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JUPITER

A Rock Solid Comedy

by

Gary Britson

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JUPITER

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

SARAH; a maternal woman about 45-50 years of age. She and her family live next door to Joe.

JOE; a young man in his mid-teens whose parents seem to be missing. Joe is ever aware of the celestial sky.

MAURY; Joe's friend. He has been expelled from school for painting "Happy Birthday, Jane" at the entrance to the new parking garage.

MELISSA; Sarah's daughter, about 26 years of age. By education she is a lawyer, but has recently been fired from her fiancé's law firm.

JEREMY; Melissa's brother. Slightly younger than his sister, Jeremy has never gotten with the program and probably never will.

ALICE ALTOONA; a charming, life-loving creature of unfortunate and untimely experience with no convictions whatsoever. She is Joe and Maury's age.

GRANDPA; Joes' Grandfather to be exact. He looks just like a grandpa should look.

CHARLES; Melissa's fiancé. He is a lawyer, and worst of all, he's proud of it.

SETTING

Joe's house somewhere in America today

JUPITER
by Gary Britson

ACT I; SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: a living room in America today. SARAH is on the phone. SHE is 45-50; maternal, sane. JOE, in his mid-teens, sits reading at center stage. HE often looks out over the audience. When HE does this, HE is looking out a big picture window, which we cannot see. Behind him, his friend MAURY, same age, is fooling around with a computer, playing a game of some sort. MAURY talks to everyone. Not everyone HE talks to is present. His eyes are usually on the game. HE rarely, if ever, makes eye contact. It's not that he's afraid to look you in the eye. HE is simply not interested in what anyone else looks like or what anyone else is doing.)

SARAH

(Talking into phone) No, they're gone. I mean gone. They've moved out. They took most of their clothes; there isn't any food in the house. And all of Ellen's flowers are dead. No one's watered a thing. That's how I knew something was wrong. I hadn't seen her out in the yard. No one's cut the grass. *(Looks at JOE)* Yes, Joey's here. He looks all right. He doesn't seem to know. *(Pause)* No, there aren't any bloodstains. *(Pause)* Yes, I'm quite sure he didn't kill them. *(Pause)* I can't ask him that. *(Pause)* Oh, all right, just a sec. *(To JOE)* Joey? Honey? Did you kill your parents?

JOE

Nope.

SARAH

He says he didn't kill them. He's an honest boy. He wouldn't lie. *(To JOE)* Joey, you wouldn't lie to me, would you?

JOE

Nope.

SARAH

No, Maury's here too. Maury. Jane's youngest. I don't know. *(To JOE)* Joey? What's Maury doing here?

JOE

He's doing Jane time.

MAURY

I'm on my way to the store. For more olives.

SARAH

(On the phone again) I'm not sure. It might mean Jane's re-inventing the martini again. *(Pause)* No, they seem all right. I'll ask. *(To JOE)* Did you go to school today?

JOE

I tried.

MAURY

(Concentrating on his computer game) Then what's the capital of North Dakota?

JOE

Bismarck. Or Fargo?

MAURY

(Waving an accusatory finger at an imaginary victim, as if he's giving someone a good lecture) What kind of a student are you?

JOE

Sorry.

MAURY

Now you'll *never* get into Princeton!

SARAH

I'll have to let you go. I just called to see if Ellen had told you anything. *(Pause)* I'm at their house. I'll call you later. OK. 'Bye. *(Hangs up. SHE is curious, but doesn't want it to show. SHE sits near JOE. As SHE talks, we can almost hear her turning the pages of the textbook in the child psychology course SHE took two or three decades ago.)* Joey? Dear? Where are your parents?

JOE

Switzerland.

SARAH

That's what you told me before. It's a little difficult to believe.

JOE

(Removes a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolds it, and reads) "Dear Joey: You were right. Off to Switzerland. Tuna in fridge. Love, Mom." *(Gives SARAH the note)* Actually, I never liked tuna. I never met anyone who does.

MAURY

Tuna's just another conspiracy.

SARAH

(Studying the note) This is Ellen's handwriting. What does she mean by "You were right"?

JOE

I told her it was probably a good time to see the world.

SARAH

Ellen never said anything to me about going to Switzerland. She and Al usually tell us when they're going away.

MAURY

Maybe they're "post-verbal."

SARAH

(To JOE) What does he mean?

JOE

One of Maury's counselors says he's "post-verbal."

SARAH

What does that mean?

JOE

It means he's not going to school anymore.

MAURY

It means I have been placed on waivers, for the purpose of giving me my unconditional release.

JOE

He's been asked to re-evaluate his future in the academic community.

SARAH

You mean Maury has decided not to go to school?

JOE

He didn't decide.

MAURY

Heck no. I like school.

JOE

I like it too. It's warm and dry.

MAURY

It's got Spanish rice for lunch. And girls that smell good.

JOE

Something's always happening.

MAURY

And there aren't any olives. Best thing about school is they never make you go out for olives.

JOE

(*To SARAH*) He's supposed to be getting olives.

SARAH

What do you mean? He didn't decide not to go to school?

JOE

They said his services are no longer required.

MAURY

I'm like one of those astronauts they sent up that never came back.

SARAH

What astronauts?

JOE

Maury's brother Roger says they used to send up astronauts and not tell anybody about it, and lots of times they never came back.

SARAH

I don't believe that.

MAURY

I never came back. They sent me up—I'm still out there.

SARAH

You mean Maury has been suspended?

JOE

Worse.

SARAH

Expelled? Maury do your parents know about this?

MAURY

Sure. I went home. I started telling Jane about it.

JOE

Jane's his mother.

SARAH

I know. What did she say?

MAURY

She sent me out for olives.

JOE

I told him he could have some of ours.

MAURY

Jane's gonna ride the Bombay Express.

JOE

(*To SARAH*) That's the name of the stuff she puts the olives in.

SARAH

I know what gin is.

MAURY

All aboard!

SARAH

This is terrible. I'm sure your father will want to talk to Principal Morgan. Maury, why don't you run along home. Have a nice long chat with your mother. I need to talk to Joe awhile. There are too many things going on. I have a headache.

MAURY

So does Jane. That's why she sent me out for olives. When she has a headache, she takes a glass, puts in some Bombay, adds three olives—she likes the big fat suckers—holds the glass up to her lips, whispers "*Vermouth*" very softly over it, and ten minutes later she sounds just like Audrey Hepburn.

JOE

That's Maury's cue to disappear. When Jane turns into Audrey Hepburn. Maury would like to stay here. Because Jane...

SARAH

...needs time.

JOE

Jane time.

SARAH

I see.

JOE

It's not as if we can't talk some other time, Mrs. Goodwin. How about tomorrow? You could come over for lunch.

SARAH

You eat lunch at school.

MAURY

Not after today.

SARAH

What does he mean, Joey? (*JOE smiles, says nothing. SARAH's face falls.*) Oh no. Joey. You too? (*HE nods.*) Why?

JOE

I've been worried about the sky.

MAURY

He looks out the window a lot.

SARAH

That's no reason to expel someone.

JOE

I don't look at it as an expulsion. I see it as an opportunity.

SARAH

To do what?

JOE

To...observe things.

SARAH

Tell me, Joey. While everyone else is going to school and preparing their futures, what exactly will you be observing?

MAURY

Big fuckin' rock!

SARAH

Maury!

MAURY

(*Sheepishly*) Sorry...Big *honkin'* rock!

JOE

Maury's the one who really needs school. He has to develop his language skills. Mine are already pretty good. I was considering a career in advertising. Or casino management.

MAURY

(Talking to the computer, and thrilled at the concept of being a Las Vegas businessman)
Yeah! Get outta my casino, or I'll blow up your mother's car!

SARAH

This is ridiculous. You both should be in school. Do your parents know?

JOE

Not really.

SARAH

Joey. Do they know or don't they?

JOE

Not literally. Although I'm sure they knew that it was...foreseeable.

MAURY

Big...falling...rock!

SARAH

What is he talking about?

JOE

He seems to be under the impression I predicted a meteor.

SARAH

Did you?

JOE

Not exactly.

SARAH

What's this all about?

JOE

All I said was that I'm...a little worried about the sky.

SARAH

I don't see anything.

JOE

(Smiles) You're not supposed to.

SARAH

Well, I'm getting to the bottom of this. Ellen and Al do not just go flying off to Switzerland without telling anyone, while their son gets kicked out of school.

JOE

There has been a lot of activity today. But that's all it's been. Activity. People moving around. Nothing's really changed.

SARAH

Well, something's going to change. For starters, you're coming home with me. Someone has to take care of you.

JOE

Thanks. I'm fine here.

SARAH

(To MAURY) And *you're* going home, young man. Jane must be frantic.

MAURY

I have to get the olives.

SARAH

Oh, screw the olives. *(Embarrassed)* I'm sorry.

(MELISSA enters. SHE is mid-twenties; sunny, winning, warm. Not lawyer material at all, though SHE is, in fact, sad to say, a lawyer. More's the pity.)

MELISSA

Mother. I thought I'd never find you. Dad told me you were over here. Trouble?

SARAH

Al and Ellen are gone.

MELISSA

Gone where?

JOE

Switzerland.

MELISSA

Lucky them. Mother, I need to talk to you.

SARAH

(Looking for an excuse not to listen; looks at her watch) Good grief, I have to go. We're playing bridge with the Martins. Call me tomorrow, okay?

MELISSA

(Sighs) It's kind of important. Can't we talk now, mother? Just ten minutes?

MAURY

Hey, you guys want to hear a song I wrote? (*There is a guitar on the floor next to the computer; MAURY picks it up*) Mother's Day's a long way off, but I've been practicing so I'll be ready. This is a Mother's Day song I wrote. Here goes: (*HE sings a derivative, bluesy tune*)

*Oh Jane, you've changed my brains.
You've put my brains in chains.
My brains are just a stain.
Run over by a train.
Oh Jane, you've changed my brains.*

SARAH

That's a Mother's Day song?

MAURY

I couldn't afford flowers. Wait. There's more. (*Sings*)

*My brains are in the drain.
They're chained and drained and sprained.
They're dying in the rain.
Oh, Jane—*

SARAH

(*Interrupting*) That's...very nice, Maury. You should go home now. I'm sure your mother's expecting you.

MAURY

What she's expecting is olives. Big fat ones.

JOE

(*To SARAH*) Maury and his mother have a very practical relationship.

SARAH

I have to go. (*SHE heads for the door*) Joey, you can't stay here alone. Come over to our house at ten and bring your pajamas and toothbrush. We'll get this straightened out in the morning. Missy, call me from your office tomorrow, after lunch. We'll talk then.

MELISSA

That's just it, Mother. I don't have an—

SARAH

Maury, please run along home now, dear. Have Jane call me. We need to get together on this. Something's not right, and I intend to see that it's fixed, tomorrow. And don't sing that song for your mother. If you can't afford flowers, run over to the Botanical Center and *borrow* some. (*Exits*)

MELISSA

What was my mother doing over here, Joey?

JOE

She seems to think something's wrong.

MELISSA

Is there?

JOE

No more than usual.

MELISSA

(In no hurry to go anywhere; relaxes on the sofa) This is a nice room.

JOE

My mom and dad fixed it up.

MAURY

"It's a showcase."

JOE

No...

MAURY

Jane said so. It must be true. She said, "Their home is a *showcase*. I live in a mausoleum." She says that when she's running out of olives. "Your friends live in a showcase. I make you live in a *mausoleum*." What's a mausoleum?

JOE

It's like school, but without the algebra.

MELISSA

Do you and Maury hang out together a lot?

JOE

This is where he does his Jane time.

MELISSA

Jane time?

JOE

Yes. His mom needs some time alone every day.

MELISSA

Isn't he at school every day?

JOE

Not exactly.

MELISSA

Is he taking some sort of special classes, or what?

JOE

They're not so much special as...non-existent.

MELISSA

You mean they kicked him out.

MAURY

They sent Jane a letter. "Disciplinary considerations necessitate permanent non-continuance of the individual's participation in the contemporary academic paradigm."

MELISSA

Three strikes and you're out.

MAURY

Oh, it was way more than three strikes. A hundred and nine, at least, by my count.

MELISSA

What did he do?

JOE

Everything? Or just the most recent?

MELISSA

Strike three. Or one hundred and nine. Whatever.

JOE

Well, he...he gave Jane a birthday present.

MELISSA

You remember your mom's birthday, so they expel you? That is one tough school.

MAURY

(Wagging a finger sternly, as if scolding a student) "Young man, we cannot countenance disruption of our paradigm!"

JOE

That's what Principal Morgan said.

MAURY

"Such...turpitude!"

JOE

Principal Morgan really flexes his vocabulary when he's mad.

MAURY

Old people look funny when they yell.

MELISSA

Come on, tell me. Really. What was it? Drugs? Sex? Insider trading?

JOE

Well, it was Jane's birthday.

MAURY

We were *very* depressed.

JOE

He stands accused of exercising questionable judgment in choosing a gift.

MAURY

I wanted it to have a personal touch.

MELISSA

May one ask?

JOE

He wrote..."Happy Birthday, Jane."

MELISSA

So far, so good...

JOE

In red spray paint.

MAURY

I thought she *liked* red.

JOE

Over the entrance to the parking ramp.

MAURY

I wanted her to *see* it, for Pete's sake.

JOE

The brand *new* parking ramp.

MAURY
It's what they call an "attention-getter"...

JOE
Next to her office building.

MAURY
...an attention-grabber...

JOE
The brand *new* office building.

MAURY
... in the insurance biz!

JOE
His mom's in insurance.

MAURY
"Provider of insurance *services*."

JOE
A sense of humor is apparently at a premium in the world of insurance.

MELISSA
I can imagine.

MAURY
They came to our house.

MELISSA
The whole company?

JOE
The police. There was no need to call them, but there they were.

MAURY
I was doing my algebra.

JOE
Everyone over-reacted.

MAURY
I almost had the value of x when the doorbell rang. And whaddya know. I forgot my theory, just like that.

JOE

And someone told Principal Morgan.

MAURY

He called Jane on the *phone*.

JOE

One thing led to another....

MAURY

Jane *hates* the phone.

JOE

And now, well, let's just say...

MAURY

(*Wagging a finger at an imaginary telephone*) "That infernal thing is the *bane* of my existence!"

JOE

...that, educationally speaking...

MAURY

She broke three fingernails tearing it right outta the wall!

JOE

...Maury is now between engagements...

MAURY

Nobody ever likes my ideas.

JOE

...as am I. It was the last straw.

MELISSA

What was the first straw?

JOE

Last fall, in algebra, when Maury asked too many questions.

MELISSA

Isn't that what school is about? Asking questions?

JOE

Not in algebra class. Algebra class has never been my idea of an enlightened forum.

MAURY

A real hell-hole. Except for Alice Altoona!

MELISSA

Who's Alice Altoona?

JOE

She sits next to Maury in algebra. Jane says Alice is "an alley cat," but Maury prefers to think of her as "high-spirited."

MELISSA

I know the type.

MAURY

She smells good. Just like cough syrup!

JOE

Anyway, there we were, in algebra class. And Mr. Dunbar says, "Are there any questions?"

MELISSA

Yes?

JOE

So Maury asked: What's the value of x ?

MAURY

Yep.

JOE

Then he asked: What's the capital of North Dakota?

MAURY

Nobody seems to know.

JOE

Then he asked: What is sex like?

MAURY

I was just asking.

JOE

He's very inquisitive.

MAURY

Jane says she knows, but she's not talking.

MELISSA

Sounds like Maury has his work cut out for him, if he ever wants to go back to school.

JOE

I'm afraid things have gone a bit beyond school. But I'm not worried...about that.

MELISSA

You're not worried?

MAURY

Only about the sky.

MELISSA

What about it?

JOE

It seems to be getting smaller.

MAURY

And darker.

JOE

That too.

MELISSA

And what about you, Joey? How's school going for you?

JOE

Let's just say Maury and I would have lots of time to help each other with our homework. If either of us had any homework.

MELISSA

Not you too.

JOE

When it rains it pours.

MELISSA

What happened? Did you get *your* mother an illegal birthday present, too?

JOE

No.

MAURY

He looks out the window.

JOE

It's just a suspension, until my parents can meet with Principal Morgan. Only they're in Switzerland, you see, and their return is...well, let's just say they're enjoying the altitude. And the distance.

MELISSA

Do you? Look out the window a lot, I mean?

JOE

I've been worried about the sky.

MELISSA

The sky? What's wrong with the sky?

(JOE and MAURY exchange a long look.)

MELISSA

Guys? Hello? Guys?

JOE

(Changing subject) You're looking very nice today, Melissa.

MELISSA

Why, thank you, Joey. You're very sweet.

JOE

It's good that you dropped by, because just the other day Maury and I were thinking about talking to you. You're a lawyer, and Maury and I were thinking about going to law school. But you have to get through high school first, right?

MELISSA

It's one of those pesky technicalities. But I'm not exactly a role model for aspiring young attorneys. Not today, anyway. You see, I'm sort of in the same boat with you guys. I got fired today.

MAURY

My dad got fired once. He said it was good for him. He said it was a crummy job, and getting fired made him go out and get a better one. So it all turned out good, except when he had to go to jail for beating the hell out of the jerk who fired him.

(MAURY exits.)

MELISSA

I can't really do that. You see, my fiancé and I both work—I should say worked—for the same law firm, and the guy who fired me is his boss. I can't do anything to get Charles in trouble.

JOE

Why did this happen? If that isn't too personal a question.

MELISSA

I'm not sure. I thought things were fine. When old man McDonough called me in today, I thought he was going to give me a bonus for the good work I've been doing lately. He didn't even give me a chance to sit down. He just told me I was unsatisfactory, handed me an envelope—which, in my sublime naiveté, I took to be severance pay—and bade me adieu. Told me to get the hell out, actually. I always give people too much credit. When I got back to my office, I opened it. It was a bill. They'd billed me for a week's worth of coffee. I tried to find Charles before I left, but he wasn't around. He probably doesn't even know I'm gone yet. *(Coughs)* And I'm coming down with a cold.

JOE

Would you like something to drink?

MELISSA

No thanks.

JOE

Would you like to brush your teeth?

MELISSA

What?

JOE

That's all I've got to offer you. Beverages and toothpaste. There's no food in the house.

MELISSA

Thanks. I shouldn't. Although getting drunk wouldn't be a bad idea. There's no reason not to, although I really should call Charles. I hope he isn't too mad at me. He takes everything so personally. I have an overdue library book, he gets mad, says it reflects on him.

JOE

I had a similar experience. Mr. Dunbar took it as a personal rejection when I looked out the window in algebra class. But I can look and calculate at the same time. I couldn't make him understand. Looking out the window isn't idleness. It's a form of study.

MELISSA

Why were you looking out the window?

JOE

(Looking out the window) I've been worried about the sky.

MELISSA

(Looks out the window) What's to worry about?

JOE

It's changing.

MELISSA

Are you looking for shooting stars?

JOE

No. They're easy. What's really interesting is the stuff you can't see. Yet.

MAURY

(Enters with a glass on a tray; the glass contains something red; HE serves it to MELISSA)
Here. Specialty of the house.

MELISSA

(Takes glass, eyeing it skeptically) What is it?

MAURY

Maury's Magic Meteor. Toss that sucker down. It'll make you feel famous.

MELISSA

What is it? *(She sips gingerly)*

MAURY

Like it?

MELISSA

I can't tell what it is.

JOE

Just a little something from us, to make you feel better.

MELISSA

Not bad. *(Continues to sip)*

MAURY

It makes me cough.

JOE

It won't cure your cold, but after two or three, you won't care.

MELISSA

You boys really shouldn't be around alcohol, and I shouldn't drink around you.

JOE

We're fine. We like having company.

MAURY

Most people can't stand to be around us.

MELISSA

I can't imagine why. I think you're both very sweet. (*JOE and MAURY exchange a knowing and pitying look*) Well. Joey, are your parents really in Switzerland?

JOE

Yes.

MELISSA

Why didn't you go with them?

JOE

I thought that, on their last trip, they should be alone together.

MELISSA

It's funny that they should have gone while you had school.

JOE

Actually, it was the perfect time for them.

MAURY

Yes, but you...

JOE

I'm fine.

MELISSA

But you understand what my mother meant when she said you must stay with us for the time being. As responsible neighbors, we can't let a young boy stay alone and unprotected. Whether you want to admit it or not, you need someone to take care of you.

MAURY

And what about you? Since you got shit-canned, who's gonna take care of you?

MELISSA

Well, I've got Charles. I've got my wedding to plan. Maybe it's better that I have some time now. There's a lot to do. When it's all over, I'll have time to look for another job. I have an excellent résumé. Finding the right place shouldn't be difficult. That law firm just wasn't a good fit for me, that's all. I'll get back on track, when it's all over.

MAURY

When it's all over, you won't need no tracks, and you won't need no job. When it's all over, man, it's gonna be all over.

MELISSA

What does he mean?

JOE

You never need to ask Maury what he means. He always says exactly what he means.

MAURY

Big honkin' rock!

MELISSA

(*To JOE*) How do you guys plan on getting back in school?

JOE

We weren't planning on it.

MAURY

My Uncle Ted says a boy in school is like tits on a boar-hog.

MELISSA

(*To JOE*) Does he always talk like this?

JOE

Especially when he's doing Jane time.

MAURY

I might go live with Grandpa Lyle!

MELISSA

Grandpa Lyle. I like the sound of that. It's nice and rural.

JOE

His Grandpa might try and get him into school someplace else, although there probably isn't time.

MELISSA

Time for what? (*JOE and MAURY exchange their look again.*) OK. Well, Joey, what about you? How are you going to get back in school?

JOE

I'm not sure I want to attend a school where it's a crime to...

MAURY

He's worried about the sky.

MELISSA

You must go back. There's no alternative. It's too bad your parents had to leave just before this happened. Maybe we could contact them. I'm sure they'd want to be here.

JOE

They know. That's one of the reasons they left. It was their cue.

MELISSA

That's crazy! Going on vacation in your only child's hour of need.

JOE

They needed Switzerland more than I need school.

MELISSA

You don't mind being alone? Hmm. Do you, uh, have a girlfriend, Joey?

JOE

I have one or two very satisfying platonic relationships. They're the most practical kind, when you have no freedom, no money, no credit, and you're not allowed to leave the house after eight p.m.

MELISSA

What about you, Maury? Do you have a girl?

MAURY

Heck no. Jane says, if I ever knock anybody up, she'll have me fixed, just like the cat.

MELISSA

(To JOE) He sees things in rather dramatic terms, doesn't he? *(Looks at drink, knocks it back)* That wasn't bad. A little sweet, perhaps. No, what I meant was, a girlfriend, someone to talk to, could be nice when things aren't going well. For instance, I have Charles. He'll be concerned that I got sacked at the firm where he works. But after five minutes of fuming, he'll simmer down, relax, we'll talk it out. Everything will be fine.

MAURY

Don't count on it. You oughta hear Jane: *(HE jumps up and points an accusing finger at an invisible man as HE assumes Jane's personality)* "All men are fornicators."

JOEY

That's Jane talking again.

MAURY

The last time I thought everything was going to be "fine", I could hear Jane and Ed in the kitchen: "Get your own damn dinner, you horny rat!"

JOE

He's overheard many lively conversations over the years.

MELISSA

I see. Maury, are your parents separated?

MAURY

(Wielding an imaginary knife) "I'll remove your private parts with this butter knife and run 'em through the food processor. Then we'll see how much your stewardess loves you, you weasel!"

MELISSA

A stewardess?

JOE

His dad used to travel a lot.

MAURY

"I'll turn your testicles to cappuccino, you over-sexed gerbil!"

MELISSA

Good heavens.

MAURY

(Waving the imaginary knife) "Isn't she a little young for you, Ed? When you're not appalling her with your shriveled, wizened manhood, what do you do with her, Ed? Help her with her homework?"

MELISSA

My goodness.

MAURY

"Teach her to read, Ed? Help her with her geography? Huh?" *(Slashes the air with the invisible dagger)* "Whaddya do, Ed? Get that child under the covers with her fucking geography book and teach her the goddamn capital of North Dakota? Huh?"

MELISSA

(Alarmed, turning to JOE for reassurance) He certainly has a flair for the dramatic.

MAURY

(In full swing) "When it's five a.m. and she's puking her guts up because you're too damn inconsiderate to use a condom, what do you, Ed? Do you call the principal at her school? *(Mimicking a phone call)* 'Excuse me, sir, my sweet little Samantha can't come to school and get her high school education today. You see, she's up to her eyeballs in vomit induced by my rampaging lust, my insane carnal appetite, my low-life rut...'"

JOE

He's an excellent impersonator. You should see him do Cary Grant.

MAURY

"You gonna teach that bimbo algebra, Ed? Help her with her home-ec projects? *Huh?*"

JOE

You have to give him credit. He has Jane down cold.

MELISSA

But it's horrific! What a life for a poor kid.

JOE

It's all right. Jane gives him enough money. There are usually doughnuts in the house. He never gets bugged about doing homework. Since his father unwittingly convinced Jane that all men are worthless, she has no expectations that Maury will turn out any better. No expectations, no pressure. Right?

MELISSA

She's lucky the social workers haven't gotten after her. They'd love to make her stop drinking and give that boy a better home life.

JOE

He's got a good home life. Just not in *his* home. He comes over here and plays with the computer. He had one of his own, but Ed took it with him when he moved out.

MELISSA

What about you?

JOE

He needs it worse than I do. He might as well enjoy the little time we've got left.

MELISSA

You said it again.

JOE

Said what?

MELISSA

Something about how there isn't enough time. If you're not in school and you're not working, how could there not be time?

JOE

Easy.

MELISSA

But why not? (*JOE and MAURY exchange a knowing glance.*) Oh, I get it. It's a guy thing. An *in* joke.

JOE

Not exactly...

MAURY

This is a joke everyone'll get.

MELISSA

I'd better go home.

MAURY

Big honkin' rock!

MELISSA

Why does he say that?

JOE

It intrigues him.

MELISSA

Is he talking about, like a meteor?

JOE

Or an asteroid. Either way... (*Shrugs*)

MELISSA

Oh. Is that why you guys are being so fatalistic? (*Laughs*) You think we're going to get creamed by a shooting star? (*Laughs again*) Come on, guys. You can do better than that.

(*JOE and MAURY exchange another long look, then look with pity at MELISSA.*)

MELISSA, *Continued*

Why are you looking at me like that? Don't. It makes me feel funny.

JOE

No one's said anything funny.

MELISSA

I'd better go home.

JOE

Why did they fire you?

MELISSA

It was something ambiguous about unsatisfactory work. I know that can't be it. I never lost a case. My clients liked me. I brought new business into the firm. Billed lots of hours. I don't know. Maybe they just needed to cut back and I had the least seniority. Who knows? Maybe they just didn't like me.

JOE

We can relate to that.

MELISSA

Four years of college. Three years in law school. My first job lasts a year. Not a very good return on one's investment. (*MAURY gets HER another drink*) Thank you. It's enough to make you lose faith, you know? It's as if I got ready to go to this big party. And when I get there, everyone's gone and all that's left is the janitor pushing a broom in this empty hall. Hmm. If I sound self-pitying, it's because I am. I do feel sorry for myself. And rightly so! A career woman doesn't get fired. Not in this day and age. And if she does...maybe it's time to look for a different career. What's in this drink?

MAURY

A little of this, a little of that.

MELISSA

It's very relaxing. (*Starts to fade*)

JOE

Maybe Charles can help you find another job.

MELISSA

Charles doesn't know anyone outside his law firm. He has no life outside his law firm. If it disappeared, he'd disappear. He can't change a light bulb or boil water or do his own laundry. All he knows is that bunch of stuffy...bigoted...egotistical...mean... You want some advice, kid? Stay out of school. For God's sake, don't become a lawyer... You know what would be a nice job? A shepherd. Watching over your flock by night. Yeah, that'd be great. Peaceful. A bit pungent perhaps, but, as they say, nothing is perfect. You'd have to have the right clothes... (*Startled by an insight*) Did you know that? Did you know that nothing is perfect?

JOE

I learned that in algebra class.

MELISSA

The worst thing about being out of work is when people tell you to keep your spirits up. I can deal with rejection; I can deal with being broke. But one thing I cannot—I will not—be subjected to is being told to keep my spirits up. I refuse to have a good attitude so that someone will think I'm Polly Perfect and give me some dumb job. "Keep your chin up, Melissa!" "Have a Positive Attitude, Missy." If there is one thing that positively *slays* my

MELISSA, *Continued*

spirit, it's the necessity of having a positive attitude. It makes me want to burn my law degree and go to work slinging hash at the truck stop... What's in this drink?

JOE

Cough syrup and vermouth.

MELISSA

(Tossing it down) Not bad.

(Enter JEREMY, Melissa's brother, early twenties. If HE quit drinking and got some exercise once in a while, HE wouldn't be bad looking. His hair is never quite combed, his clothes are never quite right. His intentions are good, but HE has never gotten with the program and probably never will. HE is nevertheless confident of his superiority over everyone, living or otherwise, and this includes Shaw, Cole Porter and Picasso. HE is so busy waiting for his talent to be recognized that HE will never get around to doing anything. What he's supposedly talented at is anybody's guess. HE has some record albums under his arm, and always carries a messy manuscript.)

JEREMY

(To MELISSA) Mom said I'd find you here.

MELISSA

We were just leaving.

JEREMY

(Making himself at home) Whatever you're having, I'll have a double. Joey, congratulations on killing your parents. Brilliant concept. Now I can come over and listen to your dad's great sound system anytime.

MELISSA

Jerry, what's wrong with you?

JOE

It's okay.

MELISSA

My brother's kidding, Joey.

MAURY

How do you know?

MELISSA

Because Joe's parents haven't been killed. They're just...gone. For a while.

MAURY

How do you know?

MELISSA

That's what mother said. Didn't she?

MAURY

I haven't seen them around here lately.

MELISSA

Neither have I...

MAURY

So you don't know where they are.

MELISSA

Well, I know. I just thought they were, you know...gone.

MAURY

Maybe he did kill them. (*Exits to kitchen*)

JEREMY

(*Crossing to stereo speakers*) Well. Let's listen to *Abbey Road* before the cops get here. What great speakers.

JOE

He was quite fond of them.

JEREMY

Everyone said his sound system was state-of-the-art, and that he had absolutely no taste in music whatsoever.

JOE

Not everyone appreciates the polka.

JEREMY

I took the liberty of bringing over a few albums. Mom gets nervous when I play them.

MELISSA

That's not nerves. That's outrage. You're too old to be listening to Beatles albums in your mom's basement.

JEREMY

Which is why I'm *here*. Let's listen to a few of these. They always cheer *me* up whenever *I* get fired.

MELISSA

How did you now I got fired?

JEREMY

Mom's using words she doesn't usually use, and you're sitting in the neighbors' house drinking something red. I'm a failure, but I'm an observant failure. Come on, guys, let's rock 'n roll. *(Removes a record from its cover)*

MELISSA

How'd she know? I didn't tell her.

JEREMY

Someone did. *(To JOE)* Your father is said to have the only record player left in town. It shows he has exquisite taste and an appreciation of traditional values. I love record albums. Their covers remind me of electric blankets. They're rich and warm. I hate compact discs. They come in these little plastic coffins. Whenever I unwrap one, I feel like I'm opening up a TV dinner I don't really want to eat.

JOE

My father doesn't let me use his stereo.

JEREMY

No problem. I know how they work. *(Rubbing his hands together in anticipation)* I suggest a complete Beatles retrospective, starting from square one.

JOE

You can't play a record without a needle. He always hides it.

JEREMY

He hides the needle?

JOE

He's very possessive that way. But I don't mind. I was never into music.

MAURY

(Entering with more drinks) He likes to observe things.

MELISSA

I can see that this is going to turn into a male bonding session. In a few minutes you'll be arguing about the Super Bowl and spraying beer on each other. I'm going home to plan my wedding and look for a job. Before I go, I just want to say one thing: Don't drink all the...stuff. I may be back later. *(Starts to leave, then comes back)* Joey? You didn't kill your parents, did you?

MAURY

He didn't kill them.

MELISSA
That's good.

MAURY
But you won't be seeing them again.

(MELISSA exits.)

JEREMY
This is a nice room. I've never been here before.

JOE
I know.

JEREMY
My mother and father have been here. But I never have. Until now.

JOE
Nope.

JEREMY
Nope.

JOE
It's because they don't like you.

JEREMY
Who?

JOE
My parents.

JEREMY
Oh. For a minute there I thought you meant *my* parents don't like me.

JOE
They don't.

JEREMY
I can't say I'm surprised.

JOE
But we still respect you.

JEREMY
That's a relief. What's in this drink?

JOE

Or music appreciation class.

JEREMY

I used to like music appreciation.

MAURY

That's 'cause you're old.

JEREMY

Age has nothing to do with it. Anyone, of any age, can like music.

JOE

We're not talking about liking music. We're talking about appreciating it. Enjoying music is fun. Appreciating it is a lot of work.

MAURY

Damn straight.

JEREMY

What kind of music do you like?

JOE

Maury likes music that makes him feel like he's just been run over by a cement mixer. Personally, I don't listen to much of anything.

JEREMY

You don't like music?

MAURY

He *looks*.

JEREMY

At what?

MAURY

The sky.

JEREMY

You're into astronomy?

MAURY

Hell no.

JEREMY

You study the sky?

JOE

I don't so much study it as...

MAURY

Worry!

JOE

I've been worried about the sky lately.

JEREMY

The sky? What's to worry? It gets light, it gets dark, sometimes it's blue. Who cares?

JOE

You'd be surprised.

MAURY

He worries a lot.

JEREMY

Why did you guys get expelled?

JOE

Maury got expelled for remembering his mother's birthday. I got expelled for worrying about the sky.

JEREMY

(Long pause) Okay. Well. I hear you're all alone here now.

JOE

No, I've had plenty of company.

JEREMY

I mean, you're *living* alone. Your parents are gone.

JOE

Yes, I'm rattling around in here all by myself.

JEREMY

I was thinking. Since you've got all this extra room, I was wondering...

JOE

You want to rent a room?

JEREMY

I don't mean rent, exactly. What I meant...

JOE

You want a free room?

JEREMY

I didn't mean free, exactly. What I meant...

JOE

What did you mean?

MAURY

Spit it out.

JEREMY

Well, you see. I am, at the moment, between opportunities. What I need...

MAURY

You have a home.

JOE

You live with Sarah and Stu.

JEREMY

Yes, I do live there. However...

JOE

Yes?

JEREMY

There's more to life than living.

JOE

I wouldn't mind living with Sarah and Stu. They always smell good.

MAURY

Jane's house smells like olives.

JOE

Why do you need two residences?

JEREMY

I need a place to play my records. Since I dropped out of school, I haven't been able to find a job. To soothe my nerves, I need to listen to music, which needs to be played at a certain decibel level. This poses certain problems for my housemates.

JOE

You want a room here?

JEREMY

No, I need a studio.

JOE

What's the difference between a room and a studio?

JEREMY

A room's where you go to get drunk. A studio's where you go to get drunk and worry about the meaning of life.

JOE

If all you want is a place to listen to records, you're welcome. But you'll have to furnish your own needle.

JEREMY

I just need a few hours a day. I only understand the meaning of life when I'm listening to my records. You see, they don't understand me at home.

MAURY

You're too old to understand.

JEREMY

What's that supposed to mean?

JOE

He means there comes a time when understanding is beside the point. Sooner or later, a person will sacrifice knowing the meaning of life in exchange for a little peace and quiet.

JEREMY

Thanks. My mom keeps saying I should be out looking for a job. I've had a few interviews. The thing is: The only time the world makes any sense to me is when I'm listening to my records. When I've listened for a few days, I finally understand what everything is all about. Then I go to another job interview, and everything is chaos again. In a nutshell, I'm not going to any more job interviews. I'm going to listen to my records until whatever happens happens. And since you have a piano in the other room, I can work on my musical here.

JOE

What?

JEREMY

I'm in the middle of composing a magnum opus, something that will make me immortal in the annals of The American Theatre. My working conditions aren't conducive to creation at the moment. You see, my parents don't like music.

MAURY

“You don’t like it here, get your own place!” That’s what Jane tells me.

JEREMY

Easier said than done. It was easy to work at college. But the Dean of Admissions and I came to a parting of the ways.

JOE

What happened?

JEREMY

There are conflicting stories. Some say I took a leave of absence to pursue my art.

JOE

Sounds like you flunked out.

JEREMY

That’s what the Dean told Sarah and Stu. And, of course, faced with a choice between believing their own flesh and blood, or the invective of some redneck bureaucratic fascist, they naturally opted for the latter. And now I have nowhere to compose.

JOE

I wonder if the Beatles had this problem. (*JEREMY glares*) Just thinking out loud.

JEREMY

If I could just have a few months to finish composing, I know it would be a hit.

JOE

What is your musical?

JEREMY

It’s called “Earl!” With an exclamation point.

JOE

That’s interesting.

JEREMY

A lot of great musicals have one-word titles, with an exclamation point. Like “Oklahoma!” or “Oliver!”

MAURY

Or “Baloney!”

JOE

Who wrote that one?

JEREMY

Like a lot of great musicals, it's based on a great literary work. But most of the good novels and stories have been taken. That's the way it is with my generation. All the good stuff has been used up, and there's nothing left for me. And then I thought of it.

JOE

Thought of what?

JEREMY

The one great work of literature that's never been set to music. The one Shakespeare and Puccini would use if they were alive today. The greatest work of the last millennium.

JOE

Which is?

JEREMY

The Warren Report on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy. That's where I got the title. Earl Warren was the leader of the Warren Commission. So my musical is titled, appropriately enough, "Earl!"

JOE

Funny how no one thought of that before.

JEREMY

That's what genius is. Seeing possibilities that no one else can see.

JOE

So you want to spend the rest of your life in my basement, listening to Beatles records and singing about the Warren Commission?

JEREMY

I see myself as a sort of cross between Paul McCartney and Lee Harvey Oswald, only without the rifle.

JOE

Oh well. Whether or not you get a job or finish your musical is small potatoes at this point.

JEREMY

Compared to what?

JOE

It's difficult to explain.

MAURY

Big honkin' rock!

JOE

There isn't much for anyone to do now, except...

JEREMY

Except what?

MAURY

Worry about the sky.

JEREMY

That takes up a lot of your time, does it?

JOE

It's all there is.

SARAH

(Entering) I might have known.

JOE

Hello again. We were just discussing the future, such as it is.

SARAH

He asked if he could come over here and listen to records all day, didn't he?

JOE

I don't think he meant *all* day.

SARAH

You're a piece of work, Jeremy.

JEREMY

Just a few hours here and there. I was thinking: Afternoons, maybe one to five. Evenings, maybe seven or eight 'til eleven or whenever. That would allow everyone else to grab some shut-eye.

SARAH

I heard of kids dropping out of college to join the Peace Corps or save mankind or something. I never heard of dropping out of college so you could listen to old records. What are you doing about your future?

JEREMY

I'm appreciating art. It's an intellectual exercise.

SARAH

You're going to drink beer and listen to Beatles records.

JOE

I didn't know there were any of those left around. I thought they were all in museums.

SARAH

Jeremy has the last copy of every temper tantrum ever committed to vinyl.

JEREMY

They're called archives.

SARAH

They're called nonsense. What are you doing here?

JEREMY

I heard there was a room for rent.

SARAH

(*To JOE*) Don't let him bring records over here. You'll never get rid of him.

JEREMY

What are *you* doing here?

SARAH

I need to talk to these boys in private. Run along home. I'll deal with you later. (*JEREMY picks up records and exits.*) I can't believe it. Dropping out of college, with no job, no nothing. And *you*. (*Points to JOE*) I've been on the phone to the school. You were running around telling everyone the world was going to end. You scared little Mimi Haggembrock so bad she started hyperventilating and had to be taken to the hospital. You've got every child in your grade in hysterics because you told them a meteor is going to kill us all any day now.

MAURY

And prom weekend is coming up!

JOE

I didn't tell anyone anything.

MAURY

Oh nooo! Now nobody'll get laid!

SARAH

No wonder they expelled you. You're lucky they didn't call the police.

MAURY

They'll have to cancel the prom now! What are we gonna do with all those corsages! All that fake champagne? All those ribbed condoms!

SARAH
What is he babbling about?

MAURY
Mrs. Goodwin, can I ask you a question?

SARAH
Certainly, Maury. What is it?

MAURY
What is sex like?

SARAH
Go home, Maury.

MAURY
Jane won't tell me, either.

JOE
Can he stay a few more minutes? I don't think Jane is ready for him yet.

SARAH
I want to know, from you, exactly what happened at school.

MAURY
Principal Morgan called Jane and told her I had to stay home. That's not what she wanted to hear. (*Waves his finger at an imaginary victim again, doing his JANE imitation*) "If you think I raised you to be a jailbird, young man, you've got another thing coming! Up to your room this minute. But first, get me some olives!"

SARAH
Maury, you can stay on one condition.

MAURY
Yes, ma'am?

SARAH
Stay quiet while I talk to Joe, or I'll have to break your face into little tiny pieces.

MAURY
It's a deal.

SARAH
Okay. Now, Joey. Tell me what happened at school.

JOE

We were sitting there in Mr. Dunbar's class. And Mr. Dunbar excused himself and left the room for a few minutes. My desk is close to the window, and I was looking at the sky.

SARAH

You should have been studying.

JOE

And Priscilla Watson, who sits near me, said I looked worried and asked me why.

SARAH

And?

JOE

And I told her I was worried about the sky.

SARAH

And?

JOE

She started whispering to somebody next to her, and somebody else started whispering to somebody else. Then the bell rang, and we all went to lunch.

SARAH

What happened then?

JOE

I had macaroni and cheese, green beans and applesauce. Actually, I had two helpings of green beans—mine and Maury's—because he has a problem with vegetables.

SARAH

Yes, dear, we all know that Maury has lots of problems. Then what?

JOE

At the end of the day, Principal Morgan asked me where Al and Ellen were. I told him they were in Switzerland. He was terribly disappointed that he couldn't call them up to bad-mouth me, but since there was no one else around for him to verbally abuse, he had to settle for me.

SARAH

And?

JOE

He pointed his finger at me and gave me his "Young-man-I'm-doing-this-for-the-greater-good-of-the-school" speech. He loves to give it. He gave it to Harvey Foster when Harvey got busted in the boys' room for selling naked pictures of his Aunt Peggy. It's the speech about how he holds you in the highest personal regard and believes you have many sterling qualities

JOE, *Continued*

and a great future, et cetera, but, for the greater good of the school, it would be best if you took a nice long vacation and never came back.

MAURY

Jane says, "Go take a long walk off a short pier!"

SARAH

I see.

JOE

So I came home. Maury dropped by to keep me company. And to discuss the problems he'd encountered regarding his birthday card for Jane.

SARAH

That wasn't a birthday card, Maury. That was what we call "vandalism."

MAURY

Words, words, words...

SARAH

And you're leaving something out of the story, Joey. I don't think you were expelled for telling one of your classmates that you're worried about the sky.

JOE

(Shrugs) At this point, it's not worth worrying about.

SARAH

Why not?

MAURY

Bring on that big honkin' rock!

SARAH

I thought I told you to be quiet. *(To JOE)* Being expelled from school is worth worrying about. Something has to be done. I want to meet with Principal Morgan, and I want to get in touch with your parents. There has to be a meeting.

MAURY

Call Jane. She looves meetings.

SARAH

Maury.

MAURY

(Pantomiming the telephone) "We need to have a meeting, first thing in the morning!"

SARAH

I called the Principal. He's supposed to call me back. We're old friends. Maybe I can talk him into coming over here and discussing this informally.

JOE

Whatever you do, I'm sure it will be the right thing.

SARAH

So what I want you to do now is get your clothes together in a little suitcase, and bring your toothbrush, and come over to our house until Ellen gets back. It's absurd for a boy your age to be all by himself.

JOE

I'm not all by myself. Maury's here.

SARAH

Maury, you're going home right now. Have Jane call me.

MAURY

Yes, ma'am.

SARAH

I mean it.

MAURY

Yes, ma'am.

SARAH

Joey, I'll expect you in ten minutes. We have to play bridge tonight, but I'll want to discuss all of this with you first thing tomorrow, understand?

JOE

Okay.

SARAH

And Maury. Don't buy those olives. Go right home.

MAURY

I'll tell her, but she's not going to like it.

SARAH

Do it anyway. *(Exits)*

(There is a Long pause. MAURY and JOE think things over. JOE looks out the window.)

MAURY

How much time is left?

JOE

Not enough to worry about.

MAURY

I wasn't going anywhere anyway. Still...I wish there'd been time for me to do a *few* things. Like, I always wanted a chain-saw. Jane would never let me have one. Having just one chain-saw, for a little while. That would have been nice.

JOE

What's stopping you?

MAURY

And a snow-blower.

JOE

My Uncle Roy used to say, "There's no time like the present." He said a lot of things like that. I'm sure you had an uncle who said the same thing.

MAURY

And a hedge trimmer. And maybe some hedges. What are hedges, anyway?

JOE

Things you have to trim.

MAURY

And a case of olives for Jane.

JOE

I'm glad to see you're thinking of others.

MAURY

And a big honkin' book, it would take your whole life to read. In case I ever actually learn to read.

JOE

"Busy hands are happy hands."

MAURY

And Alice Altoona.

(MAURY exits. JOE smiles and looks out the window. LIGHTS FADE OUT.)

ACT I; SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: Several hours later. The same room, but a few things have been added: A snow-blower, a chain saw, a hedge trimmer, a case of olives, some weighty tomes, and ALICE ALTOONA, who is JOE and MAURY's age. SHE is a charming, life-loving, impecunious creature of well-honed insouciance, unfortunate circumstance, untimely experience, and with no convictions whatsoever. SHE wears a lot of necklaces, bracelets, rings, and other hardware. SHE probably has a couple of tattoos. ALICE lounges casually, MAURY examines his swag—which includes ALICE, with whom HE is most impressed—and JOE looks out the window.)

ALICE

My mom is gonna be like so pissed.

MAURY

(Fascinated by her) What's it like to be a girl?

ALICE

It's neat. People give you stuff. It's like: I just try to be myself, wherever I am.

JOE

Being ourselves doesn't work for us.

MAURY

Every time we try that, we have to stay after school. Jane says if I'm myself much longer, she's going to become somebody else.

ALICE

Is this where you guys like live?

JOE

I lived here with my parents. Maury lives down the street with Jane.

MAURY

I just use this place when I'm doing Jane time.

ALICE

Where's your like brothers and sisters?

JOE

It's just me.

ALICE

That is so cool. God, if I had all this room to myself, I would be like so happy. I could go around naked all the time.

MAURY

We wouldn't mind.

ALICE

Sometimes I do that at home. I go in my room and take off my clothes and just stand there or lay down on my bed and just be perfectly still. It is so cool. But it never lasts very long, because my sister comes in and wants to like show me her latest bunch of baby pictures. She's married and has her own house, but she has to come over to our house and show us her stupid baby pictures like five times a day. She gets pregnant every other weekend. And my mom is like: "Oh goody, more babies, I get to clean up more vomit." And I'm like: I don't even like my own vomit, so I don't really want to like cope with somebody else's. Or my mom comes in and she's like "What are you doing? Get dressed before I tell your father. Why aren't you pregnant like your sister?" Or like my father comes in, and sometimes his friends are with him. They've been hunting or bowling or something and they're all bloody or sweaty or something, and it's like gross. They spill beer on my carpet and they never want to leave.

MAURY

(Picks up chain saw) You want to go outside, cut something down?

ALICE

Oh God. My mom catches me with a chain saw; she would be like so pissed. She'd be like: "You drop that thing, or it'll slip or something and you won't be able to have babies like your sister." Stuff like that.

JOE

The chain saw as a method of birth control: You may be onto something there.

ALICE

My mom is like frantic that I might not have like twenty-seven kids by the time I'm nineteen. She's like, "It's a gift from God" And I'm like, "If God wants to give me a gift, how 'bout like a *car*, or a *sailboat*. Something I can *use*."

(SARAH enters.)

SARAH

I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to talk last night, Joey. Our bridge game went on forever. Who's this?

MAURY

Alice Altoona.

SARAH

I'm not sure your mother wants you to have girls over here, Joey.

JOE

You're a girl.

SARAH

That's different.

MAURY

Melissa's a girl.

SARAH

She's different. What is that chain saw doing here? And this snow-blower?

JOE

It's kind of a long story.

SARAH

We'll settle that later. I have too many things on my mind right now. I talked to Principal Morgan. I explained to him that your parents are gone and no one knows why.

MAURY

I know why.

SARAH

Maury, please. (*To JOE*) He understands that there may be some issues at home that affect your behavior at school. He's willing to discuss them with you.

MAURY

How about me?

SARAH

No. You're a vandal. You're history.

MAURY

Darn.

SARAH

As I told you before, Principal Morgan is a close friend of the family. He's willing to meet with us here. I've invited him for coffee.

MAURY

What about cookies?

SARAH

Forget it, Maury. You're not invited. Maybe Jane can arrange a meeting for you. I can only handle one expulsion at a time.

MAURY

I like the real gooey kind. I like it when they pull out your fillings and you get to skip school the next day to have them fixed.

SARAH

Now, Joey, when Principal Morgan arrives, try to be nice. He might allow you to return to school, under certain conditions.

JOE

It's an academic question at this point.

SARAH

That's exactly the kind of thing you can't say to him. You have to be contrite. And let him do the talking. And don't interrupt. I'll be there for moral support. I hope you understand.

JOE

Sure.

SARAH

Now, before we meet with Principal Morgan, I want you to tell me, in your own words, what happened.

MAURY

Well, it was Jane's birthday. The Big Four-O, as she called it, and—

SARAH

We're not talking to you, Maury. We all know why you were expelled. You were expelled because you're bad. Now, Joey, tell me exactly what happened.

JOE

I was looking out the window while Mr. Dunbar was gone. And Priscilla Watson—

SARAH

You told me this before. I don't believe you were expelled from school because you told some girl that you were worried about the sky.

JOE

That's what happened.

SARAH

It doesn't make sense.

JOE

At the end of the day, Principal Morgan said to me, "Young man, the current academic paradigm within this logistical framework has reached a terminal time-frame within the context of curricular dysfunctionality!"

MAURY

He cut my boy loose.

JOE

I wanted to tell him that my paradigm can beat up his paradigm any day of the week. But he was already confused enough as it was.

MAURY

He disrespected my bro.

JOE

I was given my unconditional release.

MAURY

Placed on permanent waivers.

JOE

They didn't pick up my option.

MAURY

Jewed, screwed and tattooed.

SARAH

Maury, perhaps you could go fix Jane a drink.

MAURY

She already has one.

ALICE

Priscilla Watson is like insane. She keeps trying to get knocked up and she can't. It's like making her crazy.

SARAH

Why would she do that? She's got her whole life ahead of her.

ALICE

So she won't have to take algebra any more. They've made her take it about like fifty times and she keeps flunking. She can't handle it.

SARAH

She wants to get pregnant so she won't have to take algebra?

ALICE

Shows how much *she* knows. She is so like ignorant. Everyone knows: it's like, you have your baby, but if you haven't graduated, you still have to do like homework. Fat ladies in old cars bring it to your house. And Mr. Morgan, he's like: "Well, if she's home with her kid all day, she has lots of time to do extra algebra!" So he like sends over a shit-load of algebra for you to do while you're trying to take care of this kid you only had in the first place so you

ALICE, *Continued*

could get out of going to school and taking algebra. And now you're like, "God, if I'd known this would happen, I'd have just learned how to do algebra."

SARAH

So you're saying...

ALICE

Right. If you don't like algebra, forget about sex until you're forty. Of course, I kind of like algebra, so I—

SARAH

(Holds up her hand like a traffic cop) Don't finish that sentence. Now, where were we?

JOE

Procreation and its relationship to the value of x.

SARAH

You told some students that you thought a meteor was going to hit the earth and cause mass destruction. It made one girl so upset they took her to the hospital. You caused a huge panic at the school. So the Principal decided, for the good of the student body as a whole, to expel you. Now, as we grow older, one of the things we must learn is that we must be careful of what we say when others are listening. Our words can affect others in ways we may not have anticipated, as you've found out the hard way. Now: Principal Morgan will be at our home shortly. He's doing this as a special favor to Stu and me. I'll talk to him first. When he's ready for you, I'll come get you. Then, I want you to stay at our house until your parents return from Switzerland.

ALICE

All he told that chick was: he's worried about the sky. So she gets together with her little band of traveling Nazis, and they corner Mimi Hagg Brock in the bathroom, because they know she's half hysterical all the time anyway, and plus she's dumb and will believe anything. So they start telling her that a meteor the size of Michigan is going to land on Earth and kill us all, just like it killed the dinosaurs. So Screaming Mimi goes flying down the hall yelling about how we're all going to die. Mimi's on medication. Her whole family is. Her mother looks like a horse. She sleeps with the veterinarian. I think she gets the drugs from him. I'd rather spend the day looking at my sister's baby pictures than spend one minute with that girl. You know Mimi Hagg Brock.

SARAH

No, I don't.

JOE

Brain damage in sensible shoes.

MAURY

She's crazier than Jane.

ALICE

She usually chooses religious holidays to flip out. But Christmas is a long ways off. I guess she couldn't wait.

SARAH

So you're saying it's all a lie. The world isn't really going to end, and you didn't say it would.

JOE

All I said was: I'm a little worried about the sky.

ALICE

It's going to end.

MAURY

Big honkin' rock!

SARAH

Please tell him to stop saying that.

JOE

Maury?

SARAH

I'm beginning to doubt my own sanity. Joe, I'm doing you a favor here. When you talk to Principal Morgan, be good. That's all I'm asking. Just be good. *(Starts to leave, stops in front of MAURY and points at him)* And you! Go home. *(Turns to ALICE)* And you!...I don't know where to begin. *(Exits)*

ALICE

That one needs it worse than anyone I ever saw.

JOE

She's quite tense.

ALICE

(Changing subject) I forgot to ask: What am I like doing here?

JOE

Maury's last chance to get a chain saw.

ALICE

I'm like standing on this corner, waiting for the bus, and this guy like picks me up, and I'm like: Hey, I've been dragged off to worse places. At least, wherever he's taking me, I probably won't have to spend the day looking at baby pictures.

JOE

I hope you don't mind.

ALICE

Oh, heck no. When we lived in Omaha, this like happened to me all the time.

JOE

You see, Maury's been doing a bunch of things he couldn't do before without worrying about legal repercussions.

ALICE

Before what?

MAURY

Big rock.

ALICE

The asteroid. The comet.

JOE

They call it a lot of things.

ALICE

That's going to hit the earth?

JOE

Yep.

ALICE

Knock everybody down?

JOE

That's the one.

ALICE

When is this going to happen?

JOE

Let's say you want to write a check, but you're afraid it'll bounce. Go ahead and write it. It won't make it to the bank.

ALICE

I'm like: I thought that's what you were talking about in school. But it's like, I wasn't sure. So. Like how long have you wanted to pick me up at the bus stop and carry me away?

MAURY

(Embarrassed) I dunno.

ALICE

I wish you'd done this when we had like more time. I could have like taught you a few things. We could have gone to Omaha.

MAURY

I have a learning disability.

ALICE

I could have fixed it. I've like done that for like a lot of guys.

MAURY

Would you...

ALICE

Yes?

MAURY

Like to...

ALICE

Yes?

MAURY

Have some cough syrup?

ALICE

Not unless you've got some vermouth.

MAURY

As a matter of fact.

ALICE

Sure. A nice tall one.

(MAURY exits.)

JOE

You can leave if you want to.

ALICE

No. I'm like okay. It's just. I was like: Where is *this* guy taking me?

JOE

We're not kidnappers.

ALICE

I've been kidnapped lots of times. I don't mind. One time, these guys made me go to a concert with them. It was at this like fairgrounds. They passed out during the show. I waited around for them to wake up, but they were out cold. So I waited a few hours. Then I went home. I went back to the fairgrounds the next day and looked for them, but they were gone. I wish I knew their names, but they wouldn't like tell me. They were the shyest kidnappers I ever had.

JOE

Maury's kind of shy.

ALICE

My Uncle Paul kidnapped me once. He took me into this like basement and made me watch these movies with him. I didn't like understand them. They were in black-and-white, and they were in like Spanish or Greek or something. When Paul's wife got home from work she came down there and knocked the crap out of him. Then she stayed and watched the rest of the movie with us. They're divorced now. He's in the Veterans Hospital with a serious liver.

JOE

Cirrhosis of the liver?

ALICE

Something. I hope they have movies there.

JOE

They've cut back the funding at those places.

ALICE

I didn't tell my mom about it, because I knew she'd be like: "Oh God, you got pregnant by your father's brother. Your baby will be like a wino." Paul's wife told her how he'd kidnapped me. So mom took me to this hospital to see if I'd been raped. She was hoping I'd be pregnant and that I'd have this real like tragic pregnancy she could brag to her sisters about. Then she took me to talk to the cops. What a day. This one detective made me sit there with his questions for like two hours. Then he took me to this like Chinese restaurant and asked me to spend the weekend with him in Kansas City. I'm like: "No way. I'll miss my bus." He took me out a few times after that, but I had to drop him when he came over with a gun at midnight one time. My dad doesn't allow guys with guns in the house after ten. He's real strict about that. So my dad told him I couldn't see him anymore. He had a nice car. He used to show me his war wounds. They were blue. So were his eyes.

JOE

You've lived a full life.

ALICE

I was going to write it all down, but I couldn't find a pencil. When I'm dead, I'm not going to miss anything. I wish I was like young again. Once you're too old to go to the circus, it's like: what's the point? If I got old, my mom would make me have a bunch of babies and then I'd have to get drunk a lot and go bowling on Thursday nights and get the crap kicked out of me by my husband and get divorced and sleep with a bunch of plumbers. Why bother? This one plumber my mom knows is kind of cute though. He lets me drive his truck, even though the cops took away my license. I took the truck to Branson one weekend without asking him. He wasn't like mad or anything. Branson isn't so hot. This one guy wanted me to join his band. I said, I can't sing or like play the guitar or anything. He said, "Who cares? Neither can anyone else around here." He said I could be a superstar in six months. And I'm like: I have to return my mother's plumber's truck or she's gonna be like, "God, you're in Missouri with a stolen truck. You're probably pregnant now." My mother wants me to get pregnant, but she wants to like be there when it happens. I don't know. I don't want any kids, but I don't want my mom to feel I've let her down. What I thought I'd do: in a couple years, when I'm done with algebra, I'll just borrow a bunch of baby pictures from somebody. Then I'll disappear for nine months and just send mom the pictures from Mexico or someplace. She'll never know the difference. She doesn't really want any more babies. She just likes pictures.

MAURY

(Enters with drink) I wish we had some aspirin.

JOE

Do you have a headache?

MAURY

No, but they go good with cough syrup.

ALICE

You want to go outside?

MAURY

Sure. Want me to bring the chain saw?

JOE

I better stay here. I'm expecting company.

MAURY

We could go over to my house, but Jane's probably changed the locks by now.

ALICE

I'd like to spend an hour without seeing anybody's mother.

MAURY

I got a great idea. Let's saw down the school.

ALICE

(Looking out the window) There's a guy coming up the drive.

JOE

Principal Morgan.

ALICE

He has three kids, but I don't know how he got them.

MAURY

Are you gonna give him the rest of the syrup?

JOE

No. He looks like he's already had some.

ALICE

With my luck, he'll turn out to be another one of my uncles. Let's get out of here.

(ALICE grabs MAURY by the hand and pulls him off. LIGHTS FADE OUT.)

ACT I; SCENE THREE

(AT RISE: a few minutes later. JOE is still sitting. PRINCIPAL MORGAN stands throughout the scene. The Principal is having a bad day. HE has been having a bad day for several years. HE is wearing a raincoat which is in urgent need of cleaning. HE is soiled and frazzled and is not well. His hair is a mess. HE seems to be fleeing something. Although the weather has been calm, HE seems to have come in from a storm, although he clearly feels no comfort or relief. HE has not had a good night's sleep in recent memory. HE needs a shave. HE has disorders of several internal organs. No sane health or life insurance agent would sell him a policy at any price. In a nutshell, PRINCIPAL MORGAN looks just like a school principal should look. HE tries to be imperious, but he's way too shallow and unimaginative to bring it off. HE has spent his career among adolescents, and it shows. There is a slight chance that he's had a martini recently; more likely, he is in a state of terminal distraction. JOE sits patiently throughout.)

PRINCIPAL MORGAN

So. I hear you're worried about the sky. Picture, if you will, a sunny summer's day, long ago, when the world was young. Or maybe not all that long ago. It *has* been a while. But never mind. Anyway. Picture, if you will, a sunny summer's day. A boy—a humble, unassuming youth with a heart of gold—walks down a pleasant street. With him: a black dog, whose soul is as pure as mountain air. Lofty elms tower above them as they take in the air of a Saturday morning. The milkman has been here, delivering real milk, not the chemical nightmare that

PRINCIPAL MORGAN, *Continued*

now passes for nature's most nearly perfect food. The real thing. And when the milkman brought it to your door, he didn't act like you were taking up his valuable time. As though it were your fault he's a milkman instead of a neurosurgeon. He did it gladly, and he wanted you to be glad, too. The boy tosses a stick, and the dog fetches it with glee and returns it, gratitude flowing from his eyes like light from a star. Yes! The dog was grateful to be able to serve me, to be my friend. They walk, and soon they are in the countryside, rolling hills and wide open spaces. The boy and his dog run, fierce and free. Around them, a good world works in harmony and peace. The sky is filled with music. The churches and the temples and the factories are all one. Hope and comfort are one. Peace and wealth are one. Truth and prosperity are one. And you're worried about the sky? Let me continue. Now imagine again: Years pass. The sky is now paved. It's got tar and hamburger wrappers and beer cans. The birds that used to soar up there are embedded in asphalt and cement, little skeletal statues to remind the casual observer that, once upon a time, God's creatures could move around a little bit, as their Creator intended them to, without being victimized by some psychopath with an engineering degree, an unlimited appetite, no conscience and a profit plan. Yes, you won't believe me—why should you? I'm a school administrator, what do I know?—but there was a time when a bird could leave its nest for a quick spin around the sky and be reasonably sure that when it returned its home hadn't been turned into a parking ramp. The dogs can't romp in the fields anymore because they've all got jobs at the airport, harassing Japanese businessmen and looking for cocaine inserted into the orifices of French armadillos. Instead of one good blizzard every three years, we get fifteen of the little bastards. The snow is filled with radioactive urine from hell and if you take a drink of water from the well, say your prayers first, because it doesn't rain water any more. It rains glue that glows in the dark and gives your eyeballs cancer just to look at it. It's illegal to be happy now, you know. It's illegal to go for a walk. It's illegal to have a dog, to have a hope of love in the world. No profit in it. It's not *pure*, they say. It's not *responsible*. It's not good for the *children*. Of course, if it comes to pass that we can make a buck putting arsenic in the children's drinking water, then the children will just have to drink arsenic. I've had a cold since nineteen eighty-nine and my doctor says it's a sign of moral decay. He thinks I'm immoral for not presenting him with a more lucrative and endearing affliction. And you're worried about the sky? I'm worried about the sky too. Because I can't see it anymore. And I want to know where my dog is. Some little girl is in the hospital in hysterics because she thinks one of her classmates predicted that the planet on which she resides is about to be creamed by an asteroid the size of Michigan. I don't know who told her that. Rumors abound. People lie. I refuse to crawl under a rock, just because you're worried about the sky. You hear that? If you want to burn my school to the ground, go right ahead. But be honest about it, like they did in the old days. Find yourself a real arsonist, fat guy named Artie, drives a '64 Cadillac with fins and no carburetor, trenchcoat, he'll schlep into the building at 3 a.m. with gas cans and a box of matches he stole from the A&P. But enough of this diversion. You want to torch us all like burned oatmeal cookies, be my guest. I'm ready to meet my maker. Not that he's dying to meet me. But I want to go honestly, with my boots on. When the big rock comes, let it land on me. In my distant youth, I fully intended to devote my life to sunshine and fresh air and healthy dogs and good things. However, my Creator, in His unfathomable and unknowable wisdom, has seen fit to place me in charge of a public school and to slowly turn me into a pointlessly vain, petty

PRINCIPAL MORGAN, *Continued*

and recalcitrant son-of-a-bitch. So be it. If that's what He or She wants, then I hereby resolve to be the best, the finest vain, petty and recalcitrant son-of-a-bitch in the valley. I've administered every school that's ever been assigned to me into the ground. I'm afraid of nothing. When the rock comes, let it turn me to vapor. If God wants me to prepare evaluations, condemnations, and budgetary policy, then, by God, I'll be evaluating, condemning and budgeting until the moment when my person is reduced to steam by your comet, and all men and good dogs alike become just another bothersome memory in the eternal mind of the great nevermore. But I'll never complain. You hear that? And I'll never worry, never. I refuse to run for cover just because you've got something against sunshine and dogs. And I refuse to crawl under a rock, just because you're worried about the sky. (*Exits*)

(*MAURY and ALICE enter.*)

MAURY

We should have offered that guy some of the syrup. Who was he?

JOE

Principal Morgan. You remember?

MAURY

Oh yeah. Before he expelled me, I kept waiting for him to hit me. He never did. I used to walk by him in the halls. I'd be thinking, "Hit me. Come on, get it over with." He never did. He's probably very sick.

JOE

I was going to offer him the syrup, but I think he'd already had some.

MAURY

Why don't you move into Sarah's house? I bet they've got all kinds of neat stuff over there.

JOE

She didn't really want me. I could tell. She'd be watching me at the breakfast table, counting how much toast I had. I need freedom at breakfast.

MAURY

She'll be back, you know. They always come back.

JOE

I know.

MAURY

Jane always comes back. She tells me to do something, then she comes back. Then she tells me again, then she comes back. She doesn't really want me to do anything—she just wants to keep coming back. Women always come back.

JOE

My mom isn't coming back.

MAURY

Jane says: "If you *knew* what I've given up for you. How I've *sacrificed*. I've given you my *youth*. I've given up my *figure*. I've given you my *life*."

JOE

She's a very giving person.

MAURY

I'm like: "Jane, I don't have your youth. I don't have your figure. I don't have your life. If I did, I'd give them back to you. But I don't have them."

JOE

It's all right.

MAURY

Who's coming over next?

JOE

It's difficult to tell. When Ellen and Al were here, they used to wonder why nobody ever came over. "How come nobody ever comes over?" they used to ask. They'd buy all kinds of nice beverages in brightly colored bottles. The bottles would cast interesting colorful shadows over the living room wall. Sometimes they would sit there in the colored light and wait for people to come over.

MAURY

Soon as Ed moved out on Jane, we had all sorts of company.

JOE

I thought she was going to get married again.

MAURY

"All men are *animals*."

JOE

I liked that one guy. The one with the trombone.

MAURY

The magician was okay too. He locked me in a safe one night. Handcuffs and everything. I couldn't get out 'til morning. He was gone then. Jane was asleep.

JOE

The good old days. There was always something happening.

MAURY

She slept all week.

JOE

Wasn't she engaged to an airline pilot?

MAURY

He used to take me out to the airport a lot. One time he took me out there, put me on a plane to Yucatan!

JOE

You missed school.

MAURY

Took me a whole week to hitch-hike home.

JOE

That was a week to remember.

MAURY

The police were real nice about it.

JOE

I don't know if I remembered to thank you for the maracas.

MAURY

That's okay. Some guy gave them to me. At the airport.

JOE

There are lots of helpful people out there.

MAURY

He wanted me to go home with him. I wanted to, but I was afraid Jane would be missing me. So I hurried home.

JOE

I remember.

MAURY

They wouldn't even open the door.

JOE

I remember it was snowing.

MAURY

When I got through the window, I never understood why they were so surprised to see me.

JOE

Probably because you were crawling through the window, covered with snow and playing the maracas.

(MELISSA enters, looking weary.)

MELISSA

Joey? I thought mom wanted you to come over.

JOE

She was just being polite.

MELISSA

You're right. She doesn't really want you to come over. She is so appalled at how her own family has turned out, she can't bear to watch another family decomposing. I feel like I just got paroled from a Gulag. I hope you don't mind if I sit a moment. I didn't know where else to go. I don't want to go to my own apartment. Since I got fired, I don't feel I belong there. The apartment represented freedom to me. If I don't have a job any more, I don't feel I deserve freedom. And I can't stand to spend another minute at my folks' house. They stare at me. And Jeremy keeps playing "Let It Be." If I hear that hymn to serenity one more time, I'll take that record album and cram it down his throat.

JOE

He likes to play the same record over and over, doesn't he?

MELISSA

You noticed?

JOE

He dropped by in the middle of the night and spent two hours playing "She's Leaving Home."

MELISSA

I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. Charles keeps calling. I don't want to talk to him. Maybe I should. Maybe he knows who got me fired.

MAURY

Jane got Ed fired once.

JOE

Maury's family has a checkered employment history.

MAURY

Caught him in a hot tub with a court stenographer.

JOE

Never a dull moment.

MAURY

Went over there with a chain saw.

MELISSA

Is Jane still drinking martinis?

MAURY

She only does stuff like that when she's had too much coffee. Martinis put her right to sleep.

MELISSA

Because I'd heard...never mind. *(Telephone rings)* If that's for me, I'm not here.

JOE

(Answering) Hello? *(Looks at MELISSA)* No, she's not. No, she hasn't. No, you can't. *(Hangs up)*

MELISSA

Charles?

JOE

I don't know. It sounded like a guy who's used to giving orders.

(SARAH enters.)

SARAH

Charles is coming over, dear. Come home and help me get ready for him.

MELISSA

Charles. God, I can't believe it. He probably wants to know about this letter I got. *(Holds up envelope)*

SARAH

What letter?

MELISSA

Oh, nothing. Just I'm getting disbarred, is all.

SARAH

(Taking letter) What?

MELISSA

It's from the ethics commission of the state supreme court. They want me to appear at a hearing to explain why I shouldn't be disbarred for stealing money from the law firm.

SARAH

Did you?

MELISSA

Have you ever known me to steal anything?

SARAH

Of course not, but...

MELISSA

Of course I didn't steal anything! I'm an Episcopalian. I'm supposed to be nouveau riche. Why the hell would I steal anything?

SARAH

Where have you been, child? You look terrible.

MELISSA

I got a phone call to go back to the office. One of the secretaries called. Like a fool, I went. I kept thinking: maybe this is all a joke of some sort. Maybe it's all a big mistake. I know it sounds stupid, but I was so sick about getting fired, I wasn't thinking clearly. I went back, and this security guard wouldn't let me in the building. I stood there like an idiot. This big, dumb guard is looking at me like I'd kidnapped the Lindbergh baby. Then this cop comes out into the lobby. I kept waiting for him to say: Gotcha! Big joke. And you know what he did? He read me my rights. He took me to the police station. I was there for hours. I felt like I was in Cuba.

MAURY

Did they give you a good beating?

SARAH

Maury, your mother wants you to go home.

MAURY

My Uncle Woody says it's not a real arrest unless they give you a good beating! (*Pantomimes a good beating*)

SARAH

I don't understand—

MELISSA

They charged me with theft. I had to go before a judge. I had to enter a plea of not guilty and sign a promise to appear for an arraignment before they let me leave.

SARAH

Who's accusing you?

MELISSA

The firm, I guess. The whole law firm.

SARAH

But who specifically?

MELISSA

The cops wouldn't say. And nobody would let me back into the office to ask. Nobody would talk to me. I'm accused of stealing money from the firm. I don't even know where the firm keeps their money. I wasn't there long enough to find out.

SARAH

What money are you supposed to have stolen?

MELISSA

Mother, you're trying to apply logic to a situation that is not logical. When you're accused of a crime, all they tell you is the code section and how much it'll cost you to get out of jail. If I hadn't known the judge from when I was an intern with the D.A.'s office, I never would have been released. I can't believe any of this.

MAURY

Aw, it's nothing. Uncle Woody gets arrested all the time.

SARAH

Please, Maury.

MAURY

He likes jail. They give you food and a warm place to sleep.

ALICE

Just like school.

MAURY

He calls it "Three hots and a cot."

SARAH

Will you kids leave us alone, please?

JOE

I live here. But I could leave if you'd like.

SARAH

(Closes her eyes, puts her hands to her face as if in pain) I have to go home. Missy, come with me. Your father needs to talk to you.

MELISSA

I don't want to talk to him, or anyone. I just want to sit here for a few minutes. I need to sort things out.

MAURY

Uncle Woody knows a guy that breaks people's legs for fifty dollars. Give me the name of whoever's hassling you, and I'll call Uncle Woody.

MELISSA

It sounds tempting. But I'm afraid...would that be *both* legs for fifty dollars?

SARAH

Missy?

MELISSA

Never mind. I guess I'll have to hire a lawyer.

SARAH

Talk to Charles first.

MELISSA

Charles will never speak to me again. He got mad when I got a speeding ticket.

SARAH

You need to talk to him.

MELISSA

Forget it. Charles thinks that everyone who's arrested is automatically guilty. I'm history.

SARAH

He's your fiancé, and if he can't tell you why you got fired from his firm, maybe you ought to find another husband.

MELISSA

Right. I'm quite a catch. There's a big market for women who are about to go to prison. It'll make me very desirable.

JOE

Ted Bundy got married while he was in prison.

MELISSA

Thank you, Joey.

JOE

Just a thought.

SARAH

I'm going home. I want you to come home too. I'm too old for this. (*Exits*)

MELISSA

She still thinks I'm her little girl. I shouldn't complain. Maybe she'll come visit me in prison.

ALICE

My mom's been to prison lots of times.

MELISSA

That's very comforting.

ALICE

She kind of likes it. Like the man says: "Three hots and a cot."

MELISSA

Why was your mother in prison?

ALICE

Stupid stuff. Like that time we lived in this like trailer with this guy. And she's like really mad about something, so she throws this lamp at him. And it's like made of glass and it like breaks. So she goes to sleep and the next thing this guy's on the floor and he's like bleeding to death. And she's like, "Oh grow up" So she goes back to sleep and the next morning she goes to get some coffee and this guy's like dead on the floor. What a jerk. So she calls the police, and they're like, "Oh no, you killed him with that like broken glass." And she's like, "Come on."

MELISSA

I heard about that case. They got her for manslaughter.

ALICE

So she's standing in front of this judge, and the judge is like: You broke that glass, he fell on it, he bled to death, it's your fault, blah-blah-blah. And she's like, oh well, at least it's quiet in prison. I think she pled guilty just to get away from me for a while.

MELISSA

What did you do while she was away?

ALICE

I had a bunch of uncles who came over and took care of me. At least they said they were my uncles. I hadn't heard of most of them. They were pretty nice guys. I know how to fix motorcycles now.

MELISSA

I'm sure you do. Joe, would it be all right if I go lie down in one of your bedrooms? Just for a couple of hours? I won't steal anything.

JOE

Sure. Help yourself.

MELISSA

Thanks. Is there any of that red stuff left?

JOE

It's in the refrigerator, next to the vermouth.

(MELISSA exits.)

ALICE

You know what that chick needs?

JOE

A good defense attorney.

ALICE

That's not what I was thinking.

(JEREMY enters.)

JEREMY

Now I know how Roger Hammerstein must have felt.

JOE

It was two guys.

JEREMY

Huh?

JOE

Rodgers and Hammerstein were two separate guys.

JEREMY

Where'd you hear that?

JOE

Music appreciation class.

ALICE

Don't get me started on musical comedy.

JOE

Okay.

ALICE

My brother Larry was in a musical at the high school a couple of years ago. “Bye Bye Birdie.” He made a tape of it. He carried it around the house all the time. We had to listen to it while we were eating breakfast. You’d be taking a shower or talking on the phone, and you’d hear Larry’s tape of “Bye Bye Birdie.” Mom says that’s one of the reasons she pled guilty to manslaughter, so she wouldn’t have to listen to Larry singing “Put on a Happy Face” one more time.

JEREMY

Okay. This is a tender ballad. Every musical has to have at least one tender ballad. Like in *Oliver!* when that big guy kills that nice lady, she sings “As Long As he Needs Me,” which is a tender ballad. And in *West Side Story*. That guy sings a tender ballad when he gets shot. It’s a moment for the composer to say to the audience: “Okay. There’s been a lot of exciting stuff going on in this show, very witty and impressive. But I’m going to show you that beneath this glib and perhaps facile exterior, there beats a tender heart, the heart of a warm and sensitive and caring human being.” That’s very important to me, you know. I’m not going into show business just for money and fame. I’m doing it to show the world that I’m a warm and caring human being. So in my musical, *Earl!*, Lee Harvey Oswald sings a tender ballad to his sweetheart. It’s called “When the President’s Been Slaughtered, I’ll Be Coming Home to You.” Wanna hear it?

JOE

No.

MAURY and ALICE

No.

JEREMY

Okay. Here’s how it goes. I hope you like it: (*Sings*)

*When the President’s been slaughtered, I’ll be coming home to you.
When I’ve gunned down every gypsy, and I’ve pogrommed every Jew.
When there’s moonlight on the Volga
I will kill a million men,
And when the President’s been slaughtered.
I’ll be coming hooooooooooooomme again!*

What do you think?

JOE

Have you ever considered a career in auto mechanics?

MAURY

I hope Uncle Woody never gets his hands on you.

ALICE

That's like the worst song I ever heard. You need to like do something with your life, instead of making everybody sick with your freeloading and your dumb songs.

JEREMY

They laughed at the Beatles, too, at first.

ALICE

No, they didn't. The Beatles were like loved all over the world every day of their lives. One of my uncles that stayed with me when mom was in prison went all the way to San Francisco to see the Beatles. He says it was like a religious experience. He says the Beatles were God in their day. Nobody laughed at the Beatles. It's just that nobody likes them anymore. They're like too old. But nobody laughs at them either.

JEREMY

Don't get so defensive.

ALICE

Come on over when my uncle's visiting and tell him you like laugh at the Beatles. He'll ream you a new asshole.

JEREMY

All I'm saying is a prophet is never appreciated in his own country.

ALICE

A lousy songwriter is never appreciated in anybody's country.

JEREMY

Excuse me. Do you live here?

ALICE

Excuse *me*. Do you?

JOE

Children, children. Please.

MAURY

What are you going to do with that song?

JEREMY

It's the centerpiece of my musical, that's what I'm going to do with it. It's going to bring down the house at the Winter Garden Theater. It's going to put me on the map.

ALICE

It's going to put you in a rubber room.

JEREMY

If I could just stay here six months. Think that'd be all right, Joey? I just need to get the libretto typed up, and get all my songs down on paper.

JOE

Then what?

JEREMY

Then I'm going to take it to Broadway. I've got a book with the names of a bunch of producers. I'll knock on doors. I'm not saying it'll be easy. But, like they say: Talent Will Out.

MAURY

Who says that?

JEREMY

The eternal "They." Everybody. It's common knowledge.

JOE

What kind of audience did you have in mind?

JEREMY

It's a family show. Not one bad word in the whole thing.

ALICE

Just bad songs.

(SARAH enters.)

SARAH

Come on, Joey. I'm not going to leave you alone in this house another minute.

JOE

I'm not alone.

SARAH

Since your parents left, this house has been filled with nothing but bad influences.

JEREMY

Present company excepted, of course.

SARAH

(To JEREMY) And you're the worst of all. You're supposed to be a role model for young people. Instead of wasting your life listening to old records. *(JEREMY exits.)* Maury, go home. *(To ALICE)* Go home, young lady. Whoever let you get those tattoos should be shot.

ALICE

My mother let me get them. And she did get shot, right after she got out of prison.

SARAH

Good-bye, Alice.

ALICE

When she was in prison, one of the other women like fell in love with her. She used to send my mom love letters and jewelry and bowling balls.

SARAH

I don't want to hear this.

ALICE

My mom didn't want anything to do with her. So like one day the other woman came over to the house and shot her.

SARAH

Enough.

ALICE

Her name was Betty. Everybody called her "Boxcar Betty" because she used to always—

SARAH

The party is over! Everybody out. Joe, get your toothbrush, you're coming home with me.

(GRANDPA enters. HE looks just like a grandpa should look.)

GRANDPA

Pardon me. I am looking for Al.

JOE

Hello, Grandfather.

GRANDPA

Hello there, young fella. How are you? Where's your old man?

JOE

(At the window, looking out) Switzerland.

GRANDPA

What's that? Whatcha looking at? *(Crosses to window.)*

JOE

The sky.

GRANDPA

What about it?

JOE

I've been worried about it.

GRANDPA

(Looking out window, then at JOE) I see. Looks like I got here just in time.

(JOE and GRANDPA stare out the window. LIGHTS FADE OUT.)

End of Act One

ACT II; SCENE ONE

(AT RISE: immediately following Act One. The scene is the same.)

SARAH

Hello, I'm Sarah Goodwin, from next door. You're Al's father?

GRANDPA

I have the distinction...

SARAH

Wonderful.

GRANDPA

...if not the honor. *(To JOE)* Did you say...

JOE

Switzerland.

SARAH

He says Switzerland. We're not sure.

GRANDPA

If the boy says Switzerland, then it's Switzerland. I've never known him to lie. You've never lied to your grandfather, have you, Joe?

JOE

No sir.

GRANDPA

"Sir." I like that. Always was a respectful boy.

SARAH

You showed up at a good time. Joe here has...problems.

GRANDPA

Yes, I know. His parents are idiots.

SARAH

And there are problems at school.

GRANDPA

Schools *are* problems. What else is new?

SARAH

He seems...I don't know how to explain this. He seems to have upset some people at school.

GRANDPA

(*To JOE*) What's the matter, kid? Did you forget to bring your shotgun to school?

SARAH

It's a little more complicated—and a little more serious—than that.

GRANDPA

(*To JOE, mock serious*) Shame on you! Did you refuse to share your ammunition with the other children? Naughty, naughty...

SARAH

And we are worried about his parents. No one seems to have heard from them. We haven't talked to them.

GRANDPA

Count your blessings. Al's my son, and I have some sort of obligation to love him, but he's not much of a conversationalist. In fact, he has no ability in that direction at all.

SARAH

I don't—

GRANDPA

Know what my son's problem is? He's too nice. People like him too much. In school, he was so nice they were always giving him good grades, scholarships, trips to England to study Shakespeare's fingernail clippings. Of course, if you put him on a race track, I don't think he could find his way around it without getting lost. But he was very nice. I used to go to those school conferences to see how he was doing, and all the teachers could talk about was how damn nice he was. I already knew that. What I wanted to know was how a kid who got such good grades all the time at school was so doggone dumb at home? But the teachers weren't talking. I let it go. Eventually, when he went to work, everyone started giving him good jobs and raises. Never had to work for anything. Everyone gave him everything he wanted. That's

GRANDPA, *Continued*

the way he thought it should be. He always sat back like some retarded Buddha, smiling like a fool and raking it all in. Now: Take me; obstreperous son-of-a-bitch. No one ever gave me squat. And I'm the better for it. You don't see me rushing off to Switzerland the first time the going gets a little rough. *(To JOE)* What happened? Why did they rush off to Switzerland?

JOE

It's kind of a long story.

GRANDPA

Never mind. I don't want to hear it. None of my business anyway.

SARAH

It's a mystery. And to make matters worse, Joey here... You tell him, dear.

JOE

I've been worried about the sky.

SARAH

That's not what I meant. He's been expelled from school.

GRANDPA

No kidding? *(Slaps JOE's shoulder)* Good for you. Now you can come exploring with me. My wife passed on. I can't stand to live in my own house any more. I'm going on a cross-country tour. You don't need any more schooling, anyway. Too much schooling's bad for a boy. Gives him ideas. Boys don't need that many ideas. What you need is muscles. Fresh air! Adversity! Survival!

SARAH

He needs to go to school.

GRANDPA

If he's been expelled, what's the point? I don't believe in going where you're not wanted. Joe, if they don't want you, don't go there. Hell with 'em.

SARAH

It's not a question of where he's wanted. He's just a child. He needs school.

GRANDPA

It doesn't look like they need *him*, if they kicked him out, does it? What'd you do, son? Knock somebody up?

JOE

Actually, I've been worried about the sky.

GRANDPA

I knocked somebody up when I was about your age. Carmen Talarico. Nice girl. Her father owned a bakery. I used to come in there after school. She'd be working in back. She'd come out, all covered with flour. To this day, the smell of fresh bread late in the afternoon just brings out the devil in me.

SARAH

I think we should—

GRANDPA

Her old man liked opera. She and I used to be up in the attic fooling around, and he'd be downstairs listening to the second act of *Tosca*. To this day, the sound of an Italian woman about to stab the police chief of Rome really makes me want to—

SARAH

About Joey. He seems to—

GRANDPA

A lot of things bring out the devil in me. When I was a lad, I used to think it would be a tremendous relief to me if I ever reached a point where I wasn't thinking about sex all the time. I figured if I could make it to age twenty-five, I'd have all that razz-ma-tazz out of my system and I'd be all right. Of course, when I reached twenty-five it was even worse. So I thought, if I can make it to thirty-five I won't be preoccupied with lust. Thirty-five came and went, and the smell of dough rising still did terrible things to my spiritual development. So I thought: Surely, by the time I'm fifty, this rampaging sense of indiscretion must surely cease. Wrong again. And here I am, deep into grandfatherhood, and every time I see an Italian girl who looks like she might have a little flour under her fingernails, I become a total disgrace to society.

SARAH

Joey doesn't have that problem, yet. And I would just as soon you didn't introduce him to that side of life, if you don't mind. Honestly, Ellen would kill me if, while she was away, Joey happened to—

GRANDPA

Ellen is genetically incapable of killing anyone. Unless, of course, she happened to bore somebody to death. I like Ellen, don't get me wrong. But she's dull. Of course, to be married to my son for all these years, she'd have to be a bit of an empty briefcase. That's why I'm glad to hear they finally up and took a little vacation.

JOE

It's not a vacation, exactly.

GRANDPA

No? What is it?

MAURY

It's a getaway.

GRANDPA

Getaway? From what?

SARAH

I don't know all the facts. But apparently Joey told some of his classmates that a meteor is going to kill us all in the near future. It upset one girl so badly that she had to be hospitalized.

GRANDPA

Oh, a meteor. That thing again. Let it come. I'm sick of it.

SARAH

Please, let's not get started on that.

GRANDPA

They say the last one killed the dinosaurs. And since then, we've created a whole new race of dinosaurs, only now we call them school teachers and investment counselors and insurance executives. At least the former batch of dinosaurs was an honest breed. They wanted your life's blood, they'd just take it. Swallow you whole, just like that. Today's dinosaurs just wear you down, a day at a time, a dollar here, a drop of blood there, until there's nothing left. I tell you, I'd rather get creamed by fifty meteors than have to deal with one more bureaucrat, one more bankruptcy judge, one more weasely little "executive." If I'm going to get killed by something, make it a good, honest death. Not this bureaucratic erosion of the soul.

SARAH

(Putting a hand to her forehead) Excuse me. I lost the train of thought here.

GRANDPA

Don't have one. I'm retired. My train of thought no longer runs on time. I paid my dues to society. I was logical for sixty years, and I didn't like it. Is there any whiskey?

MAURY

We have cough syrup.

JOE

And vermouth.

GRANDPA

You want this kid to go back to school, when in all the years he's been in school, nobody ever taught him the first rule of decent conduct in any civilization, which is to always have whiskey in the house in case a lonely old man comes wandering by, in need of refreshment?

SARAH

I don't think Al and Ellen kept much alcohol in the house.

GRANDPA

I don't want "much." One bottle will do.

JOE

They have all kinds of bottles here. They loved to look at bottles of liquid. They just didn't care to drink it much. They were saving it for their guests.

GRANDPA

That's the problem with them. That's the problem with everyone. Everyone's always looking at things. Nobody does anything anymore. That's what I admire about comets, asteroids, all big rocks with our name written on them. They're one entity in the universe that does something. Sure, we're afraid of getting turned to steam by some big piece of slag from outer space, but what really irritates us no end is that this mindless piece of junk is doing something great, something really impressive. And all we can do is sit around and worry about it. Us and our college degrees and our mutual funds and our technology stocks, we can't do a thing about it. It's coming right at us while we sit and complain and produce television documentaries and scare the horses. I've always wondered how I was going to go. I was worried it would be something that took away my self-respect, that turned me into some kind of vomiting disgrace. It would be a relief to know that I'm going in a way that's nice and quick and clean. Nothing's cleaner than fire, you know. That's why the medieval Christian nut-cases burned heretics. It was cheap and clean and purifying. Plus, it made an interesting spectacle in an age which knew neither the motion picture nor the TV set nor the Disney musical. Must have been nice.

SARAH

What are you talking about? I listen to the news. I haven't heard anything about any meteor.

GRANDPA

No reason why you should. Reporters aren't going to give you any information you can use. Why should they? What's in it for them? Relax; it might not land until tomorrow. And not a moment too soon. I was starting to think it'd never get here.

MAURY

Day *after* tomorrow.

JOE

Maybe as late as Friday. Probably no later than that.

GRANDPA

You don't say.

JOE

That's what I've been worrying about.

GRANDPA

Well, don't worry about it, boy. Enjoy it. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. A rare chance to actually see what's going to kill you. Most people don't get that luxury. Usually what's going to kill you is under the skin and you don't get to see it. Or it's wearing the three-piece suit of an insurance executive, and then, of course, you don't *want* to see it.

SARAH

What do you have against insurance executives?

GRANDPA

Nothing, except that they're rats, weasels, pimps, whores and duplicitous little scumbags with the moral compass of a rabid hamster. Other than that, not a thing.

SARAH

My husband is in the insurance business.

GRANDPA

(Long pause; eyes her carefully) That explains one or two things.

SARAH

What?

GRANDPA

Never mind. *(To JOE)* Say, Joe, you didn't by any chance murder Al and Ellen and bury them in the basement, did you?

(JOE smiles.)

MAURY

We're too young to prosecute anyway, unless they transfer us to adult court.

ALICE

Don't worry. They never send me to adult court. The docket's too crowded for people like us. They'll just put you on like juvenile probation and assign you to a counselor. That's what they did with me.

SARAH

Alice, I thought I told you to go home.

ALICE

My counselor's real nice. He never makes me do anything. When I go in for my appointments, we just sit around his office and listen to his Judy Garland records and take Demerol. He wanted me to dress up as Little Red Riding Hood once, but I said no.

GRANDPA

If you did kill them, you'd tell your old grandfather about it, wouldn't you?

JOE

Probably not.

GRANDPA

Good boy! You're smarter than you look. Smarter than your old man, anyway. Of course, I've had snow-shovels that were smarter than your old man.

ALICE

My mom's boyfriend says if you kill a guy, don't bury him in the basement. He says like dump them in the woods, so the wild animals and birds will like eat them and there won't be any clues. He says that's what he did to his like step-brother, and nobody found his body. But he says nobody like looked for it either. He says that's the important thing about killing somebody. Kill somebody nobody likes, so like nobody goes looking for them.

JOE

I don't think anybody much liked mom and dad. They were pretty lonely.

GRANDPA

Everyone liked your father.

JOE

No offense, Grandpa, but mom and dad didn't have any friends. They were pretty lonely and depressed most of the time. They used to give parties, but nobody would come. They'd sit here all alone. "Where *is* everybody?" they used to ask. It made me kind of sad. They stopped giving parties. Nobody invited them anywhere.

GRANDPA

Joe. Son. Where are your mom and dad?

JOE

They said they were going to Switzerland.

GRANDPA

When did they go there?

JOE

Right after I explained to them why I was worried about the sky.

GRANDPA

And why is that, Joe?

JOE

It's dark, and it's going to get darker.

(SFX: Telephone rings. SARAH answers.)

SARAH

(Calling offstage) Melissa? It's for you. *(Puts down phone)* I really think we should all leave. Except for you, sir. I want Joe to stay at our house until his parents come back. *(To GRANDPA)* Why don't you come over too?— unless you have other plans...

GRANDPA

When you get to be my age, you don't make plans. I'm on the road. I'm an itinerant nobody. I just stopped by to see if anyone wanted to come with me.

SARAH

We can discuss it over dinner. Please come over. Maury, Alice, it's been great talking to you. Now go home. Come on, Joey.

(MAURY and ALICE start to leave.)

GRANDPA

That's very nice of you. I accept your invitation. But I would like to stay here a moment and talk to Joe, if you don't mind.

SARAH

Whatever you want to do. We'll be expecting you. Come on, everybody. Out.

(SARAH, ALICE and MAURY exit.)

GRANDPA

You always have this much company?

JOE

We never have any.

GRANDPA

So. About the sky.

JOE

I've been worried.

GRANDPA

I know. Me too. But at my age, what's the point?

JOE

I know what I see.

GRANDPA

I know.

JOE

Not everyone can see it.

GRANDPA

Not everyone wants to.

JOE

They're better off.

GRANDPA

Damn straight, kid.

(MELISSA enters.)

GRANDPA

Hello, young lady.

MELISSA

Hi. Joe, did mother go home?

JOE

Yes. She's expecting us.

MELISSA

(Slightly dazed) I just got off the phone with my attorney. She said she's pretty sure one of the other lawyers got me fired. She says she heard that one of the senior partners told the cops that I'd been stealing money from the firm. *(Noticing GRANDPA for the first time)* Oh, hello. I'm Melissa Goodwin. I used to be a lawyer.

GRANDPA

Name's Sam, but you can call me Grandpa. Everyone does. Joe's my grandson. I used to sell bathtubs. Now I'm a traveling nuisance.

JOE

Melissa? Why would anyone want to hurt you like that?

MELISSA

It's the strangest thing, isn't it? And yet, for some reason, I'm not mad, or upset. It's as if this was supposed to happen. Maybe it isn't so strange after all. I can't explain it.

GRANDPA

Young lady, I don't know the details of your situation, but my grandson here seems to think the world is going to be wasted by a meteor in the near future, so I would say that these—

MELISSA

They were supposed to be on my side.

GRANDPA

—lawyers are the least of your concerns. Matter of fact, in the near future, you won't have any concerns.

JOE

Day after tomorrow. Friday at the latest.

MELISSA

I haven't heard anything about it on the news.

JOE

You won't. They don't want to scare anyone.

GRANDPA

That's not the reason. The real reason is they want to keep the good stuff for themselves. What's the point of being in charge of the media, and having all this great information, if you go and give it away to every Tom, Dick and Harry? That's no fun. The fun is keeping it to yourself. That's why they never told us who killed John Kennedy or Martin Luther King, or where Jimmy Hoffa is, or Amelia Earhart, or any of those guys. The only thing the news boys do is tell you it's going to rain when it obviously isn't. Hell, they don't even understand the meteor. It's because they have no concept of their own demise. They can't deal with it. They think death is for everyone else. They think it's something that happens in India. Ask them to talk about something like this, something big, you're asking way too much. No, kid. The meteor is way, way over their little heads.

MELISSA

(To JOE) How do you know?

GRANDPA

He knows because he looks. Nobody else does.

MELISSA

There are astronomers who spend years looking for things like that. Don't they know?

GRANDPA

They might. But why the hell would they tell us? Where's the profit in that?

MELISSA

I look at the sky. I don't see anything.

GRANDPA

Look again.

MELISSA

I don't know what I'm thinking about meteors for. I lost my job. I think the world has lost its collective mind.

GRANDPA

What are you going to do about these lawyers who got you canned?

MELISSA

I don't know. I'm so confused, embarrassed...

GRANDPA

Want me to have them shot?

MELISSA

I beg your pardon?

GRANDPA

I know a guy who'll shoot any lawyer. Of course, there's a price and I don't know what he's charging these days. But his rates have always been reasonable. Of course, if the lawyer is also in the insurance business, it's on the house. Want I should give him a call?

MELISSA

Thanks, but I've got enough problems. I don't need to get involved in a murder conspiracy.

GRANDPA

Don't think of it as a conspiracy. That's a word for whiners. Think of it as plain old frontier justice. Think the pioneers worried about "conspiracy" when they were killing each other? 'Course not. They did what had to be done, and let the devil take the hindmost. I never did know what "hindmost" meant, but never mind.

MELISSA

Why would they do a thing like this to me?

GRANDPA

Malice. Greed. Random hostility on an otherwise gorgeous day. Stupidity. Sometimes people do cruel things because they can.

(MELISSA exits.)

GRANDPA

When your grandmother was alive, she was always after me to quit swearing. So I did. I'd already given up gambling and tobacco. As soon as I'd given up all the manly vices, she died. It's a shame that as soon as I became perfect, she wasn't around to appreciate my perfection. Oh well. So. Want to go next door, see if there's something to eat?

JOE

You go ahead.

GRANDPA

Really think it'll happen?

(JOE smiles at him; THEY both stare ahead, as if looking at the sky through a picture window; JEREMY enters; HE has trouble getting their attention. JEREMY sits between them with his overflowing manuscript; HE looks where they look, but sees nothing.)

JEREMY

(Turns to GRANDPA) Hi. Do you like music?

(BLACK OUT.)

ACT II: SCENE TWO

(AT RISE: Evening; the set is the same, except that MAURY might have stolen a few more items. Appliances, tools, musical instruments, advertisements and traffic signs are possibilities. GRANDPA, MAURY, JEREMY and ALICE are present. GRANDPA has taken a set of photos from his wallet and is showing them to ALICE. HE hands them to her one by one and points at each one as HE describes it. JEREMY is working on his manuscript.)

GRANDPA

Here's Betty Lou...This one's Imogene...This is Pete. See there? Right behind him is his mother. Isn't she something? Never met a happier pair...Here's Loretta...Gladys...And there are Jack and Jill...Here are the other twins. Here we all are at the Grand Canyon. Yellowstone. Mount Rushmore. Here we all are at the World's Fair. Remember the Space Needle? No, I don't suppose you would...This is a good one of Mary. Then we have Ann. Tony...Frank...Margaret.

ALICE

(Truly impressed) Wow. These are the nicest dog pictures I've ever seen.

GRANDPA

Thanks.

ALICE

You really carry all these pictures of your dogs around with you?

GRANDPA

Yes, Alice, I do. You see, I don't like to look at baby pictures either. I've always preferred dogs. I still have the photograph of every single dog I've ever owned. I take them out and look at them, to soothe my mind in times of stress. And they come in handy when some bore sits beside me and starts hauling out baby pictures. I just take out my dog pictures and presto! The bore disappears. Like showing a cross to a vampire. These pictures have been a life-saver for me on many occasions.

ALICE

Amazing. Not a baby in the bunch. I am impressed.

JEREMY

I don't believe Maury. He took all this stuff, just went around the neighborhood taking it, because somebody told him the world's going to end. Kids today are crazy.

GRANDPA

Too bad they couldn't be doing something useful, like composing a musical about the Warren Commission.

ALICE

I guess I'm supposed to be part of his collection, too. He picked me up while I was waiting for the bus. I didn't know it was because the world is going to like end.

JEREMY

That's what he told me.

ALICE

I thought maybe it was because he liked my necklaces. If the world is going to end, I guess I don't need to worry about algebra anymore, right?

JEREMY

Or anything else. Of course, the little jerk doesn't know what he's talking about.

ALICE

Joe does.

JEREMY

Joe? My mom thinks he murdered his parents and buried them in the basement. She's thinking about calling the cops. They'll probably be over here with shovels and jackhammers. They'll tear the place apart. We'll all be on TV.

ALICE

You think I should wash my hair before the TV guys get here?

JEREMY

You're fine. Can you sing?

ALICE

My mom used to date a TV guy. He used to bring cameras over to the house. They made a movie together. They wanted me to be in it, but I was like busy with my algebra, so they went ahead without me. Mom didn't want me to see it, but I watched it anyway, one weekend when they were in Branson. There wasn't much like dialogue. I guess you'd call it a like action picture.

JEREMY

You could call the cops, you know. You were kidnapped. They could put Maury away for life. You gotta stand up for your rights.

ALICE

Like, what do I need with rights? I get everything I want just being myself.

JEREMY

What rock have you been living under?

ALICE

I don't see anybody picking *you* up.

JEREMY

Be quiet.

ALICE

I don't see anybody asking you to be in their movies.

JEREMY

I don't see my mom going to prison either, little girl, so just watch your mouth.

ALICE

Maybe she should go to prison. Maybe she'd learn something, like how to keep her kid from flunking out of college.

JEREMY

I did not flunk out.

ALICE

I don't see anybody like begging you to go back.

JEREMY

I can't work under these conditions. (*Picking up his papers*) I'm going downstairs. (*To ALICE*) I don't remember anyone telling you that you could hang around here.

ALICE

You don't live here either, numb-nuts.

JEREMY

I ought to take you across my knee.

ALICE

Promises, promises.

JEREMY

I give up. Young people today have no respect.

GRANDPA

You haven't earned the right to use a line like that, kid. You have to wait until you're an old coot, like me.

(JEREMY storms out.)

ALICE

Hurry back. He's like weird. Hey, are you really Joe's grandfather?

GRANDPA

That is my lot in life. Yes, Joe's father is my son. I'm glad to see my boy got himself a nice roof over his head. It's too bad he's always been so dumb.

ALICE

My mom likes to date dumb guys. She says they're the best.

GRANDPA

The best at what?

ALICE

At doing what she tells them to do.

GRANDPA

So. How does it feel to be *(Gestures at all the junk around them)* part of the furniture? Did Maury just grab you and bring you here?

ALICE

Sure. But I wasn't scared. This happens to me all the time. I knew he wouldn't know what to do with me once he got me here. I'm just looking for a place to hang until school's out.

GRANDPA

You might as well stay until the show's over.

ALICE

You think Joe's like right about that?

GRANDPA

Since not one single solitary soul has reported this particular meteor's arrival—not one newspaper, TV, radio station, town crier or anyone else—and since there is absolutely no reason to believe that a schoolboy heretofore of no significance whatsoever can predict what scientists, meteorologists, alarmists and popes the world over have been unable to predict down through the ringing corridors of time...I don't see why not.

ALICE

I might as well like stay here then. I like older guys.

GRANDPA

I'll take that as a compliment.

(CHARLES enters. CHARLES is a lawyer. Worst of all, he's proud of it. CHARLES is a straight arrow; well-dressed, imperious, insensitive, the whole nine yards. There is within his well-fed frame nary a glimmer of self-doubt nor skepticism of any kind. HE worships at the First Church of Charles. When other children were dreaming of becoming firemen or shortstops, CHARLES was dreaming of depositions and fees. You'd trust him to handle your divorce, but you wouldn't necessarily want him to walk your poodle. He'd probably sell it.)

CHARLES

Hello. I was told I could find Melissa here.

GRANDPA

Lately, you can find just about anybody here.

CHARLES

I am her fiancé. My name is Charles.

GRANDPA

I'm Grandpa. My son lives—or rather, lived—here. I'd tell you what I'm doing here, but I'm not so sure myself. Care for some cough syrup?

CHARLES

No thank you. Is Melissa here?

GRANDPA

I think she's upstairs. Have a seat. I'll go see. *(Exits)*

CHARLES

(To Alice) Hello.

ALICE

Hi. *(Stares at him)*

CHARLES

Have we met?

ALICE

No.

CHARLES

You look vaguely familiar.

ALICE

I've seen you at the courthouse.

Oh yes, of course.

CHARLES

I'm there a lot.

ALICE

I see.

CHARLES

I've testified at a lot of my mom's trials...

ALICE

I see.

CHARLES

...her boyfriends' trials, my uncles' trials, one or two of my own trials.

ALICE

That's nice.

CHARLES

Then there are the sentencings, the probation revocation hearings, evidentiary suppression hearings, restitution hearings—

ALICE

Yes, I'm sure.

CHARLES

I'm in court more than I'm like at school.

ALICE

I'm sorry to hear that.

CHARLES

I'm not sorry. Court's fun. I know all the cops. They always give me a ride home afterwards. Sometimes they move in with us for a few days. I may go to law school, if I ever pass algebra. Do you know anything about algebra?

ALICE

Pardon?

CHARLES

Just checking.

ALICE

(MELISSA enters.)

MELISSA

Charles?

CHARLES

Missy. My God, you look terrible. What are you doing here? I've been worried sick. Your mother's worried, too. Are you hiding here, or what?

MELISSA

Not hiding, exactly. I needed some time alone.

CHARLES

I couldn't believe it when McDonough told me he'd fired you. What a lousy thing to do, without any warning or anything. What did he say?

MELISSA

He said the firm wasn't happy with my work. News to me. He said there had been complaints. I don't believe that!

CHARLES

What kind of complaints?

MELISSA

He said he didn't have time to go into detail. He said there were too many problems, and no time to discuss them, and that it would be mutually beneficial if I went somewhere else. I didn't even get any severance pay.

CHARLES

Maybe it's for the best.

MELISSA

How could it possibly be for the best? I'm a lawyer, Charles. I want to work. I've only been out of law school a year. I've still got my student loan to pay off. My God, I didn't go to law school to be a waitress.

CHARLES

You don't have to work at all.

MELISSA

It's not a matter of have to. I want to.

CHARLES

Why? There's no need.

MELISSA

Charles. Why did they fire me?

CHARLES

How would I know? I didn't hear about it until after you'd gone.

MELISSA

How could that be, Charles? Didn't you get a little suspicious when those cops started showing up?

CHARLES

I didn't see any—I mean, I was busy. I didn't know what they were doing.

MELISSA

You didn't talk to them?

CHARLES

Of course not! I don't associate with people like that. They're beneath my dignity.

MELISSA

They're beneath my dignity too. But that didn't stop them from arresting me.

CHARLES

Arrested?

MELISSA

Yes, Charles. I got arrested. Just like Ma Barker and the Dalton Gang. They put handcuffs on me, put me in a police car, took me downtown, took my fingerprints, and hauled me in front of a judge. Who, by the way, just happened to be someone I knew from law school. She got a big kick out of that. One of her former pupils in handcuffs. I made quite an impression.

CHARLES

You'll get over it.

MELISSA

When I was in the legal clinic in law school, I used to see the cops haul in these poor nobodies in handcuffs. We used to scoff and smirk at those pitiful losers. "Where the hell did *they* come from?" we used to say. And now I know where the pitiful losers come from. They come from here, Charles. Right here.

CHARLES

You're getting hysterical.

MELISSA

It's perfect. The whole thing is perfect. Somebody's timed it to a T. First I'm fired, then arrested, then I get a certified letter from the bar association wanting to know why they shouldn't take away my law license. Usually it takes them months to get around to that. They usually wait until you're in prison. They figure, you're locked up, you now have plenty of

MELISSA, *Continued*

time to talk them out of yanking your license, which, by the way, I haven't even started to pay for.

CHARLES

I'll pay for it.

MELISSA

I don't want you to pay for it. I want to pay for it. Charles: Who told old man McDonough I was stealing money from the firm?

CHARLES

Who said anything about stealing?

MELISSA

The cops, Charles. This grubby little detective. He looked like one of the Three Stooges. He said—

CHARLES

Which one?

MELISSA

What's wrong with you? I don't know which one. I don't know their names, for crying out loud. Do you?

CHARLES

Well...yes. Was it the one—

MELISSA

Stop trying to change the subject. This short, ugly little detective told me all about it, Charles. How McDonough is going to testify that I'd siphoned money away from the firm and into my own bank account. Good grief, the last time I looked in my checking account, I had eleven dollars and fourteen cents.

CHARLES

(Puts his arm around her) It doesn't matter. What's done is done. I want to marry you. Take care of you.

MELISSA

(Removing his arm) Charles, this is hardly the time to be romantic. I'm in a lot of trouble now.

CHARLES

I know, Missy. I want to help you out of it. And I'm going to. But first, I think we should get married right away. I'll drop the charges, and then everything will be normal again.

MELISSA

What is this “Right away”? We’ve been engaged for a year. You’ve never been in any hurry before. Besides, I haven’t had any time to make arrangements yet. Everything’s up in the air. And it’s going to stay up in the air until this thing gets ironed out. Now, I did not steal any money. I wouldn’t know how to steal money from the firm if I wanted to. I’m not that clever. I don’t even know where they keep the money. And I— What do you mean *you’re* going to “drop the charges”?

CHARLES

Nothing. I mean, I will. I mean, somebody will. I mean, as soon as I explain. I mean, don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.

MELISSA

A minute ago, you said you didn’t know who accused me. If you don’t know who made the accusation, how could it be up to you to drop anything?

CHARLES

Trust me on this, honey.

(CHARLES puts his arm around her again, but she slips away.)

MELISSA

Somebody told old man McDonough I had stolen money from the firm. Somebody called the police. Who was it, Charles?

CHARLES

I said I don’t know.

MELISSA

(Crosses to telephone, picks it up) Then call the firm and find out. Go ahead. Call McDonough. He’s the one who canned me, so he’s the place to start. You’re a partner, and that makes you a victim of the theft and so you have a right to know. Ask him. I’m surprised you haven’t asked already. Why haven’t you asked already, Charles?

CHARLES

Because I don’t care, honey. I just want us to be married as soon as possible. I want to take care of you. I want to have children.

MELISSA

Excuse me, Charles, but before I conceive with you, there are a few questions we have to clear up.

(CHARLES moves to her again, and MELISSA again side-steps him.)

CHARLES

I want to take care of you.

MELISSA

I think you already have taken care of me.

CHARLES

Honey...

MELISSA

Charles, you are the worst skin-flint I have ever met. You specialize in tax evasion—your own and your clients'. You scrimp and save on everything. You wear your clothes until they're threadbare. You never take me out for dinner unless it's a place your clients own and we can go for free. You're obsessed with fees and tax deductions, and suddenly somebody is accused of stealing money from your firm and you "don't care"? Since when "don't" you "care" about money? One of the clerks failed to chip in for coffee and you tried to get him fired.

CHARLES

I just don't like irresponsibility, is all. Young people need to be taught about obligations.

MELISSA

You haven't answered my question. Why didn't you ask old man McDonough why he fired me?

CHARLES

It's none of my business.

MELISSA

Of course it's your business. You're a partner. It was your money, for Christ's sake!

CHARLES

I wish you wouldn't curse.

MELISSA

(Picks up phone) Maybe I'll call him myself.

CHARLES

(Tries to grab phone) No, don't do that.

MELISSA

Or maybe one of the other partners will know. What about Paul Jackson? I'll call him. Jackson knows everything.

CHARLES

No, Jackson doesn't know anything.

MELISSA

How could he not know? He's a partner. It's his money, too.

CHARLES

No, it's not.

MELISSA

How do you know it's not? If it's the firm's money, it belongs to all the partners. How could the other partners not know?

CHARLES

Because I didn't tell them.

MELISSA

Didn't tell them what?

CHARLES

That you'd stolen money from the firm.

MELISSA

Who did you tell?

CHARLES

Just old man McDonough.

MELISSA

Why did you tell him that, Charles?

CHARLES

Because I...because I love you. And I want to marry you.

MELISSA

You love me.

CHARLES

Yes. I want to start a family.

MELISSA

Forgive me, Charles. I don't mean to appear obtuse. But why on earth did you tell the old man that I stole money from the firm?

CHARLES

I don't know how it happened. I was talking to the old man. And he asked about you. I told him that I had some misgivings about a husband and wife being in the same office. It's okay now, but after we're married...I don't know. I told him I thought it would seem odd. We continued talking...

MELISSA

Yes?

CHARLES

There have been some discrepancies in the firm's books lately. I don't fully understand it. I was talking about the problem with the old man. And I was talking about you. And...

MELISSA

And?

CHARLES

I told the old man you had been collecting your fees from your clients directly, instead of reporting your earnings to the firm, like we're all supposed to do. I told him your clients' money was going directly into your pocket, instead of the firm's account. And that you'd lied to the book-keeper about what you'd billed, and that you only reported a little of what you'd actually been collecting. People do it all the time. Lawyers have been doing it for a long time. You're not the only one.

MELISSA

Excuse me, Charles. I didn't do anything. You made it all up.

CHARLES

Well, yes, about *you* doing it. Sure. I'm just saying that if you *had* done it, you wouldn't be the only one. You're just one of the few who got caught.

MELISSA

But I didn't really get caught, Charles. I didn't do anything to get caught for.

CHARLES

(Starting to get impatient) I know that! You don't need to rub it in. I just want you to know that I smoothed it over with McDonough.

MELISSA

What?

CHARLES

He understands.

MELISSA

Well, that's certainly a relief.

CHARLES

He understands that to a young person, such as yourself, fresh out of law school, dealing with wealthy clients for the first time, it must be very tempting, instead of pooling your earnings with the firm, as per our contractual agreement, to help yourself to money that's there for the taking. It's human nature. And he forgives you. And so do I.

MELISSA

Even though this is something you made up.

CHARLES

Well... yes. Technically.

MELISSA

I'm glad to hear that the old man is so forgiving.

CHARLES

He's willing to forget the whole thing. Criminally, I mean. If I recommend it. Of course, you're out of the firm. And your license to practice law might be suspended for a little while. Probably no more than a year...or two...But you won't have to serve any time...I think it's a good deal. Don't you?

MELISSA

I get fired because my fiancé tells the boss I stole money from the firm, even though I didn't steal anything, and I don't even have to go to jail? Yes. I am one lucky girl.

CHARLES

Of course, I'm not sure the I.R.S. will be so lenient.

MELISSA

The I.R.S.?

CHARLES

Yes. You'll have to pay tax on the money you stole. And there'll be penalties. And interest.

MELISSA

Of course.

CHARLES

But I'll help you through it. It won't be so bad.

MELISSA

(Long pause) Charles? Why?

CHARLES

(Snaps; out of control) Because I want you out! Because seeing you there every day makes me sick! Other men looking at you all day. Undressing you with their eyes. Staring at you when you walk, looking at your legs...imagining...it's filthy...disgusting. God. It's indecent. I hate it. And I won't have it!

MELISSA

(Very quiet) Won't have what, Charles

CHARLES

I won't have my wife in my office. I want you home! I want you in my house, taking care of my house, taking care of our children. Taking care of me!

MELISSA

I see.

CHARLES

No, you don't see. You think you can come into my law firm, parade around like some streetwalker, force other men to look at your, your...body.

MELISSA

Excuse me, Charles, but I haven't figured out a way to go anywhere without taking my body with me. It's one of those little problems modern science hasn't been able to solve.

CHARLES

I will not have other men looking at my wife. Sniggering at me behind my back. Making dirty jokes. You don't belong there! It's mine! And I will not be made a laughing stock in my law firm.

MELISSA

So you lied to the senior partner about me?

CHARLES

If you want to be picky about it...yes. But it was for the greater good.

MELISSA

And what good was that, Charles?

CHARLES

To make things right. (*Suddenly apologetic and mellow*) Don't you see, honey? We could never be happy as long as we were both working in the same place. It's indecent. I can't make love to you one night and work with you under the same roof the next day. It's not right. It's...I don't know what to call it.

MELISSA

Respect, Charles. It's called respect. It's called love, mutual trust. It's called all sorts of things.

CHARLES

It's filthy! It's vulgar and indecent. And I won't have it.

MELISSA

You won't have me either.

CHARLES

What? You're not in your right mind.

MELISSA

I've just stood here and listened to you say that you lied to the senior partner of our law firm about me stealing money from the firm. As a result of your lie, I was arrested, hauled into court, publicly humiliated. Now you're saying you want to screw me but you can't stand to look at me the next day and that you find the idea of women and men working together in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect filthy and disgusting. I don't mind to be critical, dear, but a man who calls his fiancé a thief and then says he's ashamed to be around her isn't really in a position to accuse her of not being in her right mind.

CHARLES

You don't understand.

MELISSA

Who called the police, Charles?

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