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THE ASCENSION OF TWYLA POTTS

A New Comedy by

Fred Perry

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THE ASCENSION OF TWYLA POTTS

by Fred Perry

CAST OF CHARACTERS

TOBY; *late 40's; a blue-collar man, never married. His mother, Ariel is up a tree.*

TWYLA; *50; Toby's successful and controlling sister who demands her mother come down.*

TOMMY; *18; Twyla's son; a freshman in college*

SISSY; *20's; appears to be Tommy's new girlfriend to Twyla's dismay.*

AXEL; *50's; though separated, he remains married to Twyla*

ELLIE; *80's; Ariel's eccentric free-spirited sister.*

BUCK; *60's, the local fire captain*

SAM; *50, owner of the Seafood Shanty restaurant*

LOIS; *70's, a friend of Ariel's*

IVY; *70's, another*

MARGE; *80, another*

CORA; *80+; yet another*

SETTING

*Around 2002; the living room of a middle-class home built in the 1940's
near Sandy Point, Maryland*

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ACT ONE

(AT RISE: The living room of a middle-class home built in the 1940's. An archway spans the U.C. hallway. Old furniture and knick-knacks are everywhere. An ancient Victrola and a Tiffany lamp occupy the U.L. corner of the room. A piano, covered with family photos, sits S.R. Middle-age TOBY POTTS is seated on the S.C. sofa, talking quietly on a cell phone. He wears khakis and work boots. Momentarily, 50-year-old TWYLA POTTS races frantically into the room. She wears an expensive, cream-colored business suit and high heels.)

TWYLA

Is she still up there?

TOBY

Yup. 'Bout twenty feet I figure.

(TWYLA tosses her purse on the sofa, hurries to the open window S.L.; looks out. Her jaw drops.)

TWYLA

My God. She's in her wedding dress.

TOBY

Yup.

TWYLA

How'd she get the hammock up there?

TOBY

I should know this?

TWYLA

(Spins from the window) I told you, Toby. The last time she did this: Trim that stupid tree. Better yet, cut the damned thing down. Remember? What're we going to do? *(No response)* Get off the phone, Toby. *(Paces)* God, it's hot in here.

TOBY

(On phone) I gotta go. *(Turns phone off)* Twyla, take it easy.

TWYLA

Where the hell is Tommy?

TOBY

He's on his way. Would you please calm down. She's just sitting up there.

TWYLA

She's not sitting, you dope. She's swinging. (*Out window*) Momma, stop that!

(*TOBY stands; crosses to the window.*)

TWYLA, *Continued*

Why wasn't that nurse watching her?

TOBY

Mom flushed all her meds down the toilet this afternoon. So Leon drove over to the pharmacy for a re-fill. Truck rear-ended him. He's in emergency right now getting stitches. That was him on the phone.

TWYLA

Why did she flush her meds?

TOBY

I don't know. Leon said she was looking through her old scrapbooks, and around five o'clock said, "I'm going to see Howard, now." Then she flushed the pills and put on her wedding dress.

(*SFX: PHONE RINGS. TOBY answers.*)

TOBY, *Continued*

Hello? Oh, hi. (*Listens*) Sure. (*Hands phone to TWYLA*) It's for you.

TWYLA

(*On phone*) Hello? (*Listens*) What? (*Turns back to the window; looks out*) Yes, Momma, I can see you took your cell phone up there with you. Yes, I know it's a lovely day, but (*Listens*) I don't care what Daddy said. (*Covering mouthpiece*) She's having conversations with Daddy again.

TOBY

(*Grinning*) Yeah. She's really on a roll this time.

TWYLA

I knew this would happen again. Didn't I tell you? Right after she did this last year. Sell the house and put her in a good nursing home for her own safety, didn't I tell you that?

TOBY

We tried, Twyla. She wouldn't budge.

TWYLA

No, Toby— I tried. You and that dingbat sister of hers thought it would be cruel and unfeeling. Let's just get her a nurse, you said. She'll be fine, Twyla. Does she look fine right now?

TOBY

What was I supposed to do? Drag my mother out of her own home? It would've killed her.

TWYLA

And this won't?

TOBY

She'll be okay. (*Looks up*) Boy, look at all those birds. We didn't have the birds last year, did we? Must be hundreds of 'em. (*Points*) Look at that white one coming in.

TWYLA

(*Sees something through the window; snatches phone back to her ear*) Momma, what are you doing? (*Listens*) No, it isn't a pure white dove. It's a pigeon. (*Listens*) No, it's not a sign from above. Now get it off your head. We're going to get you down. Don't move. Tommy's bringing the ladder over.

TOBY

I don't think that ladder's gonna reach. Why don't we just call the fire department?

TWYLA

(*Covers mouthpiece*) So our family can be embarrassed in front of the entire neighborhood again? No thank you.

TOBY

Twyla, everybody already knows. (*Taps her shoulder; points RIGHT; waves at someone*) Hey, Jimmy. Thanks for the call, appreciate it. How you doin', Darlene?

TWYLA

(*Elbows him*) Stop it. All right, if Tommy can't get her down, we'll call the fire department, but— (*Brings phone back to her ear; listens*) What? No, Momma, I didn't talk to Daddy today, but I'm sure he wouldn't want you to get hurt. (*Covers mouthpiece*) God, she's hallucinating— (*On phone*) No, Momma, it isn't a stairway to heaven. It's a eucalyptus tree. (*To TOBY*) I don't care what anybody says. Not you, not Axel, not anybody. As soon as we get her down, she's going straight into a nursing home.

TOBY

Ellie'll never go along with that.

TWYLA

I don't care what Ellie will go along with. She doesn't have power of attorney. I do. And you should be grateful I had the sense to see a lawyer after Momma's first time up that tree.

TOBY

You should at least talk it over with her.

TWYLA

What for? She's crazier than Momma. She'd probably want to read my palms.

(*TOMMY enters S.R. through the archway and heads for the window. He is 18, with long, scraggly hair.*)

TOMMY
Grandma's in the tree again.

TWYLA
We know, Tommy. Where's the ladder?

TOMMY
Back of the truck. You oughtta see all the people over in old man Brickman's yard.
(TWYLA snaps her eyes S.L.)

TWYLA
Jesus.

TOBY
(Waving) Evening, Fred.

TOMMY
(Looking up) Whoa. Look at all those birds.

TWYLA
(On phone) What? *(Scowls; hands the phone to TOMMY)* It's your grandmother.

TOMMY
(On phone) Hi, Grandma. *(Listens)* I don't know. Looks like a dove to me.

TWYLA
It's a pigeon.

TOMMY
(On phone) Mom says it's a pigeon.

TWYLA
Go get the ladder.

TOMMY
(Scrutinizing the tree) I don't think it's gonna reach.

TWYLA
Just do it.

(TWYLA wheels and crosses to the sofa.)

TOMMY
(On phone) Sure, Grandma. Bye.

(TOMMY turns off the phone, hands it to TOBY, and hurries to the archway.)

Where are you going?
TWYLA

Kitchen
TOMMY

What for?
TWYLA

She wants a Heineken.
TOMMY

Good God.
TWYLA

(TOMMY exits.)

(Fidgeting) I, uh – called Ellie.
TOBY

What? Why would you do that?
TWYLA

Don't get all worked up. She already knew about it. Besides, she's the only one who stands a chance of talking her down from there. You know that. She would've gotten her down last year if the fire department hadn't shown up.
TOBY

(TOMMY crosses past the archway carrying a bottle of beer and disappears S.L.)

She wasn't trying to get her down, you nitwit. She was going to spend the night up there with her. She's weird, Toby.
TWYLA

That doesn't make her weird. She's just unique.
TOBY

Oh, really? Maybe you can explain how she and Momma managed to get up that tree when Tommy couldn't even do it. That isn't unique, Toby. It's bizarre. Even the firemen couldn't figure that one out.
TWYLA

What does it matter?
TOBY

It matters, Toby, because it's impossible. That's why it matters. Nobody saw how either one of them got up there. I didn't see them. Did you?
TWYLA

TOBY

No, but—

TWYLA

Momma's arthritis is so bad she can barely button her own blouse. I mean, what'd they do? Float up there like two geriatric Tinkerbells? (*Suddenly fans her face with a hand*) It's boiling in here. Aren't you hot?

TOBY

No. Take it easy.

TWYLA

Want to know something? Sometimes your utter lack of critical observation amazes me. You're just like Axel. You never seem to be phased by anything. Ever.

TOBY

How do you want me to act? Like you? She'll come down when she's ready.

TWYLA

What if she never gets ready, Toby? What if she decides to stay up there like a goose?

TOBY

Be serious.

TWYLA

I am serious. And I don't need that lunatic sister of hers, coming over here, getting her all crazy, talking about Daddy and spirit guides and astral projection and who knows what else. She'll probably want to go up there so they can have a séance or something.

TOBY

So they're a little eccentric.

TWYLA

A little? What about last Christmas? I come over here at five in the morning, cook all day long. Everything's finally ready, food's on the table, but we can't eat because they suddenly decide to go up to Momma's room and close the door. House starts reeking of Daddy's old Bay Rum and pipe tobacco. An hour later they waltz back down here like everything's just dandy and Momma says, "Your father says hello, let's eat." That isn't a little eccentric, Toby. It's— (*Sees something through the window; calls out*) Tommy, what are you doing? No! Tommy, don't you dare throw that beer bottle up there, it'll—

TOBY

Nice catch, Mom.

TWYLA

(*Out the window*) Tommy, you go get that ladder right now. I don't care if she wants to visit. Go. (*To TOBY as he heads for the archway*) What are you doing?

TOBY

Gonna see if there's anything to eat.

TWYLA

Your eighty-year-old mother is dangling in a tree with a bunch of mangy pigeons. She's talking to a husband who's been dead for two years, and now she's drinking. And you're hungry?

TOBY

She's not going anywhere. Relax.

(TOMMY strolls S.R. past the archway.)

TWYLA

(To TOMMY) Hurry up.

TOMMY

Okay, Mom. Chill. *(Exits)*

TWYLA

Chill? What is that? Chill—

TOBY

Twyla, you're getting hysterical.

TWYLA

Our mother is about to fall out of a tree.

TOBY

Nah. She's wedged in there pretty good.

(TOBY places the phone on the cabinet and exits.)

TWYLA

(Pivoting back to the window) Momma – sit!

(Momentarily, Sissy enters stepping into the archway. She's in her late-20's, wears ultra-heavy makeup, nose rings, spiked heels, and a skin-tight, thigh-high skirt.)

SISSY

Tommy here?

(TWYLA turns towards Sissy running her eyes up and down her.)

TWYLA

Who the hell are you?

Sissy. SISSY

Sissy? TWYLA

I'm with Tommy. SISSY

Not in that dress, you aren't. TWYLA

Huh? SISSY

How old are you? TWYLA

Twenty nine. SISSY

Tommy?! TWYLA

You're his mom, huh? SISSY

That's right. TWYLA

Yeah, he told me you were kinda tense. SISSY

(SFX: PHONE RINGS. TWYLA crosses to it, her eyes on SISSY.)

TWYLA

(Answers phone) Hello? (Hurries back to window; listens) What? What are you talking about? Why do you want bread? (Listens) No, Momma, you don't need to feed the birds.

(TOBY enters, working on a sandwich. He spots SISSY and grins.)

You must be Sissy. TOBY

Yeah. SISSY

TOBY

I'm Tommy's uncle.

SISSY

I gotta go to the bathroom. Where's the facilities?

TWYLA

(On phone) Momma, you listen to me. Hello? Hello? *(Hangs up. turns to TOBY)* She hung up on me. Can you believe that?

SISSY

I really gotta pee, mister. I'm talkin' race horse, here.

TOBY

(Pointing) Down the hall.

SISSY

Thanks.

TOBY

Like your outfit.

SISSY

Yeah? *(Exits)*

(TWYLA glares at TOBY. He catches her look.)

TOBY

What.

TWYLA

(Furiously punching out a number on the phone) Toby, I don't mind that you never got married. That's your business. I can even tolerate some of those bubble brains you date. What I won't tolerate, is you coming into our mother's home, ogling some semi-clothed little hussy half your age. It's disgusting.

TOBY

I wasn't ogling.

TWYLA

Oh, please. Your tongue was hanging out far enough to catch flies. *(Gets response on phone)* Why'd you hang up on me? No, I wasn't being rude, I was – Okay, all right. Just don't move. Please. *(Rolls her eyes, then to TOBY)* Tell Tommy to take her some bread.

TOBY

(Shouting down hall) Tommy!

TOMMY (*O.S.*)

Yeah?

TOBY

How you coming with that ladder?

TOMMY (*O.S.*)

Just got it through the kitchen door.

TOBY

Take Grandma some bread. (*Crosses to the window*) Hey, Mom! You're outta mustard.

TWYLA

(*Turning off phone*) Christ.

(*Fuming, Twyla crosses to the S.R. cabinet, puts down the phone, flings open a door and pulls out a large, elaborately decorated decanter full of orange liqueur. She uncaps it, pours some of the contents into a glass and drinks.*)

TOBY

Know what you just did?

TWYLA

(*Irked*) What.

TOBY

You just opened Mom and Dad's fifty year old brandy.

(*TWYLA snaps her eyes to the bottle, troubled.*)

TOBY, *Continued*

Remember? The brandy Dad made from that old apricot tree out back. Their special brandy. The brandy we were never supposed to touch?

TWYLA

You're wrong. Because that's not what she said. What she said was, "Don't open it – unless it's for a truly profound occasion." Well, our mother's up a tree. (*Drinks again*)

TOBY

I wouldn't let her see you doing that.

TWYLA

I'm sure she already knows – What with all her unique powers.

(*TOMMY appears, dragging the ladder down the hall. He carries a loaf of bread.*)

TOMMY

Hey, Uncle Tobe. Can you give me a hand?

TOBY

(Heading to the archway) Sure, kid.

TWYLA

Why not ask Momma to help. Maybe she can levitate the damned thing.

TOMMY

Jeez, Mom. Isn't that the brandy that Grandma and —?

TWYLA

Just get the ladder out there. Hurry up.

(TOBY and TOMMY hoist the ladder and exit S.L. TWYLA grabs the decanter and starts to refill her glass. SFX: PHONE RINGS. She freezes, puts down the decanter and answers it.)

TWYLA, *Continued*

(On phone) What. *(Listens)* No, you can't talk to Axel. Because he isn't here, that's why. We've been separated eight months. You know that. We haven't even spoken in — *(Emphatic)* Momma, I'm telling you he isn't—

(At that instant, AXEL appears at the archway. He's in his 50's, wears soiled mechanic's overalls.)

AXEL

How's Ariel?

(TWYLA wheels to AXEL, the phone still to her ear.)

TWYLA

What're you doing here?

AXEL

She called, said it was important. So I closed up and came over. She okay?

TWYLA

(Covers mouthpiece) She's in the tree again.

AXEL

(Smiles, crosses to window) I know. Saw her from the street.

TWYLA

I don't think it's amusing, Axel. *(On phone)* What? *(Frowns)* She wants to talk to you.

(TWYLA hands the phone to AXEL.)

AXEL

(On phone) Hi, Mom. How you doin? Good. You sure got a lotta birds up there with you. *(Looks R.; waves)* Hey, Jimmy! Don't waste your money on that new block. I got a good re-built down at the shop right now. Save you a couple thousand.

TWYLA

I can't believe you'd actually do business at a time like this.

AXEL

(On phone) Hold on, Mom. *(Covers the mouthpiece, looks back at TWYLA, smiles)* You look nice, Twyla.

TWYLA

Why do you always do that?

AXEL

Do what?

TWYLA

Change the subject with some stupid non sequitur.

AXEL

I don't think it was stupid.

TWYLA

Well it infuriates me. Why do you do it?

AXEL

I miss you, Twyla.

TWYLA

You see?

AXEL

(On phone) How's that? *(Listens, then to TWYLA)* She says you should calm down. Says your aura is so intense, it's giving her a migraine.

TWYLA

Oh, really? *(Charges to window)* Momma, you come down right now or – *(Freezes)* Tommy, what are you doing in Mr. Brickman's yard? Where's your uncle? *(TOMMY'S Voice is heard O.S.)* Forget about the peaches, both of you, and get that ladder over here.

AXEL

(On phone) Be right there.

(AXEL hands the phone to TWYLA and heads for the archway.)

TWYLA
What are you doing?

AXEL
She wants a beer.

TWYLA
(*Covers mouthpiece*) Tommy just took her one.

AXEL
(*Stopping*) She wants another one.

TWYLA
You listen to me, Axel. It's bad enough my mother's in a tree. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let her start swilling beer.

AXEL
She's not swilling.

TWYLA
For God's sake, Alex. Her bones are as brittle as pretzels. What if she slips?

AXEL
She's not going to slip.

TWYLA
And just where did you arrive at this scientific conclusion? Under the hood of a truck?
(*Brings phone to her ear*) What? No, Momma, I won't come out there. No, it isn't a celebration, it's – Hello? (*Out window*) Why'd you hang up on me again?

(*AXEL breaks into a huge smile.*)

You find something humorous in all this?

AXEL
Twyla—

TWYLA
Let me tell you something. She's not going to die on my watch.

AXEL
Careful, Twyla. You're starting to sound like a warden.

TWYLA
Don't you dare—

AXEL

Twyla, you're not upset because you think she's actually going to fall out of that tree. The real reason you're acting like this is because you can't understand why she wants to be up there. Even if she gave you a reason, you wouldn't be able to accept it. How could you? It wouldn't fit into your tidy perception of reality. And that's what's making you crazy. Because no matter how hard you try, you'll never be able to understand what she's doing up there.

TWYLA

And you do?

AXEL

Hell, no. I'm not trying to. Why does everything always have to make sense?

TWYLA

My God, you're starting to sound like her.

AXEL

And there we have it.

TWYLA

What. Have what?

AXEL

The whole philosophical battle ground we called a marriage for twenty years.

TWYLA

Don't be oblique. You know it drives me up the wall.

AXEL

Okay, let's say you manage to get her down from there.

TWYLA

She's coming down all right. Count on it.

AXEL

Then what?

TWYLA

She'll be down, that's what.

AXEL

Will she be any happier? Will anyone be any happier?

TWYLA

I'll be happy, okay?

AXEL

No you won't. I don't think you've ever been happy in your entire life. Not really. You just have temporary lapses of stress. That's not being happy, Twyla. It's just breathing.

(Pause; TWYLA gazes motionlessly at AXEL.)

TWYLA

Are you going to help me or not?

AXEL

(Sighs, runs a hand through his hair) I'm tired, Twyla. I really am. If you're so gung ho on getting your mother out of that tree, why don't you stop trying to organize rescue parties, and just climb up there and do it yourself?

TWYLA

You think I won't?

AXEL

I'll admit, I'd love to see you do something like that, Twyla. Something that totally uninhibited for once in your life. But I've got to be honest here. I don't think you'd take a chance on wrinkling that little eighteen hundred dollar outfit you got on there. I'd lay money on it.

TWYLA

You'd lose, buster.

AXEL

Would I? *(Points out of the window)* There's the ladder.

TWYLA

I haven't changed?

AXEL

Twyla, do whatever you have to do. Run the show, rant and rave, make yourself miserable if that's what you want. But here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to the kitchen and then I'm taking a bottle of beer to your mother. Want to know why? 'Cause it'll make her happy.

(AXEL exits into the hallway. TWYLA crosses to the cabinet, tosses the phone on it, then grabs her glass and the decanter. She carries them over to the window and holds them up.)

TWYLA

Momma, you see this? Your special apricot brandy. Yours and Daddy's. Fifty years old. Never touch it, remember? Well, I'm touching it now. *(Fills the glass, slugs down half of it; grimaces)* It's good. And if you don't come down from that tree right now, I'm going to drink some more. I mean it. I'll drink it all. All by myself. *(Drains the rest of the glass)* What do you think of that?

(SFX: PHONE RINGS. TWYLA crosses back to the cabinet and answers it.)

TWYLA, *Continued*

Will you come to your senses now? (*Face falls*) What do you mean it's the perfect time to drink it? (*Listens*) This isn't a profound occasion, it's – Hello?

(*SISSY reappears in the archway.*)

SISSY

You got any tampons?

TWYLA

(*Wheels to SISSY*) Pardon me?

SISSY

Yeah. Surprise, surprise. Better late than never, though.

TWYLA

What?

SISSY

I'm covered for a while but—

(*SISSY sees something through the window, rushes over to it, breaks into an excited grin, waves.*)

SISSY, *Continued*

Hey, Tommy! False alarm.

TWYLA

What?

(*SISSY hurries to the archway and disappears down the hall. TWYLA blows out a frustrated breath, puts the phone down, places the top back on the decanter, and starts to put the bottle away. ELLIE suddenly sweeps into the room with the energy of a teenager. She wears a loud, multi-colored caftan, a headband, and high-top sneakers*)

ELLIE

Hi, hon.

(*TWYLA spins to ELLIE; stares at her, confused.*)

ELLIE, *Continued*

What is it, sweetie? What's wrong?

TWYLA

How'd you get here so fast?

ELLIE

Fast?

TWYLA

Ellie, it takes your bus over an hour to get here.

ELLIE

Oh, I didn't have time to wait around for that stupid bus.

TWYLA

You paid a cab to bring you all the way out here?

ELLIE

Don't be silly. You know I can't afford that. I drove.

TWYLA

Are you out of your mind? You can't drive.

ELLIE

Of course I can drive.

TWYLA

Ellie, you don't have a license

ELLIE

Well, not in the strict, legal sense. *(Sweeps over to the window)* Yoo, hoo! Ariel! Hi, honey. Oh, my, don't you look lovely. *(Waves)* Hello, everyone. *(VOICES O.S.)* How are you, Mister Brickman? *(BRICKMAN'S VOICE O.S.)* Why, yes, I'd love some peaches. Thank you. Oh, look. The doves are arriving.

TWYLA

(Under her breath) Oh, Christ.

ELLIE

Don't swear, Twyla. You know how your father is.

TWYLA

Daddy's dead, Ellie.

ELLIE

Don't be negative. Oh, it's going to be such a lovely sunset.

(TWYLA uncaps the decanter and fills her glass. AXEL passes the archway, carrying two bottles of beer. TWYLA brings the glass to her lips, starts to drink.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

(Still looking out of the window) Don't drink it all. *(TWYLA freezes)* Save some for the ceremony.

(ELLIE turns from the window, scrutinizes TWYLA, crosses to her, peers intensely at her, removes her eyeglasses, leans in closer, and shakes her head.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

No wonder you're so—

TWYLA

What? I'm so – what?

ELLIE

Well, good Lord, Twyla. It's as plain as the nose on your face. It's all around you.

TWYLA

What, already? What's all around me?

ELLIE

Your aura.

TWYLA

Don't start.

ELLIE

But, honey, it looks awful. It really does. Wretched. Like a spotlight on a carbuncle. You'll get through it. We all do.

TWYLA

(Losing it) Through what, Ellie?

ELLIE

You poor thing. You didn't even know, did you? Probably thought you were just going mad. *(TWYLA stares numbly at her)* All those warm episodes you've been having lately? Miserable hot episodes? Like being crazy hot? Ants crawling under your skin hot? Hmm? That's what it is, all right. *(Suddenly cocks her head, frowns)* Oh, dear. *(Reaches over; places her hand on TWYLA'S stomach)* Let me see your hand.

TWYLA

What for?

ELLIE

Just let me look. Here –

(ELLIE takes the drink from TWYLA, places it on the cabinet, grabs TWYLA'S hand, turns it over, and squeezes the fleshy area between TWYLA'S forefinger and thumb.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Uh, huh. Yep.

TWYLA

(Recoiling) That hurts.

ELLIE

Of course it hurts. You're getting another ulcer.

TWYLA

(Trying to pull away) I'm not getting an ulcer.

ELLIE

No?

(ELLIE squeezes again, harder.)

TWYLA

Ow!

ELLIE

You see?

(ELLIE releases TWYLA'S hand, crosses back to the window and looks out. TWYLA picks up the glass of brandy, glares defiantly at ELLIE, and guzzles. At that moment, Fire Captain BUCK FOLEY enters. He's in his mid-60's, wears a soot-streaked uniform, complete with hat. His face is smeared with grime.)

BUCK

(Removing his hat) Evening, Ellie. Twyla.

(The women turn. ELLIE smiles.)

ELLIE

Evening, Buck. My, don't you look nice.

TWYLA

He's covered with dirt, Ellie.

ELLIE

I was speaking in the metaphysical.

TWYLA

Christ.

ELLIE

(A warning glance) Twyla Jean?

BUCK

Actually, Twyla, she's right. It isn't really dirt. It's soot.

TWYLA

Who cares? Who called you, anyway? That busybody, Darlene?

BUCK

Nope. Your mother invited me.

TWYLA

Invited? What the hell are you talking about, invited? Never mind.

(TWYLA grabs the phone, punches out a number.)

BUCK

How's she doing?

TWYLA

See for yourself. Here. *(Hands the phone to BUCK)* Maybe she'll listen to you.

(BUCK takes the phone, crosses to the window, looks out, smiles, waves.)

BUCK

(On phone) Ariel? Hi, there. Boy, look at you. Is that a wedding dress you got on there? *(Listens)* Well, yes it is, Ariel. Real pretty. *(Listens)* Yep, veil's nice, too. You betcha. Say, all them birds ain't bothering you, are they? *(Listens)* That's good. I sure will. Bye, bye.

(BUCK turns off the phone and hands it to TWYLA, who stares incredulously at him. He turns back to the window, looks out.)

BUCK, *Continued*

Hey, Tommy. I'd move that ladder a bit to the left if I was you. But you be real careful, son. That storm yesterday soaked the soil pretty good. Ground's as spongy as a bucket of mush. You make sure you anchor them legs down real good and firm in that mud 'fore you do any climbing. Don't wanna be breakin' your neck. Actually, I don't think that little ladder's gonna reach. Nope. What you need is one of them real long extension ladders like we got on the – *(Looks to the Left, waves)* Hey, there, Tobe. How's she going?

TWYLA

What the hell are you doing?

BUCK

Huh?

TWYLA

Go to your truck. Get your men. Bring the ladder.

BUCK

That's gonna be kinda tough, Twyla. Sorta drove over in my own car. Didn't bring the boys with me this time.

TWYLA

What are you doing here, then? How do you plan on getting my mother down?

ELLIE

Don't be rude, dear. Besides, he didn't come to get her down.

TWYLA

What do you mean he didn't come to get her down? Of course he came to get her down. Why do you think he's here, Ellie?

ELLIE

To visit.

TWYLA

What?

BUCK

She's right, Twyla. See, we were in the middle of knocking down this fire when your mother called and – well, you know.

(TWYLA gazes vacantly at both of them.)

ELLIE

(To BUCK) Ulcers

BUCK

Really?

ELLIE

Duodenal.

BUCK

Those can be real butt kickers.

(TWYLA grinds her teeth, turns back to the cabinet, puts the phone down.)

ELLIE

(To BUCK) So – a fire. Where?

BUCK

Seafood Shanty. Even bigger than last year.

ELLIE

My.

BUCK

Yep. Deep fryer shorted out again. We had her pretty much contained when—

(SFX: PHONE RINGS. TWYLA automatically reaches for the one on the counter. BUCK waves her off.)

BUCK, *Continued*

That'll be mine, Twyla. (*Reaches into a pocket, takes out his cell phone, flips it open, answers*) Foley here. (*Listens*) That's good, Sam. My boys get that smoke outta your kitchen okay? Good. Don't mention it. (*Listens*) Nope. I'm over at Ariel Pott's place. Oh, yeah, she's still up there. What? Well, sure, I love shrimp. Who doesn't? (*Listens*) How many cases? Boy, that's a heck of a lot of shrimp, Sam. Let me ask her. (*To ELLIE*) You want some shrimp? They're jumbos.

ELLIE

That would be lovely.

BUCK

(*On phone*) Say what? Well, exactly how well done are you talking about? Uh, huh. (*To ELLIE*) He says most of 'em are a tad on the crispy side.

ELLIE

Crispy's fine.

BUCK

(*On phone*) Crispy's good, Sam. Just pluck out them burnt ones and bag up the rest. (*Listens*) Oh, yeah, we'll be here. See you in a while. Bye, bye.

(*TWYLA rolls her eyes.*)

ELLIE

Did you bring them?

BUCK

Yep. Out in the car. Picked up that section of rope like you wanted, too. Want me to bring it in?

ELLIE

That would be real nice, Buck. Thank you.

(*BUCK nods; exits.*)

TWYLA

What's with the rope?

ELLIE

We need it to hoist the basket up to her.

TWYLA

What basket?

ELLIE

The one we're putting some of your father's things in.

TWYLA

What things?

ELLIE

Oh, his pipe, some tobacco, his after shave. Some pigs' feet.

TWYLA

Feet? Pigs?

ELLIE

Yes. Pickled.

TWYLA

Exactly why would you do something like that?

ELLIE

Because she wants them for the—

TWYLA

Momma doesn't want pigs' feet. She hates Pigs' feet.

ELLIE

I know that, honey. They're for your father.

TWYLA

(Through clenched teeth) Daddy can't eat them, Ellie.

(BUCK re-enters, carrying some rope and an immense jar of pickled pigs' feet.)

BUCK

Say, Ellie. You think it'd be okay with Ariel if maybe I laid my choppers into a couple of these babies? I love these greasy old things.

ELLIE

Dig in, Buck.

BUCK

Thanks. I'll stick the rest in the fridge.

(BUCK exits. ELLIE glances at her watch, then sweeps over to the window.)

ELLIE

Yoo, hoo! Everything's on schedule, sweetie. We should be ready to start in about an hour. We're gathering everything right now. Toby, would you and Axel be a couple of dears and come inside? I want you to bring some things down from the attic. Thank you, boys.

(TWYLA takes another swig of brandy, wavers slightly. ELLIE turns back to her.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

You're getting drunk.

TWYLA

Why not? My mother's up a tree and my son is dating a tramp.

ELLIE

You listen to me, Twyla Jean. You think you know so much about everything, about everyone. Well, you don't.

TWYLA

I know how close your sister came to being a great grandmother.

ELLIE

You don't know anything. You don't even know what's going to happen here tonight. The incredible event that is about to take place.

TWYLA

I'm sure you'll fill me in.

(TOBY and AXEL enter through the archway. TOBY has a box of peaches wedged under an arm.)

AXEL

Whatcha need from the attic, ELLIE?

ELLIE

That pretty little mauve basket. You know the one, Toby. And the box with all your mother's old records in it. The 78's.

TOBY

Will do.

(The men disappear down the hall.)

TWYLA

What are you going to do with the records, Ellie? Send them into space with the pigs' feet?

ELLIE

Don't be sarcastic. We're going to play them.

TWYLA

On what?

ELLIE

(Points at the old VICTROLA) That.

TWYLA

That thing hasn't worked in fifty years and you know it. It's useless.

ELLIE

Memories are never useless, Twyla.

TWYLA

It isn't a memory, Ellie. It's a dust collector, like everything else in this asylum.

ELLIE

That's not true.

TWYLA

No?

(TWYLA crosses to the Tiffany Lamp, reaches down, and holds up the frayed cord, which is missing its plug.)

TWYLA, *Continued*

What do you call this? I call it useless. *(Drops the cord, points at the piano)* Just like that God-awful thing, which is so out of tune, if anybody ever played it, the racket would – *(Giving up)* What's the point?

ELLIE

I think tonight everything is going to work fine, Twyla. Tonight is going to be – inspiring.

(TWYLA stares at ELLIE for a moment, then charges angrily to the window.)

TWYLA

Tommy, you get up that ladder and you bring your grandmother down – Now!

ELLIE

(Out window) No. You keep off that ladder, Tommy. It's not stable. See? Now, you come down. And don't get that mud all over you. I need you to get some things from your grandmother's room.

TWYLA

Do you know what you just did, Ellie? Do you? You superseded my authority with Tommy. You had no right to do that.

(ELLIE slowly turns to TWYLA, suddenly serious.)

ELLIE

Authority?

TWYLA

Yes, Ellie, authority. And it's about time I exercised some of it. (*Crosses to the sofa, puts her drink down on the coffee table*) I can't believe this. I'm going to have to go up there and get her down myself.

ELLIE

You're not going to get her down from there.

TWYLA

(*Unbuttoning her jacket*) Watch me.

(*TWYLA starts unbuttoning her jacket. ELLIE mulls something over.*)

ELLIE

Twyla?

TWYLA

(*Curt*) What.

ELLIE

This entire episode will resolve itself in less than an hour. Why don't you calm down and wait.

TWYLA

Because by then it'll be too dark to see, that's why.

ELLIE

No it won't.

TWYLA

Ellie, I don't know how things work where you live, but on this planet, when the sun goes down, it gets dark.

ELLIE

That's why the girls are bringing the Japanese lanterns.

TWYLA

Girls? What girls?

ELLIE

Our Bingo clutch.

TWYLA

You're going to play Bingo?

ELLIE

Don't be silly. Ariel invited them over for the ceremony.

TWYLA

(Losing it again) What ceremony?

(TOMMY and SISSY enter through the archway.)

TOMMY

(To ELLIE) You wanted me to get something?

ELLIE

Yes, honey. Go to your grandmother's bedroom. Howard's favorite pipe is sitting on the dresser next to his humidior. Bring those and his bottle of Bay Rum from the bathroom. Then— *(Abruptly locks her eyes on SISSY, crosses to her, stares intensely at her face, then breaks into a huge smile)* Good grief.

SISSY

What.

ELLIE

You're Maggie Morgan's daughter.

SISSY

Yeah.

ELLIE

You don't remember me, Sissy?

SISSY

I should?

ELLIE

When you were just this high, you were in my Sunday school class.

TWYLA

(Yanking off her jacket) Well, she's out of school now, Ellie.

ELLIE

Lordy, you've certainly – matured. How are your folks?

SISSY

Divorced.

ELLIE

(Face falls) Oh, what a shame.

SISSY

Why?

(PAUSE. TOMMY and SISSY exit down the hall. TWYLA drapes her jacket on the back of the sofa, then sits and starts removing her high heels.)

ELLIE

Look at yourself. You own three successful boutiques. You've won every award a business woman can win in this county. You're educated. You've been all over the world. You have more money than you know what to do with. And look at you. You're miserable.

TWYLA

I am not.

ELLIE

You're a mess, Twyla Jean. And you've got no one to blame but yourself.

TWYLA

I'm not blaming anyone for anything.

ELLIE

Nonsense. Whenever you don't get what you want, you blame it on someone else. And this time you're blaming it on Axel.

TWYLA

Excuse me?

ELLIE

You heard me. Axel is the sweetest, most supportive man a woman could ask for. But the first time in twenty years, he doesn't do exactly what you want – no, what you demand – you give him an ultimatum. And when he doesn't bend, you just throw him away.

TWYLA

I didn't throw him away, Ellie. He walked out.

ELLIE

Of course he did. He got tired of constantly having to defend his decision.

TWYLA

That wasn't a decision, Ellie. It was a thoughtless impulse.

ELLIE

The journey to one's dream is often begun on impulse, Twyla.

TWYLA

Oh, stop with the journeys and dreams. He was offered the plant manager position, Ellie. But did he accept it? No. He suddenly decided, out of the blue, to throw away a career he spent his whole life building. Didn't feel a twenty-thousand-dollar-a-year raise was what he really wanted out of life. Not Axel. Hell, no. What he wanted was to find himself.

ELLIE
He did.

TWYLA
By opening that grease pit.

ELLIE
It's not a grease pit, Twyla. It's a body shop. You'd know that if you'd ever taken time out of your busy schedule to go by and see it.

TWYLA
I did, Ellie. It's a grease pit. Have you looked at his hands lately?

ELLIE
It's honest work, Twyla. And for the first time in his life, Axel loves what he's doing. Really loves it. Believe it or not, most of the time he's pretty happy.

TWYLA
How can he possibly be happy? He has to work seven days a week just to keep the lights on.

ELLIE
You still don't understand.

TWYLA
What's to understand? He hit fifty and had a mid-life breakdown.

ELLIE
We prefer to call them breakthroughs.

TWYLA
Swell.

(TWYLA starts removing her bracelets, putting them on the coffee table. ELLIE studies her, smiles, and crosses back to the window.)

ELLIE
As a matter of fact, I think you're going to have one of your own tonight.

TWYLA
No, Ellie, I won't. And by the way, just when did you become such an expert on my marriage? What'd you do, consult your Ouija board?

ELLIE
Axel told me.

TWYLA
(Jolted) What?

ELLIE

Yes. And your mother. He shared everything with us.

TWYLA

Why would he do that?

ELLIE

He needed someone to talk to.

TWYLA

He could've talked to me, Ellie. For twenty years he could've talked to me.

ELLIE

He tried, Twyla. But you were always too busy to hear him.

TWYLA

I see. And just how many other people have the three of you shared my personal life with?

ELLIE

No one.

TWYLA

Why do I find that so hard to believe?

ELLIE

Maybe it's because you're a cynic.

TWYLA

Maybe it's because you're the biggest gossip in five counties.

(TWYLA struggles to unclasp her necklace. ELLIE crosses to the sofa and sits next to her.)

ELLIE

You're so self-involved. You don't even know what day this is, do you?

TWYLA

I know precisely what day this is, Ellie. It's Saturday, June third, okay?

ELLIE

Twyla, it's your parents' anniversary.

TWYLA

You're telling me the reason my mother's gone up a tree two years in a row, is because it's their anniversary.

ELLIE

Partially, yes. But this time it's not the only—

TWYLA

Well, this'll be her last party in a tree, Ellie. And there's nothing partial about that.

ELLIE

I'm afraid you're not grasping the—

TWYLA

I'm grasping just fine.

(TWYLA removes her necklace, lays it on the coffee table. SFX: PHONE RINGS. TWYLA starts to get up. ELLIE motions her to stay put and crosses to the cabinet.)

ELLIE

It's for me.

TWYLA

How do you know?

(TWYLA scowls, starts removing her earrings. ELLIE answers the phone.)

ELLIE

(On phone) Well, I was just starting to tell her, but she doesn't seem to be quite ready for — *(Listens)* All right, I'll try. I will. *(A huge smile)* I know, honey. Isn't it wonderful? I can't wait. It's going to be so magical. What? No, of course I haven't told anyone else. You said no one but Twyla would be capable of — *(Listens)* Okay, I will, sweetie. *(Places the phone on the cabinet; turns to TWYLA)* There are some things your mother wants me to tell you.

TWYLA

If she's got anything to say to me, she can do it herself. Right here.

ELLIE

That's not what she wants.

TWYLA

I don't care what she wants.

ELLIE

You'd better start caring, Twyla. Because there are a few things you need to know before the— *(Her voice trails off)*

TWYLA

Before the what? *(No response)* Damn it, Ellie, what things?

(ELLIE cross to the sofa, eases herself down onto it, searches for the right words, then looks at TWYLA.)

ELLIE

Your mother is preparing to – ascend tonight.

TWYLA

Uh, huh. Well she'd better start preparing to descend, Ellie, because she's coming down.

ELLIE

No, Twyla. What I'm trying to say is – (*Looks at her watch*) in about forty-five minutes, your mother is going to – cross over to the other side.

TWYLA

The other side of what?

ELLIE

She's going to be with Howard.

TWYLA

What?

ELLIE

She's passing tonight.

TWYLA

(*Flabbergasted*) She can't do that.

ELLIE

Why not?

(*TWYLA flings her earrings on the coffee table, charges to the window.*)

TWYLA

Because she's out of her mind, that's why. Because I won't let her. (*Out window*) Momma!

ELLIE

It's already been decided.

TWYLA

Nobody can just decide to die. Momma!

ELLIE

Some people can. When they feel the time is right, some very special people can –

TWYLA

What do you mean, when the time is – (*Sudden realization*) Oh, God. What did she take?

ELLIE

Take?

TWYLA

Pills, damnit, pills. Drugs. What did she take?

ELLIE

She didn't take anything. Don't be foolish.

(MISTER BRICKMAN'S VOICE is heard O.S. TWYLA glares through the window.)

TWYLA

No, Mister Brickman, I don't want any of your stinking peaches. And you can take that lawn chair back into your own yard and mind your own business.

ELLIE

I know your upset, but there's no need to be rude to the neighbors.

TWYLA

Momma, you listen to me!

ELLIE

Twyla –

TWYLA

(To the ceiling) Am I the only one capable of seeing the insanity in all this?

ELLIE

No one else knows. Well, Buck knows – some of it. But Ariel felt the others might not quite – appreciate the profound nature of this event.

TWYLA

Look at me real good, Ellie. Does it look like I'm appreciating it? Does it?

ELLIE

You will. Very soon. But there are some important things you need to know first. Things that will astonish you.

TWYLA

I don't need to be astonished, Ellie. What I need, is my mother back in this house. Right now.

(TWYLA storms to the archway.)

ELLIE

She's not coming down, Twyla. Ever.

TWYLA

(Exiting) Yes she is.

ELLIE scurries to the window, looks out.

ELLIE

Oh, dear.

(BLACK OUT.)

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

(AT RISE: Not long after; at the house. A large cardboard box is now sitting on the floor in front of the Victrola. A mauve basket with a handle is on the coffee table next to a bottle of Bay Rum, a pipe, glass humidior, and a coiled rope. ELLIE is at the window, fretting; BUCK stands next to her, working on a Pig's Foot.)

BUCK

(Out window) That's it, Tommy. Now ease that ladder up just a hair, so they can slide her legs outta that muck. *(Watches)* That'll do her. Axel, you and Toby take her arms and pull her on up. Easy now. That's the ticket.

ELLIE

Lord, what a mess.

BUCK

Looks like she's gonna need a good hosing down.

ELLIE

Toby, take her to that faucet by the porch and wash off her feet, will you?

BUCK

(Watching) There you go.

ELLIE

Look how badly she's limping.

BUCK

Aw, hell, Ellie, that ankle's probably just sprained.

ELLIE

(Out window) Axel, bring her into the bedroom and get her out of those clothes. She can put on Howard's old robe.

SAM (O.S.)

Eats are here!

(ELLIE and BUCK turn. SAM from the Seafood Shanty appears in the archway. He is dressed in a soot-streaked pirate costume. His arms are loaded with scorched cartons of shrimp.)

BUCK

Hey there, Sam.

SAM

Evening Buck, Ellie.

ELLIE

Sam.

SAM

Where you want this shrimp?

ELLIE

I think there's some platters in those shelves by the fridge. *(Running her eyes over the cartons)* My, what a marvelous assortment.

SAM

Oh, yeah. Got 'em all here. Tigers, Languistinos, Mexican Whites, Alaskans. Even got some of them little cocktail shrimp and sauce, case you wanna whip up a batch.

ELLIE

Why, thank you.

(SAM nods, turns towards the kitchen, stops.)

SAM

Say, Ellie, could I get your opinion on something?

ELLIE

Surely.

(SAM puts the cartons on the cabinet, grabs the top one, and carries it over to ELLIE.)

SAM

Go on, take one. Give it a taste and tell me what you think.

(ELLIE reaches into the carton, pulls out a blackened jumbo shrimp, takes a bite.)

ELLIE

Mmmm. This is delicious, Sam.

SAM

(Grinning) Figured you might appreciate it.

ELLIE

What is that pungent flavor?

SAM

Gonna tell you. You know how old that building is where I got my restaurant, right? *(To BUCK)* ‘Member that wall your boys had so much trouble breakin’ through this afternoon?

BUCK

(Eating pig’s foot) Yep. Real tough entry, Sam.

SAM

Know why?

BUCK

Got my suspicions.

SAM

Studs, Buck. Was them studs. Every single stud inside that wall, guess what kinda wood it was. *(To ELLIE)* You ain’t gonna believe this. *(To BUCK)* Whoever built that place eighty years ago, must’ve been stinkin’ rich, or plain stupid or both. ‘Cause the idiot went and used oak for the studs. Not pine. Oak. You believe that? Solid oak.

BUCK

(Nods) I figured it was a hardwood of some kind. Good thing, too, Sam. If there’d been pine in that wall, that dried up old building woulda gone up like a torch.

SAM

You got that right. Anyway, after your boys left, I’m up there on the roof, layin’ a plastic tarp over that burnt-out section, and some of that smoke’s still curlin’ up outta my kitchen. And I’m sniffin’ it and it smells so good it’s makin’ me crazy hungry, and I can’t figure why. I’m tellin’ you, it’s startin’ to drive me nuts. And then it hits me like a brick. Barbecue. What I’m smellin’ is barbecue. *(To ELLIE)* That’s what you’re eatin’ there, Ellie. Genuine, oak barbecued shrimp.

ELLIE

It’s lovely, Sam.

SAM

Thank you. *(To BUCK)* So then I think to myself, whoa there, Sam. Slow down just a minute there. Maybe I won’t re-build that wall. Maybe I’ll just knock the dang thing down for good. Maybe put in a little open-air patio out there with some tables and a couple of them big smoker grills – you know the ones I’m talkin’ about, Buck. Them fifty gallon oil drums they cut in half for them tailgate parties?

BUCK

Right.

SAM

During the summer I could make a killin' out there. I mean, with that view of the river and all. I could even diversify. You know, start cookin' up some of them big tri-tips, or maybe even a whole pig.

BUCK

Sounds good.

SAM

Hell, Buck. I might even get rid of that old deep fryer altogether.

BUCK

That might be a real good idea, Sam.

SAM

You think?

BUCK

Oh, yeah.

(At that instant TWYLA limps into the archway with AXEL and TOBY, who are supporting her by the arms. Her face is a mask of MUD, her hair matted and filthy, the front of her clothes caked with grime.)

SAM

That you under there, Twyla? Look like a big old raccoon *(TWYLA stares coldly at SAM.)* Guess we both had little accidents today, eh?

(Still gnawing on a pig's foot, BUCK crosses to TWYLA, kneels and scrutinizes her ankle.)

BUCK

Yep. You got a good one goin' there, all right. Startin' to swell up like a honeydew. Better let me check it out for you.

(BUCK wipes a sleeve across his mouth, clamps the pig's foot between his teeth, then reaches for TWYLA'S foot.)

TWYLA

(Recoiling) Don't touch me.

(TWYLA shakes her arms free of AXEL and TOBY, starts to lose her balance, regains it.)

AXEL

(Reaching for her arm) Come on, let's get you out of those things.

TWYLA

(Pulling her arm away) Don't. Just – don't. *(Scans the faces staring at her)* You're crazy. You're all crazy.

(TWYLA turns and limps painfully down the hall. AXEL follows. TOBY crosses to the piano, sits on the bench.)

SAM

(To ELLIE) I'll go fix these things up for you.

ELLIE

Thank you, Sam.

(SAM disappears down the hall with the boxes of shrimp. As ELLIE and BUCK head back to the window, TOBY absentmindedly plays a few soft NOTES on the PIANO, which is incredibly OUT OF TUNE.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Poor thing.

BUCK

She'll be fine, Ellie. You don't need to worry about that one. Twyla Jean is one tough gal.

ELLIE

(Troubled) Yes, I know.

(VOICES are heard O.S. ELLIE and BUCK turn. Four old gals – LOIS, IVY, MARGE and CORA – burst through the archway, laughing and chattering. They carry a number of Paper Japanese Lanterns, and a couple of Wind Chimes. CORA, who is at least 90, wears ultra-heavy makeup with glossy, painted-on eyebrows, bright red lips and cheeks, and jet-black hair. She carries some candles.)

NOTE: During the following lines, LOIS and MARGE bee-line over to the window, as IVY guides CORA – who clearly has poor eyesight – down to the chair in front of the cabinet. She helps CORA sit, then hurries over to the others.

(CORA squints at the decanter on the cabinet, leans in closer.)

LADIES

(Ad-libbed greetings) Hello there, Ellie – Hi, Buck – Did you get that fire out? Hello, sweetie. Isn't this exciting? – How are you, Toby? – We brought the lanterns – What a perfect night for an anniversary – Where's the bride? – Where do you want these candles, Ellie? *(Etc.)*

IVY

(Out window) Happy anniversary, Ariel! What a lovely gown. Oh, look at the birds. *(To ELLIE, conspiratorially)* Sorry we're late, but you know how Cora is with her makeup. We practically had to drag her away from her mirror.

ELLIE

No, you're fine. We'll have the toast in about thirty minutes.

LOIS

(Waving out window) Hello there, you gorgeous thing.

(MARGE cups a hand to her ear, cocks her head.)

MARGE

(To IVY) What? What did she say?

(IVY speaks loudly into MARGE'S ear.)

IVY

(Over-enunciating) She said – Happy anniversary!

MARGE

What?

LOIS

(Out window) Ariel, you look absolutely stunning.

MARGE

How's that?

IVY

(Loudly to MARGE) Ariel is stunning!

MARGE

No. I have gas.

(IVY starts to respond but turns her attention to CORA.)

CORA

(Still squinting at the decanter) Where did Ariel find this lovely candelabra?

IVY

That isn't a candelabra, Cora. It's a decanter.

CORA

Well, Lord almighty, what's it doing on the piano?

IVY

You're not at the piano.

CORA

Huh?

(Confused, CORA puts down the candles, extends her hands and runs her fingers across the top of the cabinet, as if feeling for the piano keys.)

CORA, *Continued*

When did she move the piano?

IVY

She didn't. Stop being so vain, Cora May, and put on your new glasses so you can see.

CORA

They're heavy and uncomfortable. Besides, they don't help that much.

IVY

(Crossing to her) You're blind as a bat without them.

CORA

That was very insensitive, Ivy.

IVY

Well, it's true. You're just being vain.

CORA

I am not.

IVY

Oh, please, Cora. You're just afraid if that old lecher, Bo Morgan ever sees how unattractive you are in those glasses, he'll stop sneaking into your room.

CORA

(Gasping) What?

IVY

Don't play coy. I heard the two of you in there after Bingo Saturday night – frolicking.

CORA

(A longer gasp) Shame on you. You're just jealous because Bo never bought you any roses.

IVY

Those weren't roses, Cora. They were Camellias. You'd know that if you'd had your glasses on. And he didn't buy them. He stole them.

CORA

He did not.

IVY

Oh, yes he did. From the garden by the dining room. I saw him.

CORA

No you didn't.

BUCK

Ladies, come on now.

LOIS

Buck is right. We should be ashamed. Let's not forget why we're here.

(IVY and CORA glare at each other, then IVY turns and crosses back to the window.)

LOIS, *Continued*

Oh, Ellie. You'll never guess what happened to Ivy last week.

ELLIE

What.

LOIS

She was mugged.

ELLIE

No.

LOIS

In broad daylight, right in front of the bus stop.

IVY

I was on my way to the bank to deposit my Social Security and—

LOIS

The pennies, Ivy. Don't forget the pennies.

IVY

Yes, and some rolls of pennies.

LOIS

Seventeen dollars worth.

IVY

And this little thug comes up behind me and tries to snatch my purse.

ELLIE

That's despicable.

IVY

But he didn't get a thing, Ellie, 'cause I yanked my purse back and bopped him right in the face with it.

ELLIE

You didn't.

(As the chattering fades O.S., TOBY hits one more discord on the piano, stands, crosses to the coffee table, and places the items in the basket. He exits. ELLIE crosses to the cabinet counter, starts placing the candles in some holders. AXEL enters.)

ELLIE

How's she doing, hon?

AXEL

(Shrugs) You know Twyla. Wouldn't let me help.

ELLIE

Really miss her, don't you?

AXEL

Bad, Ellie. Some nights it gets so lonely, I – you know

ELLIE

(A reassuring smile) You stop fretting. I have a feeling that by the end of this evening you may see a brand new Twyla.

AXEL

You and Ariel are really something. I've never really understood either one of you, but somehow you know how to make a guy feel like everything's gonna be okay.

ELLIE

It is, Axel. You'll see. In the meantime, could you help the girls get set up out back?

AXEL

Sure.

(As AXEL turns to leave, TOMMY and SISSY enter through the archway.)

AXEL, Continued

(To SISSY) What time did you say that show started?

SISSY

Ten.

TOMMY

You coming, Dad?

AXEL

Gonna try.

SISSY

Cool.

(AXEL exits. ELLIE opens the lower doors of the cabinet, removes some sniffers and places them on the counter.)

SISSY, *Continued*

(To ELLIE) Need any help?

ELLIE

Actually, yes. Thank you, Sissy. *(Points at box in front of the Victrola)* Why don't you go through those old records and find "I'll Be Seeing You." We're going to play it for Ariel. It's their favorite song.

SISSY

Okay.

(SISSY crosses to the Victrola, sits on the floor, and starts looking through the old 78's.)

ELLIE

And Tommy, would you be a sweetheart and scoot the Victrola just a smidge closer to the window so Ariel can hear it?

TOMMY

Sure.

(TOMMY starts easing the Victrola towards the window. There is a general sense of hubbub heard O.S., then Cora, IVY, LOIS and MARGE burst into the archway.)

CORA

The green lantern was just fine where it was before you had to go and move it.

IVY

It looks much better by the fence.

CORA

Oh, it does not.

IVY

How would you know?

ELLIE

(To LOIS) What is it? What's wrong?

LOIS

Slight disagreement.

IVY

(To ELLIE) I'll tell you what's wrong. *(To CORA)* You have absolutely no artistic sense at all, Cora. None whatsoever. One simply does not place a pink lamp next to a green one.

CORA

And pray tell, why not?

IVY

Because they clash, that's why. They're too dissimilar in hue.

CORA

Hue? What would you know about hue? Your own hair is blue, for God's sake.

IVY

(Pointing at her hair) This is not blue, Cora. It's called Twilight Silver.

CORA

Call it anything you like. It's still blue.

IVY

(Stung; glares) I'm going to remember that.

CORA

Fine. And while we're at it, what about the wind chime? I don't see why we have to move it, too.

IVY

Because there isn't enough breeze on the east side of the house. You need a good breeze for a wind chime.

MARGE

(Cupping her ear) The what?

LOIS

(Loud) Chime. Marge. The chime!

(MARGE looks at her watch.)

CORA

The breeze is fine right where it is.

IVY

Then why isn't the chime tinkling?

CORA

It is tinkling, Ivy. But you talk so much, nobody can hear it.

IVY

Well.

(IVY and CORA glare at each other.)

LOIS

Ellie, would you please come out back and decide this before they strangle each other.

ELLIE

Of course. Come on.

(ELLIE turns and exits through the archway. The others follow, chattering. Momentarily, TWYLA limps into the archway. She is now wearing her father's old bathrobe. Her hair is wet and combed back, her makeup removed, making her appear tired, defeated. Her ankle is wrapped in an ace bandage. TWYLA scans the living room, still brooding, then limps to the window, wavering slightly. She peers outside. Her face goes slack.)

TOMMY

You okay, Mom?

TWYLA

Do I look okay?

(TWYLA turns, limps to the cabinet, and pours a drink.)

SISSY

(Pulling a RECORD out of the box) Got it. (Pulls off the paper cover; reads the record label) Wow. Bing Crosby. Cool. (To TOMMY) Here.

(SISSY hands the record to TOMMY and resumes scrounging through the box of records. TOMMY carefully slips the Record onto the Victrola's turntable.)

TWYLA

(To TOMMY) I want to have a little talk with you.

TOMMY

About what?

(To SISSY) Excuse me, but would you mind if I spoke with my son for a moment?

SISSY

(Preoccupied) Sure.

TWYLA

Alone.

SISSY

Oh, right. *(Standing; to TOMMY) I'll, uh – see you out back.*

(SISSY exits, carrying a few records. TWYLA watches her leave, takes a drink.)

TOMMY

So what's the deal?

TWYLA

I think you know what the deal is.

TOMMY

I do?

(TWYLA limps to the sofa with her drink and sits.)

TWYLA

Just how long have you and this Sissy person been dating? Or would “mating” be more accurate?

TOMMY

What?

TWYLA

You think I don’t know what’s been going on with her?

TOMMY

Sissy?

TWYLA

I’m not talking about the Virgin Mary.

TOMMY

(It dawns) Oh, wow –

TWYLA

You’re damn right, wow.

TOMMY

(Grins) No, Mom. I mean this is really lame.

TWYLA

Lame? Excuse me, you think this is lame?

TOMMY

Mom, listen.

TWYLA

No, you listen. You’re barely eighteen. You’re a freshman in college. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.

TOMMY

Mom –

TWYLA

It’s bad enough you’ve been having relations with someone who looks like a hooker.

TOMMY

Aw, jeez.

TWYLA

Worse, you don't even have the sense to use protection. I mean, what're you thinking with? Never mind.

TOMMY

Mom, wait –

TWYLA

But to embarrass your entire family by parading her through your grandmother's own home – at a time like this.

(TOMMY laughs, crosses to the sofa, sits next to TWYLA.)

TWYLA, *Continued*

You think this is funny, Mister? It's not one bit funny. I happen to know about your little near-miss with parenthood.

TOMMY

First of all, we're not dating.

TWYLA

You're not even dating her?

TOMMY

No.

TWYLA

My God, she's cheaper than I thought.

TOMMY

(Laughs) She's not cheap. She's a performance artist.

TWYLA

A what?

TOMMY

She does this act with projectors and synthesizers and ham radios. I run her lights and sound. We're doing a show tonight at the student union. That's why she's dressed like that. Dad might even come.

TWYLA

You live with me, Tommy. How does he happen to know about all this when I don't? Why didn't you ever say anything?

TOMMY

I did, Mom. Months ago.

(PAUSE as TWYLA absorbs it all.)

TWYLA

Then what was all that business at the window about false alarms?

TOMMY

Her boyfriend dumped her and took off to L.A. She thought she was—

TWYLA

I know what she thought she was. *(Stares intensely at him)* So, you two aren't – involved?

TOMMY

Geez, Mom. She's not even my type. You worry too much.

TWYLA

You're my son. It's my job to worry.

(TWYLA reaches over and gently brushes aside a strand of hair hanging over his eyes.)

TOMMY

(Annoyed) Mom.

(TWYLA gazes at him for a moment, then nods wearily.)

TWYLA

Go on. Go be with your – performance artist.

(TOMMY exits as ELLIE enters.)

ELLIE

There, you see?

TWYLA

I don't appreciate you slinking about, spying on me.

ELLIE

I wasn't slinking.

(ELLIE crosses down to the cabinet, lifts the decanter, and starts filling the snifters with brandy.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Twyla, I know how upset you must be right now.

TWYLA

You haven't the foggiest.

(TWYLA stares into space, drinks.)

ELLIE

When was the last time you were out in the backyard? I mean before tonight.

TWYLA

What does that have to do with anything?

ELLIE

Go on, tell me.

TWYLA

I don't know, Ellie. Months ago. Why?

ELLIE

Tell me what you could see.

TWYLA

Houses, Ellie. That's what I saw. Houses and fences and trees. Miles and miles of them, okay?

ELLIE

Exactly. But do you know what your mother is looking at right now?

TWYLA

Yeah. A private room.

ELLIE

The river.

TWYLA

Excuse me?

ELLIE

She can see the river, Twyla. From where she's sitting right now, she can just make out Sandy Point over the roof of the Home Depot. Do you know how far away that is? Four miles.

(PAUSE. ELLIE turns and watches TWYLA.)

TWYLA

Well, thank you for clearing up that great mystery.

ELLIE

Aren't you beginning to understand why she's up there?

TWYLA

If I understood, Ellie, I'd be as nuts as the rest of you.

ELLIE

(Abrupt) For once in your life, Twyla Jean, stop being sarcastic and show some respect.

(ELLIE'S attitude momentarily stuns TWYLA.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

You think everything in the Universe can be calculated and measured. Everything. Even emotions. Some things just can't be measured, Twyla. *(Turns, crosses to sofa)* You think your mother's up there because of some silly senile whim. Well, you're wrong. Now, I'm going to tell you some things – incredible things. And like it or not, you're going to—

(At that instant, CORA and IVY sweep through the archway, bickering. Oblivious to TWYLA'S presence, they cross to the cabinet and start gathering up the candles.)

IVY

I'm telling you, we didn't bring a big blue lantern.

CORA

We certainly did. It's hanging over the garage door right now.

IVY

That isn't a lantern, Cora. It's a bug lamp.

CORA

What?

IVY

Why do you think all those flies are stuck to it? Put on your glasses, Cora.

(IVY picks up the last candle, turns, sees TWYLA and breaks into a surprised smile.)

IVY, *Continued*

Twyla, you came. How sweet of you. Ariel was so worried that you might not—

ELLIE

(Cutting her off) Ivy?

IVY

Yes?

ELLIE

(A stiff look) Why don't you put those candles on the picnic table.

(A moment, then IVY grasps ELLIE'S meaning.)

IVY

Oh. Yes. Of course.

CORA

(Oblivious) Twyla, have you been out back yet?

(IVY grabs CORA's and pulls her towards the archway. As they exit, BUCK appears.)

BUCK

Everything's almost ready, Ellie.

ELLIE

Thank you, Buck.

BUCK

You let me know if you need me to help explain about the, uh – you know.

ELLIE

I will, Buck. Thank you. Oh, and would you tell the others to give us a few minutes alone?

BUCK

You bet.

(BUCK nods to them and exits.)

ELLIE

Back in the late 30's, there were summer dances down at Sandy Point, right there under the stars. And the bands that came to play – Harry James, Stan Kenton and – Oh, Twyla, you should have seen your father on that dance floor. My Walter, too. They were so graceful and – you could even rent these little boats and go out on the river and listen to the music with this warm breeze flowing along the bluffs. It was so magical and romantic. That's where your parents met. Howard proposed to Ariel in one of those little boats. It was their favorite place on Earth. We were all so young and hopeful, we thought it would last forever. But the war came along and Howard and Walter went off to the Pacific. It was so sad. All these young boys going away to – After the war, Howard made it back all right, but not—Anyway, there was this housing boom and Sandy Point was covered with all these expensive riverside homes below the bluffs. No more dances or boats or—It was all gone, Twyla. Gone. You couldn't even walk down to Sandy Point anymore because it was all private property. And your folks certainly couldn't afford one of those places. It broke their hearts. And with all that development going on, you couldn't even see the river anymore. Unless – *(Crosses to the window)* Unless you came way out here on the bluffs. Then you could see it. There was nothing up here then. Nothing but miles and miles of scrub brush and *(Points)* that tree right there. That's why they built this house here. It was the very first one. On warm nights they would spread a blanket in front of that tree and sit there for hours, gazing down at Sandy Point. They loved it up here, Twyla. But the developers came here, too. By the time you were five, the view of the river had vanished again. *(Turns back to TWYLA)* Your mother isn't crazy, Twyla. She just wants to see the place where she and Howard fell in love. Now do you understand?

TWYLA

She could have told me this.

ELLIE

Would you have let her go up there if she had?

TWYLA

So, this is the amazing thing you were going to tell me?

ELLIE

Of course not.

TWYLA

There's more?

ELLIE

Good Lord, yes. But the rest of it is – I mean the important part is so – Oh, dear, how can I say this without—You see, Twyla, what I am about to tell you is going to get rather, well, mystical in nature. Intensely so.

TWYLA

Oh, boy.

(ELLIE watches her for a moment.)

ELLIE

Are you aware of just how little you respect your mother?

TWYLA

What? How can you say that? What do you think I'm doing here? I love my mother. Dearly.

ELLIE

Love, yes. But respect? *(Shakes her head)* Be honest, Twyla. You're embarrassed by her. *(TWYLA starts to respond.)* You think she doesn't know that? You've always thought she was too eccentric, or not sophisticated enough for those upscale friends of yours.

TWYLA

That's ridiculous.

ELLIE

Is it? Did you ever once invite her to a luncheon at your trade club, or to one of those business awards dinners you seem to find so important?

TWYLA

She never cared about things like that.

ELLIE

How would you know? You never asked. She was so proud of you, Twyla. Just once, you could have asked. But you felt she wasn't worldly enough, or a failure somehow because she stayed at home with you and Toby, instead of pursuing some meaningful career.

TWYLA

Like me, you mean.

ELLIE

Yes. And you've spent your entire adult life overcompensating for it by being aggressive and unpleasant.

TWYLA

This isn't the 1940's, Ellie. If people are uncomfortable with an assertive woman, that's their problem.

ELLIE

There is a vast difference, Twyla, between being assertive, and being downright snotty. And that's your problem. Now, you may not want to hear what I am about to tell you, and some of it is going to shock you. But you're going to sit there and listen to it. All of it.

TWYLA

Well, it's not as if I can get up and dance out of here, is it? Shock away, Ellie.

(ELLIE reaches into a side pocket of her caftan, removes a yellowed, folded up piece of paper, carefully unfolds it, and hands it to TWYLA.)

What's this?

ELLIE

Look.

(TWYLA scans the page. Her eyes widen.)

TWYLA

Oberlin?

ELLIE

She was a concert pianist, Twyla.

TWYLA

My mother was accepted into Oberlin?

ELLIE

In the spring of 1941. She'd just turned seventeen.

(TWYLA stares at the paper, baffled.)

TWYLA

Wait a minute. This can't – (*Points at piano*) – She never played that thing. I never even saw her sit down at it.

ELLIE

Yes, you did. You just don't remember.

TWYLA

This doesn't make any sense

ELLIE

Listen to me. Right after she was accepted, the war started. She could have still gone. On a scholarship. That's how good she was. But she didn't feel it would be right for her to be playing music, while other young men and women were sacrificing their lives. So, you know what she did, Twyla? She turned it down and spent the entire war working graveyard at the Lockheed plant. You didn't know that about her either, did you?

(*TWYLA shakes her head, numb.*)

ELLIE, *Continued*

After the war, after she and Howard got married, she re-applied to Oberlin and they offered her another audition. She was so excited, Twyla. (*Crosses to window*) It was the year before Toby was born. You had just turned three. This was still the only house out here, then. And it was the worst storm I've ever seen. It lasted five days. Sometimes the wind blew so hard, the sleet felt like razor blades on your skin. Temperature never got above ten degrees. Snow drifts were everywhere, power lines were down. It was horrendous, Twyla. And Ariel was here, alone with you. Howard was upstate at a sales convention. (*Crosses to the piano*) She'd been at the piano most of the night, getting ready for her audition. You were already in bed and – Twyla, it was so cold that night. Even with the basement heater going full blast, the house was still freezing. So she did something she'd never – I mean, she'd always been so careful about not – (*Shakes her head, walks to the archway, gazes down the hall*)

TWYLA

What, Ellie?

(*ELLIE studies TWYLA for a moment.*)

ELLIE

She opened the basement door to get a little more heat up here. Then she came back to the piano. But the power went out. So she lit some candles and kept on working. She was so involved with her music, it never occurred to her that you might – I don't know, maybe you were trying to find the hall bathroom, or looking for her. But it was so dark in that end of the house and she was playing and – She didn't hear it when you fell down the basement stairs. (*TWYLA locks her eyes on ELLIE.*) When she did find you, you were hardly breathing. Your eyes were rolled back, bleeding from both ears. She was so scared. She tried to call an ambulance but the phone lines were down. And she couldn't drive you anywhere because your father had the car. The nearest house was three miles away.

TWYLA

(It dawns) She didn't.

ELLIE

She was in a panic. She had to get you some help. So she wrapped some heavy blankets around you, threw on her coat and – started carrying you down the road. She didn't even stop to put on her gloves. It was minus-seven that night.

(PAUSE as it sinks in.)

TWYLA

My God.

ELLIE

Buck and his father found you less than a mile from here. When Ariel realized she couldn't go any further, she put you inside the coat with her, then wrapped her arms around you and just laid down. You were still alive. Barely. But—

TWYLA

But what?

ELLIE

Well, you see, this is where it starts getting rather—

(SFX: PHONE RINGS. ELLIE hurries to it, answers.)

ELLIE, Continued

(On phone) Yes, Ariel? *(Listens)* Yes, I think that would be better, too. She might tend to accept it if someone else – All right, I will. *(Crosses to the window, scans the backyard)* Oh, Buck? Would you please come inside? I think I'm going to need you after all. Thank you. *(On phone)* What, Ariel? *(Looks up, smiles)* I know. Not much longer now, sweetie. I love you too.

(ELLIE hangs up.)

TWYLA

What was that all about?

ELLIE

You'll see.

(Momentarily, BUCK enters and looks over at ELLIE.)

BUCK

How much did you tell her?

ELLIE

Only that you found them.

(BUCK nods, puts his thoughts together.)

BUCK

Me and Dad were driving back from an emergency call out on Route Forty. At first we thought it was just a pile of snow layin' there in the road. Heck, Dad started to drive right over it. But then I saw this hand stickin' out of it, so I made him pull over and – let me tell you, Twyla, you were in bad shape. Real bad. But at least you were alive. If Ariel hadn't put you inside that coat with her – Anyhow, she wasn't so lucky.

TWYLA

What are you talking about?

BUCK

Well, see, your mother wasn't exactly – I mean she didn't – Aw hell, Twyla. She was dead.

(TWYLA stares blankly at BUCK, then looks over at ELLIE, who is nodding.)

TWYLA

You don't honestly expect me to believe this.

ELLIE

Honey, Buck's father checked her out.

ELLIE

So what? How would he know? He was a veterinarian.

BUCK

People gotta have a heartbeat too, Twyla. Same as horses. And believe me, she was deceased. Had been for some time.

TWYLA

(Rattled) She was probably in shock and your father didn't –

BUCK

Nope. Wasn't breathin' a lick. She was gone, Twyla. Stone cold gone.

TWYLA

This is absurd.

ELLIE

Keep quiet and listen.

BUCK

(Uncomfortable) Uh, look. I didn't mean to start nothin' here.

ELLIE

She needs to know, Buck. *(BUCK hesitates)* Go on, tell her.

(BUCK blows out a breath, scratches his head.)

BUCK

Well, Dad figured at least you might be able to make it if we could get you some treatment real fast. I mean, aside from the hypothermia, you had one hell of a bad concussion there. So we put you both in the truck and high-tailed it down to Dad's clinic, and see – that's when the thing with your mother happened. Strangest thing I've ever seen in my life. One minute she's layin' there, deader than—

TWYLA

All right, that's it. Stop.

ELLIE

What are you so afraid of?

TWYLA

It's insane. The whole thing is –

BUCK

Saw it with my own eyes, Twyla. Took this huge breath, sat straight up, and said she'd been into the light.

TWYLA

(Ready to blow) I don't want to hear any more.

BUCK

But I'm tellin' you, she—

TWYLA

(Bolting to her feet) Stop it!

(TWYLA grimaces in pain and backs away from ELLIE and BUCK, limping badly.)

TWYLA, *Continued*

Get out, Buck. Now. Go!

ELLIE

They saved you're life. How can you? –

BUCK

It's okay, Ellie. *(To TWYLA)* Didn't mean to upset you. *(To ELLIE)* I'll go on out back.

(ELLIE nods. He exits. TWYLA simmers.)

ELLIE

It's the truth.

TWYLA

The truth? What would you know about the truth? You think Daddy comes down and visits Momma. *(Points at Victrola; limps towards it)* You actually think you're going to play records on this broken piece of junk. You really want the truth, Ellie? Do you? All right, here's the truth.

(TWYLA reaches down and turns on the Victrola. Nothing happens. TWYLA slowly turns back to ELLIE.)

TWYLA, *Continued*

You hear anything, Ellie? Do you? Tell me. I'd really like to know. Because I don't hear a damn thing. Maybe I'm missing something here, but the record doesn't seem to be turning. *(Looks down)* Nope it's still just sitting there, Ellie, doing nothing. And would you like to know why it's doing nothing? Would you?

ELLIE

(Glances at her watch) It's a bit too early, that's all.

TWYLA

Too early? What do you mean it's too early? What're you waiting for, Ellie, the repair man?

ELLIE

Twyla, listen to me—

(TWYLA suddenly reaches down, yanks the 78 off of the turntable, and shatters it against the console, the pieces clattering to the floor.)

TWYLA

Maybe he can fix that, too.

(ELLIE stares numbly at the broken record, then crosses to the Victoria, kneels, and starts picking up the pieces.)

ELLIE

This was their favorite record.

TWYLA

Haven't you been following any of this? The Victrola doesn't work, Ellie. When are you going to come to your senses?

(ELLIE starts placing the shards inside the box of records. SFX: PHONE RINGS. ELLIE stands, crosses to it, and answers.)

ELLIE

(On phone) Yes, Ariel? *(Listens)* Yes, I know. It doesn't seem to be going quite as well as we'd— *(Listens)* Well, I suppose the girls could do it. *(Brightens)* Actually, that would be rather lovely, wouldn't it? Yes, we could do it all from right here. Let them all know, will

ELLIE, *Continued*

you? What? (*Glances furtively at TWYLA*) Are you sure? (*Listens*) I guess there isn't any other way, really. All right, I will. Give me a sign when you're ready. Okay.

(*ELLIE hangs up, crosses back to the Victrola, leans down, reaches into the record box and searches intensely for something. A moment, then she pulls out another record, which is wrapped in a plain, yellowed, dust cover.*)

ELLIE, *Continued*

(*Motioning Twyla aside*) Excuse me, please.

(*TWYLA steps aside. ELLIE carefully slides the record out of the dust cover, places it on the turntable. TWYLA watches her in disbelief, then limps back to the sofa, eases herself down, stares into space, rubs her ankle.*)

ELLIE, *Continued*

You know, you weren't always this willful and cynical, Twyla. You certainly didn't start out that way. You were the most trusting, sweet-natured little girl – I don't know. (*Looks back at TWYLA*) Do you want to know why your mother stopped playing piano? She had to. The night Buck and his father found you, Ariel's hands had been exposed to the cold so long that – They were frostbitten, Twyla. So horribly, her joints were permanently damaged. She couldn't play anymore. Certainly not well enough to—Why do you think she's had such terrible arthritis all these years?

(*ELLIE turns, moves towards the sofa.*)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Have you any idea the guilt she's carried for what happened to you that night? Do you? You almost died in that basement, Twyla. She didn't even know you were down there for two hours because she was so preoccupied with her music. Can you understand what I'm saying to you? (*Pointing to the piano*) That was the last night she ever played.

TWYLA

Why didn't she ever tell me any of this?

ELLIE

Why in God's name would she do something like that? Something that thoughtless. So you could grow up feeling guilty, too? Knowing she ruined her hands trying to save your life? What kind of mother would burden a child with something like that?

Twyla

Then why now? Why at all?

ELLIE

(*Adamant*) Because she's leaving, Twyla, and she wants to know that you—

TWYLA

(*Weary, burying her face in her hands*) No. Please, Ellie. No more.

ELLIE

You always thought I was responsible for getting your mother involved in the mystical; that I was some kind of horrible influence on her. You've always resented me for it. I know that. But that's not how it happened. Not at all. It was Ariel who showed me. All of it. After she came back to us, she—

TWYLA

Ellie, please—

ELLIE

Let me finish. We don't have much time. She was different. Somehow the experience changed her, imbued her with these – abilities, these incredible spiritual powers that were so— Oh, Twyla, she could do such amazing things just by—

TWYLA

Wait. If this is true, Ellie. If what you're saying is really true, then why didn't she just heal her own hands? Tell me that.

ELLIE

Don't you see? She was blessed, Twyla, with a gift of the spirit. She would never use something that miraculous for selfish gain. If you only knew how many people she'd—

TWYLA

I'm exhausted, Ellie. And my ankle is killing me. So just tell me when she's coming down. Please. I'll do whatever she wants. What does she want from me?

ELLIE

She just wants you to be happy, Twyla. That's all she's ever wanted. She needs to know that you believe in what she's—

TWYLA

I can't. It's all too crazy.

ELLIE

No it isn't. Twyla, it's wonderful.

TWYLA

Wonderful? She invites her family and closest friends over so they can watch her die? Even if all this were true, Ellie, it wouldn't be wonderful. It would be cruel.

ELLIE

They're not going to see anything like that. No one will even know she's crossed over until—well, later. You and I are the only ones who will witness the actual ascension.

TWYLA

(Exhausted) Ascension of what, Ellie? What are you talking about?

ELLIE

Her spirit, Twyla. The ascension of her spirit.

TWYLA

(Exhales; stares at the floor) I can't do this anymore.

(ELLIE starts to respond, then cocks her head as if hearing something. She slowly turns towards the window, breaks into a smile, and nods.)

ELLIE

(Barely a whisper) That would be perfect.

TWYLA

What?

ELLIE

(Putting a finger to her lips) Shhh...

(TWYLA stares at her.)

TWYLA

Ellie, what are you? –

ELLIE

(Pointing at the window) Look.

(TWYLA hesitates, then reluctantly looks over at the window.)

TWYLA

Okay, I'm looking. So?

ELLIE

Shh...Just watch.

(In a moment, A GENTLE BREEZE through the window; the CURTAINS BILLOW. Before TWYLA can react, THE VICTROLA STARTS PLAYING. A scratchy recording of Fredric Chopin's FANTAISIE IMPROMPTU in C-Sharp Minor is heard. TWYLA jerks her head towards the Victrola, totally baffled.)

ELLIE

It's your mother. At a recital in 1941. One of Howard's friends made the recording.

(TWYLA listens.)

TWYLA

But when? – When was it? –

ELLIE

Go on, see for yourself. Get up and look if you want. It's okay.

(TWYLA eases herself up from the sofa, takes one step towards the Victrola, then abruptly stops. Her face goes slack. She peers down at her ankle.)

TWYLA

(Confounded) My ankle – Ellie, my ankle isn't –

ELLIE

I know, honey. You can walk fine now. Go ahead.

(TWYLA remains frozen in place, staring wide-eyed at ELLIE. The CURTAINS BILLOW again as suddenly the LIGHTS GO OUT. Before TWYLA can react: The TIFFANY LAMP LIGHTS UP, filling the room with a soft, golden glow. TWYLA gasps, pivots to the lamp. ELLIE walks to the window and looks out, the colored lanterns outside, illuminating her face. She smiles, nods, then gazes back at TWYLA.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Come on, honey. Come over here to the window with me.

TWYLA

(Astonished; frightened) I can't, Ellie. I – What's happening?

ELLIE

I told you. Something wonderful

(The MUSIC on the Victrola imperceptibly starts to FADE OUT.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Believe, Twyla.

(TWYLA's demeanor completely transforms. She becomes vulnerable, almost childlike.)

TWYLA

I'm scared, Ellie. Oh, God, why am I so scared?

(ELLIE crosses to TWYLA and extends her hands.)

ELLIE

Give me your hands.

(TWYLA hesitates. ELLIE reaches down, takes TWYLA'S hands.)

TWYLA

(Pulling away slightly) Don't make me do this. Please, Aunt Ellie, don't make me.

ELLIE

(Reassuring) There's nothing to be afraid of, honey. Everything is perfect. You'll see. Come on, now.

(ELLIE gently guides TWYLA over to the window, watches her for a moment, then backs away as TWYLA lifts her eyes and gazes up at ARIEL. VOICES and LAUGHTER are heard O.S., then ARIEL'S guests start pouring through the archway into the living room, moving to various locations. MARGE and LOIS carry two lighted candles to the piano and place them on top. LOIS opens the top of the piano bench, scrounges through the sheet music stored inside, finds the piece she was looking for, opens it, and places it on the piano. IVY leads CORA to the piano, then crosses to the cabinet, picks up the tray of drinks, and moves about the room serving the brandy. CORA produces a pair of thick-lensed glasses, furtively slips them on, then leans forward and squints at the open sheet music on the piano. TOBY, TODD and SISSY cross down to the sofa. BUCK and SAM move to the cabinet, engrossed in conversation. AXEL remains in the archway watching TWYLA. ELLIE crosses to AXEL, says something. Perplexed, he nods and looks back at TWYLA. IVY approaches TWYLA and offers her a drink. In a daze, TWYLA takes the brandy, her eyes never leaving ARIEL. IVY curls her brow, shrugs, and moves away. ELLIE hurries back to TWYLA, whispers something to her, looks at her watch, then turns to the group.)

ELLIE

All right, everyone. Gather over here so she can see you all.

(There is another surge of activity and chattering as the GUESTS cross to the window and take up position behind TWYLA. ELLIE moves in next to TWYLA, gives her arm a comforting squeeze, then turns to the others, smiles, and slowly scans their faces. The chattering dies down.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Okay. Before we do this, Ariel wanted me to thank you, all of you, for coming tonight, and to tell you how truly grateful she is for having known such wonderful, loving people. Her life would never have been so full without you. She and Howard wanted to – well...

(ELLIE turns back to the window and raises her glass towards Ariel and smiles.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Happy anniversary, honey.

(The GUESTS AD LIB noisy congratulations as they wave at ARIEL and offer toasts, etc. TWYLA vacantly lifts her glass, then lowers it without drinking.)

ELLIE, *Continued*

Okay, everyone to the piano.

(CORA sits at the piano bench and prepares to play, as IVY, LOIS and MARGE jockey for position behind her, peering over her shoulder at the sheet music. MARGE reaches inside her blouse, locates a hearing aid, and slips it into her ear. As the OTHER GUESTS gather around the piano, CORA hits a perfectly tuned chord.)

TOBY

(A confused grin) Hey, Ellie. Who tuned this thing? I—

CORA

Shhh.

(CORA glances back at IVY, MARGE and LOIS. She hits the chord again, then nods. The LADIES start humming, searching for their notes, then break into a beautiful harmony. CORA scowls and spins to IVY.)

CORA, *Continued*

Stop singing my part, Ivy.

IVY

I wasn't singing your part, Cora. I was singing my part.

CORA

You were singing a fifth.

IVY

I was singing the third.

(CORA glares at IVY, then locks her eyes on LOIS for a decision.)

CORA

Lois?

LOIS

I'm afraid it was a fifth, Ivy. It really was. But it was lovely.

IVY

(Scowling at CORA) Well just do it again. I'll find it. Go on.

(As THE LADIES prepare to sing again, pointing to the sheet music, going over their parts, the OTHER GUESTS start joining in, until the air is filled with soft vocalizing. Momentarily, CORA turns to the group.)

CORA

Ready?

(ALL respond with an affirmative murmur. CORA plays an intro, then nods. The group starts singing a beautiful, haunting rendition of "I'LL BE SEEING YOU.")

LADIES AND GUESTS, *Singing*

“I’LL BE SEEING YOU”

*I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places
That this heart of mine embraces, all day through
In that small cafe, the park across the way
The children's carousel, the chestnut trees, the wishing well*

*I'll be seeing you in every lovely summer's day
In everything that's light and gay, I'll always think of you that way
I'll find you in the mornin' sun and when the night is new
I'll be looking at the moon but I'll be seeing you*

*I'll find you in the mornin' sun and when the night is new
I'll be looking at the moon but I'll be seeing you*

(ELLIE listens for a few moments, then crosses to TWYLA, who is still gazing through the window at ARIEL.)

ELLIE

(To ARIEL) Can you hear it okay, sweetie? (Listens; smiles) I know. It's beautiful, isn't it.

(ELLIE glances at TWYLA, then turns and crosses up to AXEL, whispers something to him, and motions towards TWYLA. AXEL nods tentatively, then makes his way down to TWYLA.)

NOTE: During the following dialogue, the piano and voices gradually diminish in volume, audible in the background, but not intrusive.

(AXEL listens to the song for a few moments.)

AXEL

(To TWYLA) I know this is a long shot, but, you know how Ellie is. She thought I should see if maybe we could – talk or – something, you know.

(TWYLA continues gazing motionlessly at her mother. AXEL throws a helpless glance at ELLIE who shrugs. ELLIE motions him to keep going. He runs a hand through his hair, then turns back to TWYLA.)

AXEL, *Continued*

Twyla, listen. This whole thing with you and me – it's not – I mean, I miss the hell out of you and – damn it, Twyla, I love you

(AXEL waits for some reaction, gets none, gives up, turns to leave . Without taking her eyes off of ARIEL, TWYLA suddenly reaches out and grabs AXEL'S hand.)

Don't – don't leave. TWYLA

What? AXEL

Please. TWYLA

(PAUSE as AXEL tries to process TWYLA'S transformation, her eyes still riveted on ARIEL.)

You all right? AXEL

I'll change, Axel. We can make it work. I'll really try – this time. I promise you. TWYLA

(Perplexed) Okay. AXEL

Tommy and I need you and – I'm so sorry, Axel. Forgive me. TWYLA

Forgive? AXEL

For everything. I've been wrong about everything. TWYLA

You sure you're all right? AXEL

I'm not sure of anything anymore. TWYLA

(TWYLA sees something through the window, inhales sharply.)

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