

DENIAL
(is not a river
in Egypt)

By
DS Magid

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*Thank you,
Women's International Study Center, Cleveland Play House,
April Gornik, BCR, and Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico*

For Karen

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CAST: 2 Women

ALTHEA EMORY. Painter. Elegant; wry, dry sense of humor, tightly wound, over 50.

BEATRICE LAMARTINO. Amateur cellist. Joker, over 40.

Note: Emanuela (Manny) the Concierge is a recorded voice.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A major metropolitan area and a large-ish artsy-craftsy town on the other side of the same country.

Note: This can be a unit set re-dressed during intermission.

A few notes on the Egyptiana in *DENIAL*...



Anubis, the dog-headed god, oversaw embalming in the Egyptian death rites.



Canopic jars are covered urns used in ancient Egyptian burials to hold the entrails from an embalmed body.



A Khopesh is an ancient Egyptian sickle sword which evolved from the battle-ax.

Bea often uses “Wadjet, Ptah” as an expletive: Wadjet was a cobra goddess, protector of the Pharaoh, and Ptah was patron saint of crafts, often shown wrapped in bandaging.

Think of Althea’s preferred expletive, “Ya ho-ma-ar,” as an in-joke, or something to reveal in program notes. Just between us, it means 'son of a donkey.'

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ACT I

ALTHEA EMORY's penthouse livingroom and studio, early on a rainy summer morning. There's a larger-than-life oil painting on a prominent wall of the livingroom, an edgy portrait of a big-and-tall middle-aged man jovially reaching an inviting hand. Also hanging somewhere is an antique Egyptian sickle-shaped sword (Khopesh). There are a sofa and chairs and occasional tables on which valuable tchotchkes are carefully arranged. The studio area, an alcove off the livingroom, is as clean, cold, and bright as an operating theater, paintbrushes laid out like surgical tools, the work-in-progress on the easel all right-angled lines and boxes of color (think Mondrian's later period). Rain streams down outside the large windows. Althea, a neat woman wearing a sleep mask pushed up off her eyes, and big-and-tall men's monogrammed pajamas (HPH on the breast pocket) which are way, way too big for her, vehemently – maybe even tearfully – addresses the painting.

ALTHEA. *(To the painting–)* You stepped out for groceries and it has been four days, have you forgotten how to count? You odious omelette, you sanctimonious strawberry, you pusillanimous potato! Your mother should have thrown you away and kept the stork! *(a beat)* I'll never forget the first time we met, but I'll keep trying. *(a beat)* The jerk store called, and they're running out of you! You wheelding bag of wind, you tedious, witless, commonplace– *(We hear a knocking at the door. A moment later, a buzzer-type doorbell buzzes once, long and loud. Then, shave-and-a-haircut, two bits. Morse code S O S. Outside the door, BEATRICE LAMARTINO sings a Stars and Stripes Forever parody, "Be kind to your webfooted friends..." Somewhere in the vicinity of the duck's mother, the*

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buzzing and singing stop.) (*Addressing the door—*) And you forgot your keys? Harold? I will forgive you only for your large, masculine hands. And, the groceries they'd better carry. (*Peers, by habit, through the spyhole—*) Not hide-and-seek, not your first day home. Please? (*Unlocks and opens the door, starts forward but bounces back like a mime in a rubber room, slams the door shut, does yoga-breathing—*) In-one-two-three-hold—— out-one-two-three-hold—— in-one-two-three-hold—— – (*stomach grumbles*) Do be quiet, this is humiliating enough without you chiming in. (*stomach grumbles*) Do not tell me I should have planned better. (*To the portrait—*) To recap, you are four days late. With a month's-worth of groceries. What have you to say to that, Harold P. Harrold? (*a beat*) Your charm is lost on me right now, one cannot eat charm. (*A large, red envelope slithers underneath the door. Althea gasps, then—*) Out-one-two-three-hold—— in-one-two-three-hold—— (*Peers through the spyhole, still nobody there. Thinks about opening the door again. Thinks about opening the envelope. Looks at it.*) If you want to play mystery-man, you might consider disguising your handwriting. (*a beat*) Two can play at this game. (*She pulls the Khopesh sword from its mounting on the wall, tiptoes to the door, quietly and suddenly whips it open and the sword bounces back the way she did, almost slicing her.*) Ya ho-ma-ar! (*Closes the door, hangs the Khopesh up, yoga-breathes. Picks up the envelope.*) Why would you be writing to me? And who rang the bell? (*stomach grumbles*) Do shut up, if I had any food, it would be yours in a trice. (*stomach grumbles*) In a pig's eye. Why did I say 'pig,' O dream of bacon, you are not helping. Focus. Focus will help, containment. Distraction. Lookie! A big, red envelope! (*To the portrait—*) Here's a conundrum: If you are the one who handles the mail, but the mail is from you– (*She examines the envelope, which is well-sealed. She holds it up toward her painting in the studio – it is, after all, a bright red rectangle. She smells it, examines it, nibbles a corner—*) Ewww. (*She prowls the room, opening little boxes and looking in bowl-shaped thingies.*) Chocolate! Yes! (*She does a little, very subtle, happy dance, bites it, spits it back into her hand—*) Ewww. Liqueur. Ah, beggars can't be choosers. (*Eats it carefully, savors it slithering down her throat. Her stomach grumbles even more loudly, she keeps hunting as she licks her hand.*) Brazil nut Brazil nut wherever you

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are? *(To the portrait—)* I wish you were here. I do. If you were here, I would not be in this pickle. *(stomach grumbles)* Why did I say ‘pickle’?

BEA. *(o/s)* Hello? Hello! The person downstairs? Said you were home?

ALTHEA. *(yoga breathes)*

BEA. *(o/s, knocking)* Hello, I know you're in there! People don't think you can see through the outside of a spyhole but you can, even if it's all upside down and backwards. Kinda like the Southern hemisphere. Knock knock. Knock knock?

ALTHEA. Who is there?

BEA. *(o/s)* Banana!

ALTHEA. You have a banana?

BEA. *(o/s)* You're supposed to say, “Banana who?”

ALTHEA. But have you any?

BEA. *(o/s, sings)* YES, WE HAVE NO BANANAS.

ALTHEA. No banana?

BEA. *(o/s)* Just roll with it, willya? Knock knock.

ALTHEA. Who is there?

BEA. *(o/s)* Banana.

ALTHEA. Banana Whom?

BEA. *(o/s)* Now that's funny. *(Althea peers through the peephole. Bea sneezes mightily.)*

ALTHEA. God bless you.

BEA. *(o/s)* Thank you! Can I come in?

ALTHEA. Have we met?

BEA. *(o/s)* You're Althea Emory, famous painter.

ALTHEA. Artist. Who are you?

BEA. *(o/s)* Norma Lee.

ALTHEA. Norma Lee?

BEA. *(o/s)* Normally I don't go around knock-knocking.

ALTHEA. How did you get up here?

BEA. *(o/s)* Swell elevator. Comfy little seat, plenty of room for me and my best buddy here—

ALTHEA. Is that a cello?

BEA. *(o/s)* No, it's an orangutan! *(sneezes)*

ALTHEA. What have you done to Manny?

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BEA. *(o/s)* WhoM?

ALTHEA. Emanuela. Manny.

BEA. *(o/s)* The person at the little desk? By the front door? She's worried about you. *(sneezes)*

ALTHEA. God bless you, if she were worried, she'd sneak away from her post long enough to bring me food.

BEA. *(o/s)* Look, Cookie, I'm soaked and it's freezing in all this air conditioning. Bad for my health, worse for my cello.

ALTHEA. I assume your name is not Norma Lee?

BEA. *(o/s)* I'm Bea, you little recluse, I'm Beatrice Lamartino. *(sneezes)*

ALTHEA. Oh, God.

BEA. *(o/s)* Bless me.

ALTHEA. I do not know you I have never heard your name uttered aloud or in any other manner.

BEA. *(o/s)* Have it your own way. *(We hear the elevator chime.)*

ALTHEA. Wait! Have you any food?

BEA. *(o/s)* Is the Pope Polish?

ALTHEA. Not for quite a while.

BEA. *(o/s)* Was that your stomach I could hear through the door? *(Althea's stomach grumbles.)* Yes, alright, I have food.

ALTHEA. Are you certain?

BEA. *(o/s)* A banana.

ALTHEA. Do not toy with me.

BEA. *(o/s)* Maybe you don't know me. *(Althea pulls the door open and bounces back. She yoga-breathes as soaking-wet Bea slips and slides her way in, almost taking a pratfall, wrenching her knee, never dropping the cello.)* Wadjet! Ptah! Oh, Widdikins, my baby, your case is soaked.

Owowowowowie.

ALTHEA. Are you alright?

BEA. Widdikins should be okay, she's in her original case, genuine leather over a wooden body. Of course, then there's my— Yee-ee-ee-owch. Knee.

ALTHEA. Is the provender in the case?

BEA. No, my purse. *(To the cello—)* Oh no no no you didn't let the rain in. Did you? I can't look. I'll dry your case, I will wrap you like a mummy and keep you safe. *(Bea tries to wrap the cello case with pillows, a*

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chenille throw, whatever 's handy.)

ALTHEA. I do not mean to be insensitive but you mentioned a banana?

BEA. In my purse, couldja get it? *(After an inner struggle, Althea grips the doorframe, gingerly reaches one foot toward the door. Out the door. It went! Controlling her breathing, Althea fishes around with her foot, almost hooks the bag once, twice, forgets to breathe, nearly passes out, third time 's the charm! She pulls the bag into the penthouse, closes and locks the door, sinks to the floor, much yoga-breathing to stave off panic.)*

I wouldn't give you up for all the sand in the Sahara, even for a Stradivarius, which costs more than my house.

ALTHEA. *(still panting)* The banana?

BEA. I'm a little busy.

ALTHEA. Why are you doing this to me?

BEA. As if you didn't know.

ALTHEA. Are you a collector, did you buy one of my paintings, are you less than satisfied? Are you here to visit the orchestra conductor? She lives downstairs.

BEA. Denial is not a river in Egypt.

ALTHEA. What do you know about Egypt?

BEA. A big red envelope slithers under your door and you don't read it? You don't even open it? Even when you see Hap's distinctive scrawl all over it? *(To the portrait-)* You told me she was a little kooky but she's locked up tighter than a tomb, the nut.

ALTHEA. You keep referencing cookies and nuts and I believe you offered me a banana?

BEA. I thought he was kidding about the groceries. Dontcha at least have an assistant or something? Friends?

ALTHEA. Nothing is more valuable than my privacy.

BEA. Even food?

ALTHEA. *(yoga breathes)*

BEA. Tell ya what, get me some towels and then we'll read whatever's in the envelope together, and then I'll look in my bag, never know what kind of a smorgasbord I can cook up.

ALTHEA. I will give you towels after you give me the banana.

BEA. You're no fun. *(Bea pulls a banana from her purse and tosses it to*

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Althea, who scarfs it down.) You really can't get out? He really does bring all your food?

ALTHEA. I cannot imagine to whom you refer.

BEA. Uh-huh. Good thing I'm here.

ALTHEA. Might there be another?

BEA. You're like a two-year-old.

ALTHEA. Banana?

BEA. We made a bargain?

ALTHEA. Touch nothing. *(Exits.)*

BEA. *(To the portrait—)* Traitor. Yeah, you heard me, you're a big, fat traitor and no, its not just large bones. Damn if you aren't even cuter in effigy. Was that a guffaw? I swear I heard you chuckle. *(Althea enters with a beach towel and a roll of paper towels in which Bea entombs the cello case.)* Oh, my widdw diddums, oh my widdw girl.

ALTHEA. Have you anything else I may eat?

BEA. I'm sorta surprised you let me in, doesn't it go both ways?

ALTHEA. I beg your pardon?

BEA. You can't leave, but you can let a perfect stranger in?

ALTHEA. I would not call you perfect.

BEA. Thank you.

ALTHEA. If I knew who you were—

BEA. You know exactly who I am.

ALTHEA. You mentioned other foodstuffs?

BEA. I gave you my very best banana.

ALTHEA. Thank you did I say thank you where are my manners thank you so very much is there really anything else edible in your magic bag of tricks?

BEA. You don't care I'm dripping all over your parquet?

ALTHEA. Must I beg?

BEA. Why wouldn't I have food? All the way across the country? I'd be as desperate as you if I trusted the airlines.

ALTHEA. I am not. Desperate. Just a bit peckish.

BEA. Uh-huh. Maybe there's food in my bag, maybe there isn't. Shall we see what's in that big red envelope first?

ALTHEA. I think there is food.

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BEA. In the envelope? Pretty flat. Ooh, maybe beef jerky.

ALTHEA. In your handbag.

BEA. You gotta give me points for not opening it.

ALTHEA. Your handbag?

BEA. Oh for the love of Hap. *(Bea brings out a tiny bag of airline peanuts. Althea lunges, grabs, manages not to touch Bea but snags the bag, devours its contents.)* You're welcome.

ALTHEA. Thank you. Is there. Erm.

BEA. Remind me how long it's been?

ALTHEA. You are enjoying this.

BEA. How would you know, you don't know me, remember? Hey, ya got some ice for my knee?

ALTHEA. I ate it.

BEA. Guessing there's no bag of frozen peas. How about a cold-pack? *(Althea exits. To the portrait—)* Hap Hap Hap, she's fruitier than a nutcake!

ALTHEA. *(Re-entering quickly.)* You have cake?

BEA. Figure of speech.

ALTHEA. With whom were you speaking, who did you bring into my home? *(Pulls the Khopesh off the wall.)*

BEA. Whoa, Cookie, that thing looks sharp.

ALTHEA. You were talking with someone.

BEA. Hap?

ALTHEA. Hap?

BEA. That guy in the portrait on your wall, you don't know his name?

ALTHEA. Of course I know his name, that's Harold P. Harrold.

BEA. The guy who wrote an entire book about a kumquat.

ALTHEA. Yes, my husband.

BEA. We'll get to that.

ALTHEA. We shall do no such thing.

BEA. If you would just hang up the sword?

ALTHEA. I do not know you, I do not know anything about you.

BEA. Except I'm cute. And that's my husband. Which I know you know.

ALTHEA. I do not believe you have sustained an injury. *(Bea shows off her swollen knee. Althea gags a little, re-hangs the Khopesh, exits.)*

BEA. This is like climbing a pyramid without a paddle. *(To the portrait—)*

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That was a guffaw. Wow do I miss you. *(To the cello—)* Okay, I gotta know. Dry hands, gotta have dry hands. *(She dries her hands on the beach towel, then drapes herself in it for good measure.)* Dry hands, check. Dry cello case *(feels it up)*, check. *(Ceremoniously unwinding the paper toweling, she hums an ancient Egyptian folk song. She unclasps the first latch.)* One. *(The second.)* Two. *(The third.)* Three, four, here goes nothin'. *(Bea opens the case, runs her hands over the cello.)* Dry like the desert. Thank you Isis and Osiris *(oh-SIH-ris, short middle 'i')*. *(She hugs the cello. To the portrait—)* What did you just say? I love her more than I love you? Don't make me laugh. If I laugh I'll cry. *(Another cello hug. She retrieves her bow and plays the first eight or ten bars of Bach's Cello Suite #1. She's not bad.)* Oh, that's better. *(Althea enters with a cold-pack.)*

ALTHEA. Please do not play that piece of music.

BEA. *(Bea takes the cold-pack and tries to hug Althea. Like that's gonna happen.)* Why can't I thank you?

ALTHEA. There is no reason to get personal. *(Bea puts the cold-pack on her knee, maybe tries to wrap it in place with paper towels.)*

BEA. I can play Amazing Grace. Though I'd rather not have to.

ALTHEA. I prefer quiet.

BEA. Then don't ask me to play Tequila.

ALTHEA. My husband is expected momentarily, you had best be gone soonest.

BEA. About that.

ALTHEA. Soonest means, at any moment.

BEA. There might be something in the envelope—

ALTHEA. Second husband, actually.

BEA. If one is good, two could be better? Or worse. Get it, better or worse? *(To the portrait—)* Thank you, how did you live with this sourpuss?

ALTHEA. Oh, dear, you are delusional.

BEA. I bet you talk to him, too. Uh-huh. How could anybody resist that adorable face, those large, masculine hands? Cookie—

ALTHEA. Have you one?

BEA. Are you sure you don't wanna know what's in the envelope? He went to a lotta trouble to get it to you, namely me and Widdikins. He owes me for the airfare.

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ALTHEA. Is that why you are here, you want money? True, the money is mine in this marriage but that is not why he stays with me.

BEA. And I'm the delusional one.

ALTHEA. You did say you had more food.

BEA. Altoids, a granola bar.

ALTHEA. May I? Please?

BEA. If that's the way you wanna play it. *(Bea rummages, hands over a granola bar which Althea stuffs into her mouth.)* How long since you had a real meal?

ALTHEA. I had a chocolate earlier.

BEA. Are they trying to starve you out? Is this rent-control?

ALTHEA. The Board is very, very strict about prohibiting delivery people in the elevators. And Harold goes down whenever he is in residence.

BEA. And how often does he come?

ALTHEA. Are you certain you wouldn't rather visit the symphony conductor? She lives right below me.

BEA. Why doesn't she bring you food?

ALTHEA. My domestic arrangements are none of your business, and nor is my husband.

BEA. Second husband, wasn't it? Be careful, I listen.

ALTHEA. You seem to have recovered so please leave.

BEA. I spent every penny I have to get me and Widdikins to this side of the country to bring you the envelope you don't wanna open, the least you can do is. Well, you already did the least, you let me in.

ALTHEA. Go now or I shall call the police.

BEA. Keep your pants on.

ALTHEA. Now! *(Bea turns, slips – on the banana peel? – falls. Out cold.)* Beatrice? Bea? Are you alright? Where is that damned phone? *(Althea slips and slides on too-long pajama bottoms.)*

BEA. Wha– Wha– Where am I?

ALTHEA. *(yoga breathes)*

BEA. Wha hopen?

ALTHEA. You are alright, I think you're alright, you must be alright, you're fine, would you like to lie on the sofa?

BEA. Maybe I'll lie from here.

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ALTHEA. Does anything hurt?

BEA. Who are you?

ALTHEA. Althea Emory, don't you remember?

BEA. Emory, Emory.

ALTHEA. You and your cello arrived a few minutes ago.

BEA. Widdikins! *(Sits up, dizzy—)* Whoa. *(Lies down.)*

ALTHEA. Do you know where you are?

BEA. A penthouse?

ALTHEA. Oh good. Do you know who you are?

BEA. Althea?

ALTHEA. Yes?

BEA. Althea.

ALTHEA. Yes?

BEA. Is there an echo in here? Althea.

ALTHEA. Yes?

BEA. I'm Althea Emory, maybe you've heard of me?

ALTHEA. I am Althea Emory.

BEA. I make tens of thousands for a buncha lines and a couple colors, a six-year-old could do it.

ALTHEA. My paintings are carefully, tightly plotted, it takes weeks to plan the grid, to mix the colors precisely.

BEA. Even your name is wrapped up tighter than a mummy.

ALTHEA. You must be feeling better, if you can make metaphors. Now, your name?

BEA. *(Italian pronunciation, bay-ah-TREE-chay)* Beatrice.

ALTHEA. God bless you. Would you like to lie on the sofa?

BEA. I can lie just as easy from here. *(To the portrait—)* Homonym anyone? Really she needs to laugh more.

ALTHEA. And now you are babbling, you were out for only a moment.

BEA. Where did I go?

ALTHEA. Could we please establish that you are alright?

BEA. There's a little bump here— OW— Eew, blood. *(Althea claps a hand over her own mouth.)* Only a little.

ALTHEA. Where's the damned phone?

BEA. Or a bandage for my knee?

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ALTHEA. More towels. Please please touch nothing. (*Althea exits. Bea picks up a small statue of a standing, human male body with dog-head and large, pointed dog-ears – ANUBIS.*)

BEA. Hap Hap Hap, how could you? Egypt is ours. Hear me, you gotta hear me, Hap. (*Favoring her bad knee, Bea does a ceremonial Egyptian Muu dance.*) Come. Back. (*Althea enters, hands Bea another roll of paper towels.*) Funny ears.

ALTHEA. I will take that, thank you. (*Bea sneezes.*) You have got to get out of those clothes.

BEA. I'm not that kinda girl. Hey, maybe you could turn down the A.C.? And get me another towel?

ALTHEA. I have a dryer.

BEA. Put my dress in there and it'd fit the little statuette. Anubis, right?

ALTHEA. What do you know of Anubis?

BEA. He's the Patron Saint of mummifiers. Doesn't everybody know that?

ALTHEA. Perhaps you could wear Harold's robe while you see to drying your dress.

BEA. He has a robe here?

ALTHEA. You think these are my pyjamas? (*Bea hobbles or scoots around examining the stuff on display.*)

BEA. Wow, this is rare—

ALTHEA. Give me that.

BEA. These scarabs are really valuable—

ALTHEA. I'll take those—

BEA. Is this a Ba-feather?

ALTHEA. A replica, of course, since the Ba-bird is mythical. (*Althea takes the feather and is now juggling it, the envelope, the ANUBIS statue, scarabs, and amulets, all of which are precious but don't fit well into her grasp.*)

BEA. Hey, why do seagulls live by the sea? Because if they lived by the bay they'd be bagels!

ALTHEA. Please stop mentioning food. Wait, if your knee is well enough for you to wander about, it is well enough for you to fetch some. You need only go as far as the lobby. And then you may leave.

BEA. Gee, thanks.

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ALTHEA. Or partake, I am not entirely devoid of courtesy.

BEA. Simple, human curiosity is how the species survives, good thing we never had to rely on you.

ALTHEA. Conversing with you is like following a shell game.

BEA. Well, not exactly survives, people like to eat mushrooms and they end up with *Amanita galerina*.

ALTHEA. *Amanita galerina*? That sounds delicious.

BEA. *Amanita galerina*?

ALTHEA. You will obtain the edible variety? Today? Now?

BEA. *Amanita galerina* is the most poisonous shroom on the planet.

ALTHEA. Perhaps you are not the best person to send after food.

BEA. I'm giving you an example of natural selection, try to follow along. If you find somebody ass-over-teakettle face-plant, you probably wouldn't gobble down the shrooms you found their face in. Right?

ALTHEA. You hit your head harder than I thought.

BEA. Hey! If you saw somebody dead on the ground, would you forage next to the body?

ALTHEA. Sadly, even that is not curbing my appetite.

BEA. We could talk about what's in the envelope which I never opened because Hap put your name on it. Yeah, the one you bit a corner off of. Me, I'm hungry for information.

ALTHEA. You?

BEA. Hello, my name is Beatrice Lamartino, my cello and I just flew cross-country at great personal expense, not to mention injury, to bring you this envelope.

ALTHEA. Thank you. Harold will deal with it upon his return. Harold always deals with the Post.

BEA. Oooh, now it's the Post. Well Hap didn't post it, he had me hand-deliver it, which means it wasn't a felony if I'd'a opened it which I didn't, being as I am an exceedingly sensitive person.

ALTHEA. Apparently you have fulfilled your obligation. Now you may leave. By the door. With your cello.

BEA. Okay. You win.

ALTHEA. Huzzah.

BEA. Do I at least get a door prize? Maybe Hap's portrait? Or this. (*Bea*

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grabs the envelope, Althea grabs it back, there's a tug-of-war in which Althea slips and slides in her too-long PJs and Bea slips and slides because, well, she's Bea. Althea holds onto all the stuff in her arms and gets the envelope. Bea gets even.) Ow! Ow! My knee, owowowowowowow-owowowowie.

ALTHEA. And you fell on my property. Twice. Phone phone phone.

BEA. *(sneezes mightily)*

ALTHEA. Bless you. I'll get the tissues.

BEA. Tissue? I don't even know you.

ALTHEA. A bandage, I must have one somewhere. And then somehow you must depart before something even worse happens. *(Althea exits, enters, drops a box of tissues and a rolled bandage on Bea, and places towels on the floor around her as if she were a wee-ing puppy. Yes, still juggling the objects and envelope.)*

BEA. Do I look like I could bend that far?

ALTHEA. You don't mean for me to wrap your knee?

BEA. Well, Widdikins here is only animated when I play her, and the husband in the portrait is a little two-dimensional.

ALTHEA. Here you are with a cello in a rainstorm, who knows the limits of your aptitudes and capabilities?

BEA. Was that a compliment?

ALTHEA. I would posit that you have likely had this particular 'accident' before.

BEA. Crappity bucket. *(Bea wraps her knee, milking it for all she's worth. Althea returns the objects to their rightful places, never letting go of the envelope.)*

ALTHEA. Now you may pack up your cello and go.

BEA. *(sneezes repeatedly, and coughs a bit for good measure)*

ALTHEA. Fine, Camille, but I'm getting you out of those clothes. You needn't fear, I shall not make any untoward advances.

BEA. And I was just starting to like you. *(How does Althea help Bea without touching her? But she manages it, Bea hopping and hobbling and generally making the most of things. They exit. Lights momentarily brighten on Hap's portrait.)*

ALTHEA. *(Entering.)* Phone! *(Grabs it, taps out a number, waits for the*

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outgoing message.) Harold, where are you? Call me back. Please? I am not begging. Please? *(She looks at the envelope. It looks at her, or would if it could. To the portrait—)* We had a Plan. You made the Plan, I agreed to the Plan under the condition that you would not ever deviate from the Plan which involved, as you may recall, a phone. This phone. The phone you insisted I acquire, the phone which will likely give me cancer. The phone on which you promised to call me, in a timely manner, if there were ever the possibility that you were not going to return. You charmed me into agreeing to a plan to which I had no desire to agree and then did whatever you damned well pleased on your end of the bargain. Isn't that what men do? Ensure that they could have whatever they want, even if they do not actually want it? And then, when I agreed, you changed the Plan without ever notifying me, why would you, being, as I am, in your thrall. Do you get extra man-points in the man-world for man-ipulating me? And why would you send an oversized, overhued envelope in one hand of a harridan, the other of which held her oversized instrument? What ever happened to violins? Ahh, someday you will answer me and then I will know I've gone mad. Hmm. Two can play at this game. *(Althea retrieves a beautifully crafted metal wastepaper basket, strikes a match, several of them, and burns the envelope.)* Even that smells appetizing. *(Althea hides the wastepaper basket, wafting away the smoke. Bea hobbles in wearing an oversized man's robe with HPH on the breast pocket. She picks things up and moves them around, kinda like a room-sized shell game.)* Put that down, it's frangible.

BEA. I know what that means, by the way. Ooh, this is cute, wheredja get it?

ALTHEA. Ireland, it's Belleek.

BEA. I thought that stuff was all enameled.

ALTHEA. You're thinking of Lalique which is both French and entirely different, put it down.

BEA. Belleek, Lalique, take a leak.

ALTHEA. You know where that is.

BEA. Wait a minute, if you can make a funny then you get 'the funny', so why don't you laugh at my jokes?

ALTHEA. Do be careful with those.

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BEA. I'm sorta the elephant in the china shop.

ALTHEA. Bull.

BEA. Yeah, I'm full of it. Okay, I give, what do I hafta do to make you laugh?

ALTHEA. Why would you want to?

BEA. Hap sent me.

ALTHEA. To make me laugh?

BEA. Not exactly.

ALTHEA. You've spoken? Recently?

BEA. He's incommunicado on the high seas.

ALTHEA. The man is terrified of water, he would not be caught— on a lake, not even a bathtub, much less an ocean. He goes to writers' retreats, motocross, countries without decent bathrooms.

BEA. Motocross?

ALTHEA. My husband eats life whole, huge rents and tears and gout of life, he makes me taste every nuance.

BEA. Sticks it to ya, huh?

ALTHEA. I deny that.

BEA. He invites you to go with, knowing you wouldn't be caught dead?

ALTHEA. That word. (*Bea picks up the ANUBIS statue.*)

BEA. Motocross?

ALTHEA. Put that down. Harold is in Egypt, if you must know.

BEA. He's sailing the Pacific.

ALTHEA. He is in Egypt, researching the god Anubis, for which that bit of pottery is an exceedingly valuable representation, put it down.

BEA. You want it? Come and get it! (*Bea tries to play keep-away, but her knee won't let her. Althea takes it.*) Fine, why would I want a tour-guide for the dead.

ALTHEA. Please do not use that word.

BEA. What, tour-guide?

ALTHEA. Very funny.

BEA. I don't hear you laughing. Ooh, look, an

ALTHEA & BEA. Isis knot.

BEA. A protective amulet for the tomb.

ALTHEA. Osiris's (*oh-SIGH-ris, long middle 'i'*) tomb.

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BEA. Osiris. (*oh-SIH-ris*).

ALTHEA. Osiris (*oh-SIGH-ris*).

BEA. Osiris. (*oh-SIH-ris*).

ALTHEA. Osiris (*oh-SIGH-ris*).

BEA. I could do this for forever.

ALTHEA. Put the Ba-feather down.

BEA. I bet you didn't know that if your heart is heavier than this feather, you go directly to Hell.

ALTHEA. As I'm certain you will.

BEA. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred buckeroonies.

ALTHEA. One's soul becomes a Ba-bird with the late person's face, so there.

BEA. Anubis makes you leave the heart in the body. Can't go to Heaven without your heart.

ALTHEA. Isis protects the heart.

BEA. The liver, Isis protects the liver.

ALTHEA. Paradise rejects one if one does not look one's best.

BEA. Egyptians had wig and makeup people just like the movies.

ALTHEA. And arms are crossed in emulation of Osiris (*oh-SIGH-ris*).

BEA. You're starting that one again?

ALTHEA. You cannot possibly know that before, er, burial, the body is cleansed in Palm Wine—

BEA. And the innards are stuck in jars with animal heads on 'em, a.k.a. Canopic Jars. Try, try again.

ALTHEA. The disincarnate personality remains connected with physical existence via the tomb.

BEA. Herodotus left a step-by-step guide to mummification. So there!

ALTHEA. (*die-O-dor-us SIC-you-lus*) Diodorus Siculus wrote that manual.

BEA. Herodotus.

ALTHEA. Diodorus Siculus in the first century before Christ, put that in your Canopic jar and display it.

BEA. di-Odorously Sick-you-lus? It sounds like a double stink and then you puke.

ALTHEA. Shows how little you know. And the Goddess Nephthys

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watches over the lungs.

BEA. They embalmed their cats.

ALTHEA. A boon to allergy sufferers everywhere.

BEA. Shoulda figured you'd hate cats.

ALTHEA. Archaeologists have found the entrance to the Underworld!

BEA. I know! At Giza!

ALTHEA. Which is where my husband is.

BEA. There's no sailboats in the Sahara.

ALTHEA. Camels are the Ships of the Desert.

BEA. Wow, another joke.

ALTHEA. Under duress.

BEA. But you won't laugh at mine.

ALTHEA. One maintains certain standards.

BEA. Fun as this is, you need to know that Hap was sailing the Pacific.

ALTHEA. Harold would never go on the water.

BEA. Sailing the Pacific.

ALTHEA. For the sake of argument, from where?

BEA. Backwards.

ALTHEA. Which way is forward?

BEA. West-to-east.

ALTHEA. There is a word for east-to-west.

BEA. "Backwards," try to keep up? They were making for Christmas Island from Hawaii. I told him it was too dangerous, the currents, the prevailing winds but you know him, he went anyway, just to prove me wrong.

ALTHEA. Do you even know Harold? He is terrified of water.

BEA. Big headlines in all the papers.

ALTHEA. Newsprint stains the sofa.

BEA. Lead story on the evening news.

ALTHEA. Television rots the mind.

BEA. Internet?

ALTHEA. The light from the screen disturbs one's sleep.

BEA. Or, read the red envelope.

ALTHEA. I think I will order out, where did I put those menus?

BEA. No delivery guys up the elevator, how ya gonna get it?

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ALTHEA. Isis will provide.

BEA. *(To the portrait—)* Seriously? *(To Althea—)* Is it yours?

ALTHEA. I beg your pardon?

BEA. Hap's portrait. Didja paint it?

ALTHEA. Freud.

BEA. Was that a slip? Nyuk nyuk nyuk.

ALTHEA. Freud made the portrait.

BEA. I give up.

ALTHEA. Really?

BEA. You expect me to believe that picture was painted by the guy who made sex dirty?

ALTHEA. Sigmund's grandson Lucian Freud, rather famous for his portraiture.

BEA. Go figure.

ALTHEA. Lucian said, and I quote, "I paint people, not because of what they are like, not exactly in spite of what they are like, but how they happen to be."

BEA. And Hap just hap-hap-happens to be lost at sea. Why dontcha paint that?

ALTHEA. Menus. *(Bea hops and hobbles to the studio while Althea hunts.)*

BEA. So this is where you paint your famous paintings. Very, what's the word?

ALTHEA. Orderly.

BEA. Nah.

ALTHEA. Methodical.

BEA. Nope.

ALTHEA. Precise.

BEA. I could do it in my sleep.

ALTHEA. My work is an elegantly complex meditation. *(Bea snores à la Three Stooges. Althea goes into the studio.)* When I was a Sunday painter, I gave one as a gift. A dealer saw it, a gallery called, and the rest is how I live in a penthouse.

BEA. You got rich without going out the door.

ALTHEA. A bonus.

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BEA. Dontcha you bore yourself?

ALTHEA. My work is soothing.

BEA. It ain't spontaneous.

ALTHEA. Your taste, my dear, is in your mouth.

BEA. Where else would it be?

ALTHEA. Please stop making a mess. *(Bea has pulled out Warhol's Shot Marilyn, but with Althea's face.)*

BEA. This looks familiar.

ALTHEA. Copying is a time-honored tradition with which to learn techniques of the masters.

BEA. Don't they call that, forgery? *(Bea pulls out Gainsborough's Blue Boy, Wood's American Gothic, Picasso's Gertrude Stein, Whistler's Mother, Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring, da Vinci's Mona Lisa, all with Althea's face in place of the original model.)* Look, the Mona Althea!

ALTHEA. I could paint on a cello.

BEA. You wouldn't dare. Hey, paint me, why dontcha, then they'll know which is which when they find us here all starved to death.

ALTHEA. A portrait? I would likely be more successful trying to play an instrument.

BEA. My stomach's playing percussion. *(Shouting back to the portrait—)* She doesn't get the hints, either.

ALTHEA. You could hop to the elevator, Manny could hand you the take-out, and you could hop back.

BEA. I'd be wearing it.

ALTHEA. I could call for an ambulance for your knee, and the paramedics could bring it up.

BEA. Cookie, you're bazonkers. *(Althea presses a button on the intercom, which is next to the front door.)*

ALTHEA. Manny? *(Through the intercom, Manny mutters unintelligibly.)* Would you please place an order for me? *(Muttering.)* I cannot put my hand on a menu just now, but I would be very happy with an assortment of Dim Sum. *(Muttering.)* You may add a dish for yourself, if you like. Lo ba-ak gou, perhaps? Fun zao? *(Muttering.)* I know, the delivery person may not come up and you cannot leave your post. *(Muttering.)* Someone will come down. *(Muttering.)* Perhaps the woman you sent up here without

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verifying that I knew her? (*Laughter, more muttering.*) Thank you, dear, you are a gem.

BEA. And how will it get up here?

ALTHEA. Osiris will provide. (*Yes, the oh-SIGH-ris/oh-SIH-ris game continues.*)

BEA. You're so hot for Osiris, why don't you paint him?

ALTHEA. Osiris. Tell me, do you play Schoenberg?

BEA. Yikes.

ALTHEA. Exactly.

BEA. Wheredja learn to paint?

ALTHEA. I do not see why it matters.

BEA. You'd rather we open the envelope?

ALTHEA. Here, my first husband lived here, it seemed a reasonable choice.

BEA. How do you stand the winters? Oh, right, you never go out.

ALTHEA. Not never.

BEA. Care to explain that one?

ALTHEA. I wonder how long it will take.

BEA. I dunno, a couple sentences maybe?

ALTHEA. The Food.

BEA. Let's go at this from a different angle. How did you hook up with husband number two?

ALTHEA. We met at a cocktail party, on the roof terrace of this building, as it happens.

BEA. So you used to get to the elevator and beyond.

ALTHEA. As I said, it's only the past few days, weeks, months, we married quite soon thereafter.

BEA. Was it a mistake?

ALTHEA. Hardly.

BEA. What did you have in common?

ALTHEA. If I tell you, will you help with the take-out?

BEA. You're not the only one who's starving.

ALTHEA. How do I know I can trust you?

BEA. You don't.

ALTHEA. I can live on water. Yogis do.

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BEA. Lie, lie, lie. Spill it, sister. (*Althea communes with the portrait.*
Then—)

ALTHEA. I have never had so many fascinating discussions or heard so many truly novel opinions or ideas about anything. I have never laughed so much in my life as when he is with me.

BEA. Him, you laugh at.

ALTHEA. He, is funny.

BEA. And charming. Slippery as hell, all guys are, 'til you decide you can do fine without 'em, that's when they pull the wool over your eyes. What does that mean, pull the wool, is it a couple of balls or straight off the sheep or a bunch of strands or a bundle from the yarn store? I'll tell ya one thing, Cookie, men don't knit. (*Althea's stomach grumbles.*)

ALTHEA. Some men do. Have you ever heard of Roosevelt Grier? The football player?

BEA. Needlepoint, and he turned out to be gay. Not that it matters. I mean it matters to yourself but pretty much nobody else unless you're hot for them or they're hot for you. Ever tried it?

ALTHEA. Homosexuality is narcissistic. One looks in the mirror, every loved one being one's mirror, and the reflection may not be precise, but—

BEA. Ya got the same bits, tits, clits, dingdongs—familiar territory.

ALTHEA. Which could breed contempt.

BEA. But it's sure-as-hell never safe for a woman with a man. How do ya even know if you got a good one? I mean, you ask questions, like, does he like his job, does he live with his mom, does he know a hawk from a handsaw?

ALTHEA. A wife should be everything to her husband, lover, friend, the one person who can fill him utterly, and she should be willing and ready to receive everything he has to give.

BEA. Even his snoring?

ALTHEA. Heaven forfend.

BEA. When Hap's away, Ka help me, I miss the roof-tiles rattling.

ALTHEA. I, for one, do not. Of course he sleeps in his own room, when sleeping time comes around.

BEA. I thought so.

ALTHEA. But otherwise.

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BEA. Shmotherwise, you're as fulla bull as I am.

ALTHEA. What were you saying about denial?

BEA. Why would you even want him, after that prize-winning collection of not very nice essays about some 'unnamed' painter?

ALTHEA. Artist. And that collection is what made him famous. Not solvent, but famous.

BEA. Mr. Harrold ever thank you for that?

ALTHEA. The dedication? "To the woman who paints my heart"?

BEA. It is pretty.

ALTHEA. For purple prose.

BEA. Is that another gay thing?

ALTHEA. Will you stop that?

BEA. I never tried, never wanted to, and for the last four years—

ALTHEA. Four years, since I have been on the street alone.

BEA. Well, now that we're all cheered up. What should we do til the Dim Sum comes? Where is that pesky envelope?

ALTHEA. Charades?

BEA. You play Charades?

ALTHEA. I am full of surprises. (*Bea indicates 'Author.'* *Althea is clueless. Bea tries it a couple more times.*) Author?

BEA. Very good. (*Gesticulates 'three words'.*)

ALTHEA. Three words.

BEA. Three names.

ALTHEA. Are you permitted to speak? I think not.

BEA. (*Gesticulates 'first word'.*)

ALTHEA. First word.

BEA. First name.

ALTHEA. May we get on with this? (*Bea gesticulates 'two syllables', Althea is again clueless.*)

BEA. I wonder how deaf people shout.

ALTHEA. Harold P. Harrold.

BEA. How did you know?

ALTHEA. (*doesn't answer*)

BEA. Fine, I need to practise anyway. (*Bea goes to the cello, plays the Bach.*)

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ALTHEA. Why do you insist—? Fine. (*Althea plays music on her phone, Steve Reich or John Adams, as repetitive, linear, and layered as her art.*)

BEA. I hate Charles Ives!

ALTHEA. (*smug*) He is not the composer of this piece.

BEA. I knew that. Wheredja hide it? (*Starts searching the room, in drawers, under sofa pillows.*)

ALTHEA. I haven't the foggiest idea of that to which you refer.

BEA. (*To the portrait—*) Oooh, you warned me, when her grammar gets stick-up-the-ass, she's lying through her teeth.

ALTHEA. (*To the portrait—*) You never told her that.

BEA. Then how would I know?

ALTHEA. (*To the portrait—*) Traitor!

BEA. That's my word.

ALTHEA. I would wager that he told you to ship the envelope, not to bring it.

BEA. The envelope that doesn't exist?

ALTHEA. It does not.

BEA. Liar.

ALTHEA. I burned it.

BEA. Sure ya did. (*Althea produces the wastebasket.*) NO, his last words were in there, there was another envelope inside marked "To be opened only in the event of my disappearance."

ALTHEA. How would you know that?

BEA. Curiosity is a strength, not a weakness.

ALTHEA. And lying?

BEA. Creative use of the truth.

ALTHEA. Why are you still here?

BEA. I give her food when she's starving, I bring word from someone she's desperate to hear from, I minister to her immortal soul by playing Bach, and how does she react? She breaks my knee and burns the last words of the only man who's ever really loved me.

ALTHEA. They cannot have been his last words.

BEA. What if they were? What if he really was sailing dangerous waters, what if he really did capsize, what if he's dead?

ALTHEA. Do not utter! Do not! (*To the portrait—*) Tell her she is not to

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utter that word! *(To Bea—)* Leave.

BEA. In a robe that would fit a Pharaoh?

ALTHEA. Naked, for all I care. *(Althea heads for the intercom, and Bea sits on her.)* Let me up. Help!

BEA. Like anybody could hear you in this insulated mausoleum.

ALTHEA. There is cash in the bedroom. A lot of it.

BEA. Tempting.

ALTHEA. You need money.

BEA. Nah.

ALTHEA. What have you done with my husband?

BEA. For someone who lies to herself all the time.

ALTHEA. I do not lie. You do.

BEA. You told me to.

ALTHEA. When?

BEA. When I came in. You said, “Lie here, lie there—”

ALTHEA. Will you please get off of me?

BEA. Hap was on a boat, Hap is missing, Hap told me in case something bad happened to come to you with the red envelope. He might be the only guy on the planet who understands that it’s bred in the bone, women look out for each other even when they hate each other. At least, normal women do.

ALTHEA. You are no more normal than you are perfect.

BEA. Everybody’s perfect, that’s why we’re all different.

ALTHEA. Get up. *(Maybe Bea bounces a little.)*

BEA. Also why we have so much trouble getting along.

ALTHEA. You are not as light as a feather.

BEA. I bet his poem was in there.

ALTHEA. A poem was his heart’s desire, even a good lyric, but writing one was never his gift.

BEA. He called you Wife East.

ALTHEA. He what?

BEA. It was a joke, not something you’d understand. Look, I knew he was in touch with you all this time, I knew he showed up every now and then and made sure you got fed, he told me way more than any second wife wants to know but men can’t help themselves. Even if they’re sensitive

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and evolved, they don't see that it's been all about them for seven thousand years, and how could I get him over that in only four?

ALTHEA. Wife East?

BEA. And he made me promise to make sure you got what you need. So couldn't you try to be nice?

ALTHEA. When pyramids fly. *(Althea pushes Bea off, grabs Bea's cello.)*

BEA. Hey! Okay! I'll just take that now.

ALTHEA. Will you?

BEA. Please? She's all I've got left in the world.

ALTHEA. Boo hoo.

BEA. Okay, how's this, maybe Hap isn't d- uh, maybe he's on some beach bumming around with the natives. Right? There's no way that force of nature is d- I didn't say it, I didn't say the word, that's gotta count for something. Look, Cookie, you can take it out of his hide when he finally shows up with your groceries. I won't even complain if he stops here first, you knew him first, he helps you out, you're important to him, even after the divorce he never let go-

ALTHEA. We are not divorced. Take that back or I shall break this neck.

BEA. Widdikins is an innocent bystander. *(Bea grabs the Khopesh off the wall.)*

ALTHEA. You'll snap her strings.

BEA. I'll snap more than that. *(Althea lifts the cello so that the stick faces Bea.)*

ALTHEA. En garde! *(They fence, but Bea ends up mostly backing up, safeguarding both Althea and Widdikins.)*

BEA. I give up! I surrender! I'm putting the sword down-

ALTHEA. On the wall, put it back on the wall.

BEA. Let me by.

ALTHEA. Do not try anything funny.

BEA. You wouldn't laugh anyway. *(The cello begins to slip - it's heavy - Bea drops the sword, which shatters as she grabs the cello.)* Widdikins! Ow ow ow crappity ow ow ow.

ALTHEA. My Khopesh.

BEA. My Widdikins. *(Bea checks the cello body before hugging it tightly.)*

ALTHEA. My priceless antique, worth more than your house, worth more

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than your entire neighborhood.

BEA. I could work off the debt, I could be your cook, you could take it out in trade. Let me clean it up.

ALTHEA. Stay where you are. Knowing you, you'd cut your foot on a shard.

BEA. Prob'ly an artery.

ALTHEA. Occupy yourself if you must, play if you must, only sit down now. (*Althea exits, enters with a broom, sweeps. Bea hugs the cello.*) Do you always do what he tells you?

BEA. I had to see for myself.

ALTHEA. That his taste isn't all in his mouth?

BEA. That he didn't start writing fiction.

ALTHEA. You need money to leave, I shall give you money, just bring up the Dim Sum before you depart.

BEA. Nutcase.

ALTHEA. Harold loves me.

BEA. He divorced you.

ALTHEA. Then why do I still have his clothing? His things?

BEA. You're a hoarder.

ALTHEA. Because he lives here, with me. Home for him is where I am.

BEA. In your dreams.

ALTHEA. And at present, he is in Egypt.

BEA. How would you know, you haven't left the house since King Tut.

ALTHEA. I go on the street with Harold.

BEA. A likely story.

ALTHEA. I do. Once a month, without fail.

BEA. Every month?

ALTHEA. Without fail.

BEA. Yeah, right, good thing I showed up, since he's lost at sea and all.

ALTHEA. Water has always terrified him.

BEA. I got him over that our first year.

ALTHEA. You could not possibly be a therapist.

BEA. You sure as hell need one.

ALTHEA. I am perfectly sane.

BEA. Walk out that door. You're starving and you can't walk out that

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door.

ALTHEA. And why won't you?

BEA. I should, I should leave you here to starve with your precision lines and anal colors and antique gobbledegook.

ALTHEA. If Harold is. Gone. What will I do?

BEA. Well, there are instructions. Were.

ALTHEA. When Harold comes home, to me, what will you do?

BEA. I'll be just fine. I have Widdikins. And a red envelope.

ALTHEA. Another lie.

BEA. Widdikins, right here, in the flesh. In the wood. *(To the portrait—)* Seriously, Hap, you expected me to get through to this sphinx?

ALTHEA. How much of the time did you say he was in your town?

BEA. I bought right after college.

ALTHEA. How much time?

BEA. We live there.

ALTHEA. He spends four days a month here with me. *(To the portrait—)* Tell her.

BEA. He brings me stuff from all his travels so I know where he's been, and I don't own a Chrysler Building shot glass. *(The intercom buzzes.)*

ALTHEA. Ya ho-ma-ar.

BEA. Even your cursing is hoity-toity.

ALTHEA. *(On the intercom—)* Manny? *(Manny, muttering.)* Oh, won't you send the boy up, just this once? *(Muttering.) (To Bea—)* How is that knee?

BEA. You can do it, you know.

ALTHEA. Easy for you to say.

BEA. Listen, you can, I promise.

ALTHEA. It is your fault I cannot go out.

BEA. Blame me for global warming, too. *(Manny, muttering.)*

ALTHEA. Just a moment, Manny, dear.

BEA. You can get to the elevator and down and back, you won't even have to step out of it.

ALTHEA. You think I haven't tried?

BEA. That's exactly what I think.

ALTHEA. Why do you persist in the delusion that Manny is not about to

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have a large Chinese feast all by herself?

BEA. I got Hap over his fear of water, didn't I?

ALTHEA. So you say. (*Manny, muttering.*) Please do not start without us.
(*Muttering.*)

BEA. Where's your cell phone?

ALTHEA. Where is yours? (*Bea pulls a cell phone from her purse.*)

BEA. Not sure I have any minutes left. ShlockPhone, pay in advance. Hah, with what money?

ALTHEA. You may not use mine.

BEA. Mine mine mine. Fine, remind me your number. (*Althea takes Bea's phone, dials, returns it to Bea. Althea's phone rings the same Bach piece Bea was playing earlier. Althea taps to answer it.*)

ALTHEA. Now what?

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) Hello? Hello? Is anybody there?

ALTHEA. (*Not into the phone—*) Oh please.

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) Hello?

ALTHEA. (*Not into the phone—*) Hello.

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) Is there an echo in here?

ALTHEA. (*Not into the phone—*) This is ridiculous.

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) If nobody's there, I'm gonna hafta hang up.

ALTHEA. (*Into the phone—*) Hello.

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) Hi! Howareya?

ALTHEA. (*Not into the phone—*) You know perfectly well how I am, you are not five feet away.

BEA. I could be right in your ear.

ALTHEA. Do I know why? (*Bea waggles an index finger, ready to hang up her phone.*) (*Into the phone—*) Do I know why?

BEA. So I can be with you all the way down in the elevator and all the way back up.

ALTHEA. Even for you, this is nuts. Oh, nuts.

BEA. You can do it!

ALTHEA. I haven't been out alone in.

BEA. That Chinese isn't getting any hotter.

ALTHEA. I'd best not take the chance.

BEA. How many minutes do I have left?

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ALTHEA. I could stand to lose a little weight.

BEA. I could sit on you again.

ALTHEA. That might be preferable.

BEA. This is your once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity, coward.

ALTHEA. I am not.

BEA. Say you'll try.

ALTHEA. What if I fail?

BEA. Say, "I'll try." That's all you have to do, is say it. (*command voice*)
Say it!

ALTHEA. I'll try.

BEA. Atta girl! Say it again! Say it!

ALTHEA. I'll try.

BEA. Into the phone.

ALTHEA. (*Into the phone—*) I'll. Try.

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) You're not alone, as long as you hang onto your phone, Okay? You are not alone. Say it.

ALTHEA. I am not alone.

BEA. I'm right here with you, Okay?

ALTHEA. O. Okay.

BEA. Once more with feeling.

ALTHEA. Okay.

BEA. You'll stay safe in the elevator, Manny'll come over and hand you the bag.

ALTHEA. Do you really think this will work?

BEA. Keep stalling, I might not have enough minutes to get you back up here.

ALTHEA. Ya ho-ma-ar.

BEA. Pick up your left foot.

ALTHEA. What?

BEA. (*command voice*) Pick it up! (*Althea involuntarily lifts her left foot.*)
(*command voice*) Put it down!

ALTHEA. Stop that.

BEA. A little spunk, that's a good thing! Go to the bedroom, get the cash, come back, and go!

ALTHEA. But I—

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BEA. Go! (*Althea exits to the bedroom, returns, Bea shoves her out the door and blocks it with her body.*)

ALTHEA. (*Into the phone—*) Keep talking.

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) I'm talking.

ALTHEA. (*Into the phone—*) You won't stop talking, say you won't stop talking?

BEA. (*Into her phone—*) Go! You're doing fine, you're doing great. (*The elevator chimes.*) There's the elevator see, all nice and cozy, marble and carving, brass railings all polished up fine, hang on to one of them, and sit down on the little seat. (*Elevator chime.*) There you go! (*Bea picks up the ANUBIS statue, peers at his left ear, thrusts it into her bag.*) In-one-two-three—hold—— out-one-two-three—hold, in-one—— that's right, that's right. (*She picks up a big shard of Althea's sword and approaches the portrait. She begins sawing it away from its frame.*) Little bell, say "Hi, Manny," do not give Manny the phone! – Right, see, there's Manny, say hello— say, "Hi, Manny." – It's okay if she stays at her desk, do you see the Chinese food bag? – Right there. Can you pick it up? – Very good! Say thank-you— See, Manny's proud of you, too! Say goodbye— Not to me, Althea breathe— Manny, hello, wouldja put the phone up to Althea's ear?— In-one-two-three—hold! Out-one-two-three—hold! In—take—the—phone—from—Manny! Take the phone. (*command voice*) Take the phone! Good girl.

Yes, spunk is a very good thing. Doors closed, on your way up—

(*Frantically tries to reattach the now-loose corner of the portrait to the frame.*) You're doing great! You're doing fine! In-one-two-three—hold, out-one-two-three—hold, in-one-two-three—hold— (*Althea enters with a food bag and stands, stunned. Bea stuffs the shard into a pocket and nonchalantly stands in front of that pesky loose portrait corner.*) Well look at you. (*Over her shoulder to the portrait—*) Look at her. (*To Althea—*) Put the bag down. Down! (*Althea puts the bag down.*) Good girl. Good girl.

ALTHEA. Oh. (*a beat*) Oh. (*a beat*) I did it. (*a beat*) I did it! (*a beat*) I went out through the doorway, all by myself. (*a beat*) Without Harold. (*a beat*) Without anyone.

BEA. It was nothing.

ALTHEA. I did it. (*a beat*) Oh my goodness, I did it.

BEA. Got any Palm Wine, we could toast.

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ALTHEA. I went in the elevator.

BEA. Hair of the dog? Anubis, dog, never mind.

ALTHEA. All by myself. I went down to the lobby. Myself. And back.

BEA. Do you want a medal or a monument? *(Bea unpacks the food bag as Althea grabs the doorframe, then carefully removes her fingers from it one-by-one. She sticks a toe over the threshold as if testing a calm ocean for temperature.)*

ALTHEA. I could do it again.

BEA. Not without your cell phone. *(Althea suspends and retracts her arms as if flying, steps outside, suspends, retracts, steps inside.)*

ALTHEA. Forth. And back. Out. And in. Just like my breathing exercises. *(She plays through the doorway.)*

BEA. I've created a monster.

ALTHEA. It's easy. I'm easy. Life can be easy.

BEA. Four years, huh?

ALTHEA. Four years.

BEA. That's a long time between drinks.

ALTHEA. Until today.

BEA. I helped.

ALTHEA. You did, oh where are my manners, thank you, I could not have done it without you.

BEA. Finally.

ALTHEA. I am so grateful!

BEA. *(Bea opens her arms for a hug. Althea wavers, finds herself sitting on the floor.)* Hello!

ALTHEA. What happened?

BEA. It's your body.

ALTHEA. What if I wasn't physically ready? Why did you push me out the door, when a person has a phobia one must act with caution and care—

BEA. Hey! All you ate in days was a banana, a granola bar, and some peanuts.

ALTHEA. I had a chocolate.

BEA. In days.

ALTHEA. I— but— Oh. Well. *(Bea eats out of a carton.)*

BEA. How did you survive this long? Without me, I mean, and don't say

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Hap, as fun and funny and generous as he is, it's all about him. Like any man, they can't help it, seven thousand years.

ALTHEA. *(Looks in the food bag.)* Did they pack plates? In the kitchen, I can— *(Althea gets up and woozily sits again.)*

BEA. For once in your life, share.

ALTHEA. Plastic. I do not use plastic.

BEA. Yeah, I know, Hap wrote a book, all the bad environmental stuff about plastic.

ALTHEA. Would you mind terribly going to the kitchen and—

BEA. You do know how to use chopsticks, dontcha? *(Bea breaks open a pair of chopsticks, hands them to Althea, motions for her to eat. Mimes exaggeratedly how to pick up a piece of food. Althea sits there.)* Open the terminal, here comes the trans-Egyptian Express. *(command voice)* Open! *(Althea opens her mouth, and Bea feeds her.)* Chew chew chew! Get it, choo-choo? Woo-oo-woo *(train whistle).*

ALTHEA. *(laughs in spite of herself)*

BEA. *(To the portrait—)* Didja hear that? I knew she could laugh!

ALTHEA. And I thought I was hungry before. *(They eat, sharing, offering, finding a way to eat from the same cartons, together.)* I. Er. How did you meet. Harold.

BEA. You really wanna have this conversation?

ALTHEA. You are my guest I have neglected you woefully please tell me about yourself I am honestly curious how did you meet Harold?

BEA. Mutual friends, amusement park, he got sick as a dog so of course I was sympathetic. Or just pathetic.

ALTHEA. He is a charming man.

BEA. He was retching all over the place. So I took him back to his hotel, and he took me by surprise— What'll we do if he comes home?

ALTHEA. When he returns.

BEA. Aside from, murdalize him.

ALTHEA. Tempting.

BEA. If he isn't already dead.

ALTHEA. Stop it stop it stop saying that word. In-one-two-three-hold—

BEA. Breathe like a person!

ALTHEA. Do not speak to me in that manner, you are a guest in my

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home, Harold's and my home.

BEA. Hap's home is with me.

ALTHEA. You will comport yourself with a modicum of dignity.

BEA. With me, his real wife.

ALTHEA. I am Harold's real wife, you are just more recent.

BEA. He wouldn't lie to me. Not about your divorce. *(They look at the painting.)* Denial, anyone?

ALTHEA. So he lied to me.

BEA. When?

ALTHEA. By omission, every time he stayed here, two, three, four days a month.

BEA. Wait, you're not just a hoarder?

ALTHEA. Put that in your Canopic jar and display it.

BEA. He lives here every month?

ALTHEA. He enriches me and fills me and leaves me dripping.

BEA. Widdikins. *(Bea goes to play cello again, but for some reason she can't touch the strings with hand or bow.)* Sweetums? Widdikins? Wassuh matter? *(Bea tries again, but cannot even pluck a string, much less play.)*

ALTHEA. Quiet. At last.

BEA. *(To the cello—)* Traitor, you're a traitor, he's a traitor, she's a traitor, I'm surrounded by traitors. *(Bea grabs a carton and starts shoveling food into her mouth.)*

ALTHEA. Please leave some of that for me. *(Bea eats faster and Althea grabs the carton away, spilling it.)*

BEA. Now look what you did.

ALTHEA. I? *(Althea flips a piece of the spilled food at Bea, who instinctively bats it back. Althea does it again.)*

BEA. Your aim is terrible.

ALTHEA. Practise makes perfect. *(Bea tries to catch the next piece with her mouth but it hits her in the face.)*

BEA. You did that on purpose.

ALTHEA. What if I did?

BEA. En garde! *(They duel with chopsticks until Althea stabs a piece of food and paints Bea's face in sticky sauce. Bea picks up a food carton and aims it at Althea.)*

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ALTHEA. Don't waste it! *(Bea pretends that the whole time she was picking up the carton to eat from it.)*

BEA. Not everybody's a belly dancer. *(After a moment, Althea takes a napkin from the bag and hesitatingly, gently wipes Bea's face. The napkin tears, leaving fragments all over Bea.)*

ALTHEA. Let me get some water.

BEA. Leave me some food, willya? *(Bea hobbles out. Althea puts the spilled food into the bag.)*

ALTHEA. *(To the portrait—)* She is charming, in an oddball sort of way. And fun. Was I ever fun? In bed, of course, but did I ever return the favor and make you laugh? Harold? *(Althea goes to the portrait, sees the torn corner.)* That thief. She never came here to deliver an envelope. She came to steal your portrait! *(Bea enters with a clean(er) face.)* You scoundrel, leave my home this instant!

BEA. Did you finish the Chiu-chao-fan-guo?

ALTHEA. Con artist.

BEA. At least I'm some kind of artist.

ALTHEA. I will not have you in my home one more instant.

BEA. Are you delusional? *(To the portrait—)* You didn't tell me she was delusional.

ALTHEA. Do not speak to my husband, do not speak to him or of him ever again. Leave!

BEA. Could I at least put on my shoes?

ALTHEA. You have one minute to change or I call the police.

BEA. You're just fruity enough to do that.

ALTHEA. Leave!

BEA. Okay, okay, keep your pants on. *(Bea hobbles out.)*

ALTHEA. My darling darling man, how did you ever fall under her spell? Don't answer that. *(What does Althea do while awaiting Bea's return? Try to repair the portrait? Clean up? Do three things at once and drive herself crazy? Bea limps in fully dressed if still quite damp.)* Now get out. I am duly grateful for your assistance but, just, get out.

BEA. *(Putting the cello in its case.)* You don't want me here, I don't want to be here, plenty of flights every day, every night. I could use a coupla bucks for the subway.

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ALTHEA. I am surprised you didn't steal the change from the Dim Sum.

BEA. If you want me gone, you're gonna hafta help. *(Althea pulls the change from her pocket and starts to throw it at Bea but regains control, neatens the stack of bills and the coins, saunters to the door and opens it, and holds the money out into the hallway. Bea hoists her bag and the cello case and exits, taking the money as she goes. Elevator chime. A phone rings that same Bach tune, Althea looks at hers and no, it's not ringing.)* (o/s) Hello? Yes, this is Beatrice Lamartino. *(Elevator chimes. Althea closes her door.)*

ALTHEA. And the cherry on the sundae is, I have lost my appetite. *(To the portrait—)* You're not coming back to me, are you? And I will never know what was in that envelope, will I? Or will I? *(She pulls charred fragments out of the wastebasket and starts piecing them together like a jigsaw puzzle.)* Here. No, that. There? There. No. Yes! What ever possessed me? *(The ashes on her face look like tribal face-paint.)* At least you tried to tell me something, to give me something to remember you by. Was it all a game? a puzzle? We do love doing the crossword in bed, how comforting, how banal. Was the medium the message? Was the messenger? *(She manages to piece together a holey half-a-page, and gasps.)* You couldn't have. You didn't. *(She finds a couple more scraps, fits them to the page, reads.)* You did. *(She picks up the phone, taps it a few times.)* Beatrice? Voice mail. *(Waits for the outgoing message to end—)* Beatrice, I wish to apologize for asking you to leave. Beatrice, please come back?

END OF ACT I

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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