

BABES IN AMERICA
By Carole Clement

Perhaps "The March of the Toys" from Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland* plays before the performance begins.

Act I
Scene i

The time is the present. Interior of the SMALL family's van.

AT RISE: LIZ and CHAS SMALL sit in the front of their van. CHAS drives while using a laptop computer. On the dashboard sit several remote control devices, a stack of third-class mail and a cellular phone.

Containers of alpha hydroxy, collagen and retinal cosmetics, DHEA, HGH, ginseng, ginkgo biloba, antioxidants, saw palmetto, melatonin, flaxseed oil, etc., also sit on the dashboard. CHAS and LIZ dip into these preparations from time to time.

LIZ films the scenery with her video camera and studies a road atlas.

LIZ

Chas! There's one! (BEAT) It wasn't crowded.

CHAS

It wasn't crowded 'cause it's no good. Only losers eat at places like that.

LIZ

Just one meal at one of those places wouldn't--

CHAS

Look. We're nine hundred miles from home. You know darn well that if I pulled in back there, half our neighborhood'd drive by, tooting and waving. And snickering. So just relax and enjoy your vacation.

LIZ

Vacations are the last place I can relax. The tapes in the VCRs must be full by now. And just thinking about all the mail and magazines and catalogues and newspapers and faxes and voice mail and email and--

CHAS

Beth can handle it. She's probably in our living room right now, sorting the stacks so you can scan them tonight. Check the monitor, if you're worried.

(CHAS uses a remote to switch on the monitor. LIZ studies the computer screen.)

LIGHTS UP on the Small's living room.

The SHADOW enters and adds newspapers, magazines, etc., to the existing stacks.)

LIZ

Beth's not there. But the stacks are. Oh, wait. I hear something. Turn on the bedroom monitor.

(CHAS does so.)

LIGHTS DOWN on the living room. LIGHTS UP on the bedroom, where BETH examines the contents of LIZ and CHAS's dresser drawers.)

CHAS

(To BETH--although SHE can't hear HIM)

Hey! That's my--put it back!

(To LIZ)

What's she rummaging around in our bedroom for?

LIZ

That's just the way she is. Even in college, she went through everyone's drawers, foot lockers, purses.

CHAS

Didn't anyone ever tell her to cut it out?

LIZ

That wouldn't have been very nice, would it? How do you think she would've felt?

CHAS

That's my girl. Civil.

(LIGHTS DOWN on the living room.)

LIZ

Is it my imagination, or are we getting even more stuff than we used to?

CHAS

You bet, we're getting more! Because all those newspapers and catalogues and faxes are the successful man's burden. A burden a man's got to shoulder before he can earn the respect of his neighbors, his co-workers, and his bankers. How many pre-approved credit cards did we get last month?

LIZ

Lots.

CHAS

You see what I mean?

LIZ

I see a mountain of work for me when we get home.

CHAS

Well, we aren't home. And till we get home, we're just a couple of hard-driving, hard-spending road warriors.

LIZ

Road warriors with babies. Of all the vacations we've taken for them, this is the best.

(To BETSY and CHARLIE)

Isn't that right, little ones?

(BETSY AND CHARLIE make GOOING, COOING SOUNDS when appropriate throughout the scene.)

LIZ cont.

Look at those two. They can't take their little eyes off the Everglades. And yet, I worry about all the preschool they're missing.

CHAS

Not to worry. For good American citizens, take good American babies on good American vacations by the dawn's early light. That's what I always say.

(LIZ opens jar of retinal cream and applies it to her face.)

LIZ

I wonder.

CHAS

Not again.

LIZ

I'm wondering if you always say that because it's true? Or is it true because you always say it?

CHAS

Now what're you splitting hairs over?

(THE SHADOW enters and stacks newspapers and magazines at LIZ's feet, crowding her so she is forced to sit in an awkward position.)

LIZ

I mean, are things . . . uh, are ideas You know, a jar of this doesn't last anymore. Have you been using it?

CHAS

Get serious. Guys don't use retinal.

(CHAS occasionally sneaks retinal from the jar throughout.)

LIZ

I wonder if words and ideas--

CHAS

Why can't you relax, like me, and enjoy yourself?

LIZ

I feel . . . separated from myself unless I'm doing something. Maybe even when I'm doing something.

(LIZ accidentally kicks a few newspapers off the stack at her feet.)

LIZ cont.

(To SHADOW)

I didn't mean . . . sorry.

(The SHADOW exits in a huff.)

LIZ cont.

Oh, dear. I really didn't mean to do that. (BEAT) Look at our baby Betsy! She's trying to take off her bonnet again. Isn't she the cutest little rascal?

CHAS

Where was I when you interrupted?

LIZ

At, "...dawn's early light." Next comes, "Let each parent-

-

CHAS

Let each parent march toward the rockets' bright glare, however measured and far away,--

LIZ

Oh, Chas! I'm getting goose bumps! You've always had such a way with words.

CHAS

Words don't mean a thing 'till they're leveraged with spin! That's how you create a concrete illusion of reality.

LIZ

It's your slogans. They're what sell the product. (BEAT) I remember the first time I saw you reading your poetry at the Open Mike. My heart melted, even though I didn't understand most of what you were talking about.

CHAS

I'm embarrassed to think about that stuff. There I was, a semi-starving graduate student, majoring in existential woe.

LIZ

Don't you ever wonder what--

CHAS

Wondering's a luxury creative men can't afford to wallow in.

LIZ

But I wonder what our life would've been like if--

CHAS

Baby, if Liz and Chas Small're gonna be a winning team, you gotta spend less time dreaming and more time doing. You

haven't been too productive lately, to tell you the truth.

LIZ

You do tell the truth about everything, don't you. Even about the little . . . you know. Between you and your secretary.

CHAS

Now, wait a minute. You agreed you weren't going to bring that up anymore.

LIZ

I'm just using the incident as an example of your unfailing dedication to telling the truth.

CHAS

It runs deeper than truth, Liz, even deeper than relative values and comparative appearances. It's the angst of looking at that man in the mirror every morning and knowing that the best he can hope for is virtual virtue.

LIZ

That must be hard.

CHAS

Here's the really hard part: Knowing all that, a guy's still gotta take the old pants off, one leg at a time.

(LIZ snaps out her arm and delivers a powerful forearm-shiver to CHAS's chest, knocking the wind out of him.)

CHAS cont.

You trying to kill me?

LIZ

Just stretching. (BEAT) Beth never steals anything. She probably needed something. Aspirin. She gets lots of headaches.

CHAS

Who wouldn't, married to him?

LIZ

Chuck's a very talented man!

CHAS

And doesn't he know it! Thinks he's such hot stuff. Mr. Chuck Hot Stuff Small.

LIZ

He's a very caring and . . . satisfying husband.

CHAS

He is? How would you know?

LIZ

I just . . . know. (BEAT) Is the retinal working? How do I look?

CHAS

Just as youthful as your husband!

(SQUEALING of BRAKES. THEY are thrown forward as CHAS slams on the brakes.)

CHAS cont.

That's it! There's our restaurant.

(SOUND of CHAS backing up at high speed.)

LIZ

Chas! That woman! You almost ran over her!

CHAS

What's she expect, walking around in the street? Yessirree, you gotta travel to know how good we got it in the 'burbs.

LIZ

Thanks to our Property Association.

CHAS

If you see someone wandering around our neighborhood, you know they're in maintenance.

LIZ

Or homeless.

CHAS

Forget those losers.

LIZ

(BEAT) Do you mind that the Association's never given me an award?

CHAS

What do you think?

LIZ

I don't blame you. (BEAT) Look at that. Our babies are sleeping again.

CHAS

Our babies. You know how the world's gonna know what Liz and Chas're really like?

LIZ

The world? You mean the whole world? Well, I guess if they look at what we do and say, they'd--

CHAS

You're not even close, Baby. They won't know the real Liz and Chas until they see our reflections in our two little chips off the old block. In Charlie and Betsy.

LIZ

Let's try to wake them.

CHAS

Let'em sleep. It's their vacation, too.

LIZ

But if they never eat--

CHAS

They're growing, aren't they? Hmph! According to Chuck, too much. Just lock the doors. They'll be safe.

(LIZ and CHAS get out of the car lugging as much of their techno equipment and cosmetics as they can.)

CHAS

Look at all the kids. Milling around the sidewalks of the capital of this great nation. Why aren't they on the internet, where they belong? Why aren't they learning what makes this great nation dedicated to the proposition that it is a great nation?

(THEY enter and seat themselves in the restaurant.

BETSY and CHARLIE, wearing baby clothes, emerge from the van. CHARLIE needs a shave.

THEY peel off their baby clothes to reveal radical teen clothing.)

BETSY

It's like I always say, Charlie: For good American parents, hold their feet to the rockets' bright flare!

CHARLIE

For chrissake, give'em a break!

BETSY

Sometimes I think your DNA strands are as kinked as his.

(Enter a SERVER and approaches LIZ and CHAS.)

SERVER

Senior dinner specials till five PM.

LIZ

Senior?

CHAS

(She/He) means the high school seniors outside.

SERVER

Nah. I mean you old people seniors inside.

(Indicating a computer on the table)

Punch in your orders when you're ready.

(Exit SERVER.)

LIZ studies the backs of her hands.)

LIZ

How awful! (She/He) must have thought these freckles on my hands were . . . you know. Old age spots. Oh, I hate these things!

CHAS

Don't hate it, baby. Hide it!

(Offering her a tube of cream)

And hand me one of those DHEAs! Gotta keep that old testosterone roaring!

LIZ

Here. Try a couple.

CHAS

I'm starving. Let's have a look at those menus. Wow! Look at the price of the soft-shelled crab!

LIZ

Oh, dear. My heart was set on having them. But I'm so hungry, I'll be just as happy with the crab cakes.

CHAS

Crab cakes? Nothing but the best for my wife!

(BETSY and CHARLIE enter and sit with THEIR PARENTS.)

BETSY

Thanks for asking. We'd love to join you.

LIZ

Why . . . why, wherever are my manners? Please sit down.

CHARLIE

How's it hangin', Pops?

CHAS

Are you here with a group from school?

CHARLIE

Uh-uh. With our parents. Salt of the earth, our parents.

LIZ

How lovely! Where're you from?

BETSY

Wisconsin.

LIZ

We are, too!

BETSY

What a coincidence! We insist. Dinner's on us. Unless, of course, you insist dinner's on you.

CHAS

Well, I . . . we do insist. I guess. Dinner's on us.

CHARLIE

Cool! Gimme your credit card and I'll get us rollin'. Lemme see. Ummm. Escargots. And Maryland soft-shelled crabs!

(CHARLIE punches in many items.)

BETSY

Make that two. Of everything. (BEAT) Oh, dear, Mr. Small. Maybe you can't afford all this.

LIZ

Well, actually--

CHAS

Of course I can! Liz, you said you weren't hungry, but how about splitting an order of crab cakes with me?

LIZ

Actually, I'm very--

CHAS

One order of crab cakes and two large waters.

(CHAS punches in their order.)

Enter the SERVER laden with trays of scrumptious food for BETSY and CHARLIE and a plate of crab cakes for LIZ and CHAS.)

CHAS Cont.

Omigod!

(Whispering to LIZ)

Don't look at'em. Don't look! They're the same ones that mooched lunch and breakfast from us!

LIZ

You're right! What'll we do?

CHAS

We'll be agreeable, say good-bye and never see'em again.

LIZ

What kind of parents would raise--

CHARLIE

What's the whisperin' about, Momma?

CHAS

We gotta get back to our babies. You think your folks're the salt of the earth? You're looking at a couple of pillars of family living. Right, Liz? It's for our babies that we take vacations.

LIZ

I spend every minute I can with our babies. Except, of course, when I'm busy doing things for them.

BETSY

Really. Such as?

LIZ

Such as scanning--Chas! Did you scan the afternoon editions?

CHAS

Omigod! I forgot! And I always help you on vacation.

(CHAS and LIZ gather up their paraphernalia.

BETSY and CHARLIE gather up as much food as they can.)

CHAS cont.

I sure let you down this time. Some team player I am.

LIZ

If you're ever in our neighborhood--

(BETSY and CHARLIE hurry out to the van ahead of LIZ

and CHAS and get in, slipping back into their baby clothes.)

LIZ cont.

Well. Those two were certainly in a hurry all of a sudden. (BEAT) This dinner was a disaster. It opened my eyes to just how important--

CHAS

Mine, too. Calling us, "you old people seniors"!

LIZ

No. I meant how important it is for me to spend more time with our babies.

(LIZ and CHAS get in the van.

LIZ scans the stacks of newspapers in the van.)

LIZ cont.

(To BETSY and CHARLIE)

You'll never grow up like those unfortunates.

CHAS

That punk calling me "Pops." As though I were old enough! (Holding up a tube)

You think this's just another tube of transdermal film with active toning and firming agents? Well, it's a lot more than that. It's a promise, a covenant with the American people guaranteeing we can mature with character while avoiding embarrassing wrinkles. (BEAT) Sorry for getting carried away.

LIZ

They sat with us at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Why do you think they've been following us?

CHAS

Forget those losers. Get on with what counts.

LIZ

I'd better. I haven't made a dent in the newspapers. Or the third-class mail!

CHAS

Easy, easy. There's always tomorrow.

LIZ

Thank goodness for tomorrow. It's always the best part of today. And you know what I'm going to do tomorrow? I'll take our stacks down to zero. All that messy information. All of it. I'll suck it all up and file it out of sight.

CHAS

Now, that's what I call doing instead of dreaming!

LIZ

You were right, as usual. I have to do something. Because when the stacks get this high, I feel only this high. And when I catch up, I'll spend more time with our babies. So they don't grow up like those two.

CHAS

Our babies'll grow up to be civil citizens who'll say to us, "Thanks for all those trips when we were babies. Thanks for not leaving us with our grandmothers."

LIZ

Who were not particularly civil.

VOICE OF BETSY

Especially Grandma Williams!

CHAS

Especially your mother.

LIZ

Chas, we just passed Gettysburg. Slow down so we can read the historic signs.

CHAS

The babies whine less than you do.

LIZ

I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me.

CHAS

You're probably missing Beth. You gals must spend half the day on the phone, leaving messages for each other.

(LIZ busies herself with the video camera and films the area THEY pass through.)

BETSY

I miss Grandma Williams. She sure was a lot of fun. Even Grandma Small was funny. Compared to this.

LIZ

I just realized something. When I'm filming, I don't experience what it is I'm filming. It's as though I weren't really here.

CHAS

There you go again! Take a nap. Just keep the camera going. I always say, the real vacation starts when we show the tapes to the neighbors.

(LIZ settles back for a nap.)

BETSY

Hand me my geometry book. I can't listen to this anymore.

CHARLIE

Yeah. It wears pretty thin after four solid days.

BETSY

Charlie! Is that any way for a reflection off the old block to talk?

(END Scene i)

Scene ii

The SMALL'S living room. From time to time, The SHADOW adds to the growing stacks of newspapers, third class mail, etc.

SOUND: A FAX machine spews out faxes, a computer printer PRINTS OUT messages, a TELEPHONE RINGS (SOFTLY) and PLAYS a RESPONSE and RECORDS INCOMING MESSAGES.

Further back sits an assembly of exercise equipment, one piece consisting of a mounted push-type lawn mower, another, The Garden of Weedin', consisting of a shovel (suspended from the ceiling by a bungee cord) hanging

over a tub of soil or sand.

LIZ opens mail and scans it with the scanner. CHAS exercises with The Garden of Weedin', repeatedly turning over the same shovel of sand.

LIZ

They don't have to come over tonight. If I call Beth and tell her I have a headache--

CHAS

No. Let'em come over. Why worry your best friend?

LIZ

Beth won't worry. Friends know when friends are hiding something. She won't give it a second thought.

CHAS

I'm an adult. I won't be a spoil-sport just 'cause I had a rotten day. Just 'cause I see Chuck all day at work. Why can't he stay in his lab, where he belongs? This morning he comes swaggering into my office, waving a magazine with one of our new products releases in it and says, "Chas, old buddy, when you're interviewin' secretaries this time around, keep your eye on the size of their cranial cavities instead of their chest cavities. Then maybe your new girl could get the spellin' of the names of my new products right? Haw! Haw!"

LIZ

Tracy couldn't even spell?

CHAS

She could spell quite a few words.

LIZ

Well, good for her! What is Chuck's newest invention? Beth must be so proud of him!

CHAS

I'll give him "Haw! Haw!" I've had it up to here with his needles. And then that dream last night. Him and his ninety-six hour video tape cassette. He kept pulling it out of his pocket and laughing at me 'cause his lasted longer than mine. Only it didn't look like a cassette. It was shaped more like the Washington Monument.

(Reaching into own pocket and pulling out video tape cartridge)

We'll see what he thinks about my one hundred-twenty hour video tape cassette!

LIZ

Where did you--? Oh, Chas! It almost . . . glows.

CHAS

Next time he mentions his tape, I'll whip this baby out. I wonder why Beth married such a jerk.

LIZ

His kissing makes her crazy.

CHAS

His what?

LIZ

He told me Beth gets goose bumps. And not only on Saturday nights.

CHAS

He told you that?

LIZ

I mean Beth told me. That she gets goose bumps.

CHAS

I'm not surprised. Anybody's flesh'd crawl, some of the stuff that guy comes up with. No wonder she's afraid of her own shadow.

LIZ

Is that any way to talk about your best golfing buddy?

CHAS

He beats me at that, too. Liz, there's some things a guy can't take. Even from a golf buddy. It's time to draw a line in the old sand trap. (BEAT) How do my biceps look?

LIZ

Manly! Just what you'd expect from exercising with our Garden of Weedin'.

CHAS

Aw, you're just saying that.

LIZ

I am not! They're almost as big as that worker's out there, digging in our garden.

CHAS

That guy's biceps aren't anything.

LIZ

Not him. The one over there. With the big bulge . . . I mean big tear in his jeans.

(DOOR CHIMES SOUND)

LIZ cont.

C'mon in. The door's always open to neighbors.

(No response. The DOOR CHIMES SOUND again.)

VOICE OF CHUCK OUTSIDE

They said, come in. Let's go in!

VOICE OF BETH OUTSIDE

No! It's not, like, right to just walk--

(CHUCK opens door and pulls BETH in with HIM.)

BETH cont.

--into someone's house.

(To LIZ)

Liz!

LIZ

(To BETH)

Beth!

CHUCK

Chas!

CHAS

(To CHUCK)

Chuck!

(LIZ laughs.)

CHAS

What's so funny?

LIZ

Our names! Didn't you hear--

CHUCK

(Aside to LIZ)

All I wanna hear is that little tiger Lizzy's made up'er mind, and it's a go!

(To CHAS)

You blown out your satellite dish lately? Haw! Haw! Only kiddin'. How's Chucko's favorite old golfin' buddy?

LIZ

Wait, wait. Didn't anyone else hear something funny about our names?

CHUCK

Chas, you think we got funny names?

CHAS

Beats me, Chuck.

BETH

You sure, Liz?

LIZ

All these years next door to each other, and none of us noticed? Didn't you hear? Liz and Beth. Chas and Chuck.

BETH

Liz, are you like, uh, you know, coming down with a headache?

LIZ

I'm fine! The rest of you're missing the joke. Beth, what's your last name?

BETH

You forgot my last name?

CHUCK

It's gettin' late. We better--

BETH

Yes, we'll be on our way. Friends always know when friends need to hide something.

LIZ

(To BETH)

Your last name is Small, isn't it? Isn't it Small? Beth? Oh, never mind. Chas. What's our last name?

BETH

Liz, you mean, like, your last name is Small and our last name is Small, too? I noticed that long ago. But I thought it was our Property Association. I thought it was a rule that everyone with the same last name lived on the same street.

LIZ

That's not a rule. It's--

CHAS

Maybe Beth's on to something. We both have the same zip code. Maybe it is a rule, to make it easier for nine-eleven to respond to emergencies.

LIZ

Listen to me. Even our first names are--

CHUCK

Hey, hey! We got the same area code. And telephone exchange, too.

BETH

What seems odd to me is that . . . our addresses are, like, different!

CHAS

That's the exception that proves the rule!

LIZ

Our addresses have to be--

BETH

Everything's the same except our addresses. I like the way they make things easy to remember.

CHAS

Wow! Kind of puts the whole universe in perspective. Just when we think we got it all figured out, wham! A new paradigm. From nowhere.

BETH

It's not from nowhere. It's from me. I, like, noticed it. I wonder if--

CHUCK

Don't! Just tell'em your big news.

BETH

I was only wondering if maybe I could become a board member of the Association. Since I, like, thought of something.

CHUCK

You wanna be a bossy bitch like that other gal they tried?

BETH

Well, then maybe they'd let me be on the Junior Women's Committee. I could tell them things about our neighborhood that they don't know. And then they could keep things right.

CHUCK

Will you tell'em what you came over to tell'em?

BETH

Chuck brought home a new scanner for me, and now I can do two stacks of newspapers, like, at the same time!

LIZ

If I had that, I could catch up! Chas, wouldn't you like to buy one for your little Liz?

CHUCK

Sorry, old buddy. Can't buy it. Yet. Not till the patent goes through.

LIZ

Another patent! I'm so proud to live next door to you.

CHAS

Yeah. Same here, old buddy.

CHUCK

That's how I make a livin'. Keepin' you advertisin' types busy.

CHAS

Yeah.

CHUCK

They oughta just move your desk outside the lab. That way, I could keep an eye on your spellin'. Haw! Haw!

LIZ

You mean I have to wait until your scanner's patented?

CHUCK

You don't hafta wait, Lizzy. It's so easy, any dummy with a screwdriver and a pair of stripping pliers could figure it out.

CHAS

Say, old buddy. Have you recorded any ninety-six hour tapes lately?

BETH

We don't need our VCRs anymore. Chuck found something better on the satellite.

CHUCK

I was messin' 'round with the satellite chips. Ever do that, old buddy?

CHAS

Ha! Ha! Can't keep my hands off'em! Right, Liz?

CHUCK

(Reaching into shirt pocket)
I found this little baby.

BETH

It pulsates.

LIZ

It glows.

CHUCK

It's the speed chip. I stripped the insulation, plugged the baby back in, and damned if it didn't pull in somethin' called The Thinkin' Man's Sound Byte. Twenty-four hours'a broadcasts boiled down to seven minutes every seven minutes. Makes tapes low-tech history.

(CHAS takes the video tape cartridge from his pocket, crushes it in his hands and methodically unreels the tape throughout the following.)

CHAS

I was gonna try it long ago, but there's that tag that says, "Do not strip insulation under penalty of law."

BETH

I didn't know it was a rule! What if someone, like, tells?

CHUCK

Want me to walk you through it, old buddy?

CHAS

I'll pass on that one. No more high-tech or low-tech. We're going no-tech.

BETH

You wouldn't!

CHAS

Here's the one-way ticket: Back to the no-tech Pilgrim's pride that made this nation's purple majesty.

LIZ

Yes. I want that. Yes.

CHUCK

What about the kids?

BETH

Chuck! You promised you wouldn't bring up Betsy and Charlie!

CHUCK

I'm only askin' what they'll give'em instead a high-tech.

CHAS

We'll give'em the mother's milk of experiential knowledge.

LIZ

I'm getting goose bumps!

CHAS

Any more questions?

LIZ

Well, what is experiential knowledge?

CHAS

It's the wave of the past surging forward and pounding on the shores of our awareness.

BETH

It's like, experiencing things so you know them.

CHUCK

Haw! Haw! Good one, Beth!

LIZ

Wait. She's right. I remember one of my philosophy classes--

CHUCK

Let's go, Beth. I told you we should've stayed off the yellow brick road tonight!

LIZ

You haven't said hello to our babies yet. They'll think you don't love them anymore.

BETH

Of course we love your babies! Don't we just love their babies, Chuck?

(LIZ stands CHARLIE up on his feet.

CHAS picks up BETSY, staggering under her weight.)

CHUCK

Dammit, this one's got a beard like a lumberjack's, and that one needs a bra!

BETH

You promised!

LIZ

How could you say such--

CHUCK

Check it out yourself.

(LIZ does not look.)

LIZ

If our baby had a beard, someone would've told us by now.

CHUCK

Beth. Tell'er!

BETH

Well, is it, like, against the rules or something if a baby had a beard?

CHUCK

And these books. How come your babies' school sends--

LIZ

Preschool. They go to preschool.

CHUCK

Right. How come your babies' preschool sends'em home with solid geometry books?

CHAS

It's an abstract introduction to building blocks. We don't send our kids to the same old "Do-re-me, Buckle my shoe" schools our parents sent us to.

LIZ

And Betsy loves that book. I can hardly get her to put it down to read Mother Goose to her.

CHUCK

Those kids're heavy. You guys're too old to--

LIZ

Is that how you see me? As too old?

CHAS

You're only as old as you let people think you are, old buddy.

CHUCK

Face it, old buddy. You guys don't look--

BETH

Sorry we have to rush!

(CHUCK and BETH exit. CHAS and LIZ put the babies back on the sofa and apply cosmetics to themselves.)

CHAS

Every damn time we see that guy, it's the same thing! If my tapes aren't too small, then our babies're too big. You saw those old-man liver spots on his face? He hates the way he's aged compared to us. C'mon. Out to the satellite dish.

LIZ

But the non-tech Pilgrim's pride. You said no high-tech.

CHAS

Right. We're on fast-forward to ultra-tech! I'm gonna strip the speed chip and every last wire leading to it! I'll show him this thinking man's got a few bytes of his own up his sleeve! I'll strip those little babies so fast that we'll be pulling in--

LIZ

Why? Why are you going to do this?

CHAS

Because I can, that's why.

LIZ

OK. So you do it. And then what?

CHAS

And then what "what"?

LIZ

I thought you meant it. I believed the part about the mother's milk of experiential knowledge.

CHAS

My sweet, silly little girl.

LIZ

Beth's right. We can learn from experience.

CHAS

Even if you could, you know how long it'd take? Your whole life! C'mon, Liz. Let's fix those chips. In an hour, I'll pull in enough experience to last our babies fifty lifetimes!

LIZ

Couldn't we just try--

CHAS

You know what your problem is? You aren't watching enough TV. That's the fly in the contentment of travelling. It interrupts your routine. Let's go.

LIZ

No. What about our babies?

CHAS

Do you want to waste years and years of time, like our mothers did? Our babies're learning just fine.

LIZ

But maybe there's something I have to learn. From them.

CHAS

Come on!

LIZ

Chas, listen to me. If we went no-tech, we'd have lots of time. And have it right now. In fact, we'd have nothing but now.

CHAS

Just now? That's all you want out of life? Sounds kind of puny to me. C'mon, get real. What you really want is the same thing everyone else wants: That big now in the sky. That big now just beyond the next horizon. Get those stacks down to zero, and you'll know what a power now is all about. A real pow! now!

LIZ

Something's missing.

CHAS

What's missing is faith, Liz. The only way to spend more time with our babies is to spend less time with them. It's one of those western paradoxes of Buddhism.

BETSY

Different day, same ca-ca.

LIZ

Chas! Betsy said her first words!

CHAS

Baby babble? What're you talking about?

LIZ

Maybe I'm imagining things. But--

CHAS

You wanna catch up? You wanna stand tall and proud beside those scanned bundles of mail and papers in front of our house?

LIZ

Yes, yes! I want that!

CHAS

Then we gotta act. It's our chance to be wired, twenty-four hours a day! Wired!

(Exit CHAS. LIZ follows, then pauses.)

LIZ

(To herself)

But I want experiential knowledge. For our babies. And for me, too.

(To herself)

And I want . . . now.

CHAS'S VOICE OFFSTAGE

Liz! Hurry up! You gonna wait till Chuck scoops us on this, too?

LIZ

Chuck! I almost forgot him.

(LIZ dials a number on the telephone.)

LIZ cont.

Chuck? It's Liz.

(SOUND of CHUCK HANGING UP. Enter CHUCK.)

CHUCK

You thought it over already? You hot little geyser of youth!

LIZ

Stop that. I said no, I meant no, and I still mean no.

CHUCK

Whatsa matter? You scared'a bein' with a real man?

LIZ

What did you mean about Chas and me looking old?

CHUCK

Lizzy, Baby, if you'n me're gonna get along--

LIZ

Why did you say those dreadful things about our babies?

CHUCK

Hey! Whadja call me over for? No hard feelin's, but I get plenty PMS crap next door. Gimme a call when you're over it.

(Exit CHUCK.)

LIZ

(To herself)
I'm over it.

VOICE OF CHAS

Liz! Hurry up!

(LIZ exits.)

BETSY and CHARLIE eagerly bite into a couple of hot dogs they'd been concealing.)

CHARLIE

I thought I'd starve waiting for'em to get outta here.

BETSY

Yeah, well, that's the old fly up the Pilgrims' purple Shinola™. How 'bout these hot dogs? Best meal we've had since D. C.

(CHARLIE rips open the third-class mail while BETSY plays back messages on the answering machine.)

CHARLIE

The steak in Daytona wasn't bad, either.

BETSY

The old man's face when we sat down with'em! I thought he'd stroke out.

(CHARLIE searches the table top for the van keys.)

CHARLIE

I don't know where you get the ovaries to try some of the stuff you do.

BETSY

Maybe ovaries have to skip a generation.

CHARLIE

Yeah. To give them something to rebel against.

BETSY

How do you rebel against people who don't see you?

CHARLIE

They sure saw us in the restaurant!

BETSY

Yeah. And didn't like who they saw.

CHARLIE

Don't take it personal.

BETSY

Don't worry, I don't.

CHARLIE

Here's your mail. You've won another million-dollar sweepstakes.

BETSY

Pitch it. Pitch it all.

CHARLIE

Before it's scanned?

BETSY

Yes, Aunt Beth. It's time we broke a few rules. I wanna try something.

CHARLIE

Slow down. You make me nervous when you decide to try something.

BETSY

Blame it on my hyper-active ovaries. First the answering machine.

(BETSY presses a button on the ANSWERING MACHINE. It emits a SCRAMBLED YELP.)

BETSY cont.

Good-bye, messages.

(BETSY goes to the computer.)

BETSY cont.

Control, delete, enter! So long, e-mail. Whatcha think?

CHARLIE

Cool!

BETSY

It's saner in here.

CHARLIE

Yeah. Even the floor and walls seem to slant less.

(Enter LIZ.)

BETSY

(To CHARLIE)

Oh, boy! Here's where it hits the fan!

LIZ

Chas! Chas! Come in here!

CHAS'S VOICE OFF STAGE

It's on the table. The handle's wrapped in black

(Enter CHAS.)

CHAS cont.

. . insulating . . tape . . and . . and . .

BETSY

(To LIZ and CHAS)

You're home! What a lovely surprise!

CHAS

Me, too. I'm surprised, too.

BETSY

We were afraid we missed you.

CHAS

No chance of that, right, Liz?

LIZ

What are you doing in our house?

BETSY

You said to stop in if we were ever in your neighborhood.

LIZ

I'm counting to three--

CHARLIE

Wouldja have a little Dijon around for our hot dogs?

BETSY

And how about some Vidalia relish?

LIZ

Get out of my house!

CHAS

Liz. They're invited guests. This is a civil neighborhood.

LIZ

(BEAT) Come on to the kitchen, invited guests.

CHAS

Hey, wait. What were you doing at our computer?

BETSY

Reading your e-mail.

CHARLIE

We knew you wouldn't mind, Pops.

(Exit LIZ, BETSY, and CHARLIE to kitchen.)

CHAS examines his appearance in the fourth wall mirror as he applies cosmetics.)

CHAS

Pops? Does he think I'm old enough to be his father?

(Enter LIZ.)

LIZ

They were reading our e-mail.

CHAS

They can't help what they're doing. They're victims. The miserable products of poor parenting. And you can't help what you're doing, either. It's your mother shining through.

LIZ

My mother had enough sense to keep strangers out of her refrigerator! And her mail!

CHAS

Sometimes you gotta close your eyes so you can see what's

important in life. Here's your first big clue:

(CHAS escorts LIZ out of the room.)

VOICE OF CHAS cont.

It's out here!

(BETSY and CHARLIE enter from the kitchen.)

BETSY

Now, if the old folks'd go to bed so we could take off for-

CHARLIE

Forget it. The keys weren't on the table. He must have 'em in his pocket. We're grounded for the night.

BETSY

I almost don't care. I feel like such a dork ridin' around in that thing.

CHARLIE

You feel like a dork? How'd you like to hafta drive that old-fart mobile?

(THEY hear the VOICES of CHAS and LIZ OFFSTAGE. THEY make a dive for the sofa and disappear from view as CHAS and LIZ enter.)

CHAS

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy! Wait'll Chuck gets wind of this!

LIZ

And when Beth comes over, she'll see my stacks going down and down and--

(LIZ indicates the place where the third-class mail had been.)

Chas! Look! The mail's gone. Is it because you stripped the wires?

CHAS

Omigod! It worked!

LIZ

Look! The faxes are gone, too!

(LIZ checks the telephone messages and e-mail.)

LIZ cont.

You are so wonderful!

CHAS

Doesn't Daddy Chas always deliver what his little girl wants?

LIZ

I'll catch up! I'll spend time with the babies!

CHAS

And I'll subscribe to those Micronesian newspapers Chuck's always crowing about. Mr. Big-Shot! Our life in this neighborhood's just beginning. Wait'll the guys see the kind of papers we throw out!

LIZ

I know just what I'll do! Imagine this: Stacks and stacks of--

CHAS

--tall, proud stacks!

LIZ

Yes! Tall, proud stacks of bundles of newspapers--

CHAS

--from all over the world!

LIZ

Yes! Tall, proud stacks of bundles of newspapers from all over the world piled out in front of our house, at our curb, waiting for our garbage pick-up!

CHAS

Aw, Liz--

LIZ

Wait. I'm not done. And all the bundles . . are you listening? Are tied . . in--oh! I've got goose bumps! They're all tied . . in perfect square knots!

CHAS

Liz. How long've we been married? Baby, you still take my breath away. You do the Association proud. A certificate's the least they'd give you. Who knows? They might even invite you to join the Junior Women's Committee.

LIZ

You're right! Our life in this neighborhood is just beginning.

(Exit CHAS and LIZ.

CHARLIE gets up and pulls the plug. The MACHINES and SOUNDS STOP.

HE opens a window. We hear the SOUND of CRICKETS.)

BETSY

What's that chirping noise?

CHARLIE

They're some kinda bugs. Outside.

BETSY

I like it. The rhythm's like . . . my heart beat. Charlie. If we don't get outta here soon, I'm not gonna know what's real and what isn't.

CHARLIE

Like it or not, we owe'em somethin'. They never asked to be our parents.

BETSY

So what? Look what this's doing to us. I'm still sneaking lipstick. My friends're already sneaking birth control pills!

CHARLIE

Why are you interested in sneaking birth control pills?

BETSY

I didn't say I was.

CHARLIE

For Christ's sake, are you messing around with that geek with the--

BETSY

Shut up! I get all the crap I need from those two!

CHARLIE

Quit feeling so sorry for yourself. Plenty of kids got it worse than we do. You've seen their parents.

BETSY

All I care about are the parents I have to live with! They're like something out of that play Grandma Williams took us to see. With all the music? And the toys marching around?

CHARLIE

Babes in Toyland.

BETSY

Right. Only they're *Babes in America*, the land of amber waves of gain (sic).

CHARLIE

Aw, Betsy!

BETSY

How can you defend them?

CHARLIE

I guess I knew'em before you did. Before they got so wacko. They used to be pretty decent.

BETSY

I never knew those parents. And the ones I do know, I'm sick and tired of protecting. I'm outta ideas. And patience.

CHARLIE

Hang in just a little longer. Because I'm beginning to think they won't make it without us.

BETSY

And I'm beginning to think they won't make it with us. We've got a right to a life, too. And I'll tell you another thing: If you don't take that scholarship, if you don't go away this fall, I'll never forgive you. Never. Promise me you're going.

CHARLIE

I can't promise anything.

BETSY

Well, I have news for you. Come September, this house'll have one less dydee cross-dresser. Because I'm going to start my junior year wearing real clothes and eating real food and being a real person.

CHARLIE

Think what it could do to 'em.

BETSY

There's a good chance it won't do anything to 'em. They may never notice.

CHARLIE

Sometimes I wish you never heard of tough love.

BETSY

Me, too. I never said I'd like it.

CHARLIE

What if they never get it?

BETSY

That'll be sad. Everyone needs something. To believe in.

CHARLIE

What do you believe in?

BETSY

Right now? Hmm. (BEAT) Bug sounds.

CHARLIE

Cool.

(BETSY pulls out a joint.)

BETSY

Got a match?

CHARLIE

Jesus!

(CHARLIE snatches the joint from her hand.)

BETSY

Don't get greedy! I was gonna share it.

CHARLIE

Are you crazy?

BETSY

What's your problem?

CHARLIE

You know what this shit does to you?

BETSY

Yeah. It makes me feel good. Makes me believe that what's happening . . . isn't really happening. (BEAT) At least for a little while. Is that too much to ask? Give that back! What I do isn't any of your business!

CHARLIE

You are my business! I don't ever want to see you with--

BETSY

Who do you think you are? My freakin' mother?

(BETSY cries.)

CHARLIE

Aw, Betsy. Don't cry. It's gonna be OK.

BETSY

Don't give me that! Grandma was the last person who bothered to see us. Who cared about us.

CHARLIE

Where'd you get that thing?

BETSY

Where do you think? At school.

CHARLIE

Jesus! You're walking around school with that shit on you?

BETSY

Come off it! It's not like I was walking around with a gun!

CHARLIE

Promise me you won't mess with this stuff anymore. It's gonna be OK.

BETSY

When? (BEAT) And what am I supposed to do until it's OK?

CHARLIE

Promise me!

BETSY

I'll think about it.

(CHARLIE takes a couple of condoms out of his wallet and offers them to BETSY.)

BETSY cont.

Will you please mind your own business?

CHARLIE

I am. I want you to hang on to these for me. In case I run out and I'm broke or something and can't buy'em when I need'em. Just keep'em with you for me.

(BETSY reluctantly takes them.)

BETSY

Just for you, Bro.

End Scene ii

Scene iii

The SMALL'S living room. The stacks continue to grow. AT RISE The FAX machine continues to spew out faxes, a computer printer PRINTS OUT messages, a TELEPHONE RINGS (SOFTLY) and PLAYS a RESPONSE and RECORDS INCOMING MESSAGES.

Enter LIZ and CHAS, LIZ looking somewhat frazzled.

LIZ

Chas, maybe Chuck's right. About our babies being too big. He said their babies walked and took solid food long ago.

CHAS

Sure. And I'll bet they're bow-legged and colicky.

LIZ

Listen to me! What if Betsy and Charlie aren't normal?
What is normal for children their age?

CHAS

The only question that matters is what's normal for parents
our age. Get the picture?

LIZ

No. I don't even see the picture.

CHAS

You used to.

LIZ

Things are different now. Every day, the floor and ceiling
and walls of this house get closer and closer together.
And every day, I get more and more behind. (BEAT) Maybe
you should give Chuck a call.

CHAS

"Maybe you should give Chuck a call." That's all I hear at
work all day. Now at home, too?

LIZ

You've been so testy lately. Is there something you aren't
telling me?

CHAS

(BEAT) We don't need Chuck! 'Cause Daddy Chas has his own
rocket in his pocket. I was walking through the lab today,
and look what followed me home.

(HE produces a device with several split leads and
attaches it to the answering machine, fax, and computer
throughout the following. HE hands the control box to
LIZ.)

CHAS cont.

Go ahead--activate it!

LIZ

First tell me what's going to happen if I do.

CHAS

Will you press the damn button?

(No response from LIZ.)

CHAS presses the button, and the TELEPHONE STOPS RINGING, the ANSWERING DEVICE SHUTS OFF, and the FAX TURNS OFF. Only the TV continues TO PLAY.)

CHAS

See? Everything goes straight home to momma computer. And you never have to lift a finger. Get it now?

LIZ

Yes! It does everything except the mail and papers!

CHAS

My little girl's never gonna hafta read another fax or hafta listen to another phone call! She'll just store them.

LIZ

Oh, my wonderful, wonderful Chas! (BEAT) But why store them if I don't know what they're about? What if what we've been storing, isn't information? What if it's something . . . else?

CHAS

Well, if you wanna split hairs, technically, you're right. Actually, it's faux (PRONOUNCED foh) information. Faux info. Understand?

LIZ

Less and less.

CHAS

'Cause every day you ask more and more questions. That's the problem.

LIZ

Well, if it is a problem, it's my problem.

CHAS

No, it's my problem, too, because it's rubbing off on me. You wanna know why I can't get anything done at work anymore? Because I sit and think about what I'm supposed to do instead of just doing it. I sit around . . . wondering about stuff.

Liz, I can't live with the kind of negativity you generate at home and go to work and still be productive. You're undermining me. And everything I've worked so hard for.

LIZ

Do you ever think about what our lives would've been like if you were still writing poetry?

CHAS

I don't have to think about it. I know. And so do you. We'd be living in Loserville. That isn't what counts in the real here and now! (BEAT) Look. You wanna catch up, or not? (BEAT) Of course you do! Well, there's only one way to do it:

(Like a cheerleader)

Scan'em! Stack'em!
Tie'em with a square knot!
Haul'em out the door, and
Pile'em at the curb!

C'mon, Liz. Say it with me! Say it like you mean it! Say it from the power of your inner abundance!

LIZ and CHAS

Scan'em! Stack'em!
Tie'em with a square knot!
Haul'em out the door, and
Pile'em at the curb!

LIZ

I'm trying to believe it'll work. I want to believe. Oh, how I want to believe!

(Enter the SHADOW. The FIFTH DANCE (1'55) of Bela Bartók's *The Wooden Prince* PLAYS. As the SHADOW adds to the stacks of newspapers, its MOVEMENTS are CHOREOGRAPHED to the MUSIC.)

CHAS

Nothing'll stop us if we're positive. Old Chucko takes twenty minutes to suck in all this. Ha! Ha! You'll do it in two!

LIZ

I'm scanning, Chas.

(LIZ scans and stacks the newspapers, her MOVEMENTS are CHOREOGRAPHED to the MUSIC. CHAS channel surfs with the remote, his MOVEMENTS are CHOREOGRAPHED to the MUSIC. THEIR dialogue is paced, not hurried.)

CHAS

(Chanting)

C-SPAN Showtime HMO and MAX!

LIZ

I'm stacking!

CHAS

(Chanting)

TLC TNT USA and SEX!

LIZ

I'm scanning and stacking as fast as I can!

CHAS

(Chanting)

A&E T&A S&M and GOD & SON!

(CHAS collapses, exhausted.)

LIZ

I'm trying to believe--

(LIZ sees that the pile of newspapers is higher than when she started. SHE follows the movements of the SHADOW. The MUSIC STOPS. LIZ staggers toward the door.)

CHAS

Hey! C'mon back! This calls for a celebration!

LIZ

As soon as I've thrown up my inner abundance.

(LIZ and the SHADOW exit.)

End Scene iii

Scene iv

The SMALL'S living room.

It is night. Sinister, melancholy music, such as the

middle section of "Le Gibet" from Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, plays. The SHADOW occasionally adds to the stacks of newspapers throughout the scene.

BETSY and CHARLIE are doing their homework. BETSY gets up and opens the window. The MUSIC STOPS, and the SOUND of CRICKETS comes through the open window. SHE hears a SOUND from the other room and scurries back to bed.

Enter LIZ. SHE wanders listlessly, as one sleepwalking throughout the scene.

LIZ

(To herself)

Now what's happening? What's that chirping noise? And where's it coming from? Or isn't it real, either?

(LIZ sees the open window.)

Why'd Chas open the window? And let all that noise in. No wonder I can't sleep. No. It's not the noise out there. It's the noise inside of me. Telling me I should be doing something. Processing something. Scanning something. Stacking something.

(LIZ closes the window. The SOUND of the CRICKETS STOPS. The SINISTER MUSIC RESUMES.)

LIZ wanders among the newspapers, fax, etc. HER MOVEMENTS are choreographed to the MUSIC.)
Who'd have thought the world had so much information in it?

(To the machines)

Silent machines. Silently recording each syllable of today for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

(LIZ opens the door to the outside. The SOUND of the CRICKETS fills the room. The MUSIC STOPS. LIZ opens the window and then stands BETSY and CHARLIE on their feet.)

To BETSY and CHARLIE)

You hear that noise? That's the noise of dark summer nights. In winter, when I was little like you, I built snowmen. Outside in the yard. And I made snow angles

(sic). No. Not snow angels. I can't remember what we called them, but we lay in the snow . .

(LIZ tries to demonstrate but can't remember how to make snow angels.)

. . like this. Or was it like this. . . We moved our legs at an angle to our bodies. Which is why we called them snow angels. No. That's not what we called them. What else was fun was eating the snow.

And what was fun in the summer was when Grandma Williams let me camp out in a tent. On a warm summer night like tonight when the crickets--that's what they're called! The chirping of crickets was part of the summer night sounds I remember. You don't know what I mean, do you?

Do you even know what "outside" means? Outside's where we aren't when we are in the house or in the van. Inside's where we learn about everything. Including the outside. Information about the outside comes inside to us . .

(Indicating the machines)

. . from them. When you're older and can read, you'll learn all about the outside. Fast. A lot faster than Mommy and Daddy did.

Because daddies and mommies always want a better life for their babies than they had themselves. So Daddy stripped wires. For his babies. And that's why you have such a good . . . life.

(A firefly flies into the room. LIZ catches the insect in her hands and offers it to BETSY.)

Look! A firefly! I used to catch them when I was little, and the next morning I could still smell them on my hands. I liked the smell so much that I didn't wash my hands before I went to bed. Smell it, Betsy. Charlie? Smell it. That's the smell of a child's summer nights.

When Mommy was little, she slipped out of the house long after Grandma and Grandpa Williams were sleeping. I was barefooted, so they couldn't hear me, and wearing only my nightgown.

And I'd climb up an old apple tree. That's where apples come from. And I'd sit staring up at the stars and listening to crickets until I fell asleep up there.

Once I tore my nightgown on a branch. I was scared that Grandma would ask me how it happened and then she wouldn't let me do it anymore. But she never asked. She just mended it and put it back in my drawer. And so the next night I went out and climbed the tree and dozed and climbed down again and scampered across the grass and--my feet! I'd forgotten how wet they got from the dew. So deliciously, chilly wet that I had to snuggle up under my blanket to get warm again! And Grandma Williams never knew!

And I never figured out why she didn't ask about the tear and make me stay in bed at night. A good mother would have. (BEAT) That's what I'd do. I'd make sure I knew what my babies were doing. (BEAT) Wouldn't I?

Ah, my little babies. Daddy's right. You're too young to understand what I'm saying. And I don't know how to explain it. But I can show you. I'll show you what the outside's all about.

And the stars and the sky, too.

(LIZ seats BETSY and CHARLIE in front of the TV and types in a website on the computer.)

Here's the star gazer's page on the Nature Lovers' Website. It's so romantic. Look. That's Ursa Major. See how it looks like a bear? (BEAT) No. It doesn't, does it. All it looks like is a black TV screen with a matrix of bright dots on it. It doesn't look anything like what I felt when I was little. This is just a bunch of pixels.

Betsy. Charlie. Listen to me: You're going to learn about the stars and the sky. By looking at the stars and the sky.

(A SHADOW hands LIZ a blanket.)

LIZ cont.

(To SHADOW)

Thank you.

(To CHARLIE and BETSY)

We're going to have an adventure. An experience. We'll sleep outside on the grass. We'll listen to summer sounds and look at the summer sky.

You don't know what that means, do you. You will. As soon as you get your little feet wet in the dew, you'll know. And then you'll lie on your backs and look way up at the sky and the stars until you fall asleep. (BEAT) Let me make sure nobody's watching.

(LIZ looks outside the door.)

CHARLIE

Betsy! You think?

BETSY

Don't get your hopes up.

LIZ

We'll go outside to be where it's happening. We'll experience knowing and then we'll have . . . experiential knowledge! I was right! It does exist!

(Exit LIZ with CHARLIE and BETSY. The SHADOW stands gazing out the window for some time and then dumps the newspapers near the window and exits to join LIZ and BETSY and CHARLIE outside.)

END ACT I

ACT II

Scene i

Same as Act I. It is dawn of the next day in the SMALL living room.

CHAS enters.

CHAS

Why's the window open? Liz? What're you up to now?
Where're the babies?

(CHAS searches the room.)

Omigod! Kidnapped! My whole family! Dragged out the window!

(CHAS picks up the newspapers the SHADOW dropped near the window.)

And my Liz, my brave little Liz, fought'em to the end, struggled to take our newspapers with her. What a heel I was, thinking she wasn't a team player!

(Calling through window)

Keep scanning, Liz. I'll find you!

(HE goes to the computer and types in a website address.)

Www dot emergency dot bad karma dot gov.

RECORDED VOICE

Welcome to your nine-eleven Online Lifeline.

CHAS

What a friend we have in nine-eleven!

RECORDED VOICE

(Sotto voice, to another 911 person)

He fell for it! They all do! They think we're recordings!

(To CHAS)

If you are experiencing fire, flood, or famine, press One now. For all other emergencies, press Two now.

(CHAS presses Two)

RECORDED VOICE

Welcome to your nine-eleven Man-made Life-threatening Emergencies Website. All of our recordings are currently assisting other victims.

ANOTHER RECORDED VOICE

So we can assess your worthiness of our recordings' attention, please enter the square root of nine-eleven rounded off to eleven decimal places. Now.

CHAS

(Typing in the numbers)

Thirty-point-one...uh....

ANOTHER RECORDED VOICE

Hurry up!

CHAS

Eight-two-seven-seven-six--

RECORDED VOICE

Time's up. You've entered

ANOTHER RECORDED VOICE

only six

RECORDED VOICE

decimal places. Press One for further instructions.

(CHAS presses One.)

ANOTHER RECORDED VOICE

Welcome to your nine-eleven Losers Website. Ask yourself if the community is well served by our helping one who took

RECORDED VOICE

three-point-five

ANOTHER RECORDED VOICE

seconds to enter the square root of nine-eleven in

RECORDED VOICE

a meager six

ANOTHER RECORDED VOICE

decimal places. Hang up and do the best you can.

(Snicker) If you still consider yourself worthy, or if you haven't yet abandoned all hope, press One now.

(CHAS presses One.)

RECORDED VOICE

Welcome to your nine-eleven Losers in Denial Website. For a reality check, press--

(CHUCK bursts into the door. CHAS disconnects the RECORDED VOICE)

CHUCK

Brace yourself, old buddy. Bad news.

CHAS

My family. Where are they?

CHUCK

Sorry, old buddy.

(CHAS and CHUCK exit and re-enter, CHAS leading BETSY, and CHUCK leading CHARLIE, whom they put in bed. BETH follows, her arm around a calm, centered LIZ.)

CHUCK cont.

I was goin' out for the *Tibetan Times*, and there they were. Sleepin'. On your . . grass. Like nothin' I ever saw in this neighborhood.

BETH

In college she was in the astronomy club. At night they watched the, like, astronomies. Maybe that's what she thought she was doing.

LIZ

(To CHARLIE and BETSY)

Now you know. It's an experience that fills me and empties me at the same time.

CHAS

She's babbling! Flipping out!

LIZ

Don't you characterize me like that in front of my children!

CHAS

Sure, sure. Calm down.

BETH

It's like when she was always breaking the dorm rules. She needed help back then, too.

CHUCK

(To LIZ)

And I got just the thing that's gonna help'er.

CHAS

I'll help'er like I always help'er, right, Liz?

CHUCK

Looks like your experiment in low tech's comin' home to roost. How 'bout if I strip that speed chip for you guys?

CHAS

No need to. I'm a different man than I was an hour ago. Stripping speed chips isn't where it's at. We gotta strip away the idea that we're the center of the universe. We gotta ask what we can do for nine-eleven, not what nine-eleven can do for us.

(LIZ guffaws.)

CHAS cont.

The man who says the corporate welfare buck stops here hasn't walked a mile in another guy's Giorgio Brutinis.

(LIZ collapses in helpless laughter.)

CHAS cont.

(Indicating LIZ)

This's all my fault. I made life so easy for her that she's lost touch with reality.

CHUCK

Maybe it's time to get back to the old basics.

CHAS

Which reminds me. You know what the square root of nine-eleven is?

CHUCK

Sure.

CHAS

To eleven decimal places?

BETH

Say them, Chuck! Say them for Mommy!

CHUCK

(To BETH)

Just for you, Baby: Thirty-point-one-eight-two-seven-seven-six-one-nine-three-six-one.

(To CHAS)

The Thinkin' Man's Sound Byte suggested learnin' it in case of a life-threatenin' emergency.

CHAS

Right. Glad to know you're keeping up.

BETH

Chuck even knows what nine-eleven to the tenth power is, don't you?

CHUCK

Piece'a cake. It's the new code for the nine-eleven International Multiple Life-threatenin' Emergencies Website.

BETH

Say them. They make me, like, crazy!

CHUCK

(To BETH)

My hot little momma and her thirty dirty digits!

BETH

Do it to me, Chuckie!

CHUCK

Three-nine-three-seven-one-six-six-three-nine--

BETH

Oh, Daddy!

(BETH seductively leads CHUCK off stage.)

CHUCK

six-zero-zero-zero-

(CHUCK and BETH exit. CHUCK'S voice continues OFFSTAGE intermingled with BETH's "Oh, Chuckie! Chuckie!")

CHUCK

zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-point.

(Enter the SHADOW, miming support for LIZ during CHAS's speech to LIZ.)

CHAS

(To LIZ)

This hurts me worse than it hurts you. Until I see that you appreciate the things I've given you, you can't use them.

(LIZ claps her hands delightedly.)

CHAS cont.

You don't get it. What I'm saying is, no more VCR, scanner, FAX or answering machine. No more . . .

(CHAS detaches the split cable device he'd hooked up in the previous act.)

. . . Mighty-Byte Poly-Synchronous Scanner!

(LIZ mimes relief.)

CHAS cont.

You've lost sight of the true, the good and the technical. All I ever wanted you to be was an exemplary wife. And a good mother and model citizen. You've condemned yourself to learning the hard way. The same way people who don't remember history are condemned to report it!

(CHAS exits.)

LIZ

(To SHADOW)

I remember how to do it! Look!

(LIZ sprawls on the floor and mimes making snow angels.)

They're snow angels, not angles! This is how we made them. Like this:

(The SHADOW joins LIZ on the floor.)

And we'll make them this winter in the snow with Charlie and Betsy. And with Daddy. If Daddy can come out to play. And if he remembers how to play.

End scene i

Scene ii

The Small's living room.

CHARLIE and BETSY sit on the floor.

The car keys to the van are on the table.

BETSY

I'm up to my eyeballs in homework, and you expect me to--

CHARLIE

You know how important this is. There aren't any shortcuts.

BETSY

(Imitating CHARLIE)

"She can't move on to the next step of parental development unless she completes all the preceding steps first." My brother the social worker. What that loser needs is a good kick in her stupid butt. I don't think I can take another show-and-tell session with her.

CHARLIE

Yes, you can. She's worth the investment. Look at the progress she's making.

BETSY

I need to make some progress with Biology. And that stupid paper on that stupid *Silas Marner*.

LIZ'S VOICE OFFSTAGE

I found it!

BETSY

I'm outta here!

CHARLIE

Sit down! And don't get smart with her, you hear?

BETSY

Moi?

(LIZ enters, carrying an old cardboard box.)

LIZ

I knew I wouldn't have thrown it out. Look what's in here.
(LIZ takes out a silk scarf and ties it around her throat.)

LIZ cont.

Here's how Mommy wore this scarf. It's special. Mommy wore it the first time she met your daddy.

(LIZ removes the scarf.)

LIZ cont.

See how light it is? Silk floats on the air. The first parachutes were made of silk. Silk comes from . . .

CHARLIE

Silk worms.

(LIZ takes another scarf from the box.)

LIZ

Wool feels rough. Grandma knitted this scarf for me when I was little. Wool comes from . . .

BETSY

Wolves!

CHARLIE

(Aside to BETSY)

Knock it off!

LIZ

Betsy! Don't you remember where wool comes from?

BETSY

(Singing)

"Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any--

LIZ

You funny baby! You were teasing Mommy again, weren't you? Mommy's so proud of you, the way you're learning your nursery rhymes.

(Reaching into box)

LIZ cont.

Here's my high school year book. Those hair styles!

(The TELEPHONE RINGS. LIZ answers it.)

LIZ cont.

Small residence. Liz speaking.

VOICE OF BETH

Oh, sorry. I called to leave a message for Liz.

LIZ

This is Liz. What did you want to tell me?

VOICE OF BETH

I don't want to tell you anything. I want to leave a message for you. I'll call back when you're, like, busy.

LIZ

This is as good as it's going to get. We're not using the answering machine. Back to basics.

(BETH appears on stage talking into her telephone throughout.)

BETH

Back to barbarics, I'd say.

(BETH fights back tears.)

BETH cont.

How can I talk to a person at a time like this? Especially my best friend.

LIZ

Well, think of it as talking to an interactive machine.

BETH

You mean it's like virtual reality?

LIZ

Actually, it's more like real virtuality. It offers the option of real-time, intelligent interaction.

BETH

But it's still like a machine, right?

LIZ

Very like a machine.

BETH

Well, here it is: I'm going crazy.

LIZ

Beth, you're still not upset about the Association? They're nothing, just a bunch of--

BETH

No, no. Why would I be angry at the Association? I can understand why they wouldn't want me on the Junior Women's Committee. Besides, I don't think Chuck would've wanted me on the Committee, anyway. I've got a real problem right now. Remember that morning we found you and your babies outside? Ever since, I've wanted to sleep outside, too. And that's not all. You know that big weight Chuck keeps on the garbage can lid? Guess what? It's, like, a book!

LIZ

And?

BETH

Remember when you helped me in American Lit? The Shakespeare stuff? Well, I still can't get it. I just read his part in the book. He said we could find tongues in trees and books in running brooks. And sermons in stones. That's not the way it's supposed to be. Tongues in trees?

LIZ

That could be a little off-putting.

BETH

But it, like, tugs at me. I want to study trees until I can hear their tongues. I want to, like, put down my scanner.

LIZ

Do it.

BETH

What if I'm wrong?

LIZ

What if you're right? I think it's the most important thing you could do today.

BETH

How do you know?

LIZ

The same way I know that my babies are enjoying the things I'm doing with them.

BETH

You make as much sense as Shakespeare does. How can you know if they're enjoying it? You're not your babies.

LIZ

And you're not me. So you can't know that I don't know that they're enjoying it.

BETH

You're making me nervous. You're acting just the way you used to. Like when you almost didn't graduate.

LIZ

Because you reported me about the graffiti on the dean's windows.

BETH

I never did! (BEAT) Who told you?

LIZ

I didn't need to be told.

BETH

It was for the good of the college.

LIZ

Of course.

BETH

And for your own good, too. I never told anyone this. I-- I guess I can't tell it now, either.

LIZ

Let me guess. You wanted to paint graffiti, too.

BETH

Really dirty graffiti. With dirty cartoons. I even bought a can of magenta spray paint!

LIZ

Good choice. You can't cover it with anything except black paint.

BETH

I still have it. And the cartoons I wanted to paint were going to be of big, erect--really swollen . . . I can't say it.

LIZ

For heaven's sake, say it. Wanting to do a thing isn't the same as doing it.

BETH

I don't remember what I was going to say. (BEAT) What if I get to be like you are? It's like, if I were you right now, I'd be looking at trees, trying to find their damn tongues instead of doing what I'm supposed to do. You want to hear the worst part? Here it is: I don't care about keeping up with my stacks! I don't care anymore!

LIZ

Does Chuck know?

BETH

Nobody knows except your real-time interactive intelligent virtuality. All Chuck knows is that I'm, like, less and less agreeable. And that we have more and more stacks of newspapers and mail and faxes.

LIZ

I'm happy for you, Beth.

BETH

That's not appropriate! Your machines go haywire at the worst times! Just make sure Liz gets my message.

(SOUND of BETH HANGING UP.)

The SHADOW enters.)

LIZ

I will.

(LIZ returns to BETSY and CHARLIE)

LIZ cont.

Here's my old scrapbook from high school. Look. I cut this from the newspaper. This little girl holding the football for the little boy with the round head? His name's Charlie, too. Maybe that's why I love the name so much.

And these're poems. "O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!" How I loved that one.

CHARLIE

Edna St. Vincent Millay.

LIZ

When did I teach you that? Here's another one of hers:

The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide.

I don't remember what it means. I used to know.

BETSY

It means we see with our hearts.

LIZ

We see with our eyes. Maybe I am confusing you. Or were you teasing Mommy again? I'm never sure with you. Let's see what else is in here.

Leaves! I remember their fragrance when I ironed them. This is what autumn smells like. Maple leaves, hickory leaves, and . . . oh, what are these leaves from? The rabbits--no, it was the squirrels that loved the nuts from the tree. Oak trees. These are oak leaves! So we must have called the nuts, oak nuts. That doesn't sound right. What was it my mother called them?

Here's another poem:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures . . .

Betsy! Charlie! That's what we did that first night we spent outside. A man was at a lecture about the stars and he got bored and, and--

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by
myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to
time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

That first night we spent outside--we did this poem. We were a poem! We . . . are poetry.

(The SHADOW exits dancing.)

And the next thing we're going to do is . . . I don't know. What are we supposed to do? What is poetry supposed to do? Just be? Is that it?

(To herself as she repacks the box.)

Still, whatever it is that I'm supposed to do or supposed to be, I know that I'll know it. When I'm ready to know it. I'll know exactly what to do and how to do it. How to be the woman I'm meant to be. And then . . . I'll know who to love. And who to let love me.

That's it, isn't it. So elegantly simple. But not easy.

(LIZ exits.)

CHARLIE

Well?

BETSY

Well, what? (BEAT) You mean Mommy's big epiphany? She'll manage to screw it up one way or another.

CHARLIE

Sometimes I think you don't care about them at all. Not at all.

BETSY

Maybe I'm too busy taking care of myself to care about them.

End scene ii

Scene iii

The SMALL'S living room.

CHAS affixes a bow on a largish box he's wrapped.

The mounted reel-type push mower is no longer on stage with the other exercise equipment.

CHAS

Won't she be surprised! And so proud of her husband. Yessirree, this oughtta do it! This'd win over any woman's heart!

(CHAS channel surfs on the TV.)

VOICE OF TV SPORTSCASTER #1

Another strikeout! Fans, I've never seen anything like--

(CHAS changes the channel.)

VOICE OF TV SPORTSCASTER #2

. . and he fumbles it! Right on the ten-yard line--

(CHAS changes the channel.)

VOICE OF TV SPORTSCASTER #3

Round Six and he's already down for the count!

(CHAS sets the TV on MUTE and dials a telephone number.)

CHAS

Chucko. It's your friendly weekend athlete calling. Ha! Ha! It's about six-thirty, and I'm thinking about winning

a couple of rounds of golf from you. Give me a call--

(CHUCK bursts in the door.)

CHUCK

Gotcher message. Gotta talk. Where's Liz?

CHAS

Dunno. She's probably out walking. With our babies.

CHUCK

Oh, boy. Like you hadn't bought'er a van.

CHAS

Maybe she feels like walking instead of driving.

CHUCK

What's she think'er treadmill's for?

CHAS

Maybe she just wants to be outside. I don't know.

CHUCK

I'll say you don't. And I bet you don't know about the clubhouse, either. About the paint?

CHAS

I saw. Why'd they paint the doors black? I thought the green looked better.

CHUCK

They had to use black. The green wouldn't cover the graffiti someone sprayed on'em. The F word. In bright pinky-purple!

CHAS

Omigod!

CHUCK

Complete with directions. And lots of pictures of a...
(Using gestures to indicate a phallus)
Yeah. Right in our neighborhood.

(CHAS begins to work out vigorously with the Garden of Weedin'.)

CHAS

They aren't gonna take over this neighborhood without a fight from Chas Small. Stand back.

CHUCK

Easy, old buddy. Say. Where's that Macho-Muscle-Masher of yours?

CHAS

That's a Macho-Muscle-Mower. Maybe Liz sent it back for service. All of a sudden, it rusted. And started squeaking.

CHUCK

Just as well. Younger men than you've keeled over from--

(SOUND of SQUEAKY REEL-TYPE OF MOWER from outside)

CHAS

Must be the maintenance crew. Why would they be using an old push mower on our yards?

(BETH enters.)

BETH

(Over her shoulder to LIZ outside)
C'mon, Liz. You promised! I'll be right out as--

(BETH sees CHUCK and CHAS.)

BETH cont.

I didn't knock because I didn't think anyone was home.

CHAS (Opening the door and looking outside)
Omigod! My poor Liz.

BETH

I didn't knock because I had to tell you so you could stop her. She's using your exercise equipment to cut grass with.

(SOUND of MOWER STOPS)

LIZ'S VOICE OFFSTAGE

OK, Beth. Your turn. But hurry up before the dew settles and the blades get--

(LIZ enters.)

LIZ cont.

rustier . . . and squeakier than they already are.

CHUCK

(To BETH)

You were goin' to push that thing. In front of the whole neighborhood.

BETH

Not really. I just wanted to get it away from Liz. So I could talk some sense to her. Right, Liz?

LIZ

Right, Beth.

BETH

And I wanted to try it so I could understand what she was feeling when she did it so I could help her.

CHUCK

You think you gotta do a thing before you understand it?

LIZ

There goes the neighborhood! People experiencing things left and right.

BETH

I'm trying to understand her. That's the only reason I've been sitting outside.

CHUCK

You've been what?

LIZ

As though Chuck hadn't bought you a perfectly good pumpkin to sit in.

CHUCK

Beth, I'll talk to you later. Go home.

BETH

Why?

CHUCK

I said, go home.

BETH

I was only trying to I'm sorry.

(BETH exits.)

CHAS

(To LIZ)

And you, Liz.

LIZ

What about, and me? I'm already in my home. I'm going to put my mower away. After I wipe and oil her blades.

(LIZ exits.)

CHUCK

Oh, boy. The neighbors'll have plenty to talk about tonight!

CHAS

Someone's doing more than talking. They reported her to the Association. For keeping the babies outside all night.

CHUCK

They're gonna make you move?

CHAS

They can't. Technically, she hasn't broken any rules. But they're keeping an eye on us.

(Handing CHUCK an envelope)

And they sent this.

CHUCK

Ouch! A citation!

(Reading)

Pretty tough language. Even tougher than the rejection Beth got. Old buddy, this's probably the best thing that could've happened to Liz right now. I'll bet she'll think twice the next time she wants to go off and do whatever pops into her head! What'd she say when she got it?

CHAS

Nothing. She was expecting a certificate, at the very least. For her square knots. I haven't had the heart to give it to her.

CHUCK

Well, give it to'er! Before she gets in real trouble. A guy can't let his family do stuff just 'cause they wanna.

CHAS

Why can't he?

CHUCK

What if we all let our families do it?

CHAS

I'll bite. What if?

CHUCK

Are you tryin' to tell me you want Liz doin' that?

CHAS

Not exactly.

CHUCK

Old Buddy, a guy's gotta trust what he wants and doesn't want. It's time to do something.

CHAS

Right. Such as?

CHUCK

Back to Plan A. They're givin' each other funny ideas about bein' part of the Association. It's like when they were so hot on those women's talkity-talk groups. I say we separate'em again.

CHAS

Oh, man!

CHUCK

To tell you the truth, I'm beginnin' to think I'm losin' my handle on Beth, know what I mean? You said it yourself: A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

CHAS

I don't know. Liz was pretty mad at me the last time we separated them.

CHUCK

You got a better idea?

CHAS

I don't know. Maybe we should just let'em do what they want to do. Who says there's gonna be a problem?

CHUCK

Don't kid yourself!

CHAS

OK. Let's try it.

CHUCK

That's my old buddy talkin'! Now I'm ready for that game.

CHAS

It's your turn to choose the course.

CHUCK

Ummmm, the Half Moon at Montego Bay.

CHAS

OK, mon, you're on. Sit down, and I'll just slip the cartridge in . . . there! The usual friendly wager?

CHUCK

Wouldn't be a game without it! Put'er there!

(CHAS and CHUCK shake hands as LIZ enters.)

LIZ

How agreeable! A gentleman's agreement!

CHUCK

Good luck, old buddy.

(CHUCK exits.)

CHAS

Well, Liz?

LIZ

Quite well, thanks.

CHAS

Liz, I got something for you. I was going to save it for our anniversary, but I think I'd better give it to you now.

(CHAS hands LIZ the box, which SHE opens.)

SHE stares in stunned silence at the contents.)

CHAS cont.

Ha! Ha! Bet you'll never guess who made that!

(HE takes out a Rube Goldberg contraption.)

LIZ

Well, I don't think it was Chuck.

CHAS

You got that right! Look. You attach this end to the computer, aim this at the stack, and whamo! And it won't take even half the time you're spending on it now!

LIZ

Oh.

CHAS

I made it for you. (BEAT) You look disappointed. I know, I know. It's not like it was something fancy. Or something a guy could patent. But it works! And I made it. For you. Because I want you to have whatever makes you happy.

LIZ

Thank you. I do know that you want me to be happy.

CHAS

I always have. I remember that long ago June morning, seeing you marching down the aisle toward me. The fragrance of the garlands of orange blossoms--

LIZ

Mock orange blossoms. This is Wisconsin.

CHAS

The morning you vowed, in front of our dearly beloveds, to love, honor and obey?

LIZ

(BEAT) That was another woman.

CHAS

How about if we plug this in and see how you like it.

LIZ

Maybe later. I just don't feel up to scanning right now.

CHAS

Aw, Liz. How about we light a couple of candles and I give you a little alphahydroxy massage? Or maybe retinal?

LIZ

No, thanks. Not right now.

CHAS

What's going on, Liz? What're you doing?

LIZ

I'm searching for something. Something that may take precisely a lifetime to find.

CHAS

I don't wanna wait a lifetime for you to come back. I'll find it for you. Tell me what you're looking for.

LIZ

I can't. I don't know myself. Yet. I won't know what I'm looking for until I'm ready to see it.

CHAS

Then I'll help you get ready. Whatever it is you gotta see, I'll help you see it.

LIZ

(BEAT) This is something I must do alone. In real time.

CHAS

You don't need me anymore.

LIZ

This is my quest, Chas. A quest to regain my vision of the true, the good, and the . . . technical.

CHAS

Aw, Liz. Can't you be serious? Look. I got something else for you.

(Handing LIZ an envelope, which SHE opens)

LIZ

Poetry! What a surprise! A delightful surprise!
(Reading)

"Why do I miss thee? Let me count the ways:
You're the bottom line of my balance sheet--"

CHAS

Aw, don't laugh. And don't read it out loud. It sounds so stupid!

LIZ

Where'd you get this?

(Reading author's name)

"By . . . Chas Small." You wrote this! When?

CHAS

The last few days. At work. I couldn't get you out of my mind.

LIZ

(Reading)

"You're my reason for pitching, for winning the--"

CHAS

This is embarrassing! Just read it to yourself sometime. If you want to. You don't have to. It's not very--

LIZ

Why did you write this?

CHAS

I don't know. Maybe 'cause you used to like my poetry.

LIZ

(Reading)

"You're the spin on my copy, the star of my slogans--"

CHAS

Cut it out! It's not like what I used to write.

LIZ

No, it isn't. I understand every word of this.

CHAS

I don't know how else to tell you I really care. And that I wanna help. Or at least I wanna understand why you're doing all that outside stuff.

LIZ

It's nothing I can explain to you. If you want to know why, you'll have to come and discover why for yourself. With me and the babies.

CHAS

OK. OK. I'll do it. Once.

LIZ

Bet you can't.

CHAS

I said, I'd do it, and I will!

LIZ

No. I meant, I bet you can't do it just once.

End Scene iii

Scene iv

Interior of the SMALL family's van. LIZ drives. CHAS sits in the passenger seat. CHARLIE and BETSY sit in the back of the van, perhaps playing cards.)

LIZ

(To CHARLIE and BETSY)

And that video store used to be a library. Your grandmother took me there twice a week. To get books.

(The SHADOW enters with newspapers to add to the stacks but instead pitches the paper offstage and settles down to listen to LIZ.)

CHAS

Books were the basis of the cornerstone foundation of--

LIZ

Oh, be quiet. Unless you have something to say.

CHAS

You--you're playing some silly game.

LIZ

Yes. Better than I've ever played any game in my life.

(LIZ parks the van.

To CHARLIE and BETSY)

And this is the entrance to what used to be the park.

BETSY

Cool! Whose neighborhood is this? Lookit all the flowers. Right in the grass!

(ALL get out of the van.)

LIZ

They aren't florist flowers. They're natural flowers.

(SHE picks a few and gives them to CHARLIE and BETSY.)

LIZ cont.

They're on the endangered species list. But look. As far as the eye can see, a host of yellow dandelions.

CHAS

They're nothing but weeds!

LIZ

They're useful flowers. Look.

(To SHADOW)

Let's see if you like butter.

(Holding a dandelion under the SHADOW's chin)

Looks to me like you do!

CHAS

I'll be darned! Do me!

(The SHADOW holds a dandelion under CHAS's chin.

BETSY and CHARLIE hand LIZ a few dandelions gone to seed.)

LIZ

I'd forgotten how delicate these are. Watch.

(LIZ blows on a dandelion crown, dispersing the seeds in the air.)

LIZ cont.

Isn't that fun?

(The SHADOW blows on dandelion crowns and hands one to CHAS.)

LIZ cont.

It's OK, Chas. Try it. Global real estate values won't plummet because of a few dandelion seeds.

(CHAS tries it and likes it.)

LIZ cont.

If we take some home and blow the seeds all over our lawn,

next year we'll have home-grown dandelions to enjoy.

(The SHADOW draws LIZ and CHAS's attention to something on the ground.)

CHAS

It's an ant mound!

LIZ

Ant hill.

CHAS

Ant hill. And what's this? Ow! It's sharp--it looks prehistoric!

LIZ

It's a . . . darn, I forgot what it's called.

CHARLIE

A locust shell.

BETSY

Dummy. It's a cicada shell.

LIZ

Thanks! You're both right.

(To CHAS)

Aren't they the smartest babies ever?

CHAS

Aw, Liz. I thought you were over that fantasy. They'll talk when they're good and ready. When they're old enough.

LIZ

Tell me. What do you think about our excursion?

CHAS

Well, it's kinda . . . different. Kinda . . . fun.

LIZ

Now you almost know.

(Ravel's *Bolero* PLAYS. LIZ takes a blanket from the van and spreads it on the ground and hands the van keys to the SHADOW.)

LIZ cont.

Make yourself and the kids scarce for an hour or so.

(The SHADOW and BETSY and CHARLIE exit.)

CHAS

Why'd you get rid of the kids?

LIZ

Sit beside me. Wouldn't it be fun if we played a little?

CHAS

You mean play . . . like . . .

LIZ

Exactly like.

CHAS

Here? Outside?

LIZ

Outside. On the grass.

CHAS

It's still pretty light out.

LIZ

The better to see you!

CHAS

But it's not Saturday night.

LIZ

So what?

CHAS

So I hafta go to work tomorrow.

LIZ

I'll leave enough of you intact so you can make it.

CHAS

You wanna do it without the video?

LIZ

Not needed.

CHAS

We don't have our sex toys.

LIZ

Oh, yes we do!

(The MUSIC speeds up to fast-forward as LIZ and CHAS have sex together. MUSIC STOPS when appropriate.)

CHAS

Wow! I got goose bumps!

LIZ

Now you know.

End Scene iv

Scene v

The SMALL living room, the afternoon of the next day.

Liz's anniversary present sits on the floor beside LIZ, CHARLIE, BETSY, and the SHADOW. LIZ leads them in stretching exercises.

LIZ

Now exhale as you bend forward. And breathe in as you slowly come up. Ah, my little babies. Sometimes I think you understand every word I say. Sometimes I think you're the only people on this earth who do understand what I say.

(The TELEPHONE RINGS. LIZ answers it.)

Small residence. Liz speaking.

VOICE OF BETH

Something's happening. I started scanning the stacks this-

-

BETSY

Lady, get a life!

LIZ

Yes. Get a life!

VOICE OF BETH

We already get *Life*. And *People* and *Newsweek*. And we've got stacks and stacks--

BETSY

Screw the stacks!

LIZ

Ah, Beth. Screw the stupid stacks!

(To herself)

That's . . . it. Forget about them. Because they don't matter! Whether they take me a day to scan, or a minute to scan, they don't matter!

(The SHADOW holds a mirror up to Liz's face.)

LIZ removes her youthful wig and examines herself.)

VOICE OF BETH

(Throughout the above action)

Screw them? You mean, like, instead of scan them? Or scan them first?

LIZ

(To herself, as she studies her reflection in the mirror)

Oh. I didn't know. The wrinkles. The dark circles. When did this happen?

BETH

Liz? Where are you? What should I do?

LIZ

Whatever you want to do. We're adults. We don't have to--

BETSY

Well, I'll be damned--the old lady's gettin' it!

CHARLIE

Didn't I tell you she'd beat the old man? Pay up!

BETSY

Here's your fiver, Bro!

(BETSY hands CHARLIE a five-dollar bill.)

LIZ

(To BETSY and CHARLIE)

Take off those ridiculous clothes.

(BETSY and CHARLIE do so.)

VOICE OF BETH

Who're you talking to? Who's with you? Are you--

(LIZ hangs up the telephone and studies BETSY and CHARLIE.)

LIZ

(To CHARLIE)

You need a shave. And Betsy. You're almost grown up. Why didn't I see? We have a lot to catch up on.

CHARLIE

Later, Momma.

(CHARLIE scoops up the keys for the van.)

CHARLIE cont.

When you get rid of the van, how about a Mustang?

LIZ

A red one.

BETSY

Convertible?

LIZ

What else?

CHARLIE

Cool!

(CHARLIE and BETSY head for the door.)

LIZ

Where're you going?

CHARLIE and BETSY

Out!

LIZ

What're you going to do?

CHARLIE and BETSY

Everything!

(CHARLIE and BETSY exit.)

BETSY enters after a few beats and regards LIZ.)

BETSY

You won't feel bad if we take off for a while, will you?

LIZ

Not in the least.

BETSY

(BEAT) 'Cause if you did, I could stay and hang out here. With you.

LIZ

I'm OK. But can I have a rain check for the hanging out? For later?

BETSY

Yeah.

LIZ

Thanks. For now, though, you go. And be, be . . . Betsy. Just be Betsy.

(BETH bursts in through the door.)

BETH

Oh. Betsy. I like your new clothes.

BETSY

Me too, Aunt Beth. Bye, Mom. See you soon.

(Exit Betsy.)

BETH

I had to come over!

LIZ

You aren't scared of Chuck finding out you're here?

BETH

Not half as scared as I was back home. Something like, bizarre happened. I turned on the scanner, and no electricity. I called the power company, and even the utility can't figure out what happened! Nobody knows why my power went off!

LIZ

Maybe it's just coming on, Beth.

(Indicating stacks of newspapers)

Forget this junk. It's nothing but history.

BETH

Maybe we'll need them some day.

LIZ

Some day. That's nothing more than a dream.

(Kicking at the supplements and cosmetics on the floor)
Like this stuff.

(Indicating stacks)

And those are nothing but memories. Dreams and memories.
This is how a capitalist lives. An emotional capitalist.
Always waiting to enjoy my indefinitely postponed tomorrow.
I want today. And I want it now.

BETH

Maybe if I got caught up, Chuck wouldn't mind if I slept on
the grass. Once in a while. As long as the stacks--

LIZ

Stacks, stacks! Beth, have you read any of this stuff?

BETH

I don't have time.

LIZ

Here. Read.

BETH

I don't have--

LIZ

Read it.

BETH

(Reading)

Oh, no. No. Why are they saying these awful things? What
is this?

LIZ

Who knows? Let's see. Hmm. It's a transcript of a
session between a psychiatrist and his patient. Oh, my.
The patient's a former first lady.

BETH

How could a first lady do things like that?

LIZ

She was just a little girl.

BETH

Why'd she tell anyone about it? My parents punished me, for my own good, when they found out I Oh, I didn't mean I'd done anything like she did.

LIZ

Of course not.

BETH

Besides, I was just a little girl, too. Oh, this is horrid!

LIZ

Yes. And we've been storing it.

BETH

From now on, I'm sticking to television. Or the internet.

(LIZ unplugs the computer and TV.)

LIZ

They're no better.

BETH

I don't know what to do. Maybe just forget it.

(BETH replaces the newspaper and tidies the stacks.)

Yes. I'll scan it and store and forget it. That's it.

LIZ

No, Beth. That's not it. This isn't worth storing.

(LIZ and the SHADOW join hands, dance around one of the stacks and fall down. To the tune of "Ring around the Rosie:")

LIZ and SHADOW

Ring around the papers,
Chronicles of capers,
One, two, three,
And we all fall down!

BETH

The stacks're standing there like they disapprove!

LIZ

Not half as much as I disapprove of them.

(LIZ dances and SINGS solo.)

You really do not matter,
You're just a bunch of chatter.

One, two, three,

(LIZ pushes at a stack of newspapers until it topples.)

And you all fall down!

BETH

(Trying to restack papers)

You can't do that!

LIZ

Don't you dare restack that garbage in my house!

BETH

You'll never catch up!

(LIZ pushes on another stack and topples it over.)

BETH cont.

Stop that!

LIZ

Liz two, stacks zero. C'mon, Beth! It's fun!

BETH

No!

LIZ

Give me your hand!

(LIZ and BETH and the SHADOW topple the rest of the stacks.)

BETH

That felt awful!

LIZ

Awful awful or awful good? Beth. This doesn't matter.

BETH

Then what does?

LIZ

I don't know. Yet. I only know that whatever it is, we won't find it in this room.

LIZ, BETH, and SHADOW

(Sung as a round to the tune of "Three Blind Mice":)

No more stacks.
No more stacks.
See how they fell.
See how they fell.

(In counterpoint to VOICES of CHAS and CHUCK OFFSTAGE CALLING, "Liz!" "Beth!" "Liz!" "Beth!" etc.)

They grew very tall in her living room,
'Cause inch by inch, she was giving room,
Till they tumbled down in her living room.
No more stacks.
No more stacks. Etc.

BETH

I helped do this.

(CHAS and CHUCK enter.)

CHUCK

Anarchy.

(LIZ gathers up her box of souvenirs and her scrapbook,
preparing to exit.)

CHAS

Liz! Where're you going?

LIZ

Out!

CHAS

Why?

LIZ

Have you forgotten already?

(LIZ exits, slamming the door behind her.)

BETH

Liz did it. I tried to stop her. She wouldn't listen.

CHUCK

We know you tried, Baby. Let's give our old buddy a hand.

CHAS

She's gone.

CHUCK

She'll be back.

(CHUCK and BETH begin to stack the newspapers in an
orderly pile.)

From outside, we hear LIZ and the SHADOW singing to the
tune of "London Bridge Is Falling Down:")

VOICES SINGING OFFSTAGE

All the stacks are falling down,

(CHAS gazes out the door and then examines Liz's anniversary present.)

CHAS

She looks so happy. She doesn't need me.

VOICES SINGING OFFSTAGE cont.

Falling down,
Falling down, etc.

(Enter BETSY and CHARLIE. They reach out to CHAS.)

CHARLIE

(Overlapping with song)

C'mon, Pops. It's fun.

(CHAS yanks apart the connections on the gift and joins the singing.)

All the stacks are falling down,

CHAS

(Solo on this line as LIZ enters.)

My free lady.

LIZ

(Seeing the gift torn apart)

Oh, Chas! I must have done that by accident. I only wanted to knock over the stacks, and--

CHAS

Me, too!

(CHAS knocks over the stack that BETH and CHUCK restacked.)

To BETH and CHUCK)

C'mon you guys! It's fun!

(CHAS removes and throws down his toupee and exits with LIZ, CHARLIE and BETSY.)

CHUCK

I saw it comin'. He's been actin' weird at work, too. Ignorin' my memos. Askin' questions. Told the VP of Marketin' my Virus Detector/Deflector was redundant. What the hell's he talkin' about?

(HE takes BETH's hand and examines it.)

CHUCK cont.

What's that under your nails?

(BETH pulls away her hand.)

BETH

Nothing.

(CHUCK takes her hand again.)

CHUCK

It's purple. Or pink. What the hell color is it?

(BETH hurries away and gazes out the window where LIZ and OTHERS are playing.)

BETH

It's magenta. It's from, uh, I was considering a new shade of nail polish.

CHUCK

Doesn't look bad. Might be sexy. Especially on your toe nails. (BEAT)

(Imitating CHAS)

"C'mon, you guys! It's fun!" I wonder why Liz married such a jerk.

(CHUCK notices the herbal supplements and cosmetics on the floor.)

CHUCK

You suppose this stuff works? (BEAT) Not that I need it. I could probably pass for thirty-five. Right, Beth?

(BETH studies CHUCK.)

BETH

No.

(BETH kicks over the stack SHE and CHUCK had made and exits to join in the fun.)

CHUCK examines some of the labels on the herbal supplements and smears something on his face.)

CHAS, LIZ, BETSY, CHARLIE and BETH

(Standing outside the window, singing a chorus from "The Farmer in the Dell")

The cheese stands alone,
The cheese stands alone,
Heigh-ho--

(CHUCK closes the window.

CHAS, LIZ, BETSY, CHARLIE and BETH exit.

CHUCK notices CHAS's toupé and tries it on, preening in front of a fourth-wall mirror.

CHUCK

Well, maybe thirty-eight. Yeah. Thirty-eight, for sure.

END ACT II

FINAL CURTAIN

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