

TH/IR/DS

By

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CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

0 MALE / 4 FEMALE

MAYA, a beautiful and determined young woman (F—27)

OLIVIA, her older sister, a librarian (F—29)

DELILAH, her older sister, a parent (F—33)

PHYLLIS HOFMEYER, a prospective homebuyer (F—33)

SETTING

The entire play takes place in the combination living room / dining room of the Tuck residence in an upscale suburb of New York City. One door exits to the garage stairs, the other to the kitchen and beyond. Neither the garage nor the kitchen are visible. Those who favor realism might furnish the stage with a damask sofa stacked high with pillows, an assortment of armchairs, a rocking chair, cluttered bookshelves, armoires filled with knickknacks, a dining room service beneath a chandelier, and a crescent-shaped glass coffee-table of the variety that was fashionable during the 1970s. A tablecloth should cover the dining room table; a bouquet of flowers sits in a vase on the tabletop. High budget productions might include a piano—although no one in the Tuck household has played a piano in many years, nor ever played one well. Above all, the room should appear “lived-in”: pizza boxes open on the coffee table, old board games piled high on the sofa. Also gardening supplies, an easel, maybe works of sculpture in progress. In short, this is what happens when a free-spirited twenty-seven year old takes over a house from a middle-aged matron.

SCENE ONE

(The curtain rises on Maya, in mason's whites, constructing a brick wall across the Tuck's living room. The wall separates exactly one third of the stage from the other two-thirds, running from upstage to downstage. It is approximately as high as Maya's knees. While Maya works, a lit cigarette dangles from between her lips—sending drifts of smoke into the room. A long pause, at opening, should permit the incongruity of the wall to sink in. Then, Olivia approaches Maya, but backs off at the last moment. This should occur several times, with Maya ignoring her sister's efforts. Eventually, Olivia speaks.)

OLIVIA

This is a bad idea.

MAYA

(Without looking up from her work.)

Could be.

OLIVIA

I read recently that, at the height of the Cold War, the United States military considered attaching nuclear-powered rockets to the moon and flying it into the Soviet Union....This is a worse idea than that.

MAYA

Could be.

OLIVIA

Please, Maya. Delilah is going to go through the roof.

MAYA

Could be.

OLIVIA

You're not listening to me.

MAYA

Could be.

OLIVIA

(On the verge of tears.)

Nobody *ever* listens to me....Not since Mama died....Sometimes, I think if I shot myself, you'd all just think it was a car backfiring....

MAYA

Don't get yourself worked up, Livy. I *was* listening to you....You were telling me how the Pentagon planned to take the moon for a joyride.

(Looking up.)

Can you pass me that trowel—the one with the tapered blade?

(Olivia hands Maya the trowel reluctantly; Maya returns to laying bricks. The women are on opposite sides of the wall: Maya in the "one-third," Olivia in the "two-thirds.")

OLIVIA

When we have a difference of opinion at the library—let’s say over which new books to order in a given year—we always form a committee....That way each librarian has a chance to voice her ideas. It’s a very healthy way to do things.

MAYA

If I ever open a library, I’ll keep that in mind.

OLIVIA

What I meant was: Maybe *we* should form a family committee. You, me and Delilah.

MAYA

I realize you’re trying to be helpful, Livy. But let’s face it: If you’d been advising Columbus, he’d have had a committee debating if the earth was round—and we’d still be in Eastern Europe, fighting off Cossacks while our husbands argued about whether the Old Testament permits bacon made from soybeans. Trust me: Some situations call for decisive action....Would you pass me that level?

(Olivia hands Maya the level reluctantly; Maya measures her work with satisfaction.)

OLIVIA

Mama wouldn’t have liked you smoking in the house.

MAYA

Mama wouldn’t have liked you *selling* the house.

OLIVIA

Don’t drag me into this. That’s between you and Delilah.

MAYA

I'm not *dragging* you into anything. You inherited one third of the house...It's about time you acted like you owned one third of the house.

OLIVIA

I do my part. I've paid my share of the taxes.

(Maya extinguishes her cigarette. She steps over the wall into the "two-thirds.")

MAYA

(Mimicking Olivia)

"I've paid my share of the taxes."

(In her own voice)

Assert your authority, for once. If you own one third of this house, *act* like you own one third of this house. Put your feet up on something. Mark your territory. Piss in a corner, for Christ's sake.... Say to me: This is my third of the house. Come on. Say it. Say: Maya, you're trespassing on my third of the house. Say it!

OLIVIA

(Tentatively)

Maya....You're trespassing on my third of the house.

MAYA

This is your *property*, dammit. Your castle. The house where your mother died.

(More forcefully)

Say: "Maya, you're trespassing on my third of the house."

OLIVIA

(More confidently)

“Maya, you’re trespassing on my third of the house.”

MAYA

That feels good, doesn’t it? Say: I pay my goddam taxes, Maya. You’ve got no business trespassing on my third of the house.

OLIVIA

(Decisively)

I pay my goddam taxes, Maya. You’ve got no business trespassing on my third of the house.

MAYA

Say: Maya, get the fuck out of my third of the house!

OLIVIA

(With great fervor)

Maya, get the fuck out of my third of the house!

MAYA

(Confronting Olivia)

And if I won’t?! If I won’t get the fuck out of your third of the house?!

OLIVIA

If you won’t, then I’ll...I’ll...I’ll go back to the library.

MAYA

(Dismayed)

You would do that, wouldn’t you?

OLIVIA

Or I could go straight back to my apartment....I'm thinking about baking a pie for the new reference librarian....He's very...distinguished-looking. You don't think a pie would be too forward, do you? Nothing fancy, of course—Nothing with cream or meringue. Just an innocuous Dutch apple pie...or maybe a rhubarb cobbler....

MAYA

I thought you were meeting Delilah here.

OLIVIA

I am...

(Clearly befuddled)

Why don't I *invite* you into my third of the house? That way you wouldn't be trespassing and there'd be no reason to argue.....

(Maya returns to bricklaying.)

MAYA

Arguing is healthy....It prevents plaque from building up in your arteries.

OLIVIA

Is that true?

MAYA

I have no idea. I'm not a doctor.

OLIVIA

But where did you hear it?

MAYA

Oh, I just made it up. It sounded good.

OLIVIA

You can't just make things up because they sound good.

MAYA

Or what? The army is going to fly the moon into me...? I tell you what: I'll worry about whether or not I can make things up—and you help me out with the wall.

(She takes a bucket of dry cement paste, pours water into it and hands it to Olivia.)

Why don't you stir that to keep it from hardening?

(Olivia begins to stir the bucket gently.)

OLIVIA

I'm not an ostrich, Maya. I know you think I am. But I'm not.

MAYA

(Admiring the wall)

Doesn't it look solid? I'm so glad I went with brick and not wood....

OLIVIA

You think I live with my head in the sand. But you're wrong. I know the world is full of mad bombers, and sex predators, and self-proclaimed evangelists who steal the artificial limbs from wounded war veterans....I recognize that every day traveling circus clowns seduce and abandon teenage girls...and that escaped baboons carry sleeping children out of their bedrooms and bash in their skulls in with stones....But just because I know about it doesn't mean that I have to like it.... You and Delilah are the only family I've got. I have every right to want us to be happy.

MAYA

Do you know what would make me happy?

OLIVIA

What?

MAYA

It would make me happy if you were less interested in making everybody happy. This isn't Woodstock.

OLIVIA

But I was reading this book—

MAYA

—You and your library books! You're no better than Mama and her fan letters....Don't you ever want to break loose and walk up to a hot guy on the sidewalk and jump him? Just start going at him right there—in front of his wife, or his mother-in-law, or whomever? Or don't you want to look up a professor who gave you a lousy grade in college and then go bash in her car windows with a shovel? Or—I don't know—track down some deadbeat with a whole sack of overdue library books and hold him hostage at gunpoint for a few days?....Maybe make him read *Moby Dick* out loud until he begs for mercy....Don't you ever want to stand up to the world and say: I'm in charge here. Cross me at your peril. I have only one chance at life, goddammit, and I'm not taking any prisoners. Don't you ever want that?

OLIVIA

(Shocked)

No....I don't.

MAYA

No, of course you don't....You really are just like Mama....Do you know what else would make me happy?

OLIVIA

What?

MAYA

If you stopped bringing me flowers.

OLIVIA

I thought you liked flowers

MAYA

I do. I love them. They're beautiful....But you're not bringing them for me. You're bringing them for Mama—like you've been doing every week since I can remember. Only Mama isn't here anymore.

OLIVIA

I'm sorry. I never thought of it that way.

MAYA

And do you know what else would make me really happy?

OLIVIA

What?

MAYA

It would make me really happy if you could stir a bit more aggressively. It's a bucket of cement, Livy. Not a martini.... Like this....

(Maya takes the bucket and demonstrates "aggressive stirring"; then she return it to Olivia.)

OLIVIA

Please don't make me stir this. It makes me feel complicit—as though I'm enabling an alcoholic...or abetting a war criminal. This must be how the soldiers who built the Berlin Wall felt—following their orders, but knowing they were trapping themselves forever on one side of the barrier. And it turned out to be the wrong side....Maya, do you think I'm on the wrong side of the wall?

MAYA

Could be.

OLIVIA

I don't think I can go on stirring like this, not knowing which side I should be on....Why does all of life have to be about choosing sides...? Please don't make me choose sides....

MAYA

If you don't want to stir, you don't have to stir.

OLIVIA

I don't?

MAYA

Of course, you don't....It's a free country....You could join the Foreign Legion, if you truly wanted to...or the circus...or even the Republican Party....But I'm your baby sister, and it would make me really happy if you mixed that cement....

OLIVIA

What about Delilah?

MAYA

If you're lucky, we'll be done with the wall before she gets here—and that way she won't ever know that you helped out.... You can be like a double-agent.

OLIVIA

So I should work harder....

(Olivia begins stirring like a madwoman.)

That's it. I'll show the cement who's in charge around here. This *is* my third of the house, isn't it? We'll present the wall to your sister as a *fait accompli*.... a combined effort of our two-thirds.... and if she doesn't like it, I had nothing to do with it.

MAYA

Nothing at all.

(The sound of a motor vehicle, followed by an automated garage door.)

OLIVIA

(Jumping up in alarm)

Oh my God! That's her.

MAYA

You should have stirred faster.

OLIVIA

(Panicked)

What are we going to do? God help us.... This is why I became a librarian. To avoid situations like this. You never have a real crisis at the library. Worst thing you ever confront are dog-eared pages—or maybe some kid drops a new acquisition in a mud puddle—but that's not the death of western civilization, is it? We always find a way to

manage somehow...sometimes we use Scotch tape...or a steam iron, if we're desperate ...but I'm not cut out for confrontation, Maya. I'm just not. It's as though somebody dropped your older sister into a mud puddle.

DELILAH

(From offstage)

I'm home!

OLIVIA

...I know! We'll have to hide it.

(Olivia begins an ineffective effort to conceal the brickwork project with furniture, making a further mess of the room and inadvertently drawing additional attention to the wall; Maya attempts to stop her.)

DELILAH

(From offstage, approaching)

Someone left the lights on in the garage. I don't mean to start in on you, Maya, but they're not having any double-coupon days at the electric company.

MAYA

(To Olivia)

Get a grip on yourself. It's just a wall.

OLIVIA

To you, the Great Wall of China is just a wall....

(Olivia yanks the table cloth off of the dining room table)

and covers the brick wall with it, tucking it in around the edges as though making a bed.)

Let's hope that works.

(At the last minute, she realizes she is holding the bucket of wet cement. In desperation, she puts the vase of flowers into the bucket of cement so that it looks like a vase.

Delilah enters.)

DELILAH

It's not your responsibility to put the president of the electric company's kids through college.... What's that smell?

OLIVIA

What smell?

DELILAH

It smells like plaster.

MAYA

Are you sure it's not a blend of sulfate-resisting Portland cement and slaked lime?

DELILAH

Have you been messing around with toxic chemicals in here? Jesus, you're not running one of those crystal methadone laboratories, are you?

OLIVIA

Crystal methamphetamines....That's a leading Internet search at the library....

DELILAH

(To Maya)

Well?

MAYA

I've got to hand it to you, Delilah. You figured me out. After Mama died, I started sniffing liquid paper to keep my edge on....and that was the gateway to rubber cement, and aerosol paint, and nail polish remover—I began trucking in permanent magic markers by the kilo—and before I knew it, I was hooked on heroin, and angel dust, and rolling marijuana joints filled with crack cocaine. That's right, your baby sister funds her dope habit turning tricks at highway rest stops and running guns for the Latin Kings. You want to know why it smells in here? Because the Medellin Drug Cartel has been using this place as a safe house....From the outside, it's the set of *Leave it to Beaver*. But lurking behind those innocent bay windows is the clandestine hideaway where Colombian drug lords stockpile their Elmer's glue!

DELILAH

Okay, if you're not running one of those labs, what smells like plaster?

OLIVIA

I don't smell a thing.

(Delilah surveys the chaos of the room. She spies the covered wall, walks over and yanks off the tablecloth.)

DELILAH

What on earth?!

OLIVIA

I had nothing to do with it!

DELILAH

Let me guess. Another one of your sculptures?

MAYA

It's a wall.

DELILAH

I can see that. I just hope it hasn't damaged the parquet....

MAYA

I'm dividing the house into thirds.

DELILAH

Don't start with me, Maya.

OLIVIA

Please, let's not fight.

MAYA

This way, you can sell your two thirds and I can keep my third....It'll be sort of like a lopsided duplex.

DELILAH

We're selling the house, Maya. The *entire* house. This is not up for discussion. You'll have more than enough money left over from your third to buy a nice apartment and go on doing whatever it is that you do all day....But Olivia and I cannot to continue to pay for a four-bedroom house in the suburbs. It's just not reasonable.

MAYA

That's easy for you to say. You don't live in the house.

OLIVIA

Please, listen to me. If we all just sat down and talked this over like reasonable adults,

I'm sure we can reach a compromise....Or maybe we could settle it with a game of rock, paper, scissors....That always worked when we were kids....

DELILAH

Look, Maya. I didn't ask Mama to burst an aneurysm. I'm just dealing with things as they come at me. But I am the executor of the estate—and without the survivor's benefit from Papa's law firm, there's no way for things to keep going like this. Put yourself in my shoes for a moment. I have a mortgage of my own to pay off too. And tuition to prepare for. Am I supposed to deny my kids a college education because the money's tied up in their aunt's home equity?

OLIVIA

You and me first, Maya. Okay, ready. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot.

(Olivia plays "a rock"; Maya and Delilah ignore her.)

Rock. It would have crushed a scissors.

MAYA

Who's talking about college, Delilah? Your girls aren't even in kindergarten.

DELILAH

You have to plan ahead with these things...especially in New York....Once you have children, you'll understand what I mean....

MAYA

And if I don't *ever* have children?

DELILAH

You will.

MAYA

Maybe I won't *want* to have children!

DELILAH

That's exactly what I thought at twenty-seven. And then I turned thirty, and I was overcome with a burning desire to spread my DNA across the continent like marmalade. Just wait. You'll have your turn.

OLIVIA

It doesn't work unless we all do it. Please, Maya....Rock, paper, scissors, shoot.

(Olivia plays a "scissors"; Maya and Delilah still ignore her.)

Scissors. It would have sliced your paper to pieces.

MAYA

And you'll have your turn too. You'll be dead and your daughters will sell your house off to total strangers.

DELILAH

Probably.

MAYA

And that doesn't bother you?

DELILAH

It's not a matter of bothering me or not bothering me. There's nothing I can do about it. People buy houses and people sell houses. It's the way of the world....Besides, what do you need such a large house for?

OLIVIA

Be reasonable, Delilah. It's fun. Just like when we were kids. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot.

(Olivia plays "paper"; Maya and Delilah continue to ignore her.)

Paper. It would have.....

(Olivia is clearly befuddled. Finally, tentatively....)

It would have *suffocated* your rock.

DELILAH

For God's sake, Maya. Grow up. You can't just go caking cement onto hardwood....

OLIVIA

Why don't you two play first? Okay? On the count of three. Rock, paper, scissors—

DELILAH

(To Olivia)

And enough, already. You would have settled World War II with a coin toss....

OLIVIA

Nobody dies from a coin toss.

DELILAH

I love you, Maya. Truly. But just because I love you doesn't mean I owe you a ranch house on one-point-five acres with a clay tennis court and a Jacuzzi in walking distance of the third highest ranked public elementary school in the nation.

(Aside, to the audience)

Second-highest if you go by long term college placement.

MAYA

I can't believe you're even saying that. As though I chose some random house out of the real estate listings and said: I want that one....We grew up in this house, Delilah. Do you remember that? Do you remember our childhoods? Do you remember how Uncle Barney would carve his girlfriend's initials in a tree trunk every Thanksgiving—?

OLIVIA

—A different women every year—

MAYA

—And we'd all have to go out in the backyard to watch him carve—Stand out there for an half an hour—No matter how cold it was—

OLIVIA

—Like at an unveiling.

MAYA

Until that year he ran out of trees. Don't you remember *that*, Delilah? When Uncle Barney brought over the chubby woman with the giant lips, and he blew a gasket because all the trees were already taken? Have you forgotten the look on his face when we caught him carving "Barney loves Dolores" into the refrigerator door?

OLIVIA

Poor Uncle Barney. He didn't bring over any other girlfriends after that.

DELILAH

Mama wouldn't let him. Not without a wedding ring on his finger. I think the only reason he remarried was so he could have a date for the holidays....

MAYA

So you *do* remember! And what about the time the raccoon climbed down the chimney and tore up all the upholstery?

OLIVIA

I remember Papa taking a swing at it with a golf club and throwing out his back.

MAYA

It's not just a house, Delilah. Right where you're standing is where Jimmy Denton kissed me on the lips for the first time....And that sofa is where Jimmy and I—

DELILAH

Please! We'll tell the new owners. Maybe they'll put up a plaque that says Jimmy Denton slept here.

OLIVIA

I had such a crush on Jimmy Denton.

MAYA

That's the chair where Mama did my make-up while I waited for Walter Padruski to take me to the prom...and that's the beam where we used to hang the mistletoe, and under it is where I used to make out with Alan Templeman and—

OLIVIA

I had such a crush on Alan Templeman.

DELILAH

We'll have a plaque for Walter and a plaque for Alan—and God knows how many other plaques. Maybe you should make a list. If you can still remember.

MAYA

You're missing the point. It's not a couple of specific events. It's Mama writing those fan letters at the escritoire, and Papa trying to wire that front porch light by himself and shorting out the power for a two-mile radius, and visits from Grandma Dorri after she thought she was Joan Crawford and this was the Beverly-Wiltshire Hotel....It's our entire lives. And now you want to give it all away for thirty pieces of silver, or a pound of flesh, or whatever the going rate is for a lifetime of memories.

OLIVIA

(Hot and bothered)

Did I ever have a crush on Alan Templeman....!

DELILAH

I'm not missing the point, Maya. You're missing the point. Sure, a lot happened here. But this isn't *The Grapes of Wrath*, for Christ's sake. Papa didn't build this house from logs he hewed in the forest. He bought it from a real estate agent. And that was thirty years ago, not three hundred. I think it's delightfully quaint that you've developed this deep attachment to the land—that you've become the Tom Joad of Westchester County—but the time has arrived to move on....I told you I'd help you out in any way that I reasonably can. Todd and I will go with you to look for an apartment. Or even help you find a job, if you decide you want one. But Todd's been working twelve hour days down at the clinic, and you can only see so many crazy people in one week before you start bringing it home with you. Something has got to give, Maya. *We need the money.*

MAYA

I thought this was a fair compromise. I'd keep one third—and you'd unload the other two. Look at this:

(Maya displays a blueprint)

I tried to map it out so that both sections would have street access and bathrooms, but I'd still keep as many places with sentimental value as possible. Like the kitchen table, and the porch swing, and the pantry where we played hide-and-seek. But you don't have much leeway with only one third of a house. The hardest part was giving up Mama and Papa's bedroom, but I couldn't manage to design a wall that kept their room and an exit door in the same third. I kept having to weave in and out and double back on myself. It ended up looking like a Congressional district.

OLIVIA

Why can't we just be a happy family? They're out there, you know. Happy families. I've read about them.

DELILAH

(To Olivia)

We *can* be a happy family—as soon as your sister stops trying to bait me. She knows full well that I can't sell two-thirds of the house. Have you ever read a real estate listing that begins: "Two-thirds of a home situated on two-thirds of a lawn with garage space for 1.3 automobiles..."? She's just doing this to try to prove an abstract point...to make me feel guilty about doing what she knows I'm going to do anyway....

(To Maya)

Since when do you know anything about bricklaying?

MAYA

I learned from the Internet....You can learn anything on the Internet.

OLIVIA

Not at the library. We have filters. Otherwise, all the fathers come in on weekends and look at smut while their kids do research. It ties up the machines...

MAYA

About the only word you can type into a search engine without getting pornography is drywalling.

DELILAH

This really is too much. Has it never cross your mind that you might need permission to build fortifications across your living room?

MAYA

Permission from you?

DELILAH

Permission for the town. You can't do this kind of thing without a building permit. Didn't you learn anything from what happened with Papa and the porch light?

MAYA

I have a building permit.

(She removes the document from her mason's whites and passes it to Delilah.)

Impressed, huh? Vince Cangelosi runs the construction and variances division down at Village Hall. You do remember Vince Cangelosi, don't you? From junior high school?

DELILAH

Funny looking kid, right? Giant forehead. No chin. Nose shaped like a hatchet.

MAYA

That's him....He looks exactly the same.

OLIVIA

I had such a crush on Vince Cangelosi.

MAYA

So I'm in line, filling out the application for the permit—but then I see the part about how it can take three to six months for approval—and I swear I'm about to give up and try something else, when Vince Cangelosi recognizes me and starts telling me what a crush he had on me when I was thirteen. All it took was a small show of kindness on my end and he was more than glad to expedite the process.

DELILAH

So you slept with Vince Cangelosi and he gave you a building permit.

MAYA

I smiled at Vince Cangelosi and he fast-tracked my application.

OLIVIA

This is why I switched to the children's room at the library....All of the families in the children's room get along so well....The families in the books, I mean. *Little House on the Prairie*. *Swiss Family Robinson*. With the families outside the books, it's sometimes harder to tell....

DELILAH

Todd warned me not to let you keep living here alone. He said the estate should charge you rent—like any other tenant. That not to charge you rent was irresponsible.

“Psychologically unhealthy.” But I honestly believed I was doing the right thing by giving you some time to find yourself....Now, I'm not so sure....

MAYA

Send Todd my love. And thank him for his uncanny ability to pathologize the normal....I bet he makes a damn fine psychiatrist. But he can rest assured that I'm not lost. If I do get lost—if I fall behind the sofa or something—I'll be certain to let him know...

OLIVIA

How about we draw Scrabble letters—like we used to to determine who'd choose the pizza toppings? Whoever picks the highest letter gets to decide about the house.

DELILAH

Sometimes I want to shake you, Maya Tuck. All that beauty. All that intellectual talent. Don't you have any desire to contribute? To leave your mark on the world?

OLIVIA

(Producing a bag of letters from a Scrabble set)

Who wants to go first...?Okay, I will....

MAYA

(To Delilah, ignoring Olivia)

Have you and Todd ever considered that all progress isn't measured by the Gross Domestic Product? I contribute plenty....I've nearly completed two self-portraits.... Mama's tomato crop is having a bumper year....I've set up bird feeders all over the raspberry grove...and nectar dishes for butterflies....We have a pair of orioles nesting in the oak tree....

OLIVIA

(Drawing a letter)

Z.

(Olivia realizes the implications of drawing a "Z" and

throws the letter back.)

DELILAH

(To Maya, ignoring Olivia)

You really believe life is all about birds and butterflies and flowers and doing whatever you darn please....

OLIVIA

That was just practice. This is for real.

(Reaching her hand into the bag.)

Highest letter wins.

(Drawing a letter out of the bag.)

Z.

DELILAH

(To Maya, still ignoring Olivia)

Mama's death hasn't changed you at all....To you the whole world is an enormous game created solely for your personal enjoyment....

(Delilah takes note of the flowers.)

And Livy is still bringing over flowers for Mama.

OLIVIA

I didn't realize it was upsetting everybody.

DELILAH

Tiger lilies! It's hard to think of tiger lilies without thinking of....

(Delilah lifts the bouquet to adjust them and the cement drips onto her hands and arms.)

What the hell is this?

MAYA

Cement.

DELILAH

I just bought this blouse....

OLIVIA

You'd better wash it off before it hardens.

(Delilah exits quickly into the kitchen)

DELILAH

(From off-stage)

What has gotten into the two of you? Who in God's name puts tiger lilies in cement?

MAYA

(To Olivia)

Go find her a bath towel.

OLIVIA

What does she need a bath towel for?

MAYA

Trust me. They're in the linen closet.

(Olivia exits. Maya retrieves the bucket of cement, removes the flowers and uses the contents to continue bricklaying.)

DELILAH

(Shouting from off-stage)

What the fuck?!

OLIVIA

(From off-stage)

There aren't any bath towels left.

MAYA

Bring a couple of face towels then.

DELILAH

(Shouting from off-stage)

This is total bullshit.

OLIVIA

All that's left are cloth diapers.

MAYA

Then you'd better bring them. Quickly.

(Delilah returns from the kitchen, still covered in cement.)

(Olivia returns from the linen closet with the diapers.)

DELILAH

Why isn't there any water?

OLIVIA

(Offering Delilah a diaper)

You'd better use these.

(Delilah uses the diapers to remove the cement.)

DELILAH

Why isn't there any water?

MAYA

Promise me you won't get upset.

DELILAH

I'm covered in cement. I'm already upset....

MAYA

Can you at least promise you won't get *more* upset?

DELILAH

I have three children under age five. I'm *always* more upset.

MAYA

Maybe we should put this conversation off until they've grown up.

DELILAH

Dammit. What happened to the water?

MAYA

They shut it off.

DELILAH

Who shut it off?

MAYA

Whoever shut it on in the first place. The water company—or whatever it's called.

DELILAH

Well, *why* did they shut it off?

MAYA

I don't know. They just did.

DELILAH

For heaven's sake. This isn't Baghdad or Calcutta. They don't just shut the water on and off randomly. If they shut it off, I'm sure they had a reason....

MAYA

You never know with those water people. They can be very mysterious.

DELILAH

Have you been sending me the water bills?

MAYA

Maybe.

DELILAH

This is unbelievable. I asked you: "Can I trust you to put all of the bills into an envelope and mail them to me or do I need to have Mama's mail forwarded?" And you said: "Of course I can mail you the bills." Do you remember that? I didn't ask you to go out and get a job and pay the bills—even though you're twenty-seven years old and most twenty-seven year olds don't rely on their older sister to pay their bills—but all I asked of you was to take the bills out of the mail box, and place them into a manila folder, and send them to me. How hard could that have been?

MAYA

I sent you the other bills, didn't I? The electric bill and the mortgage and the rest of them....

DELILAH

But you held onto the water bills for safekeeping?

MAYA

I threw them out. Every last one. And the overdue notices.

DELILAH

For any particular reason?

MAYA

(Sheepishly)

I thought they were a scam.

DELILAH

Excuse me? You thought the water bills were a scam?

MAYA

You know: Like the Publisher's Clearing House or those guys in Nigeria who want money to help recover the stolen treasures of the Belgian Congo....I guess it never occurred to me that people actually paid for water. When you begin to think about it conceptually, it doesn't sound too credible....

DELILAH

What planet do you live on?

MAYA

Please, Delilah. Hear me out—

DELILAH

No, you hear me out. Do you really think water just falls from the sky? It depends on thousands of workers running large, complicated machines. *Expensive* machines—machines built for slave wages in Poland and China and Bangladesh. Most people spend their entire lives doing backbreaking labor from dawn to dusk to pay for clean water.... Maybe if you had a job—maybe if you broke a sweat once in a while—then you'd appreciate the value of a glass of water.

MAYA

I guess I thought water was like air or sunshine. Nobody pays for those....And *you* don't have a job either.

DELILAH

I don't have a job?! I tell you what, Miss Butterflies-and-Tomatoes. Tomorrow, you explain to Eleanor why we don't visit Grandma Muriel anymore, and then you call the Department of Motor Vehicles and tell them that Mama can't possibly have gotten a citation for reckless driving last month because she's dead—dead, dead, dead—and then you wait on hold while the clerk looks for her supervisor, because “deceased” isn't a choice on the appeals form, and then you try to explain what “dead” means to Virginia, who keeps asking if it's like being raped by pirates, and you spend forty-five minutes on the phone with the DMV supervisor until his shift ends, and state law prevents him from working even one more minute, because he's maxed out on overtime for the week, and then he suggests you call back in the morning, when his hours start again, so you give up for the day, and drive Virginia to afternoon kindergarten, where she explains to the other children that Grandma Muriel was raped by pirates—pirates from Mexico, none-the-less—and so you spend the rest of your day in an emergency meeting with a school psychologist and district social worker—and after you do all that, then you tell me that I don't have a fucking job! Todd was right. I should have charged you rent.

MAYA

Look, I'm sorry about the water. Anyway, I'm the one who was inconvenienced....I had to go next door to get the water for mixing the mortar.

DELILAH

You poor, poor girl.

MAYA

I made the most horrific discovery when I went next door for the water.

DELILAH

That the neighbors also pay for water.

MAYA

That all of the neighbors are dead.

OLIVIA

She's making that up. She makes things up because they sound good.

DELILAH

That doesn't sound so good to me.

MAYA

I'm not talking about the current neighbors....They look healthy enough. And they were happy to give me water—particularly the wife. She was *too* happy, if you ask me. As though she'd been waiting for me her entire life...with almost Biblical desperation, like Rebecca waiting for Isaac at the well. When the husband left for his tennis match, she started in about how they were trying to have a baby. And then she kept apologizing for telling me that they were trying to have a baby, because maybe I was too, and she didn't want to bring up unhappy subjects. All of this, mind you, in the course of fifteen minutes. And after I'd filled up the bucket, she giggled in this nervous way of hers and said: "This is just like Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz."

OLIVIA

So you killed her?

MAYA

No, I didn't kill her. But then the woman started weeping, because she remembered that Lucy Ricardo *did* have a baby....And while I was trying to comfort her, I suddenly realized that she wasn't Dr. Madigan.

OLIVIA

Dr. Madigan! How could you possibly mistake a crying woman for Dr. Madigan? He must have been six foot five. And he had that long white beard. I can't imagine him crying. Ever.....No wonder why this woman's having a hard time of it.

MAYA

She doesn't *look* like Dr. Madigan, Livy....But she's living in his house. Only now it's her house. Because Dr. Madigan is dead. I've known this for years, of course—Mama and I even went to his funeral out on Long Island—but it never really sank in until this morning, sitting in what used to be Dr. Madigan's kitchen. Do you understand what I'm driving at? All of the neighbors who lived on this block when we were growing up are dead now. Mrs. Ringmore, and the fat woman with the three-legged cats, and Rabbi Tinklebaum and his wife, and Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer—

OLIVIA

I remember Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer. On Halloween—

MAYA

—She used to give away those boiled fruits—

OLIVIA

—Instead of candy—

MAYA

—Kumquats and stewed pears—

OLIVIA

—And she'd insist you come inside while she served the fruit—

MAYA

And you'd be looking at the clock the whole time, knowing that valuable trick-or-treating minutes were evaporating forever—

OLIVIA

—But Mama still made us go there—

MAYA

—Because none of the other children did—

OLIVIA

—And it made Mrs. Hofmeyer feel useful—

MAYA

What a nutcase that woman was!

OLIVIA

Oh, how I disliked Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer!

MAYA

Well, she'd dead...They're all dead. The houses are full of young couples with snot-nosed children and overfed dogs and station wagons and tricycles and gold fish waiting patiently for their turns to swim down the toilet. Just like twenty-five years ago. Only then, *we* were those snot-nosed children. It's as though someone pulled a lever and started everything all over again.

DELILAH

So the neighbors are dead. They were nice people and all—

OLIVIA

Except for Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer—

DELILAH

With the exception of Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer, they were nice people—

OLIVIA

And didn't Dr. Madigan go to prison for watering down cancer drugs?

DELILAH

Some of the neighbors were perfectly nice people. But we hardly knew them....I think I exchanged ten words with Dr. Madigan in my entire life. And I saw Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer once every year. So I'm sorry that they're dead, sincerely I am, but I don't understand what it has to do with us.

MAYA

If I'd thought about it, I would have realized that Mama's turn was next. That everything has a logical order to it, an inevitable order, and after Rabbi Tinklebaum's wife, Mama was the last one still here. That a part of Mama started dying when Mrs. Hofmeyer took those pills, and when Mrs. Ringmore's liver went haywire, and by the time Irene Tinklebaum's heart stopped beating, very little of Mama remained. I knew that—at some level—but I didn't *really* know it.

DELILAH

I don't see what this has to do with not paying the water bill.

MAYA

When I was looking in the attic for a water bucket, I found carbon copies of some of Mama's fan letters. They really are priceless.

(Maya retrieves a box of letters from a shelf and spreads them on the table.)

OLIVIA

Mama's letters!

MAYA

You've got to listen to this.

(Reading as Mama)

“September 15, 1980. Dear President Carter: I hope you don't mind me writing again. I certainly don't want to make a nuisance of myself, and I know you have a lot on your plate these days, and that it must be so terribly difficult to handle rising oil prices, and the Iranians, and nuclear arms reduction all at the same time. But I saw you on the television the other night, talking about the canal in Panama, and you looked so awfully tired....so much older than you did when I voted for you....and I started to worry. Are you eating well? Are you getting enough sunshine? I know you're not a drinking man, so I don't worry about you driving under the influence of alcohol, but sometimes driving while you're too tired can also be extremely hazardous. A woman I play bridge with has a nephew at Brown University who fell asleep and drove into a drainage ditch and shattered his collarbone. His name is Arnold Watkins. In case you ever find yourself campaigning in Rhode Island. But what I wanted to tell you, Mr. President, is that you should be very careful not to drive unless you're well-rested. Hang in there. Best Wishes, Muriel Tuck.”

OLIVIA

Dear, dear Mama....

MAYA

And Carter's office even wrote back....

(Reading as Jimmy Carter)

“Dear Mrs. Tuck: I am always delighted to hear from Americans about their ideas regarding matters of public concern. *Fatigued driving* is an issue that my administration takes very seriously. As we work together to improve the lives of all Americans, I will certainly keep your views on *fatigued driving* in mind. Thank you very much for contacting the White House. Sincerely, James Earl Carter, Jr., President of the United States.”

DELILAH

Our tax dollars at work.

OLIVIA

(Olivia reaches into the box of letters.)

Here's one to Ronald Reagan.

(Reading as Mama)

“April 15, 1981. Dear President Reagan: Thank you so much for responding to my previous letter. I know you are a very busy man, and that you've been shot since our last correspondence, so I appreciate your taking the time. I'm especially grateful that you have no hard feelings about the election. I cannot emphasize enough that my vote for your opponent was not meant as a criticism of your candidacy, but rather reflected my longstanding relationship with your predecessor. You seem like a fine man too. Had I

been permitted to vote twice, I would have voted once for each of you. In any case, I remain very concerned about those jelly beans. My brother-in-law worked as a dentist in Canarsie for many years, and he tells me that the sugar in candy is like cyanide to the teeth. Please do consider switching to a low sugar snack. I must tell you that you've looked a bit under the weather since you were shot by Mr. Hinckley, but you should take heart that the worst is most likely behind you. No President has ever been shot twice while in office. At least as far back as I can remember. So hang in there. Best Wishes, Muriel Tuck."

MAYA

We should have these framed.

OLIVIA

Wait until you hear the letter she got back....

(Reading as Ronald Reagan)

"Dear Mrs. Tuck: I am always delighted to hear from Americans about their ideas regarding matters of public concern. *Dental hygiene* is an issue that my administration takes very seriously. As we work together to improve the lives of all Americans, I will certainly keep your views on *dental hygiene* in mind. Thank you very much for contacting the White House. Sincerely, Ronald Wilson Reagan, President of the United States."

Oh, Mama. I could spend all day reading these.

MAYA

Maybe Delilah wants to read one....

DELILAH

We really need to clean this place up. And I have to phone the water company—

MAYA

Suit yourself.

(Maya begins returning the letters to the box.)

DELILHA

(In spite of herself)

Okay. Just one.

(She reaches into the box, as though drawing a prize out of a grab bag, and looks over the letter. Then she reads out loud.)

“February 14, 1968. Dear General Westmoreland: I hope you remember me. I’m the coed at Vassar who wrote to you last October about your photograph on the cover of *Time* Magazine. Maybe you did not receive my letter—I suppose letters get lost a lot during wars—so I am writing to you again. As I said in my previous note, you would look much more handsome if you smiled. You must be familiar with the expression: “When you smile, the whole world smiles with you.” Well, it may be clichéd, but it’s true. Though I suppose the North Vietnamese wouldn’t smile, just because you did. But most people here in New York would. I also learned in my introduction to biology course that it takes much more energy to frown than to smile. So maybe if you frowned less, you’d have more energy left over to win the war against the North Vietnamese. I hope you don’t think I’m intruding into military matters. I’m just trying to be helpful. Hang in there, General. Best wishes, Muriel Vandam.”

OLIVIA

She has a point. There was a picture of him in a book I was reading, and he did look so unhappy....

MAYA

He was losing a war, Livy. There's a reason he looked unhappy.

OLIVIA

But we don't any reason to be unhappy, do we...? It's so much fun spending time together like this....

MAYA

(Pointedly)

In the house we grew up in.

DELILAH

In the house *we're selling*. We need to get this place in order....I have a prospective buyer lined up.

MAYA

You're joking? With Mama hardly cold in her grave?

DELILAH

It's been over a year. It was a year *last June*.

MAYA

It feels like it was yesterday. Sometimes, I think it's always going to feel like it was yesterday.

DELILAH

I'm not heartless, you know. It's so easy to walk up those front steps and imagine Mama, sitting at that desk, writing fan letters. But it wasn't yesterday. It was fourteen months ago. And we've got to make this place presentable before the buyer gets here.

MAYA

When is she coming?

DELILAH

Around five o'clock.

MAYA

Five o'clock *today*?

DELILAH

Unfortunately. If you'd told me about the water, I would have postponed.... We'll have to make sure she doesn't turn on any of the taps until we can get it running again....

MAYA

I can't believe you went out and found a buyer on your own.

DELILAH

I didn't find her. She found me. It's Phyllis Hofmeyer.

OLIVIA

Crazy Mrs. Hofmeyer's daughter?

MAYA

The one who couldn't ever get her permission slips signed to go on field trips?

OLIVIA

I remember her. Her grandfather took her to the junior prom.

MAYA

It was her great uncle. Everybody in my grade called her “Auntie” after that.

DELILAH

She just got married. Get this: She just got married to a guy named Hofmeyer. She met him during the roll-call for jury duty. Now her name is Phyllis Hofmeyer Hofmeyer.

MAYA

And she called you up and said: “I heard your mother died. Can I buy her house?”

DELILAH

She wrote me a card, actually. Right after Mama died. She said she was really sorry, and she’d always admired Mama very much, but also that, when the time came, she’d be very interested in looking at the property. And then she followed up with another note six months ago...and then another last week....She really seems to want the place.

OLIVIA

Maybe there’s treasure buried under the yard. Like in *Huckleberry Finn*.

MAYA

Well, let it stay buried. I am not selling my childhood memories to Phyllis Hofmeyer Hofmeyer.

DELILAH

(Assessing the room)

Maybe we can throw all of this junk into garbage bags and take it up to the attic....and I know you don’t want to hear this, but you’ll have to do something about that...wall....

MAYA

(Maya returns to bricklaying.)

You stay away from my wall, Delilah....This is my third of the house and you keep Phyllis Hofmeyer the fuck out of it.

DELILAH

(Delilah begins gathering the contents of the room—from pizza boxes to heirlooms—and stuffing them into plastic garbage bags.)

Don't make this any harder than it has to be, Maya. The law is on my side.

OLIVIA

Please, stop. We were all getting along so well....Why don't we draw Scrabble letters again, but this time the *lowest* letter can decide...?

MAYA

(To Delilah, ignoring Olivia)

You want to show the house, you show the house. But don't expect me to go along with it. I'm going to let Mrs. Hofmeyer Hofmeyer know what she's Hofmeyering her way into....

DELILAH

What's that supposed to mean?

MAYA

I think Mrs. Hofmeyer Hofmeyer has a right to make an informed decision. Someone ought to tell her about the termites, and the fire ants in the bedrooms, and the problems with the septic tank overflowing, and the ghost of our fourth sister who had her skull bashed in by that escaped baboon.

OLIVIA

(Olivia reaches into the bag and draws a letter.)

A.

DELILAH

We both know we didn't have a fourth sister. And there are no escaped baboons.