LETTERS FROM THE OTHER WORLD

A Play in Two Acts

by

Sergei Task

Sheremetevskaya St.27, Apt. 228
Moscow 127521, Russia
7-495-619-4462 (phone/fax)
sergei_task@mtu-net.ru
sergeitask@aim.com

©1997, 2002 by Sergei Task. All rights reserved

Hosted by Iowa Research Online: http://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_alumni/

This play is for you, Dad.

Cast of Characters

Sandra Hamster:	an attorney, early 30's
Tennyson:	her son, 9
Parker:	her daughter, 13
Patti:	her confidante, 35-40
Ms. Kepke:	neighbor, 70
Brian Stripes:	her nephew, a realtor, 40
David Banks:	a theater director and friend of the family, 45
Joel:	a postman, 60
Sergeant Higgins:	a police officer, 30

SCENE

A neglected two-story house and other locations in a small Midwestern town.

TIME

Now.

SETTING: The play will benefit from minimal props establishing the various locations. The main playing area is the living room in the Hamsters' residence. The family is going through rough times: unread, dusty magazines are scattered about, there is a stack of bills on the table, etc. There are four chairs round the table, one being the focal point of action. The couch that was recently slept on reveals a tangled blanket and a not-too-clean pillowcase. Within reach, on the floor, we see an ashtray brimming with stale cigarette butts, a phone, an answering machine. There is a full-length mirror draped in black cloth. A staircase leads to the second floor with SANDRA'S master bedroom, looking as if no one uses it anymore, and her two children's rooms. Since we are not going to enter PARKER'S living space, it may as well remain offstage. In TENNYSON'S hideout, with its litter of reference books, almanacs and writer's encyclopedias, we find a bed and a turned-on Macintosh. Other places of interest on a split stage--DAVID'S, BRIAN'S and PATTI'S apartments, the police precinct, cafe--are spotlighted areas, with bare essentials, on the periphery of main action.

ACT 1

Scene 1

AT RISE: At the moment, the stage is empty. The phone in the Hamsters' living room rings. Light on PATTI, a charmingly lackadaisical young woman, in her apartment. While making her calls she smokes long-stemmed cigarettes in a cigarette holder, inhaling introspectively between her sentences. First we hear the outgoing message.

PETE'S VOICE

You've reached the home of a pack of Hamsters, who are out at the moment, looking for *you*. You can save us time if you leave your name and phone number. Thanks.

(PATTI begins to speak)

PATTI

Do you have to play his voice? It is spooky. Sandra, listen. I'm *so* sorry to have missed the funeral. It's what we all expected, but that doesn't make it easier, does it. Pete was special. His passion. His
humor.

(She chuckles)

Like that "From the Better World" postcard that he sent me last month? Far-out, huh? Listen. I had a *dream*. I leave Macy's and I see this Black&White cab stranded in the traffic. Dead center. In my

dream, it is a one-way street and the car is going the wrong way. I mean it's stuck, but it's *heading* the wrong way. See what I'm saying? Then the driver's window rolls down and *Pete* calls out to me. He says, "Patti, I'm on my way." Can you believe it? Well, my condolences. I'll try you later, Sis.

(Lights out. The tape rewinds)

Scene 2

AT RISE: Enter SANDRA, in mourning, looking frail and euphoric. Here is a woman who is one raw nerve, with a predisposition to irrational behavior. She lights her cigarettes and leaves them burning in sundry ashtrays. As she enters, she takes in the mess in the room, as if for the first time. She removes her black hat and studies it reflectively. With a quiet laugh, she sends it flying like a Frisbee® across the stage. She kicks off her heels and goes to check on the voice messages she has no intention of playing. She speaks with Patty's inflections.

SANDRA

"I'm *so* sorry to have missed the funeral."

(She gets the cassette out and drops it in the waste basket)

SANDRA (Continued)

It's over. Finito. Kaput.

(She turns to the draped mirror)

You know, Pete? As they were lowering the casket I asked myself: This is "it"? A hole? Two or three ugly wreathes? Where is the "mystery"? The ineffable?

(She touches the black cloth tenderly)

Surely there is more to it than six feet under.

(Sitting on the floor, she lights a cigarette and punches in a "0")

SANDRA (Continued)

. . . Yes, I have a question. What happens after death? Wait, operator, don't hang up on me! Please? You see, I buried my husband today and now I wonder what's next for him. I mean, does he take off straight to heaven, or hang around for a while? You see, my neighbor, who also happens to be a widow, except she is old, says
the soul spends forty days on earth, talking to the living, bidding farewell to places, before taking the final bow, so to speak. She swears to God it is the damn truth, according to the Orthodox Church that her late husband, last of a dozen, belonged to. Say, did anybody ever bow to you . . . ? Hey, listen--!

(The operator has hung up on her)

SANDRA (Continued)

I don't think so.

(She cradles the receiver. She is puffing on her cigarette as though it were her life support. Enter her children, PARKER and TENNYSON, also in black. The girl is in a fighting mood. SANDRA follows PARKER'S moves closely, the mother's guarded expression indicating that she is expecting unpleasantries. The boy goes to give his mother a hug, which she returns absentmindedly.)

TENNYSON

Do you think there is life after death?

SANDRA

Why?

TENNYSON

There's this "Dust to Dust" chat room I'm hanging out in for the moment, on the Internet, and they are talking about the Grim Reaper and the Bible and resurrection, all that stuff, you know, and then this guy pops up and he goes, like, Hello? are you sure there is life *before* death?

SANDRA

I think I've heard that one. Parker, will you stop pacing like an insomniac bear during hibernation?

(The girl ignores her. TENNYSON does the talking, as though he is his own audience)

TENNYSON

The guy says there's this club in New York, with, like, a grinning skull above the entrance? And it's, like, Forbes Magazine Top Twenty. Just to get through the doors, you must be a two-time goner. That is, your death, twice, has been falsely announced in the papers. Weird, huh?

SANDRA

What is it, Tennyson? It's unhealthy, all this time you spend at your computer.

TENNYSON

It was Dad's idea.

SANDRA

Are you always going to hide behind your Father?

(A bad gaffe followed by a lame attempt to change the subject)

SANDRA (Continued)

And where is Ms. Kepke?

TENNYSON

She dropped us off at the corner. Said she'd forgotten to buy something important.

PARKER

A cat toy. She spends a fortune on her pets and she brings paper flowers to the funeral.

TENNYSON

Doesn't she make them herself?

PARKER

Yeah. So she can use up the trash she's been collecting for two hundred years.

SANDRA

Tennyson, tell your sister she doesn't have to be mean.

PARKER

Tennys, tell your mother I will be cloyingly sweet at Ms. Kepke's grave. I might even say a eulogy over her. *She brushed her teeth three times a day, even though they were not her own.* Something "cute." Save your best words for the funeral.

SANDRA

Can I have some peace? I need to draft a letter to the Bar Association . . .

PARKER

(Taking no heed)

Like the priest today: "Very few people knew that Mr. Hamster was writing wonderful plays in his spare time." Now, how would *he* know? Not from David *Banks*. The one person in town who had faith in "a writer driven by three hundred horse power" to . . .

TENNYSON

Hey, Park--!

PARKER

. . . to actually *talk* to him. I'm sure *David* had a few things to say on the subject--and I don't mean dad's cab either. Well maybe *David* figured the cemetery wasn't the best place to discuss art. At least *he* refused to be part of that spectacle.

SANDRA

What you call a "spectacle" was only a . . .

PARKER

David *Banks*. The only person in attendance who did *not* use his friend's death as an excuse to put on the dog.

SANDRA

Bite your tongue, Parker!

PARKER

. . . which leaves us with one possible leak. Are you thinking what I am thinking?

SANDRA

The subject is closed as far as I am concerned.

PARKER

I love that game.

TENNYSON

What game?

PARKER

They call it "Rest in peace." *Bye, sweetheart. You are the best thing I'll ever have.* The "I've paid my dues" words. The "gold nails in your coffin" words. The words they pound in with such "love" it will echo for miles and miles around. *See you in heaven, darling, and don't mess with my life, thank you very much.*

(TENNYSON has spotted the tape in the trash basket. He routinely puts it back in the answering machine as the fight goes on)

SANDRA

Are you accusing me of something? Are you?

PARKER

What's the point!

SANDRA

What did I do that you stopped talking to me?

PARKER

Nothin'.

SANDRA

"Nothin'." Is that a new name for my crime?

(She is holding back her tears)

Why don't we frame it, hang it on the wall? We don't want to keep it a secret, do we? It's a national landmark. People will pay good money to see it.

PARKER

You just gave up on Dad, is all! The minute his doctor said it was terminal, you gave up on him!

SANDRA

I gave up on him? I brought him home and I hired a nurse--

PARKER

You brought him home because you couldn't pay the hospital bills that had been piling on your desk.

SANDRA

So I couldn't pay the bills, is that a crime?

PARKER

And you began to work late hours because . . .

SANDRA

I had to review my clients' cases.

PARKER

. . . because you couldn't look death in the face! Those big words you use in court don't quite work at home, I guess?

TENNYSON

Parker . . .

PARKER

You tried hard not to notice that we were changing his bed sheets, and giving him his pain killers . . .

SANDRA

How dare you . . . !

PARKER

. . . and because he screamed night after night, you moved your bed downstairs and plugged your ears.

SANDRA

I had to do my job in the morning!

PARKER

Getting up at six? Slinking around? Sneaking out without even flushing the toilet, not to mention making the bed? Job my ass.

SANDRA

How can you be so hateful?

PARKER

Tough love.

(She picks up her mother's hat)

Black doesn't become you. Think of the points your bust lost and your legs didn't gain.

SANDRA

I'll try to remember.

(They face off as light fades)

Scene 3

AT RISE: DAVID BANKS, a theater director, is going over a manuscript. He reads it out loud.

DAVID

"I don't understand, Ms. Resnick. I thought you reserved a taxi."
"To take me to my grave site, yes."
"I didn't know you bought a plot."
"Two."
"Two?"
"I thought you might be interested. Oh, you'll love it, Mr. Busch."
"Thank you, Ms. Resnick. Maybe some other time."

The cab pulls off, then crawls to a stop. The driver's head appears in the window.

"Ms. Resnick? Why me?"
"You are a family man, Mr. Busch, which I cannot say about any of my late husbands. With you lying at my side I can rest assured there will be no dalliance."

The man gives it a careful consideration. Then the car slowly backs up to where the old lady is standing and the passenger door opens.

"Get in, Ms. Resnick. If this is as platonic as it sounds, I don't see why my wife should mind."

(DAVID looks up from the script)

DAVID (Continued)

It's jolly good, Pete.

(Lights out)

Scene 4

AT RISE: SCENE 2 continued.

PARKER

You want to slap me.

SANDRA

Yes.

PARKER

But you can't--'cause it's all true. And you've never been good at slapping yourself.

(She puts on her mother's hat in defiance and makes for the stairs)

Tennys?

(She climbs the stairs without a second glance. Her brother, grudgingly, joins her. Left alone, SANDRA appears to be lost in thought. She crosses to the full-length mirror and removes the drape. She examines herself, full face, profile. She takes off her black dress and her black stockings, never taking her eyes off the mirror. She walks in her underwear to the front door and leaves it ajar. She begins to speak)

SANDRA

Pete? . . .

(TENNYSON is back, coming down the stairs with his mother's black hat)

Are you there, Pete?

(SANDRA'S words make her son stop in his tracks)

SANDRA (Continued)

It's all right, you don't have to say anything. We haven't been very close lately, have we. When was the last time you took me in your arms? February the fourth. Nearly six months ago. Left a stain on my night gown . . . that minor cut on your finger. It's funny how one remembers these things. Your cab honking outside. Getting me to "loosen up" in a bar before my first court hearing. Roughhousing with the kids. Then your sickness took over and you found yourself married to your pain. I was a distraction: those "hills and faults"

(Referring to her curves)

you had no business with. Wholesome body, an obscenity. For you, what a relief. To be left alone, finally. You and your terrible "secret."

(SANDRA hugs herself, she is shivering)

SANDRA (Continued)

It's not to say that I wasn't scared. I was mortified. To watch "It" grow inside you . . . I just . . . couldn't. I'm no hero, okay? Come at me with a pair of forceps and I am a basket case. What did you expect? You had changed so completely . . . and it just went on and on. Your skin, a dragonfly's wing. Your rickety frame. Your voice. None of it, Pete, seemed to be you anymore.

And whatever you were so hopelessly turning into certainly did not belong to me . . . nor to this world.

(She steps into a pool of light and spreads her arms)

SANDRA (Continued)

Well I am of this world, Pete. Look. Look at me. What do I do with this body? Your daughter would have me lock it up for good if it meant proving my loyalty to you. Is that what you want? You're shocked? You act like you are insulted, but you couldn't care less, really. I don't think you care one way or the other. You do? Then say it, damnit! Say you want me to throw myself on your pyre. Or better yet, rot alive. Speak up. Don't be a wimp, Pete. You have some forty days to make up your mind. And I'm not taking silence for a "yes." If mum's the word, Pete, then it's O.V.E.R. Do you understand . . . ?

(She is suddenly blinded by the bright lights of a car)

SANDRA (Continued)

Holy shit!

(Slamming the door shut, she is frantically getting back into her clothes. TENNYSON stands paralyzed)

Scene 5

AT RISE: Light on BRIAN STRIPES, a real estate agent who has a problem closing deals. He is presently talking on the phone, i.e., periodically opening his mouth in an attempt to sneak his way into his client's stream of consciousness.

BRIAN

. . . yy-y-y . . . yes, Ma'am . . . abso. . . it's a tough . . . tough sale, but . . . you're ab. . . I know . . . still, it's a . . . I'm saying it's a good house . . . yes, and as your agent . . . oh, there's something else? . . . the roof . . . gotcha . . . and where exactly? . . . right . . . right . . . well, maybe . . . I don't . . . I don't be. . . I don't believe you did . . . well sure it's imp. . . the bathroom, are you kidding me . . . aha . . . aha? . . . a hundred and. . . and twenty thousand . . . as opposed to one-thirty? . . . sure . . . Miss Settles, I have . . . a buyer for. . . that's what I've been trying to. . . he is very much inter. . . yes . . . the price is right . . . oh, he has already seen your house . . . well, as a matter of fact it's your humble servant . . . funny, isn't it? . . . and the good news is you don't even have to move out . . . I mean, if it's all right with you . . . you are a very fine lady, Miss Settles, and I would consider myself a happy man to . . . do I sound like I am proposing to you? . . . well, why don't I call you tomorrow and you will . . . oh, I see . . . yes, I understand . . . and you don't want me to call you to. . . ? I had no intention of hurting your feelings, but . . . yes, I can see your point, Miss

(She hangs up)

Settles.

(He is holding the phone refusing to admit his defeat)

Scene 6

AT RISE: SCENE 4 continued. A doorbell. SANDRA answers the door. In comes MS. KEPKE, a mine of wisdom open to the public. She is carrying a bowl covered with plastic wrap. Hearing her voice, TENNYSON retreats to his room.

MS. KEPKE

Oh they are so *cute!* I leave my prayer book open, and next thing Scrub is petting it with his paw, like he is about to read it! Did you know a cat will take care of your stress?

SANDRA

Do you still talk to your late husband?

MS. KEPKE

Do I talk to Mr. Kepke? How else can I expect to get a word out of him? He had a problem keeping up his end of conversation when he
was alive, and he is hardly getting more cooperative.

SANDRA

I mean, does he talk back?

MS. KEPKE

It's not easy, Ms. Hamster. Certain things he won't touch, no matter how far I push. Take blackjack. I love blackjack. We play it at the club, right? And it's *hard*. You have seventeen, do you take a card? That sort of thing. So I ask his advice, quietly. He is supposed to *know*, now that he is shmoozing with you-know-Who. Well, he pretends he is deaf. Like he is punishing me for this little indulgence? It is *so* humiliating. Considering how much I lose.

SANDRA

And other matters?

MS. KEPKE

His roots. This would always get him going. Except who wants to hear about his aunt's teeth in a water jar, or his "dear little tzatzkeleh" next door? So he was a Romeo at the age of eight, and my middle name is Virgin Mary.

SANDRA

Now this must be--?

(Looking at the bowl in MS. KEPKE'S hands)

MS. KEPKE

Rice-'n'-raisin.

(She sets it on the table and begins to remove the plastic wrap)

It's this wake thing: they take a pinch and pass it around.

(She shows how. SANDRA apprehensively dips her fingers into the bowl)

SANDRA

The Jews?

MS. KEPKE

Ummm. Or is it the Russians?

(Chewing reflectively)

It's a good question. I must remember to ask Mr. Kepke, although we may never get a straight answer, confused as he always was about these things. In his family they would eat the Jewish matsoh on Easter and bake the Christian kulich on Passover, how's that for a mix-up?

(She notices the mirror is no longer covered with a black cloth)

SANDRA

It . . . slipped.

MS. KEPKE

Well. It's over isn't it. Has anybody told you black is not your color?
It's also too dramatic. This funeral season, pistachio is "in."

(Looking around)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

You've got some cleaning to do, young lady.

SANDRA

I've got some writing to do. Did I tell you this? I forgot to file a complaint for my client--the custody case?--and she raised hell. Now I'm facing bearing my soul before the Grievance Committee.

MS. KEPKE

You've been her best friend! How could she have done this to you?

SANDRA

It's OK. She withdrew her grievance after she'd cooled off, but . . .

MS. KEPKE

But?

SANDRA

There were other screwups lately, see? And they are always looking for more dirt under the rug.

MS. KEPKE

So what happens now?

SANDRA

I don't know. I write them a letter, they might cite me for misconduct. Hope they don't revoke my license.

MS. KEPKE

They would, if they saw the mess you work in.

SANDRA

Forget it. It'll take me months before I can even think of it.

MS. KEPKE

How old were the two of you when you got married?

SANDRA

I was eighteen and Pete . . . what does it have to do with my cleaning the house?

MS. KEPKE

Trust me, my child. I've been through this four times and, God forbid, the lightning may strike again. I must be charged or something. Shall I tell you what Mr. Kepke used to say? "A man marries three times: first, because he doesn't know; second, because he knows; and third, because it no longer matters."

SANDRA

(Smiling in spite of herself)

And a woman?

MS. KEPKE

A woman marries to reclaim Paradise. It can take more than three tries . . .

(The phone rings. Light on DAVID, who has finished reading Pete's script)

SANDRA

Excuse me.

(She picks up the phone)

Hello?

DAVID

Hi. How are you doing?

SANDRA

David? I'm OK. And you?

DAVID

Tired. Listen. I just finished reading Pete's script. He asked me to look at it after--after he was gone, and sort of go from there. Tell you the truth, it's a helluva . . .

SANDRA

David, it's not a very good time.

DAVID

I'll try you later.

SANDRA

I'm not sure I will be up to it. How about tomorrow?

DAVID

Tomorrow I'm leaving town for a few days. Hey, there's no rush, right?

(He is clearly upset)

SANDRA

Exactly. Call me when you get back. I'll make you a Margarita.

DAVID

Maybe I should cancel my trip?

SANDRA

Bye David.

DAVID

Bye Sandra.

(Lights out)

SANDRA

It's David Banks. Artistic director of Encore Theater.

MS. KEPKE

One of the pallbearers? He is very cute. Did you notice the hairs on the back of his hands? And his Adam's apple! You could fall in love with his Adam's apple. What a terrible waste.

SANDRA

Waste . . . ?

MS. KEPKE

He is from the club.

(SANDRA looks puzzled. MS. KEPKE explains)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

The "club"? He is gay, isn't he?

SANDRA

I suppose.

MS. KEPKE

He directed Pete's play with that funny title . . . ?

SANDRA

His short play, yes.

(Changing the subject)

Before the phone rang we were talking about . . . ?

MS. KEPKE

. . . the house?

SANDRA

The house, yes. It's heavily mortgaged--so I may as well forget about cleaning.

MS. KEPKE

I didn't know lawyers were hurting these days.

SANDRA

A divorce attorney? This is no Quitsville. People abuse, insult, maim, and kill, too busy to allow themselves to get distracted by a civil suit. New York, Los Angeles, now those are our holy shrines of separation. Their custody battles outnumber their children, and what they are willing to pay to settle their disputes out of court would make John D. Rockefeller spin in his grave. I wish somebody would tell me what I'm doing in this hole.

MS. KEPKE

You have a nice home.

SANDRA

It looked nice when we moved in.

MS. KEPKE

It hasn't changed that much in seven years. Did I tell you what Mr. Kepke said when you bought it?

SANDRA

"This boitshick across the street has some pocket change."

MS. KEPKE

And then of course he saw Pete's cab.

SANDRA

Of course.

MS. KEPKE

"A very nice cab . . ."

SANDRA

". . . but it made him wonder."

MS. KEPKE

Not that he winked twice over his neighbor being a cabbie . . .

SANDRA

". . . which would be preposterous . . ."

MS. KEPKE

. . . yes, but it made him doubt if that indeed was something your husband really enjoyed doing.

SANDRA

Well he did. I'm sure he gave you the spiel.

MS. KEPKE

About being a taxi driver? I loved it.

SANDRA

Taking orders from strangers, hustling for tips. Not minding it one bit. All the while being a father of two kids. It's pathetic.

MS. KEPKE

Given the circumstances, I think you are overreacting.

SANDRA

How true! It's what I was always so good at, I was told. Don't you agree?

(She sweeps the bills in a big pile and throws them up in the air, a snowfall of confetti)

SANDRA (Sings)

Strange bills in the night
We'll pay together
After being tight
Through stormy weather.
It'll work so right
For strange bills in the night.

SANDRA (Continued)

You silly girl! Life is beautiful, as long as you stay away from it! You blow it a kiss and oh so gingerly you "one two three, one two three" away from it before it can catch you by the hem! A prom dance!

(She sings and waltzes around, forgetting MS. KEPKE, who is not quite sure how to react to this little outburst. PARKER emerges, a flute in hand. As the girl starts to play, SANDRA comes to a halt. She is standing and waiting, but PARKER continues to play, producing the ever more disturbing, excruciatingly false tune, making every note of Frank Sinatra's song sound like an insult. Finally, her mother cannot take any more of it)

SANDRA (Continued)

Parker? You've made your point, okay?

(PARKER continues to play)

I'm sorry about what you saw, I didn't mean it.

(Pause)

Honey, we've all been under a lot of stress lately, you don't have to make it harder than it is.

(A longer pause as the girl plays on)

SANDRA (Continued)

You want me to admit, in front of our neighbor, that I haven't been a good wife? Very well. "I haven't been a good wife." Peace?

(Pause)

What is it, then? You want a sworn statement that I'm a self-serving, callous, heartless person, who failed "to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health"? I am, I did, case closed?

(Pause)

Oh I see. You want blood.

MS. KEPKE

I'm afraid I have to . . .

(She turns to go but is stopped by SANDRA, who speaks to her directly)

SANDRA

I'll tell you what she wants. She wants me to say it is my fault that Pete died.

(To her daughter)

SANDRA (Continued)

Is that it? You want me to say that, by giving up on Pete, I pushed him over. Is that what you want? Sandra the murderess. Well, I'm not giving you the satisfaction. Unlikely as it sounds, your father died of natural causes. And you can play your thing till you turn green. Because, frankly, I don't give a fuck.

(PARKER puts her flute down. She looks her mother in the eye, then returns to her room. There is a pause)

MS. KEPKE

Sorry I . . .

SANDRA

Rough time.

(She begins to collect the scattered bills, getting some help from MS. KEPKE)

SANDRA (Continued)

With these bills for wall paper, I could do a complete makeover. It would look "cute," wouldn't it? And when they arrive to give us the boot I'll say the magic formula: "Black&White."

(She is in tears)

MS. KEPKE

"Black&White"?

SANDRA

Pete's cab. Or should I say the title of his Hollywood-produced, award-winning film script?

MS. KEPKE

I didn't know he made a picture in Hollywood.

SANDRA

Well he did. Seven years ago, at Columbia Pictures. Lock, stock, and barrel. Complete with running credits and his name in gold.

MS. KEPKE

I'll be damned.

SANDRA

In his head.

MS. KEPKE

Excuse me?

SANDRA

He had it produced by a major studio--in his head.

MS. KEPKE

You mean . . . ?

SANDRA

Writers. Daydreamers. You know.

MS. KEPKE

He assumed they had produced the script he sent them?

SANDRA

He assumed they had produced the script he *assumed* he had written.

MS. KEPKE

I'm not sure I . . .

SANDRA

Have you seen *Taxi Driver* with Robert DeNiro? Well, Pete had his own ideas. No New York loner-turned-psycho-killer flick. A warm, sensitive, family-oriented movie. A small town story. So he writes a treatment, five pages, which he sends off to the same studio that made that DeNiro thingamajig . . . unless he imagined the whole nine yards, and, if I were you, I wouldn't bet my life that he didn't. Which is not the point. The point is, he assures me he is on top of the situation, like he has a deal with Columbia, and on the strength of his "contract"--are you with me?--he gets a bank loan, don't ask me how. And we buy this wonderful home, hallelujah.

MS. KEPKE

I see.

SANDRA

Do you? Someone talking rings around you about the revisions, the deadlines, the *casting*, as though he is slowly but steadily getting
there? Without actually having written a single line? Are you sure you can see someone screwing with you like this for seven *years*? The expectations, the thrill, the agony of waiting! All but savoring that sweetness in your mouth, the heavenly nectar they collect from the flowers we don't even have a name for. All but booking the tickets to the exotic places you've always dreamed about as a child. All but spending the real money that you never had! No, you can't see it. But when someone does, finally, in that moment of chilling epiphany, there's only one thing left.

(She puts a barrel of the imaginary gun to her temple)

Bang!

(Pause)

SANDRA (Continued)

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: But she didn't kill herself!

MS. KEPKE

That's not what I was thinking!

SANDRA

Right. The defense wants to show the jury Exhibit No.1.

(She bears her wrists)

Done to a T. However, at the last minute Mrs. Hamster freaked out. Once a flop, always a flop. Now, Exhibit No.2--a bottle of Seconal. Mmm, can't show you the pills, ladies and gentlemen. All washed down and partially digested. How about the medical report from St. Rita's emergency unit? Stomach pump? Will that be enough proof?

MS. KEPKE

I'm sorry.

SANDRA

A divorce. Would that have worked for my client? Nah.

MS. KEPKE

So you never filed for . . . ?

SANDRA

You ever see a second-story man burglarize his own house? I couldn't drag myself through the dirt, having done it to others so many times, could I?

MS. KEPKE

Well . . .

SANDRA

And then I learned about his illness . . .

MS. KEPKE

Oh dear!

SANDRA

. . . which I managed to keep a secret from him to his last day. But, illness or no illness, I never considered a divorce. He would have turned the trial into a circus. His antics!

(She cackles)

The judge would have found us in contempt.

MS. KEPKE

That man certainly knew how to turn things upside down.

(She giggles remembering something from the past)

SANDRA

And living in an upside-down world was lots of fun.

MS. KEPKE

Oh, it must have been terrible.

(Suddenly businesslike)

I'll send Brian over.

(Apparently the name does not ring the bell)

Brian? My nephew? I'm sure I've told you. A real estate agent? Oodles of brains.

SANDRA

A real estate . . . ?

MS. KEPKE

To divorce his tsedrait wife--that took balls on top of the brains!

SANDRA

What do I want with a real estate agent?

MS. KEPKE

I thought you said this house was a liability.

SANDRA

Yes but . . .

MS. KEPKE

Oh, I must run.

(On her way out)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

Here is a man who cracks it in one bite. He'll sell a rug from under your feet and you won't notice.

(Her eyes drop on the carpeting)

You could use a new rug.

(In the door)

The name is Brian Stripes.

(She is gone)

(SANDRA examines the stains on the rug. She looks around. The neglect and desolation are sickening, but now she knows she is ready. She brings out the cleaning equipment and gets to work. She quickly slips into the rhythm of it, surprised by her own verve. She begins to hum. At some point she turns on the vacuum. Both children, attracted by the unlikely sound, emerge from their rooms. They sit on the step up high and watch her silently, one with love and rising hope, the other with utter scorn)

Scene 7

AT RISE: Six days later. The sitting room has changed, and so has SANDRA who finishes laying the table for four. She is so pleased with herself she could sing. She looks at her watch and goes to check the mailbox. She is sorting through her mail and then she drops it, all but one letter, which has caused the shock. She has to sit down to read it aloud.

SANDRA

"My Honorable Hamster! Wrestling with a concept of 'Being Gone' is an exercise in brain racking, with no brains to speak of. I miss you, darling. It's a one-way street, but having discovered a short-cut to send you, now and then, a little note . . ."

(She reads the rest of it, silently moving her lips, her hands slightly shaking. Having reached the end, she takes another look at the envelope. She thinks for a moment. She rereads aloud one passage)

SANDRA (Continued)

". . . it's good to know that David is at your side. If there is a man who will pull you through thick and thin, . . ."

(She stands up brusquely, suddenly furious and destructive. She rushes off to the bathroom and, putting on a pair of rubber gloves, begins to dump Pete's personal things: tooth brush, razor, shaving cream, etc. She storms into the master bedroom to throw her late husband's clothes out of the closet and his underwear out of the drawer. Her first anger quenched, she picks up the phone and pounds out a number. It rings four or five times, then light on PATTI, rushing from the shower)

PATTI

Hello? Hello?

SANDRA

Patti!

PATTI

What happened?

SANDRA

I could kill him!

PATTI

Sandra. You scared me out of my panties.

SANDRA

You know what he did? He married me off! How's that for a will? Can you imagine, fixing me up with his best friend, *as he lay dying* and me being . . .

PATTI

Whoa whoa whoa. Slow down, will you.

SANDRA

Pete. He wrote me this letter. On his deathbed. Suggesting that I hook up with David.

PATTI

Which David?

SANDRA

Banks.

PATTI

He's a homo.

SANDRA

So?

PATTI

How can you hook up with a homo?

SANDRA

How would I know!

PATTI

Wasn't Pete supposed to know?

SANDRA

Maybe he was blotto. Maybe he was nuts. Maybe it's his way of getting back at me.

PATTI

Horsefeathers!

SANDRA

That's what he wrote, for Chrissake.

(Quoting)

SANDRA (Continued)

"If there is a man who will pull you through thick and thin . . ." I can't believe it!

PATTI

Someone had to mail it.

SANDRA

Huh?

PATTI

Someone had to mail it for Pete. He couldn't do it himself.

SANDRA

His bosom buddy.

PATTI

David? He's a homo.

SANDRA

Will you stop it! I don't care if it was mailed by Rainbow Muffler. Gee!

PATTI

No, it can't be David. Read some more.

SANDRA

Oh please.

PATTI

Go ahead.

SANDRA

"He is intelligent, he is tough, a steppenwolf seasoned in the . . ." I'm going to lose my breakfast!

PATTI

Children?

SANDRA

Huh?

PATTI

Does he write about children?

SANDRA

Let's see. "And, as you may have noticed, he is great with kids."

PATTI

Yep.

SANDRA

What?

PATTI

He means business.

SANDRA

I got so mad I trashed his underwear.

PATTI

Didn't you say before that you couldn't touch it? Like it had been contaminated by death or something?

SANDRA

I put on my rubber gloves.

(She studies them obtusely)

What a mess.

PATTI

Hey. What are you crying for?

SANDRA

Why would he do that to me?

PATTI

Maybe it was his way of saying that he didn't want to let you go.

SANDRA

Ha!

PATTI

He hated the idea of you remarrying, so what does he do? He brings up David Banks, who can't . . . you know . . .

SANDRA

You serious?

PATTI

The guys had a field day with that letter, I'm telling you.

SANDRA

Scumbags.

PATTI

Next time you see David you prod him a little and he'll crack like an overripe water-melon.

SANDRA

Oh shoot!

PATTI

What?

SANDRA

He should be here any minute! Call you later.

(Lights out)

Scene 8

AT RISE: Moments later. A doorbell. SANDRA rushes to let DAVID in.

DAVID

Sandra!

(He gives her a hug)

SANDRA

David!

DAVID

So now you put on rubber gloves to hug me?

SANDRA

Oh it's . . .

(She peels them off and throws them in the corner)

DAVID

You are expecting guests?

SANDRA

No--I mean--you. I was expecting you.

DAVID

Looks like a hearty welcome.

SANDRA

How was the trip?

DAVID

Boring. Sorry about the short notice. Shall we sit down?

(They do)

No, that's not the way to do it.

(He stands up)

It's much too important. A formal announcement. Well . . .

SANDRA

David . . .

DAVID

I know, Sandra. It's not easy.

(He goes to the table and pours himself a drink, which he swallows in one gulp. SANDRA is flustered almost beyond control. He is back)

DAVID (Continued)

Are you ready?

(She is too weak to answer)

Phew. It's here!

(He presses his hand to his heart. SANDRA finally finds her voice)

SANDRA

David, you're really rushing it.

DAVID

Am I?

SANDRA

This could wait a few months . . .

DAVID

Months!

SANDRA

. . . at least.

DAVID

But why!?

SANDRA

David! It hasn't been ten days, for Pete's sake!

DAVID

Exactly. I'm doing it for him. And it might raise your spirits.

SANDRA

Well it doesn't.

DAVID

It doesn't?

SANDRA

No.

DAVID

Oh well. I guess I screwed up.

SANDRA

Don't take it so hard.

DAVID

Sorry.

SANDRA

It's okay.

DAVID

I think I better go.

SANDRA

Yeah.

(He makes for the door, then turns back)

DAVID

I'll make a copy for you, in case you change your mind.

SANDRA

A copy . . . ?

DAVID

Of the script.

SANDRA

What are you talking about?

DAVID

(Producing it from his inner breast pocket)

The script. Pete's "Hollywood project."

SANDRA

The six-figure mumbo-jumbo?

DAVID

I'm not so sure now.

SANDRA

Are you saying he actually *wrote* it?

DAVID

That's why I'm here.

SANDRA

I thought you were--oh shoot!--so you didn't come to--?

DAVID

To . . . ?

SANDRA

To propose?

DAVID

What?!

SANDRA

Forget it.

DAVID

You thought I was making a . . . ?

SANDRA

David. I'm sorry. I . . . it doesn't make any sense, I know. It's that stupid--where did I put it?

(She fishes out the letter)

Here.

DAVID

(He looks at the envelope)

From Pete?

SANDRA

You can read it.

(She studies him closely as he reads the letter. His reaction convinces her that he was not in cahoots. When he is done he checks the postmark on the envelope)

DAVID

It was mailed locally.

SANDRA

A week after his death.

DAVID

Somebody out there is matchmaking, so it seems.

SANDRA

"Somebody"?

DAVID

You don't think it was Pete who wrote it?

(He is busy inspecting the handwriting)

SANDRA

I . . . don't know.

DAVID

The *hand* looks like his.

SANDRA

You're saying somebody . . . ?

DAVID

It's been done before. Possible suspects?

(She shrugs)

DAVID (Continued)

Good. I mean, you can go nuts thinking about it. *If* it is true. After all, he *could* have written it. I mean, the words, the flavor. The humor. It's vintage Pete.

SANDRA

. . . marrying me off to a . . . ?

DAVID

(Innocently)

Yes?

SANDRA

. . . uh, his best friend?

DAVID

The edge--that's Pete. Read his screenplay. It's dynamite. He fattened our small-town sacred cows to butcher every one of them.

(He puts the manuscript in her hands and gets up)

We are all here. You'll love it.

SANDRA

You're not staying for dinner?

DAVID

The candles? Handfuls of rice? "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!"

(He exits)

(SANDRA alone)

SANDRA

All that smoke screen! *"Somebody."* That *somebody* appears to be a huge fan of David's, and Pete was a sucker for eulogizing.

(Playing Jeopardy)

Our category: Holy Matrimony. The Question: Who wants to see David Banks as Sandra Hamster's next husband? Bzzzzzzz. Wait a . . . wait a minute! After the funeral. Right here. "David this, David that . . ." Chewing David and spewing David. Like he was the only decent man in town. All the while telling me how bad a wife for Pete I was. Well how about that!

(She dials a phone number. Light on PATTI)

SANDRA (Continued)

Grab a chair!

PATTI

Will the clothes hanger do?

SANDRA

It’s Parker!

PATTI

It’s Parker what?

SANDRA

She wrote it, she mailed it!

PATTI

No way.

SANDRA

She likes the guy!

PATTI

Enough to want him to replace her father before his body is cold?

SANDRA

She’s a wild thing.

PATTI

Okay?

SANDRA

She wants me out of the picture . . . so she can have Pete all to herself.

PATTI

Are you working on a novel, sister?

SANDRA

Do you think I should confront her?

PATTI

If you are sure your home can withstand *two* hurricanes.

SANDRA

She’ll never fess up.

PATTI

Fess up what? You may as well ask me if I had been diddling you with your husband.

SANDRA

Don’t be ridiculous.

PATTI

See?

(Lights out)

Scene 9

AT RISE: Back from school, the kids are struck by the sudden order in the sitting room. SANDRA is upstairs, cleaning the mess in the master bedroom.

PARKER

Ooh la la. Party time.

TENNYSON

It's just a dinner.

PARKER

The art of understatement. And "just" who might that fourth setting be for?

TENNYSON

How would I know?

PARKER

That is Pete's chair. No one is supposed to sit in *Pete*'s chair. Ever.

SANDRA

(From above)

I'm coming!

TENNYSON

Look.

(He discovers the neglected envelope)

PARKER

What is it?

TENNYSON

A letter from Dad!

PARKER

Really.

TENNYSON

Look for yourself.

PARKER

(Taking a peek over his shoulder)
Who would have thought? She was hearts-and-flowers. Does it smell of perfume?

TENNYSON
It's not an old letter, Park. It came today.

PARKER
Give me a break.

TENNYSON
The postmark, see?

SANDRA
(From above) School okay today?

PARKER
Hmmm.

TENNYSON
I wonder what it's about.

PARKER
Any clues, Holmes?

TENNYSON
Well, the fact that it was mailed after Pete's . . .

(He bites his tongue: their mother has come in. He is awkwardly holding the envelope realizing it is too late to hide it)

SANDRA
Why don't you . . . run upstairs while I finish up here.

PARKER
(Sarcasm thinly disguised)
I could give you a hand.

SANDRA
I'm done, basically.

PARKER
(More venom)
Good work.

SANDRA
Thanks.

PARKER

A big shot?

SANDRA

Excuse me?

PARKER

Must be a big shot you're expecting to fill up Pete's chair.

SANDRA

Oh. It's only . . . Ms. Kepke.

TENNYSON

Ms. Kepke?

SANDRA

She's been so helpful. It's the least that we can do for her.

PARKER

Except introducing her to a nice man. I'm impressed she could stay single that long. Tennys, what's the American standard grieving period? A week?

SANDRA

I don't have to take this in my own house.

PARKER

It's all about you, isn't it? Your peace. Your looks. Your *terri*tory. You have it all mapped out don't you?

SANDRA

My *terri*. . .

PARKER

Or is it Larry? At least he is not a taxi driver? Who wants another dork for a husband when there are bills to pay. Someone has to think ahead. Let it slip by and you find your children on the street.

(She goes panhandling)

"Mister, can you spare me some change?"

SANDRA

You damn well know it's not Terri or Larry.

(She snatches the envelope from TENNYSON and waves it in the air)

You want to talk about this?

PARKER

Sure.

SANDRA

"He is intelligent, he is great with kids." The ideal man, huh?

PARKER

You're talking about . . . ?

SANDRA

David is who I'm talking about! The man you're so anxious to fix me up with!

PARKER

David *Banks*?

SANDRA

Don't give me that face. Even if it was Pete's idea we both know you gave him a hand. You always were birds of a feather. Hold it! Please spare me the details of your collaboration. I can live with yet another masterpiece that fell by the wayside. But one explanation you do owe me: Why David?

TENNYSON

Parker, are you coming?

SANDRA

He is not even interested in women, which your father knew.

TENNYSON

Park--?

SANDRA

So why him? Huh?

PARKER

Dad wanted you to be happy . . . I guess.

SANDRA

I am not wearing my hearing aid today. "Happy"? Is that what you said?

PARKER

David would take good care of you. With him, you'd be safe and--

SANDRA

Safe! What I like about "writers" is that they can fix the limits of flapdoodle for you in no time. "Safe." With a gay husband I'd have nothing to fear. Oh, this is a riot!

PARKER

But that's the point, don't you see? He didn't want to share you. Wanted you all to himself. He was playing safe.

SANDRA

He said that?

PARKER

He didn't want you to mope. He said, "A woman in tears is witness that the divine plan has failed."

SANDRA

Sounds like Pete.

TENNYSON

(Urging his sister)

Hey, man!

PARKER

He said, "You only love once, and then you fool around until you've proven it to yourself."

(SANDRA smiles vaguely)

We'll be upstairs.

(SANDRA sits quietly for a while after they are gone, then dials a number. Light on PATTI)

PATTI

Hello?

SANDRA

He wants to take care of me.

PATTI

Oh?

SANDRA

He said, "A woman in tears is witness that the divine plan has failed."

PATTI

Is that what he said? How interesting. Well. Finesse is what they are known for.

SANDRA

"They"?

PATTI

Queers. Rock Hudson opposite Doris Day. Very congenial.

SANDRA

I'm talking Pete here.

PATTI

Oh *he* wants to take care of you.

SANDRA

You're surprised?

PATTI

I am not surprised. Pete was a caring person.

SANDRA

What do you mean?

PATTI

Little things. A get-well postcard. A word of consolation.

SANDRA

I know what you're saying.

PATTI

Women's tears rendered him helpless.

SANDRA

Like a baby.

PATTI

You almost felt guilty.

SANDRA

Yeah.

PATTI

Even if it was his fault.

SANDRA

Which it usually was.

PATTI

Right.

SANDRA

What did he make *you* cry for?

PATTI

Oh, things.

SANDRA

Uhmm.

PATTI

That's how I remember that phrase.

SANDRA

Which one?

PATTI

"A woman in tears . . ." It's funny.

SANDRA

What?

PATTI

When I heard it from you, I thought, There's another line that Pete had picked up and put in his play, like he always would. And now it's in the public domain.

SANDRA

What do you mean, "like he always would"?

PATTI

You've read his plays?

SANDRA

Well . . . sure.

PATTI

For the Birds? That "Agnes" character? I was on my high horse.

SANDRA

(Unsure)

Yeah.

PATTI

Did you feel the same way about "Connie"?

SANDRA

(Bluffing)

You bet.

PATTI

You couldn't talk to him without having your words boomerang to you in some crazy way. Did he carry around a dictaphone or

PATTI (Continued)

something?

SANDRA

He dictated stuff when he worked at home. Drove me nuts.

PATTI

Well *I* searched him. Every time he stopped by, a first-degree once-over. No doodad. The man had a good memory.

SANDRA

Oh shit!

PATTI

What?

SANDRA

Our neighbor is supposed to join us for dinner and she doesn't even know.

PATTI

You'll live forever, girl.

SANDRA

Why are you saying this?

PATTI

You can never be quite through with your "To Do" list.

(Lights out)

Scene 10

AT RISE: Same time. The children's room. They both are rather subdued.

TENNYSON

It was a lie.

PARKER

Huh?

TENNYSON

The letter that you helped Dad with--you lied?

PARKER

So?

TENNYSON

Why?

PARKER

Use your brains, dipstick.

TENNYSON

You hated the idea that she might be happy with somebody else some day.

PARKER

Not if it was Pete's idea.

TENNYSON

Pete's idea?

PARKER

It's what he wrote in his letter, dumbbell.

TENNYSON

Oh yeah.

PARKER

You men are something else. When was the last time that you saw short hairs in the sink?

TENNYSON

Short hairs in the . . . ?

PARKER

When she cares about her looks she'd give herself a trim. Every other day. Makes her feel young, I guess. Attractive. New. It's a sure sign she is alive. And shall I tell you when she trimmed her hair last? It's been months.

TENNYSON

Months?

PARKER

And now Pete wants her to get another life.

TENNYSON

But she won't?

PARKER

Well not with David Banks. Tennys? He is gay. Hello! Gays are not supposed to marry.

TENNYSON

No?

PARKER

Except in San Francisco where everyone's gay.

(He is mulling over the news)

PARKER (Continued)

Anyways. How did you know I'd lied?

TENNYSON

Well . . . That thing you said he had told you? About Mom?

PARKER

Yeah?

TENNYSON

"A woman in tears . . ."? It's from *Floppy Summer*.

PARKER

Really?

TENNYSON

And "You only love once . . ." is from his one-act.

(Pause. She lunges at him with raised fists. They roll on the floor keeping their voices low so as not to attract their mother's attention)

PARKER

You slimebag!

(She is holding him down by the throat)

TENNYSON

Let go--!

(He is trying to snap at her hand)

PARKER

Get your rabies shot first.

TENNYSON

Keep your--!

(He sinks his teeth in her flesh. She lets go of him, with a grimace of pain. He sits up. They keep an eye on each other while catching breath)

PARKER

I'll teach you to break into my drawer.

TENNYSON

I never broke into your drawer!

PARKER

Then where did you get the plays?

TENNYSON

Hard drive!

(Pause)

PARKER

You geek, you broke the access code!

(It's genuine admiration)

TENNYSON

(Modestly)

Yeah well.

PARKER

I should have known.

TENNYSON

You gotta read *Black&White*. It's real cool.

PARKER

The screenplay?

TENNYSON

He's made us twins there. Liz and Buzz.

PARKER

Neat.

TENNYSON

Yeah. They fight.

PARKER

Oh.

TENNYSON

Not fight-fight. She'd hold him down by the throat--and he'd bite her--

PARKER

Ha!

TENNYSON

--and she'd say--

PARKER

"Get your rabies shot first!"

(With big smirks, they do a "high five")

Scene 11

AT RISE: Same time. SANDRA dials a number and gets a voice recording.

SANDRA

Oh no!

(She begins to dictate the message)

Ms. Kepke, will you have dinner with us at . . . in about fifteen minutes? It's a short notice, I know, and you are not even home, but if you can . . .

(A doorbell)

One second, Ms. Kepke.

(She puts the phone down to get the door. It is MS. KEPKE in flesh and blood)

SANDRA (Continued)

Ms. Kepke?

MS. KEPKE

I stopped to--

SANDRA

Excuse me.

(She goes back, picks up the phone. With mad precision)

Ms. Kepke? Sandra again. Ms. Kepke is here, thank you.

(She hangs up)

I'm glad you've made it.

MS. KEPKE

Weren't you just talking to . . . ?

SANDRA

I'm trying to get organized. Too many things going on. My client's mother called--this jerk is verbally abusing her. The Bar is calling me for a hearing on Tuesday. Then this script. Did I tell you about the "Hollywood script"? The Dead Sea scrolls have been uncovered! Yes, and David says it looks pretty good. I am beginning to sniff real money. Oh, the best news: I've got a love letter from Pete.

MS. KEPKE

From Pete?

SANDRA

Not a "love-love" letter but . . . you know. He'd like to keep it alive.

MS. KEPKE

How wonderful!

SANDRA

Spiritually.

MS. KEPKE

Aha?

SANDRA

Would you tie the knot knowing that your late husband is not quite ready yet to give you a divorce?

MS. KEPKE

I'd never do such a thing without preparing the ground.

SANDRA

You talked to Mr. Kepke about your marriage prospects?

MS. KEPKE

God forbid! What husband would give you a blank check? It's by hook or by crook, my dear. Did I ever tell you how I had convinced my Number Two, may he rest in peace? I had tried everything, and all I was getting was dead silence. He wouldn't budge. So I produced a false medical record.

SANDRA

A false medical . . . ?

MS. KEPKE

That Wayne, my new boyfriend, was impotent. Don't ask me how I got it. Early morning, I'm at the cemetery. I weed grass. We talk as I plant corn-flowers, his favorites. I tell him things. The

hearsay, you know. And when he is laid back and mellow, I take out the medical record in a plastic case--it was supposed to rain later--and I leave it on the marker.

SANDRA

And?

MS. KEPKE

What do you think! Who wouldn't like to hear bad news about his rival?

SANDRA

He was pleased?

MS. KEPKE

He could have died laughing.

SANDRA

How do you know?

MS. KEPKE

My dear, when a man is happy he'll find a way to show you.

SANDRA

Well. If you'll excuse me. Parker! Tennyson! It's dinner time!

(She exits. MS. KEPKE alone)

MS. KEPKE

I don't remember being invited for dinner.

(She picks up the script from the couch and leafs through it distractedly)

I think she is cuckoo. So what? Brian can deal with it. For a realtor, he may be one egg short of a dozen himself.

(She chuckles pleasantly)

Now, what is *this* . . . ?

(She reads out loud)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

"I don't understand, Ms. Resnick. I thought you reserved a taxi."
"To take me to my grave site, yes."

(She looks up)

That sounds familiar.

(She reads on)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

"I didn't know you bought a plot."
"Two."
"Two?"
"I thought you might be interested. Oh, you'll love it, Mr. Busch."

(Her face brightens up)

It's what I said to Pete! My own words! The day he refused to take me to the cemetery!

(Very excited, she crosses to the table to pour herself a glass of wine, which she raises to toast herself)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

I've made it! Hollywood-ho!

(Fadeout)

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2

Scene 12

AT RISE: A few days later. We catch SANDRA in the middle of giving BRIAN STRIPES, the real estate agent, a tour of the house. They have already seen the basement and the first floor and are on their way to the upper story. SANDRA is needlessly apologetic. BRIAN is at ease and tenderly indulgent. He sees his client's helplessness as adding to her graceful femininity.

SANDRA

. . . and it's *damp*!

BRIAN

I noticed.

SANDRA

The rusty plumbing. The crumbling brickwork. The bats? This basement is so ugly the gas man refuses to read our meter. Or else it's the rickety steps he won't chance. Just to clean this mess will cost a fortune!

BRIAN

We'll sell it to a bunch of kids who will use the basement as a haunted house. Dripping water, cobweb . . . you could probably double the price.

SANDRA

And what will they use the bathroom as? A dumpster? Mr. Stripes, let's give up.

BRIAN

It's a sure thing.

SANDRA

It's a brick.

BRIAN

A gold brick, yes.

SANDRA

What about this?

(Referring to the sitting room with disgust)

BRIAN

Change the carpeting. Retouch the walls. Put in a fire-place with marble mantelpiece.

SANDRA

With mar. . . ?

BRIAN

Imitation marble--costs next to nothing. Hang good artwork. French Rococo. Watteau, Poussin. Bronze knickknacks, here and there. "Adonis Resting on His Lover's Lap." I know a place where we can rent it dirt cheap.

SANDRA

But--

BRIAN

Ms. Hamster, close your eyes.

(She does)

Imagine: Persian rug . . . love seat next to the fire-place, where logs crackety-crack their cheerful vespers . . . idyllic landscapes in lavish frames . . . rays of the setting sun breaking through the gossamer curtains . . .

SANDRA

Well . . .

BRIAN

Give me your hand.

(She extends her hand, her eyes still closed, allowing him to lead her forward. We hear the first bars of a minuet played on a harpsichord. She dances with a faint smile on her face)

BRIAN (Continued)

Can you see it?

SANDRA

Yes . . .

BRIAN

Show me a person who can resist the Garden of Eden.

(Music fades out. She opens her eyes, a little dazed)

SANDRA

I don't know. Do you want to see the bedrooms?

BRIAN

If we must.

SANDRA

The kids won't mind. This way, please.

(On their way up)

BRIAN

When I mentioned your name they all but bribed me for a chance to see the house. Your husband's play was a big favorite. "A good line is worth two whoops in hell." For someone whose life is one endless pitch, that sums it up!

(They enter TENNYSON'S room. The boy is at his Macintosh)

SANDRA

Mr. Stripes, this is Tennyson. And Parker is probably reading in her
. . .

(PARKER walks in, a book in hands)

SANDRA (Continued)

Oh, there she is.

BRIAN

I like your names.

PARKER

Same here.

(TENNYSON chortles)

SANDRA

Children, say "hello" to the Miracle Man.

(They do without much enthusiasm)

Mr. Stripes says he will sell this house for us. Can you believe it?

PARKER

Sure thing.

BRIAN

They will, Ms. Hamster, before you can count to ten.

(The kids look up at him with mild curiosity)

May I ask the young lady to open her book to page thirty-six?

(She shrugs and does as told)

BRIAN (Continued)

Now will you kindly go to . . . the seventh line from the bottom?

(She finds the line)

And can we have the pleasure of hearing it out loud?

PARKER

". . . with his push-cart, selling lettuce, and fresh asparagus, and artichokes the size of . . ."

(She stops)

BRIAN

Did I hear the word "selling"?

PARKER

(Double checking)

It says "*selling* lettuce."

TENNYSON

Wow.

SANDRA

Isn't that amazing!

(Acting every inch the David Copperfield, BRIAN turns to the boy)

BRIAN

And the gentleman here is playing . . . ?

TENNYSON

Chess.

BRIAN

The game of gods. What do you say to a little blitz, sir? I win, the house sells.

PARKER

No way. Tennys will take you out ten out of ten.

BRIAN

That so?

SANDRA

He is good.

PARKER

The best.

BRIAN

The die is cast! We'll see if I can beat the odds.

SANDRA

You guys have fun. I'll wait for you downstairs, Mr. Stripes.

BRIAN

Now my chances are even slimmer.

(His gallantry wins him a smile from SANDRA, who exits. BRIAN pulls a chair next to TENNYSON'S. PARKER comes over. The players pass the mouse back and forth, ad libbing as they make quick moves. Then BRIAN gives a cry of triumph while PARKER gasps)

PARKER

No!

TENNYSON

Congratulations.

BRIAN

If not for this little slipup, you'd have me against the wall. You *are* good.

TENNYSON

Thanks.

BRIAN

How did you get your name?

TENNYSON

Dad was looking for something sweet, and his first choice was Alfred Lord Tennyson.

BRIAN

And

(Turning to the girl)

Dorothy Parker was his idea of sour?

PARKER

"Can sick men play so nicely with their names?"

BRIAN

"Thou speakest wiser than thou art 'ware of." My lords!

(He exits)

TENNYSON

The guy is right out of Dad's play!

PARKER

A little slipup?

TENNYSON

I goofed my Queen. The Rook may not have been enough.

PARKER

You took a dive!

TENNYSON

"He wins, the house sells." It's what Mom is waiting to hear.

PARKER

I'm not moving out!

TENNYSON

But we can't . . .

(She stops him with a gesture inviting him to look out the window)

PARKER

Is it there?

TENNYSON

The cab?

(He looks out)

'course it's there.

PARKER

His cab. Parked outside? His home. He would honk and we'd blow our train whistles back till we turned blue in the face. Then we'd sprint down the stairs to the front door, and the winner got the "flip-flop-from-Pop." There was the Late-Sleepers-Pillow-Fighting-Big-Pete Award on Sundays. And the Spooky Cocktails after his bedtime stories. It was in this house. You can't pack it in a suitcase. And you can't give it to the birds!

(She looks away)

TENNYSON

Hey Park.

PARKER

Hey yourself.

TENNYSON

It'll be all right.

PARKER

My foot.

TENNYSON

I promise.

PARKER

Tell it to your Macintosh.

(Lights out)

Scene 13

AT RISE: It is Saturday, about a week later. SANDRA and TENNYSON are off shopping. PARKER, alone, is lying on the couch with a book. She hears the postman's footsteps on the porch and goes out to get the mail. She is back sorting it out.

PARKER

Bills, junk.

(Her expression changes. She is staring at a letter thinking on her feet. She grabs a pen, inserts it through an opening, and carefully rolls it along the glue strip. The back flap opens without any visible damage to the envelope. She reads the letter)

PARKER (Continued)

"My Honorable Hamster! I've learned one thing about life after death: here you don't need a surge protector . . ."

(She reads the rest of it to herself throwing anxious glances at the front door. She makes a run to her room for Elmer's Glue. She is sealing the envelope when we hear the car honking. PARKER puts the letter with the rest of the mail and goes out on the porch to help with the grocery bags. TENNYSON and SANDRA come in talking about her client's ongoing misfortunes)

TENNYSON

. . . Scabies?

SANDRA

Lice. These kids are with dirty people. You can see the bites on their arms and legs.

TENNYSON

He got it on film?

SANDRA

The kids. Shabby walls. Scraps on the table. Got it all while they were not looking. He is smart. He calls himself a social worker but he is more of a detective.

TENNYSON

You think you can win this case?

SANDRA

Let me win my battle with the Bar first. If they get off my back, *that* would be a month of Sundays.

(To PARKER)

You okay?

PARKER

Yeah.

TENNYSON

This goes in the freezer?

SANDRA

No.

(They finish unloading and putting things away)

PARKER

There's mail for you.

SANDRA

Yeah yeah. Bills, junk.

PARKER

A letter from Pete.

(SANDRA puts the can down and goes for the letter. She briefly glances at the envelope and exits with it. A split scene follows. We see SANDRA, in her bedroom,

reading the letter and later talking to PATTI, while the children carry their conversation in the sitting room)

PARKER

I'm not claiming responsibility for this one.

TENNYSON

It was Dad's handwriting? On the envelope?

PARKER

Inside, too.

TENNYSON

You opened the letter!

PARKER

I had to. *(He doesn't look convinced)* Tennys, we must track him down.

TENNYSON

Who?

PARKER

That asshole who keeps forging Dad's hand!

TENNYSON

Forging? What if he's doing Dad's will? Dropping off, one letter at a time, what Pete had written . . .

PARKER

Uh uh.

TENNYSON

What?

PARKER

This one mentions the Miracle Man.

TENNYSON

Mr. Stripes?

PARKER

Dad didn't know him from Adam anymore than we did until last Friday.

(SANDRA has finished the letter. She dials the number. Light on PATTI)

PATTI

Hello?

SANDRA

He must have lots of spare time up there.

PATTI

Who?

SANDRA

Pete. Got another letter from him. Do “they” have to pay for postage?

PATTI

It’s a good question.

SANDRA

I find it corny.

PATTI

Yes?

SANDRA

So far they are using stationery and ballpoint pens. Soon they’ll switch to computers. I hate to see the better world as an outpost of Microsoft.

PATTI

Think of it as having the opposite value.

SANDRA

How so?

PATTI

Corporate greed replaced by corporate love.

SANDRA

Hear hear.

TENNYSON

You’re saying . . . ?

PARKER

Whoever is doing it has a first-hand knowledge of what’s going on here on a daily basis.

TENNYSON

Huh.

PARKER

He learns about Mr. Stripes’ visit, the next day he goes, “That’s a great guy! You, lady, better take a closer look at him.”

TENNYSON

If it's a he.

PARKER

Huh?

TENNYSON

The writer of these letters? Doesn't have to be a he.

PARKER

No. Actually . . .

TENNYSON

What?

PARKER

You've got some brains between your ears . . .

TENNYSON

Come on, Park?

PARKER

I think I know who is doing it.

SANDRA

Speaking of love. Pete would never tip me off to somebody like Brian Stripes. I doubt he even knew the man. This is foul play, Patti. I can smell it.

PATTI

(Taunting)

And it smells of Christian Dior.

SANDRA

Why can't it be a woman?

PATTI

Oh brother.

SANDRA

Someone who never liked the idea of me being married to Pete?
And now that he is gone she is cooking up all these schemes for me!

PATTI

And to make them work, she lets Pete's spirit enter her body to govern her hand.

SANDRA

She has a sample of his handwriting!

PATTI

Like what?

SANDRA

Like his poems! The rhymes that he used to give to people on their birthdays? *You* know.

PATTI

You think . . .

SANDRA

I got it!

PARKER

It's Patti!

SANDRA

It's Ms. Kepke!

(Pause)

I better call the police.

(Fadeout)

Scene 14

AT RISE: MS. KEPKE is entertaining her guest, SERGEANT HIGGINS, a black man in his early thirties. They have tea with small treats. There is also a bottle of Slivovitz and two tumblers. SERGEANT has not yet disclosed the purpose of his visit.

MS. KEPKE

. . . and a fine gentleman he was, may he rest in peace.

(She pours SERGEANT another one, as he shakes his head)

SERGEANT

I'm on duty, Ma'am.

MS. KEPKE

This is duty, Officer. Never insult the dead.

(They down their drinks)

SERGEANT

Now, did you say Wayne Baker was your *second* husband?

MS. KEPKE

My third. I think you were too young to know him.

SERGEANT

Matter of fact, he gave me a pipe when I was ten.

MS. KEPKE

A pipe?

SERGEANT

He caught our gang passing the joint in the junkyard and he suggested that we may find passing a pipe around a little more exciting. Well next we run out of tobacco and find ourselves sucking collectively on the mouthpiece.

MS. KEPKE

Mr. Kepke wouldn't put a cigarette in his mouth. Nothing, he said, would ever replace the pacifier.

SERGEANT

A real gentleman, Mr. Kepke.

MS. KEPKE

May he rest in peace.

(She pours SERGEANT more plum brandy, as he protests mildly)

SERGEANT

I'm on duty, Ma'am.

MS. KEPKE

This is duty, Officer.

(They down their drinks. He gets up)

SERGEANT

I better go.

MS. KEPKE

Are you sure we remembered all of them? I'll call you at the station if we missed one.

SERGEANT

Ms. Kepke, I must ask you a sticky question.

MS. KEPKE

How old are you, Mr. Higgins?

SERGEANT

I'm thirty, Ma'am.

MS. KEPKE

Well, a forty years difference is a little bit of a stretch, but . . . let's hear it.

SERGEANT

Did you write these letters to Sandra Hamster?

MS. KEPKE

You mean, she got another one?

SERGEANT

And it gives a lot o' credit to your nephew.

MS. KEPKE

Brian? He deserves every ounce of it.

SERGEANT

I'll take your word for it, Ms. Kepke. Here it is.

(He produces a letter from his breast pocket)

Myself, I don't think you're capable of duplicating Mr. Hamster's longhand.

MS. KEPKE

And why not? I was capable of signing my late husband's personal checks.

SERGEANT

Is that a fact? Well, your hand may have lost its former confidence, Ms. Kepke.

(She gives him a punch under the belt, from which he staggers)

MS. KEPKE

Has it?

SERGEANT

(Slowly recovering)

Can I have a drink?

MS. KEPKE

No, you're on duty.

(She intercepts his look as she is pouring him Slivovitz: her hand is visibly shaking)

MS. KEPKE (Continued)

Oh you snake.

SERGEANT

Now that wouldn't make it possible for you to trace these letters would it, Ma'am?

MS. KEPKE

They were traced?

SERGEANT

It's what we believe.

MS. KEPKE

Traced from where?

SERGEANT

I'm afraid it's classified information, Ms. Kepke.

MS. KEPKE

Oh that hurts.

SERGEANT

I understand.

MS. KEPKE

One for the road?

SERGEANT

I'm on . . . oh well.

MS. KEPKE

Let me tell you something, Mr. Higgins. I think you guys are looking in the wrong places. A man dies, and you write him off? You must look a little deeper. You want to crack down on crime, you give the afterlife some respect. "They" leave unfinished business here, legal or illegal. You think I could run my cement factory without getting tips from the late Mr. Kepke?

SERGEANT

From the late Mr. Kepke, you said?

MS. KEPKE

I'm not saying Pete is up to some mischief, but checking his record may not be such a bad idea. Do you see what I am saying?

SERGEANT

Hope I do, Ma'am.

MS. KEPKE

Today "they" target me; tomorrow, it's you.

SERGEANT

Thank you for the drinks, Ms. Kepke.

MS. KEPKE

Any time, Mr. Higgins. Any time.

(Lights out)

Scene 15

AT RISE: SANDRA is in her bedroom reading Pete's screenplay. She is completely immersed, now laughing at some joke, now sighing over a sad story. Then something jumps off the page at her. She looks up, bleary-eyed.

SANDRA

Oh, Pete.

(She returns to the script and begins to read the monologue out loud)

SANDRA (Continued)

"What a time. Being a law student in Washington, D.C. and a waitress in a bar, catering to history, thinking some day *you* will win a case like Roe vs Wade, leaving your name in law books, and people in the very same diner discussing it at lunch, at the next table, while Mr. Speaker, who happens to be your *client*, suggests that you kick some ass on Capitol Hill, as you prepare to tip the girl who's been waiting on *you*.

"Yeah right. Here I am, ten years later, a small practitioner dealing with petty problems of petty people, in the middle of nowhere, getting drunk at one-thirty in the morning, with two kids and a dying husband sleeping upstairs. For them, I must put on an act, day after day, as though I'm *not* spinning my wheels, drained by my cases, sickened to my stomach by the judges and magistrates who put on airs to pass judgment on human *lives*.

"Meanwhile waiting for 'It.' A faceless messenger. Waiting and waiting and waiting. Too terrified to scream. Almost wishing it was me. Does anyone have a clue how totally screwed up I am?"

(The monologue is over. For some time she sits motionless, then her eyes fall on a pair of slippers--Pete's. She picks them up and talks to them)

SANDRA (Continued)

Your pain-induced clairvoyance messing with my fuddled mind. I hardly read any of *your* thoughts, Pete. How did you expect me to take seriously what you yourself were always making fun of? I feel like an idiot. A loved idiot. Is it how you want me to feel, Pete?

(Fadeout)

Scene 16

AT RISE: Phone rings. SANDRA and BRIAN STRIPES.

SANDRA

Hello?

BRIAN

How are you, Ms. Hamster?

SANDRA

I feel like I've been propositioned out of the blue. Do you know what it tastes like, Mr. Stripes?

BRIAN

Yes?

SANDRA

A cool Maraschino cherry on a hot day.

BRIAN

Mmmmm.

SANDRA

Did I tell you about my "love correspondence" with the Bar? How crazy about my past these guys are?

BRIAN

Ms. Hamster--

SANDRA

Sandra.

BRIAN

Sandra . . . I think I have a buyer for you.

SANDRA

For the asking price?

BRIAN

Yes.

SANDRA

Who is crazy enough to want to pay that kind of money without seeing the house?

BRIAN

My dear Ms. Hamster . . .

SANDRA

Inaugural speech.

BRIAN

Excuse me?

SANDRA

(With pathos)
"My fellow citizens, let us build this bridge to the 21st century!"

BRIAN

Is that how I sound?

SANDRA

Do you know the difference between the President of the United States and a taxi driver?

BRIAN

I don't believe I do.

SANDRA

When a taxi driver offers Paula Jones a ride he doesn't have to take off his boxers.

BRIAN

Really.

SANDRA

When you quote be sure to make a reference to *Black&White*. It's going to be done by Columbia Pictures. Isn't it great? One of these days Pete expects to sign a contract.

BRIAN

He expects to . . . ?

SANDRA

A major studio. They have compulsive jaw muscle contractions. You don't want to put your head in a lion's mouth for nothing.

BRIAN

I . . . guess so.

SANDRA

So what about this lunatic?

BRIAN

Pardon me?

SANDRA

The guy who is buying a pig in a poke?

BRIAN

Well, actually he saw your house and he liked it.

SANDRA

No one saw this house in months. Except you, of course.

BRIAN

There you go.

SANDRA

You want to buy it?

BRIAN

That's what I was trying to tell you . . . Sandra. And your family doesn't have to move out. If you accept my proposal, that is.

SANDRA

Your proposal . . . ?

BRIAN

Of marriage.

SANDRA

Oh.

BRIAN

Bad timing, I know, but think of it as mathematical probability. If you estimate it at 5% or more then we can agree on a timeline for review process, say, every two months, to check on the numbers. Meanwhile, I will take care of the interest you're paying on your mortgage.

SANDRA

It's very sweet of you, Brian.

BRIAN

You don't have a problem with my math, then?

SANDRA

Not your math, no. Call it a problem in chemistry. I cannot discuss marriage, even as mathematical probability, with Pete being around. And I'm not so sure I want to sell this house anymore.

BRIAN

You don't?

SANDRA

Like you said, it's a gold brick.

BRIAN

But you can't pay it off!

SANDRA

Well, with the "Hollywood money". . . .

BRIAN

Sandra, there's no Hollywood money. It's a ghost, like your husband. He is not signing with Columbia Pictures. He is dead. You can't
afford a dream in a world where you must pay the bills.

SANDRA

Said a realtor serenading his client. Brian, I don't know if you will ever seal the deal on *your* terms, but if you do I'd be the first to wish you happy honeymoon.

(Lights out)

Scene 17

AT RISE: A few days later. Enter JOEL the postman, held at gunpoint by PARKER. It is a heavy-duty squirt gun known as SuperSoaker. Not only does the man offer no resistance, but he responds with an invariable smile on his weathered face. JOEL may have a low IQ but he has a philosophy: joy in the bringing of good news, which has kept him in this business for years in spite of occasional problems. More than anything else, he wants to please PARKER, who will conduct the interrogation, much to the chagrin of her brother TENNYSON who looks confused. PARKER motions for JOEL to take a chair and sits across from him, gun in hand.

PARKER

I'll have him confess even before the police arrive.

TENNYSON

Parker, look. I'm sure he has nothing to do with . . .

PARKER

He delivers the mail, doesn't he! Now Joel, this

(She waves a letter in front of him)

is supposed to be a letter from our father. A *third* one. Three letters in three weeks. He continues to write at a steady pace. No small feat, considering he is dead. What do you say?

JOEL

(Nodding eagerly)

Your father took it very seriously. He wondered if he should put his name on the front page. They never go beyond the name.

PARKER

Uh-uhm?

JOEL

(Proudly)

I deliver tons of rejections. Pete and I, we both had our share.

PARKER

Interesting. So you and Dad had literary debates. Don't tell me he encouraged you to write.

JOEL

(Modestly)

He gave me some tips. "I'd prefer the crime of writing," he said, "over any other crime."

PARKER

I see. Joel, are you good at reading longhand?

JOEL

It's my forty-second year on the job.

TENNYSON

What does that prove?

PARKER

Shut up. Do you think you could copy this for me?

(She gives JOEL a pen and a pad. She holds the envelope for him while he is copying the address slowly and diligently)

PARKER (Continued)

Okay. Very well. You're doing great, Joel.

(He looks up, smiling broadly as he remembers something)

JOEL

He taught me how to write plays, too. At left, "Says Who"; at right, "Says What." Simple.

(PARKER takes the pad for inspection, then shows it to her brother)

PARKER

See?

TENNYSON

I don't know.

PARKER

You don't know?! They are clones. Joel, remember the hullabaloo over our monthly bills?

JOEL

Ms. Hamster didn't like them.

PARKER

That's what our father appears to have told you. "My wife is griping over those bills you keep dropping in our mail box," he said to you. "I wonder if you can do something about it, Joel?"

JOEL

Yes yes.

PARKER

It was a joke.

(JOEL is listening carefully, afraid to miss the point)

You know what the word "joke" means?

(He nods solemnly)

Right. And what did you do? You stopped delivering our bills. Rent. Gas. Bank loans. You tore them up.

JOEL

It made Ms. Hamster happy?

PARKER

Oh yeah.

TENNYSON

He meant well, Parker.

PARKER

(Disregarding him)

And that guy on Collette Street? His wife ran out on him . . . ?

JOEL

Mr. Simmons?

PARKER

Yep. You sent him a postcard didn't you?

JOEL

Two.

PARKER

Two postcards, in *her* name, saying she was coming back soon.

JOEL

It made Mr. Simmons feel better.

PARKER

I'm sure it did. Joel, would you write a letter for our *father* if you thought it would make *him* feel better?

JOEL

(Graciously)

A letter. A play.

TENNYSON

He is eager to please . . .

PARKER

Damn right. That's why he's been doing it to us.

(A doorbell)

TENNYSON

The cops!

PARKER

Hey, what are *you* freaking out for? Get the door.

(The boy lets in SERGEANT HIGGINS, who stops in amazement)

SERGEANT

What's going on here?

PARKER

We've got the evidence, Mr. Higgins.

SERGEANT

(To JOEL)

It's only a squirt gun, Joel. See?

(He fires a jet of water into the air. To PARKER)

Now what is it all about?

PARKER

I tricked him into copying the address. My brother's a witness. It's the same handwriting, see?

SERGEANT

Is this some kind of a game?

JOEL

I am writing a letter for Pete!

SERGEANT

You ain't writing no letters, Joel.

(To TENNYSON)

Give him his mail pouch.

PARKER

Aren't you gonna question him at the police station?

JOEL

I can stop by after five. When I'm done.

SERGEANT

After five, eh?

JOEL

Is it too late, sir?

SERGEANT

No sir. It's never too late to get your mug shot.

JOEL

(Elated)

You will take my picture?

TENNYSON

(To JOEL)

It was a joke.

JOEL

I know what "joke" means.

SERGEANT

Good for you, Joel. Now you can go.

JOEL

Nothing for you today, Mr. Higgins.

SERGEANT

(Taking the letter from PARKER)

Well, *this* should take care of my headache.

(JOEL grins happily, his way of saying he can appreciate a joke, and exits. SERGEANT takes a close look at the envelope)

SERGEANT (Continued)

Never tamper with a piece of evidence.

PARKER

I know.

(SERGEANT opens the envelope and begins to read the letter. His expression changes dramatically)

What?

SERGEANT

(He reads out loud)

"I've been thinking a lot about Sergeant Higgins lately. There's a man, my dear, who will make a woman's life shine brighter than his buckle."

(Mystified, he searches for clues in the children's faces, but they look down in embarrassment. He wants to come up with an explanation, albeit a poor one, and draws a blank)

SERGEANT (Continued)

Hey, don't treat me like I wrote that letter! Why would I do that? I have a lady friend, if you must know. You wanna talk to her? Fine with me, 'cause I have nothing to hide.

TENNYSON

No one's blaming it on you, Mr. Higgins. Right?

PARKER

Right. We just need to know who is doing it.

SERGEANT

Oh I'll get him for you. I owe your Dad one. He gave my sister the

ride of a lifetime.

(Laughs nervously, tries to fix it)

He rushed her to the hospital. A medical emergency.
(Realizes it is even more ambiguous)

SERGEANT (Continued)
She had a . . . what-d'ye-call-it . . . I don't even want to get into it. You didn't know, huh?

(Looking for an escape route)

Well, don't you worry, we'll pull this catfish out by the gills and we'll fry him black. He'll know better than to play his tricks on good people.

TENNYSON
He can be put in jail?

SERGEANT
Oh yeah. He'll have plenty o' time to think it over.

TENNYSON
Three years?

SERGEANT
That's up to the judge. Hey, take it easy, man. We'll ask for more, if that's what you want?

TENNYSON
Yeah.

SERGEANT
I'm taking this to the lab. They can read handwriting like an open book. You guys think you'll be all right?

PARKER
Sure.

SERGEANT
Say hello to your mother for me. She is a nifty lady. Oh, and this?

(He points at the water gun)

This is no joke. This is serious stuff. Do you know why I'm not pushing it?

(They shake their heads)

'Cause it's Pete, OK?

(He exits, leaving them in a kind of stupor)

Scene 18

AT RISE: DAVID and TENNYSON are in a cafe. The boy is playing with his milkshake nervously.

DAVID

Shall I tell you what you wanted to talk to me about?

(Pause)

The letters? The investigation is under way, and you are scared. Scared and maybe ashamed a little, because what you've been doing is not exactly commendable.

TENNYSON

I did it for Mom.

DAVID

She was depressed, yes. With your sister's sharp teeth on her throat. But this is no way to treat depression.

TENNYSON

There were short hairs in the sink. Three days in a row.

DAVID

What are you talking about?

TENNYSON

She began to take notice of her looks.

DAVID

(Good-humoredly)

She began to take notice of her looks. Courtesy of your letters.

TENNYSON

She told Dad she was still young and, and could start a new life, if it was OK with him.

DAVID

And he said it was OK with him?

TENNYSON

He was already gone.

DAVID

Oh. She spoke to him *after* he had died? I see. So you took it upon yourself to answer for your Dad? Well, let me tell you, buddy, and it's off the record, okay? You did one hell of a job. I had no problem swallowing your first letter: It was Pete, hook, line and sinker. I reread it maybe a dozen times before I finally got it.

TENNYSON

Got what?

DAVID

That it was a compilation.

(The boy does not know the word)

Bits and pieces. From *Floppy Summer*. From his one-acts. You must know your Dad's plays by heart?

(The boy shrugs it off)

And you certainly used them creatively. Your *third* letter was a riot.

(TENNYSON stirs uneasily)

Oh, come on. It was great. Fresh, too. How did you get ahold of his last script?

TENNYSON

Hard drive.

DAVID

Of course. It's when I told myself it had to be you. Or your sister. No one else could possibly know Pete's plays so well. Was your sister in on it?

TENNYSON

Ha!

DAVID

A ghost writer *and* a conspirator. I may have a job for you.

TENNYSON

A job?

DAVID

We are doing Edward Albee's *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* in the fall. Care to audition?

TENNYSON

I'll be busy working on my play.

DAVID

I see. A full-length?

TENNYSON

The length should come naturally. I must research my characters first.

DAVID

Really. Well, I hope I can read it when you're finished.

TENNYSON

It may take months. First draft, rewrites, you know.

DAVID

Uh-uhm. Does Parker also write plays?

TENNYSON

She's working on a novel. The French Revolution through the eyes of Charlotte Cordet. The feminist perspective.

DAVID

Some family.

(He sips his drink)

Tennyson, can I ask you one more question?

(The boy nods)

How did you learn to simulate your Dad's hand so well?

TENNYSON

I didn't.

DAVID

No?

TENNYSON

It's the font.

DAVID

The font?

TENNYSON

You send them a facsimile, and they send you back a floppy disk with a font. You write a letter, it prints it in the person's longhand.

DAVID

They can do that?

TENNYSON

Sure can.

DAVID

Wow. But the letters didn't look like printouts!

TENNYSON

Yeah well. I would carefully trace the characters.

DAVID

No kidding. Hey, you may be ready for dollar bills, if you're looking for more trouble. But first things first. Let's see if we can handle *this*. Is there anything else that I should know?

TENNYSON

No.

DAVID

No?

TENNYSON

I mean, nothing really important.

DAVID

I like trivia. What is it?

TENNYSON

That third letter--it wasn't me.

DAVID

It . . . WHAT!?!

TENNYSON

I'm not gonna go to jail for someone else's stunt--!

DAVID

Hold it, hold it. Are you sure you didn't write the letter that mentions Officer Higgins?

TENNYSON

Do I look like someone who would shoot himself in the foot?

DAVID

Well, maybe not three times in a row.

TENNYSON

You know, when it came? I thought I was going . . .

(He makes a gesture of going crazy)

DAVID

It's what we all may find ourselves thinking pretty soon if we catch this "Pete virus."

TENNYSON

Pete virus?

DAVID

The need to keep him alive by writing things for him. You may have started an epidemic, my young friend.

TENNYSON

Can you, please, do something before the police find out? I'll never write another letter in my life!

DAVID

Well, if there's one person in town who can do damage control it is our good friend Patti.

TENNYSON

Patti?

DAVID

Mmmmm, that may be not such a bad idea. She may even get a kick out of it. At least, I think, I could give it a try.

TENNYSON

Could you?

(In his excitement he knocks over his milkshake spilling it on DAVID'S lap)

I'm sorry!

DAVID

It's OK. Really. Let's just say I'm paying for something I've learned from you today.

(He is cleaning himself, the boy watching him wretchedly)

Scene 19

AT RISE: PATTI calls up her friend. SANDRA picks up the phone.

SANDRA

Hello?

PATTI

Any news from the Bar?

SANDRA

They are *not* suspending my license.

PATTI

Good.

SANDRA

But I *may* get a reprimand.

PATTI

An official letter?

SANDRA

A publication. Can you believe it?

PATTI

So you'll have something to frame.

SANDRA

Go hang yourself.

PATTI

Speaking of letters. I have a confession to make. Those epistles that you've been getting lately? It was me.

SANDRA

Oh yeah?

PATTI

Think of it as psychotherapy.

SANDRA

Are you nuts! What is this, an Evening at the Improv?!?

PATTI

"Yea, noise? then I'll be brief. O happy dagger! This is thy sheath."

(She "stabs" herself uttering a loud moan)

SANDRA

Patti?

(More groaning at the other end)

Patti, are you all right?

PATTI

I'm going to--bleed--to death.

SANDRA

I don't believe one word of what you're saying.

PATTI

(Puffing on her cigarette)

You'll never--forgive me--for what I did to you.

SANDRA

Damn right!

PATTI

Let me get some gauze. Shit . . .

SANDRA

You're not hurting, are you?

PATTI

No, I'm . . .

(A long exhale)

. . . fine.

SANDRA

Listen, I'm hanging up and I'm calling the ambulance. Just hang in there and it's going to be all right.

PATTI

A fuddy-duddy. *Now* I'm in trouble.

SANDRA

Patti . . .

PATTI

I am better, OK? Don't be a fussbudget, Sis. I can take care of myself.

SANDRA

Are you sure?

PATTI

Do I get my absolution?

SANDRA

Patti, this was a dumb thing to do!

PATTI

(Covers the mouthpiece)

Why her, Pete? How could you fail to write *me* a letter?

SANDRA

I lost you, Patti. What did you say?

PATTI

(Back into the phone)

I guess I just wanted to shake you up a little.

SANDRA

. . . and you did.

PATTI

Sorry.

SANDRA

Never mind.

PATTI

Peace?

SANDRA

Peace.

PATTI

Don't forget to tell the Sergeant.

SANDRA

He'll take you to the woodshed.

PATTI

I'll wear my Victoria's Secret.

SANDRA

Oh boy.

PATTI

See you at the pool.

SANDRA

Bye, sweetie.

(Lights out)

Scene 20

AT RISE: It is the 40th day since Pete's death, the day when the soul of the deceased is said to leave for the better world. The family has gathered round the table set for four, with one chair conspicuously empty. They sit in silence, hushed by the occasion, refusing to touch food. Then SANDRA says what has been on her mind for a long time.

SANDRA

At least he didn't know that he was dying. I made sure nobody told him about his condition.

PARKER

The doctor told him. He didn't want you to know that he knew. And made us promise that it would be our little secret. Sorry.

(A long pause. Then TENNYSON breaks silence)

TENNYSON

I searched the Internet. Ms. Kepke is right: after death, on the 40th day, one's soul departs.

PARKER

From Russia.

TENNYSON

(He checks his notes)

It says "From this world." They get together to pray and sing psalms.

PARKER

Psalms?

TENNYSON

They call them "serenity of the soul."

(He reads)

"Let psalms be forever on your lips. Where there are psalms and grieving, dwell God and his angels."

PARKER

Mom, are we waiting for someone?

SANDRA

No, why?

(PARKER motions to the fourth setting)

Oh. *This* is for your Dad.

PARKER

For Dad?

SANDRA

Will you pass me the wine?

(She pours some for herself, then fills up Pete's glass and covers it with a piece of brown bread. She lights a candle)

SANDRA (Continued)

It's his last dinner with us. Will you say grace?

(PARKER is too overwhelmed to speak)

It's OK, honey.

(She says grace and they begin to eat. Again, TENNYSON is the first to break silence)

TENNYSON

They open their memorial service with a canon. "My Soul and I Are Parting Ways." You are supposed to sing it yourself . . . but you are dead . . . so they sing it for you.

(Pause)

Mom, about these letters . . .

SANDRA

You miss them too? I know. They've become a fixture in our lives, haven't they. It's so strange. I keep forgetting someone else has been writing them, and suddenly it's over. Some stupid part of me, I guess, is still hoping there will be more from Pete.

PARKER

Yeah.

SANDRA

One letter a month, to touch base. Fuss about the afterlife. Beg to fill him in. That sort of thing. It's good to know that he is out there. Is it asking for too much?

PARKER

Even if we can't respond?

SANDRA

Even if we can't respond.

TENNYSON

You don't really mean it.

SANDRA

We don't?

PARKER

Sure we do. And why not?

TENNYSON

Because it's . . . weird.

PARKER

You liked *ET*. You liked *Ghost*.

TENNYSON

Movies. Anything can happen in movies. In real life? These things don't happen in real life.

PARKER

Well how do you know?

TENNYSON

How do I know?

(There is a sound of a car outside. The children look at their mother)

SANDRA

Must be Ms. Kepke.

TENNYSON

(Looking out the window)

It's UPS.

PARKER

Are you expecting something?

SANDRA

Not really.

PARKER

You think it might be a . . . ?

(There is a doorbell)

SANDRA

Tennyson, what are you waiting for?

TENNYSON

I don't know.

SANDRA

Well . . . ?

(Another bell sounds. Suddenly individual spotlights discover other characters, each working on a letter, silently, passionately. Tableau: SANDRA and PARKER waiting, their eyes fixed on the door; the boy procrastinating at the window. After a long pause, TENNYSON makes a few tentative steps, as lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY