

Shut up, Jennifer! You don't know what you're doing to me!

JENNIFER

Maybe you're there, buried so deep I can't get to you. Where are you? I can't find you! There I go again, believing one last time that you are good. That this evil, cruel, thing you've become is just a distortion of your true character, brought on by fear and disappointment and your own misplaced feelings of inferiority and insecurity. That this evil isn't you. But you know something? It is you. You are evil.

TOM

Stop it!

JENNIFER

I won't! I wanted to love you. For you to love me. For us to be happy. With life. With yourself! But evil doesn't love. It can't love. It hates always.

TOM

Stop! Stop!

JENNIFER

It only pretends to love to further its own needs.

TOM

No. No!

JENNIFER

I've been stupid. I've been your whore. My whole life with you is one horrendous lie!

TOM

*(Grabbing the loaded pistol from the mantel.)* Help me! *(TOM fires the gun, killing JENNIFER. The reverberations from the gunshot slowly fade away into silence. Dead silence.)* I warned you, Jennifer. I begged you to stop. *(TOM crosses to JENNIFER and touches her.)* I'm sorry, Jennifer. One of us had to leave. Remember? You said so yourself. I couldn't do it. I wanted to. I couldn't. You were in so much pain, Jennifer. I couldn't let you suffer, could I? Jennifer? Jennifer? Jennifer!

*(A dying cow wails in the distance as the lights fade out. End Act I.)*

**INTERMISSION**



## ACT II, SCENE I

*(AT RISE: A year later, a courtroom in the county courthouse in Four Corners. Lights up. A trial in progress. Counsels for the Defense and the Prosecution direct their arguments toward the audience, as if it were the jury. MARY JARVIS is on the witness stand, MR. ELLIOTT, Counsel for the Prosecution, questioning the witness.)*

MR. ELLIOTT

Mrs. Jarvis, is it true you have known the Defendant Tom Benedict for almost two years?

MARY

Yes, that's right.

MR. ELLIOTT

And during that time have you been a guest in the Benedict home many times?

MARY

Well, yes, until—

MR. ELLIOTT

And the purpose of those visits was to see Jennifer Benedict?

MARY

And Tom, too. Oh, if I'd only listened more carefully. Jennifer tried to tell me—

MS. SOMERS

Objection, Your Honor. Supposition on the part of the witness.

JUDGE

Sustained. Mr. Elliott, please direct your witness to limit her responses to what actually happened, not what she thinks may have happened.

MR. ELLIOTT

Yes, Your Honor. Did you stop by often to chat with Jennifer?

MARY

Yes. We were very good friends. Best friends.

MR. ELLIOTT

Was Tom also a good friend?

MARY

He was. At the time.

MR. ELLIOTT

During your many visits in the Benedict household, did you ever hear or see Tom Benedict act strangely or act in any such manner that might lead you to think he was mentally unstable?

MS. SOMERS

I object, Your Honor. Mrs. Jarvis is a housewife, not a psychiatrist.

MR. ELLIOTT

May I restate the question?

JUDGE

Proceed, Counsel.

MR. ELLIOTT

Mary, as a friend of both Mr. and Mrs. Benedict, having visited quite often in their home, did you at any time witness any actions on the part of Mr. Benedict which you, as a friend, considered peculiar or disturbing?

MARY

No, not at all. He was always quite charming and hospitable.

MR. ELLIOTT

Alright, Mary. Thank you. That's all for now.

JUDGE

Ms. Somers, you may cross-examine the witness.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Your Honor. (*Approaching the witness.*) Mrs. Jarvis, Mary, you seem to know quite a lot about the Benedicts and their relationship. Do you make it a practice to engage in, what should we call it, small talk about your neighbors?

MARY

If you're calling me a gossip, why don't you just come right out and say it?

MS. SOMERS

Just answer the question.

MARY

No. I don't make a practice of talking about other people. I do my best to mind my own business.

MS. SOMERS

As a friend of the family, were you aware of the negligence suit pending against Mr. Benedict?

MARY

Yes, of course. Everybody knew about it. It was the talk of the town.

MS. SOMERS

The talk of the town. Yes, interesting. It must have been very difficult for Tom knowing everyone, all his friends, his neighbors, all the people in town, everywhere he went, people were talking about him. That everybody knew he was running a log splitter when a piece of wood flew off and struck a nine year old neighbor boy in the face, blinding him in one eye.

JUDGE

Your question, Counselor?

MS. SOMERS

Yes, Your Honor. Mary, even though it was an accident, wouldn't you agree that Tom was extremely upset about the lawsuit, about a little boy losing his eye, believing it was his fault?

MARY

Yes. He was upset.

MS. SOMERS

Extremely upset?

MARY

Wouldn't anyone be? It didn't give him the license to kill her!

JUDGE

Caution your witness, Mr. Elliott.

MR. ELLIOTT

Yes, Your Honor.

MARY

I'm sorry, Your Honor. This is very difficult for me. I'm sorry.

MS. SOMERS

Yes, we know this is difficult for you, Mary. When something bad happens to us, we sometimes say and do things we wouldn't do under normal circumstances. Mary, were you aware that Tom Benedict was going to lose his farm over this lawsuit?

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection, Your Honor! That's purely supposition on the part of Counsel. The lawsuit was dropped. At no time were the Benedicts in danger of losing their farm.

MS. SOMERS

That's not true, Your Honor. If the lawsuit had gone forward, the Benedicts did not have sufficient insurance to cover the three million dollars in additional damages the boy's parents were seeking. Consequently the farm was at risk.

JUDGE

Then rephrase the question.

MS. SOMERS

Yes, Your Honor. Mary, did Tom Benedict ever express to you that he believed he could lose his farm over this lawsuit?

MARY

No.

MS. SOMERS

He never mentioned to you personally about his concern?

MARY

No, not personally.

MS. SOMERS

No?

MARY

Tom didn't like anybody talking about his private affairs.

MS. SOMERS

So, you really knew nothing about what really made Tom Benedict tick, so to speak. You were more on the "Hi, how's the weather?" first name basis.

MARY

I know Tom Benedict a lot more than that!

MS. SOMERS

How? If he didn't talk to you himself and he hated others discussing his affairs? Did Jennifer Benedict talk to you about her husband's private thoughts and concerns?

MARY

Sometimes. Like friends do. We all talk about our husbands when we get together. Don't you?

JUDGE

Mrs. Jarvis. Counsel asks the questions, not you.

MARY

Sorry, Your Honor.

MS. SOMERS

In your opinion, did Tom seem overly paranoid about Jennifer discussing his business with you?

MARY

I don't think so. I don't really know. I don't think he knew what we talked about.

MS. SOMERS

So Jennifer discussed his affairs behind his back. Did she ever tell you he adamantly demanded she never discuss his private affairs with you or anyone else?

MARY

Well, I know Jennifer felt uncomfortable talking about him. She knew he wouldn't like it.

MS. SOMERS

But she did it anyway. Jennifer Benedict purposely betrayed her husband's confidence. If she talked to you, no telling how many other people! And what all did she say? Did Mrs. Benedict ever discuss her sexual relationship with her husband?

MARY

Do I have to answer that?

JUDGE

Yes.

MARY

She wouldn't like me saying this. Yes.

MS. SOMERS

And did she ever say, when she was describing these intimacies, these most private and confidential affairs between a husband and a wife, did she ever once say she had a healthy and happy physical relationship with her husband, or did she in fact, describe their sexual relationship as vulgar?

MARY

She never used that term.

MS. SOMERS

In fact, didn't she say she hated to have sex with her husband?

MARY

She never said she hated it. She just didn't like to.

MS. SOMERS

Didn't she say she was repulsed by him and didn't she tell him so repeatedly and shame him and cause him to have obsessive doubts about his manhood? About himself as a sexual human being? Nothing like castrating a man behind his back.

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection, Your Honor!

JUDGE

Sustained. You will ignore the Counsel's remarks. Watch yourself, Counselor.

MS. SOMERS

Yes, Your Honor. Mary, did Jennifer ever confide in you about, well, about her own personal thoughts about sex, about, say, her fantasies about other men?

MR. ELLIOTT

Your Honor! What does it matter what Mary and Jennifer talked about? Tom Benedict had no idea what transpired between them. Therefore, it has no bearing on this case.

MS. SOMERS

Your Honor. We don't know what Tom may have overheard. It does matter what Jennifer said. Whatever she talked about may have contributed to his extreme state of paranoia.

JUDGE

You may answer the question.

MARY

We talked about her fantasies. Once. It was girl talk. Nothing more.

MS. SOMERS

Mary, did Tom ever tell you he loved Jennifer?

MARY

Oh, yes, all the time. That's why it doesn't make sense.

MS. SOMERS

Do you love your husband?

MARY

Of course.

MS. SOMERS

Would it hurt you if he told his friends he had fantasies about other women?

MARY

Men don't talk about their fantasies to other men. They tell their wives. They think it turns them on.

JUDGE

You may ignore the witnesses' comments.

MARY

I'm sorry, really I am. But I don't understand? We all get jealous or hurt and upset about things our husbands say or do sometimes. But we don't kill them.

MS. SOMERS

I'm trying to establish, Your Honor, the number of problems piling up on Mr. Benedict; the lawsuit, the threat of losing his farm, his wife's betrayal of his confidence, his failure to satisfy Jennifer in bed. At what juncture does a man reach his breaking point?

JUDGE

Save it for closing arguments, Counsel.

MS. SOMERS

Yes, Your Honor. Mary, you saw Tom not long after the unfortunate incident that resulted in Jennifer Benedict's demise.

MARY

Yes, I saw Tom shortly after he shot her.

MS. SOMERS

The Defense does not dispute that Mr. Benedict played a role, albeit, an unwilling role, in his wife's death. According to the coroner's report, Jennifer died instantly at the scene, on March 15, curiously the Ides of March, throughout history a day of mental distraction and tragic events. At exactly what time, and under what circumstances did you see Tom after Jennifer's death?

MARY

Well, it was a little past 7:00. I know because I had just finished the supper dishes and my husband, Randy, was watching TV with Lisa, our littlest, well, our littlest at the time, we have an eight month old, Toby.

MS. SOMERS

Congratulations.

MARY

Thanks. Anyway, Randy changed the channel to watch the evening news and Lisa started crying. I went into the living room, picked her up and carried her out to the kitchen and Tom was standing there in the middle of the room. He'd walked right in the back door.

MS. SOMERS

Had he ever walked right into your house before?

MARY

No. Never.

MS. SOMERS

Did he say anything to you?

MARY

No. Not a word. He just stood there.

MS. SOMERS

What was he wearing?

MARY

Dress pants. And a white shirt. And he was wearing a tie. But his clothes were a mess, his pants ripped, his shirt torn. He was soaked clean through, all the way up to his chest. His hair was covered with burrs, his face and hands bleeding where thorns had slashed through his flesh. I'll never forget the way he looked.

MS. SOMERS

How far do you live from the Benedict farm?

MARY

A little over three miles. Through the woods and over a knob. He had to cross two creeks in the dark to get to the house.

MS. SOMERS

So he came by foot?

MARY

Yes.

MS. SOMERS

And he didn't speak to you?

MARY

Not a word.

MS. SOMERS

Have you ever had your skin slashed wide open by briars while running through the woods?

MARY

Try to work yourself carefully through a briar patch. They'll rip holes in a pair of jeans and draw blood no matter how slow you move. That hurts bad enough.

MS. SOMERS

So Tom was in serious pain. Did he appear aware of the pain?

MARY

No.

MS. SOMERS

So, why did he come to your house?



MARY

I thought he stopped by to tell me if he and Jennifer were going to go see *My Fair Lady* with Randy and me at the Community Theatre. But that didn't make sense. I called out to Randy. He came out to the kitchen and took one look at Tom—he asked what was wrong. Tom didn't answer. He asked if Jennifer was okay. He didn't answer. Randy grabbed the keys to the truck and ran out the door. I put Lisa down and told her to go upstairs. Then I managed to get Tom into a chair and wrap a blanket around him. He was still sitting there over an hour later when the sheriff came to arrest him.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Mary. You paint quite a vivid picture of a man whose mind has been torn to shreds. (*MS. SOMERS returns to her chair.*)

MR. ELLIOTT

(*Rising.*) Your Honor, may I redirect?

JUDGE

Proceed, Counsel.

MR. ELLIOTT

Mary, what did Tom do when your husband returned to your house with the Sheriff?

MARY

He looked at Randy and cried. He said he was sorry. And then he walked out of the house with the Sheriff, got in the patrol car and they drove away.

MR. ELLIOTT

A man totally cognizant of his actions. Thank you, Mary. That's all Your Honor.

JUDGE

You are excused, Mrs. Jarvis. You may step down. You may call your next witness, Counselor.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Your Honor. At this time we would like to call Inspector Harrod to the stand.

JUDGE

Have you been sworn in, Inspector?

MR. ELLIOTT

Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Proceed, Counselor.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Your Honor. Inspector, you are with the State Police in Fortsmith, is that correct?

INSPECTOR

That is correct.

MR. ELLIOTT

And you led the investigation into the death of Mrs. Benedict?

INSPECTOR

That is correct. I worked with the local authorities on the case.

MR. ELLIOTT

I have your complete report here which I would like to enter into the court record. Inspector, would you summarize the report in your own words?

INSPECTOR

Yes, sir. Mrs. Jennifer Benedict was found shot to death in her home at approximately 7:16 PM on Thursday, March 15. The estimated time of death 6:05 PM. Death was the result of a single gunshot wound to the chest. The murder weapon was found at the scene. Her husband, Tom Benedict confessed to being alone with his wife at or about the time of the murder. His fingerprints were found on the gun, his wife's blood on his clothing. His shoes had tracked bloody footprints across the kitchen floor, on the porch and down the steps where he had fled the scene.

MR. ELLIOTT

Is there any doubt that Tom Benedict shot his wife?

INSPECTOR

None.

MR. ELLIOTT

What motive did your investigation conclude drove Tom Benedict to brutally murder his 34 year old wife of only two years?

INSPECTOR

Mr. Benedict admitted to arguing with his wife shortly before the incident, although he claims no recollection whatsoever of actually killing her. Our report concludes that Tom Benedict in a state of hostile aggression, lost control of his emotions in the heat of an argument and shot Jennifer Benedict, motivated by anger and a desire to hurt or kill her.

MR. ELLIOTT

During your investigation, you found something in the fireplace, Inspector. The Prosecution would like to submit exhibit B into evidence at this time. (*Placing a plastic bag containing a charred voice recorder in front of INSPECTOR HARROD.*) Inspector, can you identify the item on the table?

INSPECTOR

That is the digital voice recorder we found in the fireplace.

MR. ELLIOTT

Who purchased this voice recorder?

INSPECTOR

Jennifer Benedict. She had a receipt for it in her purse.

MR. ELLIOTT

Jennifer Benedict, a former Long Island newspaper editor, a talented writer well on her way to a highly rewarding and successful career as an independent author, purchased this item most likely to record notes for her stories and then used it as a means to speak to us from the grave about her own personal nightmare living with Tom Benedict.

MS. SOMERS

Objection, Your Honor, speculation on the part of Counsel. That recorder may have been purchased solely to spy on Mr. Benedict.

JUDGE

And now we've heard your theory as well. Objection overruled. Proceed Counselor.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Your Honor. Inspector, were you able to recover anything from the recorder?

INSPECTOR

The recorder was damaged but we were able to recover words and parts of phrases.

MR. ELLIOTT

And what words did you extract from the device, Inspector, that proved Tom Benedict terrorized his wife and threatened to kill her?

INSPECTOR

The words "bitch," "hate," and "kill."

MR. ELLIOTT

As an officer of the law I expect you have witnessed other cases of spouse abuse and domestic violence?

INSPECTOR

Yes. Unfortunately I have, but when I walked in that kitchen, well, you can't imagine what a bullet from a nine millimeter Berretta does to the chest of a 120 pound woman.

MR. ELLIOTT

We can imagine, Inspector. The jury has seen the photographs. What verdict would you like these men and women to return, Inspector?

INSPECTOR

As an officer of the law, I expect the jury to find Tom Benedict guilty of murder. As a man, seeing Mrs. Benedict lying in a pool of her own blood on the floor of her own kitchen, in her own home, where she should feel safe and protected, I'd like to see him hang.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Inspector. *(As he returns to his chair.)* Your witness, Counselor.

MS. SOMERS

And how safe, Inspector, do you think Tom Benedict was in his own home that his wife could drive him into a state of insanity?

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection, Your Honor!

MS. SOMERS

Question withdrawn. Inspector, the voice recorder you found, I have a list of some of the other words recovered. Would you like to tell the court what they are?

INSPECTOR

We recovered a number of partial words and phrases. I'm not sure which ones you refer to.

MS. SOMERS

Then I'll read it for the court. "Whore." And "How could you?" And, "Help me, please!" What could she have been doing that Mr. Benedict would call his wife a whore? What happened that he felt so threatened he would cry for help? Was Jennifer wearing her wedding ring at the time of her death?

INSPECTOR

No, she was not.

MS. SOMERS

Did you find the ring?

INSPECTOR

We found her wedding ring under a cabinet in the corner of the room.

MS. SOMERS

Interesting. Tom Benedict was building a model ship. A model of the tall ships he saw as a small boy on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1976, in celebration of our independence from imperialistic England. He had spent hours and hours over many months painstakingly working on this ship that he intended to proudly display on the mantel of his beloved new home as his symbol of independence and freedom from the stress and rat race he endured in the city, where he worked endless hours to save the money to move his family to the country, for a simpler lifestyle, to improve the quality of their lives.

JUDGE

Is there a question here, Counselor?

MS. SOMERS

Of course, Your Honor. Inspector, where did you find the ship?

INSPECTOR

We found the remains of the model in the fireplace as well.

MS. SOMERS

And let's guess who threw it there. I have no more questions for this Witness.

JUDGE

Counselor?

MR. ELLIOTT

Just one thing. Inspector, when her body was discovered, what was clutched in Mrs. Benedict's hand?

INSPECTOR

The keys to her jeep.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Inspector.

JUDGE

You may step down, Inspector.

INSPECTOR

Thank you, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Your next witness, Counselor.

MR. ELLIOTT

The Prosecution would like to recall Dr. Roberta Reed to the stand.

JUDGE

*(As DR. REED takes the stand.)* Let me remind you Doctor that you are still under oath.

DR. ROBERTA REED

Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE

You may be seated.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Your Honor. Dr. Reed, we have already examined your impressive educational background and your commendable work in the field of psychiatric disorders and psychopathology. You were first contacted by the State as a consultant to determine whether or not Tom Benedict was competent to stand trial. What was your impression of Mr. Benedict during your first interview following his incarceration?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Certainly a very frustrated man. Defensive. Indignant at times. He exhibited a disconnect between his actions and his incarceration which I found somewhat disturbing but overall I determined nothing to indicate mental illness.

MR. ELLIOTT

So it was your professional opinion that Tom Benedict was competent to stand trial and aid in his own defense?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Without a doubt.

MR. ELLIOTT

After that initial interview, did you have a second opportunity to observe Mr. Benedict?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Yes. At your request, I interviewed Mr. Benedict to evaluate his mental state and provide a thorough assessment of his overall mental condition.

MR. ELLIOTT

What sort of questions did you ask Mr. Benedict?

DR. ROBERTA REED

I asked Mr. Benedict if he had ever been angry enough that he wanted to harm someone.

MR. ELLIOTT

And his response?

DR. ROBERTA REED

He said he had been told he killed his wife.

MR. ELLIOTT

Out of anger?

DR. ROBERTA REED

That was the extent of the question.

MS. SOMERS

Objection, Your Honor. The answer is taken out of context to deliberately mislead the jury. Mr. Benedict was purely repeating what he had been told he did, not what he did.

JUDGE

Sustained.

MR. ELLIOTT

I have a list of your other questions. "Tom, have you ever acted violently towards another person in anger?" And he said?

DR. ROBERTA REED

He said he didn't remember.

MR. ELLIOTT

Then you asked if he remembered shooting his wife and he said what?

DR. ROBERTA REED

He replied 'no.'

MR. ELLIOTT

Is that possible? Is that normal?

DR. REED

There are many instances when a normal person blocks out an unpleasant experience as a means of self preservation because the trauma was so great that dealing directly with the experience or having to accept responsibility for the outcome could prove damaging to the psyche. For example, a woman who runs a red light is struck in the intersection and her infant child killed as a result of her action. She may remember leaving home that day, strapping her child into the car seat. She may even remember the time on the marquis outside the bank or the color of the coat the pedestrian waiting to cross the street was wearing, but she won't remember the act of running the light, or the impact, or the baby crying, the ambulance or the frantic attempts to save her baby's life.

MR. ELLIOTT

So not remembering a traumatic event is normal?

DR. REED

Under certain circumstances. Of course, there are reasons one might profess to forget a difficult experience.

MR. ELLIOTT

You mean pretend to forget? Such as?

DR. REED

Such as failure to accept responsibility for one's actions. Such as fear of the repercussions if one does admit culpability in an act that results in the harm or death of another individual.

MR. ELLIOTT

In other words, to save one's own neck?

DR. REED

Precisely.

MR. ELLIOTT

What was your final question in your interview with Mr. Benedict?

DR. REED

I asked, "Are you relieved your wife is dead?"

MR. ELLIOTT

And his response?

DR. ROBERTA REED

He became irate. He threw his chair across the room and stood in my face, cursing and screaming that he didn't have to talk to me, and what a moron I was and where did I learn my pinhead psycho babble. Then he told me the interview was over and to get the hell out.

MR. ELLIOTT

He turned on you, just like that? Were you in danger? Did you fear he was angry enough to hurt you?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Let's just say I took no time gathering my briefcase and exiting the room.

MR. ELLIOTT

Have you witnessed this sort of behavior before?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Yes, from my ex-husband.

MR. ELLIOTT

And is your ex-husband in a mental institution?

Dr. ROBERTA REED

No.

MR. ELLIOTT

So what did you conclude from you interview? Is Tom Benedict insane?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Tom Benedict is not insane. Tom Benedict is a narcissist.

MR. ELLIOTT

A narcissist?

DR. ROBERTA REED

A self-important man. Often considered conceited to the point of abstraction. Concerned only of oneself, lacking sympathy or empathy to others. Often a male narcissist shares a characteristic hatred or lack of respect for a woman, similarly to what has been referred to as misogyny. Misogynists feel threatened by women, particularly intelligent woman who do not treat them in the superior manner in which they view themselves. The stronger the woman, the greater the need to demean, demoralize and victimize her. If confronted directly, he may lash out viciously.



MR. ELLIOTT

To the point he could harm or kill his victim?

DR. ROBERTA REED

There have been cases.

MR. ELLIOTT

And narcissism is not a psychiatric or psychopathological disorder?

DR. ROBERTA REED

A personality disorder perhaps, but in no manner a psychosis. No, it is not.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Dr. Reed.

MS. SOMERS

*(Approaching the witness stand from the Defense Table.)* So, Dr. Reed, you base your entire evaluation of Mr. Benedict on your own personal emotional tribulations with your ex-husband?

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection, Your Honor, Dr. Somers is a highly regarded psychiatrist, a mental health professional, an expert in her field.

MS. SOMERS

A paid expert for the Prosecution. Withdrawn, Your Honor. Dr. Reed, as an expert in mental health, would you say that you could provoke a mentally healthy individual to such an extreme emotional fervor with three questions?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Possibly. If Mr. Benedict felt sufficiently threatened or if it were in his interest to stop the interview. Or if he were experiencing extreme guilt or frustration or in denial of his actions.

MS. SOMERS

But that guilt could be despair over not protecting his wife, frustration for being incarcerated for a crime he does not remember committing and denial of his own unresolved cries for help. You attacked a man in a diminished mental state and he did what he had to, to protect himself. Self-preservation, Doctor. Self-preservation. Thank you.

MR. ELLIOTT

Judge Martin, the Prosecution would like the opportunity for rebuttal.

JUDGE

Granted.

MR. ELLIOTT

Dr. Reed, Tom Benedict's history as a successful businessman indicates he is a highly intelligent man. Would you agree?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Yes.

MR. ELLIOTT

Intelligent enough to concoct a fairy tale that he was so threatened by a 120 pound woman that he suffered a temporary break from reality and that in that psychotic state, he brutally murdered her? And intelligent enough to maintain no memory of her slaying in an attempt to fool you, his doctors, this jury, his lawyer and this judge?

DR. ROBERTA REED

Yes.

MR. ELLIOTT

Thank you, Dr. That's all, Your Honor.

JUDGE

You are excused, Dr. Reed.

DR. ROBERTA REED

Your Honor. *(DR. REED stands and exits the courtroom.)*

JUDGE

Counselor, do you have any other witnesses?

MR. ELLIOTT

No, Your Honor. The Prosecution rests.

JUDGE

Then we will hear arguments for the Defense beginning tomorrow at 2 PM. Court dismissed.

*(Lights down.)*

## ACT II, SCENE II

*(The following afternoon, lights up.)*

JUDGE

Ms. Somers, you're up. Let's see what you've got.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Judge. The Defense calls Dr. Angela Hignight to the stand.

JUDGE

Has the witness been duly sworn in?

MS. SOMERS

Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Dr. Hignight, you may have a seat.

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Thank you, Your Honor.

MS. SOMERS

Dr. Hignight, what can you tell the court about yourself?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

I am Dr. Angela Hignight. I graduated from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and attended graduate studies at the East Virginia Medical School in Norfolk. After medical school, I completed a fellowship in clinical psychology at Bellevue Hospital in New York.

MS. SOMERS

And after the fellowship at Bellevue in New York?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

I returned to Charlottesville, accepting a faculty position in the University's Department of Psychiatric Studies. While a professor, I did extensive research in the relationships between brain disorders and violence and published a text, "Pre-empting Aggressive Behavior in the Mentally Ill." Several years later I relocated to Fortsmith, going into private practice, but I continue to publish articles in the American Journal of Psychiatric Research and lecture throughout the U. S. on violence and psychosis.

MS. SOMERS

And you belong to a number of highly respected professional organizations?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Yes, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Society for the Advancement of Mental Health, the National Organization against Substance Abuse and the National Organization for the Prevention of Violent Crimes.

MS. SOMERS

Quite impressive Doctor, and yet you find time to practice pro bono at the State Mental Institution?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Yes. It's a twofold benefit. I am able to provide expert services in an institution in need of funds to keep its doors open, and in return I have the occasion to study some very challenging clients that I might not necessarily treat in my private practice.

MS. SOMERS

And it was at the State Mental Institution that you met Tom Benedict?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Yes, it was. He was transferred to the hospital for psychiatric evaluation when he exhibited disorganized behavior in the custody of local authorities. When I heard Mr. Benedict was accused of shooting his wife, I requested he be assigned to my care and he has remained under my care ever since.

MS. SOMERS

The Prosecution has painted a picture of my client as a woman hater narcissist who killed his wife because she threatened his self image and that he is feigning a mental disorder to escape punishment. Is Tom Benedict so intelligent he can manipulate us into believing he is mentally ill?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Some of us, perhaps.

MS. SOMERS

In your expert opinion, with your extensive education, research and experience, is Tom Benedict pretending to have suffered a psychotic episode to escape consequences for his role in his wife's death?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Certainly not. Tom Benedict suffered a complete break from reality.

MS. SOMERS

A complete break from reality. Is there a clinical name for this disorder?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

The highly influential Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders terms a temporary break from reality as Brief Psychotic Disorder, falling under the same classification as other psychotic disorders such as Schizophrenia and Delusional Disorder. It is characterized by delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and or behavior that lasts a day to one month.

MS. SOMERS

And what is the cause of this psychotic disorder, Dr. Hignight?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Typically an extremely stressful event or trauma.

MS. SOMERS

In your opinion, Doctor, considering your extensive research on pre-emptive treatments for aggression, is it possible to have intervened at an earlier point and prevented the unfortunate outcome for which Tom Benedict is on trial?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Absolutely. Tom Benedict had to have exhibited behavior that indicated he was suffering emotionally months before the break. As the stress in his life compounded, that extremely thin line in Mr. Benedict's mind that separated reality from madness snapped. And the result

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT, *Continued*

was something so incomprehensible that it is lost somewhere in the outer vortexes of his brain. It may take many years of therapy to recover that gross memory so that it can be dealt with and resolved so that Mr. Benedict can return to a truly complete state of mental health.

MS. SOMERS

As a highly intelligent woman in a position of great authority, has Tom Benedict ever acted violently towards you?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

No. However, during our therapy sessions Mr. Benedict exhibited emotional instability, and extreme anger and anxiety contrasted with persistent depression. I believe the source of the anger stems from his resentment of his father's alcoholism and the shame he harbored as a child. This resentment carried over into a failed first marriage that resulted in his separation from his son and daughter whom he adores. The failure of his marriage and his inability to reconcile what he believed to be a failure to his children, just as his father had failed him, magnified his feelings of guilt and self-doubt until it became impossible to form a successful relationship with anyone. Mr. Benedict withdrew to the country to get away from people, although he continued to seek comfort and intimacy with his second wife, Jennifer. However, Mr. Benedict believed his wife had no understanding of nor sympathy towards his deteriorating mental state and in fact, became increasingly aggressive in her determination that he live up to his mounting responsibilities which further exacerbated his emotional condition, causing him to slip into a dangerous state of depression. We're fortunate he did not take his own life.

MR. ELLIOT

I think his wife may have disagreed.

JUDGE

*(To MR. ELLIOTT.)* You're this far from being held in contempt, Counselor. *(To MS. SOMERS.)* Proceed, Counselor.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Your Honor. So, if Jennifer Benedict had recognized the signs of his mental deterioration, particularly after the horrible accident with the neighbor boy on their farm, and the alarming consequences, and sought professional help, the violent outcome would have been preempted?

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection, Your Honor! Counsel is attempting to persuade the jury into believing that Jennifer Benedict is to blame for her own death!

MS. SOMERS

Not at all, Your Honor. His wife, the closest person to him, the person he counted upon for support, failed to recognize the seriousness of his condition. I am merely establishing that Tom Benedict's cries for help went unanswered and contributed to his complete mental collapse.

JUDGE

You're on thin ice, Counselor, but I'll allow it.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Your Honor. Dr. Hignight, is there a cure for Mr. Benedict's disorder?

DR. HIGNIGHT.

By definition, the prognosis is very good. As in Mr. Benedict's case, with supportive therapy, the condition resolved itself. Mr. Benedict is no longer undergoing treatment for his psychosis but rather as part of an ongoing effort to resolve the underlying stress that led to his breakdown.

MS SOMERS

And he is not a threat to himself or society?

DR. HIGNIGHT

No.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Doctor.

JUDGE

*(Addressing MR. ELLIOTT who is writing notes.)* Counselor?

MR. ELLIOTT

Yes, Your Honor. I was just jotting down some of the amazing metaphors Dr. Hignight and Counselor Somers have used to mask the severity of Tom Benedict's actions. Let's see, Mr. Benedict "played a role" in his wife's death. His lack of so-called pre-emptive treatment caused a temporary break in reality resulting in an "unfortunate outcome." Please! Tom Benedict murdered his wife! Isn't that the reality, Dr. Hignight?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Mr. Benedict was delusional. He experienced frightening hallucinations, and in the terror of the moment, believing his own death imminent, in a state of psychosis, grabbed the closest thing he could find to defend himself, and unwittingly shot his wife.

MR. ELLIOTT

In your evaluation of Mr. Benedict, there is no indication of alcoholism, and yet you reference his father's alcoholism and we know, according to Inspector Harrod's report, that Tom Benedict had alcohol in his bloodstream at the time of his arrest. Is it not true that alcohol is also known to cause delusions and blackouts?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Yes. I have read the report and we did address the issue in session. Mr. Benedict admitted to having several drinks the afternoon in question. But, according to the report, only one partially consumed container of alcohol was found at the residence, hardly an indication of alcohol abuse.

MR. ELLIOTT

After your first meeting, you removed Tom Benedict from the antipsychotic medication that had been prescribed by the admitting physician at the Hospital. Is that not proof that you saw no indication of psychosis following your examination?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Not at all. Medication is seldom indicated in the treatment of Brief Psychotic Disorder. Rather as I stated earlier, the rule of treatment lies in supportive therapy or interpersonal relationships.

MR. ELLIOTT

Interpersonal relationships? You didn't mention that earlier. Dr. Hignight, do you find Tom Benedict personally attractive?

DR. ANGELA HIGNIGHT

Are you accusing me of professional misconduct?

MR. ELLIOTT

Me thinks you protest too much. I withdraw the question. Thank you, Doctor.

JUDGE

Counselor?

MS. SOMERS

Nothing, Your Honor. Dr. Hignight's professionalism stands on its own. Mr. Elliott's furtive attempt to discredit her testimony is too absurd to merit rebuttal.

JUDGE

Then you may step down, Dr. Hignight.

DR. HIGNIGHT

Thank you, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Counselor?

MS. SOMERS

I would like to call Billy Lester Johnson to the stand, Your Honor.

JUDGE

So be it. Mr. Johnson, have you been sworn in?

LESTER

I aint brought up to swear fer God, Judge, but I promised ta tell the truth and I aint no liar.

JUDGE

Good enough. You may be seated, Mr. Johnson.

LESTER

Jest call me Lester, Judge, ever body else does.

MS. SOMERS

Lester, what is your relationship to the Defendant, Tom Benedict?

LESTER

We aint got no relationship. He's m' closest neighbor 'n' I think might highly of 'im.

MS. SOMERS

How would you characterize, describe Tom Benedict? Is he hardworking?

LESTER

He keeps m' sister's boys busy five days a week.

MS. SOMERS

You mean your nephews work for Mr. Benedict?

LESTER

Yes, um. Buildin' fences 'n' tendin' to the chores.

MS. SOMERS

So even after everything that's happened, your sister's boys still continue to work for Mr. Benedict. Now, I know you can't speak for your nephews, but I'm sure among the family you personally must have heard talk about Tom?

LESTER

Yes, um. Tom don't have much knowhow 'bout farmin' so we spoof on 'im now 'n' then. But he's gittin' better. I like Tom. He's a good man. He's tryin' to git his place back ta workin' order. Gotta give 'im credit fer that.

MS. SOMERS

So, no talk about what happened?

LESTER

No mam. Figgered Tom's had 'nuff trouble.

MS. SOMERS

Now, you come by Tom's place quite often, yes?

LESTER

Two er three times a week.

MS. SOMERS

And you visited often last winter?

LESTER

Bout the same.



MS. SOMERS

Did you ever witness Tom Benedict acting mean or aggressive towards his wife?

LESTER

No mam. Can't say the same fer Jenny.

MS. SOMERS

Jenny? You mean Jennifer Benedict?

LESTER

Yes um. I kum up ta the house 'bout dark one night through the field 'n' they didn't see me kumin'. She was bellerin' at 'im like a cow 'n' labor. She wuz hollerin' at 'im that it wuz all his doin' 'bout that youngin' losin' his eye. She wuz talkin' bad hateful 'n' threatenin' ta call the sheriff on 'im.

MS. SOMERS

And when did this attack occur?

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection, Your Honor! Attack?

JUDGE

Sustained.

MS. SOMERS

When did this verbal assault take place?

LESTER

Night fer she got herself killed.

MR. ELLIOTT

Your Honor, you don't get yourself killed!

MS. SOMERS

You mean the night before Jennifer died?

LESTER

Yes um.

MS. SOMERS

Now, Lester, it is my understanding that you, being the good neighbor you are, led the move to drop the negligence lawsuit against Tom Benedict. Is that right?

LESTER

Yes um. My sister 'n' the boys 'n' me got together with the youngin's daddy 'n' put in some good words fer 'im. Now, fer that time, we wuz thinkin' Tom had a lot a money 'n' could ford ta pay more 'n' the insurance wuz offerin' but Jenny said they wuz havin' money

LESTER, *Continued*

trouble. I wuz thinkin' she wuz after m' goat, but then I jawed on it awhile 'n' thought there might be somethin' to it. It cost a lotta money ta make a bad farm good agin. Las' boy had the place let 'er fall ta ruin. Now I never once s'pected Tom ta go nuts 'n' shoot Jenny like that. Never thought he could do nothin' like that, he bein' the kinda man who'd pick up a hit dog 'n' take it to the doctor 'n' pay fer fixin' it when it aint him that done the hittin'. But guess ya provoke a man 'nough, guess any man could do it. Women got a way a drivin' a good man crazy. It aint writt'n no book. It's jest the way it is.

MR. ELLIOTT

Objection!

JUDGE

Overruled.

MS. SOMERS

That's all I have, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Counsel?

MR. ELLIOTT

I have nothing for this witness, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Lester, you may step down.

LESTER

Thankya, Judge.

JUDGE

Counselor, your next witness?

MS. SOMERS

Only one more, Judge Joe. Tom Benedict wishes to testify on his own behalf.

JUDGE

I believe that calls for a short break. Court will resume tomorrow at 10 AM.

*(Lights down briefly.)*

### ACT II, SCENE III

*(Light up. TOM BENEDICT seated in the witness stand.)*

JUDGE

You understand, Tom, you are not required to testify.

TOM BENEDICT

Yes, Your Honor. I understand. I want my neighbors to know what happened.

JUDGE

You may proceed with your testimony.

MS. SOMERS

*(Approaching the witness stand.)* Tom, I know this is difficult. I'm only here to help you tell your story.

TOM

Thank you.

MS SOMERS

Tom, can you tell the jury what you were feeling in the days before your wife's death?

TOM

I was falling apart.

MS. SOMERS

A little louder, please, so everyone can hear you.

TOM

My life was falling apart. Everything was falling apart. I was under a lot of stress. I didn't realize how much it affected me.

MS. SOMERS

Tell us about the pressures.

TOM

There was the lawsuit.

MS. SOMERS

Yes—

TOM

They said I was negligent. They said it was my fault the little boy lost his eye.

MS. SOMERS

Was it?

TOM

It was an accident. But I couldn't sleep at night. I kept seeing it happen. His poor little face. I was running the log splitter. You see, we heated with wood. It was the only way I could protect my family from the cold. A piece of wood jammed and, I don't know. Chunks flew out of the track and struck him hard in the face. One broke his nose and smashed his cheekbone. The doctors could fix that. But another pierced his left eye and blinded it.

MS. SOMERS

It wasn't your fault. Your neighbor's said so. The boy's parent's said so. The judge said so. Your doctor said so.

TOM

But I will never forget.

MS. SOMERS

And what about your farm, Tom?

TOM

I stood to lose everything. Everything I'd worked so hard to get. They were going to take it all away.

MS. SOMERS

Did you think Jennifer understood your fears?

TOM

No, she never understood. She said I was wrong. I was always wrong.

MS. SOMERS

Did Jennifer go with you the day of the hearing?

TOM

No. She never attended any of the hearings. There were three.

MS. SOMERS

Do you think Jennifer loved you?

TOM

No. She told me over and over again how much she hated me. She said I wasn't a man. She said I was vulgar and detestable, that she couldn't stand the sound of my voice and that I'd never satisfied her as a woman. I felt worthless. I felt nothing but contempt for myself.

MS. SOMERS

Then why didn't she leave you?

TOM

She needed me. You see, Jennifer dreamed of becoming a famous writer. That's all she talked about. But she couldn't make a living that way. She needed me to get the farm in shape so it could start producing income again. She needed me to take care of her.

MS. SOMERS

Did you believe Jennifer was seeing other men?

TOM

Yes. We all need to be loved. To be held. She wouldn't let me touch her. But someone was. I know it.

MS. SOMERS

How did this make you feel?

TOM

I was distraught. And then, when the ship was thrown into the fire. Something snapped. I'd give anything to go back in time. If I had just known how close I was, how close I was to breaking. I could have gotten help. I could have stopped it from happening. Jennifer would be alive today. If I'd only known. I'm so sorry.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Tom.

JUDGE

Mr. Elliott.

MR. ELLIOTT

Yes, Your Honor. (*Rising and approaching TOM.*) Forgive me if I don't treat you like a poor lost puppy with a thorn in his paw. You were drunk the evening you shot Jennifer?

TOM

Two drinks. I'd had two drinks. I was upset. It seems I'd been upset for a long time. So many pressures.

MR. ELLIOTT

Don't insult my intellect, Mr. Benedict. The lawsuit was dropped four hours before you killed her. What's your excuse?

TOM

I didn't believe it. They could change their minds. No, I believed it would never end, until it was gone. The farm was gone. I was sure of it.

MR. ELLIOTT

So your wife wasn't capable of living without you? Funny, she made it 34 years on her own. And yet, when they found Jennifer, she was clutching her car keys. Was shooting her the only way to stop her from leaving you?

TOM

She wasn't leaving me. She would never leave me.

MR. ELLIOTT

Then tell me, if a woman did to me what you claim she did, I'd leave. Why didn't you leave her?

TOM

Because I loved her.

MR. ELLIOTT

Because you loved her? You know, it's not that difficult to copy a recording. Even from a recorder you threw in the fire. Would you like to hear it in your own words, how much you loved your wife? (*MR. ELLIOTT turns on the copy of the recording.*)

“TOM’S VOICE ON THE RECORDING”

“I hate you, you bitch. I could kill you for what you’ve done to me. Do you hear me, Jennifer? I could kill you for what you’ve done.”

MR. ELLIOTT

That’s all I need to hear.

MS. SOMERS

Tom, what did Jennifer say when you came home and told her the lawsuit had been dropped?

TOM

She said it was ludicrous. She said they’d lock me up and throw away the key if she had her way. She said I was nothing, worthless. She screamed at me and cursed at me. I begged her to stop but she kept on. Screaming.

MS. SOMERS

What did that do to you?

TOM

I know it sounds crazy, but it happened just this way, I was watching her face and it became all distorted, it manifested into something grotesque, something unreal. Her mouth became a cavernous pit and her body transformed into, it’s crazy, I know, but into this terrifying, screeching monster, flailing its claws in my face, gouging my eyes right out of their sockets. I could no longer see, but the smell— putrid, like a dead cow left out in the sun, ripped to shreds by vultures. I wanted to run away. I tried to. I couldn’t. This hideous creature engulfed my head in its slimy mouth, smothering me, swallowing me! I was drowning in the stench. I couldn’t hear. I couldn’t breathe. I begged it to stop, to let me go, my voice echoing into the chambers of its bowels. But it didn’t stop. It wanted to kill me. Oh, God, I was suffering. Dying. I knew I had to destroy it. I had to. It was it or me.

MS. SOMERS

And then?

TOM

I don’t know what happened after that, but I felt as if I’d had a dream, a terrible dream. Something unfathomable happened but I couldn’t remember what it was. I wanted to remember. I thought if I could remember and tell someone about it, I could make it go away. I want that horrible feeling to go away.

MS. SOMERS

Are you alright, Tom?

TOM

No. I don't know if I'll ever be alright again.

MS. SOMERS

Tom, would you, could you ever have intentionally hurt Jennifer?

TOM

Never, no, never.

MS. SOMERS

Thank you, Tom. Your Honor, the Defense rests.

JUDGE

Counselor?

MR. ELLIOTT

Nothing more, Your Honor.

JUDGE

Then we'll move onto your closing arguments.

This is Not the End of the Play  
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes