

THE ITHACA LADIES READ MEDEA

by

Arthur M. Jolly

THE ITHACA LADIES READ MEDEA

CAST: 6F, 1M

KATIE O'CONNOR	Late 20's. Irish.
ADELAIDE HOUGHTON (Huff-'en)	40-50's. Uses a wheelchair.
ALISON DUNHAM	40-50's.
ELSIE BISHOP	60's+ (70's?)
MARCIE MAYFIELD	Late teens - 20's.
BRIDGET MAYFIELD	40-50's.
SENATOR KARL E. MUNDT	50's.

ON CASTING DIVERSITY:

Adelaide Houghten uses her wheelchair for the duration of the play. Whenever possible, an actor who uses a wheelchair should be cast in this role.

There is no reason to presume that the characters are white, with the possible exception of Katie, who is an Irish immigrant. The university that inspired this fictional setting hired its first minority professor in 1876.

TIME:

Autumn, 1953.

SETTING:

The action takes place largely in
The living room of Mrs. Alison Dunham, in Ithaca, NY
with occasional interludes in
Room 357 of the Senate Office Building, Washington D.C.

Act I

Scene 1: Washington

Scene 2: Ithaca

Scene 3: Washington

Act II

Scene 1: Washington

Scene 2: Ithaca

Scene 3: Washington

Scene 4: Ithaca

PLAYWRIGHTS NOTES:

However the director interprets the staging, the intention is that Senator Mundt comes across as an otherworldly, "behind the scenes" presence rather than interacting directly with the cast.

If I were staging this, I would build a suspended box that looms above the action, scrim the front and dress the interior entirely in black and white with greyscale makeup for Mundt to create a living 1950's TV broadcast... but that's just me.

Lines from Medea by Euripedes are taken from Edward P. Coleridge's 1910 translation and are used under the fair use act for works in the public domain.

Words spoken in the interrogation scenes are blended from the actual words of Senator Karl E. Mundt, Chief Counsel to the Committee on Special Investigations Roy M. Cohn, and others, as recorded in the transcriptions of the Senate Hearings in 1953, however they have been fictionalized and are not intended to portray historical events or actual persons.

THE ITHACA LADIES READ MEDEA premiered in September 2016 at the Little Fish Theatre in Los Angeles, CA. The production was directed by Danielle Ozymandias and produced by Tara Donovan. The Stage Manager was Caroline Benzoni, Scenic Design by Mitch Rossander, Lighting Design by Stacey Abrams, Costume Design by Diana Mann, Prop Design by Allison Mamann, Sound Design by Lia Metz and Scenic Painting by Daryl Houge France. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

Senator Mundt -----	James Rice
Bridget Mayfield -----	Marti Hale
Katie O'Connor -----	Tara Donovan
Adelaide Houghton -----	Shirley Hatton
Alison Dunham -----	Kristin Carey
Elsie Bishop -----	Mary-Margaret Lewis
Marcie Mayfield -----	Kathryn Farren

THE ITHACA LADIES

READ MEDEA

Scene 1

Room 357 of the Senate Building. BRIDGET MAYFIELD, isolated by lighting, answers the questions of SENATOR KARL E. MUNDT.

MUNDT. Mrs. Mayfield, what, presently, is your occupation?

BRIDGET. Well, it's... I'm not sure what you want me to... it's Mrs. Mayfield.

MUNDT. I did not hear a word she said. Speak up, please.

BRIDGET. My occupation is Mrs. Mayfield.

MUNDT. You're a housewife.

BRIDGET. That is correct, sir.

MUNDT. Mrs. Mayfield, have you or your husband ever joined any of these organizations that the Attorney General has listed as subversive?

BRIDGET. I have never joined anything. I know what they are, because I have gone over them. I have gone over that list, and in fact, there are two lists, and I have gone over both of those, and we were never - we never joined any of those organizations.

MUNDT. Was your husband ever a member of the Communist Party?

BRIDGET. I know The Register wrote a piece saying he was a Stalinite and smearing him in other ways. He was very angry and went to a lawyer, who said it would cost us five thousand dollars to clear this up, so he didn't do anything about it. But we were never members.

MUNDT. But you are - both of you - friends with Professor Morris Dunham?

BRIDGET. Morris? Well, yes, as a colleague of my husband's. We don't, uh ð socially, not in my circle of - no. I am aware he was quoted in one of those articles against us.

MUNDT. What did he say?

BRIDGET. I think he said once that they would like to have Franklin as editor of the Daily Worker or some paper - as editor of something.

MUNDT. So Professor Dunham implied you were under communist discipline, did he not?

BRIDGET. I never read that anywhere, and I deny it.

MUNDT. When he said they would like your husband to become editor of - uh - of this paper - to what they was he referring?

BRIDGET. I'm sorry. What? (*beat*) I just don't understand the question.

MUNDT. To what they did Professor Dunham refer to?

BRIDGET. To what they?

MUNDT. Did he say they or did he say we?

BRIDGET. I think it was the Daily Worker, but I might be mistaken.

MUNDT. And when Professor Dunham spoke - Mrs. Mayfield, look at me when I'm speaking to you. I am speaking. When Professor Dunham said they would like Professor Mayfield to become editor - did he say they would like that, or did he say we would like him to be editor and so forth.

BRIDGET. This was years ago -

MUNDT. Do you know if Professor Dunham is now, or has ever been, a member of the Communist Party?

BRIDGET. Well, look, do I know or - Well, look for instance - I want to tell you this frankly.

MUNDT. When you talk, talk a little slower and remember it is being taken down and she will have to read it.

BRIDGET. I'm a little nervous.

MUNDT. I appreciate that madam, but I must ask you again. We have a copy of a letter - correspondence that raises some serious questions.

BRIDGET. A letter?

MUNDT. That is correct. A letter sent to the Dean regarding some of the professors at that institution -

BRIDGET. Who would write that?

MUNDT. Who wrote the letter is not relevant. What is of note is that it mentions Professor Morris Dunham by name.

BRIDGET. I don't know who would write such a letter, but I believe in my heart they are mistaken.

MUNDT. Then why would someone feel the need to write to the Dean regarding his affiliations?

BRIDGET. I can't answer that, sir.

MUNDT. Can you confirm, under oath, that Professor Morris Dunham has never been a member of the Communist Party? (*A beat.*) Mrs. Mayfield? (*Bridget hesitates. Lights Out.*)

SCENE 2

Lights up. The elegantly appointed living room of the Dunham residence. There are four kitchen chairs off to one side, brought in for the evening. KATIE prepares coffee service. ALISON checks her reflection in the mirror. In a moment, she will refer to herself as not being "dressed" yet. This might mean as much as one curl out of place.

ALISON. I am rather looking forward to this. Just an evening of civility, of friends having a moment to cast off this tainted atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust and bet- [*betrayal*](*beat*) I don't call it art, I don't aspire to any literary pretension... but just a moment of calm amidst the chaos. That's all I want. Surely there's no storm - even this one - without a lull. Lull. What an ugly word. (*ADELAIDE taps on the French doors.*) If I ever give a momentary consideration to obtaining a dog as a pet, feel free to shoot me in the head.

KATIE. Yes, ma'am. Would you like me to get you a gun, just to be prepared? (*A beat.*)

ALISON. Well, let her in for heaven's sake. Apparently our monthly evening has become a free-for-all night of bohemian abandon. Turn up as you will, and to the devil with propriety. I will be down when I have dressed. (*Alison exits to her room. Katie opens the French doors. Adelaide enters.*)

ADELAIDE. I'm early, I know...

KATIE. You must be Missus Adelaide. She told me one of her friends was a D (*awkward beat*) Well, she mentioned that you were in a -

(more awkwardness. Maybe even a whimper. Adelaide, for her part, does nothing to let her off the hook. Play with it.) She - you have a - were... uh... *(silence)* I'll just tell Missus Dunham you're here.

ADELAIDE. I'm not here.

KATIE. What?

ADELAIDE. I'm not here.

KATIE. You're not here?

ADELAIDE. I haven't arrived yet.

KATIE. I don't understand.

ADELAIDE. It's too... I would not like Alison to know I came here alone. It would alarm her.

KATIE. Missus Adelaide, if you had called, I could've come for you, or arranged a car.

ADELAIDE. It's a small town - uh...

KATIE. Katie, ma'am.

ADELAIDE. Katie. I live only a few streets away. The lady who used to assist me no longer attends, so - I came alone.

KATIE. But, with your... condition...

ADELAIDE. Katie, are you aware that when you refer to a ladies "condition" you are implying that she is enciente? ... Expecting. *(beat)* Pregnant.

KATIE. Oh heavens!

ADELAIDE. I am well aware of my situation. I simply give myself a little extra time, in case there's a car blocking one of the driveways I rely on, or if there's no passerby available to lend a hand up a curb. I usually go the long way to avoid Court street - the state of the drains there means the curbs are easily a foot high. However, I happened to run across a pair of boy scouts on their way to a troop meeting who assisted me at every crossing all the way here. So... early.

KATIE. You shouldn't have to be looking for a driveway, missus. They should put in a divot on the street corners or something. For folks like you, or for all the veterans.

ADELAIDE. What do you mean?

KATIE. If they made a slope in the pavement. On the corner.

ADELAIDE. Modify my route to Alison's? It's an idea -

KATIE. Every corner.

ADELAIDE. The whole town?

KATIE. Well, yessum. They have to build them one way or t'other - why not with a slope? Everywhere. *(A beat.)*

ADELAIDE. I don't think this is an appropriate discussion - it sounds almost... I'm not sure what you're saying. Anyway, with the assistance of a couple of adolescents hungry for some merit badge or other, I am somewhat before the appointed hour. I would have preferred to remain in the garden, unfortunately, I... I need some help.

KATIE. You...?

ADELAIDE. I dislike asking, but the hallway to Alison's accommodation is rather narrow.

KATIE. The hallway...?

ADELAIDE. I need your assistance with the - uh - the transition.

KATIE. Oh! Oh yes, of course. *(Katie goes to take the handles of the wheelchair. Adelaide smacks her hands away.)*

ADELAIDE. Just when we get there.

KATIE. Yessum. *(Adelaide rolls herself off, followed by Katie. The front door opens - surreptitiously. ELSIE peeks in. She enters, removes her white gloves and tucks them in her purse.)*

ELSIE. Alison! I caught her stealing the cream again! *(beat)* Alison? *(beat)* Anyone? Oh for pity's sake, we're not even set up yet. *(beat)* Is there someone who can help with the chairs? Hello? *(beat)* Old lady here! *(She goes for one of the kitchen chairs. The doorbell rings.)* I got it! I have to do everything else, apparently. *(She goes to the door. MARCIE waits, dressed in her Sunday best.)*

MARCIE. Mrs. Dunham?

ELSIE. Bishop. Elspeth Bishop. Everyone calls me Elsie.

MARCIE. I do apologize - I must have the wrong -

ELSIE. This is the Dunham residence. Right place. You the new girl?

MARCIE. Yes.

ELSIE. Well don't stand there lollygagging, come on in.

MARCIE. Oh. Thank you.

ELSIE. The chairs still need to be set up.

MARCIE. Okay. *(Elsie gestures: Well? After a beat)* Should I help?

ELSIE. Don't put yourself out. (*Elsie struggles feebly to move a chair, shuffle-dragging it towards the center - barely able to lift it.*)

MARCIE. Oh - let me.

ELSIE. I got it.

MARCIE. No, please...

ELSIE. I said I got it! I'm not helpless, my arthritis has been very compliant so far - must be this unseasonable warmth - I - Ooh!

(*staggers*) My hip - it's gone. I can't - help! (*Marcie catches Elsie as she falls, moaning in pain.*)

MARCIE. Oh my! Oh my!

ELSIE. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?!

MARCIE. I'M SORRY! (*Elsie shrugs Marcie off, picks up the chair in one hand and places it forward.*)

ELSIE. Pitch in.

MARCIE. That was... I don't know what to say.

ELSIE. Opportunities for self-improvement are seldom expected, but should be welcomed like a cooling rain shower on a tropic night.

MARCIE. I feel rather faint. (*Elsie hands her the next chair.*)

ELSIE. Work it off. ... Semi-circle, facing away from the window. That way, we don't get a glare off the scripts. (*beat*) We used to face the window, just for the view. Well... a view of Morris' sad attempt at a lawn and a bunch of dead begonias. It ain't exactly the Duomo.

MARCIE. (*rallying gamely*) I always wanted to go to Paris. (*Elsie stares at her long enough for her to get uncomfortable.*) It's not in Paris, is it?

ELSIE. It's close. (*beat*) This time of year, doesn't make much difference, I suppose. Getting dark already. I hate fall. Bunch of trees turn red and yellow and everyone flips like a pancake, looky-loos driving their Studebakers up from the city at six miles an hour with their necks out the window. The leaves are red because they're dying. It's morbid. Might as well be touring a TB ward. (*referring to the chairs*) We only need three, Addie brings her own. (*Marcie hesitates, stopped in the act of carrying the fourth and final chair. Elsie continues her previous thought.*) Get to my age, you start worrying - nature getting ideas. What's one more, you know?

MARCIE. I was... Um... I'm Marcie. I was hoping to sort of join.

ELSIE. Join?

MARCIE. The reading group.

ELSIE. You're not the new girl?

MARCIE. Yes, I am. Well, I'd like to be. I'm Bridget Mayfield's niece.

ELSIE. Bridget's niece - in service?

MARCIE. Service? Me?

ELSIE. You're not the maid.

MARCIE. I should say not!

ELSIE. Well what the heck are you moving chairs for?

MARCIE. I was being nice.

ELSIE. You're being a sap! I thought you were the maid.

MARCIE. (*straightens her dress*) Oh... I was sure... It's just Aunt Biddy says Mrs. Dunham's ever so proper.

ELSIE. Aunt Biddy.

MARCIE. Bridget. My - Mayfield.

ELSIE. Aunt Biddy. I'm going to remember that.

MARCIE. I was... you do think this dress is all right?

ELSIE. You're the cat's meow... It's just...

MARCIE. Oh. There's a just.

ELSIE. You look like you're trying.

MARCIE. Trying?

ELSIE. Awful hard. This is an informal evening. Why, we don't even wear our gloves once we come inside.

MARCIE. Oh. (*Marcie starts taking off her gloves.*)

ELSIE. You know what we do, right?

MARCIE. Aunt Bid - Bridg - Mrs... - My aunt says it's a play reading group. The Ithaca...

ELSIE. The Ithaca Ladies Amateur Dramatic Society.

MARCIE. I want to be - I always had this sort of dream of... well, it's silly.

ELSIE. We're a bunch of crotchety old biddies and neglected university wives who get together one Thursday a month while our husbands are at the faculty meeting and gripe about how gals like you have no respect any more. (*beat*) You don't, do you.

MARCIE. What - I - why - uh...

ELSIE. We also read the occasional play. *(beat)* Okay, four chairs it is.
(Adelaide enters.)

ADELAIDE. Leave a gap. I'm not sitting at the end.

ELSIE. You'll sit where I put you and like it.

ADELAIDE. Not the end - I get a crick in my neck.

ELSIE. Goes with the crick in your legs. *(Marcie stifles a gasp at that - Adelaide isn't perturbed, and let that be a character note between her and Elsie. Close friendship, enough that Elsie can tease her in ways no one else might be able to.)*

ELSIE. Addie, this is...

MARCIE. Marcie.

ELSIE. Marcie. She'll be joining us this evening.

ADELAIDE. Well, that will be lovely - some new -

ELSIE. Aunt Biddy's niece. *(pause)* Bridget.

ADELAIDE. Oh, you're Bridget's niece. How delightful. Bridget is one of my dearest friends. We have been - we have known each other for years. And now she's bringing family. We will certainly have to make some room.

MARCIE. Where would you like to sit... um... Adelaide?

ADELAIDE. Miss Houghton, I think. Just leave a gap.

MARCIE. Well, I could put you right in the -

ADELAIDE/ELSIE. *(aware that Alison ALWAYS sits center)*
Not in the center! *(beat.)*

MARCIE. Okay. *(beat)* Well, how about I make a nice place for you right -

ELSIE. Why are you talking in that voice?

ADELAIDE. Elsie -

ELSIE. She's crippled, not stupid. *(to Adelaide)* Don't that just get your goat? That syrupy, talking-to-a-baby voice people put on?

ADELAIDE. You get used to it.

ELSIE. Gets right up my nose. I had a son-in-law who talked to me like that.

MARCIE. I didn't mean to -

ELSIE. So patronizing. Made me want to kick him right in the fork.

ADELAIDE. You mean, why should she assume that merely because I use a wheelchair I am unable to speak up for myself?

ELSIE. (*oblivious*) Exactly!

ADELAIDE. (*to Marcie*) Just leave a gap, one in will be fine.

MARCIE. Yes, Miss Houghton.

ELSIE. He doesn't do it anymore, of course - he died. The Pacific. USS Yorktown.

MARCIE. Oh my goodness - the Yorktown, weren't they...

ELSIE. Torpedoed. (*beat*) I s'pose I should forgive him. I don't know what the protocol is. I mean, on one level, he's a war hero - or at least Janey clings to that. What else can she hold on to? What does she have - a folded flag and an empty space at the dinner table. No... remains. Nothing to bury. The Pacific is a cold, deep bitch. And a lousy grave. (*An awkward silence.*)

ADELAIDE. Well, now you've brought the mood of the evening tumbling down - at some point you and I need to discuss some correspondence.

ELSIE. Correspondence?

ADELAIDE. A letter. A letter to the Dean that somehow found its way to the Committee on -

ELSIE. Oh, I think not. Certainly not tonight. Tonight is for pleasant thoughts only - and for Marcie. (*beat*) Not that those two are in opposition. Pleasant thoughts and also welcoming Marcie to the - never mind, forget it. I have dug my trench, now I will lie in it and let the shells land where they may. (*beat - to Adelaide*) I ran into Miriam at the A and P.

ADELAIDE. Miriam... is not my concern. (*Katie enters.*)

KATIE. I apologize - I didn't hear the door.

ELSIE. I let myself in. Now you are the new girl.

KATIE. Katie, ma'am. Missus Dunham will be down in one moment. May I take your -

ELSIE. I got it.

KATIE. Would you care for a -

ELSIE. Lots of cream. No sugar. Healthy splash of whisky.

KATIE. Yessum.

ELSIE. Make it an unhealthy splash. Is that an Irish accent?

KATIE. Yessum. Dublin.

ELSIE. How charmingly Joycean. I must introduce you to my latest husband. Dean of Comparative Lit. Insists Joyce is a burgeoning genius destined for recognition and reads the latest gibberish to his students in a truly atrocious Irish accent. Says you can't get the rhythm without affecting the proper patois.

KATIE. I've never read her.

ELSIE. James Joyce. No?

ADELAIDE. You're not missing much. Flash in the pan. (*turns to Marcie*) This is Marcie, Miss Bridget's niece.

KATIE. (*recognition*) Oh. Miss.

MARCIE. I believe we've met.

ADELAIDE. Really?

KATIE. I think, perhaps you have me confused with someone else.

MARCIE. I'm sure we... where was it? You don't go to the Episcopal Church on Cayuga street -

KATIE. No, miss. I really don't think we ever -

MARCIE. I saw you somewhere. Recently...

KATIE. I used to work at the Starlite Motel.

MARCIE. What?

KATIE. My last place of employment was the Starlite. The receptionist. You meet a lot of people passing through.

MARCIE. I hope you're not implying - I would never... I don't think that's where...

ADELAIDE. I think she's got your number, Missy.

MARCIE. Marcie. No! She's... the idea of it!

KATIE. With another woman, maybe? Rather an outspoken one in the matter of complaints. They had a meeting with the men from the -

MARCIE. I must be thinking of someone else. I was mistaken.

ELSIE. Give us the dish! Was it a romantic assignation with an older gentleman?

MARCIE. That's disgusting! The Starlite - it's a - it should be shut down!

KATIE. It's just a motor hotel.

ELSIE. A rest stop for the weary traveler.

KATIE. Mostly salesmen. But for a week, these two Government Agents were holding -

MARCIE. Maybe you should stick to serving drinks, and not cast aspersions on decent people.

KATIE. Decent -?

ELSIE. I dare say there's nothing that goes on there that doesn't go on anywhere else.

MARCIE. This is not appropriate. I'm not having some chambermaid making accusations.

ELSIE. I believe it was you that brought up the subject.

MARCIE. Me?! This... servant just suggested I was in a - a sex place.
(Elsie and Adelaide both laugh.)

ELSIE. Maybe I should get a room there.

ADELAIDE. Elsie!

ELSIE. Who knew we had a sex place?

ADELAIDE. Stop teasing.

KATIE. It's nothing of the kind -

ELSIE. *(to Marcie)* Recognized the receptionist at the Starlite. You must be a regular, a different beau every week -

ADELAIDE. Elsie, let her be.

ELSIE. I am teasing, Marcie.

MARCIE. If I'm not welcome, I can leave.

ELSIE. Don't you dare - this is better than strawberry shortcake. Fine - if you wish your private life to remain private... well, it's hardly neighborly, that's all I'm saying. Look at poor Addie - sorry, Miss Adelaide Houghton, of the Syracuse Houghtons - stuck in that thing since the polio outbreak of '24, dead from the waist down and pining for some spark of vicarious sexuality -

ADELAIDE. Elsie!

ELSIE. Deny it all you wish -

ADELAIDE. We don't need this sort of language.

ELSIE. One needs some language.

ADELAIDE. What would Alison say? In her home.

ELSIE. I bet you I can find a book in here with language that would make your hair curl. No one's a bigger reprobate than a professor of classical languages - always going on about Rabelais during dinner.

KATIE. I should go and make your coffee. (*Katie exits.*)

ADELAIDE. There - you've gone and upset the help.

ELSIE. (*to Marcie*) Giving you a perfect opportunity to unburden yourself... No?

MARCIE. You may laugh at me, but I have never been to... I don't know the Starlite, but passing by it looks like a disreputable place. It has a neon sign, and I don't think nice ladies would stay there.

ELSIE. Well, you're certainly Bridget's niece.

ADELAIDE. Who is late, as usual.

ELSIE. D'you think Alison waits until we're all here so she can make a grand entrance? Top of the stairs... listening for the last arrival... (*Elsie whistles, listens. After a beat, to Adelaide:*) So what's in store for tonight?

ADELAIDE. Alison's choice.

ELSIE. She's going to be dramatic.

ADELAIDE. Alison - dramatic?

ELSIE. I don't know if my heart is up to it.

ADELAIDE. When it is my turn, I assure you, we will do something appropriate. Maybe some Coward. Blithe Spirit. Lovely play. Or the one by the other one... Major -

ELSIE. If you say Major Barbara, I'm fetching my umbrella - and I will, and then I will open it so you cannot remove it without visiting your G.P.

ADELAIDE. Must you be so crass all the time?

ELSIE. Only when it's warranted. George Bernard Shaw gives me girdle rash.

MARCIE. Is it always like this?

ELSIE. Wait 'til your aunt arrives - that's when the fireworks start.

ADELAIDE. Wait being the operative word. I don't quite know how she manages to be late for every possible engagement.

MARCIE. She once told me the perfectly punctual lady catches and misses an equal number of trains.

ELSIE. That's either brilliant or it's a total crock. I'm still figuring it out.

MARCIE. She might have had some errands to do on the way here.

ADELAIDE. Perhaps she had a letter she forgot to mail.

ELSIE. Addie -

ADELAIDE. Idle speculation. (*Alison enters - perfectly put together.*)

ALISON. Adelaide, Elsie. You must be Bridget's niece. She was kind enough to drop me a note you were coming.

MARCIE. Marcie.

ALISON. What a charming name. Pity about your hair, but I'm sure it will grow out. Or is that the new style these days? (*beat*) I'm joking of course. You should've seen Adelaide and myself in the twenties. We bobbed our hair, thought we were being so daring. The impetuosity of youth. (*indicating Marcie's hair*) So, whatever this is... enjoy it. Revel in your youth before you get to be an old stuffy stick-in-the-mud like us. (*to the others*) I am so sorry to have kept you all waiting. I could not have come down one minute earlier. And I do not wait for the moment to make an entrance.

ELSIE. And yet, somehow you always do.

ALISON. You don't have drinks yet. It's the new girl, she's still learning where everything goes. I apologize.

ELSIE. Making coffee. Least this one isn't stealing the cream, is she?

(*A pause.*)

ALISON. (*to Marcie*) I had to let my previous maid go for some petty thefts. Elsie apparently finds it a source of vast amusement.

ELSIE. Can't get good help. What was the name of that holy-roller one? Couple back.

MARCIE. My aunt believes the Irish are very hard working. I think you made an excellent choice, Mrs. Dunham.

ALISON. Actually, that was never part of my considerations -

ADELAIDE. Blanche. Blanche Mackelroy.

ELSIE. Blanche. She had a nervous breakdown or something, but she was saved by Jesus. And you'd hear her, you'd be over, having a quiet dinner with the Dunhams, and you'd hear her voice randomly from the kitchen: Hallelujah! Haaa-aal-lelujah!

ADELAIDE. Tell her about the biscuits.

ELSIE. I'm getting to that. One night, as she told us, Jesus spoke to her. In the middle of the night, Jesus woke her up, and said: 'Blanche? If you want to do good, you just get on up and do some good.' So she did - but it was three in the morning, and she couldn't think what good she could possibly do. Eventually, she baked a tray of biscuits to give to her minister and went back to bed.

ALISON. Elsie, you are a delightful raconteur.

ELSIE. Ouch. That's how you know you've insulted Alison - when she gets pointed with her compliments. Blanche was a hoot, Allie, and one of the best cooks you ever had. *(to Marcie)* That woman could cook collard greens - made you almost want to eat 'em.

ADELAIDE. Elsie, you are embarrassing your host.

ELSIE. You're right - My apologies, dear Alison. So, how was your trip to Washington?

ADELAIDE. Elsie!

ELSIE. I'm just teasing.

ALISON. Washington was -

ELSIE. *(serious)* I was joking, Alison. Honestly. You don't need to -

ALISON. The weather was clement - this Indian Summer seems to be gripping the entire Eastern seaboard. I had hoped we would have time to visit the Smithsonian, but unfortunately less pleasant matters intruded.

ADELAIDE. They kept you an extra day?

ALISON. They are schoolyard bullies. They enjoy twisting arms so much, they forget they wanted to hear "uncle" in the first place.

ADELAIDE. Try doing it from a wheelchair.

ALISON. I didn't mean to imply that my burden was -

ADELAIDE. No, no. It's fine. They are... thorough.

ELSIE. Bridget came home quite shaken by it.

ALISON. What can one do?

ELSIE. Could have been worse. I was outside the A and P the other day, and do you know who I saw? Miriam.

ALISON. Miriam? She left -

ELSIE. She had to come back to sign the bank papers. They took her house. *(A beat.)*

ALISON. *(to Marcie)* We are being quite rude to our new guest - I apologize. Merely some private business. We don't mean to exclude you from the conversation.

MARCIE. Not at all.

ALISON. Perhaps I should find Katie and see why she seems unable to produce coffee at the appropriate time. *(Alison starts off just as Katie enters with a tray of coffee - they collide - spilling coffee down Alison's dress. Alison shrieks in pain - but cuts herself off.)*

KATIE. Oh, Missus - I'm so sorry. Let me fetch a cold -

ALISON. I'm all right. Startled, is all. *(Alison holds her dress away from her skin.)*

KATIE. You must be scalding! I have to -

ALISON. Stop it! *(beat)* Please make some more coffee for our guests. *(to the others)* I am afraid I must change. Please excuse me. *(Alison, slowly, deliberately walks off... not showing any pain. Not if it kills her. A long pause. Katie starts crying silently.)*

KATIE. I scalded her. I know I scalded her. *(beat)* I'm going to be fired, aren't I?

ELSIE. Possibly. But I've learned it doesn't do to make assumptions about Alison. Is there more hot water?

KATIE. Aye. But I have to - before it sets -

ELSIE. The coffee first - that's what she asked for. Then fetch a damp cloth for the rug.

KATIE. I should blot it first -

ELSIE. Do what she told you first - you might get out of this. *(As Katie hurries off, Elsie grabs a napkin and starts dabbing at the spilled coffee.)*

MARCIE. That was rather clumsy. Maybe she should be fired.

ELSIE. I thought you considered her an excellent choice?

MARCIE. I was... I was being polite. *(Elsie dabs at Marcie's nose with the napkin.)*

MARCIE. What are you -

ELSIE. Sorry - thought I saw a coffee smudge. *(to Adelaide)* Something brown. *(The doorbell rings.)*

KATIE. *(Offstage)* Oh thunderin' Jaysus!

ELSIE. I got it!

MARCIE. It's hardly worth having help if you're going to do everything yourself.

ELSIE. You're right. You get it.

MARCIE. Excuse me?

ELSIE. It's probably your aunt anyway.

ADELAIDE. How nice. (*Marcie opens the door. BRIDGET enters, peeling off her gloves.*)

MARCIE. Aunt Biddy!

BRIDGET. Marcie - sweetie, you made it. (*air kisses*) Mwah!

ELSIE. Aunt Biddy!

BRIDGET. Marcie started calling me that when she was still pinned in didees - you, Elsie, have no excuse.

ELSIE. Try and stop me.

ADELAIDE. Bridget.

BRIDGET. Adelaide. You're looking well.

ADELAIDE. Thank you. Your dress is quite becoming.

BRIDGET. Any pain today, dear?

ADELAIDE. None at all.

BRIDGET. Well, isn't that lovely. And our host?

ELSIE. Slight mishap with the coffee. She just had to change.

BRIDGET. Oh, poor dear. I do seem to miss all the drama.

MARCIE. The new maid. Not particularly competent. She's Irish.

BRIDGET. Well, one takes what one can get.

MARCIE. Her name's Katie.

BRIDGET. I assumed that when you said she was Irish, dear. (*beat*) Not the Katie who worked at the ... (*Marcie nods.*)

BRIDGET. Oh dear. (*Katie enters with a fresh pot of coffee on a tray - but freezes when she sees Bridget. Recognition.*)

ELSIE. Katie, this is Bridget Mayfield - her husband teaches undergraduates, but we don't hold that against her. (*Adelaide stifles a laugh, which Bridget surely notices.*) If you call her Aunt Biddy, you could make an enemy for life. (*A beat.*)

KATIE. Missus Mayfield, is it? May I take your hat and gloves?

BRIDGET. (*cautious*) That would be nice. (*Katie takes them and exits.*)

ELSIE. Did anyone else just feel a tinge of frost in the air?

BRIDGET. I apologize for my lateness. I was unavoidably detained.

ADELAIDE. Your lipstick is smudged. *(A beat. Bridget removes a mirror compact and carefully dabs the miniscule smudge with a handkerchief.)*

BRIDGET. Better?

MARCIE. Perfect.

ELSIE. We saved a seat for you.

ADELAIDE. At the end. *(Kate enters with a damp cloth and starts sponging the floor... aggressively.)*

BRIDGET. Give it up, the damage is done.

KATIE. I just need to put some baking soda down -

BRIDGET. Katie, is it? There will be a stain. All your baking soda, and your dabbing and whatever will not erase it. You may make it fainter - you may make it almost unnoticeable - and that will make it ever the more obvious. I have known Alison for longer than your lifetime, and she will not allow a soiled rug in her home. So stop that. Tomorrow, there will be a new rug. Maybe a new maid. Who knows, you could be fired twice in the same month.

KATIE. I can make it clean.

BRIDGET. But you can't make it new. Run along now. *(Katie starts to exit, but as she does, the telephone rings. She backtracks to answer it.)*

KATIE. Dunham residence... Oh, yes, sir. Well, I could fetch her, she's right... Unanimous. Yes, sir, I'll tell her. *(Alison enters as Katie hangs up.)*

ALISON. Was that...? *(Katie goes to her, away from the others. Alison and Katie are able to talk quietly, alone.)*

KATIE. That was Mister Dunham -

ALISON. Professor.

KATIE. He said that they had the vote. As expected.

ALISON. Was that all?

KATIE. He said it was unanimous.

ALISON. Unanimous?

KATIE. Yes, ma'am. What was the vote?

ALISON. None of your concern.

KATIE. Is it about the hearings?

ALISON. How on earth would you... This is not an appropriate time for this conversation. I can hardly imagine what would be an appropriate time.

KATIE. It may not be my place to say, but the lady who just arrived - I saw them. Her and her niece, they were meeting with government gentlemen -

ALISON. Say hallelujah. Yell "hallelujah" one time, in the middle of dinner service.

KATIE. What?

ALISON. Listen to me, Katie. There is nothing - nothing - I wish to know before my guests depart at the end of the evening. Not secrets, not gutter-talk. This is a small town. A university town. We all know each other, sometimes far too well, and the only reason - the only reason any of us can make it in this world is if we behave with decorum. It is the measure of a lady how she handles herself in times of adversity. When Morris went over to Normandy, when he was at the front and I felt like screaming, or tearing my hair out - I did not miss one play reading. Not one, for the duration. We comport ourselves to the highest standards of decency and societal behavior. This is not a veneer we paste over the darkness, it is the bedrock, the very foundation of civilization. What we know, we keep to ourselves, what damage and pain we are subjected to, we put aside, and that is where it stays until our guests have departed - well fed, well cared for... and we are alone. Are you quite clear?

KATIE. Yessum.

ALISON. Are you sure?

KATIE. Yes ma'am. (*A beat.*)

ALISON. We will read for about three quarters of an hour, then we will take a pause before launching into the second half. I wish to have no interruptions until our act break, when you will bring out the cake and refresh everyone's drinks.

KATIE. Yes, ma'am.

ALISON. You have provided fresh coffee?

KATIE. Yessum.

ALISON. Very well. Three quarters of an hour. (*Katie exits. Alison approaches the others.*) Ladies - tonight, we will be reading Medea by Euripides. The Coleridge translation, naturally.

ADELAIDE. (*to Elsie*) You called it. (*Alison removes a cloth covering a small stack of identical books on the mantelpiece, and starts handing them out.*)

ELSIE. Dramatic and classical. Alison - we would have expected nothing less. Will you be reading the part of Medea?

ALISON. I had the part in mind when I chose the play. I hope you will indulge my vanity.

ELSIE. Wait until next month - I will be the Misanthrope and the rest of you can go scrabble for bit parts.

ADELAIDE. You already are the misanthrope, who are you kidding?

ELSIE. I am sweetness and light, and anyone who says otherwise gets a kick in the shins.

ALISON. Adelaide - will you kindly read the Nurse and the Chorus. You get to begin the play.

ADELAIDE. Glad to.

ELSIE. I assume I'm playing the men's roles.

ALISON. The two kings, Creon and Aegeus.

ELSIE. I will do my regal best.

ALISON. Marcie: the Children - plaintive and innocent, also, the Tutor and the Messenger.

MARCIE. Thank you.

ALISON. Feel free to break our hearts with your childlike cries - it is quite the tragedy.

BRIDGET. (*looking at the first page*) So am I to be Glauce - the young, beautiful new wife?

ALISON. Glauce has no lines, dear. You will be Jason - my husband.

BRIDGET. And what's he like?

ALISON. He's a filthy backstabbing adulterer. (*Dead silence. Alison holds her gaze on Bridget - eye to eye. A long pause.*) Let us begin. (*They settle.*)

ADELAIDE. (*as Nurse*)

Ah! Would to Heaven my mistress Medea never have sailed to the turrets of Iolcos, her soul with love for Jason smitten, for now his love is all turned to hate, and tenderest ties are weak. Jason hath betrayed his own children and my mistress dear for the love of a royal bride. (*Lights out*)

SCENE 3

Room 357 of the Senate Building. Alison is now on the stand.

MUNDT. Mrs. Dunham. Your husband's name is Morris? Professor Morris Dunham?

ALISON. I must decline to answer that question on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate me under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, and also on the basis of a privileged communication between husband and wife.

MUNDT. You think his name is a privileged communication?

ALISON. I wouldn't know his name unless I were married to him.

MUNDT. Mrs. Dunham - do you find this amusing?

ALISON. Not in the least, sir.

MUNDT. Is your husband now, or has he ever been, a member of the Communist party?

ALISON. I regret that I must decline to answer your questions on the basis of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, and secondly, under the Constitution, the status of the family is a privileged communication, and under that I refuse to answer also.

MUNDT. You are refusing to answer under the Fifth Amendment?

ALISON. I trust the record will reflect I gave two grounds? You stated one.

MUNDT. The record will reflect the witness refused to answer under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. (*beat*) Mrs. Dunham, we have correspondence sent to Dean Hawkes, expressing reservations - a letter that mentions your husband -

ALISON. That sounds like hearsay twice removed.

MUNDT. I will ask you to let me finish the question.

ALISON. Or idle gossip.

MUNDT. This letter makes some rather bold accusations.

ALISON. Anonymous letters so often do.

MUNDT. What makes you think it was anonymous? (*A beat.*) Do you know Dean Hawkes?

ALISON. I know the dean, obviously.

MUNDT. And Professor Franklin Mayfield. His wife Bridget Mayfield is a personal friend of yours.

ALISON. Bridget is among my many -

MUNDT. Is Professor Mayfield a member of the Communist party?

ALISON. I must refuse to answer that question under the Fifth Amendment, sir.

MUNDT. Are you aware that Mrs. Mayfield appeared before this committee? (*A beat.*)

ALISON. I am now.

MUNDT. Two weeks ago. You didn't know this prior to today?

ALISON. I was not previously aware of that, no.

MUNDT. Would it surprise you to learn that she stated, under oath, ... (*He gets distracted by some unseen person near him*) Excuse me.

(*He covers the microphone. Confers with the unseen person.*)

ALISON. Whatever Bridget may or may not have had to say-

MUNDT. One moment - please. (*He finishes with the other person.*

Speaks to the unseen stenographer:) Any reference to previous sealed testimony will of course be stricken. (*to Alison*) Moving forward. Let me ask you this, Mrs. Dunham: You will tell us you know Professor Mayfield; is that right?

ALISON. I know of Professor Mayfield.

MUNDT. You are friends with Professor and Mrs. Mayfield?

ALISON. I must refuse to answer that question on the same grounds.

MUNDT. Is Bridget Mayfield a member of the -

ALISON. I must refuse to answer that question on the same grounds.

MUNDT. Are you just refusing to answer the questions about people who might or might not be Communists, but you are glad to answer questions about people you are sure are not Communists?

ALISON. I think you understand the situation I am in. I don't know where these questions are leading me, and I just don't want to incriminate myself.

MUNDT. I asked whether you knew the Mayfields, you said you did know them, so I think it is established that you are being selective in claiming your privilege.

ALISON. Which is my right.

MUNDT. The record will reflect the witness refused to answer under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. (*Lights out.*)

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