

THE DEVIL'S WIFE
(*La Esposa del
Diablo*)

A full-length play

By Tom Jacobson

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

BONITA RAMIREZ, the oldest daughter, beautiful

DULCE RAMIREZ, the middle daughter, pretty

SOFIA RAMIREZ, the youngest daughter

NICOLAS MASTEMA, an attorney, also plays: RATEL, an
elderly servant

The action takes place on the Ramirez and Mastema estates.

And hell.

The time is whenever. Possibly Medieval Europe, Mexico or Los Angeles in the
mid-nineteenth century, or today.

SETTING: The two estate interiors can be realistic or stylized,
perhaps hardly different except for one or two details of decor. As
for hell, go crazy.

Thunder. SOFIA RAMIREZ, an attractive young woman dressed in wet but formal mourning, practices self-defense moves with a large wooden staff. She's impressive. Her sisters, BONITA and DULCE enter, also dressed in mourning, also rather wet. They watch her a moment.

BONITA

(Shaking head)

So embarrassing.

SOFIA

(Keeps practicing)

Orphans have to protect themselves.

DULCE

Sofia, he's been in the ground less than half an hour.

BONITA

Completely disrespectful.

SOFIA

Much can be accomplished with a good, stout stick, as father always said.

BONITA

He never said that.

DULCE

It sounds like something he'd say, though.

SOFIA

I'm preparing for our future. It's not as if he left us well-provided for.

BONITA

That's an understatement!

DULCE

The flood was not his fault.

BONITA

Nor the drought. Nor the locusts.

SOFIA

Nor the lawyers.

DULCE

We still have the estate!

BONITA

And all its expenses.

SOFIA

And taxes. On thirty-five thousand acres.

BONITA

Thirty-three.

DULCE

What?

BONITA

Papa sold the parcel across the river six weeks ago.

DULCE

And never told us?

BONITA

He knew you'd be upset, so he asked me not to tell you. At least he got a little gold for it.

SOFIA

That'll last us what, six months?

BONITA

Not even. He had to discount the land--subject to flooding. Especially today.

DULCE

That's all you care about--

DULCE

Money!

SOFIA

Gold!

BONITA

I care about security! For all of us!

(Grabbing the staff)

Give me that! Where'd you get that dirty thing?

SOFIA

Father gave it to me! Let go!

(Knocks her deftly away)

DULCE

He gave it to you?

SOFIA

As he lay dying.

BONITA

Why? What did he say?

SOFIA

Nothing--he was in too much
pain--

DULCE

How awful you were the only
one with him--!

BONITA

So sudden--his heart--!

SOFIA

He just handed it to me--and
the look in his eyes--!
(Weeps)

BONITA

There, there, dear.

DULCE

Let her cry! We're in mourning, for God's sake!

BONITA

Yes, cry it out, just don't let the servants see you.

SOFIA

We don't have any servants.

DULCE

I'm sure we will again soon!

BONITA

We'll have to sell a few more parcels.

(Gestures to DULCE, who helps
her undress)

DULCE

But this is our home! Our legacy! Surely there are other
ways. We're three pretty girls--we have lots of assets of
our own!

BONITA

I will not be pandered!

DULCE

(Undressing with BONITA'S
help)

Of course not, dear! We wouldn't want you to blow the dust
off your famous virtue. I, on the other hand, am perfectly
willing to sacrifice myself for the family.

BONITA

You're always willing, aren't you, dear?

SOFIA

Father said the oldest must marry first.

DULCE

Father's gone. And I can't sit around waiting till Bonita thaws herself out.

BONITA

I'm sorry, but Sofia's right. It's only proper I marry first, as much as I loathe the idea. I'm willing to put up with a husband if it means security for all of us. But what could I bring as dowry?

SOFIA

She is the most beautiful.

DULCE

Ah, yes, very true.

BONITA

I'm no prettier than you--I just take care of myself.

DULCE

But as the oldest, your charms will be the first to fade.

BONITA

Your asset is your sweet temperament.

SOFIA

Ah, yes, very true.

DULCE AND BONITA

(Very quickly)

And you're the most--

BONITA

Intelligent!

DULCE

Clever!

SOFIA

Not that intelligence and cleverness hold any value in this shallow world.

DULCE

I'm sure there's a man out there who would appreciate you.

BONITA

At least one.

SOFIA

We can't just sit here waiting for Bonita to marry or worthless land to sell.

BONITA

Figure something out then, smartie.

SOFIA

I have.

DULCE

Oh, dear.

BONITA

Oh, no.

SOFIA

We're beautiful, sweet and clever, but we have no sophistication when it comes to real estate law. We need an attorney.

BONITA

Not another horrid old lawyer!

SOFIA

He'll be here shortly.

BONITA

Sofia, we need to make these kinds of decisions together now that Papa's gone, not ad hoc.

DULCE

Is he handsome?

BONITA

Oh, Dulce!

SOFIA

I haven't met him. He contacted me when he heard Father died.

BONITA

Parasite! No doubt he's seventy-nine with scrofula.

SOFIA

And three teeth!

BONITA

Gout!

DULCE

Girls in our situation need to keep their options open.

BONITA

Dear, your options are always open.

DULCE

Mean!

SOFIA

We mustn't fight. Our best asset is each other.

DULCE AND BONITA

Ah, yes, very true.

Thunder. They jump.

DULCE

Goodness! Peculiar weather. Such brilliant sun!

SOFIA throws open a window.
Sunlight streams into the room.
Sound of rain and more thunder.

BONITA

Such heavy rain!

SOFIA

The Devil is beating his wife.

BONITA

What?

SOFIA

It's an old saying.

DULCE

That doesn't make any sense. Why would a sunshower mean the Devil is beating his wife? Who believes in the Devil any more, anyway?

BONITA

I do. The world is inherently evil.

DULCE

No! More good than evil. You only see the rain, Bonita!
Look at that beautiful sun, birds, bunnies--

SOFIA

You only see the sun, Dulce!

BONITA

And the heaviest rain can't wash the world clean of cruelty,
humiliation and pain.

DULCE

I want to experience every sensation life has to offer. Even
pain!

BONITA

Pain comes from the Devil.

DULCE

I'd sooner believe in God than the Devil!

BONITA

How can you believe in God after all that's happened?
Floods, droughts--

SOFIA

Locusts--

BONITA AND SOFIA

Lawyers--

BONITA

Papa's death?

DULCE

But the drought's over! It's raining right now!

(Rain stops)

Well, it was.

(Looks out the window)

I wonder if there's a rainbow.

(Closes window)

SOFIA

The world is neither bad nor good. It just is. Don't you remember what Father said?

BONITA

I miss him terribly!

DULCE

Don't! I'm just barely holding myself together.

SOFIA

"There is no God: natural beings support themselves."

DULCE

If he said that it was only to shock people.

BONITA

I'm sure he believed in the Devil.

SOFIA

I believe in neither God nor the Devil.

DULCE

What do you believe in?

SOFIA

Truth.

DULCE

Truth without meaning? Without God?

SOFIA

You want meaning? In this world?

BONITA

Dulce, you always ask for too much.

DULCE

There has to be God! There has to be meaning! Otherwise, what are we here for?

SOFIA

That's called theodicy.

DULCE

Oh, I hate that poem. So many ridiculous monsters.

SOFIA

Not *The Odyssey*! Theodicy!

BONITA

Spell it.

SOFIA

T-H-E-O-D-I-C-Y. The search for justice in the universe.

BONITA

Oh. It's idiocy, but with God in it.

DULCE

You're both impossible! We're sisters--

BONITA AND SOFIA

Half!

DULCE

--But nothing alike!

DULCE

Optimism is my nature. My mother ate lots of honey when she was pregnant with me, which is why I'm sweet. Bonita's mother filled the house with flowers before you were born, so you turned out beautiful and pure.

SOFIA

And my mother?

DULCE

She...read a lot of books.

By now DULCE and BONITA are both undressed down to their underwear, but SOFIA is still clothed. There is a knock at the door.

SOFIA

That's the attorney! Go put some clothes on!

DULCE

(Re: the discarded clothes)

Why haven't the servants--?

BONITA AND SOFIA

We don't have any servants!

BONITA and DULCE quickly gather their discarded clothing and disappear. SOFIA rests the staff against the wall and answers the door.

SOFIA

Welcome, sir.

NICOLAS MASTEMA comes into the house. He's well dressed, slightly imperious.

NICOLAS

Are the Ramirez sisters home? They are expecting me--
(He gives her a card)

Nicolas Mastema, esquire.

SOFIA

Very nice to meet you, Mr. Mastema. I'm Sofia Ramirez.

NICOLAS

Answering your own door? Haven't you servants?

SOFIA

Precisely why we are in need of your services. We have thirty-five--no, thirty-three--thousand acres but can't afford to staff a household.

NICOLAS

My apologies--and my condolences. You are in mourning.

SOFIA

Yes, we buried Father an hour ago.

NICOLAS

A remarkable man. Famous for his radical thinking.

SOFIA

We are proud to be his daughters.

NICOLAS

I debated him once. A formidable opponent.

SOFIA

He never lost an argument.

NICOLAS

You must miss him very much, the blow so fresh.

He produces a flower, almost as if
by magic, but casually, not with
showmanship.

SOFIA

Oh, gorgeous!

NICOLAS

My modest memorial to your renowned parent.

SOFIA

How very thoughtful, especially for a meeting that's
professional, not personal, in nature.

NICOLAS

My firm specializes in the personal touch.

SOFIA

May I get you something? Coffee? Tea?

NICOLAS

I'd enjoy a glass of wine, but only if you'll join me.

SOFIA

Wine, at a business meeting?

NICOLAS

It's your personal business we're discussing.

SOFIA

(Pours two glasses)

I admire your approach to business, sir.

They drink and look at each other.

NICOLAS

You're wet.

SOFIA

That sudden downpour.

They drink and look at each other.

NICOLAS

Your father recently sold two-thousand acres across the river?

SOFIA

Yes.

NICOLAS

He could have gotten a better price, I hear. River access.

SOFIA

But dry since the drought. You can't water with dust.

NICOLAS

Wells can be drilled.

SOFIA

We had a well there. It didn't help.

NICOLAS

Probably too shallow. You can drill much deeper.

SOFIA

But after regular expenses, we have little capital left for drilling.

NICOLAS

And with the rain today, perhaps your river will flow again.

They look at each other, sipping.

SOFIA

And in any case, that land is sold. Water under the bridge.

NICOLAS

Drilling may save your remaining acres.

(Pulls out papers)

I have a proposal--

SOFIA

We should wait for my sisters. They'll be down shortly.

NICOLAS

Of course. The Ramirez sisters are nearly as famous as their father--

SOFIA

Oh, hardly!

NICOLAS

Bonita is a great beauty.

SOFIA

She is. Wait till you see her.

NICOLAS

And known for her acts of charity, goodness and virtue.

SOFIA

She's sort of perfect. It's annoying.

NICOLAS

And Dulce? Is she truly as sweet-tempered, kind and thoughtful as they say?

SOFIA

You make her sound simple-minded.

NICOLAS

Kindness is the greatest wisdom.

They sip.

SOFIA

And Sofia?

NICOLAS

The youngest sister?

SOFIA

Yes. What do they say of her?

NICOLAS

She's a bit more complicated.

SOFIA

Is she sweet? Is she beautiful?

NICOLAS

Well--

SOFIA

Don't hedge.

NICOLAS

She's adept in several languages.

SOFIA

Mais oui.

NICOLAS

And an intellectual powerhouse! Her commentary on Cervantes is the envy of many a scholar.

SOFIA

You've read her work?

NICOLAS

I read everything. She impressed me, which isn't easy.

SOFIA

She must be hideous.

NICOLAS

No, no--physically, she's--

SOFIA jumps up and grabs her staff.

SOFIA

Athletic? Skillful?

(Makes some moves,
threatening him playfully
with the staff)

Aggressive?

NICOLAS

She's best known for her sense of humor. Tart.

SOFIA

Her mother drank a lot of vinegar during pregnancy.

NICOLAS

Where'd you get that staff?

SOFIA

It was Father's.

NICOLAS

It's actually mine. He won it from me in a bet.

SOFIA

It was important to him. It has special powers.

NICOLAS

Special powers? Really?

SOFIA

Wards off men.

NICOLAS

It's a perfectly ordinary wooden staff, but it's been in my family since the dawn of time. Lots of history. May I have it back?

(Reaches for it)

SOFIA

(Pulling it away)

Perhaps as payment for good lawyering.

NICOLAS

It has great sentimental value, but no measurable worth.

SOFIA

We'll see.

BONITA and DULCE arrive, both
looking lovely.

SOFIA

Nicolas Mastema esquire, may I introduce my sisters Bonita--

NICOLAS

Beautiful!

SOFIA

And Dulce.

NICOLAS

So sweet.

BONITA

Lovely to meet you, Mr. Mastema.

NICOLAS

Please call me Nicolas.

DULCE

Why he has hardly any scrofula at all!

NICOLAS

Scrofula?

SOFIA

My sisters are also tart.

BONITA

Dulce especially.

SOFIA

Behave, both of you. Nicolas has a proposal for us--

DULCE

A proposal? We've just met!

SOFIA

His firm has a proposal regarding our financial dilemma.

BONITA

Mr. Mastema, I'm obliged to tell you my sister acted precipitously inviting you here. We have no money for your fee.

NICOLAS

I'm sure we can work something out.

DULCE

Of course, we can.

SOFIA

All we have is land.

DULCE

That's not the way!

SOFIA

Dulce's sentimental about the estate, our thirty-five thousand acre headache.

DULCE

Thirty-three thousand acre--!

NICOLAS

My proposal involves the land, of course. But you have other things of value.

DULCE

Our family name, for instance? We have deep roots, very prominent. That means a lot around here, a good alliance.

BONITA

(To SOFIA)

Hit her with that stick.

NICOLAS

Why, you've just outlined the entire proposal!

BONITA, DULCE, SOFIA

What?

NICOLAS

It's three parts.

BONITA

How much land?

NICOLAS

Eleven thousand acres.

BONITA

That's a third of what remains!

NICOLAS

Hear me out.

DULCE

What else?

NICOLAS

I know this will seem very abrupt, but you are in an emergency situation, and traditionally legal marriage is based on the transfer of property--

BONITA

Marriage?!

DULCE

Sold!

BONITA

The stick!

SOFIA

As a matter of fact, Nicolas, we were discussing marriage as a solution to our dilemma just before you arrived.

NICOLAS

Please, call me Nick. Since we're to be married.

DULCE

Who will be married?

SOFIA

Which?

BONITA

What? There's no dowry, so you can stop right there.

NICOLAS

With this marriage, the eleven thousand acres functions as a dowry but stays in the family as community property. You lose nothing, and gain an in-law and financial security.

BONITA

Financial security?

DULCE

Pardon me, but whose marriage?

BONITA

Dulce, please--!

DULCE

Oh, hush, Bonita! We don't have time to be all proper--it is a fiscal emergency as Nick has so forcefully and charmingly stated. Who is the bride and who is the groom?

NICOLAS

I'm the groom, of course.

BONITA, DULCE, SOFIA
(After a moment)

And?

NICOLAS

The bride?

DULCE

Yes?!

NICOLAS

Isn't that obvious? Of course, it's--

SOFIA

Bonita.

(They all stare at her)

She's the eldest. It was our father's dying wish that the eldest marry first. And the three of us agreed to that less than fifteen minutes ago.

(They all stare at her)

Didn't we, girls?

BONITA

Yes--

DULCE

We did, but--

SOFIA

As this is a legal matter, we are obligated to honor the wishes of our beloved parent.

DULCE

Ah, yes, that's true.

BONITA

(After a moment)

I hope I will be acceptable barter in this transaction, Mr. Mastema.

NICOLAS

Please, Nick.

BONITA

We accept your proposal. If the collateral is worthy.

NICOLAS

Most worthy, Miss Ramirez.

BONITA

Please, Bonita.

NICOLAS

Miss Bonita. And that's assuming someone of your background is not compromised by marrying an attorney.

BONITA

Not compromised at all, Mr. Nick.

NICOLAS

I'm delighted. Here's the paperwork.

SOFIA

You had it all drawn up in advance, how lawyerly.

DULCE

And confident.

NICOLAS

You need only fill in your names and sign.

SOFIA

All of us?

NICOLAS

The eleven thousand acres are your joint property.

They all sign.

NICOLAS

Oh, and the third stipulation!

SOFIA

Is it already written in?

NICOLAS

No, but I'll add it if you consent.

SOFIA

What is it?

NICOLAS

That staff, your stick. It's an heirloom of my family, and I'd appreciate its return.

SOFIA

Of course. No need to write it in.

(Hands him the staff)

A wedding gift.

BONITA

(Signs)

You can come visit it, if you've become attached.

Thunder and sudden lighting change isolates the three sisters in light as NICOLAS disappears in the darkness. DULCE and SOFIA adjust BONITA'S clothing, turning her into a bride.

DULCE

Are you sure you're all right?

BONITA

It's my responsibility. The land stays in the family, and Nicolas will support us all. His practice is quite successful, I understand.

(She bursts into tears)

DULCE

Oh, sweetie, you know I would have--!

SOFIA

Both of us--!

DULCE

Remember, Bonita: every man comes with a convenient little handle. Get a good grip on that and they're easy to control.

BONITA

(Shaking head)

So vulgar.

SOFIA

I'm sure he'll be the perfect husband.

DULCE

He couldn't be more handsome!

SOFIA

And kind! He solved our problem for us!

DULCE

(Stepping away from BONITA)

Our worries are over!

SOFIA

(Stepping away from BONITA)

That's right, no worries!

BONITA

No worries ever again.

Thunder and lighting change. Her sisters are gone, and BONITA stands in her wedding attire in the home of NICOLAS. Before her stands NICOLAS' bent, elderly and bearded servant, RATEL.

RATEL

The master will be here shortly, mistress. Is there anything you need?

BONITA

No, I'm fine. Just send a maid to help me undress.

RATEL

That would be me.

BONITA

You're the maid?

RATEL

The master's needs are simple. I'm his only servant.

BONITA

Never mind.

(Removes some parts of her wedding dress)

I've grown accustomed to undressing myself.

RATEL

Perhaps the master can help you. It *is* your wedding night.

BONITA

What's your name again?

RATEL

Ratel, mistress.

BONITA

Ratel, please let Mr. Mastema know I need to have a bath--

RATEL

Certainly! I'll draw it right--

BONITA

No! I can draw my own bath. And no need for "master" and "mistress." It's old fashioned and creepy.

RATEL

The master likes things old fashioned and creepy. And by the way, he says you may do as you wish here, as long as you abide by one rule.

BONITA

What is that?

RATEL

You must never go in the cellar.

(Points to a door)

BONITA

Why not?

RATEL

Because he says so.

BONITA

That's hardly a reason.

RATEL

It's arbitrary and controlling, but that's how he is.

BONITA

You're a singularly disrespectful servant. How does Mr. Mastema tolerate such boldness?

RATEL

I know a lot about him.

BONITA

Please let him know I'm exhausted by the wedding, the travel, and general anxiety. I beg his indulgence and wish to postpone our wedding night until I'm more rested.

RATEL

Ah. I had heard the mistress was renowned for her virtue.

BONITA

Insolence!

RATEL

I know a lot about you, too.

Lighting change, and BONITA is back home with her sisters.

SOFIA

Well?

BONITA

The house is very nice, a lot like ours in fact, but very isolated, and there's only one servant, a frightful hunched-up gnome with a dreadful tongue on him.

DULCE

Speaking of tongues?

BONITA

(Shaking head)

So disgusting! Nothing's happened yet.

DULCE

Nothing?! He's such a looker! And very well put together!

BONITA

I'm not ready.

DULCE

You're afraid you'll get pregnant aren't you? Which would ruin your looks!

BONITA

He's been very understanding.

SOFIA

But you're going to have to...you know...sometime.

DULCE

I could go to your house dressed as you.

BONITA

That's very generous of you, dear, but I think he'd figure it out.

SOFIA

Is he as smart as he seems? We had a lively conversation when we first met.

BONITA

He's hardly around. Just me and that servant. And the forbidden cellar.

SOFIA

What's that?

DULCE

A forbidden cellar!? What's down there?

SOFIA

His wife before you? Or what's left of her?

DULCE

More likely his ill-gotten gains from illicit lawsuits!

BONITA

Probably nothing. Just some kind of test of my loyalty. I don't care what's in it, really.

DULCE

Probably enough to gold pay all our taxes and bring back our servants.

BONITA

I'm not stealing from my own husband!

DULCE

No, of course, not.

SOFIA

I wonder if my stick's down there.

DULCE

It's half yours anyway, community property.

Lighting change, and BONITA is back
with RATEL in the Mastema house.

RATEL

The master requests your presence in his bed tonight.

BONITA

Could he not ask me himself?

RATEL

He's embarrassed.

BONITA

It's more embarrassing that he makes you ask. Do you know
why he doesn't want me to open that door?

RATEL

Yes.

BONITA

Why?

RATEL

The consequences would be unfortunate.

BONITA

For me? For him?

RATEL

For everyone. But mostly you. Unless he doesn't find out.

BONITA

How would he know?

(RATEL shrugs)

Would you tell him?

RATEL

No.

BONITA

Are you telling the truth?

RATEL

I wouldn't tell him if you opened the door.

BONITA

When is he next away?

RATEL

He has business in the city a week from Wednesday.

BONITA

My sisters are much more curious than I.

RATEL

He says you may do as you wish once you've become a proper wife.

BONITA

What does that mean? I'm quite proper!

RATEL

If it's your time of the month, the master won't mind.

BONITA

You're a vile little creature, aren't you?

RATEL

He likes blood.

Lighting change, and BONITA is back
with her sisters in the RAMIREZ
house.

BONITA

I told him it was my time.

DULCE

For six weeks?

SOFIA

Does he understand biology?

BONITA

He's very understanding and patient.

DULCE

I'm not! What's behind that door?

BONITA

I won't go sneaking behind my husband's back to satisfy your curiosity, you cat!

SOFIA

Dulce, you're just jealous!

DULCE

At least she has servants.

BONITA

Only one!

DULCE

That's one more than we have.

BONITA

You can have him. He watches me.

SOFIA

Ew!

BONITA

But I don't think he'd do anything. He's just painfully honest.

DULCE

It sounds kind of lonely, especially if you're still a virgin.

BONITA

I do miss you both. As irritating as you are.

SOFIA

By the way, how's Father's stick?

Lighting change, and BONITA is back
in the Mastema house with NICOLAS,
who is preparing for a trip.

BONITA

How long will you be in the city?

NICOLAS

Just overnight. Will you miss me?

BONITA

I will. Ratel is rather a cold comfort.

NICOLAS

He's rude.

BONITA

Yes! Can't you let him go?

NICOLAS

You'll get used to him.

BONITA

He just says what he thinks.

NICOLAS

Very reliable that way.

BONITA

He says he knows things about you.

NICOLAS

(Chuckles)

Been with me a long time. He's harmless, really.

(Holds her)

I'll miss you, too.

BONITA

You've been very kind and patient.

NICOLAS

I'm nothing to be afraid of.

BONITA

It's not you. I'm afraid of own thoughts. They're unclean.

NICOLAS

I like unclean thoughts, especially about me.

She moves away from him.

BONITA

My sister's after me to open that silly cellar door.

NICOLAS

But you won't, will you?

BONITA

You're my husband. She's just my sister.

NICOLAS

I know I can trust you.

BONITA

It's a test! That's not very trusting.

(He looks alarmed)

I can't imagine what would persuade me to open it. Dulce's the curious one.

NICOLAS

What's your sister think I've got down there? Money? Gold? Diamonds?

(Holds her again)

Aren't I treasure enough? You're certainly enough for me. Or you could be.

She moves away from him again,
picks up the staff.

BONITA

What is it you'll be doing in the city?

NICOLAS

Legal affairs, very boring.

BONITA

I'm interested.

NICOLAS

Really? In tort law? Intellectual property rights?

BONITA

I thought you specialized in real estate.

NICOLAS

It all runs together, serious stuff sometimes, felonies, capital crimes.

BONITA

Capital crimes?!

NICOLAS

Don't worry, I'm just the lawyer.

BONITA

Can we throw this away?

NICOLAS

Why?

BONITA

It's a nasty old stick.

(He takes it away from her)

There's something on it.

(Wipes her hands)

NICOLAS

Maybe I should put it in the basement, out of sight!

BONITA

It looks terrible, no matter where it is.

NICOLAS

It's antique.

BONITA

It's horrid. And this is my house, too, isn't it?

NICOLAS

On our wedding night you needed a bath. A very long bath. And then you didn't feel well for a few days. After that it was your period.

BONITA

It was!

NICOLAS

For how long?

BONITA

Most girls cycle with the moon--I cycle with Mars.

NICOLAS

And now. Unclean thoughts. *Thoughts?!*

BONITA

Thoughts can be more overwhelming than anything!

NICOLAS

What were your thoughts when you married me? Money? Security? Are you sure it's your sister who's after my treasure? I've given you everything you want, and what have you given me?

BONITA

All right, keep your damn stick!

NICOLAS

That's it! A little fire! A little passion! Now you're hot! Now you're melting!

He grabs and kisses her roughly.
She struggles.

BONITA

No! Please! I will! I will! But not this way!

NICOLAS

I've tried every which way!

She breaks away from him, runs,
falls.

BONITA

Ratel! Help! Ratel!

NICOLAS

(Picking up the staff)

He's old. And deaf.

NICOLAS raises the staff as BONITA cowers and screams. Thunder and lighting change. NICOLAS and BONITA disappear in darkness, and DULCE and SOFIA are revealed at their window with light streaming in and the sound of rain pouring.

SOFIA

How does it do that? The sun so bright, and the rain just pouring!

DULCE

It's not natural.

SOFIA

Our weather's gone insane.

DULCE

At least the drought seems to be over.

SOFIA

There should be a rainbow. The sun refracting through the giant prism of the storm. Where's the rainbow?

DULCE

Maybe--over there--is that--?

SOFIA

In the west?

DULCE

Yes.

SOFIA

Don't look directly at the sun!

DULCE

Is it? A rainbow? Do you see one?

SOFIA

No.

DULCE

Oh. I was hoping.

Lights up on BONITA, who shows evidence of a beating, a black eye or some other kind of bruise, perhaps torn clothing. RATEL stands before her.

BONITA

Can you tell me what's down there?

RATEL

I'm under orders not to.

BONITA

Can you tell me how to open it?

RATEL

It's not locked.

BONITA

Then what's inside must be of little worth.

RATEL

What you most desire lies behind that door.

BONITA

How do you know what I desire?

RATEL

You didn't want to get married but sacrificed everything for financial security.

BONITA

For my family, not just me!

RATEL

And yet, you want more.

BONITA

I'm not greedy!

RATEL

And he beat you.

BONITA

That doesn't mean *I* must break faith.

RATEL

Do as you choose. I've got to milk the cows.

RATEL leaves. BONITA stands there
a moment, turns to look at the
door.

DULCE

(Appearing in light)

A forbidden cellar!? What's down there?

SOFIA

(Appearing in light)

His wife before you? Or what's left of her?

BONITA

Ratel? Are you peeping through a spyhole?

RATEL

No!

BONITA

But you're listening!

RATEL

Moooo!

Sound of a slamming door.

BONITA

Ratel?

SOFIA

I wonder if my stick's down there.

DULCE

It's half yours anyway, community property.

Lights out on SOFIA and DULCE.

BONITA

Ratel?

Steeling herself, BONITA goes to the door and opens it. The contents are only visible to BONITA, but a golden light shines upon her from within.

BONITA

Oh! Gold! Walls of gold! And a golden staircase! Is it solid?

(Steps cautiously inside)

It is! Solid gold! All the way down! So shiny and steep! And no railing!

BONITA disappears inside the door, her cautious footsteps on the gold staircase echoing as she descends. Suddenly the door slams shut behind her.

BONITA

(From within)

Ratel! Are you there?

Sound of BONITA running back up the steps and pounding on the door.

BONITA

Ratel! Open the door! There's no handle on this side!

Ratel! I'm locked in! Help!

Sound of BONITA slamming herself against the door.

BONITA

Ratel! Let me out!

Sound of BONITA slamming herself against the door.

BONITA

I'll break it down if I have to--

BONITA slams herself against the door a third time, but apparently loses her balance and falls. She screams.

BONITA

Ratel!!

The sound of BONITA'S scream dies away as she falls very, very far. Lighting change reveals NICOLAS sitting with DULCE and SOFIA in their home. DULCE sobs into a handkerchief. SOFIA'S tears are silent.

SOFIA

She...fell?

NICOLAS

I should never have left her home alone.

SOFIA

Wasn't the servant there?

NICOLAS

He was doing chores outside. When he came back, he found her.

DULCE

Ohhh!

NICOLAS

She died instantly and without pain.

SOFIA

(Wiping tears)

We'll bury her next to father.

NICOLAS

I interred her right away in my family plot. This hot weather.

DULCE

Ohhh!

NICOLAS

Such beauty lost. Such goodness.

SOFIA

You could have sent for us!

NICOLAS

I wanted to tell you in person.

DULCE

That's very considerate.

SOFIA

Still, I don't understand--

NICOLAS

Perhaps, in my grief, I made the wrong choice. Forgive me.

DULCE

Of course!

NICOLAS

I feel responsible--I shouldn't have gone to the city--

DULCE

It was an accident!

NICOLAS

Legally I inherit the eleven thousand acres as community property, but because we were married so briefly, it hardly seems fair--

SOFIA

Yes, hardly fair--

NICOLAS

I'll destroy our agreement here in front of you--

(Pulls out the agreement)

So the land reverts to your family--

DULCE

Wait.

NICOLAS AND SOFIA

What?

DULCE

The agreement requires you to marry a Ramirez sister and accept the land as dowry, yes?

NICOLAS

That's correct, but--

SOFIA

Dulce, our sister is dead--!

DULCE

I'm not dead! You're not dead!

SOFIA

Her body--although hastily buried--is probably still warm!

NICOLAS

Well, as I said, the weather--

DULCE

We can still fulfill the terms.

SOFIA

Who can?

DULCE

I realize I'm not as beautiful as Bonita, but I offer myself so you may keep the dowry.

NICOLAS and SOFIA look at each other in astonishment, then at DULCE.

SOFIA

Dulce!

NICOLAS

That's thoughtful and sweet of you, but--

SOFIA

Thoughtful? It's horrible!

DULCE

If I...marry Nick, the eleven thousand acres stay in the family and we're provided for--

(To SOFIA)

Otherwise, the two of us will starve to death on thirty-three thousand acres we can't afford to farm!

SOFIA

You'd be living in a house with significant safety concerns.

NICOLAS

I'm taking additional precautions.

SOFIA

You have no qualms? Not even the slightest discomfort? Your wife died two days ago and you're ready to take another?

NICOLAS

The marriage would resolve legal issues for all of us. And Dulce's offer--especially in these uncomfortable circumstances--is the soul of self-sacrificing sweetness.

SOFIA

Ah, yes, very true.

DULCE

Even if I had other choices, this is what I'd choose.

NICOLAS

(Taking DULCE'S hand)

I'm flattered.

SOFIA

I'm flabbergasted!

Lighting change puts SOFIA in the dark and DULCE and NICOLAS back at his home.

NICOLAS

I have you tell you your sister and I never--

DULCE

I know.

NICOLAS

She told you?

DULCE

We were very close. And I know how she is. Was.

NICOLAS

Afraid. Of me. Can you imagine? It broke my heart.

DULCE

I won't break your heart.

NICOLAS

You're not afraid.

DULCE

You're the one should be afraid.

She jumps him, amorously, bowling him over backwards as they both laugh. Lights up on SOFIA alone. DULCE and NICOLAS exhaust every sexual quirk, kink and position with great enthusiasm while SOFIA speaks the letter she is writing.

SOFIA

Dear Dulce: Warmest wishes on your wedding. I trust your wedding night was more enjoyable than poor Bonita's. I miss her terribly, and you, too! It's lonely here without anyone. I try to keep up the estate, but your husband hasn't sent the money he promised to hire more help. Could you speak to him about that? I admit to being a little worried for you. You are so easily swept off your feet, and I'll also admit he has his qualities, but the circumstances of Bonita's death...I'm naturally skeptical, as you know. Please answer as soon as you receive this. I'm not as busy as you, apparently, and you and Nick remain uppermost in my thoughts. Much love, Sofia. P.S. Have you seen my stick?

Lights out on SOFIA and up on a
post-coital NICOLAS (exhausted) and
DULCE (rarin' to go).

NICOLAS

That was...comprehensive.

DULCE

Oh, no, much more to come!
(Reaches for him)

NICOLAS

(Avoiding her)
No more to come for at least a few hours!

DULCE

(Pulling herself together)
Would you like some oysters?

NICOLAS

Just a little rest. You seem very--please don't take this the wrong way--expert.

DULCE

Just enthusiastic!

NICOLAS

You don't mean to say you've never--?

DULCE

Sofia's not the only one who reads books.

NICOLAS

But--that thing with the--eggplant...?

DULCE

I have wide-ranging taste in literature.

Lights out on NICOLAS and up on
SOFIA with DULCE.

SOFIA

Surely he's not that naive!

DULCE

He's relieved. Bonita--

SOFIA AND DULCE

God rest her soul.

DULCE

--Apparently starved the man, and I offer--

SOFIA

A banquet. Please don't give me any details about the
eggplant.

DULCE

We ate it after.

(SOFIA rolls her eyes)

He likes my cooking, too! I'm giving him what he wants,
which makes us both happy. He delights in everything a body
can experience, all the senses.

SOFIA

Sounds like a good match.

DULCE

Good indeed! I've never been so--satisfied!

SOFIA

I don't want to hear!

DULCE

He's almost disproportionate!
Big and cold--!

SOFIA

Cold?

DULCE

Which is perfect because I'm so--you know--*hot*--down there.

SOFIA

Enough!

DULCE

Are you all right?

SOFIA

Just a little over-informed.

DULCE

When you wrote me you sounded forlorn.

SOFIA

I have plenty to do. By the way, have you opened the forbidden door you were so curious about?

DULCE

I haven't had a moment to think about it! Between cooking and...*cooking*...

SOFIA

Do you two have actual conversations?

Lighting puts SOFIA in darkness and reveals NICOLAS preparing for a trip.

DULCE

Must you go?

NICOLAS

It's a very important matter.

DULCE

What's more important than us?

NICOLAS

A war.

DULCE

A war? You're an attorney!

NICOLAS

A small war, but a war nonetheless.

DULCE

(Sidles up to him)

Is your little war more important than--? Smell.

NICOLAS

(Sniffs her)

Is that cinnamon? Nutmeg?

DULCE

And ginger and clove. I'm your little pumpkin pie.

NICOLAS

Wish I had time for dessert.

DULCE

Not even a taste?

NICOLAS

Governments are falling.

DULCE

Small ones. How can you leave me unsatisfied?

NICOLAS

Have some pie.

DULCE

I'm not really in the mood for anything sweet.

NICOLAS

I have to go.

DULCE

(Hands him the staff)

I'm in the mood for rough.

NICOLAS

Where'd you find that?

DULCE

If it's so precious, why do you leave it lying around? It gives me ideas.

(She shows him her bare back)

NICOLAS

I haven't the time.

DULCE

Try it. I don't want you to get bored.

NICOLAS

I'm not bored! I have a war!

DULCE

Then one skirmish before you go. A warm up.

(He hesitates)

I want *all* your love.

NICOLAS

Even if it hurts?

DULCE

Especially. Otherwise, how do you know it's real?

NICOLAS

Very well.

(Raises the staff)

But just one--

DULCE

Make it good.

Lights out on them and up on SOFIA looking out the window. Sound of a thwack and a moan of pleasure from DULCE, instantly followed by lightning and a crack of thunder. Rain pours down outside the window, but bright sunlight streams in.

SOFIA

(Writing)

Dear Dulce: Forgive me for worrying, but I haven't heard from you in weeks. Haven't you exhausted him yet? Have you peeked in the forbidden cellar? And what of my stick? If he's not using it, I'd like it back. I can't wait much longer for your husband to send money, so I'm trying to rent 10,000 acres to the Espositos. The sticking point is water rights, of course. By the way, it's raining again, the sun is shining, and no rainbow. It's just not normal!

Lighting change puts SOFIA in the dark and reveals DULCE, only slightly worse for wear, with RATEL.

DULCE

Ratel, darling, how long have you worked for my husband?

RATEL

Too long.

DULCE

Your loyalty is astonishing, but you don't seem exactly happy in your employment. Is there anything I can do?

RATEL

I doubt it. The master's set in his ways.

DULCE

What would you say is your greatest skill?

RATEL

Are you interviewing me for a different position, mistress?

DULCE

Oh, Heavens no! I've just observed that you're very honest. You tell the unvarnished truth, no matter how unpleasant. You don't give a shit.

RATEL

Is this an attempt at flattery?

DULCE

I'm just being honest. Like you. Have you ever told a lie in your life? Even one?

RATEL

No.

DULCE

Of course, if you were a normal person, that would be a lie right there. But you're not a normal person, are you, Ratel?

RATEL

No.

DULCE

So if I ask you a question about the cellar, you'd have to tell the truth?

RATEL

Yes.

DULCE

I'd have to ask it precisely, because you could be truthful but misleading if my question is too ambiguous.

(He doesn't answer)

That was a question.

RATEL

Yes.

DULCE

What's inside?

RATEL

That which you most desire.

DULCE

Apparently I was imprecise.

RATEL

What is it you desire?

DULCE

What do you think I desire?

RATEL

That would be an opinion.

DULCE

I am requesting your honest opinion.

RATEL

Flesh.

DULCE

Go on.

RATEL

You crave experiences that stimulate the five senses, you embrace sensation, even pain. You embrace embraces.

DULCE

Honest and observant. No wonder Nick's kept you so long. If I open that door, will you tell my husband?

RATEL

No.

DULCE

And how do I open it?

RATEL

Since your sister's accident, the door has been locked. I cannot give you the key.

DULCE

Bonita died in there?

RATEL

Yes.

DULCE

Why didn't you tell me earlier?

RATEL

You didn't ask.

DULCE

Ah. Nick said she fell.

RATEL

Down the cellar stairs.

DULCE

Where do you keep the key?

(He hesitates)

Where is the key, my honest friend?

RATEL

On a chain around my neck.

DULCE

Oh. Here?

(Reaches into his shirt)

Yes, there it is. I know you can't give it to me, but someday I may just take it.

RATEL

(Stepping away from her)

I'm a weak old man, powerless to stop you.

Lighting change puts DULCE with
SOFIA.

SOFIA

Oh! I'm so glad to see you!

DULCE

Me, too! You'll have to come visit.

SOFIA

Not with that creepy old servant.

DULCE

He always tells the truth--you just have to ask the right questions. He said Bonita fell down the basement stairs!

SOFIA

Don't go in there!

Lighting change puts SOFIA in the dark and DULCE back in the Mastema home by herself. She pulls out a key, contemplates it, then unlocks the forbidden door and throws it open. She gasps with delight at what she sees as she is flooded in undulating pink and red light.

MALE VOICE

Dulce!

ANOTHER MALE VOICE

Pretty Dulce!

YET ANOTHER MALE VOICE

Sweet Dulce.

DULCE peers inside cautiously.

DULCE

Who are you?

She walks carefully through the door, slowly advancing down the stairs.

MALE VOICE

Welcome, Dulce, come see what I've got.

ANOTHER MALE VOICE

No, come to me!

YET ANOTHER MALE VOICE

We can share. Dulce likes to share.

DULCE

(Off)

Yes. Oh, yes!

Suddenly NICOLAS appears with his staff and slams the door shut behind DULCE.

DULCE

Ratel? Is that you?

NICOLAS

It's Nicolas!

Sound of her running up the stairs.

DULCE

Oh, my darling, open the door!

NICOLAS

You were forbidden to open it. But you gave in to temptation. I'm disappointed.

DULCE

I'm sorry, sweetheart! Nothing happened!

NICOLAS

Nothing?

MALE VOICES

Nothing?

(They laugh)

DULCE

Forgive me, dear! Don't leave me here with these strange--
albeit quite handsome--men!

MALE VOICES

You're stuck with us!
Forever! Let us love you,
Dulce. Pretty Dulce! Sweet
Dulce!

DULCE

Help, Nick! Let me out!
Please, darling! Stop it!
Oh, that's enough! Don't! I
don't mind a little pain, but--
-ow! Nicolas!

His back to the door, NICOLAS
listens as the VOICES grow more
insistent and DULCE becomes more
panicked. He smiles.

MALE VOICES

Just a little lick! A bite! A
tiny taste of your sweetness!
A nip! A nibble!
Delicious!

DULCE

Nicolas, they're too much!
They want too much! Make
them stop! You're hurting
me! Open the door! Have
mercy!

DULCE screams as darkness falls
suddenly and NICOLAS is illuminated
by lightning. Lighting change puts
NICOLAS back in the Ramirez home
with SOFIA.

SOFIA

She ran away?

NICOLAS

Not...by herself.

SOFIA

With...a man?

NICOLAS

More than one, actually.

SOFIA

She was kidnapped! Raped!

(He just looks at her)

Surely she didn't go voluntarily.

(He just looks at her)
You've rather bad luck with wives.

NICOLAS
I've divorced her.

SOFIA
Already?

NICOLAS
Marital fidelity is part of the contract. She's in violation. It's automatic.

SOFIA
Why haven't I heard from her?

NICOLAS
I expect she'll be in touch when she and her lover--excuse me, *lovers*--settle down.

SOFIA
Who are they?

NICOLAS
Undesirable types. I can't even think about them--it pains my heart.

SOFIA
I have to find her!

NICOLAS
She'll turn up. Eventually.

SOFIA
Alive, I hope!

NICOLAS
Unless...

SOFIA
What?

NICOLAS
She has some extreme tastes in...well, it was fun at first, but she took it farther than even I was comfortable. And these men seem more extreme than she.

SOFIA

So you fear for her safety!

NICOLAS

Yes, but I have my people working on it. They're doing all they can to make sure no further harm comes to her.

SOFIA

Further?!

NICOLAS

The greatest harm is to her reputation, which is her own responsibility.

SOFIA

You seem remarkably calm for having lost two wives in the space of a few weeks.

NICOLAS

If I give in to my emotions I suspect I will be done for.

SOFIA

I'm done for! I've lost two sisters! They're all the family I have!

NICOLAS

You have me.

SOFIA

You're not blood. A brother-in-law. Twice. And now an ex-brother-in-law.

NICOLAS

Unless...

SOFIA

What?

NICOLAS

We still have a contract.

SOFIA

Third time's the charm? I don't think so.

NICOLAS

It's actually stipulated.

SOFIA

That I have to marry you?

NICOLAS

As long as there is a Ramirez sister eligible.

SOFIA

You've rather a poor track record with Ramirez sisters.

NICOLAS

I have a confession.

SOFIA

You killed them!

NICOLAS

Bonita fell! Dulce ran off!

SOFIA

What are you confessing, then?

NICOLAS

You're the Ramirez sister I wanted all along.

SOFIA

Why? I'm neither beautiful like Bonita nor sweet like Dulce.

NICOLAS

Beauty fades and sweetness cloys.

SOFIA

You didn't love them?

NICOLAS

Marriage is but a legal arrangement.

SOFIA

And you're a lawyer.

NICOLAS

You're clever and you know how to use a stick to best advantage.

SOFIA

I know how to fight?

NICOLAS

For justice and truth.

SOFIA

How is my stick?

NICOLAS

It misses you.

SOFIA

You've a most peculiar way of courting. How could I possibly contemplate this kind of--union--under these sudden and devastating circumstances?

NICOLAS

You love me.

SOFIA

My sisters didn't?

NICOLAS

Bonita loved my money--that was clear. Dulce loved my...looks, I guess.

SOFIA

How could I love you? We hardly know each other.

NICOLAS

I notice you haven't denied it.

Lighting change puts NICOLAS in darkness as SOFIA puts on wedding attire. Her sisters appear isolated in light but don't help dress her, as they are dead. They look it.

BONITA

The house is very nice, a lot like ours in fact, but very isolated.

DULCE

I'm giving him what he wants, which makes us both happy.

BONITA

He's very understanding and patient.

DULCE

He delights in everything a body can experience, all the senses.

SOFIA finishes dressing, steels herself. Lighting change puts her sisters in darkness and SOFIA in the Mastema home with NICOLAS.

NICOLAS

(Caressing her)

Do you have everything you desire?

SOFIA

I don't know yet.

NICOLAS

I have everything I desire. And what's mine is yours.

SOFIA

I'd like to trust you.

NICOLAS

Do you feel I've been untruthful?

SOFIA

I miss my sisters.

NICOLAS

I have a confession.

SOFIA

Another one?

NICOLAS

Truth is the best way to start a marriage.

SOFIA

Also the best way to end one.

NICOLAS

You deserve the truth.

(She steels herself)

I'm not just an attorney.

SOFIA

What's worse than that?

NICOLAS

I thought perhaps you'd figured it out, guessed my name.

SOFIA

It's not Nicolas Mastema?

NICOLAS

Only a few know me by that one.

(She shrugs)

I'm the Devil.

SOFIA

That's what Dulce said.

NICOLAS

I don't mean in bed.

SOFIA

You're the King of Hell, the Great Satan, Lucifer?

NICOLAS

Those are some of my titles, yes.

SOFIA

So you have--what?--demons working for you? That must be an administrative nightmare.

NICOLAS

They do what I say.

SOFIA

They're your slaves?

NICOLAS

Where but Hell can a demon find work?

SOFIA

Is that where you go on your frequent business trips?

NICOLAS

My business is in the world.

SOFIA

Crime? War? Natural disasters?

NICOLAS

I keep busy.

SOFIA

Do you ever go to Hell?

NICOLAS

I prefer pleasant places.

SOFIA

Where are the horns, the tail, the cloven hooves?

NICOLAS

Old wives tales.

SOFIA

If you're the Devil, wouldn't you have the power to prevent Bonita from falling and Dulce from running off?

NICOLAS

(Shrugs)

Free will.

SOFIA

I have a confession, too.

NICOLAS

Then we'll be even.

SOFIA

I don't believe in you.

NICOLAS

I'm your husband.

SOFIA

Which would make me--what?--the Devil's wife?

NICOLAS

Yes.

SOFIA

I believe in neither God nor the Devil. They're old-fashioned anthropomorphic ways to explain good and evil.

NICOLAS

I'm just...a metaphor?

SOFIA

Invented by religion to frighten children and ignorant folks into obedience.

NICOLAS

You think I'm lying.

SOFIA

Isn't that another of your titles, Prince of Lies?

NICOLAS

Sometimes the best lie is to tell the truth.

SOFIA

Kiss me. Unless your lips will send me straight to perdition.

NICOLAS

Don't say I never warned you.

They kiss. BONITA and DULCE appear in separate lights as NICOLAS and SOFIA disappear in darkness. BONITA and DULCE look even worse.

DULCE

I've never been so satisfied! He's almost disproportionate!

BONITA

He's hardly around. Just me and that servant. And the forbidden door.

Lights out on DULCE and BONITA. All is darkness except for golden light seeping out from behind the forbidden door, accompanied after a moment by the sound of clinking gold. The light becomes rosy, followed by the sensual murmurs of many men. Finally a blue light emanates from the door briefly before the lights come up on SOFIA alone, no longer in wedding attire. She turns to look at the door, which looks quite ordinary, no light emanating from behind it.

She looks around, sees no one, then approaches the door and rattles the knob. It's locked. In shaking the door she dislodges the staff, which falls out of a niche. She picks it up. RATEL comes in.

RATEL

Don't touch that!

SOFIA

I gave it to your master as a wedding present. It's community property now.

RATEL

True, but you don't know how to use it.

SOFIA

Is it dangerous?

RATEL

It has great power.

SOFIA

I know!

(Demonstrates martial arts moves)

RATEL

Be careful!

SOFIA

What kind of power?

(He hesitates)

Dulce said you must always tell the truth.

RATEL

It can part the sea.

SOFIA

Uh-huh.

RATEL

If you hang a bronze serpent on it, it will cure snakebite.

SOFIA

I'll keep that in mind.

RATEL

If you hang a man upon it, it can save the world.

SOFIA

Anything else?

RATEL

Everything else.

SOFIA

Like a magic wand?

RATEL

You can't diminish it by belittling.

SOFIA

Does it have a name?

RATEL

Yes.

SOFIA

And that is?

RATEL

Faith.

SOFIA

A stick named Faith?

RATEL

Sort of.

SOFIA

Don't obfuscate with truth.

RATEL

Faith is what gives it power.

SOFIA

So it's just an ordinary stick invested with power by the belief of whomever wields it.

RATEL

Exactly.

SOFIA

And if you don't believe?

RATEL

It's just a stick.

SOFIA

Then in my skeptical hands, it's a dirty old stick--what's this on it?

RATEL

Are you asking me?

SOFIA

Yes.

RATEL

Blood.

SOFIA

(Wiping her hands)

Whose?

RATEL

Women.

SOFIA

Which women...wives?

(He nods)

Is it my sisters' blood? Did Nick beat them with it?

RATEL

Yes.

SOFIA

On sunny days when the rain fell?

RATEL

The rain was their tears.

SOFIA

(Skeptical)

Right. And how many wives has he had?

RATEL
(Shrugs)

It rains a lot.

SOFIA

Did he kill them?

RATEL

No.

SOFIA

I'm serious now.

RATEL

I cannot lie.

SOFIA

He didn't kill them...but are they dead?

RATEL

Yes.

SOFIA

You say you always tell the truth, but how do I know that's not a lie?

RATEL

You can only believe.

SOFIA

I can't just--believe--without evidence. Did my sisters go through that door?

RATEL

Yes.

SOFIA

Are they there now?

RATEL

Yes. If you want evidence, take a look.

SOFIA

I'm living in a house with my sisters' bodies rotting in the basement?

RATEL

It's not a basement.

SOFIA

What is it?

(He hesitates)

The truth!

RATEL

Is truth your heart's desire?

SOFIA

Yes! What's beyond that door?

RATEL

Hell.

SOFIA

You'd think my husband would have said something.

RATEL

Perhaps he didn't wish to tempt you.

SOFIA

(Laughs)

You're most certainly a liar. There's no Hell! Nor Heaven, nor the Devil, nor God! Even if my husband tells me he's the Prince of Darkness and you say Hades is our root cellar!

RATEL

(Shrugs)

You asked.

SOFIA

Who has the key?

(He shows her the key)

Give it to me.

RATEL

I'm not allowed.

SOFIA

Bonita was right--you are frustratingly impertinent.

She grabs the key and heads toward
the door, then stops.

SOFIA

Is this exactly what my sisters did, open this door and get sucked into a mythical dimension of everlasting torment?

RATEL

They entered of their own free will.

SOFIA

What did they see that lured them in?

RATEL

Their heart's desire.

SOFIA

They fell for a lie?

RATEL

Not a lie. They got their heart's desire.

SOFIA

Is there no way out for them?

RATEL

They're dead. They cannot change.

SOFIA

But there are lots of stories of people going to Hell and coming back out--

RATEL

Folk tales, fables--

SOFIA

--Resurrecting--

RATEL

You can write anything in a book.

SOFIA

Could I look without going inside?

RATEL

Once you see their torment, you won't rush in to save them?

SOFIA

Not if I can't get out again.

RATEL

If you're that cold-blooded, go ahead. Of your own free will.

SOFIA

Nick may be afraid to fire you, but I'm not. I'm just saying.

SOFIA unlocks the door and throws it open. Golden and rosy lights emanate. The voices BONITA and DULCE can be heard, but they are not visible. Whenever BONITA speaks, the light is golden, and when DULCE speaks, the light is rosy. SOFIA stares in horror at what she sees.

BONITA AND DULCE

(Wailing)

Sofia!

SOFIA

Bonita! Dulce! What's happened to you?!

BONITA

He tricked us!

DULCE

When he was tired of us!

(Moans)

BONITA

Said "Don't open that door--"

DULCE

So of course we did!

BONITA

How did he tempt you to open it?

SOFIA

He didn't. He never mentioned it.

DULCE

He will! He's the Devil!

(Moans)

SOFIA

That's what he said, but he was joking.

BONITA

We're not joking!

SOFIA

Why are you moaning? Are you in pain?

DULCE

We're in Hell!

(Moans)

SOFIA

(Steps toward them)

Nonsense! You're in the cellar and I'll get you out of there!

BONITA AND DULCE

Noooo!

SOFIA stops at the threshold.

DULCE

Once you step in, you can never get out!

BONITA

You can't save us. But save yourself!

DULCE

And punish him!

(Moans)

SOFIA

If he's the Prince of All Evil, how can I punish him?

BONITA

Trick him into Hell!

DULCE

We'll take it from there!

SOFIA

Not that I believe you, but if he's the Devil, can't he go in and out of Hell as he pleases?

BONITA

Not without that staff.

SOFIA

(Holding up the staff)

This stupid stick?

DULCE

He clutches it--!

BONITA

Holds it tight!

DULCE

Whenever he comes in--

BONITA

It gives him the power to pass through Hell safely.

SOFIA

(To RATEL)

The power of Faith? My atheist father won *Faith* from the Devil in a bet?

(RATEL nods)

So if I carried this with me, could I go in the basement, get my sisters, and bring them out again?

BONITA

It's too late for us!

DULCE

It's not a basement!

SOFIA

Could I?

RATEL

No one's ever gone in and out before.

SOFIA

Except Nick.

DULCE

But you can trick him!

(Moans)

RATEL disappears.

SOFIA

How can I talk him into entering Hell with me? Ask for a guided tour?

DULCE

You'll think of something.

BONITA

You're the clever one.

SOFIA

Not clever enough to trick the Devil! I can't lie to him.

BONITA

Then use the truth!

DULCE

Every man has a little handle you can use to control him. What's his?

BONITA

What does he want from you?

SOFIA

I don't know. Love?

BONITA AND DULCE

Love!

DULCE

Go! Find him!

BONITA

Close the door before he suspects!

DULCE

Close it!

SOFIA

This is ridiculous. I can't leave you in there!

BONITA

Trust me, we'll be no worse off than we are right now.

DULCE

And we'll be avenged!

(Moans)

BONITA

We'll be right here.

DULCE

We're always here.

BONITA AND DULCE

We love you! Close the door!

SOFIA

I love you, too!

SOFIA slams the door shut and turns
to RATEL but he's gone.

SOFIA

Ratel?

NICOLAS

(Appears)

What are you doing with my staff?

SOFIA

Oh, Nick! Welcome home!

NICOLAS

Here, let me take that.

SOFIA

Did you kill my father to get this back?

NICOLAS

You said he had a heart attack.

SOFIA

He handed it to me when he
was dying!

NICOLAS

Which was God's will.

SOFIA

So this is mine as much as yours, isn't it?

NICOLAS
(Shrugs)

As you wish.

SOFIA
Speaking of which, Mefistofeles...?

NICOLAS
It rather suits me that you don't believe. But at least I told you the truth.

SOFIA
You can prove it to me.

NICOLAS
How?

SOFIA
If you're the Devil, then you own Hell.

NICOLAS
It's not exactly real estate.

SOFIA
Through the community property clause in the dowry agreement, I'm half owner. Of Hell.

NICOLAS
You're being silly.

SOFIA
Husbands always say that when their wives are right.

NICOLAS
You believe in neither the Devil nor Hell.

SOFIA
Change my mind--take me there.

NICOLAS
It's not tourist-friendly. You kind of have to be dead.

SOFIA
What about Virgil?

NICOLAS

You can write anything in a book.

SOFIA

If you truly loved me, you'd take me to Hell.

NICOLAS

You won't like what you see.

SOFIA

If you do, I'll tell you I love you.

NICOLAS

That's my heart's desire. You realize a promise to the Devil is ironclad on both sides.

SOFIA

Of course. You're an attorney. How soon can we go? Do we need protective clothing of any kind?

NICOLAS

People go to Hell all the time with no preparation whatsoever.

SOFIA

But they can't get out.

NICOLAS

You must hold onto this staff the entire time. If you let go, you won't get out either. We can go now if you wish.

SOFIA

Is love truly your heart's desire?

NICOLAS

I've never known what it feels like to be loved for who I am.

He holds out the staff. She grabs
a hold.

SOFIA

It's a deal. Shall I ask Ratel to arrange transportation?

NICOLAS

Not necessary. It's right through that door.

SOFIA

Convenient!

(Reaches for door)

May I?

NICOLAS

But don't let go of the staff!

SOFIA opens the door. Multi-colored lights play on them as they peer through the doorway.

NICOLAS

Now do you believe?

SOFIA

It doesn't look especially awful.

NICOLAS

One last chance.

SOFIA

As the Devil's wife, I'm half owner, and it would be immoral of me to be an absentee landlord.

They disappear through the doorway. Instant lighting change turns the Mastema house into Hell and reveals BONITA wearing a long gold dress, perhaps a continuation of the gold walls and floor. She looks dead, exhausted and hollow-eyed. SOFIA and NICOLAS (holding the staff) appear.

SOFIA

Bonita! I thought you were dead!

BONITA

I am.

NICOLAS

She fell.

BONITA

Into Hell! My husband's servant--your husband's servant--
told me I'd find my heart's desire. Hello, Nicolas.

NICOLAS

Bonita, you're wearing your heart's desire, just as he said.
Security, forever.

BONITA

Gold! This dress is pure gold!

SOFIA

So you're not...suffering?

BONITA

I've no physical discomfort.

(She tries to move but can't
get very far)

But gold is heavy, and I can't take this off.

SOFIA

It's beautiful.

BONITA

I'm perfectly comfortable, my desire satisfied for all time.

NICOLAS

This is what you wished for.

BONITA

And it's Hell!

She lunges for NICOLAS, almost
reaching him, but is held back by
the dress as he dodges her.

NICOLAS

Beware your heart's desire! It will trap you!

BONITA

(Still reaching for NICOLAS)

A little late now, my love!

As they back away from BONITA,
lighting reveals DULCE scantily
dressed and looking worn out.

She moans and lunges for NICOLAS,
barely missing him as he dodges.

DULCE

My love!

SOFIA

Dulce!

MALE VOICES

Dulce! My love! Let me touch you! I feel you!

SOFIA

What's happening to you?

DULCE

Pleasure!

(Moans)

Constant pleasure!

MALE VOICES

So soft! So warm! So loving!

SOFIA

Who are those voices? I don't see anyone!

DULCE

Ask him! Ask our husband!

SOFIA

Nick, who are they?

DULCE

Demons!

NICOLAS

Yes, they're demons.

MALE VOICES

So pretty, so loving!

DULCE

So handsome, so loving!

SOFIA

Are they...making love to you?

DULCE

(Writhing)

All the time! Their hands, their tongues, every part of them!

SOFIA

So you're not suffering either?

DULCE

It's ecstasy--eternally!

SOFIA

Your heart's desire!

DULCE

Without a break!

SOFIA

Pleasure is Hell?

DULCE

Anything can be Hell--!

BONITA

--If it never ends!

DULCE

Pleasure!

BONITA

Gold!

DULCE

Torture!

BONITA

Torment!

SOFIA

This is a truly terrible place! Why did you bring me here?

NICOLAS

You wanted to come. You wanted the truth.

SOFIA

Why was Hell even created?

NICOLAS

So people could have their heart's desire.

DULCE

(Grabbing NICOLAS)

You're my heart's desire!

NICOLAS

(Trying to pull away)

You only want pleasure!

BONITA

(Grabbing NICOLAS)

You're my heart's desire!

NICOLAS

You only want gold! Let go!

SOFIA

They love you, Nick! Isn't that what you want most? To be truly loved for who you are?

BONITA

The Devil wants to be loved?

DULCE

We'll give you love!

SOFIA

You have your heart's desire!

NICOLAS

I want to be loved by you! Their grip is like iron!

BONITA

It's a death grip!

DULCE

The power of death!

NICOLAS

(Struggling)

They won't let go! Beat them, Sofia!

SOFIA

I can't beat my own sisters!

DULCE

He beat us!

NICOLAS

Only because you wanted it!

BONITA

I didn't want it!

NICOLAS

You'll have to beat them or we'll be trapped here!

SOFIA

What can I beat them with?

NICOLAS

I can't let go of the staff--it's our safe passage out of Hell.

SOFIA

If you let me take it, I'll give you your heart's desire.

NICOLAS

You'll tell me you love me?

SOFIA

Better than that. I will actually love you.

NICOLAS

I'm trusting you.

NICOLAS lets the staff go. SOFIA lifts it. BONITA and DULCE scream, fearing she'll beat them.

SOFIA

Step aside, sisters--this isn't for you.

NICOLAS

But you love me!

SOFIA

Is love more important than truth?

NICOLAS

I love you!

SOFIA

I can't beat anyone.

(Lowering the staff)

I have to go.

NICOLAS

You can't escape Hell without me.

SOFIA

(Indicates staff)

I have Faith.

NICOLAS

Bargains with the Devil are ironclad!

SOFIA

On both sides! What was Father's bet with you? How did he win this?

BONITA

Go, Sofia! It's too late for us!

DULCE

We'll hold him! Go!

NICOLAS

You said you'd say it! You can't go back on your word!

SOFIA

I do love you. With all my heart, not just words. Despite who you are, despite this terrible place, despite the eternal damnation you prepared for my sisters, I love you in the way you wish to be loved.

NICOLAS

So you can't leave me.

He reaches for the staff, almost gets it, but she pulls it away.

DULCE AND BONITA

Sofia, go, before he tricks you like he tricked us!

SOFIA

My love is your heart's desire--and your Hell. But I'm leaving you here. That's mine.

NICOLAS

You're my wife!

SOFIA

Yes, I'll always be the Devil's wife.

A clap of thunder. Lightning flashes, and an instant lighting change leaves NICOLAS, BONITA and DULCE in the dark and puts SOFIA back in the Mastema home. She bursts into tears while still holding the staff. After a moment RATEL appears.

RATEL

Mistress, do you require anything?

SOFIA

Yes, Ratel, actually I am in great need. I require what only you can give: the truth.

RATEL

About?

SOFIA

Hell. I...lost Nick there.

RATEL

My condolences. I see your heart is breaking.

SOFIA

As his widow am I now the sole owner of Hell?

RATEL

Yes. You are officially Queen of Hell.

SOFIA

Queen! Of such a vile place! Can I get rid of it?

RATEL

It's full of people! Where would they go?

SOFIA

How many exactly?

RATEL

Ninety-nine billion, four hundred thirty-eight million, seven hundred ninety-two thousand, five hundred and six.

SOFIA

That must be everyone who's ever lived.

RATEL

They all got their heart's desire.

SOFIA

So there's room in Heaven?

RATEL

Room in Heaven? For sinners?

SOFIA

As Queen of Hell, I'll negotiate that with my counterpart.

RATEL

The...King of Heaven?

SOFIA

Yes.

RATEL

You mean God? You don't believe in him.

SOFIA

That was before I went to Hell.

RATEL

Where you found faith.

SOFIA

Yes, against my better judgment, against all reason! I believe in God. Remarkable! Can you arrange an audience?

RATEL

It's difficult.

SOFIA

Don't try to protect me. I've just escaped the Devil. Isn't God supposed to be benevolent?

RATEL

God is good, yes.

SOFIA

So why does he even permit Nicolas to exist? Why should there be evil?

RATEL

God only knows.

SOFIA

(Indicates staff)

Do I need to use this for safe passage to Heaven?

RATEL

No. He'll come here.

SOFIA

When?

RATEL

(After a moment)

Now.

SOFIA looks around the room, sees
no one else.

SOFIA

He's invisible?

RATEL

Not at the moment.

SOFIA

Oh. He's you.

RATEL

Yes.

SOFIA

You're God.

RATEL

That's right.

SOFIA

Serving the Devil.

RATEL

It's complicated.

SOFIA

Tell the truth.

RATEL

It was a way to you.

SOFIA

To me?

RATEL

You are my heart's desire.

SOFIA

Why me?

RATEL

You know how to use a stick to best advantage.

SOFIA

(Indicating staff)

You mean--Faith? I don't believe in anything!

RATEL

Your skepticism made you intriguing, a challenge. But now you believe--you just said so. And you love me.

SOFIA

How can I love you when I've only just now found out who you are?

RATEL

You told me you love me.

SOFIA

When? Where?

RATEL

In Hell.

RATEL removes his white beard and wig, changes his posture, and reveals that he's NICOLAS.

SOFIA

Nicolas. How'd you get out of Hell?

NICOLAS

I'm God.

SOFIA

And the Devil?

NICOLAS

Now do you understand?

SOFIA

So...God is good, but sometimes wants to instigate crimes, start a war, condemn ninety-nine billion souls to Hell?

NICOLAS

Without bad, no one would appreciate the good.

(Reaches for staff)

Why don't you give me that?

SOFIA

(Keeping the staff)

So you became the Devil to make the world love God?

NICOLAS

Love: my heart's desire.

SOFIA

Then give me my heart's desire.

NICOLAS

Truth? First give me that.

(Reaches for staff, she pulls
it away)

SOFIA

I've given up on truth. I want compassion--relief for my
sisters and all those souls suffering in Hell!

NICOLAS

What you think of as Heaven doesn't exist.

SOFIA

How can there be Hell without Heaven? What about balance?

NICOLAS

I give them their heart's desire forever. Isn't that Heaven?

SOFIA

Heaven and Hell are the same?

NICOLAS

That's fair isn't it? That's compassionate.
(Reaches for staff)

SOFIA

(Keeping it from him)

Why do you want this so bad?

NICOLAS

Faith is a form of love.

SOFIA

And power. God's only power comes from faith!

NICOLAS

Yes. That's the great truth.

SOFIA

You want love. Worship! That's pathetic!

NICOLAS

It's all anybody wants.

SOFIA

Then I hold in my hand all your power.

NICOLAS

But you don't know how to use it.

SOFIA

Oh, yes, I do!

She whacks him with the staff.
Thunder.

NICOLAS

What was that for?

SOFIA

For your truth disguised as lies!
(Whacks)

NICOLAS

You can't just...beat me!

SOFIA

Faith is the only way to beat God--or the Devil!

She whacks him again. Thunder with
every blow.

NICOLAS

You're my wife!

SOFIA

So you should beat me, like all your other wives?
(Whacks)

Like my sisters!

(Whacks)

That's for them!

(Whacks

That's for the ninety-nine billion!

NICOLAS

Stop it, Sofia! That hurts!

SOFIA

No one's ever beaten you before?

NICOLAS

Only your father!

SOFIA

He beat you?

NICOLAS

In debate! Our bet!

SOFIA

How'd he beat you?

NICOLAS

He bet he could prove I didn't exist.

SOFIA

So you gave him a heart attack! This is for Father!

(Whacks)

That's for capital crimes!

(Whacks)

For the wars!

NICOLAS

Ow!

(Falls)

SOFIA

The floods!

(Whacks)

The droughts!

(Whacks)

The locusts!

(Whacks)

The lawyers!

It begins to rain, but the sun also shines. Perhaps some lightning. SOFIA begins to cry furious tears of anger and sadness.

NICOLAS

I think you broke a rib! You can't do this!

SOFIA

I can't? What about free will?

NICOLAS

I'm bleeding!

SOFIA

Oh, I know how to use this, all right!

(Whacks)

You've used faith against us since the dawn of time!

(Whacks)

NICOLAS

You're trying to kill me!

SOFIA

As only a believer can! And I'll inherit your kingdom--not just Hell but the world!

(Whacks)

Fix every injustice, right every wrong--!

NICOLAS

You'll do better than me?

SOFIA

I couldn't do worse!

NICOLAS

It's a terrible responsibility! You don't know what it means!

SOFIA

(Whacks)

It means the end of the Devil! The end of evil! Saving the world!

NICOLAS

It's not that simple!

SOFIA

(Whacks)

We should have tried this long ago! We'll be free!

NICOLAS

You can't kill God!

SOFIA

Yes, I can! You're only a metaphor!

Several whacks. NICOLAS can hardly move. Perhaps blood spatters. A rainbow starts to appear.

SOFIA

How'd my father win your debate?

NICOLAS

By...proving I don't exist.

SOFIA

How'd he do that?

NICOLAS

By not believing.

SOFIA

So you showed him no mercy!
(Whacks)

NICOLAS

If you kill me, you'll become me!

SOFIA

I'll become God?
(Whacks)

NICOLAS

And the Devil! That's what you'll inherit! What then, Sofia? Will you be wiser than me? More compassionate? Will you show more--

SOFIA hesitates, the staff raised.

NICOLAS

--Mercy?

SOFIA sees the rainbow and gasps.

END OF PLAY