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TIME FILES



**A One Act Play
by Brown Cardwell**

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TIME FILES

by Brown Cardwell

CAST OF CHARACTERS

6W / 3M / 1Either

NORMA: *Clerk of County records; official, bureaucratic; very New Jersey*

MRS. PARKER: *Mid 30s, very conservative and proper*

THUNDERBALL: *Heavy metal dude; hell's angel wanna-be*

MAGDA: *Fashionable out-of-towner; sharp, hard edges; 30s-40s*

MARTHA: *Plain, very Southern, polite; 30s-40s*

REAL ESTATE AGENT: *40s, any gender*

MR. SMITH: *70s; feisty, gruff, and independent*

MRS. SMITH: *70s; not always rational*

BETTY LOU: *Sweet, Southern, earthy and optimistic*

GERALD: *Betty Lou's fiancé; nerd/scholar*

TIME

The Seventies

PLACE

Hall of Records

Eastfork County Court House

Eastfork County, West Virginia

TIME FILES, developed in the Playwrights Forum of Washington, D.C., received a staged reading as part of the Sourceworks New Plays Program at the Source Theatre in Washington. A fuller version of the play was later produced in New York City by Love Creek Productions at the 42nd Street Theatre.

ETC.

Production Values:

This play has the important quality of flexible staging and has been performed in the round, in small black box theatres, and large venues. It adapts to formal proscenium settings or casual dinner theatre spaces. The single set is a basic government office from that time period. A counter is the focal part of the design, and the set dressing may be as detailed or limited as budget and time will allow. Both the set pieces, props and costumes are easily obtained from thrift/ surplus stores or garages/attics; these require more imagination and creativity than fiscal resources. New or bare bones companies with limited resources will create their own vision of the Eastfork County Courthouse. If the characters are there, in that place and time, the audience will be there, also!

Time Files is for general audiences of all ages.

A counter is a must as is an aquarium. Possibilities for set dressing and props: tall filing cabinets, floor-standing flags, metal trash cans, old phone, desk bell, metal folding chairs, older electric coffee pots, sugar dispenser, and electric typewriter.

Playwright's note:

Everyone asks: is *Time Files* a comedy or a drama? Humor abounds, to be sure, and yet some arresting and poignant moments occur. Much like life!

My overall intent was, as always, to write about ordinary characters who behind their ordinariness have great hopes and dreams, some of which are squashed or scalded by life. In each segment, every character has a great need, a conflict (inner and outer) to resolve, and humor derives from a bit of their stress. Conflict, however, does not mean argument, so people are often being "nice" when they are frustrated. Each character, also, undergoes an inner change from entrance to exit.

Audience reactions vary in different parts of the country, and are divided within the same audience at the same performance. So audience reactions are unpredictable, and actors will benefit by developing "real" authentic people and not thinking about comedy or drama. So...if the actors do not worry about trying to be funny or dramatic, the play will be both. If they try to play for comedy or high drama, not so much.

Time Files
by Brown Cardwell

SETTING: The office has several doors, one labeled (inverted) HALL OF RECORDS. Another door says RECORD. Another, Center, is labeled CONFIDENTIAL. The fourth wall may hold the window.

AT RISE: A WOMAN, conservatively dressed, faces the CONFIDENTIAL door. She looks around, then tries the lock, becoming desperate to open the door. Frantic, she does not notice the clerk, NORMA, entering with files, until both are startled.

BOTH

(Together, but not in sync)

Who are you? You scared me to death. Who are you? What are you doing here!?

NORMA

I am Ms. NORMA MARIA BENICELLI, and I am The Clerk of Records of Eastfork County.

MRS. PARKER

What happened to Mrs. Brown?

NORMA

Ms. Brown is no longer working here. Are you a 'personal' friend of hers?

MRS. PARKER

No. I'm Mrs. John J. Parker.

NORMA

Oooh, yes. Mrs. Parker. I know about you, Mrs. Parker. Ms. Brown left me an entire file... about how you were here last week and the week before that and the week... Mrs. Parker, you have more seniority around here than I do. But this is going to stop. Maybe Ms. Brown put up with this; I will not.

MRS. PARKER

Did she tell you.....?

NORMA

Mrs. Parker... do not tell me your problems—this is no confessional. I don't know who you think I am.

MRS. PARKER

You're like Ms. Brown. You're going to keep us apart.

NORMA

Keep you apart? Isn't that going a little far? I know you're upset and all, but I'm only doing my job. How did you get in here? We aren't even open.

MRS. PARKER

No. You and your Mr....what's his name?

NORMA

Barstow is his name. Now please go.

MRS. PARKER

Your Mr. Barstow is keeping me away from my baby.

NORMA

Your baby.

MRS. PARKER

You know that my baby is in there?

NORMA

Whoa, now, Mrs. Parker, aren't we being just a little dramatic? We both know no baby is in there.

MRS. PARKER

In there... are records. And only you and Mr. –

BOTH

Barstow....

MRS. PARKER

Can get them. Every record I need to get my baby.

NORMA

Look, Mrs. Parker, you've been told before—yesterday, the day before that, and the day before that. There's nothing more I can do for you.

MRS. PARKER

I know what you're thinking and it's not that way at all. You think I'm just upset and obsessed and hysterical and over-reacting.

NORMA

Why would think that? I'm not paid to deal with your problems. Excuse me, I have work to do. Nothing here is in proper order.

MRS. PARKER

I like to watch the fish.

NORMA

Those stupid fish. What a bother.

MRS. PARKER

Not at all. They're quite enchanting. I notice they swim in groups. Once in a while one fish will help a smaller one.

NORMA

Oh, yeah? Talk about a fish-eat-fish world. Well, the fish are going out—I've already written a work order for maintenance. Just as soon as someone gets the time. A fish tank does not belong in a government office.

MRS. PARKER

You can talk to Mr....

NORMA

Barstow... and I don't have time to run all over this building on a wild goose chase. Everything in this office needs total reorganizing, a shipment of updated forms hasn't arrived, and to top off everything, two people in licensing are out sick and I'm sure that before the day is out, someone will come in here to ask for a fishing license! Now I need to get to work.

MRS. PARKER

... or let me talk to him in person. I'm sure when he knows all the facts he'll release the records.

NORMA

He doesn't have the authority.

MRS. PARKER

Is he not the ultimate authority?

NORMA

Yes, he's the Chief of Records Division.

MRS. PARKER

Then he undoubtedly has the power. I'll explain to him the circumstances; I will document the current status of my life. He'll see I'm in a position now to care for my child. I've been to school and I've married well; I majored in Family Psychology and Child Development and probably know more about childhood studies than anyone around.

NORMA

Mrs. Parker, you signed the papers yourself. You agreed, even insisted upon, sealing the files yourself. You.

MRS. PARKER

Then I should be able to unsign them.

NORMA

Not without a court order. I need some coffee. Please see your attorney, Mrs. Parker, and leave me alone. I feel a headache beginning already.

MRS. PARKER

That would mean an interminable wait.

NORMA

(Fixing coffee)

Anyway, your 'baby' is all grown up now. Do yourself a favor and forget it.

MRS. PARKER

Oh, no. Not now. Not after getting this far, spending those years working so hard... working to be good enough. Someone to be proud of, someone with a proper education, and... please won't you speak to Mr. Barstow? It won't hurt to ask! Tell him I have all sorts of references, I'm even a member of the school board now, and I have a nice home. I even have a little dog. Everything a boy could want.

NORMA

How old is this kid now?

MRS. PARKER

Eighteen years... and about six months.

NORMA

He's a little beyond "boy." Don't you think it's a little, well, late?

MRS. PARKER

Oh no, don't say that. It's not that it's late, it's just that the time was never right before.

NORMA

And now is "right"?

MRS. PARKER

It's taken me this long to get everything right... time is going too fast. I wonder what he looks like. Wonder how he talks. Proper language is so important for young people today, don't you think? Today's world is complicated—computers and technology. I've already decided and thought this through. I won't interfere with his life. I'll only watch out for him and be a guardian angel.

NORMA

Mrs. Parker. I am going to Mr. Barstow's office to report this problem—and you!!

MRS. PARKER

Oh, thank you. Thank you.

NORMA leaves the office. MRS. PARKER waits till she is alone then returns to the CONFIDENTIAL door. Moving to the desk, she searches for a key. Finding keys, shuts drawers softly, and goes to door. A YOUNG MAN enters—a punk rocker type with spiked hair, chains, and leathers. He carries a motorcycle helmet which he puts noisily onto the counter.

THUNDERBALL

Hey, man.

MRS. PARKER

(Jumping)

Oh, my goodness, you really startled me.

THUNDERBALL

(Motioning aggressively)

So, like, y'gonna help me? You the one?

MRS. PARKER

The one? *(Pause)* Oh I think not.

THUNDERBALL

Eh. Who d'ya see? Like, I'm in a hurry.

MRS. PARKER

(A little frightened)

I'm not the one in charge here *(Pause)*. She'll be right back. I'm not alone here. She'll be coming through the door at any minute now. *(Looks longingly at the door)* In fact, here are her keys, and I'm putting them in her desk, and she'll be right here. Any minute.

His manner is threatening. After an awkward pause, she looks hopefully at the door. He removes motor cycle gloves and slams on counter by helmet.

THUNDERBALL

Who're you then?

MRS. PARKER

I . . . only came . . . I'm here for . . . a record.

THUNDERBALL

Why dyou get the keys?

MRS. PARKER

I, um, I . . . what business is it of yours. What do you want?

THUNDERBALL

Oh, yeah? I gotta find out . . . stuff. Like . . . they got all kinds o'records and stuff here, and I gotta get something looked up.

MRS. PARKER

Oh, yeah. I mean, yes. Everybody who comes here wants to find something. (*Walks to CONFIDENTIAL door*) Some have a hard time.

THUNDERBALL

Not me, man. I'm gonna find out about my old lady.

MRS. PARKER

Excuse me, does that mean, um, Mother? MOTHER? What we celebrate on Mother's Day?

THUNDERBALL

You sure talk funny.

MRS. PARKER

Do you mean you're looking for your biological mother?

THUNDERBALL

(Thinking mightily)

Yeah. That's it.

MRS. PARKER

What a coincidence. I'm here for a similar mission, to find my own child, also separated from me years ago.

THUNDERBALL

Yeah, man, like what a . . . coincidence.

MRS. PARKER walks around him, and laughs in a delighted and friendly manner, her mood changing from fear to one of interest.

MRS. PARKER

I cannot imagine . . . How old are you?

THUNDERBALL

Nineteen. Well, like almost, five more months, about.

MRS. PARKER

What a coincidence! I cannot believe this. Truly. About the age of my own son. Do you know what this means?

THUNDERBALL

Yeah (*Thinks*). It means I'm the same age of your son . . . we're the same age it means. So what?

MRS. PARKER

My son, that is—I'm trying to find him.

THUNDERBALL

You lost him? What're you? Absentminded or what!

MRS. PARKER

I came here to find him . . . like you. We're here for the same purpose – what an astounding occurrence – too good to be true?

THUNDERBALL

(*Pause*) It's . . . OK.

MRS. PARKER

Do you understand the significance of this? (*Trying to get through to him*) —that is, the statistical probability of . . . Of course, it's obviously absurd, but don't you see?

THUNDERBALL

Oh. Yeah.

She goes toward him, he moves away, removes coat and throws on chair. Sauntering to the fish tank, he darts suspicious glances at MRS.

PARKER. He looks in the water. She goes to the chair and folds coat. He becomes engrossed in fish.

THUNDERBALL

They're real pretty, ain't they?

MRS. PARKER

Aren't they. I mean, they are pretty, aren't they.

He gives her a look. Long Pinter-pause. He studies fish. She goes closer and almost touches his shoulder. He notices and moves away.

MRS. PARKER, *Continued*

Did you ever have fish when you were little?

THUNDERBALL

Na-aa-

She moves away, fishes in purse to find some gum. She holds it up temptingly—like bait. Speaks to him as if taming a lion.

MRS. PARKER

I'll bet you'd enjoy this. That's it. It's an entire pack if you wish.

He finally reaches her and gets the pack. She speaks slowly and gently.

MRS. PARKER

Good boy. Now then, why don't you and I have a little chat while we're waiting? How about a dog? *(Pause)* A puppy? Did you ever have one? Maybe you'd like one now.

THUNDERBALL

Yeah. That'd be OK. I guess I wouldn't mind having a dog. Maybe a huntin' dog. And I could get a rifle – *(Standing up to aim)* – and we could go out n'hunt – pow, pow, pow – bears maybe.

MRS. PARKER

Actually, I had in mind more like a . . . poodle. They are very smart! You could teach him tricks.

THUNDERBALL

Poodle. You mean one of those little things all trimmed up fancy. You mean one o' them wimp dogs? Not me. I'd want a huntin' dog or maybe an attack dog – you know – a Doberman or one of those mastiffs or pitbulls. Yeah, that's it. I bet they'd really hurt someone if you told 'em!

MRS. PARKER

Let's try something else here.

THUNDERBALL

Let's don't. Let's shut up. When's that lady gonna get here?

MRS. PARKER

Did you have toys to play with? I mean nice, fun ones. Quality toys.

THUNDERBALL

You mean like firetrucks...like the ones next door at that firehouse – man, it's cool. Yeah! I had all that stuff. It's all gone—kinda got broken up.

MRS. PARKER

We could just chat while we're waiting.

THUNDERBALL

Why?

MRS. PARKER

Because of the obvious oddity—our being propelled here on the same day and the same time, crossing paths with the same mission, as it were.

THUNDERBALL

No, I don't want no chat.

He walks back to fish. Both are silent, then:

THUNDERBALL, *Continued*

So, whattaya got to say?

MRS. PARKER

Don't tell me. Let me guess. I think I understand – know your innermost feelings right now. You have gone on this long journey, a lifelong search.

THUNDERBALL

You can what?

MRS. PARKER

Let me help find the words. You have wondered for years what she was really like, the woman who bore you. You have looked for the key piece of a puzzle and always wanted to know where you got your hair color and your love of music. (*Pause*) You do love music don't you?

THUNDERBALL

Yeah, man. I like it! I like it, like really loud, y'know, real cool beans, so you can really feel it. Know what I mean?

MRS. PARKER

Never mind, it's a start. And you've always wondered deep in your heart why she gave you up?

THUNDERBALL

Not really.

MRS. PARKER

...and I can tell you that your biological mother went through a most difficult and trying time. When things were not as they are now and she had to face a decision that was very difficult. Remember that she was only nineteen herself, about your age, and couldn't go home or ask for help because of shame . . . a terrible shame that you, today, cannot even grasp. Not able to get a job, not able to take care of . . . well, you. Do you understand?

THUNDERBALL

You sure talk funny.

MRS. PARKER

I guess you've always fantasized about her. Haven't you. I'll bet you've always wondered if your real mother would have fixed better suppers? Taught you to play ball and made lots of cookies. Haven't you dreamed about how it might have been?

THUNDERBALL

(Helping himself)

Naah. Say, here's coffee.

MRS. PARKER

You haven't? It's all right to admit it. It's perfectly normal to dream. And it's healthy to open up. You know, caffeine isn't good for someone your age.

THUNDERBALL

So? Gimme some of them sugar cubes.

MRS. PARKER

Those sugar cubes.

THUNDERBALL

Yeah, like I said.

He stirs coffee, spills some on floor, burns mouth, wipes mouth and face on sleeve.

MRS. PARKER

Here's a napkin. *(Pause)*

THUNDERBALL

What for?

MRS. PARKER

It is a napkin, not to be confused with your sleeve. Use it to wipe your mouth or whatever needs wiping. *(Handing him another napkin)* And this is for the floor where you spilled it.

There is a long confrontational pause. He finally grabs napkin and wipes floor!

MRS. PARKER, *Continued*

So, have you . . . thought about her a lot?

THUNDERBALL

Naah. I ain't into all that home stuff. Like . . . man, who needs it. It's a drag, know what I mean?

MRS. PARKER

What do you wonder about her then? What if you could somehow, magically, write her a letter? What would you tell her? About your parents? Your adoptive parents? You know, that much sugar really isn't that good for you.

THUNDERBALL

I happen to like it, like . . . djya mind?

MRS. PARKER

But . . . it's not healthy. Why do you want to find your mother?

THUNDERBALL

See, it's like this: My folks are, like, from another planet. I mean, totally. No way I can deal, man. It's a drag . . . always takin' me to shrinks and counselors and teachers. Like, I been running away . . .

MRS. PARKER

. . . Have been.

THUNDERBALL

Huh?

MRS. PARKER

Have been. I have been running away.

THUNDERBALL

Oh yeah? You been runnin' away too?

MRS. PARKER

Just continue.

THUNDERBALL

(Sinking and sprawling into chair)

Anyhow, been running away since I was nine.

MRS. PARKER

Don't slump. Do you then hope your biological mother will be able to help you with these problems? Do you project that she will be a fulfillment of your fantasies about the Perfect Mother? Straighten up, dear.

THUNDERBALL

(Starts to straighten up, stops, stands and glares)

You are not the boss of me! Naah. Nothin' like that. I just hope she's got some dough. I mean, for all I know she's loaded. Bet she'd give me lots of money . . . who knows, maybe she'd give me a car

He goes to desk, sits and puts legs up.

MRS. PARKER

(Giving up)

You don't mean – would you truly attempt to get money from her? Get your feet off the furniture. Don't you want to know her? Believe me, it's not too late. I know. I've studied these phenomena. I can understand the devastating trauma and the need for a satisfying resolution.

THUNDERBALL

(He tries to figure this out)

Yeah. Well, I'll just settle for the money.

MRS. PARKER

What if, perchance, she doesn't want to see you? What if she's made a Life for herself? What then?

THUNDERBALL

(Laughing)

Hey, that's even better. Like maybe no one knows. Boy, what a shock, huh. Bet she'd pay plenty to get me off her neck. *(Pause)* Wouldn't you? I mean, what a picture. There she is with her Brady Bunch lifestyle, and I come roarin' up with some of my buddies – the ones who are outside by the fire trucks – and we come screaming up on our bikes. What a picture! Like a movie or something, know what I mean?

NORMA enters. THUNDERBALL turns to face her. Horrified, she moves closer to MRS. PARKER.

NORMA

Mrs. Parker, it's exactly as I explained . . . Mr. Barstow – and he is not happy about this – says you'll have to accept it. Nothing he can do without a court order.

THUNDERBALL

Who's he and, what's this about a court order. No one told me nothin' about no court order, man.

MRS. PARKER

(Hiding behind NORMA)

Those files which have been sealed and labeled confidential cannot be given out or made public without a court order.

THUNDERBALL

Is that, like, adoption records?

MRS. PARKER

Oh, absolutely. They're the most confidential of all. It's to protect the rights of the innocent you see.

THUNDERBALL

You mean all adoption records? Like, it took a long time to figure out that this is where they would be. You're not gonna stop me seein' 'em.

MRS. PARKER

That's precisely what she means. The law is very strict about such things and there are no exceptions. You'll never find her. Tell him.

NORMA

What?

THUNDERBALL

(Pointing to CONFIDENTIAL)

Hold it, I gotta get a name outta a file in there.

NORMA

Not those files, I'm afraid.

MRS. PARKER

You'll never get through the red tape. You see you'll never be able to get her name. Believe her, she knows. When she says it's not just a question of getting through red tape, she knows. There is no way to open those records without a court order! No, sir!

THUNDERBALL

Come on, man.

NORMA

You could . . . both . . . try a lawyer. You know, you aren't the first to come here looking for answers.

THUNDERBALL

(Gathering helmet, gloves, chains, etc.)

I'm not gonna take this. You'll see. You're gonna hear from me! *(Exits)*

MRS. PARKER

I can only hope not.

NORMA

Who's that?

MRS. PARKER

His motorcycle gang is over at the firehouse!

NORMA

If they have an alarm, they might be run over by a fire truck or two. Who was he anyway?

MRS. PARKER

It's a little complicated. I don't know. An even more disturbing question is who he might have been? What would you do if you were me?

TWO WOMEN enter from outer hall. MARTHA is dressed plainly; fashionable MAGDA wears expensive, elegant clothing. MARTHA enters first, shy at first, until she spots the fish tank, then she heads straight to it.

NORMA

Why would you ask me? What did he want anyway?

MRS. PARKER

It was...

MAGDA

Oh, my God. This place looks like an actual antique, and not in a good way.

MRS. PARKER

....um, hard to explain....

MARTHA

Aww-w-w-w-w-w. Look here, Magda. Aren't these the cutest little things you ever did see? I do declare. (*Tapping on glass*) These are just the cheerfulest? Yes, you are!

MRS. PARKER

(Exiting)

If things had been different, these might have been giant glorious carp.

MARTHA

What on earth....Oh, Magda, do come look. Didn't we use to have some when we were small? We did, I remember that. Wonder what ever happened to them.

MAGDA

They were flushed, Martha. They died. It had to have been twenty years ago. The stupid fish died. Finish with the fish, and then finish what we came for.

MARTHA

We came here once with mama – we were just little things. Why, it hasn't changed a bit.

MAGDA

(Looking around)

No kidding. Clearly not designed by Thomas Jefferson. But maybe the same year. Even when I was small, it gave me the creeps. Places like this are terminally boring. I hate this color.

MARTHA

I've always liked beige myself. Goes with everything. Blends in nicely don't you think? Everything sort of blends with everything else: floor, counter, desk, see? Ble-e-e-ends.

MAGDA

That's just like you Martha. Anything I hate, you decide you've gotta love. Blends may be another word for drab. Why not have red, purple, yellow, turquoise. But beige. Ugh!

MARTHA

I declare, Magda. You are so funny sometime. You cannot have an actual building in those colors. You have to be something solid and respectable. Especially when it's official.

MAGDA

Well, how about in clothes—a little color is good. Would it kill you to wear something brighter and colorful?

MARTHA

I declare, I don't want to look like one of them go-go dancers. Besides, Mama always said that beige goes with everything and goes everywhere.

MAGDA

Perfect. Oh, hell. Beige is a wanna be Brown that hasn't got the guts for it. Beige and brown are like sisters, ugly sisters. Also the color of, I don't know, coffins, burnt beans, dead meat haunted castles, and rats. This is all baby poo beige – it rhymes with cage. Exactly like this place.

MARTHA

Let's watch your language, Sister. I would never dream of arguing with you, Magda, no siree, I am not one to argue, but I do believe that it is medium beige.

MAGDA

Baby poo.

MARTHA

Medium.

MAGDA

What is it (*To Norma*)? What would you say?

NORMA

(*Gritting teeth*)

I can't solve problems . . . I only look things up.

MAGDA

Am I allowed to have my own preferences? Well, am I? I hate beige of any kind. Then I hate it. Beige. Beige. BEIGE! Ugh. Who has ever heard anyone say, "Oh, let's go out and paint the town *beige!*" What girl has ever dreamed of a beige wedding? What great painters have painted beige roses? If you had a sports car, you would not have it beige. Would people stop for those fire trucks outside if they were painted beige?

MARTHA

Good Morning. How're you? My name's Martha Ann Flynn. We drove over from Mattahanock . . . haven't been here in years. Your name, dear? I can't quite place that accent. Would your people be from Beaver Mountain or maybe Smitty's Fork?

NORMA

NORMA.

MARTHA

We're both the Tanners from Beaver Mountain. Norma what, dear? Who are your people?

NORMA

That would be the Benicellis... from Hackensack.

MARTHA

Hmmmm? Don't rightly know it. What would that be near? Would I recognize it bein' on the way to a larger place?

NORMA

Um, that would be Hackensack New Jersey, on the way to Mid-town Manhattan.

GERALD and BETTYLOU enter, going straight to NORMA. GERALD walks rapidly.

MARTHA

Harrumph.

GERALD

Excuse me. Is this the right place to get a marriage license?

NORMA

Yeah. Yes. It is. Today, anyway. And that I can handle.

BETTYLOU

(Gazing deeply into his eyes)

We're going to get married.

NORMA

That is the usual reason for a marriage license.

GERALD

There was a sign down the hall saying to come here. And you can help us?

NORMA

Oh, that's right. Let's see. Yes, I can do that, but you can see there are people ahead of you?

MAGDA

We're next, I believe. Hope it won't take too long.

GERALD

Isn't there a way to get it quicker? You might let me jump ahead. Could I? We've already been to two offices, and both were closed.

MAGDA

Welcome to Eastfork.

NORMA

That does not mean your needs are greater than the other clients. We have very strict rules here about waiting on patrons in the proper order.

GERALD

But we're in a terrible hurry.

NORMA

Good bit of that going around.

GERALD

. . . I need to get back to Washington tonight. (*Walking briskly to Magda*) Would you mind if we went first?

MAGDA

I'm sorry; it's out of the question. I am on a deadline and I've lost too much time getting here already.

MARTHA

Oh, Magda, why not let them go on.

MAGDA

No, no, I'm afraid not. We're already behind schedule. My sister was to call ahead and make arrangements before we got here, but of course . . .

MARTHA

(*Wheedling*)

Oh, Sister. Let them go on with their business. We wouldn't want to stand in the way of young love, now would we? A few minutes won't make that much difference.

MAGDA

(Flouncing to chair, slipping off her expensive coat, taking out a cigarette)

Not to you, Martha. But other people do have deadlines!

NORMA

(Grandly official, approaching MAGDA)

I'm sorry but this is a designated non-smoking area. You'll have to go into the room down the hall if you wish to smoke.

MAGDA, further annoyed, looks for a place to dispose of cigarette; finally holds the unlit cigarette and uses it for great drama.

BETTYLOU

(To MARTHA)

Oh, thank you so much.

MARTHA

I declare, this is something special. I've never been there when someone got their actual license before the big day – kinda interestin'. Why, I guess, it's almost as interesting as goin' to the wedding. Maybe even more, that's what I think. After all anybody can go to a wedding. This is positively . . . rare. Do you think you'll need any witnesses?

MAGDA

It's not a trial, Martha.

MARTHA

Now, Magda there, she was a truly beautiful bride. In fact, it was the most beautiful wedding around anywhere. People still talk about it. Course he wasn't from around home; we didn't really know him too well. Sorta like you, come to think of it.

MAGDA

Oh, and look how THAT turned out. Martha, leave them alone. Obviously, they're in a hurry.

BETTYLOU

He does have to get back. He's very important you know . . . in Washington.

NORMA

Let's see now. I don't usually do this. But, don't worry. I have been trained. Basically, I just need to find the proper form. You know, the proper form can just about take care of any problem that comes along. We just got in some brand new forms for each division. *(Looking in another drawer)* Now then . . . fishing license, dog licenses, hunting licenses, here we are . . . in duplicate! Don't want to make a mistake and have them fill out the wrong form.

MARTHA

(To BETTYLOU)

We were just admiring the fish over here.

BETTYLOU

Oooooooo, real fish. So cute!

MARTHA

Aren't they fine?

BETTYLOU

Oh, they are fine fish. Oh, I wish we had some pretty fish like that down at the restaurant where I work. I call it a restaurant, although it's really named Ted's Diner. But it's more like a restaurant, I think. And they just redid it all. Fixed everything right up. They replaced all the old formica and now everything matches everything else – and it is the nicest shade of pink. Cute little places on the counter where we used to have glass containers for pies – all kind of pies – now they are brand new, real plastic. And they even have real photos of Elvis on the wall. Oh, it's nice. I was so lucky to get that job. And something like this in the corner, right where people have to wait to ring up their bill and pay—wouldn't it be a nice touch?

BETTYLOU and MARTHA converse apart from the others.

MARTHA

Oh, it would, it really would. That sounds downright charmin'. Don't you think so Magda?

MAGDA

Downright charmin'!

NORMA

Each of you can fill a portion of this, then I'll take care of it. Do you have the blood tests? We must have those before we can proceed.

GERALD

(Starting to fill out forms)

Betty, do you have those?

BETTYLOU gets forms from purse. She takes papers to GERALD and they gaze at each other lovingly.

GERALD

I knew you would remember. You think of everything. I don't know what I did before I met you.

MAGDA

Oh goody, we're at the prom.

NORMA

You're not from around here, I take it.

GERALD

(Passing form on to NORMA)

Hardly. Just passing through over a period of weeks for some scenery and rest—I'm usually so intense about my work.

BETTYLOU and MARTHA remain by the fish tank and the OTHER THREE near the counter.

NORMA

Oh, work is so important. It spills over onto everything else in life.

MAGDA

How on earth did you two ever get together?

GERALD

A fluke! A veritable fluke. My car broke down . . . right in front of the miserable little road house where Betty works. You must understand . . . I was so distressed, late for the seminar, car broken. And BettyLou was so helpful, so cheerful, so . . . capable. Even lent me the money to fix my car. No one's ever done anything like that for me. She saved me in the nick of time.

BETTYLOU

Isn't he sweet? Isn't he the nicest gentleman? That car even when it broke down . . . was not a truck. It was a real car, and I just knew he was the kind . . . who would remember to buckle up . . . and his truck would be kinda clean. "BettyLou, darlin'" is what he calls me. He's so cute giving me a nickname like that!

MARTHA

(To BETTYLOU)

Bless your heart!

MAGDA

(To GERALD)

You haven't known each other long then?

GERALD

Not too long. But I'm not a person who makes mistakes.

MAGDA

How nice for you. I, for one, make them frequently and enthusiastically.

MARTHA

Will you be staying on at the . . . restaurant . . . after your marriage, my dear?

BETTYLOU

(To MARTHA)

Oh, I could never leave there. It's been the best place to work. When you're there, everybody just knows you're somebody. Why, all my sisters worked down at the factory and I'm the only one who gets to wear a nice dress to work. They all wish they could work there too. And just last May, I got an award for being the most cheerful person waiting there. Can you believe it? And get this: they even made me the Queen for a night at the Bowl-o-Rama because of it. They decorated with balloons and had a cake. They made an announcement on the loud speaker. Just for me! No, that's something you don't turn your back on.

MAGDA

You've decided you like it around here?

GERALD

Oh, no. Not really. Betty, um, BettyLou will be moving immediately to Washington. I need to work with the Consortium there on my research which I hope to publish within the year. You need to fill out your part BettyLou.

BETTYLOU

Oh, my goodness; I forgot all about filling out my part here . . . it'll take me a while. When I get nervous I write slow. Lucky for me I'll have a writer and a great scientist in the family. Let me see here . . . my "place of business" . . . I reckon that would be the restaurant . . .

GERALD

Now BettyLou, it's a diner, Ted's Diner.

BETTYLOU

. . . but it's really more like a restaurant. Don't you think? Not only do they have that new day-core, they have some little cute tables at the end of the counter. And that neon sign they put on the front got added the words FINE DINING, so everyone can see it from the highway.

GERALD

Yes, indeed, I saw. It is certainly the most . . . um, unique diner I've ever seen.

BETTYLOU

You know what? It's been in the back of my mind . . . I have been figuring it all out too. I thought we could move into the Thompson's trailer; they need to go down to the mills to get work. Their trailer is just sitting there, and it might be so nice.

GERALD

That's not . . . I couldn't . . . I can't stay—

BETTYLOU

I know it doesn't look like much now. But I could fix it up . . . for practically nothing. You'll see, I sorta imagined what it would be like. You could work all day and in the evenings I could help. And we would be together. Would be so cozy.

GERALD

BettyLou, I can't live in a trailer.

BETTYLOU

Why? Oh, I would fix it up so nice and make curtains for it, and polish everything up. And in the evenings after work at the restaurant – I mean the diner – I could fix you a wonderful dinner and then, well, I could help you.

GERALD

You can't help me, and forget being around here. I need . . . resources.

BETTYLOU

What's that mean?

GERALD

Libraries, research facilities, . . .

BETTYLOU

Don't worry . . . there's a library right down in Eastfork. Don't worry. Everything will be fine.

GERALD

Not that kind of library! Oh . . . my God! I cannot live and work here. Period. I thought we were on the same page.

BETTYLOU

I don't know what that means. I can't leave my home and my work. Why Momma and Daddy would have broken hearts. They've been thinking for years about how nice it would be to have grandbabies playing in their yard. And have us come for Sunday dinner and all.

GERALD

Sunday dinner? Babies? Oh no. Not in the picture. Not for years. I need to focus on my work.

BETTYLOU

Then what will I be doing if I have no little ones.

GERALD

Honey, have you forgotten? You can take care of me! No one has ever taken care of me the way you do. Honest.

BETTYLOU

Oh, I know. But you won't be home much sounds like. Besides, have you forgotten that now I am, well, a real professional woman? I know I can get a job up there. I'm sure they have restaurants and, well, diners, too.

GERALD

You do not need to work and you certainly cannot work in a diner.

MAGDA

She can work anywhere she wants. We are not back in the days when that was an issue. Perhaps you have heard of women's lib? Hmmmmm?

GERALD

You think she should work?

ALL

Yes!

GERALD

In a diner?

MARTHA

There really is nothing wrong with a diner. I always want to go to a good diner.

BETTYLOU

I was raised to believe in honest work.

NORMA

And being a career woman is so important today. It defines you. Gives you your identity. Why, it is vital.

GERALD

But it wouldn't look good. It would reflect poorly on me. You don't know how odd the academic world can be.

MAGDA

No! You don't mean it. Well, I for one am stunned.

MARTHA

You say you're writing a book? How grand. I've never known an author before. I mean, a real one. Uncle Lou did write the church newsletter until he passed on, but I guess that doesn't really count.

GERALD

No, no you don't understand. It's not a book. It's a monograph I'm working on, that is, a scientific paper. If it should be accepted to be delivered at the national conference, then my findings could be published in a peer reviewed journal...

Words fail him at the enormity of such a possibility. He gazes at BETTYLOU.

GERALD, *Continued*

...my future would be most assured.

BETTYLOU

Gosh, can you imagine! Me the wife of a famous scientist. What do you think of that?

MAGDA

It does require a certain imagination.

GERALD

Not really famous. But at least, I know someday, somewhere I'll end up . . . in a bibliography. And universities will all want me to teach.

MARTHA

I can tell you two will be just as fancy as two fat cats a few years down the road.

MAGDA

What exactly is your paper about?

GERALD

Oh, you wouldn't be interested.

ALL chime in their eagerness!

MAGDA

Oh, I don't know about anyone else but I cannot wait to hear!

GERALD

My paper is titled "Interference of Elliptically and Circularly Polarized Light with Monochromatic Filter." I've developed an interesting thesis and constructs, and I must admit that it has caused interest in a few circles.

MAGDA

Of course. Look what a stir it has caused here. I can see how that would be . . . riveting.

BETTYLOU

You see now. You see how smart he is. Why, he's about the smartest person I have ever known. In fact, no one down at the restaurant can believe this whole thing.

MAGDA

You can see it from their point of view.

BETTYLOU

But once you know how smart he is, you realize that he is more than an ordinary person like the rest of us. I mean, he might create or find a new atom or something. Who knows? Kids might have to memorize him some day.

MAGDA

And make little dioramas about him.

MARTHA

I declare. I sure wish Mama could be here. I don't know when I've had so much excitement in one day.

BETTYLOU

And Momma and Daddy, when they met him, they being worried on account of me marryin' so sudden like, well, they could not believe how ordinary he was. I mean even with him being so smart and all, he didn't put on airs or act uppity. He was just as down to earth and as common as anyone else. Momma and Daddy said to each other later that they could hardly believe it, that if I hadn't told them ahead of time, why they'd of hardly known that he was even. . . intelligent.

MAGDA

I could go along with that.

GERALD

(Modestly)

Oh, BettyLou, you're going to embarrass me. You'd never know it, but I used to have real difficulty relating to other people.

MAGDA

No! You don't mean it.

GERALD

It's true. Before I met BettyLou, I was really not the live-wire conversationalist that I am today.

MAGDA

No! I am sure it's a miracle. But it it's agreeable with everyone, perhaps we could finish up with your business so the rest of us could deal with ours.

BETTYLOU

(Goes to the counter)

Oh, my goodness, silly me. I'm still filling out my part here. I need to concentrate. It'll take me longer. I've never been good at writing cursive.

MARTHA

Oh, I think this is going to be lovely. May we come to the wedding? Don't you think you could work on your paper down here?

BETTY

Yes

GERALD

No

MAGDA

OK. Certainly two schools of thought on that issue.

GERALD

It will take a great deal of time and work; I need to be focusing on that for the next few months. It's crucial to my professional development. And I'll need to be near colleagues.

BETTYLOU

Colleagues?

GERALD

Colleagues. The people I work with. (*Pause*) You'll meet them soon, and they'll meet you . . . and you'll all meet each other. And I'm sure you'll get to know each other and even like each other . . . in time.

NORMA

Everything seems to be in order here. I'll just stamp this and you're all set. That will be \$40 please and it's good for thirty days.

GERALD

Why thirty days? Do some people need time to think? Do people back out? Is there a refund?

NORMA

Because it's the law. I suppose they do. I don't know, and no, there's no refund.

BETTYLOU

You know these fish are sweet.

NORMA

You can have the fish. Call it an official government wedding gift.

GERALD

No! That's too much responsibility.

BETTYLOU

Oh, lookee here . . . When you look in from this side, they look like they're coming right to you. Isn't that the cutest thing, kinda like a real pet.

GERALD

That's quite impossible you know. They really don't come closer--they only appear closer when you look into the water from that angle. You see, when any object is immersed in a liquid like water, the image appears closer to the surface. Light rays diverge from the object and arrive at the surface and there they are refracted at larger angles, only to diverge more rapidly. Extending these emergent rays backward, you can locate their intersections in pairs – these are image points or virtual images. So as you move around the aquarium, the virtual image moves closer to the surface and along the curve formed by the successive images.

BETTYLOU

Oh, I just thought it was an optical illusion.

GERALD

That's what I said.

NORMA

Do you have forty dollars for this license?

GERALD

I didn't know this would all be so expensive . . . so involved. BettyLou, do you have enough money?

MARTHA

If it's a question of money, I'm sure Magda and I could help out, couldn't we, Sister.

NORMA

Excuse me, that's not called for. You are two separate clients here.

GERALD

What should we do, do you think?

NORMA

It's not my place to resolve your problems.

BETTYLOU

Gerald, we can just go on back. I have to be at work soon. Thank you. Thank you everybody. We'll . . . we'll probably come back tomorrow . . . with the money. Hang on to that paper.

MAGDA

Don't worry. This office isn't going anywhere. Now will you help us?

*BETTYLOU and GERALD look awkwardly at the SISTERS and the CLERK. They leave.
MARTHA walk up to the door labeled "RECORDS" and peeks inside.*

MARTHA

Will you just look at those. Magda, come look here. Have you ever seen so many files—must be millions.

NORMA

Excuse me. Who do you think you are! These rooms at the facility are all for use by the professional personnel, not the public.

MAGDA

Say, don't talk to my sister that way! She was only showing interest.

NORMA

Well, she shouldn't have come back here...unauthorized ...by me. And I do not need your two cents.

MAGDA

I am not even here.

NORMA

But you are of course right. Not quite millions, of course, and not all files really. We're quite up to date here. We have transferred most records to microfiche. I guess it used to be much more cumbersome. Now it's a new world, all a matter of information retrieval.

MARTHA

Must be so excitin' to work here and get to find out so many interesting things. Magda, don't you bet she knows—well, just about everything, about everybody.

NORMA

Never really thought about it. I suppose you could trace someone's life right here . . . from birth, marriage, children, court suits, permits, homes, and finally death.

MARTHA

My, my do think of that. You could trace a person's whole existence through those files. Yes, indeed, you have all those time files right there. You could write a book yourself. That's what you could do, couldn't she, Sister?

MAGDA

Yes, and we would be a very long chapter. Martha, the woman's trying to do a job.

NORMA

True enough. Don't usually get too involved with patrons, though. I try not to have a personal interest, know what I mean?

MARTHA

Oh, that's wise . . . just like doctors and all.

NORMA

Oh, yeah. Yes. That's it, that's it exactly. It's more professional. (*Pause*) Did you mention something about a birth certificate?

MARTHA

Dear, Magda dear, just come right on over and this nice lady will take care of everything.

MAGDA

Thank you, Martha, I can talk for myself. What do you need to know?

NORMA

It's for you then?

MAGDA

That's right. Can I get it today? I need it now – I don't want it mailed to me.

NORMA puts a form into the typewriter.

NORMA

Let's take one thing at a time. Name?

MAGDA

Magda Flynn Hamlich.

MARTHA

(Leaning in behind NORMA)

Magda Flynn Hamlich.

NORMA

Okay. Now, place and date of birth?

MAGDA

Right here, Eastfork County at the hospital—the old wing, of course. June 23, 1941

MARTHA

Hers June 23, 1941, and mine is June 16, 1943. Magda's just two years older than I am. You'd never know it. She's kept her looks. Everyone says so. Or sometimes they don't even say it, but you can tell it's what they're thinking. She does have more time to spend on her looks of course than I do. Not that I'm the kind to fuss with how I look. Don't you think beauty comes from within, from doing for others. Sister needs to get a passport. She's going to France for her job. Imagine that. France. She has such a good paying job and is so generous to both of us—now, don't be modest, Sister. And she is the best thing about sending presents to Mother. Why, last Christmas she sent a new TV set. Even though Mother doesn't see well these days, and I need to read to her every, every day . . . I think the idea was so wonderful. I for one feel thankful every time I dust that TV.

MAGDA

Let's just answer the questions, Martha. Then maybe we can get out of here. You're always throwing the TV in my face.

MARTHA

Now, I would never do that. I love it. But it doesn't really work right since the lightning struck it.

NORMA

What is your current address?

MAGDA

(Starting to answer, then reaching into purse)

Here, just copy all that stuff from my drivers' license.

NORMA

That the social security number too?

MAGDA

Yes.

NORMA

Good. That'll save some time. Las Vegas? You came all that way for a birth certificate.

MARTHA

Sister just flew in. She just surprised us. Why I'm surprised Mother didn't have one of her spells just layin' in the bed when Magda came sailing through that door. I always try to keep Mother so calm. Magda always does fly when she comes. I've never flown myself. Takes a lot of courage. I'm sure I could never just lift off the ground . . . up . . . into the sky. I've always been a homebody myself. Just content to stay in one town where everybody knows you.

MAGDA

Let's just get the birth certificate, Martha, just get the birth certificate. Can we get it now?

NORMA

(Bristling slightly)

Let's take one thing at a time. I'll check the microfiche and see if we have the records. Then we'll see.

MAGDA

Thank you.

NORMA

Can you fill in the parents' information on these two lines . . . as much as you know . . . then sign here.

MAGDA writes hurriedly leaning on the desk.

MARTHA

I haven't been to the courthouse . . . why, in years and years. Hasn't changed much.

MAGDA

No kidding. What ever changes around here. *(To NORMA; handing her form)* Here.

NORMA

Okay. Seems to be in order.

MARTHA

Don't you think it's excitin'—Sister goin' to France and all? She has a wonderful job. And they pay her real well – now, don't be modest, Sister.

NORMA

It's none of my business. I just do my job. I'll be right back with your records.

NORMA goes through door labeled RECORDS.

MAGDA

If you'll be quiet and stop talking so much, we'll get out of here much sooner. That woman doesn't care about our personal business.

MARTHA

Oh, that's where you are wrong. That's where you are dead wrong. People do care; they do have interest. They do like you to make conversation. You know, with Mother being so sick for so long, I don't get out much. I can tell you, even to talk with someone nice in the grocery store, well, it can be downright enjoyable. I think everybody in this County is caring . . . that's what they are, caring!

MAGDA

Yeah, maybe. I don't need total strangers . . . anyway, I always feel everybody around here is expecting something from me. I can never figure out just what it is. But they just keep expecting it.

MARTHA

They all look up to you. The ones at church all remember you growing up and being so popular and pretty and going just everywhere. You were just a regular whirlwind.

MAGDA

That was a long time ago.

MARTHA

People remember things, Magda.

MAGDA

That's because you constantly remind them. You're like a "group memory."

MARTHA

People like to hear.

MAGDA

Is that what makes you ramble on so with these content-free conversations you like so much.

MARTHA

I don't ramble. I just like to share with people, and I just like to have interesting things to say. That's all.

MAGDA

Stop telling them all the details of my life. Why do you always do that?

MARTHA

Because they are more interesting . . .

MAGDA

Anything's more interesting than what goes on here!

MARTHA

You talk like this is a horrible place.

MAGDA

I know it's not. But, it's not exactly life on the cutting edge.

MARTHA

Some of us think it's just fine.

MAGDA

How would you know? You've never been anywhere else.

MARTHA

I have, too.

MAGDA

Not counting Charleston.

MARTHA

You know very well some of us haven't had your opportunity to go out in the world. Some of us have had responsibilities.

MAGDA

How many times did I invite you out? How many times? You always treated an invitation to visit me like a siren song luring you to Sodom and Gomorrah.

MARTHA

There was always too much to do here.

MAGDA

Too much to do . . . here?

MARTHA

Anyway . . . you're just like you used to be. You were always just like Mother . . . like her all the time. You both seemed to always move so fast. I tried so hard . . . so hard to catch up. But you always went on and left me falling behind.

NORMA re-enters, crosses to desk holding documents.

NORMA

I'm sorry. Your birth records don't seem to be there.

MAGDA
What?

MARTHA
Why not?

NORMA

(To MARTHA)

I don't know. Yours is there. That would be no problem. But hers isn't where it should be. Don't worry. It's on microfiche somewhere, and I'll have to run a check on it. If we still can't find it, there're the archival records in Charleston.

MAGDA

Archival? That sounds like ancient history. Charleston? That'll take weeks!

NORMA

No more than two or three. I'll put a rush on it, but it will take a while.

MAGDA

I have to get my passport. I have to get to Paris.

NORMA

I know, I know. Oh, this is most upsetting. I've never had this happen with a record before.

MARTHA

I know you're disappointed, but you'll just have to put it off. Give us a little chance to visit. Mother will enjoy getting to spend more time with you for a change.

MAGDA

We've visited already. We've said everything there is to say!

MARTHA

Not really. I know Mother would love to spend a few days just with you.

NORMA

I must ask you to keep your voices down.

MARTHA

Now you just call that nice boss of yours and tell him about this little ol' problem. He'll understand.

MAGDA

My nice boss wants this little ol' stuff hand-carried to France immediately. Can I look for it myself? It must be there.

NORMA

No, it should have been right there with your sister's.

MARTHA

Mine? You really did find mine? My very own birth certificate.

NORMA

Sure . . . it's all there.

MAGDA

Please go back now and look again.

MARTHA

Oh, wait a minute, not so fast. Let me get a copy of mine. Please.

NORMA

No problem. You'll have to fill out a form, too, though. Sign the bottom. And pay the fee and it's yours

*NORMA once again gets a form, which
MARTHA signs.*

NORMA, Continued

It's embarrassing to think that a document is lost in the system. It does happen once in a rare while. Something is skipped in the process of transferring to microfiche. But it's most rare. We are very careful here.

*NORMA takes the completed form and goes back
into the RECORDS room.*

MAGDA

I knew that something would go wrong and it would go wrong here. I knew it. Why I thought coming here in person would help . . .

MARTHA

Now, now, Sister, just be patient. We all do what we have to do.

MAGDA

What does that even mean? Martha, I have an idea. Do me a favor. Please? Lend me yours to get the passport. It won't make a difference. It's just for this one trip. By the time I get back everything will be sorted out and I can get my own.

MARTHA

Sister. Are my ears deceivin' me? I can't believe you'd ask such a thing.

MAGDA

We look enough alike . . . and I don't mind shedding a few years. Come on, do it.

MARTHA

Oh, I couldn't do that. It sounds . . . dishonest. I'm sure we'd get in trouble.

MAGDA

Not at all . . . and we do what we have to do.

NORMA

(Entering)

Excuse me. What is this, do what?

MARTHA

Well, Sister has this . . . really funny idea . . . that we could share my birth certificate . . . until hers is . . . processed.

NORMA

How dare you! That is not only against the law, it is unthinkable. Official records are not transferable . . . ever . . . at all! These files are sacred, they must not be abused. Don't you dare do such a thing. You will go to prison. It's people like you that make this job impossible.

MAGDA

All right, all right. It was just a thought. I must have that document. And I must have it now.

NORMA

(Haughtily exiting)

I will consult my superior *(more kindly to MARTHA)* and I will process yours. That will be \$7.50.

MARTHA

(Moving around room)

This is funny, if you think about it. *(Laughing)* We know you were born!

MAGDA

You have to do this, Martha. You really must let me borrow your birth certificate. Just long enough to get a passport. No one has to know. I can even buy you something very special, something you have always wanted but never been able to afford.

MARTHA

I don't know about that. I don't know what that might be. I mean, it's not like I need any new clothes since I just go the same places and no one really cares. Now, if I went anywhere new. *(Pause)* There is one thing. I have an idea, too. I do know what we could do.

MAGDA

What?

MARTHA

I could have the perfect solution. I get the passport with my birth certificate. And I could go for you in your place.

MAGDA

You? What could you do?

MARTHA

You said you just had to carry something. I can carry something just as well as you . . . or anyone else.

MAGDA

There's a little more to it than that!

MARTHA

You can show me what to do.

MAGDA

Martha, the people I have to meet are important people.

MARTHA

You always act like I can't do things.

MAGDA

No, no. I know you do a lot.

MARTHA

You always had to be the important one, the one in the spotlight. You act like I'm stupid.

MAGDA

You talk about stupid things . . . things nobody cares about. These people are not in your world, not in this world. They will be very sophisticated. You'd probably try to give them a recipe. Which involves lard.

MARTHA

Anyway, we all talk about what we know. I talk about everyday. I'll bet there's a town just like this in France. Another Eastfork. And what's wrong with my cooking?

MAGDA

Nothing, Martha. But they're not French recipes and these people are French. And these people will know about things a little more sophisticated than Eastfork County. It's not a good idea. I have studied for this trip, learned some French. It's my job.

MARTHA

I'm just trying to help you . . . that's all. That's what I get for trying to help.

MAGDA

I know. What a wonderful little helper you've always been. "Mother's little helper." "Mother's little helper" all right . . . like I didn't do anything at all to help.

MARTHA

(Yelling)

You were never around to help. You had so many important things to do. Why don't we forget about that. Here's a real chance for me to help you.

MAGDA

(Yelling)

Oh, no. Every time you try to help me, it's a disaster. Remember when you wanted to help me and washed my white cheer leading outfit with your red camping shirt. Remember when you told Tommy Smith I was going to date somebody else. You knew I didn't want to hurt his feelings, and decided to help me.

MARTHA

What difference did one more boy make to you anyway?

NORMA enters and runs to get between them.

NORMA

Stop it. Stop it right now. I'm not here to referee a combat zone. What is the matter with you people?

MAGDA

But it was my boyfriend, and I don't need your help.

NORMA

Ladies! I must ask you to keep your voices down. Sh-h-h-h!

*MARTHA and MAGDA glare at each other
NORMA treats them like two naughty children.*

NORMA

Please try to discuss this in a quiet tone of voice. After all, this is a county government office. Now, then, *(To MARTHA)* here it is, ready to go.

MARTHA

(Paying money)

Oh, how wonderful. I'm so thrilled. Can I take it now?

NORMA

And you . . . I will have to fill out a trace and search form.

MAGDA

I can't believe this—everything depends on this document.

MARTHA

A birth certificate is an important document . . . something we need to have.

NORMA

(Starting to leave, then hesitates)

Now look, all I need to do is to take this microfiche to the copying room then, get the copy, affix the official seal on it . . . and . . . you'll be all set. Now, don't . . . get started while I'm out.

MARTHA walks to the chair as if in a dream to pick up MAGDA's expensive coat. She puts it over her shoulders.

MARTHA

Yes, indeed, we all do the things we have to. Now take me, I'm very good doing what people tell me to. And, take you . . . I'll bet you could, if you want to, Sister, explain every little ol' thing I'd need to know to do your courier job. You could give me a list, and I could study . . . like when you used to help me with my arithmetic because you were so much faster.

NORMA enters and gives birth certificate to MARTHA.

MARTHA

That is an impressive looking document. See, Sister.

MAGDA

I see, I see.

MARTHA

You know all those framed awards you have at home from when you were young . . . all the certificates for things I didn't ever seem to get to do for one reason or another . . . cheer leading and yearbook staff and all that? Well, I think I'm going to frame this, my birth certificate, Magda. Mine . . . mine . . . mine! You can't take it away from me, and you don't have one.

MAGDA

(To CLERK)

I have to get my birth certificate. Please . . . do whatever you can . . . please.

NORMA

My superior will try to talk to Charleston today. You might call back this afternoon.

MARTHA

Just think how grand it will look when it's framed.

MAGDA

Could you try now? Please. Call right now. Please—could I pay for a courier—anything?

NORMA

That certainly is not necessary. I can't make any promises. It may take time to sort it all out. I will try to call this afternoon when things slow down.

MAGDA goes to MARTHA and removes the coat. She starts for the outside door.

MARTHA

(To NORMA)

We'll need to hurry now. Sister has a lot to think on, that's for sure. Course, I might be happy to help her out of her problem if she needs me and I think she does. We can just think about it. That's what family is for.

MAGDA

I'll be back this afternoon. And I can drive to Charleston if I need to. Let's go, Martha.

MARTHA

Anyway, I'm sure Mother will be glad to have her around a little while longer. Maybe Sister can take her visiting friends and riding around town . . . wouldn't that be nice, Magda?

Before they can leave, THREE PEOPLE come in and MARTHA gets caught up in their business. MAGDA fumes and motions to leave. NORMA takes another aspirin and types at desk. Entering are a LAND AGENT and an ELDERLY COUPLE. The old man, MR. SMITH spends some time carefully settling HIS WIFE in a chair. The AGENT continues to NORMA'S desk where NORMA sits now typing fast.

AGENT

Excuse me. Is there a line here?

MAGDA

Don't worry. All lines in Eastfork County meander a bit. Don't mind me. I'm standing here seeing my career flash before my eyes. But, you haven't heard the last of me. I'll be back.

AGENT

We need to see someone about a title search and having some surveying done.

NORMA

You can see Mr. Barstow on the second floor for the title search. You're on your own for the surveying, although we can recommend four or five companies.

AGENT

(Starting to outer door)

What room is Mr. Barstow in again?

NORMA

Second floor, at the back.

AGENT

Look, can't anyone in another department look this up? It's a very minor matter, but I have another appointment, and this is time consuming.

NORMA

Everyone's in a hurry today.

During this lasts exchange, the OLD MAN approaches very slowly.

MR. SMITH

I'm here to see about my land . . . to make the arrangements.

AGENT

(Yelling in a loud voice)

Mr. Smith, I'll take care of everything. You don't need to worry about it. You didn't even need to come here this morning.

MR. SMITH

It's my land, ain't it. I've been seeing to it all these years.

AGENT

(Still yelling)

But I'm your agent. I'm here to do all the work and make it easier for you.

MR. SMITH

Nobody makes it easier for anybody else. I tend to my own business.

AGENT

(Still yelling)

Yes, Mr. Smith. *(Turning to NORMA and lowering voice)* You see with what I'm dealing with here.

The AGENT turns back to the OLD MAN and begins yelling in a very loud voice.

AGENT

Here, let me pull up an extra chair for you to sit down and rest. Mr. Barstow will be here soon, and I'll go on up to take care of the title search. You won't need to go up the stairs then.

MR. SMITH

I'll go. Susan'll come too.

AGENT

No, there's no need of that. I can assure you that I can take care of everything. *(To NORMA)* Oh, I hope you don't mind. I really need to use the phone. I've been away from the office for several hours now. I'll just use this for a minute.

The AGENT moves into the "private" area of the desk and phone and starts to use the instrument as if it were hers. NORMA is horrified at this invasion of territory.

NORMA

I'm afraid you certainly—

AGENT

I'll only be a second. My company will be happy to pay; believe me, I can appreciate the expenses involved in business.

NORMA

This is not a phone for . . . people. This is a government phone.

AGENT

Oh, hello . . . it's me . . . sorry to be so late checking in. Any messages? Uh, huh . . . huh uh. Of course, I'll be at the settlement on time. This won't take very long. It's just a matter of seeing the right person. Yes, I know we thought that. Okay, don't worry, some small matters came up. What other calls? Yes . . . yes . . . yes. Of course, I will. Don't I always? Listen, I'll try to check in as soon as we leave here; shouldn't be long. Okay. Bye. Brother. What a deal. I've earned my commission on this one all right. These old ones though . . . awfully hard to deal with. Had the same situation last year with the Richards' property.

NORMA

Situation?

AGENT

These old people . . . holding on to farms or whatever for half a century. Most of them aren't good enough for anything, can't even farm them anymore. But subdivided? . . . They're sitting on a gold mine, that's all. But try to convince them.

MARTHA

But a home . . . it's more important than any ol' gold mine.

NORMA

Wait. This isn't our business.

AGENT

It's mine. They'd never do better.

MAGDA

Ah, yes. You're just thinking of their best interest, right?

MARTHA

Would you like to leave your place like that?—where you lived for years and your people, maybe, generations?

AGENT

Like a shot! Are you kidding? We are talking three quarters of a million here.

NORMA

Would it do any good to mention it's someone's home?

AGENT

My developers are not inhuman; they are very caring people. They aren't, for instance trying to displace the Smiths

MAGDA

They aren't? That's a surprise 'cause it sure sounded like they were.

AGENT

Heavens no. They know what it's like to have a lifetime investment.

NORMA

Perhaps . . . maybe they should reconsider. I mean . . .

AGENT

A rider in the contract states that the Smiths are to have their house and two acres in perpetuity.

MAGDA

Oh, yeah. Out of how many acres?

AGENT

Three hundred and seventy-five.

NORMA

Yeah. I can see they're all heart, those developers.

AGENT

Listen. When you're old and have nothing, and not enough savings for an emergency . . . I can tell you there are plenty of old people who would jump at such an opportunity.

MARTHA

Something doesn't seem right here.

MAGDA

Martha, I can't believe we're agreeing on something.

AGENT

If you'll excuse me, I think I'll run upstairs to make sure this Mr. Barstow isn't in after all.

NORMA

Suit yourself.

MAGDA

If he's in I get to see him first.

AGENT

(Going to MR. SMITH, bending down and yelling!)

I'm going upstairs now to see if the man is in. You wait here.

The AGENT leaves. Silence except for typing. NORMA glances several times while typing, MR. SMITH looks back. He gets up and walks to the fish tank. With the air of one used to caring for the earth's gifts, he adjusts the light. NORMA finally speaks.

NORMA

Are you hard of hearing?

MR. SMITH

Hell, no.

NORMA

Why didn't you tell her?

MR. SMITH

She didn't ask. Eyes are good, too. Have all of my own teeth.

NORMA

Good for you. I can't say all that about myself. You know, you might have been better off to come here by yourself.

MR. SMITH

I don't want to go alone. I mean, Susan and I always go together.

NORMA

I only meant you might have been wiser to come without your friend, the Dragon Lady.

MR. SMITH

Dragon Lady, that's pretty good . . . Hear that, Susan, Dragon Lady, . . . have to remember that one.

NORMA

She intimidates me, and I thought I'd seen everything today.

MR. SMITH

Yup, she'd intimidate God if He let her. Oh, don't pay too much mind to her. She's probably good enough in her own way. Just takes her work far too seriously if you know what I mean.

NORMA

Too seriously? Takes work too seriously?

MR. SMITH

You know. She just gets herself all tangled up trying to keep up with her real estate check lists and rule books. Worries too much about what is legal and not enough about what's right. She forgets it's a job, not a person or even an animal, just a job. Weren't for that, she'd be fine.

NORMA

I see.

MR. SMITH

You'll be needing to do something about these fish pretty soon.

NORMA

Why. What's wrong?

MR. SMITH

(Starts to fix problem)

Gotta get some of this seaweed here out of the water. See—there's so much, it blocks the surface. Cuts out all the light and the fish can't get up for air if they need it.

NORMA

Hmm. I sure didn't know that.

MR. SMITH

Won't take any time to clear it out. Just a matter of keepin' the balance, that's all. Everything in balance. Wouldn't hurt to put a couple o' sucker cats in there . . . catfish, little ones, to keep it clean.

NORMA

Oh, no, no more fish. You can have them. Um. Would you or your wife like anything else.

MR. SMITH

(Picking up chair and moving closer to HIS WIFE)

Susan, this nice lady wants to know if you want something to drink. No, thank you anyway. This is not a good day for Susan.

As NORMA walks away, SUSAN's eyes follow her.

SUSAN SMITH

It's Muriel . . . again.

MR. SMITH

No, it's not. It's not Muriel at all.

SUSAN SMITH

It's Muriel.

MR. SMITH

No, Susan, that's not Muriel.

NORMA

Who's Muriel? A friend?

MR. SMITH

Oh, no. Well . . . years ago she was.

MARTHA

Does she look like this Muriel?

MR. SMITH

Oh, I don't know. Probably something you have on . . . or your hair . . . just reminded her, that's all.

NORMA

(To MRS. SMITH)

Do I look like Muriel?

MR. SMITH

Who can remember? Muriel's been dead for forty years.

NORMA

So she imagines her now? She's not well?

MR. SMITH

Susan? No, she's not sick. Mind's just not there sometimes. Comes and goes. Never can tell when . . . might go for days without a spell.

NORMA

That's terrible.

MR. SMITH

Humph. Hell, no. Not really. Worse things. Lots worse. She babbles some . . . even then makes more sense than people who are supposed to be real smart. *(Gesturing to where AGENT stood)*

MARTHA

(Gently guiding SUSAN to the fish tank)

See the fish. Let's watch them.

MR. SMITH

Don't feel sorry for Susan. We don't need it.

SUSAN SMITH

Muriel, Muriel. *(To him)* I told you it was Muriel.

MAGDA

Excuse me. Shouldn't she have help? See a proper professional?

MR. SMITH

She has help. She has me. What other help could she need?

SUSAN SMITH

The fish are pretty. The water should be cleaned though. It's too dirty for it to be healthy for them.

MR. SMITH

You're right. They're gonna take care of it.

SUSAN SMITH

(Becoming more alert)

This is a new place to me. Is this a friendly place? It seems a peaceful enough place.

MAGDA

I mean an actual doctor . . . medical help.

MR. SMITH

(Taking his wife's hand)

Oh, she's seen doctors. Whatever they know. They just see one side; they just see certain signs, not everything. Can't see deep into all the furrows, y'know . . . only what's on the outside.

NORMA

Your agent says you'll be selling your land.

MR. SMITH

Mebbe.

NORMA

Guess it's hard to make that kind of decision. I'd hate to do it.

MR. SMITH

We're thinking on it.

NORMA

It's a lot to think about.

MR. SMITH

(Going to HIS WIFE and taking her back to her chair)

Gotta think of Susan. If I go first, I'm not too young, you know—she has to have money to protect her. To pay someone to take care of her. Been thinking . . . gotta make plans.

NORMA

Why the survey then? That's unusual, isn't it?

MR. SMITH

They wanted it.

NORMA

Don't you remember where the boundaries are?

MR. SMITH

Hell, yes. I know every foot of my land . . . know every bit of it. Had it marked for them, too. Won't take my word for it though.

NORMA

Guess they just want everything by the book, huh?

MR. SMITH

That's not why. I know why. They think I'm a stupid old man.

MARTHA

I'm sure you're wrong about that Mr. . . . Mr. Smith.

MR. SMITH

Oh, yeah. They think I can't figure out why they're in such a swivet. Afraid it's gonna fall through and they'll lose their commissions and fees and all. Because I won't give up the gravesite on it.

NORMA

Did you tell them that?

MR. SMITH

Hell, no . . . they didn't ask.

*The AGENT, storms into the room, quite angry;
she is followed by MRS. PARKER*

AGENT

He's not there.

MRS. PARKER

Ha! I told you, twice, he wasn't in there. And I'm first in line to see him when he comes in.

MR. SMITH walks back to HIS WIFE and sits down.

NORMA

What are you doing here? I thought you...went away for good.

MRS. PARKER

I ...changed my mind. I made some assumptions...and, I mean we don't know, and I'd always wonder. Anyway, I decided to come back. Sometime, you just have to go in a new direction.

MARTHA

Yes, indeedy. That's just what I have been trying to tell Sister.

MRS. PARKER

I wondered and, well, sometimes what you imagine is more of a disaster than what is real. So I don't think I should be afraid of what might be.

NORMA

Never thought about it. Not like that anyway. Maybe you're right.

AGENT

This is driving me crazy. I wish somebody would deal with this old man. What good is one lousy quarter acre.

NORMA

Did you ever ask him?

AGENT

Not directly.

NORMA

If you'd have asked him, right out, straightforward, he'd have told you. It's a gravesite.

AGENT

So that's it! There's no cemetery there. I didn't see anything there.

NORMA

So why not just give that part to him.

AGENT

Oh, it's not that simple! That parcel is located right by the main road. It not only had all the easement rights to it, but it must be held in the clear by the developers, because when the sewer lines go out there, they have to be able to hook up. I mean, that'll be worth an extra \$10,000 on each house to have County sewer and water . . . even you can see that.

NORMA

Someone's buried there, though.

AGENT

It's not a problem to have a grave moved. It's done all the time. I mean, not by me personally, but it's done, I know.

NORMA

It seems that would be up to him.

AGENT

I'll have to give this some thought. *(Yelling)* How many children do you have?

NORMA

I don't think you need to scream at him . . . just ask.

AGENT

(Somewhat softer)

How many children?

MR. SMITH

Two.

AGENT

Have either of them . . . passed away?

MR. SMITH

Yep. Both of 'em

AGENT

(Victoriously)

I know when we lose a child, we like to have that child nearby.

MR. SMITH

Did you lose one, too?

AGENT

I know it must be hard.

MR. SMITH

The daughter we lost when it was baby. Hardly got to know it. Like to have killed Susan.

SUSAN SMITH

Such a good baby. I put her to bed one night . . . such a good baby . . . but I left the window open.

MR. SMITH

Next morning, we woke up . . . she was dead. Figure she just took cold and died sudden-like.

SUSAN SMITH

I didn't mean to leave the window open, but the night was warm. Thought she'd be safe.

AGENT

That's so very sad. I know how painful it must have been.

MRS. PARKER

Wait a minute. Didn't anyone tell you about crib deaths? I've read about it. You didn't do it. The window had nothing to do with it. No one ever told you it wasn't your fault?

AGENT

The other one? The other child? Was that one recent?

MR. SMITH

Nope. Died overseas . . . soldier. Hard to die away from home. When it happens far away it doesn't seem real. He'd been dead a long time, body shipped home and all the papers signed off . . . and we'd still be lookin' in the mailbox for a letter from him. It took a long time to sink in.

MRS. PARKER

I can't imagine how you've survived all this loss.

NORMA

I am really sorry, Mr. Smith.

MR. SMITH

No need. No need to be sorry for me. It's always hardest when it's a young life—cut down when it's still green still.

NORMA

Yes. That's what I meant.

MR. SMITH

Hardest thing when Jimmy died was the farm. Susan and I didn't seem to want to plan ahead any more.

AGENT

Mr. Smith, I think I speak for the whole firm and the partnership we represent . . . we will certainly respect your grief. We will be happy to facilitate the changing of the gravesites to any location you choose.

MR. SMITH

What gravesites?

MARTHA

Your son and daughter. Down by the road.

MR. SMITH

They're not buried down by the road. They're in Eastfork County Cemetery.

AGENT

(Glaring at NORMA)

But I thought . . . I was led to believe . . .

MAGDA

I thought you said a gravesite was why you didn't want to sell out.

MR. SMITH

Did.

AGENT

Who's buried there?

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