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Murder Squared  
Four Short Mystery Plays  
by Gary Earl Ross

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Dramatists Guild

The *Murder Squared* ensemble, ethnically neutral, has at least three men and three women. All take multiple roles, including voice-overs. One man should be young and slight enough to play a teenager. Another should be physically imposing enough to be the Host. The ensemble may be larger than six and the Host may be separate from the others. If a part of the ensemble, the HOST will appear in each play. If separate, he or she may make cameo appearances. ACTORS 1, 2, and 3, and ACTRESSES 1, 2, and 3 may be used according to the following suggestions.

Characters:

The Host—cultured, witty, deadpan. (ACTOR 1, ACTRESS 1 or a dedicated HOST)

“The Engineer”

Gina (ACTRESS 1)

Harper (ACTOR 1)

Susan (ACTRESS 2)

Officer 1 (ACTOR 2)

Officer 2 (ACTRESS 3)

Detective (ACTOR 3)

Host cameo: Extra cop in the final scene.

“Anything for Money”

Maggie Parks, a legal secretary (ACTRESS 2)

Richie Parks, a con artist (ACTOR 2)

Leonard Hutchison, a lawyer (ACTOR 3)

Deidre (Dee) Willis, also a lawyer and Leonard’s sister (ACTRESS 1)

Ted Willis, her husband, a detective (ACTOR 1)

Karen Foxworth (ACTRESS 3)

Host cameo: Cab driver who steps in to get money from Karen as she enters.

“The Heart of the Matter”

Howard Gray (ACTOR 3—Will use *sir* or *ma’am* to match the Chair’s gender.)

Julie Gray (ACTRESS 2)

Paramedic (ACTOR 2 or ACTRESS 3)

Police Officer (ACTOR 2 or ACTRESS 3)

Parole Board Chair, voice only. (Anyone not on stage during the lines.)

Aunt Lydia, voice only. (Anyone not on stage during the lines.)

Minister, voice only. (Anyone not on stage during the lines.)

Host cameo: Standing well behind Howard and Julie during the funeral as Mr. Meeks.

“Return to Riverside Falls”

Mitch Lockett, a bookseller. (ACTOR 1)

Anna Lockett, his wife. (ACTRESS 1)

Sara Lockett Garrow, their daughter, a nurse. (ACTRESS 2)

Louis Garrow, Sara’s husband, an anthropology professor. (ACTOR 3)

Christopher Garrow, Sara’s teenaged son. (ACTOR 2)

Dr. Terry Venora, a psychotherapist. (ACTRESS 3)

Host cameo: In a white coat in the newborn baby hospital segment.

A production of the Ujima Company, *Murder Squared* was first performed Saturday November 27, 2010, at TheaterLoft in Buffalo, New York. Act One was directed by Gary Earl Ross and Act Two and the Host sequences by Robert Ball. Stage manager: Alissa Steele. Assistant Stage Manager: Zoe Viola Scruggs. Stage crew: Zoe Viola Scruggs, Rachael Jamison, Hope Mayes, and Stephon Applewhite. Set design: Robert Ball. Costumes: Cindy Miller. Sound and lighting: Amilcar Hill, Jamar Singletary, and Alissa Steele. *Murder Squared* was produced by Rahwa Ghirmatzion and Lorna C. Hill. The ensemble cast is listed below.

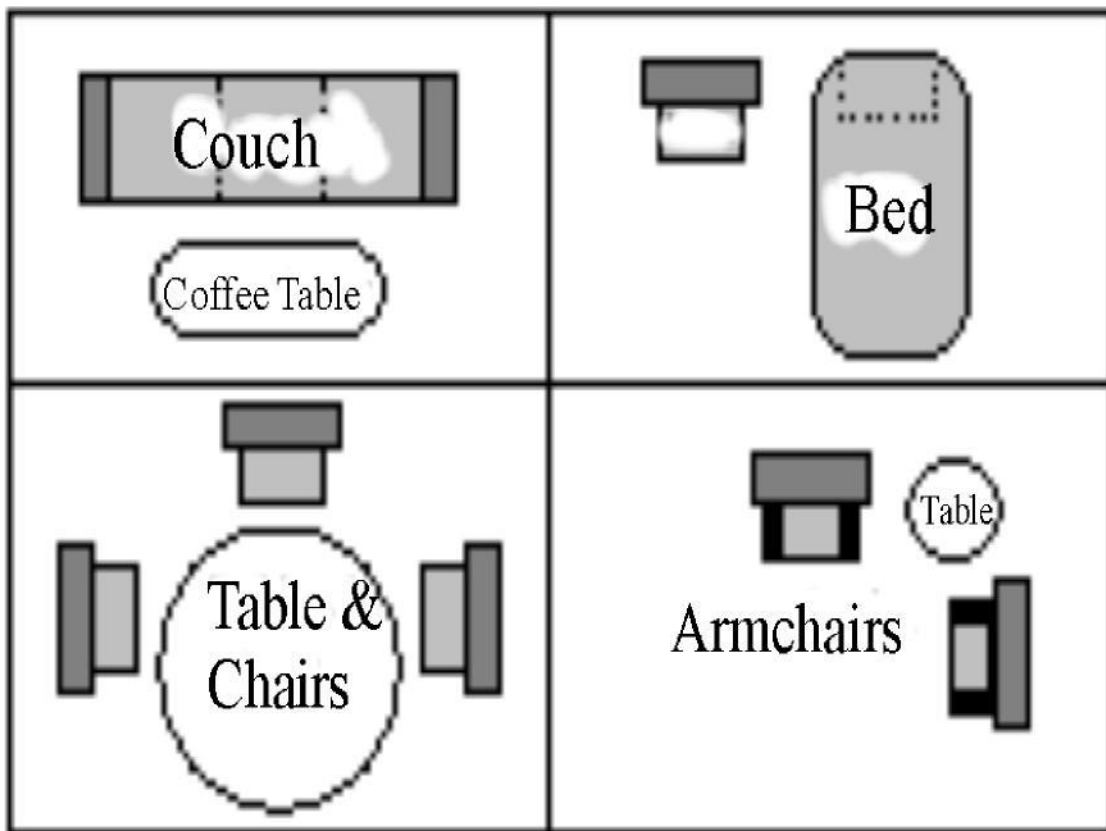
The Host	Gary Earl Ross
“The Engineer”	
Gina	Tilke Hill
Harper	Darryl Hart
Susan	Alexis Koetting
Officer 1	Rich Kraemer
Officer 2	Donald Capers
Detective	Hugh Davis
“Anything for Money”	
Maggie Parks	Samantha Sherwood
Richie Parks	Aaron Krygier
Leonard Hutchison	Rich Kraemer
Deidre (Dee) Willis	Tilke Hill
Ted Willis	Darryl Hart
Karen Foxworth	Alexis Koetting
“The Heart of the Matter”	
Howard Gray	Aaron Krygier
Julie Gray	Alexis Koetting
Paramedic	Tilke Hill
Police Officer	Donald Capers
Parole Board Chair (voice, live)	Gary Earl Ross
Aunt Lydia (live, onstage)	Mary Moebius
Minister (voice, recorded) and Mr. Meeks	Gary Earl Ross
“Return to Riverside Falls”	
Mitch Lockett	Hugh Davis
Anna Lockett	Tilke Hill
Sara Lockett Garrow	Samantha Sherwood
Louis Garrow	Darryl Hart
Christopher Garrow	Rich Kraemer
Dr. Terry Venora	Mary Moebius

*Murder Squared* was developed in the Road Less Traveled Productions Emanuel Fried New Play Workshop during the 2007-08 theater season. As part of that program, it had a staged reading at the Donald Savage Theater at Buffalo State College on October 20, 2008. The director was Doug Zschiegner. Stage directions were read by Charlie Wahl.

The Host	Beverly Dove
“The Engineer”	
Gina	Ellen Horst
Harper	Dan Walker
Susan	Adrienne Lewis
Officer 1	Steve Peterson
Officer 2	Candice Kogut
Detective	Zac Ward
“Anything for Money”	
Maggie Parks	Adrienne Lewis
Richie Parks	Zac Ward
Leonard Hutchison	Steve Peterson
Deidre (Dee) Willis	Ellen Horst
Ted Willis	Dan Walker
Karen Foxworth	Candice Kogut
“The Heart of the Matter”	
Howard Gray	Steve Peterson
Julie Gray	Adrienne Lewis
Paramedic	Candice Kogut
Police Officer	Zac Ward
Parole Board Chair (voice)	Doug Zschiegner
Aunt Lydia (voice)	Doug Zschiegner
Minister (voice)	Doug Zschiegner
“Return to Riverside Falls”	
Mitch Lockett	Dan Walker
Anna Lockett	Ellen Horst
Sara Lockett Garrow	Adrienne Lewis
Louis Garrow	Steve Peterson
Christopher Garrow	Zac Ward
Dr. Terry Venora	Candice Kogut

PRODUCTION NOTES:

It is suggested that *Murder Squared* have a multiple set—four quadrants with specific furnishings in each: upstage right (UR)—a couch and coffee table; upstage left (UL)—a bed, chair, and nightstand; downstage right (DR)—a table and three chairs; and downstage left (DL)—two stuffed armchairs and a small table. The couch must be or seem to be a bench style sofa bed with a linen storage compartment beneath the seat. The furnishings are visible in all four plays but differences in location may be indicated by covers or throws for the couch and chairs, tablecloths for the tables, different spreads for the bed, and lighting. Also, each prop or furnishing may be positioned differently for each play. Downstage chairs, for example, may be moved to center stage when needed. Depending upon the size and shape of the stage, the upstage quadrants may be elevated, either slightly or considerably.



On a smaller stage, props may be brought on and removed as needed by the stage crew. Dressed in black, they may add or remove props and furniture while the HOST delivers his prologues and epilogues downstage. The HOST may also interact with the environment. For example, in the premiere production, the HOST removed the rope from the chair at the end of “The Engineer” and dropped it as if were contaminated. Then he sat as he delivered his epilogue. Starting the prologue to the next tale, he stood as a crew member removed the chair. Before delivering the epilogue to “Anything for Money,” the HOST stopped at the drink table set up for the dinner party and poured himself a drink, which he carried downstage to sip as he addressed the

audience. If the stage crew works around the HOST as he speaks, they may be part of the curtain call.

Also, for the curtain call, the actors may brandish weapons other than those that appear in the play: crowbars, axes, power drills, and so forth. The HOST may be seated as the cast gathers behind him. Then he can meet his fate in a chair.

MITCH (“Return to Riverside Falls”) and HOWARD and JULIE (“Heart of the Matter”) may wear their suits at all times, covered by the raincoat or robes as needed.

AUNT LYDIA need not be a voice over. If the cast is large enough and the staging permits, she may be portrayed one of two ways. First, she may “come to life” and sit up in bed to deliver her harsh assessment of HOWARD’s manhood as he sits before the parole board/audience. When she finishes, she will lie back down. Second, she may appear behind him to berate him, then exit. In either case, her appearance strengthens the irony of his line, “I regret murdering her.”

In “Return to Riverside Falls” the *h* in Neanderthal is silent; the pronunciation is NeanderTALL. As an anthropologist, LOUIS will know that.

The following roles may be taken by men or women: the HOST, the DETECTIVE and POLICE OFFICERS, the PARAMEDIC, the PAROLE BOARD CHAIR, the MINISTER, and TERRY VENORA. Teen-aged CHRIS may be portrayed by a woman in a baseball cap and baggy sweatshirt. Finally, with a few gender changes in the dialogue, GINA could easily become GINO.

## Murder Squared Act One

(After the house lights go down, there is a long pause. Finally “The Funeral March of a Marionette” by Charles Gounod begins. The volume is relatively loud. The first thirty or so seconds of this classical piece will not be recognizable to most audience members. Then comes the familiar section used for “Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” to give the audience a hint of what is to come. Lights rise halfway. The HOST enters from stage left, moving slowly to downstage center in such a way that he keeps his left profile toward the audience. He is dressed in a dark suit. He stops as the music volume is lowered. Then, slowly, he turns to face the audience as downstage lights rise to full.)

HOST

(Deadpan, hands clasped in front, back straight.)

Good evening.

(Pause.)

Welcome to *Murder Squared*, a compendium of mystery, suspense, and the unexpected. I am your humble host, your prologue and epilogue. I will introduce each tale undertaken by our company of able actors and return at the end . . . to clarify matters, though I doubt I’ll have to explain much to *this* group. I can tell by the intelligent glint in your eyes that you are a brainy lot—exactly the kind of audience we were hoping you’d be—an audience unafraid to shiver on the edge of a seat or gasp at the sight of evil or laugh. Just remember this: whatever happens, you are as safe in your seats as I am on this stage. So, let us begin.

(Pause as he produces a pocket calculator and punches buttons.)

Our first tale is a story of faith. Oh, I don’t mean religion or afterlives or Supreme Beings. I’m speaking of a simple belief that unites us all every time we step on the brakes, board an elevator, or buckle ourselves into a roller coaster seat. That faith is the trust we place in those who build our world, our machines and power systems and unseen infrastructure. Imagine how terrifying life would be if we knew that one of every hundred cars would explode or one of every three elevator cables would snap or the plane flying us home for the holidays had a fifty-fifty chance of falling out of the sky. But we are unafraid because we are true believers. Thank God for “The Engineer.”

(With a flourish he punches another button, then stares as if confused at the calculator. Then he shakes it, holds it to his ear, and whacks it before shrugging and pocketing it.)

(Blackout.)



**“The Engineer”**

(Darkness. The sound of crickets, shuffling feet, a groggy moan. A sudden scuffle is followed by a punch connecting, and someone expelling air, coughing.)

GINA

Do that again and I'll blow a hole in your throat.

(The sound of someone being forced into a chair.)

GINA

Check the ropes. The drug's wearing off faster than I thought. Tight!

SUSAN

All right.

(After a moment lights rise. Center stage, in a suit, HARPER sits tied to a chair, arms behind him. A cloth hood covers his face. GINA sits on one side, slightly downstage, gun in hand. She is dressed in jeans and a large man's shirt, the sleeves rolled up just enough to reveal tattoos on her forearms. Opposite her, in more feminine clothing and looking nervous, sits SUSAN.)

HARPER

If it's money you want, you grabbed the wrong guy. My name is Harper, Charl—.

GINA

I know exactly who you are, you heartless son of a bitch.

(HARPER struggles briefly against his bonds.)

GINA

The question is, do you know who *I* am?

(She rises, yanks off his hood, and for a moment neither speaks as he reacts to the sight of her. She drops hood.)

HARPER

You?

GINA

(Showing him the gun.)

Yeah, and don't try anything stupid.

HARPER

I . . . I didn't recognize your voice . . . Gina.

GINA

Four years in a drafty cell and two packs a day can change a lot.

HARPER

And you've lost weight.

GINA

(Lowering the gun.)

The D Block diet is the latest fad.

HARPER

When . . . when did you get out?

GINA

As if you don't know what happened.

HARPER

Why would I know?

GINA

Because you know everything. You're the Engineer.

HARPER

Oh, God, not again . . .

(He looks at SUSAN.)

If I knew everything, I'd know who she was.

(Studies SUSAN a moment.)

By the looks of her, I'd guess she was your cellie in prison. Maybe when you ran out of cigarettes and it got cold at night . . .

(GINA slaps him and presses the gun to his temple.)

HARPER

I don't know where we are, but you didn't drive me all the way here just to put one in my head. First, you need me to confirm this sick fantasy you have about me. But I won't. You don't have to do this, Gina, any of it. You need help. I can get you that help.

GINA

(Stepping back and lowering the gun.)

Don't worry. You won't face the firing squad until after your trial.

HARPER

Trial?

GINA

I thought you'd appreciate the irony.

HARPER

(After a pause, jerking his head toward SUSAN.)

Then who is she? A witness for the prosecution? If you're going to put me on trial, I have a right to . . . to know her name.

SUSAN

My name is Susan.

GINA

Susan Costner. Ring any bells?

HARPER

N-no. Should it?

GINA

Bobby Costner's wife, you arrogant bastard. *Detective* Bobby Costner. You remember my partner. When our investigation got too close, he was killed.

HARPER

Look, I know you think I had something to do with that—

GINA

As if you didn't.

HARPER

This is insane. You're insane. I've never killed anybody in my life.

(To SUSAN.)

Mrs. Costner, please. You can't believe I had anything to do with your husband's death.

SUSAN

(Calmly, smiling, as GINA sits.)

But I know you did . . . Engineer.

HARPER

You're as crazy as she is.

GINA

This isn't about crazy. It's about justice—for Susan because of Bobby. For me because . . . You know how tough it is to be a cop in the joint? I had to prove myself every day, just to survive.

HARPER

Doesn't look like they kept you out of the tattoo line.

(Standing, her back to the audience, GINA unbuttons her shirt and opens it for HARPER to see.)

HARPER

(Reacting to what he sees.)

My God. They certainly didn't. That's . . . it's a mess.

(Pause.)

So you became a cross between a snake pit and a . . . graffiti wall just to prove something?

GINA

(Closing her shirt.)

You could say that.

HARPER

Was it worth the pain?

GINA

Pain is relative.

SUSAN

I think they're beautiful.

HARPER

(To SUSAN.)

I don't even want to think about how *you* came to see her tattoos.

SUSAN

You're already thinking about it . . . pig.

HARPER

Look, if you two got together to comfort each other over your shared loss, I understand. Maybe a quiet dinner for two. A little wine. Tears and hugs. Okay, but it's got nothing to do with me.

(GINA goes toward him, gun raised, but stops herself.)

SUSAN

(Rising.)

Gina!

HARPER

It's got nothing to do with me!

GINA

Don't sweat it, Susan. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of finishing this early. But he does need to understand how serious it is.

HARPER

Oh, I get that it's serious. You're going to kill me. You're going to kill me for something I didn't do, because you're confused, Gina. You've been confused for a long time. But I can help you. Nobody needs to die. We can both get out of this alive.

GINA

Not really. I've got pancreatic cancer. Six months ago they gave me less than a year. Guess who's the last thing on my list.

HARPER

I'm sorry. I didn't know.

GINA

Sure you knew.

HARPER

Here we go again. The Engineer. A finger in every criminal pie in the city. A mastermind so brilliant he controls the media, elected officials, labor unions, career criminals—all without their knowledge.

(Sighs, shakes his head.)

You make him sound like somebody out of a movie, Professor Moriarty or Keyser Soze. If this Engineer is such a super criminal, how come no one's ever heard of him but two rogue cops?

GINA

That's what engineering is all about. Nobody stops to think about how things work. TVs turn on when you push the button. Elevators go to the top floor. Planes fly. And cops get shot every day.

HARPER

Now you're making him sound like God. But even God has bodyguards. Archangels. Why didn't I? Think, Gina. Please. Why would the Engineer let two *women* snatch him?

GINA

Maybe you took a chance, to find out once and for all where Bobby and I hid the evidence.

HARPER

Mrs. Costner—Susan—if you help me now, I won't press charges. This woman is clearly insane, a drug user with a history of violence. No need for you to get hurt because she's delusional.

GINA

Susan, would you go to the car and get the groceries and supplies?

SUSAN

All right.

(Exits.)

HARPER

Did you drug her too?

(GINA says nothing as she stretches and goes to the table. She sets down the gun and rubs her eyes.)

HARPER

Supplies, huh? Sounds like we're going to be here awhile.

GINA

(Moving away from the table.)

Susan and me maybe but not you.

HARPER

(A beat.)

If I'm going to die here—and I'm guessing you'll bury me somewhere in these woods—do you mind telling me where here is?

GINA

Why? Are you hoping your people will find you?

HARPER

I have people? Lord, this just gets worse.

GINA

You did have people but I lost them long before we crossed the state line.

HARPER

I'm a criminal genius but I can't hire help competent enough to follow *you*? Come on.

GINA

It's tough to follow somebody with four flat tires.

(Sitting in SUSAN's chair, she smiles at his puzzled look.)

Water balloons full of Vaseline and roofing nails. We tossed dozens behind us on the road away from your place.

HARPER

You could've killed people. Maybe you did kill people. God!

GINA

A little late for *you* to grow a conscience, isn't it? Oh, and if they're tracking your cell phone, it's jammed behind the bumper of an eighteen-wheeler headed in the opposite direction. It's got to be two or three states away by now.

(SUSAN enters and sets a box on the table.)

HARPER

Susan, she told me about the balloons and nails. If somebody died on the road, you could face a manslaughter charge or even murder. Get the gun, Susan. Get the gun and point it at her!

(SUSAN picks up the gun as GINA stands to face her.)

HARPER

Come on, Susan. Point it at her and untie me. You can still get out of this. It's not too late.

(Pause, voice becoming calm, reassuring.)

I know people who can help you.

SUSAN

(Slowly crossing to GINA and handing her the gun.)

Who? The same folks that helped Bobby get shot?

(SUSAN sits and GINA goes to the table and rummages through the box. She opens a bag with cookies and bites into one, all the while holding the gun.)

HARPER

(To GINA.)

If I had your partner killed, why didn't I have *you* killed?

GINA

For a long time we had a real stalemate going. Bobby was dead but you couldn't kill me until you got directions to where I stashed the evidence, and I couldn't release what I had because your people let my people know somebody would kill my sister.

HARPER

Now you've got people?

GINA

Had people. They cut me loose when I went to prison on a drug conviction.

HARPER

Susan, you must see how bizarre this is. Worse than before. The cancer's gone to her brain.

GINA

Of course, you remember my conviction. You're the one who set it up and rigged my jury. Once I was out of the picture there was nobody to protect my sister.

(Pauses as SUSAN joins her and gets a cookie to nibble.)

His silence is telling, isn't it?

SUSAN

What do you mean?

GINA

Notice how he hasn't asked me a thing about what I have on him. Or my sister.

SUSAN

You're right. He hasn't. Maybe he just doesn't care.

HARPER

Maybe he's just scared.

GINA

Or maybe he already knows everything.

HARPER

All I know is, five years ago two nutcase cops tried to ruin my life. Then one of them got shot and the other ended up doing hard time. But now that I see the widow all cozy with the partner, I have to wonder if you killed him together and tried to frame me.

(SUSAN lunges toward him but GINA holds her back.)

GINA

Easy, Susan. Remember, he gets his at the end of all this, just like we planned. I promise.

(GINA releases a seething SUSAN, who crosses to her chair, but not before whacking HARPER in the head.)

SUSAN

(Smiling and sitting.)

I feel a little better now.

GINA

You'll feel even better when it's all over.

(To HARPER, leveling the gun at him.)

I guess it's time we got started. Now, for the case against Charles Harper . . .

HARPER

Gina, please!

GINA

I find you guilty.

HARPER

Can I at least have some water before you . . .

(GINA rises and goes to the table. She takes a water bottle from the box and tosses it to SUSAN, who unscrews the cap and moves to HARPER as GINA speaks.)



GINA

Susan, is there anything you want to add before we move to the penalty phase?

SUSAN

Just that I miss my Bobby. A dog deserves better than getting shot down in cold blood.

(Instead of holding the bottle so he can drink, SUSAN throws water in his face. Then she goes back to her seat.)

HARPER

I keep telling you, I don't know anything about that.

(Almost in tears, he looks at GINA, still at the table.)

You're making a big mistake. You can't get away with this.

GINA

(Picking up the gun.)

They have to find you first.

HARPER

Oh, they'll find me . . .

GINA

Then what? They'll dig me up and put my corpse on trial?

HARPER

You don't have cancer. You *are* cancer. What about her?

(Cocking his head toward SUSAN.)

You've got this poor woman believing your paranoia, and you're going to take her right down the crapper with you. Kidnapping *and* murder? She doesn't stand a chance.

GINA

She knew that before she signed on. She must have believed that taking you out of the game was worth the risk.

HARPER

For all anybody knows, *you* could be the Engineer. Maybe your partner stumbled onto the truth and you killed him, but not before he set you up with drugs from the police lock-up.

GINA

Why would he set me up?

HARPER

Because he couldn't nail the Engineer any other way. Good engineering goes unnoticed, right?

(To SUSAN.)

Ever stop to think about that before you hooked up with this lunatic? Maybe you made a deal with your husband's killer.

SUSAN

(Laughing.)

Gina didn't kill Bobby. The Engineer did.

HARPER

Well, I'm not him.

(To GINA, anger slowly displacing fear.)

If I were, I'd have had *you* put down a long time ago, for the common good. To hell with whatever evidence you think you have.

GINA

Now you're starting to sound like who you really are.

HARPER

All you've ever done is outline crimes I'm supposed to have committed. You've never presented one substantial proof. Or a motive.

GINA

Motive is easy: money and power. As for proof, I've got enough to put you away for life.

HARPER

Then go ahead and use it. I'll take my chances in a real court.

GINA

Of course you will, in a county where you control the courts.

SUSAN

But you're a long way from home.

HARPER

You think taking me to another jurisdiction, another *state*, will make a difference? Even if I were guilty of something, I can't be prosecuted *here* for a crime *there*. No wonder you didn't make it as a cop. But since you're going to kill me anyway, I don't see the point to any of this. Just do it.

GINA

Yes, you're going to die tonight because nobody else can take you out. But I know you see the point.

HARPER

I don't care about the point. I just want to get it over with.

GINA

The truth will still come out. Without you pulling strings behind the scenes, the media and the legal system will jerk your wife's head out of the sand and your daughters out of their fancy private schools. It doesn't matter that the case'll never go to court. The good name you've built up all these years will be ruined.

(HARPER seems to strain against his bonds again.)

GINA

You want to protect your family as much as I wanted to protect my sister.

(Pause.)

Why didn't you ask me about my sister?

HARPER

I don't want to play this game anymore. I'm tired, Gina.

GINA

(Voice breaking for the first time.)

You didn't ask because you already knew she was dead.

HARPER

I could've read it in the newspapers. I had nothing to do with—

GINA

I know!

(GINA wipes her eyes as SUSAN joins her to comfort her. GINA winces, clutches her abdomen.)

SUSAN

Baby, you need your pain pills. Where's your overnight bag?

GINA

In . . . in your car.

SUSAN

I'll be right back.

(Exits.)

GINA

(Regaining herself as the pain begins to subside.)

It was an accident in her group home. A fall down the stairs is an iffy way to kill somebody. Maybe *you* could engineer it, but this poor retarded woman was your insurance policy, so why?

HARPER

I'm sorry. Truly sorry.

GINA

It's what you did to Calvin Lloyd that convinced me you hadn't killed Eve.

HARPER

I don't even know who Calvin Lloyd is.

GINA

Was. My lawyer, and you had him killed, had his office trashed. They even tore his safe out of the wall. You were looking for an “In Case of My Death” letter that told him where to find all the evidence. Didn’t find it, did you?

(Shaking his head wearily, HARPER says nothing.)

GINA

Calvin was a good man but a poor lawyer. Poor, as in no money. You wouldn’t have had to kill him—you would have reached his price sooner or later—except he had no idea what your people were talking about. Your *first* mistake was thinking I’d trust *anybody* with the goods.

HARPER

And you took his murder as a sign I was desperate.

GINA

My reason for silence was gone, and when you came up dry at Calvin’s, all you had left was to kill me and hope the goodies would never surface. Getting to me in prison would be easy.

HARPER

So the C.O. who took you out to the funeral got a concussion and you escaped.

(SUSAN re-enters and sets an overnight bag on the table. She opens it and takes out a small pill case, which she hands to GINA. SUSAN rubs her back a moment.)

GINA

(Setting down the bottle and pill case.)

Not yet. It’ll make me loopy, and I need to stay straight.

SUSAN

Don’t wait too long. I hate to see you in pain like this. If you need to finish him quick, go ahead, and I’ll get the shovel from the back seat. Gives me the creeps just looking at him.

GINA

No, I’ll be all right. Really.

(Visibly reluctant, SUSAN returns to her seat.)

GINA

I called Susan. We were friends before we both lost Bobby. We shared a lot of letters when I was inside, and she knew who was responsible for her husband’s death. She agreed to help me.

HARPER

Then I suppose she's seen this so-called evidence. You had to give her something she could believe in to put her life on the line like this. Too bad it was all a crock, Susan. You're doing all this for nothing. Gina's more than delusional. She must have gone to a lot of trouble—forging evidence, hiding it, making some kind of treasure map . . . or *written* instructions?

GINA

You expect me to tell you?

HARPER

What difference does it make if I'm going to die? Seeing it might be worth a laugh before I go.

GINA

(Pause)

All right. But first you have to confess.

HARPER

Why? You don't need me to convince your girlfriend here. She's already drooling over my body.

GINA

What difference does it make if you're going to die?

HARPER

Because it makes a difference to me *how* I die.

GINA

I'm so glad you said that.

(She takes a knife from her bag, then sets it on the table.)

I've hated you so long for all the pain you've caused that I want you to die one sliver at a time. But everybody from the chief of detectives to the prison shrink tells me I'm crazy. They say I'm obsessed with you. Sometimes I even believe them.

HARPER

You need me to confess so you won't feel crazy.

GINA

Something like that.

HARPER

I do, you shoot me, quick and painless. I don't, you feed me to the wildlife in bite-sized pieces.

GINA

More or less.

HARPER

I don't suppose the idea of sparing my family any embarrassment could be part of this deal.

GINA

Maybe.

(For a time, as no one speaks, GINA and SUSAN stare at HARPER with anticipation. Finally, he sighs.)

HARPER

I've always hated that name, the Engineer.

(GINA and SUSAN are both relieved, vindicated. SUSAN leans back in her chair. GINA half sits on the table edge.)

GINA

I knew we were right! I knew it! I knew it!

SUSAN

(Wiping her eyes.)

I always had faith in Bobby.

HARPER

Susan, I'm sorry about Bobby. It was never personal. He just got too close.

(SUSAN stands as if to say something, then covers her face and exits quickly. HARPER and GINA look at each other.)

HARPER

It feels strange to say this but it's kind of a relief to tell somebody. I carry around so many secrets sometimes it feels like I'll explode.

GINA

I was right about everything, wasn't I?

HARPER

It's exhausting to play chess with people's lives and keep it from them. Dying? I need the rest.  
(Sighs.)

Feel less crazy now?

GINA

Yes.

HARPER

Then can we discuss my family? I really had no part in your sister's death.

GINA

I know.

HARPER

And your evidence? I mean, we'll both be dead. No point in hurting the innocent.

GINA

(After a pause.)

What if I buried everything with you?

HARPER

You mean it's all here? In this cabin?

(GINA reacts, as if she has said too much.)

HARPER

That's all I needed to know.

(HARPER unlocks his arms and removes the ropes, rising to his feet as GINA levels the gun at him. SUSAN enters upstage and freezes at the scene unfolding. GINA pulls the trigger but there is only a click. She tries twice more and turns to the table as HARPER lunges for her. She drops the gun. From behind HARPER locks an arm around her neck. She feels for the knife and clutches it, just as HARPER's free hand grips her wrist. SUSAN is still as they struggle.)

SUSAN

Baby!

HARPER

(Tightening his choke hold.)

*Your* first mistake was believing I had Bobby killed because he got . . . too . . . close.

(Then the struggle is over. GINA hangs limp in his arms. SUSAN makes a tentative step toward them and stops.)

SUSAN

Baby, are you all right?

HARPER

Better than I'd be if you hadn't removed the firing pin.

SUSAN

Did she say where it was?

HARPER

Somewhere in the cabin. Look, I could use a little help here. I've got to position her just right.

SUSAN

(Coming toward them slowly.)

She said this shack belonged to her stepmother's cousin or somebody. They're all dead.

HARPER

So it could have been here for years, in a place she kept in somebody else's name.

SUSAN

(Reaching them.)

Now tell me what to do. You know all that *CSI* stuff.

HARPER

(With a nod to guide her.)

Stand right there.

SUSAN

(Obeying, her back to the audience.)

We've got all night to look for—

(HARPER, still holding GINA's knife hand, swings her arm up into SUSAN's midsection. SUSAN gasps, reacts.)

SUSAN

Baby?

(HARPER forces the dead GINA to stab her again, and SUSAN crumples to the floor. Then he lowers GINA to the floor, her back to the audience. Straightening, he rubs his hands as if they are bloody and reaches inside his pocket for a handkerchief, then wipes them. He looks down at SUSAN, then kneels, kisses her forehead, and stands.)

HARPER

I don't have all night. My ride comes in two hours, I'll have to torch this dump, which means driving you two someplace else if I want you in the ground by dawn.

(As he begins to search, there is the sound of splintering wood and breaking glass. HARPER reacts as OFFICERS 1 and 2 burst in, guns drawn.)

OFFICER 1

Judge Harper? Thank God you're all right, sir!

OFFICER 2

(Seeing the two dead women.)

What the hell happened here?



HARPER

(After hesitating as if planning his story.)

Thank God you . . . found me. She was crazy. She just started stabbing her partner and I grabbed her from behind. I didn't mean to . . . I just wanted her to stop.

(Blackout.)

(Lights rise after a few moments. HARPER is in a chair, jacket off, shirt sleeves rolled up, looking exhausted.

OFFICER 1 and a DETECTIVE question HARPER, now in shirtsleeves as OFFICER 2 photographs the bodies from different angles. The police all wear latex gloves.)

OFFICER 1

Do you have any idea how long you were unconscious, sir? You're almost 500 miles away from home.

HARPER

As I said, I left my house to go to my car and somebody stuck something in my arm.

DETECTIVE

(Taking hold of HARPER's arm and examining it.)

Seems you were injected four or five times. They'd stop for gas, pop the trunk, and jab you.

HARPER

What day is it?

OFFICER 1

Thursday night, sir . . . well . . .

(Checks his wristwatch.)

Actually, it's Friday morning now, a little past one.

HARPER

So I've lost a whole day. Two by the time somebody comes to take me home.

DETECTIVE

Your honor, we're going to want you checked out at the hospital first.

HARPER

I'm fine, officer. Nothing a shower and a change of clothes won't fix.

DETECTIVE

It wasn't a request, sir. Procedure. As soon as they get here with an ambulance.

(Pointing to GINA.)

And you say this woman was a prison escapee obsessed with you?

HARPER

Yes, Gina Carlson, an ex-cop who went away for drugs. Several years ago she started blaming me for everything that went wrong in her life. I could never figure it out. I'd never met her or presided over a trial she was involved in. Her mental problems are well documented.

DETECTIVE

And the other woman?

HARPER

Her lover, I think. She untied me . . . when Gina wasn't looking.

(OFFICER 2 has stopped shooting photos and is waiting to speak to the DETECTIVE.)

DETECTIVE

Any idea why the lover would *secretly* untie you when they brought you out here to kill you?

HARPER

Maybe she got cold feet. Gina was acting more and more erratic.

DETECTIVE

Hmm. Still, I wonder why they came *here*.

HARPER

She wanted to bury me in the woods.

DETECTIVE

But why *these* woods? Why so far away? Our county seat wouldn't fill your city's back pocket.  
(Pause.)

At least now we know which one called. The girlfriend must have got cold feet early.

HARPER

Somebody called?

DETECTIVE

Yes, a woman. We thought it was a hoax till we got hold of your office and they said you hadn't come in all day. Took us a bit to get out here and find the right cabin.

HARPER

Why did you think it was one of these women?

DETECTIVE

The call came from *your* cell phone, sir, before they were out of range. It was still in their car. We just bagged it a few minutes ago.

(HARPER reacts. OFFICER 2 moves to the DETECTIVE.)

OFFICER 2

Detective, there's something I think you should see.

DETECTIVE

So show me.

(OFFICER 2 and the DETECTIVE kneel by the bodies.)

OFFICER 2

Now I haven't touched anything, sir, but the way this woman's shirt is twisted, I can see a lot of tattoos.

DETECTIVE

(Looking closely.)

Yes, a lot, but not unusual for someone who's been in prison. Messy work, though. Pictures and squiggles turned in on themselves. Weirdest looking snakes I've ever seen.

OFFICER 2

That's just it, sir. I think that's writing on them.

DETECTIVE

Like no writing I've ever seen before, except some of the scales look like fraternity symbols . . .

HARPER

(Nervous but with too much certainty.)

Probably just prison gibberish or gang markings. I'm sure it's noth—

DETECTIVE

Could be Greek . . . with something else. But maybe I'm reading too much into scribbles.

OFFICER 2

I think it's Cyrillic, sir.

(OFFICER 1 comes over for a look, crouches.)

DETECTIVE

What?

OFFICER 2

The Russian alphabet. I took Russian in high school. I think these are more than snakes. Looks like if you follow this little arc it makes a word—script, like handwriting, not block letters—and these arcs maybe make a sentence. But I don't remember enough to translate.

(Continues to study the tattoos.)

OFFICER 1

(With growing interest.)

You think she was connected to the Russian mob? I've been reading a lot about them.

DETECTIVE

Your honor, you ever have any dealings with the Russian mafia?

(Watching OFFICER 2, HARPER shakes his head.)

DETECTIVE

(Pausing to study HARPER a moment.)

Probably got nothing to do with you, then.

(Pausing as if in thought.)

Probably some prison gang thing . . . just like you said.

(Standing.)

But whatever it is, Dr. Ivanova will know.

(OFFICER 1 stands.)

HARPER

Dr. Ivanova?

DETECTIVE

Yes, she was born in Russia and came here to study medicine after the Soviet Union fell apart.

(HARPER is obviously confused.)

DETECTIVE

Dr. Anya Ivanova is this county's chief medical examiner. If that's Russian, she can tell us all about it . . . exactly what it says.

(HARPER reacts as offstage car engines stop, doors slam.)

DETECTIVE

In fact, I bet that's her outside right now.

(Blackout.)

(Lights rise on the HOST, standing downstage center.)

HOST

Dr. Ivanova's translation proved very helpful. Judge Harper retired . . . to a federal penitentiary in central Pennsylvania. Now he waits his turn in the tattoo line. One night a classic movie station showed the old Rock Hudson/ Lauren Bacall film *Written on the Wind*. The judge sang along with the theme song, so loudly he was dragged laughing from the activities room. But no one ever understood why he kept changing the word *wind* to *skin*.

(Pause.)

Our next examination of the underbelly of human nature concerns original sin—no, not sex. You people think everything is about sex, but it isn't. Whether we run buck naked through the Garden of Eden or play Truth or Dare with Pandora, another sin predates lust or disobedience or pride. That sin is greed, so much a part of being human that we've invented a symbolic representation of it we carry with us at all times.

(From an inside jacket pocket, he removes a thick wad of money and begins to leaf through it as if counting the bills. Smiling, he looks out at the audience and begins to fan himself with the money.)

Tell the truth. You'd do anything for this, wouldn't you? "Anything for Money."

(Blackout.)

**“Anything for Money”**

(Lights rise on MAGGIE PARKS seated on the couch, flipping through a bridal magazine, listening to smooth jazz. She is at peace, smiling. Then the doorbell rings. She holds up a remote. The music stops. Closing the magazine, she rises, exiting upstage right. A voice is heard offstage.)

RICHIE (off)

Aren't you going to invite me in? Or would you prefer that we stand out here so your neighbors can see us?

(Presently she returns, her pleasant demeanor replaced by agitation. She is followed by RICHIE PARKS, a small man with a backpack hanging from his shoulder. He drops the backpack and looks around, taking in everything.)

RICHIE

Nice place you got here, Mags. Leaded windows, good hardwood floors, full of nice things.  
(Looks out at the audience and smiles with appreciation.)

And the TV . . .

(Points at the audience.)

Super high definition, no doubt. How big is that screen? Fifty-seven inches maybe?

MAGGIE

Sixty-two.

RICHIE

I bet a movie really looks like a movie on that sucker.

MAGGIE

Richie, what the hell are you doing here? Why are you even in this city?

RICHIE

You don't seem happy to see me, Mags. Should I be insulted?

MAGGIE

What you should be is on your way. Tell me why you're here so I can say no and you can go.

RICHIE

I just want to talk to you.

MAGGIE

Oh, no. Whatever gig you're trying to set up will just have to go ahead without me.

RICHIE

You think *I'm* setting something up?

MAGGIE

You're a hustler, Richie. A scam artist. Setting things up is what you do. Like pretending to be a doctor whenever somebody fainted—so you could get their credit cards.

RICHIE

Pretty clever for the spur of the moment.

MAGGIE

Richie . . .

RICHIE

Don't forget the "Oh, God, it's my husband!" shotgun shakedown. How many wallets did we scarf up with that one, from married guys on the make who never dared to call the cops?

(Moves to her as she turns away, slips his arms around her.)

You were the best partner I ever had, Maggie. And you're just like me. You'll do anything for money.

(Begins to nuzzle her neck.)

MAGGIE

Damn it, Richie!

(Pulls away.)

I'm done with all that!

RICHIE

Look, I'm not here to get you to hook up with me on a job. I just want to talk to you.

MAGGIE

After five years what could you possibly have to say to me?

RICHIE

How about, congratulations, I hope you have a happy wedding? By the way, nice rock.

(Looking at her left hand, MAGGIE sinks onto the couch.)

RICHIE

I was just passing through, waiting to change trains and I saw in the newspaper Margaret Parks and some jerkwad named Hutchison took out a marriage license last week. Naturally, I wanted to find out if this was *my* Margaret Parks—

MAGGIE

Naturally.

RICHIE

(Walking back and forth in front of the couch.)

So I changed my travel plans, got a room, and started doing some homework on the computer at the public library. You're a legal secretary now.

(Stops, looks at her.)

How's that for irony?

MAGGIE

I told you, Richie, I'm done hustling.

RICHIE

You know work is never a guarantee anybody's out of the game. I've had a couple legit jobs of my own, good ones. But I still took people for whatever I could get.

MAGGIE

I know. I was there.

RICHIE

It's in my blood, and in yours too. But what I learned about you isn't half as interesting as what I learned about Mr. Leonard Hutchison . . . Esquire.

(Elbows on her knees, MAGGIE lowers her head to her hands.)

RICHIE

Not just *a* lawyer but *the* lawyer. His own firm, which means there's nobody to stop him from doing his legal secretary. Personal injury, corporate firefighting, criminal defense—Lennie does it all and does it so well that last year he bought a brand new Aston Martin.

(Looks at her, bends close to lift her chin.)

Do you have any idea what that car cost? I had to see this guy who won my Maggie's heart, so I waited across the street from his office . . . Funny, but he doesn't look a thing like James Bond. Tell me again how you're done hustling?

MAGGIE

(Standing, sidling away from him.)

I'm done. I'm getting married a week from today.

RICHIE

You love him.

MAGGIE

(Hesitating.)

Yes.

RICHIE

I watched him walk you to your door the other night. Even from the corner I could tell he kisses like a small mouth bass.



(MAGGIE turns away from him. RICHIE pulls her to him and gives her a good long kiss. She is clearly aroused.)

RICHIE

Tell me again that you love him, that you want to spend the rest of your life with him.

MAGGIE

(Suddenly stepping back, holding him at arm's length.)

Damn it, Richie, you weren't supposed to come back like this. You were supposed to stay dead.

(For a moment they look at each other, neither speaking.)

MAGGIE

(Suddenly understanding.)

You burned through your share, didn't you? I used mine to buy this house and go to school and make a life, but yours is gone and you've got nothing to show for it. So here you are, hoping I'll cut you in on *my* next gig.

(Laughs.)

But you're out of luck.

RICHIE

Why? Because you won't cut me in or you're really out of the game?

MAGGIE

Does it matter?

RICHIE

It does to me. You're a natural. I hate to see you waste your talent.

(Pause.)

Of course, if you're done, maybe that's better. I bet Lennie's generous and will give his new wife blank checks anytime she asks.

MAGGIE

If you think—

RICHIE

Of course, I wonder what he would say if he knew you already had a husband. Maybe I'll just stick around for your dinner party tonight and find out.

MAGGIE

You know about my party?

RICHIE

I know lots of things, Mags.

(MAGGIE moves downstage, hugging herself.)

RICHIE

Being dead hasn't been all that easy. At least you got to keep your name. Play the widow.

MAGGIE

What name are you using these days?

RICHIE

Joey Foxworth.

MAGGIE

The hitchhiker?

RICHIE

Yes, you remember the guy in the grave with my name on it.

MAGGIE

Only you would climb out of a wrecked car and swap wallets with a dead man. But I figured you'd have dropped that name by now.

RICHIE

Turned out he was a drifter with no family. It was a good name to keep.

MAGGIE

(Turning to him.)

You know, we were pretty much done before the accident. Right?

RICHIE

Sure, but I made sure you were okay before I hid in the woods.

MAGGIE

Only to get your share. It was a chance for us to go our separate ways, to start over with cash.

RICHIE

I should've taken more of the life insurance. It cost a lot to make Joey work for so long.

MAGGIE

It'll cost more to let him go. You can't walk into a police station and claim amnesia like that man in England.

RICHIE

Right. And once they dig up our seatbelt poster boy, we'll both go to jail.

MAGGIE

I didn't kill him. You did.

RICHIE

He was dead already. I just covered his mouth to put him out of his misery.

MAGGIE

Mercy killing is a tough sell when you steal the dead guy's identity.

RICHIE

Maybe *you* smothered him.

MAGGIE

What?

RICHIE

Your word against mine.

MAGGIE

Bastard!

RICHIE

Doesn't really matter. Insurance fraud. Identity theft. You're the legal secretary. What's the difference between murder and accessory to murder in a case like that?

(Checking his wristwatch.)

Or maybe I should wait till Leonard and his sister get here. They're both lawyers. One of them's bound to know.

MAGGIE

(After a pause.)

So, what would it take to make you disappear?

RICHIE

You don't have enough.

MAGGIE

You were right. Leonard is *very* generous. Maybe my bank balances will convince you I can make a one-time settlement.

RICHIE

(Moving downstage to join her.)

Would that settlement include a little time in bed?

(Touching her hair, stroking her face.)

Usually, a guy married to his job like old Lennie just can't take care of business where it counts.

MAGGIE

(Trembling as if with desire at his touch.)

At this stage of . . . negotiations . . . I think everything is on the table.

RICHIE

No matter how bad anything else got, this was where everything worked for us.  
(Moves to kiss her.)

MAGGIE

(Tearing herself away to move upstage. Almost breathless.)  
They'll be here in less than an hour, Richie. We can't . . . you know . . . right now. Wait here. Let me . . . let me get my bank statements before we . . . seal the deal. Or the first part of the deal.

RICHIE

All right.

(MAGGIE goes into the dim bedroom quadrant, opens the nightstand drawer, and takes something out. RICHIE looks around, as if at the furnishings again, and smiles broadly. He turns as MAGGIE returns . She raises a pistol and fires twice. RICHIE clutches his chest and collapses to the floor.)

MAGGIE

Sorry, Richie. I never thought I'd kill for money but I need you to stay dead.  
(She kneels beside the body, finds a wallet, and stuffs it into her pocket. Then she exits upstage right and returns with a mop, bucket, big roll of duct tape and a couple large sheets of plastic, all of which she sets by the coffee table. Then she looks down at RICHIE's body and begins to swish the mop inside the bucket.)

I'm so glad I never bought that carpet.

(Blackout.)

(Darkness. Music begins to play, pleasant background music suitable for a party. Its volume is lowered as the lights come up but the music plays softly throughout the scene. Lights rise on a small party. MAGGIE is near the couch. DEE is downstage near the table, which holds snacks, soda cans, liquor bottles, paper plates, cups. She has a drink in hand and from time to time snacks from a bowl. MAGGIE moves downstage to join her, throughout the scene glancing at the couch when she is unobserved. Almost at the edge of the stage stands TED, who gazes out at the audience.)

DEE

I'm glad you're feeling better.

MAGGIE

Thanks.

DEE

When you called to cancel, we were practically out the door.

MAGGIE

You were right, Dee. This is our last Saturday to do a couples' night till Leonard and I get back from Hawaii.

DEE

Go ahead, rub it in.

MAGGIE

The nap and the extra strength aspirin did the trick.

DEE

(Looking downstage at TED.)

Don't stand so close to it, honey. You'll hurt your eyes.

TED

You always say that, Deidre. I'm far enough away. Just looks like I'm too close. What a picture!  
(Mouths DEE's next line for the audience to see.)

DEE

And you always say that.

TED

(Turns to the women.)

Maggie, you're sure Leonard won't object to moving this baby into his house? I mean, it's awfully big for a guy who hates TV. And if it needs a good home . . .

MAGGIE

He hates most TV *programs*. But he comes here to watch movies with me, and every now and then he watches a game. He likes how green the playing fields look in high definition.

TED

(Turning back, periodically reacting to what he's seeing.)

Yeah, he watches the Super Bowl and the last couple games of the World Series but never without a notebook open on his lap. The guy doesn't know how to relax.

DEE

Leave my brother alone, Ted. He's a lot better about fun and socializing than he used to be—now that he's with Maggie.

MAGGIE

If most people knew how shy he really is . . .

DEE

That's you, Maggie. He's only shy around you.

MAGGIE

Sometimes it feels like he's afraid of me.

DEE

He's just afraid of his feelings. He isn't used to having them. However much money the old Leonard made for our firm, I have to say I like the new Leonard better. In the real world he's much more human, thanks to you.

MAGGIE

You're too kind.

DEE

You're too good for him, and he knows it. Giving up your cozy little house and most of your things to go live with him in that . . . that collection of echo chambers!

MAGGIE

His house isn't bad, it's just big.

DEE

Right. Wouldn't surprise me to find the Bat Cave underneath it. When are you going to put this place on the market?

MAGGIE

Soon, but a lot has to go before the painters come.

DEE

I thought they started already—with all the paint supplies and plastic in your sun porch.

MAGGIE

It's there waiting while they finish up another job. They should come Tuesday or Wednesday after we've gone. Remind me to give you the key to let them in.

DEE

Well, if you're trying to move your furniture quickly, I have a client who does liquidations and estate sales. I'm sure he could set something up at his auction hall, or at least store some things.

MAGGIE

That's okay. I already chose my charities. What's left will go to a junkyard with a giant trash compacter. I'm having some hauled away this week. Like that sofa-bed. It's seen better days.

DEE

Doesn't look so bad to me. I could probably find a good home for it.

MAGGIE

No! The frame's cracked and wired together. By Tuesday it'll be compacted and off to a landfill.

(To TED, trying to change the subject from the couch.)

Hey, Ted, suppose we have you two over for the Super Bowl. I'll sit on Leonard's lap so he can't hold a legal pad and you can see how much better that TV looks in his living room.

TED

It's a date, but my wife can't sit on my lap during the game.

DEE

When *I* sit on a man's lap, he doesn't even think about watching a game.

MAGGIE

(Laughing uneasily.)

Keep it clean.

DEE

Why? The only people who'll be here tonight are a couple of lawyers, a legal secretary, and a robbery-homicide detective. I think together we've probably seen it all.

MAGGIE

I wonder what's keeping that other lawyer. I pushed the time back. He should have been here by now.

(Doorbell rings.)

DEE

(Looking at MAGGIE, chuckling, and shaking her head.)

Leonard always did have an uncanny knack for timing his entrances.

(MAGGIE exits upstage right.)

DEE

Ted, Leonard's here. Why don't you turn that off so we can get ready to eat.

TED

(Looking at her but then back at the audience.)

But this is the best part.

(Mouthing something silently, a line from a movie.)

DEE

You don't even have the sound on. You must have seen that movie a thousand times. Don't we own it?

TED

(Sighing and reaching out to switch off the TV.)

All right. Yipee-ki-yay, Mother Deidre.

(TED and DEE turn toward upstage. They freeze as LEONARD and MAGGIE enter. Well dressed, LEONARD seems awkward, tired.)

LEONARD

(Nervous, fumbling.)

I . . . I'm sorry I'm so late. I was . . . I was rewriting this brief—

MAGGIE

That's okay, Leonard. I know Saturday's a good day to get paperwork done.

LEONARD

(Sinking to the couch.)

I just lost track of time.

MAGGIE

(Taking his arm quickly to pull him up.)

Come on into the family room. Everybody's there.

LEONARD

(Not moving, pulling her.)

Sit with me a minute.

MAGGIE

But Dee and Ted . . .

LEONARD

(Finally pulling her down beside him.)

Just a minute, here on this couch, just you and me and nobody else.

MAGGIE

(Clearly uncomfortable.)

All right.

LEONARD

Deidre will try to mother me even though I'm her big brother, and Ted . . . well, he's never known what to make of me. But you, you're . . . you never . . .

MAGGIE

It's okay, Leonard. I love you too.

(Kisses him as DEE and TED animate, move closer.)



DEE

No wonder you want to get rid of that couch.

MAGGIE

What?

DEE

I said, no wonder you want to get rid of that couch. If you two can't make it past the front room every time he comes over, that couch must have some tales to tell.

TED

(Behind her, chuckling.)

My Lumalight is in the car. Want me to get it?

(MAGGIE looks horrified.)

DEE

(Turning and swatting his arm.)

Ted, that's disgusting.

(MAGGIE rises and starts to pull LEONARD downstage.)

TED

You started it. You said—

DEE

That's not what I meant. Jeez, who wants to look at the couch if there's . . . *Jeez!*

(All are heading back downstage when the doorbell rings.)

LEONARD

You mean for once I'm not the last one here?

MAGGIE

I'm not expecting anybody else.

(Goes upstage but before she can exit KAREN enters, carrying a backpack identical to RICHIE's.)

KAREN

Shouldn't leave your door open like that. Anybody can just walk in. Better lock it when I go.

(KAREN moves a few steps downstage and stops to look at the others, who seem stunned.)

KAREN

I don't mean to trouble you. I just want to know where he is. He's always going off somewhere.

DEE

Where is who? And who are you?

KAREN

My husband. I want to know where he is. Or where he went. He should've been back by now.

MAGGIE

(Moving toward KAREN but stopping short when she sees the backpack.)

You've made a mistake. This is my house. We're the only ones here . . . and I don't know you.

KAREN

I know he was supposed to come here. I found this address on a scrap of paper in our motel room, 297 Rutherford.

MAGGIE

Then the mistake must have been his. This is Rutherford Court. There's a Rutherford Avenue, and I think one of the suburbs has a Rutherford something or other—street, lane.

TED

There are two Rutherfords in the 'burbs.

MAGGIE

See? That paper has the wrong address, which is why your husband left it at the motel. Why would he leave behind the address of the place he was going?

TED

If your husband is missing, Mrs. . . .

KAREN

Foxworth, Karen Foxworth.

(MAGGIE reacts as KAREN steps forward to shake TED's hand. With all eyes on KAREN, no one sees MAGGIE's reaction.)

TED

Mrs. Foxworth. I'm Ted Willis, Detective Ted Willis. I advise you to file a police report.

KAREN

(Looking uncertain.)

I thought . . . But you don't look like his usual crowd. I'm sorry, barging in like this. You must think I'm . . .

DEE

That's okay, sweetie. You're upset. I'd be upset if my husband were missing.

TED

The nearest precinct is just over a mile from here. I can tell you how to get there.

KAREN

I don't have a car. I came here in a taxi.

MAGGIE

I can call you a cab.

DEE

No, she's upset. Ted can drive her. Right, honey?

TED

Sure.

KAREN

You're being so kind to me . . . and after the scene I've made.

DEE

(Shaking her hand.)

Don't sweat it . . . Karen. I'm Dee, and that's my brother Leonard . . .

(LEONARD nods and gestures in greeting.)

DEE

And this is—

MAGGIE

(Coming forward quickly to shake KAREN's hand.)

Margaret. Pleased to meet you.

KAREN

Pleased to meet you too.

TED

Where are you from?

KAREN

Me? Sioux Falls originally. My husband's from Pennsylvania. We're just passing through, on our way to where there might be some work. We do . . . seasonal work . . . here and there.

(Looking at each of them.)

You're all very kind. Thank you.

MAGGIE

(Slipping an arm about her shoulders.)

Don't mention it.

KAREN

(Faltering as MAGGIE leads her upstage.)

Could I please have a drink of something?

(Sinking to the couch, to MAGGIE's dismay.)

I'm feeling a little faint.

(Everyone reacts. Frozen, MAGGIE looks horrified. DEE brings a cup and hands it to KAREN.)

KAREN

(Sipping.)

Thank you.

DEE

Iced tea with a touch of vodka. That ought to kick start you.

KAREN

You're not what I expected. When I saw him . . .

(Points to LEONARD.)

. . . get out of that really fancy car . . . I didn't know what to think. Stuck up rich folks, you know? And I thought, there goes Joey . . . Well, you're not like that at all.

(Looks at MAGGIE and then LEONARD.)

What kind of car is that anyway?

LEONARD

(Awkwardly trying to sound cool.)

An Aston Martin.

KAREN

Aston Martin . . . like . . . like James Bond? Joey loves those movies, you know? Seen'em all.

DEE

Leonard has a license to kill, but only other lawyers and only in court.

LEONARD

Would you like to ride in it?

KAREN

(Suddenly standing.)

Really?

MAGGIE

Leonard!

LEONARD

No, I'll give Ted the keys. He can take her to the police station in style.

TED

You'll let me drive your Aston Martin?

LEONARD

(Pulling a key ring from his pocket.)

Sure.

(Pressing a button before giving TED the key fob.)

It's idling right now. Give it a minute and it'll be nice and warm inside. Kind of chilly tonight.

TED

I hope Cafferty's on the desk. Old bastard's always bustin' my balls. This'll blow him away.

LEONARD

Don't let him touch anything. Oh, it's got a six speed manual transmission.

TED

Don't worry, 007. I won't need all six to get to Moreland. But Cafferty gets the ejector seat.

DEE

Boys, if you're finished dancing the Testosterone Slide, we have a lady with a problem here.

TED

(Beginning to move upstage.)

Of course.

DEE

They're like children. Are you sure you want to marry into this family, Maggie?

(KAREN steps away from MAGGIE, her sudden motion causing everyone to stop.)

KAREN

Maggie?

MAGGIE

(Gambling here that she knows RICHIE well.)

Yes, Maggie Parks. I'm a widow. I was married to a man named Richie Parks. He died a long time ago.

(Everyone, including KAREN, looks confused that MAGGIE should say what she has. No one speaks.)

KAREN

(Breaking the silence.)

I'm sorry . . . I don't know any Richie.

(MAGGIE is visibly relieved.)

KAREN

It's just that Joey said something about seeing Mags for money, or a job or something.

(A beat.)

Anybody ever call you Mags?

MAGGIE

No.

KAREN

If Mags came through, he said, maybe we didn't have to keep moving around so much. Maybe we could even stay here. It was all up to Mags.

MAGGIE

(Sharply.)

Lady . . . Karen, I don't know your husband.

(Turning away she stalks downstage, shaking.)

(DEE, TED, and LEONARD gather around MAGGIE.)

DEE

Sweetie, is everything all right?

MAGGIE

This woman . . . she . . . All I wanted was a nice get-together and she . . . she ruined it. And she's got all of you playing good cop, good cop, good cop.

(No one sees KAREN sit on the couch again and slide to one end. As the conversation unfolds downstage, she runs her fingers along the back cushions, then probes the space between each armrest and its adjacent cushion.)

LEONARD

You're usually the calm one, honey. Aren't you overreacting just a little?

TED

After all, her husband's missing.

MAGGIE

That's what *she* says. How do you know there even *is* a husband? I think she's crazy.

TED

Then I'll just take her to the Moreland Street precinct and—

(KAREN screams and leaps up as everyone looks at her.)

KAREN

F-f-fingers!

TED

What?

KAREN

(Pointing.)

Fingers in the couch!

(TED and LEONARD go to the couch. DEE continues to stare upstage. Resigned, MAGGIE sighs and sits at the table, facing the audience. KAREN guides TED's hand alongside the armrest. After a moment he jerks his hand free. Then he lifts the bench seat enough for the audience to see the plastic in the linen compartment. Everyone turns to look at MAGGIE, who continues to face the audience.)

TED

Nobody touch a thing. Deidre, call headquarters on the direct line and give 'em my badge number. They'll get here faster.

(DEE gets a cell phone from a purse on a chair. She dials and speaks quietly into the phone.)

TED

Maggie, I hope for your sake—

LEONARD

Honey, don't say anything.

MAGGIE

Just a question, Ted.

LEONARD

(Cautioning her.)

Maggie.

MAGGIE

Damn it, Leonard, don't *you* say anything! I have a question for Karen.

KAREN

I got one for you first. Is that Joey?

MAGGIE

No, it's Richie. Joey's buried in Pennsylvania.

KAREN

I don't understand.

MAGGIE

You will.

DEE

(Closing and putting away the cell phone.)

A black and white is on its way.

MAGGIE

Now, my question. Why on earth did you stick your hands inside my couch?

KAREN

Something Joey taught me. When nobody's looking, feel down inside sofas and armchairs—

MAGGIE

(Clapping a hand to her forehead as she remembers.)

Of course!

KAREN

To see if there are any loose coins.

(MAGGIE lowers her head to her arms, folded atop the table, as everyone else stares at KAREN.)

KAREN

(Looking around.)

Don't act so superior. Most folks don't have it as good as you people. Most of us will do anything for money.

(Blackout.)



(Lights rise on the HOST, standing downstage center.)

HOST

Much later, in a session with the prison psychiatrist, Maggie was asked if she understood why she was now housed in the Midstate Women's Correctional Facility. She replied simply that she had tried to get Richie quick, but her scheme had failed.

(Pause.)

Now we will take a brief intermission. Any coins you find under the seats or on the floor should be turned in to our lost and found, which will see that they are returned to their rightful owner, me.

(Blackout.)

## Act Two

(After the house lights go down, Act II begins as Act I does with “The Funeral March of a Marionette.” The HOST enters.)

HOST

(Deadpan.)

Welcome back to our show.

(From his inside pocket he produces a pocket watch on a chain and holds it up for the audience to see, twirling it as if trying to hypnotize them.)

Time is the universal coin of life. We can spend it if we have it. Time can be on our side, or against us, or running out on us. Time can fly or crawl or stand still. We waste time, save it, keep it, kill it, and then our time is just *up*. You see, time waits for no one but eventually catches up with everyone. Our next tale this evening is about *doing* time, which makes each tick of the clock an endless whisper and clarifies, ever so slowly, the moment that changed everything. It is entitled “The Heart of the Matter.” But what is the heart if not another timepiece, an internal clockwork with a finite number of ticks?

(Blackout.)

**“The Heart of the Matter”**

(In darkness, the ticking of an institutional clock.)

(Lights rise on the downstage right quadrant. A man in a dark suit is seated alone at the table, alternately looking around, then down at his hands, folded atop the table. HOWARD GRAY is visibly nervous, uncertain how this meeting will progress. But he is hopeful. There is the sound of shuffling papers, but HOWARD is not making the noise. Then someone clears a throat, and HOWARD looks right at the audience, waiting. After a moment, the ticking fades and the PAROLE BOARD CHAIR speaks.)

CHAIR (v.o.)

The next case under consideration is that of Howard Gray, inmate number 7743-26-9588. Mr. Gray has served twenty-four years of a life sentence for murder and manslaughter. According to the documents we’ve reviewed, he has been a model prisoner. He’s worked in the prison library and even taught literacy classes for fellow inmates. For the record, this is his second appearance here. Now . . . Mr. Gray, how are you feeling today?

HOWARD

(Nervously.)

Uh . . . fine . . . sir. Maybe a little scared.

CHAIR (v.o.)

There’s no need to be frightened, Mr. Gray. We really do have your best interests at heart.

HOWARD

Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

You were here two years ago. The make-up of the board was a little different then. I wasn’t the chair but I do recall *your* case. Do you remember how we proceeded?

HOWARD

Yes, sir. We kind of reviewed my . . . my crime . . . and then the board asked me some questions.

CHAIR (v.o.)

We’ll do exactly the same thing today. Do you recall why we decided against you last time?

HOWARD

(Struggling to get it just right.)

You said you thought . . . you said I didn’t seem to feel remorse for what I’d done. But I do now.

CHAIR (v.o.)

We'll see, Mr. Gray, but I hope for your sake you do. And the particulars of your . . . crime?

HOWARD

It was murder, premeditated murder. I admit that.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Good. Tell us about it.

HOWARD

The victim was my Aunt Lydia.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Your elderly aunt.

HOWARD

Yes. We were living with her, my wife and me. We were supposed to take care of her until . . . until she died. That's what my father put in his will. I couldn't inherit a nickel until his younger sister had gone to her reward.

(Suddenly concerned.)

And I'm not being sarcastic or anything, sir. Those were his exact words, in his will—gone to her reward.

CHAIR (v.o.)

All right. I gather it wasn't easy taking care of her?

HOWARD

No, sir, it wasn't. Not because she was an invalid, 'cause she wasn't at first. She was just . . . just hard to please. Hard to get along with. My father always said that's why the only man she ever married was a drunk. No sober man could put up with her, and even the drunk left her.

CHAIR (v.o.)

At your trial you said Mother Theresa would have strangled her. Do you still feel that way?

HOWARD

No, sir. Mother Theresa was alive then, and what I said was very disrespectful. What I meant was Aunt Lydia was about the most disagreeable person you ever met.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Disagreeable how?

HOWARD

She had a mouth on her, a tongue like a straight razor. She'd cut you every which way but loose and think nothing of it. A lot of her care fell on Julie because I had to work. Some days, by the time I got home, Julie was in tears.

CHAIR (v.o.)

So you decided to spare your wife the pain by murdering your aunt.

HOWARD

It wasn't quite like that . . . sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Then how was it?

(Lights rise on upstage left, where JULIE, in a robe, stands beside the bed, which holds a sheet-covered body. She crosses, as if tired, to upstage right as HOWARD stands and turns to face her.)

HOWARD

I called 911.

JULIE

It's too late, Howard. She's dead.

HOWARD

Are you sure?

JULIE

(Nods slowly but emphatically.)

I turn in early one night and she dies in her sleep.

HOWARD

(Just remembering.)

I have to call the store and take the day off.

(For a long moment they look at each other. Neither says anything. Then they both smile. HOWARD moves to JULIE and lifts her, twirling her around twice and setting her down.)

JULIE

Don't make me too dizzy. I'm not completely awake yet.

HOWARD

Maybe in a bit you can go back to bed, and I can join you, and we can be as loud as we want.

JULIE

Hold that thought. Give me a chance to catch up with it.

(Yawns.)

God, I thought the old bat would *never* die.

HOWARD

I guess . . . not even a pacemaker could keep her ticker going forever.

JULIE

It wasn't the pacemaker that kept her alive. It was all that venom in her bloodstream.

(Moving away from him, imitating Lydia.)

"Oh, Julie, what did Howard ever see in a nitwit like you?" "You call this soup? It could glue the walls of my stomach together." "It's a good thing you can't have children, dear. With you and Howard for parents, what chance would the poor little monkeys have?"

(Pauses, refuses to cry, and turns to HOWARD.)

She was a vile woman. I'm glad she's dead.

HOWARD

Maybe we should get a second opinion—or a wooden stake.

JULIE

Maybe a wooden toothpick. Her heart can't be much bigger than a jellybean.

(From offstage comes the sound of sirens.)

HOWARD

(Visibly nervous.)

That . . . that was fast.

JULIE

The faster, the better.

(The doorbell rings. For a moment, neither moves.)

(HOWARD exits. While he is gone, JULIE yawns, smoothes down her robe, adjusts her hair. HOWARD returns with a POLICE OFFICER who is chewing gum.)

HOWARD

This is my wife Julie.

OFFICER

Morning, ma'am.

HOWARD

This way, officer. She's in here.

(HOWARD leads the OFFICER to the bed. The OFFICER lifts the sheet so the audience can't see the body. He feels for a pulse, then examines the body and lowers the sheet.)

OFFICER

Who covered her up?

HOWARD

(Fighting his uneasiness.)

I . . . I don't know.

OFFICER

You don't know? If you didn't do it, who else could have?

HOWARD

She wasn't covered when I went to call for help, and there's nobody else here, so my wife must have covered her—out of respect.

OFFICER

Okay, who was the decedent to you?

HOWARD

My Aunt Lydia. We . . . took care of her.

OFFICER

How old was she?

HOWARD

Seventy-five.

(More sirens can be heard.)

OFFICER

Was she sick?

HOWARD

For a long time. Her heart mainly.

OFFICER

That wheelchair in your front hall—was it hers?

HOWARD

Yes, but it was out front because she's been bedridden the past couple months.

OFFICER

Was she in a lot of pain?

HOWARD

You have no idea how much pain there was.

(Doorbell rings as the OFFICER begins writing on pad.)

HOWARD

(Calling out to the other room.)

Honey, would you get that?

(As the OFFICER scribbles notes, JULIE exits and returns with a PARAMEDIC.)

PARAMEDIC

What's the emergency?

JULIE

(Pointing.)

In there.

(The PARAMEDIC goes to the bedroom. The OFFICER pockets his pad and holds up the sheet, but the audience still cannot see the body. The PARAMEDIC checks vitals.)

OFFICER

A 75 year-old invalid with a history of heart disease, dead in her bed.

(The PARAMEDIC nods, pulls out a handy-talky.)

PARAMEDIC

(Into the handy talky mike.)

Forget the kit, Billy. Just pull out the wheels. We got a stiff. Yeah.

(The OFFICER taps the PARAMEDIC and points to HOWARD. The PARAMEDIC puts away the handy talky.)

PARAMEDIC

Sorry, sir. No offense intended.

HOWARD

(Increasingly uncomfortable.)

None taken.

(All three leave and join JULIE near the couch. The OFFICER and the PARAMEDIC confer quietly for a moment, as HOWARD and JULIE look on. Then they turn to the couple.)



OFFICER

I'm going to step out to my squad car and get some forms to take your statement. The ambulance will take your aunt to the medical examiner's office—

HOWARD

The . . . the medical examiner?

OFFICER

Don't sweat it. Procedure. But this all looks pretty routine. We get these calls all the time.

PARAMEDIC

I'll be back in a minute with my partner and a stretcher.

(Both begin to exit.)

JULIE

Can I offer you some coffee . . . or tea?

(The OFFICER and the PARAMEDIC look at each other.)

JULIE

I slept like a rock last night. I really need some caffeine. It's no trouble to brew extra.

OFFICER

Sure, I'll have some while we go over your statement.

PARAMEDIC

None for me, thank you, but Billy might like a cup. I'll tell him.

JULIE

Ordinarily, Lydia would have been ringing her little bell by now, asking for breakfast or to go to the toilet. To think, I'll never hear that bell again . . .

(She turns away from them so only the audience can see her face. She is smiling broadly.)

OFFICER

We're sorry for your loss, ma'am. We'll be quick so you can get started taking care of business. Always a ton of stuff to do at a time like this.

(The PARAMEDIC and OFFICER exit. HOWARD stares at JULIE.)

JULIE

What? I'm just being sociable. We'll wait for them to go—and take that bag of bones with them—before we break out the champagne.

HOWARD

(With relief and mock astonishment.)

Why, Julie Gray! You know Aunt Lydia doesn't permit any kind of liquor under her roof.

JULIE

And you have no idea how long I've been hiding the bottle for this very day.

(They both laugh. Then they cross to each other and kiss.)

JULIE

(Breaking the kiss at last.)

Finally, we're out from under her and everything is ours. This house, your father's money, her money, whatever these crappy antiques can get in a sale. Finally.

HOWARD

Yes, baby. For us, this is the beginning of real life.

(HOWARD steps away from her just before the OFFICER enters with papers on a clipboard. HOWARD and JULIE both look sheepish, but the OFFICER seems not to notice.)

OFFICER

I'll need some information, including the name of her doctor.

HOWARD

(Nervously.)

Her . . . doctor?

OFFICER

If her doctor will verify her heart condition and sign the death certificate, it could save the medical examiner's office another autopsy, for which they'd be grateful. Today is Saturday, usually pretty busy after Friday night.

HOWARD

(Quickly reaching into a pocket for his wallet, opening it.)

Dr. Crane, Dr. Joel Crane. I . . . I have his card in here somewhere.

JULIE

(Almost happily.)

I'll put on the coffee.

(Blackout.)

(When lights rise, HOWARD is back in his chair, facing the audience, listening to the CHAIR.)

CHAIR (v.o.)

Your wife had no clue that you had poisoned your aunt?

HOWARD

No, sir. In fact, she *wanted* the autopsy. She even said she'd help cut Lydia into little pieces.

CHAIR (v.o.)

*Indeed.* One of the things that keeps parolees from re-offending is family. I know your wife divorced you soon after you came here . . .

HOWARD

Actually, she waited, sir. She waited till the estate was settled, and since I couldn't profit from my crime, she inherited everything. *Then* she divorced me.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Have you maintained any correspondence with your former wife? Would she be willing to offer any kind of emotional support?

HOWARD

Why should she . . . sir? She took the money and ran. Her last letter to me said she was entitled to it because she took care of Aunt Lydia for so long. Besides, I have no idea where she is, if she's remarried, if she's even still alive.

CHAIR (v.o.)

So you have no other family to help you form a support system?

HOWARD

No, sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Friends? A minister or fellow church members?

HOWARD

No, sir. I was never close to my co-workers, and we didn't go to church much. But I could start.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Would you explain for the board how you did it?

HOWARD

Sir?

CHAIR (v.o.)

Please tell us how you administered the poison. It is the premeditation that earned you a life sentence. If you are to be paroled, I want to take you through it again, to make sure you know exactly what you did and why it was wrong. It's not something you should ever forget.

HOWARD

(Biting his lip to suppress a smile.)

I'll never forget it, sir. It was her leftover heart medication, digitalis. Did you know it comes from plants called foxglove?

CHAIR (v.o.)

Yes. Foxglove is a poisonous plant.

HOWARD

Actually, it's a family of about *twenty* poisonous plants. I read something about them in an article—

CHAIR (v.o.)

*Several* articles, according to the trial transcript. The prosecutor used that to establish the degree of your premeditation.

HOWARD

Yes, sir, I'm ashamed to say, several articles. I learned small amounts of the medicine regulated heart rhythm but too much completely screwed things up. The rhythm, I mean.

CHAIR (v.o.)

(With some exasperation.)

How did you administer the poison?

HOWARD

I put it in her soup.

(Pause.)

And her applesauce.

(Pause.)

And her hot chocolate.

CHAIR (v.o.)

In other words, you were taking no chances.

HOWARD

None . . . I'm ashamed to say.

CHAIR (v.o.)

What was your aunt's reaction? Did she just die?

HOWARD

No, sir. She had a convulsion and began to vomit. Quite a bit.

CHAIR (v.o.)

The police report said nothing about vomit.

HOWARD

I cleaned her up before I went to bed. I changed her nightgown, her sheets and blankets, and put everything in the washing machine.

CHAIR (v.o.)

So you stood by and watched her die, then went to great lengths to cover your crime.

HOWARD

Yes, sir . . . I'm—

CHAIR (v.o.)

Yes, we know. Ashamed to say.

(Pause.)

Where was your wife during all this?

HOWARD

Asleep.

CHAIR (v.o.)

*Why* was she asleep?

HOWARD

It's in the trial record, sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

But I want to hear it from *you*.

HOWARD

I put a sleeping pill in her grape juice.

CHAIR (v.o.)

So you would be able to carry out this murder without being disturbed.

HOWARD

Yes, sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

Such elaborate premeditation.

HOWARD

Yes.

(Taking a deep breath.)

My crime was cold and calculated. I told myself I was killing her out of frustration, but the truth is, I was killing her because I was greedy. Her life was as precious to her as mine is to me. She didn't deserve to die like that. Nobody does.

CHAIR (v.o.)

(After a pause to consider.)

Let me ask a serious question, one that goes to the heart of the matter before this board: What do you regret most, murdering your aunt or getting caught?

(HOWARD freezes, continues to stare at the audience, wincing slightly at each insult that follows.)

LYDIA (v.o.)

(A cranky elderly voice.)

Howard, in my day, a man your age, a real man, did more than work at a neighborhood grocery store when he wasn't even an *assistant* manager.

(Pause.)

Howard, your father was so successful and you were such a disappointment to him. A state school, for God's sake, and you didn't even finish. Your job, your lack of ambition, your marriage to that barren nincompoop . . .

(Pause.)

No, Howard. I'm not saying you can't have . . . knowledge of your wife—though God alone knows what the pair of you see in each other. I'm saying I don't want to *hear* it. It's unsettling at my age to listen to all that thrashing and moaning. Now, you must be quieter or find another room. Perhaps the basement. It's not too damp this time of year.

(Pause.)

Go? Of course you're free to go. But the minute you walk out that door and leave me here all alone, you will regret it. With what I pay him, Mr. Meeks will have a new will written before you get where you're going. Then there's the matter of years of back rent you owe for living under my roof.

(HOWARD animates.)

HOWARD

I regret murdering her, sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

No regrets about getting caught?

HOWARD

No, sir.

CHAIR (v.o.)

No second thoughts?

HOWARD

Only about the irony, sir.

(Blackout.)

(When the lights rise, HOWARD and JULIE are seated in the armchairs, downstage left, facing the audience.)

MINISTER (v.o.)

So, at last, we have come to our final farewell for Lydia Hermione Gray—daughter, sister, aunt, businesswoman, neighbor, and friend. You have all heard her nephew Howard. Is there anyone else who wishes to speak before we commit her remains to their final transformation?

(JULIE glances over her shoulder, then leans toward HOWARD, who is visibly nervous, chewing his lip, wringing his hands, fidgeting, looking around.)

JULIE

(Stage whispering.)

There's nobody else here, except Mr. Meeks standing way in the back.

HOWARD

(Looking around abruptly.)

Meeks?

JULIE

Yes, Meeks. I think he's come to mourn her money. Didn't you see him when you were up there?

(Pause.)

Are you all right?

HOWARD

I . . . I will be.

MINISTER (v.o.)

Very well. In the name of the Father of all creation, I commend the spirit of Lydia Hermione Gray to eternity and peace everlasting. Amen.

(Pauses to shift to a more conversational tone.)

Mr. and Mrs. Gray, I've been asked to tell you that the urn will be available for collection in a few hours, and the staff of the Harper Hill Crematorium extends their sincere condolences.

(Organ music begins to play, and orange light can be seen in the faces of HOWARD and JULIE.)

JULIE

Burn, baby, burn!

(HOWARD smiles slowly, finally beginning to relax. The organ music begins to rise toward a crescendo. The orange light intensifies. Suddenly, there is a blinding flash of white light, then the sound of an explosion.)

(Blackout.)

(When the lights rise, HOWARD is back in his chair at the table.)

CHAIR (v.o.)

Ah, yes . . . the irony.

HOWARD

Like totaling your car three days after you make the final payment.

CHAIR (v.o.)

An apt simile, Mr. Gray. Why don't you explain for the newer members of our board?

HOWARD

I knew I had to get rid of the evidence. Cremation seemed the best way to make sure there'd never be an autopsy.

CHAIR (v.o.)

But then the oven exploded, killing an innocent person.

HOWARD

The minister's wife, at the organ. I was very sorry about that. Some parts of Aunt Lydia got . . . mixed up with the organist. Things got straightened out in the autopsy room . . . but the poison showed up in some kind of test . . .

CHAIR

And you were arrested.

HOWARD

Yes.

(After a pause.)

With all the reading I did on foxglove and poisons, maybe I should have read more about . . . Well, there was probably nothing to read then. There are laws in place now, all over the world. But back then most places didn't have them because it wasn't a big problem.

(Pauses, shakes his head, smiles sadly.)

How was I supposed to know that unless it was removed beforehand, a cardiac pacemaker would blow up a crematory oven?

(The clock resumes ticking.)

(Blackout.)



(Lights rise on the HOST, standing downstage center.)

HOST

Mr. Gray was denied parole again, but eventually word of his wife did reach him. She invested the Gray family money so wisely she never needed to work. She never remarried but as she grew older, she hired a nice young couple to live with her and look after her. Then she made the mistake of writing them into her will.

(Pause. Takes from his jacket pocket a road map, which he unfolds and begins to study.)

Our final story, "Return to Riverside Falls," is a study of the impulse to go home, an impulse so strong that we have an abundance of sayings to explain it: Home is where the heart is. Home is the place where they have to take you in. There's no place like home. Yes, there is comfort in the idea of going home. But what if home is where, earlier, something wicked that way went?

(Blackout.)

**“Return to Riverside Falls”**

(Darkness.)

Grandpa, what makes people crazy?  
CHRIS (v.o.)

I wish I knew.  
MITCH (v.o.)

Do you ever think about what it’s like to be crazy?  
CHRIS (v.o.)

Sometimes. Now and then I worry about it so much it scares me.  
MITCH (v.o.)

Me too.  
CHRIS (v.o.)

That scares me even more.  
MITCH (v.o.)

(Lights rise on the padded armchairs downstage. TERRY stands off to the side, flipping through a folder. MITCH, in a suit, appears behind her. She turns at the sound.)

Yes?  
TERRY

I . . .uh . . .I’m here to see Dr. Venora?  
MITCH

I’m Dr. Venora. You must be Mr. Lockett.  
TERRY  
(Shaking his hand.)

Yes.  
MITCH

Come in, please, and have a seat.  
TERRY

MITCH

Thank you.

(They sit. MITCH takes the chair facing the audience.  
TERRY returns to the folder as MITCH looks about.)

TERRY

Let's see . . . I have your referral from Dr. Palmer. Contact information. Medical history. Next of kin, Christopher Lockett, your grandson. Now I just need to make a copy of your insurance card.

MITCH

No insurance, Doc.

TERRY

If you don't have insurance—

MITCH

No, I have insurance, good insurance. I just won't be using it for . . . this.

TERRY

That's fine with me, Mr. Lockett, but you should read over this rate schedule.

(Hands him a sheet from the small table.)

Psychiatrists can be expensive. If my rates are beyond your . . . comfort, I can recommend—

MITCH

Oh, I can pay. I have money. I just don't want this on my insurance.

TERRY

All right. Perhaps we should begin.

MITCH

(Pointing toward a downstage corner.)

Do you want me to lie down on the couch?

TERRY

Most of my patients just sit.

MITCH

Oh . . . I'm sorry. I thought—

TERRY

A common misconception, thanks to Hollywood. So, according to Dr. Palmer, you're having some difficulty sleeping—

MITCH

Not sleeping, dreaming. Or trouble with one dream that keeps coming back.

TERRY

All right. Tell me about it.

MITCH

First I need to ask you a question.

TERRY

Of course.

MITCH

Would it upset you if I've read one of your books?

TERRY

No. Which book?

MITCH

*Impulse and Deliberation.*

TERRY

The Roots of Destructive and Self-Destructive Behaviors. Why, if I may ask, did you read *that* book?

MITCH

Do you remember the Riverside Slasher?

TERRY

Of course. Riverside Falls is just a few hours from here. In fact, those murders happened right after *Impulse and Deliberation* was published. I remember he was—wait . . . Lockett. *Lockett!* Are you—

MITCH

Yes, I'm the man who killed the Riverside Slasher. My daughter was the last person he killed but hardly his last victim.

(TERRY sets file aside, waits for MITCH to continue.)

MITCH

I haven't lived in the Falls since I retired, fifteen years ago. I couldn't live there any more, you understand, but every year we go back, Christopher and I—once in the spring, once in the fall.

TERRY

A pilgrimage.

MITCH

Yes. We pick a Saturday and start off in the morning. Sometimes we stop for lunch along the way. Sometimes we pack sandwiches. Either way we reach Riverside Falls by early afternoon.

MITCH (continuing)

One season is pretty much like another. The city never changes: gray sky, brown river, empty storefronts, fewer and fewer cars, fewer and fewer faces looking at us as we pass.

TERRY

That's pretty bleak.

MITCH

The city's pretty bleak. Sometimes it seems as if it's bleeding to death in trickles.

TERRY

That's almost poetic, Mr. Lockett.

MITCH

When I was young and foolish I thought about becoming a writer, Dr. Venora. But then I found I couldn't pull my eyes out of a book long enough to write anything, so I became a bookseller.

TERRY

A good profession for a book lover.

MITCH

For many years I owned the city's leading independent bookshop. That was in the days before the big chain stores and the internet. In the days before the Slasher seemed to kill the whole city.

TERRY

When was the last time you went to the Falls?

MITCH

About three weeks ago.

TERRY

If you can't live there, why do you go back?

MITCH

I have to take Christopher to visit his mother . . . and his grandmother. I want him to know how much they loved him.

(TERRY freezes. Lights dim. MITCH rises and walks to the edge of center stage. The chirping of birds can be heard. CHRIS enters from the opposite side of the stage with a picnic basket and a small folded blanket. MITCH kneels and pantomimes trimming grass with hand shears.)

MITCH

The grass is longer this year, and the weeds. I'll have to talk to the groundskeeper about that. Can't have their names covered up.

CHRIS

It's harder to find them when the grass is long.

MITCH

No, not for me. I always know right where they are.  
(Pointing.)

Spread out the blanket over there.

CHRIS

All right.

(He spreads the blanket.)

MITCH

You get the sandwiches out while I trim this back.

CHRIS

(Opening the basket, removing wrapped sandwiches.)

Lemonade or iced tea, Grampa?

MITCH

You choose.

(Makes three final cuts.)

There. Now you can read their names.

(Stands, as TERRY speaks from the semidarkness.)

TERRY

It's important to you to have their names visible.

MITCH

(Looking down at CHRIS, who has frozen.)

It's important because of Chris. He needs to see their names, to know he's connected to them. Besides, he's getting older and has a lot of questions.

TERRY

What does he know about his parents' deaths? These days, with the internet—

MITCH

He knows the official story but not quite everything. I think maybe that's why I've come to you. If I tell you everything first, maybe you can help me figure out a way to tell him.

(MITCH returns to his seat as CHRIS exits, with the blanket and basket. Lights rise.)

MITCH

It all began with his mother, Sara, my only child.

TERRY

Tell me about her.

MITCH

She had a gentle soul. Even as a child, Sara could never stand the sight of suffering. Broken-winged birds, stray cats, hungry dogs—they all seemed to gravitate toward her for help.

SARA (v.o)

(As a child.)

Daddy, can we keep him?

MITCH

(Looking up, away from TERRY.)

Honey, we already have three kitties in the garage. The animal shelter can find him a good home.

SARA (v.o.)

But he's so little.

MITCH

Right, he's very little. He's smaller than the other kitties and they might hurt him.

SARA

They wouldn't hurt him.

MITCH

They might, honey, by mistake. Animals don't always understand what they're doing.

(Sighs to transition from flashback. Faces TERRY.)

As she got older she turned her attention to people, doing chores for elderly neighbors, taking meals to the sick. When she was a teenager she became a candy striper at General. It was no surprise that she went to college for nursing. It was through nursing that she met her husband.

(Lights rise on the bed area. LOUIS is in the bed, and SARA, in a nursing uniform, stands beside him.)

SARA

Mr. Garrow, my name is Sara. I was just transferred to this wing. I'll be looking after you today.

LOUIS

Please tell me everyone else on this end has been discharged so I can have you all to myself.

SARA

No, sir, but I'm only a buzzer away.

LOUIS

Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?

SARA

Mr. Garrow—

LOUIS

That's *Doctor* Garrow, which means I'm smart enough to notice the absence of a wedding ring.

SARA

Well then, *doctor*, perhaps you can explain your chart to me. I don't recognize these notations.

LOUIS

Actually, I'm an anthropologist, at Riverside U. You have to ask Dr. Creighton about my chart.

SARA

And the medication I'm supposed to give you is not something I'm familiar with. This package doesn't even come from the hospital pharmacy.

LOUIS

You'll have to ask Creighton about that too. He called in a specialist named Talbot. All I know is, I picked up some kind of bug in the blood while doing fieldwork. Creighton assures me it's not contagious, so if you want to eat your lunch here while I try the hospital's mystery meat . . .

SARA

Do I look that desperate for a date?

(Lights dim on the bed area.)

MITCH

Sara was 25 when they met. Louis was twelve years older but seemed to have a lifetime's more experience. He was one of those gifted kids who went to college early and had his Ph.D. by the time he was twenty-three. After years of field research he was ready to settle down and become a professor.

TERRY

How did you feel about the age difference and his experience?

MITCH

When she first told me about him, I was against her dating him. Then I met him. He was tall and dark, too good-looking to be anything but an older man trying to score with a pretty young nurse. What father wants that for his . . . she . . . she . . .

(Begins to cry.)

She was pretty, you know. More than pretty. Beautiful. And I miss her so much.

(TERRY offers him the tissue box on her chairside table.)

MITCH

Thank you.



TERRY

You're welcome. You thought he was an older man trying to take advantage of your daughter.

MITCH

Yes, but when I talked to him, he was . . . nice, considerate, a gentleman. Actually, he was shy. There was something about Sara, he said later, when he asked me for her hand—imagine that, he asked me for her hand! There was something about her that made him gravitate toward her.

TERRY

And you and your wife had no objection to the marriage?

MITCH

How could we? The more we got to know him, the more we realized he had spent so much time pursuing his work that he really didn't have the kind of experience we were worried about. In many ways Sara was . . . more worldly than Louis.

TERRY

She had dated more than he had.

MITCH

Yes. Thank you for putting it so kindly. The truth is, he courted us all.

(Standing and moving toward the living room area.)

(ANNA and LOUIS enter. He sets props on coffee table.)

MITCH

He cooked for us and told us stories of his travels. His house was like a museum, full of artifacts and old books. I understood why he was considered one of the university's best teachers.

LOUIS

(Holding up fur, then setting it down after speaking.) Like this. This skin was worn nearly 1,000 years ago by a Norse warrior called a Berserker, a bear-shirter. Imagine sitting around your fire one night, and ten guys in skins like this one come screaming down the hill at you, swinging clubs and axes. If you were lucky enough to survive, you'd tell your friends you were attacked by some kind of cross between a man and an animal.

ANNA

(Picking up a dagger and handing it to LOUIS.)

What's this? Looks like a pretty fancy letter opener.

LOUIS

(Turning the dagger over in his hands.)

Actually, ma'am, it's an ivory dagger—or a replica of one—from ancient Egypt, from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, about 1450 B.C. Sometimes replicas are used for lectures and demonstrations because the real piece is far too valuable to take out of the museum.

MITCH  
(Pointing to an elongated skull.)

And that's rather ugly.

LOUIS  
A model, sir, of a skull belonging to *homo neanderthalis*.

MITCH  
(Picking up the skull.)  
Hello, Grandpa.

LOUIS  
Not exactly. DNA studies tell us Neanderthals were not a subspecies of *homo sapiens*. There are some similarities, like a hyoid bone that may have made speech possible. But they were not as adaptable as early humans. Infinite adaptability is what makes us special. For what it's worth, though, Neanderthal brain pans were larger than ours.

ANNA  
When you think about what we watch on television, that's not hard to believe at all.

MITCH  
(Laughing with LOUIS, then moving downstage to the table as LOUIS and ANNA withdraw.)  
Yes, Louis was charming and engaging and devoted to Sara. Even before they married, I began to think of him as the son I'd never had.

(Part of Mendelssohn's Wedding March is heard, as ANNA enters, joining MITCH who has taken a seat at the table.)

ANNA  
You looked so handsome up there, Mitch, giving our little girl away. You should—is that a tear?  
(She sits beside him, places a hand on his arm.)

MITCH  
Just something in my eye, Anna.

ANNA  
Oh, no, you big old softie! After I got all cried out last night, I'm not going to let you get away with the something-in-my-eye routine.  
(Chuckles, then sighs and looks out toward the audience.)  
They make a good-looking couple, don't they?

MITCH  
Yes, they do.

ANNA

(Suddenly crying.)

Oh, Mitch, our baby! Our baby is gone. What am I going to do? What are we going to do?

MITCH

I thought you were all cried out.

(ANNA swats his arm. They both laugh and rise. They move upstage toward the bed, where the lights rise. SARA is in the bed, holding a blanketed bundle. LOUIS stands beside the bed, smiling.)

MITCH

(As they move toward the bed.)

We laughed and cried and laughed. Their wedding was the happiest day of our lives, until the day Chris was born a year later.

ANNA

What a beautiful baby! So big and already looking around! Hello there, little fella. Come meet Grandma and Grandpa.

(SARA hands the bundle to ANNA, who holds it and coos. MITCH looks over ANNA's shoulder.)

SARA

(Tired.)

He has his father's eyes.

ANNA

More than his eyes, dear. All his dashing good looks. His chin, his mouth, his dark hair. Louis, you couldn't deny this child if you had a gun to your head.

(ANNA sits on the edge of the bed, close to SARA.)

MITCH

(Moving away to the interior edge of the quadrant.)

Louis, would you come over here a minute?

LOUIS

(Joining him.)

What is it, Mitch?

MITCH

(Taking out an envelope and handing it to LOUIS.)

Here, open it. It's a little something for the baby.

LOUIS

(Opening it.)

Mitch, this is . . . goodness! You shouldn't have.

MITCH

Yes I damn well should. It's for my first grandchild.

LOUIS

I can't accept this. It's too much.

MITCH

Take a few hundred to buy some necessities, then bank the rest for . . . What are you going to name him anyway?

LOUIS

I think we've decided on Christopher, my middle name.

MITCH

Set up a high-yield account in Christopher's name and let it sit there. Eighteen years from now it'll help with college or in sixty years it'll help him retire. Just let it grow for his future.

LOUIS

This is very generous of you, but I can't let you and Anna put yourselves out.

MITCH

We weren't able to start saving money for Sara until she was in her teens. Then she got a full scholarship and a job and seldom came to us for help so it just sat there. This is her money. It should be put away for her son.

LOUIS

Thank you.

(A nervous laugh as he looks back toward the bed.)

He does look like me, doesn't he?

MITCH

A little professor if I ever saw one.

LOUIS

Then let's hope he takes after Sara on the inside.

MITCH

If he does, he'll be the sweetest man alive.

(Pause.)

Is everything all right?

LOUIS

Frankly, Mitch, I'm a little scared.

MITCH

That's normal, son. Babies are fragile and the world can be harsh. But with you and Sara for parents, he'll do just fine.

(Blackout.)

(When the lights rise, MITCH is back in his chair, beside TERRY. No one else is now on stage.)

TERRY

When did things start to go wrong?

MITCH

Chris was seven or eight months old when the first murder happened. Some boys riding bikes near the river veered off the path and found a body—a man slashed so badly the medical examiner said there were at least three assailants. When he turned out to be a doctor known for cooking up homemade narcotics, the case was investigated as a drug gang killing. Of course, all that changed a few days later when the second victim was found.

TERRY

Wasn't she a housewife who'd gone missing?

MITCH

She disappeared from home one night while her preschoolers were upstairs asleep and her husband was at work. When she was found, her body was in even worse shape than the first. A crooked doc dealing drugs? He got what he deserved. But this woman—her murder rocked the city. Everybody began to wonder if some new kind of Manson family was on the loose.

TERRY

Nobody thought it might be the work of a single man?

MITCH

They did eventually, but at first everything was just too . . . terrible.

TERRY

How did your family react?

(Lights rise on the table and chairs. ANNA and SARA are seated. LOUIS is standing behind her. MITCH comes from the opposite side. ANNA is reading the newspaper.)

ANNA

Those poor people! What an awful way to die!

MITCH

Now, Anna, the thing here is to remember to be careful. We must keep our doors and windows locked. And the building does have an alarm system.

ANNA

I'm not worried about us, Mitch. We live over a bookstore. The kinds of people who do these sorts of things wouldn't be caught dead near a bookstore. I'm worried about Sara.

SARA

Mom . . .

MITCH

Sara has Louis to look after her. Right, Louis.

LOUIS

I'll do my best.

ANNA

What about when you're not here? When you're away at one of your conferences?

SARA

Mom, I'll be fine.

MITCH

Wouldn't hurt you kids to have an alarm system installed too.

(Everyone freezes but MITCH, who speaks to TERRY.  
As he speaks ANNA and LOUIS exit.)

MITCH

Louis promised to buy an alarm but never did. After a few weeks without a killing, I guess I got complacent, until two more died and the papers started using the name Riverside Slashers.

TERRY

Then what happened?

MITCH

I went over to Sara's to see Louis, to tell him in no uncertain terms that any house with my daughter and grandson must have an alarm. If money was a problem, I would pay for it myself.

TERRY

What did he say?

MITCH

He wasn't there, so I told Sara I would hire an alarm company myself.

TERRY

What did she say?

MITCH

Nothing. She smiled and kissed me on the cheek, then showed me what Louis had given her.  
(Coughs, as SARA animates.)

Honey, do you know how to handle that thing?

SARA

(Producing a revolver from beneath the table.)

Louis takes me to a pistol range, Dad. And we've gone shooting in the forest near the Falls. Actually, I've gotten very good.

MITCH

I can't imagine you shooting someone, Sara. Killing someone. Not you. It's not your nature.

SARA

What is it Louis is always saying about humans? We adapt better than any other species. Well, I'm not that little girl who fed birds and squirrels. I've grown up, Dad. I've adapted. I know that sometimes animals have to be put down.

MITCH

(Taking the gun to examine it.)

But a .38 is no match for—

SARA

(Taking it back.)

Louis says it's gun enough to do the job.

MITCH

All right. But you still need an alarm. I'll have someone here in the morning.

SARA

Dad, I love you, but that's my decision—and Louis's. This isn't your house.

(MITCH moves back to his seat as SARA exits.)

TERRY

How did that make you feel?

MITCH

Frustrated. Foolish. Annoyed.

TERRY

But you accepted that the decision was theirs. How do you feel about it now?

MITCH

I know now the alarm wouldn't have mattered.

TERRY

So you can forgive yourself for not insisting.

MITCH

Yes . . .

TERRY

Good. Why don't you tell me what happened next.

MITCH

The murders continued, three more by the end of the third month. All the bodies turned up near the river, though they'd been killed elsewhere. State and local police joined forces with the FBI. Nothing. Police and armed volunteers patrolled the banks. Nothing.

TERRY

As I recall, the killings had a terrible effect on the community.

MITCH

Yes. People put in new locks, glass block windows, steel security doors. They got alarm systems, guard dogs, guns. Smaller stores and restaurants began closing as customers stopped coming out. Seven victims in three months. And then . . .

(Voice breaks.)

Then . . .

TERRY

It's all right, Mr. Lockett. You can tell me about the night your daughter died.

(Blackout.)

(A telephone rings twice in darkness. MITCH, in his robe, sits up in bed, switches on a bedside lamp. ANNA is asleep beside him. He answers the bedside telephone.)

MITCH

(Groggy.)

Hello.

SARA (v.o.)

(Almost a whisper.)

Dad! There's something wrong —

MITCH

Sara? It's after two . . .



(The sound of breaking glass as if through the phone.)

SARA (v.o.)

Too late.

(More breaking glass. The phone goes dead.)

MITCH

Sara!

ANNA

(Stirring.)

Mitch, what—

MITCH

Call the police! Send them to Sara's!

(Blackout.)

(Lights rise on the house in disarray and MITCH kneeling beside SARA.)

MITCH

(Taking out a large old cell phone, pushing buttons.) Lie still, honey. Lie still. I'll get help. Where's Christopher? Hello? I need an ambulance, 958 Brazelton Drive!

SARA

Chris . . .

MITCH

Yes, the owner is Louis Garrow. No, I'm his father-in-law, Mitch Lockett. Now please hurry.

SARA

Get Chris . . . please . . .

MITCH

Where is he?

SARA

Upstairs . . .

MITCH

Don't move. I'll get Chris. I need that ambulance *now*!

SARA

Gun . . .

MITCH

Honey, where's Louis? The nature of my *what*? Somebody hurt my daughter, you idiot, maybe my grandson. I need help right—

(A scraping sound, as of something sharp scratching wood.)

MITCH

(After a pause to register the sound.)

Who's there?

SARA

Here . . .

(A guttural, throaty sound, almost a growl.)

SARA

Take it . . .

(MITCH takes the gun from SARA, holds it up.)

(An ill-defined shadow moves toward MITCH from the darkness. He fires—once, twice, three times. Finally the thing staggers backward, falls. Mitch looks toward it, then drops the gun, obviously in shock.)

TERRY

Mr. Lockett? Mr. Lockett?

(MITCH snaps back to the present, returns to his seat.)

TERRY

When did you learn you'd shot your son-in-law?

MITCH

As soon as I bent over his body. I could see his face in the moonlight.

TERRY

You used the gun Louis had given Sara. I recall the irony of that. Three bullets left and you used them all.

(MITCH looks at her but says nothing. A lighting shift gives SARA a chance to exit.)

TERRY

When did you learn Louis was the Slasher?

MITCH

Not until later, after the police came. My first thought was of Chris. I heard him crying and ran upstairs.

TERRY

When did the police arrive?

MITCH

Within a few minutes. First they took Chris away from me. Then they cuffed me and put me in the back of a squad car. I tried to explain Sara's phone call but nobody listened—until they found that makeshift cell in the basement.

TERRY

I remember the pictures from *Time* magazine.

MITCH

The news media had a headline party. Dr. and Mrs. Riverside Slasher. The Torture Chamber in the Middle of the City. Slashers Turn on Each Other. Then the forensic reports came back on the cell. Chains, scratches in the stone walls, bloodstains from the victims. Finally, the autopsies were made public. Louis had some kind of brain lesion, so he had an excuse. But Sara's brain was perfectly normal. She had no excuse, and as her parents neither did we.

TERRY

I understand why you had to move.

MITCH

The city bought the bookstore so we'd leave sooner. Louis and Sara left enough insurance for us to give Chris a good life, and we gave him our name. Anna hung on for a few more years, but the pain and shame of knowing her only child had become an accomplice to murder . . .

(Voice breaks.)

Chris was five when she died. I took her home quietly, to bury her next to Sara.

TERRY

What about Louis?

(CHRIS enters from the opposite side, stands downstage center facing the audience. The sound of birds chirping.)

MITCH

I'd already had his ashes scattered.

CHRIS

Grampa, do you think Mom and Grandma are in heaven?

MITCH

(Still in his seat, looking at CHRIS's back.)

Yes, I do, especially your mom. She liked to take care of animals. They seemed to come to her for help. The angels must have a special place for people like that.

CHRIS

Should we pray for them?

MITCH

Yes, son, we should. Just give Grampa a minute to finish his lemonade.

TERRY

Mr. Lockett, would you like to tell me about your dream now?

(CHRIS sits and freezes, still facing the audience.)

MITCH

Of course, Dr. Venora. It's about that night, the night I shot Louis, but you've got to understand where it comes from. I've thought about all this for a long time. I know everybody thinks Louis used the cell to imprison his victims and then kill them. And I know Sara helped him but I wonder if she helped him kill—or did she help him by locking him in that cell?

TERRY

I'm not sure I follow you, Mr. Lockett.

MITCH

Did she lock him up to keep him from killing? I think he found a way out of his cell and in one of his fits turned on her. Did his brain lesion cause the change in him or was it something he got from Dr. Talbot, his very first victim?

TERRY

I didn't realize—

MITCH

No one does. I found a note from Talbot in Louis's desk. It said something about a serum that needed to be reformulated. I destroyed it. To protect Chris. I'd do anything to protect him. I've even taken a job as a janitor in his school.

TERRY

How does any of that protect him?

MITCH

In my dream, when I shoot the killer and look into his face, it's Christopher.

(Lights on CHRIS dim slowly, making him look gradually more shadowy, more sinister.)

TERRY

It's a dream rooted in trauma, and you're transferring your experience with his father to—

MITCH

No! Christopher is his father's son. Same hairline, same eyes, same nose, same mouth. He's even showing signs of the same mustache.

TERRY

But he's not his father.

MITCH

Louis's genes are strong, and I don't know if they have a role in this . . . this . . .

TERRY

This kind of mental illness is not hereditary. The sins of the father, or the mother, need not visit the son.

MITCH

Not ordinary mental illness. Something else, something worse. I love Chris and I'm scared the same thing will happen to him. Dr. Venora, am I crazy, or just terrified?

TERRY

Sometimes, Mr. Lockett, nothing is crazier or more terrifying than love.

MITCH

I know the official reconstructions of what Louis did. But I know what I saw that night. I know what I shot. That's why I took these out of the gun and hid them inside the foam mattress in Christopher's crib. If the same thing happens to him, I'll be ready. I'm the only one who can deal with it.

(He withdraws his hand from his suit jacket pocket and holds something out to TERRY. His expression is grave enough and wild enough that he might be serious or he might be mad.)

MITCH

Much as it saddens me, I'm glad I still have three silver bullets.

(Blackout.)

(Lights rise on the HOST, standing downstage center.)

HOST

(Shaking his head.)

Poor man. However engaging his story, the good doctor had a legal and professional obligation to report him . . . for endangering the welfare of a child. Doctor-patient confidentiality does have its limits. You can't go around promising to shoot your grandson. Once Mr. Lockett was safely in custody, social services swept in and placed young Christopher with a loving foster family . . . who have since disappeared.

(Pause. The HOST gestures, and the ensemble files in behind him. They have their hands behind their backs.)

We hope you have enjoyed tonight's presentation of *Murder Squared*, our modest tribute to the classic mystery short story. Now that you have strolled through our garden of sinister delights, you might be inclined to think that the practice of murder is easy to undertake. Remember, murder is a serious business best left to professionals . . .

(Cast members produce various weapons from the show: the guns, the rope, the pill bottle, the knife, the ivory dagger.)

. . . so do not—I repeat, do not—attempt to commit one at home. The best place for murder remains the page or the stage, where the—

(The sound of a gunshot rips through the theater. The HOST clutches his back, drops to his knees and collapses. Behind him one member of the ensemble holds the gun he or she has just fired.)

SHOOTER

(Looking at shocked cast mates and shrugging.)

What? *Somebody* had to do it.

(Cast members bow and exit, leaving the HOST dead.)

(Blackout.)

*Props for all plays*—Quadrant 1/upstage right: couch (convertible sofa bed with bench seat and storage compartment) and coffee table; Quadrant 2/upstage left: a single bed with two pillows (holds two actors in one brief scene), a nightstand, and a bedside chair; Quadrant 3/downstage left: two matching stuffed chairs and one small lamp or utility table; Quadrant 4/downstage right: a circular table and three chairs. *Additional props used to dress each play differently*: table cloths and scarves, couch covers, sofa pillows, bedspreads, other props as desired.

*Sounds and music*—“The Funeral March of a Marionette” by Charles Gounod; organ music; Mendelssohn’s Wedding March; soft jazz; party music; clicks for light switches and television; an audio system that permits voice-overs; crackles for telephone voice-overs; gunshots; wood burning (with orange light); explosion (with a burst of light); a ticking clock; sound of shears cutting grass; approaching sirens; breaking wood; shattering glass; car engines; car doors.

Prologues and epilogues:

wad of cash	road map	watch and chain	pocket calculator
a gun			

“The Engineer”

three guns	rope	grocery box	pill bottle
a knife	a cloth hood	temporary tattoos	wristwatch
a camera	six latex gloves	two police uniforms	water bottles
bag of cookies	overnight bag	handkerchief	

“Anything for Money”

bridal magazine	a gun	a backpack	soda bottles
wine bottles	snack bowls	cups/glasses	roll of duct tape
plastic sheeting	wallet with money	keys/car fob	a purse/cell phone
bucket and mop	engagement ring		

“The Heart of the Matter”

covered body	woman’s robe	man’s robe	police uniform
paramedic uniform	pen/note pad	handy talky mike	wallet
clipboard	man’s suit	woman’s suit	

“Return to Riverside Falls”

man’s raincoat	man’s robe	man’s suit	a gun
small blanket	picnic basket	tissue box	blanketed baby
nurse uniform	elongated skull	a dagger	mound of fur
file folder	sheets of paper	telephone	old cell phone
wrapped sandwiches	soda cans	lamp	envelope with money

**Performance rights must be secured before production. For contact information, please see [the Murder Squared information page](#).**