

THE GREEK WORD FOR FISH

A PLAY IN TWO ACTS

By

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THOM

Except for his appearances in the prologue and epilogue, which are set twenty years in the future, THOM is a young man in his late teens. He is dressed in spring clothes—reversed baseball cap, jeans, tee-shirt and sneakers—except for the last scene, when he appears in a blazer, tie and khakis. He is of medium height, though markedly taller than THE WOMAN, and lean and clean-shaven

THE WOMAN

A woman in her mid-to-late thirties, extremely attractive. She will appear in various outfits throughout the play—bathing suits, a nightgown, and one mink. She has two laughs, a sarcastic snicker and her “real,” sincere laugh, which is high and musical. She also has a tattoo on the instep of both feet.

SCENE

A residential neighborhood in American city in the Northeast.

TIME

The recent past. Spring.

Act One

Prologue

THE SETTING

The interior of THE WOMAN's house, where all the action of the play takes place. The front door is downstage right or offstage right. Slightly downstage left is a kitchenette, with table, two chairs, and a window with blinds and plain print curtains. On a table is a salt-and-pepper nest and a basket containing knives and forks. Beneath the window is a stand-up covered radiator. There is a radio either on the table or on the radiator cover. Center stage is a small parlor with a couch, coffee table and a throw rug near the front entrance. Upstage, stairs leading to a sparsely decorated second floor bedroom. The set decorations should be uniformly minimal throughout—no TV on the first floor, no pictures on the walls, etc.

AT RISE

THOM is revealed seated on the couch or the steps. He is an older man, probably in his late thirties. He wears glasses, is clean-shaven, and is dressed in nondescript clothes—Khakis (with cuffs), a white short-sleeve shirt, maybe a beeper on his hip, a pocket-protector or something that might identify him as “in management,” probably working for a supermarket chain.

THOM

It was my mother's idea. There's this woman, mom said, who lives by herself in a very nice house, several blocks away. Mom said she did not exactly *know* the woman, had never even talked to her, in fact had not even *heard* of her until Pastor Mike pulled her aside after services and asked if her son, Thom—me—wanted to make a little extra money. The woman needed help with some “job” she had around the house, something having to do with moving something, a job that was perfect for “a strapping teenager,” which I never was, who needed money, which I did. The woman had reached out for help to Pastor Mike because he had once ministered to her son during a “spiritual crisis” the

kid had gone through years back. Pastor Mike was also a Scoutmaster, so he was close to the young men in his flock and could recommend someone trustworthy. That's where I came in. Pastor Mike called my mom and my mom called the woman, and bingo, I ended up stopping by her house on a Saturday afternoon in April on my way to my regular job at the supermarket.

(THOM exits through the audience down the center aisle.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act One

Scene 1

THE SETTING

Lights up on the kitchenette of THE WOMAN'S house.

AT RISE

THE WOMAN is sitting in the kitchenette, legs crossed, reading a newspaper. Classical music from a radio nearby. She is wearing a red bathing suit with blue baby crabs crawling down the sides is. There are two knocks at her door. She crosses the stage, goes to the door and opens it.)

THE WOMAN

Oh, you're here. Good you came. Close it.

(THOM, holding a paper bag, enters and closes the door.)

THE WOMAN

Come in. It's Thomas, right?

THOM

Thom is fine.

THE WOMAN

(Unselfconsciously.) It's too hot for clothes. I don't like using the a-c, it makes too much noise. And with the windows closed, I feel trapped. What can I offer you?

THOM

I'm ok.

THE WOMAN

I was about to make iced tea.

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Or iced coffee.

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

What don't you know?

THOM

Which to choose. Either is fine.

THE WOMAN

What's in the bag?

THOM

Nothing, just my lunch. It's for work. I have work later.

THE WOMAN

Is that drippy? Give it here.

(As she speaks the following, THE WOMAN takes the bag from him, checks the bottom, goes to the kitchenette, drops it on the drain board, then returns to center stage.)

The job I have is something I don't think I want to do by myself. Not sure I can manage it. It's upstairs. Come on.

(THOM follows THE WOMAN up the steps to the second floor bedroom. Against the back wall and facing the audience is a Queen-size bed. Stage left is a walk-in closet, situated cattycorner to the audience. On the door of the closet is a large, four-year old calendar, all of whose squares contain writing. Stage right is a four-by-eight-foot bookcase, also cattycorner so that the audience can see the shelves, all six of which are packed with books. Down one side of the bookcase is a long, beautiful Celtic Cross routed into the wood and stained a darker brown than the surrounding wood. Off left is a doorway leading to an unseen bathroom and a corridor and stairway leading to the first floor kitchenette. The walls in this bedroom are totally bare except for a thermostat, a light switch, and scattered nail holes.)

THE WOMAN

So, sit here.

(THE WOMAN pats the bed. THOM sits. She walks to the bookcase.)

It's this bookcase. I need to do something with it.

THOM

Maybe you should paint it.

THE WOMAN

Is that what you would do?

THOM

(He shrugs.)

THE WOMAN

What's that mean?

THOM

(He shrugs again.) I don't know.

THE WOMAN

You own a bookcase, Thomas?

THOM

Just Thom. *T-h-o-m*. It's the Scottish spelling.

THE WOMAN

Are you a Scot?

THOM

No. My mother is Irish and my father is German.

THE WOMAN

(Amused.) Fascinating. Do you have a bookcase?

THOM

Repurposed. It's got my bowling trophy, model cars, some Scouts pictures, my DVDs, stuff from church. You know, just normal stuff.

THE WOMAN

You own any books at all?

THOM

On sports. Mostly hockey. I'm not much for reading.

THE WOMAN

Fiction, poetry or memoir? Fantasy or science-fiction?

THOM

No.

THE WOMAN

How about that Harry Potter crap?

THOM

My parents wouldn't let us.

THE WOMAN

Perfect.

(Walking to the bookcase, she slowly runs her hand down the side with the Celtic Cross.)

I love natural wood. It has presence. Come here. Feel.

(THOM approaches the bookcase. THE WOMAN takes his hand and guides it over a soft beveled edge.)

THOM

It has a nice feeling.

THE WOMAN

French polish, layer upon layer. You know about French polish? Anyway, I have this beautiful bookcase, but my beautiful bookcase is filled with crap. I want to get rid of it. Just throw it out.

THOM

I wouldn't throw it out.

THE WOMAN

Not the bookcase. I didn't ask you here to appraise the bookcase. I'll never part with the bookcase. I want you to help me get rid of *these* books and fill it with new books.

THOM

Oh.

THE WOMAN

These were my stepson's. He no longer lives here.

THOM

Where are they?

THE WOMAN

Where are what?

THOM

The new books.

THE WOMAN

Not here yet. I want you to help me pick them out. Pick me out a library. Can you do that?

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

(Sharply.) It's a simple question. Yes or no?

THOM

I guess so. Just pick out books.

THE WOMAN

After we get rid of these.

THOM

I can help with that.

THE WOMAN

I want books a young man your age would have in his library.

THOM

Like I said, I'm not much into reading.

THE WOMAN

(Laughing.) That's exactly why you're perfect for the job.

THOM

I don't know if I can start today.

THE WOMAN

I don't expect you to start today. Stage one, I order cardboard boxes we fill with these books as we empty the shelves. Once I order the boxes, that is, later today. How about next Saturday? Whatever you make on your job, I'll match that.

THOM

I make minimum wage.

THE WOMAN

Where's your job?

THOM

Stop and Shop. I'm a stocker and pricer. I stock shelves and price products.

THE WOMAN

Do you like it?

THOM

I guess.

THE WOMAN

Does that mean yes?

THOM

(Shrugging.) I don't know.

THE WOMAN

(After a pause.) As you can see, he was an eclectic reader. Top shelf, science fiction. Next two shelves, crackpot religion and junk science, virtually a continuation of the top shelf. L. Ron Hubbard, Immanuel Velikovsky, *Dianetics*, *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail*, and this one—*Other Tongues*, *Other Flesh*. (Removing a book.) Thom, did it ever cross your mind that the Japanese were actually from outer space? Extraterrestrials? From a planet with a brighter sun, which is why Asians have that epicanthic squint? Anyway, that's *this* character's claim. Next comes the Bible shelf, shelf number four. Starting with the Douay—(Pulls the Douay, tosses it on the bed)—in alphabetical order right through the Geneva Bible to Jerome's Vulgate, with every version of the King James Bible *ever*, *The New King James*, *The King James Easy Reading*—

THOM

That's the one we have.

THE WOMAN

— *God's New Covenant*, *The Message*—

THOM

That one too.

THE WOMAN

The Good News Translation, *The New American Standard*, *Revised New American Standard*, *The Child's Christian Bible*. What a waste of trees, huh? Then we come to the math-science shelf, the one last from the bottom—Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, a biography of Einstein, *The First Three Minutes*, right down to this end, reserved for quantum physics, which he more or less understood. He had more than just “a head for math,” he was a borderline genius. Then the last shelf, my favorite—cookbooks, he was a whiz in the kitchen—and woodworking. He saved the best for last. He built this, by the way (patting the bookcase). He could build anything. The bed, too. All his handiwork. Anyway, Thom, the books have to go.

THOM

Go where?

(THE WOMAN picks up the Douay Bible from the bed, turns and descends the stairs. THOM follows her. The rest of the scene plays out in the parlor on the first floor. At some point she casually tosses the bible in her trash.)

THE WOMAN

(Leading THOM to the front door.)

I'm thinking Salvation Army or to the curb on trashday. Unless you can think of something better.

THOM

I'll think about it. There's this place, Book Trader. My brother traded in his used computer books for newer ones there.

THE WOMAN

Good, you think about it. And be sure to thank your mom for me.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act I

Scene 2

THE SETTING:

The following week. THE WOMAN'S home, the second floor bedroom.

AT RISE:

THOM is sitting on the floor of the bedroom cutting the binding straps on a bundle of flattened cardboard boxes and putting them together. THE WOMAN stands stage left, watching him and holding a glass of iced tea, a hand on her hip. She is wearing a different bathing suit this time, a green bikini with tiny sharks of a darker green swimming across each cup of the bikini top. She is wearing green flip flops and her toenails are a matching green.

THE WOMAN

This top shelf is purest crap. Him and his sci-fi. I should just trash the whole shelf.

THOM

Maybe you can donate them to the library.

THE WOMAN

God, no! They know me there. (Reading off titles) Bradbury, Burroughs, Campbell, Dick, Disch, Ellison, Heinlein, LeGuin, Spinrad, Van Vogt, Zelazny . . .

THOM

There was a 9th grade summer reading book about firemen who start fires, by the first name you named.

THE WOMAN

Bradbury. Did you like it?

THOM

I thought it was stupid. I never finished it.

THE WOMAN

He even went through the trouble of alphabetizing them, believe that? Purest crap. He devoured them, collected them. He liked to say that reading science fiction helped him think. He also stamped two dates in the flyleaves, one for when he began reading the thing and the second for when he finished it.

(Removing a title, opening it to any page, pointing.)

See that? That's his name. Always in very tiny script, in blue ink. And this—see? Tiny crucifixes or six-pointed stars, his place markers. His marginal notes, see how tiny? Wonder what tiny script reveals about a person? You know who I'm talking about?

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Thom, why do you always say "I don't know"?

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Look me in the eye. (Cocking her head, smiling.) You don't have to pretend to not know.

THOM

Who's pretending?

THE WOMAN

Don't. It's impolite. It's an insult when you're talking to someone who sees right through you.

THOM

(Running a strip of tape across a seam). I don't know what I was or wasn't supposed to know.

THE WOMAN

I'm talking about my stepson. This was his room from the time his father and I got married. I raised him from the age of two. By four, he was reading and conversing like an adult, a savant. He was beyond gifted. On his thirteenth birthday his father decided to leave and walked out on us. That was over ten years ago. I raised him and we lived here until he went off to Valley Forge Military Academy.

THOM

(THOM begins filling the boxes and continues this throughout the scene.)

My brother said he sort of knew your son.

THE WOMAN

Stepson. How?

THOM

He ran into him once or twice at church.

THE WOMAN

What did he say about him?

THOM

He said he was a nice kid but maybe a little bit “too into God.”

THE WOMAN

That’s an understatement. (Snickering.) Until Jesus snagged him, he was happy and wonderfully balanced. But never really “normal” either—he was abnormally intelligent, handsome, and handy. The total package. I think his father resented him. Right after he entered puberty, the month he entered Valley Forge, he left. To be accurate, his father *abandoned* us.

(THE WOMAN abruptly stands and moves to the closet, stops and seems to be considering opening it. She places her hand on the knob and jiggles it, then returns to the bed and sits.)

THE WOMAN

So, Thom, tell me, do you have a girlfriend?

THOM

(Avoiding eye contact.) Sometimes.

THE WOMAN

How about now?

THOM

I don’t know if she’s exactly a girlfriend. She’s a girl I work with.

THE WOMAN

With or beside?

THOM

Sometimes with, sometimes beside.

THOM

What does she do?

THOM

She mostly works checkout.

THE WOMAN

Is she attractive? Smart?

THOM

I don’t know, a little of both.

THE WOMAN

You’re full of maybe’s and I-don’t-knows, aren’t you?

THOM

(Laughing nervously.) I don't know. I suppose. I never noticed.

THE WOMAN

Anything you want to ask me?

THOM

Like what?

THE WOMAN

Oh, come on. Do you find me *bland*? Don't I interest you at all?

THOM

Ok. (Sitting up straight.) So, what kind of work do *you* do?

THE WOMAN

I don't work. I collect alimony.

(THE WOMAN tongues a dot of water that has run down the side of the sweating glass and re-crosses her legs. THOM keeps glancing at her foot and at the tattoo, inches away from him, on her instep.)

You like my tattoo? He had one too. Matching body art. Here. I saw you looking. Look closer. Go on.

THOM

Teardrops. That's really different.

THE WOMAN

How interesting! You see *teardrops*! No, it's yin and yang, Thom, Chinese symbol of cosmic balance. Everything is two things. Male is female, good is evil, mind is body, love is sex. See?

(THE WOMAN takes his hand and places his finger on the black dot in the center of the white figure, then on the white dot in the center of the black.)

Nothing is ever one thing, as somebody, I can't remember who, said, or wrote. Not some Chinese person.

THOM

What happened to him?

THE WOMAN

(THE WOMAN quickly retracts her foot and folds her legs.)

Went looking for his father. The One That Art in Heaven. He got religion when he left the military academy, or maybe just before he left he caught that bug. I think your pastor might have had something to do with it, maybe encouraged it. What do you think?

THOM

(Shrugs.) Pastor Mike? I don't really know him all that good. (Trying to avoid her gaze.) So, where did your son go?

THE WOMAN

Beats me. I haven't had a word from him in—going on four years.

THOM

He sure was a reader.

THE WOMAN

He really didn't need school. He taught himself to do things just by reading about them. That's all he did. He had no friends, his friends were his books. He never had a girlfriend. Never went on a date, believe that? When was your first date?

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Or, "hook up," as your generation says. When was your first hook-up?

THOM

(Grinning sheepishly.) I don't know. Is this important?

THE WOMAN

Don't know or don't want to say?

THOM

Middle school, probably.

THE WOMAN

Want to elaborate?

THOM

Not really.

THE WOMAN

Do you smoke?

THOM

No.

THE WOMAN

Drink alcohol?

THOM

It's not allowed in my house.

THE WOMAN

That's not what I asked you.

THOM

Once, I almost did.

THE WOMAN

When was this?

THOM

Scouts' retreat. Somebody brought a canteen of beer.

THE WOMAN

(Amused.) Sounds awful! Wasn't it flat?

THOM

I don't know, I never tried it. I was going to, but it turned out the kid who brought it had peed in the canteen.

THE WOMAN

Boys. Gross. I'm glad you don't smoke. It's a filthy habit. He didn't smoke, not even marijuana.

THOM

Do you smoke?

THE WOMAN

(Laughing her high, musical laugh—her “real” laugh.) Sometimes. Then, I brush my teeth and Water Pic with the tongue tool and polish off my new breath with mint mouthwash.

THOM

What's a “tongue tool”?

THE WOMAN

It comes with the Water Pic. (Standing, approaching him) So, are you almost done?

THOM

This is the last box.

THE WOMAN

Good. Almost ready for Stage Two. When you come by next Saturday we'll start ordering the replacements. God, what a relief! I will finally be rid of them.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act I

Scene 3

THE SETTING

The following Saturday. The kitchenette on the first floor and the second floor bedroom.

AT RISE

THOM is sitting and eating lunch in the kitchenette. THE WOMAN is behind a folding screen in the second floor bedroom, undressing, having just returned from disposing of the books. She tosses a skirt and a blouse on the bed and emerges in a tank top, wearing thigh-length, frilly cut-off jeans, and flip flops, then descends the steps and enters the kitchenette with a laptop under her arm.)

THE WOMAN

What a relief to be rid of those books! (She sits.) How's brunch?

THOM

(Swallowing.) Very good, thanks.

THE WOMAN

Curried egg salad with celantro and diced ham is my specialty. Actually, I stole the recipe from him. Also good with chopped shrimp.

THOM

Can I ask you something? (Stops eating.) What happened to his mother?

THE WOMAN

Died in childbirth. A botched C-section. You've heard of a C-section?

THOM

Ines Ramirez. She did one on herself. Pastor Mike preached on her as an example of a divine miracle. Ines' son and I have the same birthday, March 5th. His name is Ramon.

THE WOMAN

(Smiling.) Thom, you are full of surprises. You do know things! Well, his mother died giving birth to him, his father sued the hospital and two gynecologists and came out of it a widower with a baby boy and a ton of money. We met when he was a toddler of two. An incredibly verbal little guy. More companion than child, more soulmate than companion. Everything was fine until he turned twenty-two, then—like father, like son. He abandoned me, too. I left that calendar on the closet door to remind myself how long I've been alone, how long since he left—my stepson, not my husband. He had a peculiar habit of writing messages in the calendar squares. Sometimes he wrote backwards so you

could only read his writing with a mirror. The last message he entered was on the 18th of May four years ago. One word in Greek. It's the Greek word for fish. It's pronounced "ick"-something. It's an acronym.

THOM

Like the word *radar*.

THE WOMAN

Radar is an acronym?

THOM

Yeah. Where's he now?

THE WOMAN

Which?

THOM

Not your son, your husband.

THE WOMAN

Why so interested in *him*?

THOM

I don't really know.

THE WOMAN

How come you ask?

THOM

Just, I don't know, curious. What was he like?

THE WOMAN

Ah, well. In truth, Thom, he was a very nice man. He was rich and very nice. He was the kind of man who uses words like *effectuate*.

THOM

I don't know what that means.

THE WOMAN

Neither did he.

THOM

You know a lot.

THE WOMAN

I didn't know *radar* was an acronym, Thom.

THOM

“RADio Detection And Ranging.” My father was Coast Guard. I know a couple more. Like “Fubar,” but—

THE WOMAN

That’s quite sufficient. (Opens the laptop.) Ok, to work. I want all new books, a middlebrow selection So: let’s start with. . . .sports. What’s your favorite?

THOM

(Chewing.) Hockey, bowling, football, and skateboarding.

THE WOMAN

(Typing.) Keep going. We need to fill a shelf.

THOM

Surfing. I’ve always wanted to surf. Also I kind of like the WWF.

THE WOMAN

Baseball?

THOM

I hate baseball. It’s boring and too hard.

THE WOMAN

Who cares? It’s a sport. Golf?

THOM

Boring. And you wear stupid clothes.

THE WOMAN

Soccer.

THOM

Sure. I never saw anybody who could type so fast.

THE WOMAN

I won contests at your age. What else?

THOM

NASCAR!

THE WOMAN

(Glaring.) NASCAR is not a sport. What about tennis?

THOM

(Shrugs.) My father says tennis is for fags.

THE WOMAN

Your father has a lot of opinions, doesn't he?

THOM

That's what my mother says, too! He's has more opinions than the Supreme Court.

THE WOMAN

(Laughing sarcastically.) There's some egg salad left.

THOM

I'm ok. I think I might be full.

THE WOMAN

You think or you know? Because I'm throwing it out if you don't finish it. We don't keep leftovers, Thom. Think of the starving children in Africa.

THOM

Ok.

(THOM starts to spoon the egg salad out of the bowl. THE WOMAN pulls the bowl away.)

THE WOMAN

Uh-uh. Around here, Thom, we eat from the dish and not out of the bowl. Spoon it into your dish, please. And use a clean fork. Here. (Handing him a fork from a basket on the table.)

THOM

Sorry. (Chewing again.)

THE WOMAN

And don't talk with your mouth full.

THOM

(Swallowing hard.) Sorry.

THE WOMAN

I need more titles.

THOM

How about skateboarding and the X-Games? Also basketball and lacrosse. There's also this book I own on the hockey hall of fame. I own a couple strategy manuals with all these statistics too.

THE WOMAN

Good work! I'll order these. This should fill at least one shelf. They should be here by next week. Oh, before I forget, let me pay you. (Opening her purse, handing him cash.)

THOM

Thank you.

THE WOMAN

And here, take this.

THOM

What's this?

THE WOMAN

My housekey. Ok, now, more! We need more titles. Five shelves to go.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act I

Scene 4

THE SETTING

The following Saturday.

AT RISE

THOM is seen entering from stage right. He has his lunch in a bag and has the housekey on a string around his neck. He is dressed for a 70-degree spring day, in sneakers, jeans and a beater. THE WOMAN appears, framed in the kitchen archway, in another two-piece bathing suit—black, with white string ties—a black choker around her neck, and in fuzzy bunny slippers and leg warmers. In her hand is a pair of leather sandals.

THE WOMAN

Shut it, quickly, it's chilly! And lock it. And take off your shoes. Hand me that. (Taking his lunch.) Here, take these. (Hands him the sandals.) Put them on.

(THOM sits, removes his shoes and straps on the sandals.)

THOM

I never wore sandals before. These are nice.

THE WOMAN

Hand-tooled, Armani's. Consider them a belated birthday present.

THOM

Wow. I don't know what to say. Thanks!

THE WOMAN

March fifth, you and Ramon Ramirez.

THOM

I hope you didn't think I was, like, *hinting*?

THE WOMAN

I know you weren't, Thom. That's not your style. You're too decent for that. (Touching or tapping his cheek.) Anyway, last week you tracked in some dirt and I hate vacuuming

more than once a week. Come on, let's eat. I prepared brunch. An sausage and pepper omelet with a warm brioche and fresh coffee.

(THE WOMAN enters the kitchenette and THOM follows. As he does he glances the pile of packages on the floor of the parlor.)

(THE WOMAN sits, then jumps up.)

THE WOMAN

Jesus, this chair is cold! Hand me my robe. Over your chair. Thanks. I hate chilly April days.

THOM

(Gesturing back toward the parlor.) Is that the new ones?

THE WOMAN

Let's eat first.

(She pours two coffees, then turns to the radio and tunes to a classical music station. Then she opens his lunch bag and sniffs.)

What's in the bag?

THOM

Baloney and cheese on white bread with mayo.

THE WOMAN

(Scowling.) Any fruit?

THOM

(Chewing, swallowing.) Gummy snacks.

THE WOMAN

Whoever makes you lunch is trying to poison you. I hope it's not your mother.

THOM

(Laughing.) How'd you know?

THE WOMAN

A wild guess.

THOM

I've never had a lunch like this.

THE WOMAN

Not lunch, Thom, *brunch*. This is brunch we're having, a perfect blending of breakfast and lunch.

(An protracted pause, during which both eat. THOM seems distracted.)

THOM

You're pretty amazing.

THE WOMAN

I am? (*Laughing her musical laugh.*) Why's that?

THOM

You read three newspapers each day, you listen to classical music, you're a great cook, and you type faster than most people can talk. You seem to know everything.

THE WOMAN

(Studying him.) That's a very flattering thing to say, THOM

THOM

I'm not trying to flatter you.

THE WOMAN

Well, I'm flattered anyway.

THOM

I mean it's not *just* flattery. Flattery is sinful.

THE WOMAN

Really? Says who?

THOM

St. Paul. Romans 16:17-19. "Sweet words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." I wasn't trying to deceive.

THE WOMAN

(Laughing.) Listen to the devil quote scripture!

THOM

(Surprised.) And you're anything but simple!

THE WOMAN

Neither are you, Thom. (Stands.) Meet me upstairs in a couple minutes. Bring those packages.

(THE WOMAN exits the kitchenette stage left. THOM remains seated, briefly looking pensive, then stands and enters the parlor, picks up an

armful of packaged books and carries them upstairs. As he does, lights OUT on the first floor and lights UP in the bedroom. THOM is revealed stage right, on his knees and tearing open the packages as THE WOMAN enters silently from stage left in a chinchilla hooded jacket over her nightgown. She sits on the bed.)

THOM

(Suddenly noticing her, dumbstruck.) Wow.

THE WOMAN

This is real chinchilla. In case you're wondering.

THOM

I couldn't tell.

THE WOMAN

Here, feel. (Lifting a sleeve toward THOM.) The room feels less haunted. You feel it?

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Oh, come on, Thom. This is an exorcism! You know what *that* is. The chill is gone. Don't you feel it, the difference?

THOM

I feel less of . . . a sadness.

THE WOMAN

(Bending toward him and studying him.) What a way of putting it! Not just "sadness," but "a sadness." That's almost profound. "A sadness" is like "a vapor trail," a trace. Sort of last-cloud-on-the-evening-horizon thing. Wistful. And if you had said "*the* sadness," it would localize sadness, trivialize it. "The sadness" is the toilet paper caught on a man's shoe as he leaves the restaurant men's room. Whereas *a* sadness is . . . a summary. It says something about all the meaningful moments we have spent in restaurants with those we love . . . to be with. You are a stealth poet, Thom. Come up here, join me. (Patting the bed) Tell me what's happening with you and this so-called girlfriend. She is how old?

THOM

(Joining her on the bed.) My age.

THE WOMAN

But is she younger, older?

THOM

About the same. I don't know for sure.

THE WOMAN

Is she a time-share?

THOM

I don't know what that means.

THE WOMAN

Are you the only one getting any action? Does she "give out"? Are you two *a number*? That was what we used to say when I was your age. Look at me. This is important. Do you share her?

THOM

I don't know what you mean.

THE WOMAN

Does she date other boys?

THOM

Doubt it. Probably, no.

THE WOMAN

How did you meet her?

THOM

Church. We were acolytes when we were little.

THE WOMAN

You grew up together?

THOM

Sort of. Now we work together.

THE WOMAN

So, you met her in church but you're not sure. (Stands up.) Which means if you're not sure, your next partner won't be sure.

THOM

I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Unless you've been dishonest with me and there *is* no girlfriend, and your next partner will be your —

(THE WOMAN walks to the bookcase and runs her hand horizontally across the bindings of the newly shelved books. She seems to be thinking,

running her palm vertically down the spines and still with her back turned.
She will remain with her back turned until she sits back on the bed.)

THE WOMAN

Do you want to touch me, Thom?

THOM

Well. I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Stop saying "I don't know." You do or you don't.

THOM

Well, I mean—

THE WOMAN

Oh, Jesus, and stop saying "I mean"! *He* used to do that all the time—my ex-husband—who never knew *what* he meant. Use words that express your meaning! If you need to draw a mental breath, say, *That is*, or *that's interesting*, or say nothing! Say anything but "I mean."

THOM

So. . .

THE WOMAN

And don't start every sentence with *so*! Now, do you want to touch me or not?

THOM

I do if you want me to.

THE WOMAN

(Returning to the bed) Wasn't so hard, was it? The answer is yes, I do want you to touch me. Next time you come, if you want to touch me, bring protection. (Pause.) A condom? My tubes are tied, and I carry no diseases. There's no danger of contagion on my end. That leaves you.

THOM

(Still on his knees, sheepishly.) I will. I will get protection.

THE WOMAN

You mean a *condom*. Can you say that?

THOM

I will get a condom.

THE WOMAN

They come in packages of three.

(She stands and walks to the closet and jiggles the knob once or twice.
Stepping back, she looks at THOM.)

Good. We're almost there.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act 1Scene 5THE SETTING

Week five, the next Saturday.

AT RISE

There are two knocks on the door. THE WOMAN enters from the kitchenette in fuzzy slippers, wearing a sheer blue nightgown over blue underthings. She opens and THOM enters, dressed as usual except for a reversed baseball cap. He reaches into his clothes and presents THE WOMAN with a condom. His “presentation” ought not to be grandiose but obvious enough that the audience sees he is holding a single condom—either in or out of its foil package. The moment is awkward, anxious, slightly protracted, but it should be played as much for pathos as humor.

THE WOMAN

(Arms folded, amused, dismissive.) Where’s the rest?

(THOM reaches into his pocket, but THE WOMAN has already turned and is ascending the steps to the second floor bedroom. THOM follows her. LIGHTS OUT on the parlor as LIGHTS UP in the bedroom. THOM is revealed in the same “presentation” posture he held a moment before. THE WOMAN is stretched out on the bed, her head propped on two pillows. THOM takes a step toward her and THE WOMAN takes the condom from him.)

THE WOMAN

Whoa! Don’t get your hopes up yet, Custer. One shelf left, so hold your horses. And take off your hat. And try to get out of that habit of wearing it backwards, you remind me of these absurd middle-age men trying to look like teenagers. So here’s the story: this is the last batch. Three packages. National Geographic field guides on birds, planets, and rocks. Complete sets of *Peterson*—that would be birds, trees, plants, medicinal plants, insects, reptiles and amphibians, cloud formations, and more rocks, as well as *Stokes*, *The National Wildlife Federation*, and the *Audubon Guide* to this that and the other. The rest are guides to the natural wonders and flora and fauna of the Tri-State area, “richly illustrated.” The last two are the heaviest ones. They go on the bottom shelf. Coffee table books on woodworking and carpentry and the culinary arts. See what he did? The bottom shelf is taller than the others, designed for coffee table books. They’re taller and heavier.

(THOM kneels and begins tearing open the packages and shelving the books.)

THOM

Didn't we just get rid of woodworking and cooking? I thought you said you wanted different ones?

THE WOMAN

Changed my mind. This is getting boring, and we need to move on to Stage Three. Hurry up and finish.

THOM

(Studying the Celtic Cross on the side of the bookcase.) Is this a crucifix?

THE WOMAN

A Celtic Cross. He routed them in, then stained them dark brown over the home-brewed French polish.

THOM

(Peers at the crosses.) Why are they called that?

THE WOMAN

Because, my little fake Scotsman, they were invented in Scotland. The circle is divided into quarters, which he thought celebrated the residual paganism of your religion. The four seasons, the four humors—earth, air, fire and water—and the four astrological signs. (Pausing.) Strange, you know, as different as it feels in here, in the end it *looks* no different.

THOM

(Standing, with a slightly anxious grin.) There. I'm done. So, now what?

THE WOMAN

"Now what" is you will go over to the closet and open it.

(THOM goes to the closet and opens the door. Inside is a floor-to-ceiling tower of storage cases against which is a video camera, still on a tripod, laying on its side.)

THE WOMAN

Bring one box out. Any one. Close the door, I hate open closet doors. And come around that side of the bed. I am always on this side.

(THOM enters the closet. Noise of rustling around. Then THOM exits carrying a box, moves to the bed and sets it beside THE WOMAN, who has shifted to make room. THOM sits on the bed and opens the box. He is about to reach into it when THE WOMAN stops him.)

THE WOMAN

No. Not yet. You need to listen to me very closely. I'll explain what these are. Are you ready?

THOM

I guess.

THE WOMAN

(Testily.) Guess *what*?

THOM

I mean, I don't know.

THE WOMAN

(More testily.) If you say "I don't know" one more time I might kill you. At the very least, I might ask you to leave.

THOM

Hey, you're the one invited me over. I'm just the kid you suckered into coming.

THE WOMAN

Did you—? (Holding out the condom.) Who knows about this? Who did you tell? You little son-of-a-bitch. Did you tell somebody?

THOM

Nobody! (Raises his right hand.) I swear to God on the bible.

THE WOMAN

Then why did you say I "suckered you" over here?

THOM

Well, didn't you? Walking around half naked, then telling me to do this and do that, and acting like I'm stupid. (Leaving the bed.) I'm tired of you making me feel stupid!

THE WOMAN

(Softening her tone, patting the bed.) Come back, Thom I apologize if I made you feel stupid. I didn't mean what I said. You certainly are not stupid. It's only that I wanted a bigger *reveal*, something classy, as we enter stage three, but . . .

(She fans the covers, leaves the bed, and stands on the other side of the bed.)

Come, back to bed. Now.

(THOM comes back to the bed and sits.)

Feel this nightgown. Feel. Go ahead.

(THOM runs a hand down the nightgown.)

Wet silk, very expensive, Italian, purchased in Florence. Thom, when I remove this nightgown, I'm going to fold it into a perfect square and set it at the foot of the bed. By then I expect you to be undressed and under the covers. This will be our ritual, our signal. When I fold my nightgown. You ready?

THOM

Yes.

THE WOMAN

You sure?

THOM

Yes.

THE WOMAN

Move the box to the floor.

THOM

What are all these tapes?

THE WOMAN

Home movies.

(THE WOMAN begins to unbutton the nightgown. LIGHTS OUT in the bedroom. After a moment there is the sound of light rustling from the second floor as THE WOMAN enters the bed, then of THOM's sneakers dropping to the floor. There is a pause of maybe ten seconds.)

THOM

Is this Stage Three?

THE WOMAN

Not yet. We're still in Stage Two.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

END OF ACT ONE

Act Two

Scene I

THE SETTING

The bedroom, later that afternoon.

AT RISE

THOM and THE WOMAN are together in the bed, under the covers. THOM is shirtless, THE WOMAN either in her white nightgown or naked.)

THE WOMAN
Say something, Thom.

·
THOM
Pastor Mike.

THE WOMAN
I'm sorry?

THOM
Pastor Mike says using protection is the same as abortion. Here I am, wearing *protection*.

THE WOMAN
This was your maiden flight, right?

THOM
My what?

THE WOMAN
First time?

THOM
I don't. . .

THE WOMAN
Don't you dare say you don't know.

THOM
Yes and no.

THE WOMAN
Try yes *or* no.

THOM

Does it matter?

THE WOMAN

(Calmly) Well, yes! Because if it was you first time, we didn't need to use *that*. (Tosses the covers and leaves the bed.) Stay here, I want to get rid of this and show you something. You're the show-and-don't-tell type.

(THE WOMAN rise and leaves, stage left. A corridor light goes on and a second later we hear a toilet flush offstage. She returns with framed picture of a man in military uniform. She will hold the picture, caressing it or running a finger around the frame, through the ensuing dialogue until she puts it down.)

THE WOMAN

This is himself. His graduation picture from Valley Forge Military Academy. He was a looker, wasn't he? He really filled that uniform even though he hated it and everything it stood for. That whole culture, despised it. He said nobody said much of anything and nobody read a book or had one idea they weren't supposed to have. His father's idea, the military academy. This, for a child who at five was reading *The Times* and was a polished *raconteur*! Do you know that word?

THOM

Somebody who talks a lot. You told me.

THE WOMAN

Well, he never shut up, that's true, but no, you're confusing *raconteur*, a person with a knack for telling great stories, with a *boor*, a mansplainer—

THOM

Somebody like my father. My sister says that's what he does. He *explains* everything just to make you feel stupid.

THE WOMAN

Exactly. But a *raconteur* is never boring. He doesn't explain, he narrates. Our life was a continuous narrative. We would talk through dinner, all night, into the dawn, through breakfast. He wrote stories, but they disappeared with him. And poems, too, but I think he threw them out. All AP courses in school. Was in line for a congressional appointment to West Point. Your brother probably knew him from sports—baseball, which you hate, what he called the thinking man's sport, and that fag sport, tennis. He could also cook. After his father left, I was relieved to have him all to me. I'm not sure he even missed his father.

THOM

Did he ever talk about him after he left?

THE WOMAN

He didn't talk about him while he was here. Or talk *to* him once he reached puberty. (Turning the picture over.) Eventually, he and I fell in love. (Pause.) Does all that appall you?

THOM

No, not really.

THE WOMAN

Why not? It would appall most people.

THOM

You were the only one he had to talk to. You brought him up, taught him to talk, listened to him. You were just two very close *people*. And except that you were older. . .

THE WOMAN

The difference in ages made no difference. His father had fifteen years on me and I had fifteen on his son.

THOM

How old are you?

THE WOMAN

None of your business. And don't ask me again. Besides, age is never an issue between people unless one of them *makes* it an issue. Our life together was fine until he ran into your pastor. It came out of nowhere. The day he accepted the Lord Christ Jesus as his Savior, everything went to goddamn hell. What's so funny?

THOM

Going to hell because you found the Lord. (Suddenly alert.) What time is it?

THE WOMAN

(Drawing the word out.) The gloaming.

THOM

Glomming.

THE WOMAN

No, *gloaming*. It's like a normal day's midlife crisis, a point-of-no-return, of inbetweenness, when the light welcomes, opens its arms to the darkness.

THOM

I think I ought to get going. I'm already late.

THE WOMAN

Not yet. Tell, me, Thom, what do they say about me in the outside world? Your mother sounds like a truly good person. What do the good people say about me?

THOM

My mother says you're a single woman living all by yourself in a big house. She takes up for you.

THE WOMAN

And your father?

THOM

He says you sound like sort of a handful, and that you drive men away. He thinks you should join the fellowship of our church, learn how to be normal and get along. Mom tells him to stop trying to run peoples' lives, especially women's lives.

THE WOMAN

Do you think I'm a handful?

THOM

I just think you have strong opinions.

THE WOMAN

I suppose I can be difficult. (Picking up the framed picture.) I know I drove my ex- away, but him? Did I drive him away? I loved him. My ex- knew I did. I told my ex-, "I wish your wife had survived so I could tell her what a unique specimen she has produced"—her last act on earth! I wanted to have children with him, Thom. Tell me if that disgusts you.

THOM

I can't say one way or the other. I mean—(Pauses, quickly corrects himself.) *That is*, it's interesting that you ask because normally humans don't do . . . that sort of stuff. With their kids.

THE WOMAN

Step-children are not blood kin. It's not incest, technically.

THOM

Right, it's another one of those in-between things. Like when old Bob Welty transferred his membership during the service, right after he took communion at the altar rail.

THE WOMAN

What are you talking about?

THOM

That's how we say someone died. They "transfer their membership to another congregation." Pastor Mike said, "Bob couldn't wait for fellowship breakfast. His last meal was the body of Christ. More nourishing than a stack of blueberry pancakes." Nobody knew quite what to make of that.

THE WOMAN

Pastor Mike sounds like a real comedian.

THOM

It wouldn't have been the end of the world if you two had kids.

THE WOMAN

How odd that you put it that way! He was obsessed with the end of the world. "The end is near," "the Lord will separate the sheep from the goats," blah blah blah.

THOM

My father says we are now in the End Times. Hurricane Katrina was in the Bible, along with 9/11 and the Black president.

THE WOMAN

(Laughing her beautiful laugh.) I think I would enjoy your father!

THOM

I don't think you would. You can't argue with him. Whatever you say, he comes back with sarcastic questions, like, *Oh, so you know more than Holy Writ?* So I just sass him. I throw him impossible to argue with answers.

THE WOMAN

Like what?

THOM

I tell him that you can't really know how a thing ends if you don't know how a thing really begins. He says I'm just a wiseass.

THE WOMAN

"In the beginning God created heaven and earth," right?

THOM

Yes. But in six days? And why would God need to take a day off? That's just a story.

THE WOMAN

(Laughing her beautiful laugh again.) Why, you little goddamned atheist! I am so goddamned proud of you!

THOM

I'm no atheist! It's just common sense, which doesn't make me an atheist. Where's the evidence? The world is round. People die and stay dead. The earth goes around the sun. They are *facts*. There are people in the congregation who refuse to believe the world goes around the sun because of Joshua and Jericho. But somebody comes back from the dead, oh, well, they're ok with *that*! But the earth goes around the sun? No way.

THE WOMAN

But you're part of it all!

THOM

Oh, a person is always part of something. People need to walk in one direction so they don't end up walking into each other. Even you.

THE WOMAN

(Sitting up, she caresses his cheek.) You and I are having an actual—are actually conversing!

THOM

Will you tell me something?

THE WOMAN

I told you, my age is none of your business.

THOM

Not your age. What's your first name?

THE WOMAN

(Amused) Who wants to know?

THOM

Honest?

THE WOMAN

Yes.

THOM

My mom wants to know what to call you if she ever calls you up.

THE WOMAN

(Sing-song delivery.) You're not being honest.

THOM

(After a pause.) Ok. My father. He says you remind him of a girl he knew once.

THE WOMAN

(Laughing her beautiful laugh.) Let's see. Diane? Rebecca? Molly? Melissa!

THOM

Tell me.

THE WOMAN

No. If *you* wanted to know, it would be different.

THOM

He dated some girl named Rachel. He says you're sort of "hot," that you're "a looker," like her. I think he does it to annoy my mom.

THE WOMAN

That's mean. You're better than that.

THOM

I'm not him. But still, he's my father.

THE WOMAN

So? Have higher standards. Go your own way.

THOM

Speaking of going, I need to leave if I'm going to get to work.

THE WOMAN

No, not yet. If I have to, I'll drive you there. Stay a bit.

THOM

Tell me your name. I want to know for myself.

THE WOMAN

(Leaning over and kissing his temple.) Next time. You tell me something. You're eighteen. How come you don't have a license?

THOM

Insurance. I'd have to pay for it. My father's a cheapskate.

THE WOMAN

Might help you get a girlfriend.

THOM

Who needs a girlfriend? I've got a girlfriend.

THE WOMAN

I'm flattered. (Pause.) You mean me?

THOM

No, you're my "something on the side." (Pause.) That's a joke.

THE WOMAN

It's not funny, it's vulgar. Are you still seeing Little Ms. Checkout?

THOM

Not like this. I told you, we work together.

THE WOMAN

“Like this” means. . .

THOM

Sex. We don’t have any.

THE WOMAN

Do you mess around? Make out in the back seat—no, I forgot. You don’t drive.

THOM

She does. She has a car.

THE WOMAN

Does it have a back seat?

THOM

Yes, but I’ve never been in it.

THE WOMAN

So you make out in the front seat?

THOM

No, we just—talk about stuff. She used to live down the block from me when we were little. We were acolytes—she carried the candle, I carried the speculum. Then she moved away. Then we met again at work.

THE WOMAN

Do you tell her about us?

THOM

No. I never tell anyone about us. I never will.

THE WOMAN

There really wasn’t anything to tell until today, was there, baby?

(THOM leans over and THE WOMAN takes him in her arms and cradles his head against her breast.)

THE WOMAN

You, my little Scotsman, are a fascinating case.

THOM

What’s on those cassettes and DVDs in those boxes in that closet?

THE WOMAN

Stage Three. Soon to begin. But never mind that now. Talk to me, Thom.
Tell me something I don't know about your life. Tell me something nobody knows about
you.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act II

Scene 2

THE SETTING

A week or two later, early May, in the kitchenette. Scattered evidence of a meal just being finished.

AT RISE

THE WOMAN, dressed in a plaid mini-skirt under a white silk shirt, with gray knee sox and black shoes sitting across from THOM at the table in the kitchenette. The room is filled with spring light and classical music.

THE WOMAN

Cheers! (She raises her glass to his and they clink.) Now for Stage Three. You are going to go upstairs. Open the closet. Behind the stack of boxes is a TV. It's on a stand with two shelves, one with a DVD player and the other with a cassette deck. Wheel it out, plug it in, and position it in front of the bed. I need to clear, so wait for me.

THOM

We're going to watch movies?

THE WOMAN

Something like that.

THOM

Porn?

THE WOMAN

(Ignoring him.) And don't forget to brush your teeth.

(THE WOMAN stands and exits stage right. LIGHTS UP on the second floor as THOM ascends the steps. He crosses stage left, enters the closet and wheels out a TV. The audience can only see it from the back. THOM plugs it in and sits on the bed, thinking. Then he gets up and exits right. Sounds of running water and a Water Pic. A moment later he returns and sits on the bed. As he does THE WOMAN enters stage left, holding what looks like a glass of iced tea with a straw.)

THE WOMAN

Brought you this. It's spiked.

THOM

(Sipping.) What's in it?

THE WOMAN

Gray Goose, lover. *Vodka*. I made you a Tom Collins. A dilute solution of vodka. It won't hurt.

THOM

(Sipping through the straw.) Will this make me drunk?

THE WOMAN

Maybe, but you might need it.

(THE WOMAN moves to the TV and inserts a DVD or VHS tape then gets into bed. THOM joins her.)

Welcome to Stage Three. This is the principal reason I have you here, with me. After all, Thom, I could have *sex* with anyone. Even your religious fanatic fathers calls me "hot." But there's more I want to share with you. You have become a special person, a trusted companion.

THOM

What do I do?

THE WOMAN

Nothing. Just sit back, drink your drink, and watch with me. This will take maybe three minutes. It's like a coming attraction. Hand me the remote. Now, lie back beside me. Good.

(LIGHTS DOWN on the bedroom. The two are facing the audience watching the TV, which flickers on and begins to play the inserted DVD. THOM's expression slowly changes over the course of three or so minutes, altering from amusement to confusion and even to something like terror. She stops the DVD. LIGHTS UP on the bedroom.)

THE WOMAN

Well?

THOM

What did I just see?

THE WOMAN

Call it a home movie.

THOM

Who was the guy?

THE WOMAN

Himself.

THOM

(Shaken.) Why did you show me this?

THE WOMAN

I need somebody to watch these with. You impress me as that unique somebody with whom I can share these memories.

THOM

Because I don't read or know much and had no sex experience?

THE WOMAN

No, Thom. It's because not a lot impresses you. I mean that as a compliment. It takes a lot to impress you.

THOM

And was that. . . ?

THE WOMAN

Yes, baby, that was my stepson. I told you. I considered having a child with him.

THOM

Are we going to make these?

THE WOMAN

No, *we* are going to have sex. Then we will *watch* them. Or, we'll watch them and then have sex. And then we'll talk.

THOM

How many will we watch?

THE WOMAN

As many as there are. That many.

THOM

These were, like, his idea?

THE WOMAN

Nooo! It was my idea. I always wanted to direct!

THOM

Nobody else has seen them?

THE WOMAN

Now, lover, do I look like a pornographer? I did it for the *memories*, Thom. People in love have sex. The mere fact that I was his step-mother doesn't change that. Besides, I'm no different from all those good people taking home videos of acts of intercourse and fellatio and cunnilingus— average folks. Even good church going people.

THOM

No way!

THE WOMAN

Your parents love each other, don't they?

THOM

Absolutely.

THE WOMAN

Truly-deeply?

THOM

(With emphasis.) They renewed their vows just last year.

THE WOMAN

Vows are just words. You don't really remember someone you truly-deeply love without remembering his body. The sex you had with him, the odor of his hair and skin, the texture of his hair, everything down to moles and vaccination scars, sour feet and bad breath. You remember *everything*, even the flaws, sometimes especially the flaws. I wanted a physical record of him because I feared that one day, I might lose him. I never expected it would be Jesus he would throw me over for. (Stroking his face.) Are you grossed out?

THOM

No, but my mind is sort of blown. Seeing you on top of him, I'm seeing me.

THE WOMAN

(Testily, growing more upset.) We were in love, goddamit! People in love have sex, or have sex and then fall in love! Yin and yang, Thom. I've been living with visual evidence of him, the love of my life, and could not stomach the idea that the evidence is in a closet in a box and fading like the paintings on cave walls. I'm living with the ugly fact that the rest of the world thinks only of the "ick" factor!

(THOM puts his arm around her, and draws her closer. It is the first time in the play that he seems in control of the situation and that THE WOMAN seems truly vulnerable.)

THOM

Don't be sad. I think you're amazing. You're really something else.

THE WOMAN

You think I'm a pervert.

THOM

No, I think you think for yourself. A definite free-thinker. I think my mom would definitely like you. I think she would definitely get you.

THE WOMAN

Let's not go too far.

THOM

She would totally get you! You're what she calls a "free spirit."

THE WOMAN

"Free spirit"? I'm sleeping with her son! What's to "get"? Christ, how I hate that expression!

THOM

I don't mean that part—about you and me. I mean, compared what *she* has to deal with.

THE WOMAN

Ok, stop there.

THOM

Where?

THE WOMAN

I don't want to know about your parents' sex life.

THOM

I didn't mean that.

THE WOMAN

What, then? You mean they don't *have* a sex life? And she would love the fact that you *do*? From what you've told me about your father, if I were religious I'd be lighting candles for your mother. You're nothing like him.

THOM

No, what I meant was, like, the way this video *ended*! You're dancing by yourself, with no partner, in the nude! And that music! A free spirit!

THE WOMAN

Oh, that! (Laughing.) It's Greek, it's called the Kalamatianós. It's from a famous movie. He thought it was ridiculous, too.

THOM

I didn't say it was ridiculous.

THE WOMAN

You don't think it's silly?

THOM

I think it's just—who you are.

THE WOMAN

I have this thing about movies that end with people dancing with themselves.

THOM

It's a very young person's thing to do.

THE WOMAN

And you're dying to know how old I am!

THOM

I'm not allowed to know anything.

THE WOMAN

No, you're not allowed to know *everything*.

THOM

At least I know your name, at least. At last.

THE WOMAN

I never liked my given first name. I was named after an aunt, my mother's oldest sister, who was also my godmother. She lived her entire adult life in an apartment in Philadelphia that she shared with another woman. A "Boston marriage ." (Looks at him.) They were dykes. *Lesbians*? She was brilliant, a teacher—the only one in her family with a college degree—and she had a nasty sense of humor I loved. She was the black sheep, the aunt nobody likes except her nieces or nephews. I loved everything about her except her first name, so the first thing I did when I grew up was I changed it. Not officially. I just don't use it.

THOM

So the name you told me is still not your real name.

THE WOMAN

(Smiling.) Something like that.

THOM

But on your mail. It's the same initial.

THE WOMAN

That's all it is. *C* can stand for Caroline, Christine, Carla, Catherine, Corinna or Condoleeza. Did you tell it to your father?

THOM

No, it's our secret. I keep my promises.

THE WOMAN

My Thom.

(THE WOMAN'S tone changes, as if she is softly convulsed by something. THE WOMAN now drops her head on his chest and their positions are the reverse or mirror image of what they were at the end of II-1.)

You really are a decent human being. You're enough to make me give up atheism. You are steady and solid, hard-working, sweet-smelling, nearly acne-free, and your looks grow on a woman, not that you are bad looking. I predict you'll get a lot better looking as you get older, as you grow into this body and especially this handsome face. You are not like him. He was Hamlet. You're more a Romeo, or a Juliet. Just don't be a Macbeth. You have character, baby. And an old, deep soul. You would never tell anyone about us, at least while I'm still among the living, that I know.

THOM

How do you know that?

THE WOMAN

Because you have a conscience. I like that. You're a truth teller.

THOM

And how do you know that?

THE WOMAN

Besides, nobody would believe you.

THOM

I don't know about that.

THE WOMAN

(A bit ruefully.) You're right! I don't either. By the way, now that we have entered Stage Three, these rendezvous will be prolonged, so tell your parents I gave you another job next time you come.

THOM

What should I tell them?

THE WOMAN

Make something up. And I want you to call in sick today. Come on. Let's go down and eat. I'm making a filet of sole with a fresh sweet potato and asparagus.

THOM

You're amazing. And a great cook.

THE WOMAN

No, but he was. Me, I'm just . . . fair.

THOM

You have introduced me to a whole new way of eating, you know?

THE WOMAN

Come on. When we're done we'll come back up and watch another one.

THOM

And then we'll . . .

THE WOMAN

Yes, and then we'll . . . yes.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act II

Scene 3

THE SETTING

Mid-May, the kitchenette. A window is open, the radio on, the atmosphere relaxed.

AT RISE

THOM and THE WOMAN are finishing an obviously post-coital brunch. THOM is barechested, in his boxers, THE WOMAN in her nightgown.

THE WOMAN

The timing of Stage Three was fortunate, Thom. This is the fourth anniversary of his leaving me. Today, May 18th.

THOM

When did he get so into God?

THE WOMAN

I used to tell myself it happened suddenly. But no, on further reflection, I was wrong. He had already begun collecting books on ufo's and religion and prophecy before he went off to military school. Something must have happened there, surrounded as he was by all those macabre Republicans, chapel every week, yuck. He never just entered a thing or "tried it out," no, he always went right through until he reached the other side. By the time he came back, the seed had been planted. Pastor Mike just watered the seed. The first sign was the bookcase with those Celtic Crosses. I wasn't surprised by shelf one or shelves two and three, with all the nitwit lit. It was that lethal fourth shelf.

THOM

The Bible shelf.

THE WOMAN

He collected bibles like fine art, he was greedy for them. It's as if he was afraid he would *miss* something. I think his religious crisis would have blown over had he stuck with the Bible. But once your pastor got involved, with all those religious Looney Tunes that kept arriving, he was gone from me. You know, I actually tried to get rid of most of those books on my own, but I couldn't—they were filled with his doodles, his crosses, his notes to himself, like graffiti on condemned buildings. He even found hidden symbols in page numbers or little bunches of letters in certain passages of St. Paul, who was a truly crazy son of a bitch . . . Those books are a menace, and Paul's epistles are the higher trash.

They fed his passion for apocalypse, his obsession. And sorry, but I have to put a lot of the blame on your pastor.

THOM

I don't know if I go along with that, I mean—(Halts, corrects himself.) *That is*, I know Pastor Mike mostly from his sermons, and they're just normal boring sermons. He downloads them from the Internet. I know him from Scouts, too. He was our troop leader. He never talked about flying saucers or that crazy stuff.

THE WOMAN

He comes across as completely benign. I was never worried that he might be an original thinker, if there are any in his line of work. But your benign is somebody else's malign, you know? I saw a change when he started coming home with these "spiritual" movies. *King of Kings*, *Ben Hur*, *The Ten Commandments*. Then your pastor gave him this whole mini-series about the Bible. Another Trojan Horse. Come to think, they're all still in that closet with the Memories. I deliberately mixed them in, more for me than for him. A battery has a positive and negative pole. Yin and yang, remember?

THOM

Pastor had us watch *Left Behind* on a Scouts' retreat.

THE WOMAN

That is just plain sick. I thought you were supposed to be learning how to tie square knots and skin Bambi's mom? And your parents approved?

THOM

My dad went out and rented them for us. I told you, we already had the books.

THE WOMAN

So, you've seen that series *twice*?

THOM

More than twice.

THE WOMAN

(Mouth agape in mock horror.) Look at my face. Poor Thom. Drowning in vicious propaganda!

THOM

Actually, they weren't bad. Great special effects.

THE WOMAN

I'll bet. The bible is basically a disaster flick. What do you watch on holidays?

THOM

Uh, we saw *God's Not Dead* this past Easter and *Passion of the Christ* last Easter. Christmas we watched *Heaven is for Real*.

THE WOMAN

And not *The Wizard of Oz*? *White Christmas*? *Miracle on 34th Street*?

THOM

(Shaking his head “no” to each title.) I’ve never seen those.

THE WOMAN

You poor kids. That’s child abuse.

THOM

My parents watch too.

THE WOMAN

Doesn’t matter, they’re simply. . . *enabling* it. Propaganda gets under your skin, gets at the unconscious. For instance, you’re a smart kid, but you liked the special effects, right? Intelligence doesn’t matter. I didn’t realize that for all his intelligence, he was still susceptible. So I thought I’d vaccinate him against Pastor Mike’s gifts with *The Rapture*, *Dogma*, *Jacob’s Ladder*, *The Life of Brian*—

(THE WOMAN glances at THOM, whose reaction reveals that he has never heard of these films.)

THE WOMAN

—which he watched because I more or less forced him. The deal was that I would not stand in his way of joining the congregation if he participated in what I thought of as “film therapy”—I didn’t call it that—once a week. The breaking point came right after Easter. He came home the Sunday after Easter—

THOM

Divine Mercy Sunday.

THE WOMAN

— and went up to his room, and I heard him singing—which is one of the few things he couldn’t do well, he had a tin ear. It was an Easter hymn. (Singing.)

*I serve a risen Savior
He’s in the world today.
I know that He is living,
Whatever men may say.*

THOM

I know that!

(THOM joins in and he and THE WOMAN sing the chorus:)

*He lives, He lives,
Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me
Along life's narrow way.*

*He lives, He lives,
Salvation to impart,
Ask me how I know he lives,
He lives inside my heart!*

THE WOMAN

(Laughing her beautiful laugh.) I told him that it sounded like a high-school fight-song. He got offended, so I tried to lighten things up. (Singing.)

*He lives, He lives,
He lives across the street,
He walks with me, and talks to me,
I think he is so neat—*

THOM

(Giggling.) You sang *that*?

THE WOMAN

Yes, and see, *you're* laughing! But he could . . . not . . . laugh! That's when I knew I was in trouble. Sex therapy and film therapy had both failed. I had no idea how deep into it he was. Thom, religion is evil. Thank god I'm not religious.

THOM

Do you believe in anything?

THE WOMAN

(Testily.) Because I do not believe what you believe does not mean I believe in nothing. If you and I watched some of what I tried out on him, you'd get an idea of what I believe in.

THOM

I know it's not religion.

THE WOMAN

Not in the sense you mean. Not that Mother Goddess nonsense either. And I'm not into Wicca or being a goddam witch, if that's why your grinning. Though you know, Thom, you are so much more open-minded, whatever your limitations, which is kind of refreshing. It might further expand your horizons. Ever seen *The Last Temptation of Christ*?

THOM

You mean *The Passion of the Christ*?

THE WOMAN

Ah, Mel Gibson. Except for the transcendent Italian woman who played Magdalene, and that sexy guy who played Jesus, absolute trash, a splatter film with subtitles. Come on. Let's see if we can find a good one to begin your film therapy. *The Rapture*, that's the ticket.

(THOM stands up, he walks to her and leans in to kiss her.)

THE WOMAN

(Stopping him) You need to brush your teeth and use the tongue tool. You stink of onions. By the way, you have a pretty good voice.

THOM

I'm in the choir.

(The two exit, stage right.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act II

Scene 4

THE SETTING

The bedroom, two hours later

AT RISE

THOM and THE WOMAN in bed, facing the TV. We hear the closing credit music from *The Rapture* dying in the background, then silence.

THE WOMAN

Impressions? Reactions? Thumbs up, down?

THOM

I'm sort of confused. (Sitting up.) What's the point of the ending?

THE WOMAN

She has been liberated. She is free to choose her destiny.

THOM

But she killed her child.

THE WOMAN

Because she loved her child. Because God misled her. She can't forgive God. It's the Abraham and Isaac story, only it's mother-daughter.

THOM

Abraham never kills Isaac.

THE WOMAN

But he would have if God hadn't stepped in. The whole "sacrifice" thing was a goof, a setup. Does it make God any less a sadist?

THOM

And what happens at the end is that the mother in the movie goes to hell?

THE WOMAN

Is that a question?

THOM

Yeah, that's my question.

THE WOMAN

Well, we're never told, but yes. That's the implication. Mimi Rogers goes to hell.

THOM

You *like* this movie?

THE WOMAN

It's a small masterpiece. It raises powerful questions.

THOM

Like what?

THE WOMAN

Like, what's worse, the hell of taking orders from a sadistic dictatorial God, or the hell of standing up to him and taking the consequences?

THOM

So, at The Last Judgment, we get to choose where we go? Heaven or hell? Like her? Who just murdered her daughter?

THE WOMAN

Stop uptalking me, it's annoying. Why so perturbed?

THOM

This is so bogus! (Worked up.) This is so totally wrong. Scripture does not say that we get to choose where we go! That's the whole point of being *chosen*.

THE WOMAN

"Chosen"? Are you Jewish?

THOM

Why do you always try to make me look stupid?

THE WOMAN

Jesus, you *are* perturbed. That's good. Perturbed means you're thinking.

THOM

I'm thinking this is just blasphemy, stupid, low-IQ trash.

THE WOMAN

Careful! Accusations usually reveal more about the accuser than the accused. "Let he who is without sin," remember?

THOM

So, I'm low-IQ for calling this low-IQ and blasphemous?

THE WOMAN

I didn't say that. I am seriously sorry, *aggrieved* even that you disliked the movie.

THOM

I hated it.

THE WOMAN

But what about the performances? Mimi Rogers was married to Tom Cruise, did you know that? Could you imagine anybody married to *him* being in a seriously thoughtful movie?

THOM

I don't consider this is a serious movie.

THE WOMAN

(Reaching over and caressing his face.) Come here. Don't be angry. I promise, no more film therapy.

THOM

I don't need therapy.

THE WOMAN

Don't be testy. Come here.

THOM

(Unmoving.) How many more boxes of "Memories" are there?

THE WOMAN

Six, seven, I don't know. We've barely gone through one. (Touching him.) Hey, come here.

THOM

Do you even like me?

THE WOMAN

(Sharply.) What kind of lunatic question is that?

THOM

Are you trying to convert me?

THE WOMAN

To what, Thom? You're the one who thinks I believe in *nothing*.

THOM

To a liberal?

(THE WOMAN begins to snicker, but the snicker turns suddenly into her beautiful laugh. She reaches for him and draws him toward her.)

THE WOMAN

Come here, baby. Oh, you are a baby!

THOM

(THOM slowly yields. His expression is pained, unconvinced. Gradually, he relaxes and covers her body with his.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Act II

Scene 5

THE SETTING

A week later. The first floor.

AT RISE

There are two knocks on the front door, then the doorbell rings. THE WOMAN enters from the kitchenette stage left. She is dressed as she was in the play's first scene. She opens the door and THOM enters wearing a blazer, khaki slacks, dress shirt and tie.)

THE WOMAN

What's this? (Taken aback.) Where's your key? Did you lose it?

THOM

Here. (Hands over the housekey, closes the door.) I felt weird letting myself in today.

THE WOMAN

And you're late.

(THE WOMAN walks backward toward the steps and sits.)

You look very good in that get-up. You clean up well. We have been very good for you. But Thom, yours truly is deeply confused! Why so all dressed up?

THOM

I can't stay today. I've got an event this evening. It's a church thing. I can't be here today.

THE WOMAN

A church thing?

(THE WOMAN puts her head in her hands and groans, then rocks back and forth before lifting herself and settling on a higher step.)

THE WOMAN

Did you tell them? You told them, didn't you!

THOM

No. I never would. I promised you. It's just. . . I can't do this anymore.

THE WOMAN

Don't lie to me.

THOM

I'm not lying.

THE WOMAN

There's totally no fear of exposure! You know that nobody pays any attention to me. I'm just a woman in a house all by herself who lives on alimony checks. I own a house and a car and a library card. The neighbors see me when I go to market and when I put out my trash. Before I came into your life, Thom, nobody paid attention to *you* either. We need each other, baby. We're good for each other! Even if we don't agree on everything. Come here, Thom. (Shifting to make room.) Come sit with me, honey. And don't lie to me.

THOM

(Unmoving.) No, I can't.

THE WOMAN

You look really good in those clothes. Good enough to eat with a spoon.

THOM

I gotta go, really. My ride is waiting . . .

THE WOMAN

(Standing.) Who's *waiting*? Where?

THOM

Just some people. They're up the block.

THE WOMAN

Your parents?

THOM

No. My parents are clueless!

THE WOMAN

It was my home movies, right? It was, wasn't it?

THOM

Sort of, I don't know.

THE WOMAN

Don't say *you don't know*! Look, it's no big deal, Thom. We don't have to watch them anymore if you're uncomfortable! We'll drive them to the dump!

THOM

I just can't figure out what this is! Is it what you call love? Are we in love? Because it's not what I call love.

THE WOMAN

“If I speak with the tongues of angels and have not love,” and all that?

THOM

You know *that*?

THE WOMAN

It was part of our wedding ceremony and a thousand others. (Moving up one more step.)
Is it the age issue? I am not that old, Thom!

THOM

It’s not age. How can it be? You never told me your age!

THE WOMAN

Now, your *mother* is old. I’m less than two decades older than you.

THOM

If age isn’t such a big deal, how come you never told me yours?

THE WOMAN

It is, I can tell, it’s that age *thing*, I knew it, I knew it. You’re too kind a person to say so.

THOM

No, it is not *age*! It’s that you keep paying me. I don’t do anything except have sex with you and watch those tapes—and still I get paid!

THE WOMAN

The money is to keep your parents quiet! You need to show them something for time spent. What’s wrong with some extra money?

THOM

People who get paid to have sex. There’s a name for that.

THE WOMAN

Sex is not what I’m paying you for! The sex is not worth paying for, honey, believe me. Don’t take offense, but I’m not paying you for sex.

THOM

It’s how it seems.

THE WOMAN

I’m paying you to keep me company while I watch fifteen minutes of the only thing I own that reminds me of what I truly loved and gave me real *pleasure*. He was the love of my life. Somebody you will never meet and I will never see again. Somebody I can’t forget.

THOM

That's pretty messed up. There's something about this, about us, that —what was that word, that acronym, “ick” something, you said it was? The word on his calendar?

THE WOMAN

A Greek word. It means “fish”. *Ickthys*. What's that have to do with us?

THOM

I asked Pastor Mike about it. He told me that the letters stand for *Jesus Christ Son of God and Savior*, in English. It was used by the first Christians to mark secret meeting places when they had to hide from the Romans.

THE WOMAN

And now it's all over peoples' cars. Like that idiot with the Toyota next door. So what?

THOM

But it also stands for us. We're *icky*, this is *icky*. I feel *icky* to myself all the time.

(THOM turns and walks to the front door, not looking back.)

THE WOMAN

Wait. Thom! Hold it!

THOM

(Exiting.) Goodbye, whatever your real name is. Have a blessed life.

(THOM is now offstage. THE WOMAN follows him to the front door and holds it partly open from inside.)

THE WOMAN

Thom, wait. Please, listen, baby, I'm thinking of curtains, for the front window? What would you think of gold? (More loudly, nearly sobbing.) Thom? Thom!

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Epilogue

THE SETTING

The first floor of THE WOMAN'S house, darkened except for a spotlight center stage. *

AT RISE

THOM reenters from the audience and sits on the couch at center stage, from where speaks the epilogue. THOM is dressed as before but is holding or wearing the pair of sandals THE WOMAN gave him in act I.

(It is conceivable that THOM's epilogue is accompanied by images projected on a screen

THOM

There was no "church event." I lied. My checkout aisle girlfriend had asked me to her prom while I was on my knees pricing kipper snacks on the Tuesday after my first and only film therapy session. So I said yes, not knowing that my checkout isle girlfriend would someday be my wife. We've been married fifteen years, this summer, June 7th. We always celebrate our anniversary *on the date of*. Who can tell the future? I was instantly at home, at *rest* with her—my wife, Jean Marie—who was older than me by a month, not two decades—or less. Jean Marie was driving the car that waited for me that afternoon I dropped off her housekey, and said goodbye.

After the prom, Jean Marie and I talked into the morning about all the things we couldn't talk about at home. Jobs, home lives, school, church, even sex. Neither of us was a virgin, which was a total bonus. A real relief, not having to explain or apologize. She took me *seriously*, too, something my Saturday woman never really seemed to. When she dropped me home after the prom, Jean Marie made me promise I'd let her give me driving lessons. She said a real mature person, especially a mature man, knows how to drive a car. She gave me my first lesson in the parking lot of Stop and Shop. Then we went out and had Chinese. I already knew I would marry her. She's still a better driver than me. We have six kids, two sets of twins, and are good, church-going people. Our church family is important to us.

But I never told her—she still doesn't know—about my Saturday Woman. Maybe this is immodest, but the woman was right about me. I am a decent person. I do have a conscience. Except for that one lie, I never lied to her. And I *did* resist the temptation to

* Alternately, the director may decide to visually caption THOM's epilogue with images (live or still) projected above and behind him. In that case he might deliver it while standing, not sitting, at center stage in front of the curtain.

go back. I passed the house once or twice—it looked the same except for new curtains on the front window—but I never knocked, and I was sorely tempted to. For months and months. She was attractive, sure, and there was the sex. But she was also kind, smart, fed me like a king, taught me things, paid me better than the supermarket. And she bought me these. They’re beat up now—

(pointing to his sandals)

but I will never get rid of them. When she folded her nightgown into that perfect square and we made love, I felt fine—until I saw the two of us being sucked back into one of her “memories,” just two dark cutouts, mounting or being mounted on that TV. If it wasn’t for them, who knows? I might never have said yes when Jean Marie asked me to her prom!

I did see her, once—the only time I saw her outside her house! A rainy Sunday afternoon. I’m pricing stock in aisle fourteen, canned mussels, when I see her several aisles over, by herself, near the meat displays. She has her back to me, is wearing gloves, in a black windbreaker with the hood up and, for some reason, she’s wearing sunglasses. Without warning, she turns, lifts the sunglasses, looks right at me, and goes like this

(THOM opens his arms wide, as if in welcome or recognition.)

—wiggling the fingers on her right hand. I was about to stand up when a handsome guy in a trench coat pops out of a side aisle and puts an arm around her waist, and then I realized, ah, ok, the welcome isn’t for me. They walked to the checkout—Jean Marie checked them out—and a second later I saw them outside, under an umbrella. I watched them drive away. Jean Marie thought I was watching her and blew me a kiss, I blew one back and went back to pricing stock, but I couldn’t concentrate. I kept thinking of that bookcase, her white nightgown, the sweet odor of her skin and hair, and mostly of the stepson and his last message to her or anybody—the word she pronounced as *ick-something*—the Greek word for fish.

(BLACKOUT)

(End of Scene)