

HILDA'S DINER

BY
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HILDA'S DINER

For all those crooked pots searching for their lids.

S-M, G-A, A-H

HILDA'S DINER

Historical Notes:

During World War II, the U.S. government conducted classified experiments with mustard gas and other chemicals on thousands of American troops. Investigations have found that some military experiments singled out African American, Japanese American, Puerto Rican, and other groups of servicemen. More than 3,900 American servicemen exposed to mustard gas in secret military experiments during World War II (1939-1945).

On Sept. 16, 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Selective Training and Service Act, which was another name for the draft. It required all men between the ages of 21 and 45 to register for the draft. During the first two world wars, having flat feet could disqualify recruits from being able to enlist in the army. Having a flatfoot was seen in general as something linked to poor health.

When the war began, quickie marriages became the norm, as teenagers married their sweethearts before their men went overseas. As the men fought abroad, women on the Home Front worked in defense plants and volunteered for war-related organizations, in addition to managing their households. Women were granted the right to vote in 1920. This play takes place 25 years later at a time where prior to the war women were not working outside of the home.

Notes

Dialogue: The use of a slash symbol (/) in the dialogue indicates where the next line of dialogue should begin. The intent is to create overlapping dialogue. If there are lines following this in () this is what the actor would've said had there been no interruption. They may try to say the line as they are cut off.

Set: The Young's home can occupy a portion of the stage and the diner occupies the rest. The use of the stage apron is encouraged especially for the attack scene. However, the playwright gives producer creative freedom on staging and all matters artistic.

HILDA'S DINER

CAST

(7) 5 women 2 men (1 extra can be doubled)

HILDA YOUNG	F, 25 Wife of Lyle. Magnanimous, Ambitious
LYLE YOUNG	M, 25, Husband of Hilda, WWII Veteran, Conflicted
ROSIE YOUNG	F, 65+, Mother to Lyle & Bill, Devoted
BILL YOUNG	M, 40s, Brother of Lyle, Strong-willed
EDNA TODD	F, 40s, Head Waitress, Trusted family friend
MARGARET JOSTEN	F, Early 20s, Waitress, Rule-follower
AGNES COLLINS	F, 18+, Waitress, Loves gossip but hates small time life
METERMAN	M, Can be doubled if wearing a mask. Must not be played by BILL YOUNG

Time: February-May 1946

Place: Burton Ohio, USA.

Burton Ohio had a population of 900 residents at this time.

HILDA'S DINER

HILDA'S DINER

ACT I
SCENE I

At Rise: Living room of LYLE and HILDA YOUNG. Lyle has returned home from WWII and is adjusting to civilian life. Hilda is used to running the household in his absence. They ready themselves for dinner. HILDA is priming herself in a mirror, she is put together. LYLE enters disheveled and in a huff.

LYLE. Hilda. Hilda! Where are my dress shoes?

HILDA. Behind the couch, dear-

LYLE. And my dress socks?

HILDA. One would think you'd have those before putting on stiff shoes...

LYLE. *(Mumbles.)* And one's things should be where *they* left them.

HILDA. Excuse me-

LYLE. *(Softens.)* I'm sorry, it's just...I've been back for weeks and still I feel like a stranger in this house. Nothing's where I left it. *(He takes his dress shoes to the couch. Hilda removes a pair of socks that were folded inside the dress shoe.)*

HILDA. Are you surprised? You were gone thirty-three months Lyle. You can't blame me for tidying up.

LYLE. Right, right. I know, it's just... *(He winces in pain as he ties his shoes. His left side is weak. Hilda tends to him.)*

HILDA. Hands still hurting? Have they gone numb again?

LYLE. Cramps is all. *(He shakes his hand.)* Nothing a good meal at the diner won't make me forget about straight away. You know, I thought about the diner every time that damn c-ration key poked my pocket.

HILDA. Your ration days are behind you dear. Speaking of which, Mama's cooking tonight, she *insisted* on it.

LYLE. In her letters she said she was retiring; she's supposed to be

HILDA'S DINER

training a new cook.

HILDA. *(She hides her knowing smile.)* She has been.

LYLE. Good. She needs to cut the cord.

HILDA. With her 'baby boy' overseas she needed something to calm her nerves. The diner has been a good distraction for the both of us.

LYLE. You two have been as thick as thieves these days haven't you-

HILDA. *(Coy.)* We've gotten to know each other well.

LYLE. So, what's this surprise you two have been whispering about lately? It must be something at the diner or I wouldn't have been 'banned' until now-

HILDA. Oh, you'll see. Come on.

LYLE. I'm coming. Where's my- *(Hilda hands him his jacket.)*

HILDA. Right here dear.

LYLE. That trick might do us well at parties. *(With a flirtatious glare.)*

What am I thinking now? *(Hilda playfully hits him.)*

HILDA. Let's not be late. Mama is waiting. *(Hilda exits.)*

LYLE. *(Calling to her.)* Go ahead, I'll be right there dear. *(Lyle winces in pain, he grabs at his left side. He opens the stand and pops some pills from a prescription bottle. He steadies himself and exits.)*

SCENE 2

Lyle and Hilda enter the diner. Hilda watches Lyle for a reaction. MARGARET and AGNES are cleaning behind the counter as EDNA breaks away and warmly greets the couple.

EDNA. Well, hello, stranger! *(Edna embraces Lyle. She calls to the others.)* Girls, look who it is! Mr. and Mrs. Young. *(Margaret and Agnes wave. Edna takes Lyle and Hilda's jackets.)*

LYLE. Good to be back Edna. Good to be...here. *(Lyle is looking around. He is taking in all the new décor and changes to the place.)*

Rosie's looks...

AGNES. Different?

HILDA'S DINER

MARGARET. (*Under her breath to Agnes.*) Guess no one told the poor fella.

AGNES. (*Under her breath to Margaret.*) This ought to make things interesting.

HILDA. Let's take a seat, shall we? You're starved, dear.

EDNA. Of course, we've been expecting you- this way. (*Edna leads Lyle and Hilda to a table.*) Mama Rosie has been cookin' all afternoon. She says her casserole will stick right to your bones. I'll let her know you're here. Can I get you a drink?

LYLE. Scotch. Scotch on the rocks.

HILDA. He's kidding, we'll have two waters thanks, Eddy. (*Edna exits to behind the counter.*)

AGNES. So, the poor sap is really in the dark.

MARGARET. Hilda always gets what she wants...whether he knows it or not.

EDNA. You spinsters back here gossiping again? Don't you have glasses to prep for tonight's dinner rush-

AGNES. More like a crawl these days.

MARGARET. Yet, the pie rack is always empty. (*Margaret elbows Agnes and they share a smirk.*)

EDNA. You two can joke all you like but smell that? Mama Rosie's casserole will bring them in-

MARGARET. (*Sarcastic.*) And if not, at least it'll use up the extra meat from the icebox.

EDNA. Mama's right, with the men coming home, there's bound to be more families coming in.

AGNES. My boyfriend says when some of the soldier come back, they don't leave their homes, on account they think every loud bang are the Germans coming for them.

MARGARET. I didn't know you and your sailor boyfriend did much talking. (*Margaret makes kissy faces and Agnes playfully hits her as they tease each other. Edna hits the two on the back of the head with a large menu.*)

EDNA. Enough outta you two- Mr. Young looks thin but other than that

HILDA'S DINER

no worse for wear. (*Agnes gestures to the menu it reads. 'Hilda's Diner' in bold print on the front.*)

AGNES. Check him again after he hears the big news. (*Margaret mimes an explosion with her hands, and Agnes laughs.*)

EDNA. Stop horsing around and bring a couple glasses of water over to the table. (*ROSIE enters from the kitchen humming, In the Mood by Glen Miller. She's carrying her casserole on a serving tray. As she approaches Lyle stands as an offer to help.*)

LYLE. Ma, let me help you.

ROSIE. Oh, don't be silly honey. You deserve a rest after all you've been through. I wanted to give you a proper meal to celebrate your homecoming.

HILDA. It's lovely Mama, smells divine.

ROSIE. Chockful of meat and vegetables.

LYLE. Looks wonderful. Come sit with us.

ROSIE. Thank you, dear boy.

LYLE. I suppose I don't have to ask what the two of you have been up to these days. Would you look at this place.

ROSIE. We refreshed.

HILDA. Are you upset?

LYLE. It's just I hardly recognized the place. New uniforms, new paint, chairs...this must've cost a fortune.

HILDA. It's an investment, Lyle.

ROSIE. She's right dear. A wonderful opportunity. Here- (*Rosie takes a menu off the tray and hand it to Lyle.*)

LYLE. The casserole is plenty mother, thank you.

ROSIE. It's not for ordering son. (*Lyle turns the menu over and sees, 'Hilda's Diner' across the top.*)

LYLE. So, *this* is the surprise you've worked up?

ROSIE. It's not a secret I'm getting older and can't keep on my feet like I used to.

LYLE. That's why you were supposed to be training the new cook. (*Realizes.*) I see now. (*Hilda and Rosie share a guilty look.*)

ROSIE. I've passed down the recipes to someone that can give new life

HILDA'S DINER

to this place. Hilda loves it as much as I do.

HILDA. Mama that means so much to me.

ROSIE. And Edna has really stepped up. She'll run the kitchen and Hilda can manage the front. Such great hospitality she has/

LYLE. My being away has brought the two of you together, which I'm grateful for but, can we afford this? Business isn't exactly booming. I thought we'd see the place off and make a few bucks. Mama you could retire in peace.

ROSIE. Who says I want peace?

LYLE. I'm serious.

ROSIE. So am I. This place has always been there for me. I'm prepared to sign it over to Hilda and keep it in the family-

LYLE. We can't buy you out Ma-

ROSIE. I'm giving her to you.

LYLE. What did Bill say?

ROSIE. You look parched dear take a sip of water/

LYLE. Ma-

ROSIE. He doesn't need to know and besides he hasn't been around much since dad passed, he doesn't love this place like we do. He'll inherit the house, he'll turn around and sell it anyway. He'll do just fine.

LYLE. After months of being in the red - sounds like he's getting the better deal.

HILDA. It'll pick up, you'll see.

LYLE. This is really what you two want-

HILDA. Yes, we've thought it through, Mama even had the attorney draw up the documents. *(Rosie takes documents from her apron and slides them over to Lyle.)*

LYLE. Oh- I'll have to review these at home...

HILDA. And...

LYLE. And see if it makes sense...

ROSIE. You took your first steps right over there. You were always with me, Bill was already off to school, and you'd spend the days with me dancing on the counter tops. Daddy would take his paper over there

HILDA'S DINER

with a pot of coffee. *(She tears up a bit but recovers quickly.)* Simpler times and all.

HILDA. You can't put a price on memories. *(Lyle looking at the documents.)*

LYLE. It appears someone has...this is the operating cost? *(He sips his water.)*

ROSIE. Sometimes things must appease the heart before the pocketbook dear.

HILDA. What do you say?

ROSIE. Feels right, doesn't it?

LYLE. It feels like I'm under enemy fire tonight. First you butter me up with casserole, then a walk down memory lane, and here it is... *(He gestures to the two of them.)* the big guns. *(Hilda and Rosie hold hands and bat their eyes as if to say please.)*

HILDA. Say we can do it Lyle. After all, it *is* an investment in family.

LYLE. I see. Don't I get a say in what's best for the family? *(Rosie puts more food on Lyle's plate.)*

ROSIE. He gets a bit out of sorts if he doesn't eat enough, doesn't he?

HILDA. I keep a candy bar in my purse for just such a reason. *(Hilda and Rosie laugh together.)*

LYLE. Well, I'm clearly outnumbered here.

HILDA. Is that a 'yes?'

LYLE. A soldier knows when to surrender. *(He waves his napkin.)*

HILDA. Oh! How wonderful!

ROSIE. This makes me so happy kids. *(Hilda and Rosie hold hands high across the table and each lift Lyle's arm in celebration too. Edna enters.)*

EDNA. Well, well I see the news has been broken. I'm dying to hear what you think of the place since you left?

LYLE. *(He is trying to be positive.)* It's real... snazzy.

EDNA. We're all thrilled the diner's staying in the family. Aren't you just over the moon?

LYLE. It's something, isn't it. It's the same, but not... *(He looks around and gets overwhelmed.)* Anyone else feel a bit warm. *(He tugs at his*

HILDA'S DINER

shirt. A plate from the kitchen falls and he jumps.) Uhm...Can I get more water please? Maybe a pitcher? Thanks Eddy.

EDNA. *(To the table.)* Of course, anything else?

LYLE. *(Aside.)* Nothing on the menu.

EDNA. I'll let you all get back to celebrating. I'll grab an extra plate for you mama.

ROSIE. Thanks Eddy. *(Edna exits.)*

HILDA. You ok, dear? You look a little flush?

LYLE. These homecomings take a lot out of you. When you're over there you're constantly thinking of coming back home. Strange thing is in your mind you're coming home to the exact place you left, as if time hasn't marched on. But that's not the case, is it?

ROSIE. Eat up you barely touched your dinner.

HILDA. Everything you need is right here.

ROSIE. She's right, and that hasn't changed- and now it never will.

HILDA. Ohh!

ROSIE. What is it dear?

HILDA. I think the Grand-Re-Opening banner will look great right over there, don't you? *(Rosie nods as she slides the documents to Hilda. She signs them. Lyle begrudgingly shuffles the casserole into his mouth.)*

SCENE 3

Lyle is laying on the couch in his robe. Hilda enters in an apron with a bowl of food.

HILDA. It's been days since you've gotten up.

LYLE. I just need rest.

HILDA. You need a doctor.

LYLE. I've been to the VA. They can't find anything wrong. My head says otherwise. I can't sleep either. They say lots of vets go through this; it'll pass.

HILDA. I'm sure it will. In the meantime, we need to keep up your strength. Here, open— *(Hilda sits beside Lyle and feeds him a spoonful.)*

HILDA'S DINER

LYLE. Another recipe?

HILDA. I want to get it just right. Mama says that I can tweak her casserole, I think it needs to be a bit sweeter.

LYLE. It's lovely dear. I just have no appetite. How was the re-opening?

HILDA. The whole town was there. The mayor cut a giant ribbon in front of the diner. A reporter from the Morning Harold was there too. Took a picture right outside with the new sign.

LYLE. The money coming in from the VA is enough for us but I'm not sure it can support more renovations at the diner too. I've been talking with some of the fellas and their disability payments have already been cut and they're worse off than me. Hilda, we gotta be careful-

HILDA. After the paper comes out, I'm sure it'll remind folks that we're here. It's been a month since you've seen it, it's really coming along. Don't worry so much Lyle. Focus on getting well and let me focus on the diner. Ok?

LYLE. Yes dear- for now.

HILDA. What's that supposed to mean?

LYLE. It's not right you working so hard. When we met, I was pre-law at Ohio State. Now-

HILDA. You served your country Lyle there's no shame in that-

LYLE. When I drew that low number, I knew our lives were going to change.

HILDA. I'm proud of the man you are - only 14 out of a regimen of 4,000 made it into officer training-

LYLE. That training meant I didn't go on with the rest. I missed D-day. I should've been out there too. Instead, I hauled supplies for the armor division, hardly a hero-

HILDA. You were essential-

LYLE. I saw the beach months later. Ships partially sticking out, the bodies washed to shore...the beach was calm, I don't know why I expected it to be raging...We traveled up and down the highway and I can still smell the dead horses in the fields-some hero I turned out to be-

HILDA. You were supposed to be where you were, you couldn't control that. You should feel fortunate/

LYLE. The only emotion you can feel out there, if you're lucky, is humility. You just go forward...because they couldn't.

HILDA'S DINER

HILDA. Look at me. You're not there anymore.

LYLE. A part of me is Hilda. I don't expect you to understand, hell I don't understand. They say there's nothing wrong with me but all it takes is a smell, a clink of metal and I'm back there. When we walk down the street I check for snipers Hil, in Burton Ohio - I check for snipers.

HILDA. It'll get better, in time.

LYLE. I'm afraid when I became a soldier it stole the husband out of me.

HILDA. Shhh... enough of that talk. Rest and eat... (*Hilda continues to watch Lyle eat as the lights fade.*)

SCENE 4

Lights up on diner. Margaret and Agnes are gossiping.

MARGARET. Did you see how she just sat with Mr. Hephman yesterday? While we did all the work.

AGNES. How could I miss it. I served them! (*Imitating Hilda.*) Come here often darling?

MARGARET. (*As Mr. Hephman.*) Why no- I haven't a reason until today-

AGNES. (*As Hilda.*) You're simply captivating, Margaret and Agnes get us more coffee. I said Marge and Aggie sweep the floor, fill the coffee pots/

MARGARET. (*As Hilda.*) Marge and Aggie fill the pie display blah...blah-

AGNES. You'd think she'd be home with her sick husband but oh no-

MARGARET. More customers are coming in but it ain't families.

(*EDNA enters from the kitchen. Agnes doesn't see her though Margaret tries to warn her.*)

AGNES. I don't think she's found a man yet that she wouldn't bat her eyes at/

EDNA. Aprons! Come on ladies we open soon and you're out of uniform. If you have time to flap your gums, you have time to dress yourselves. (*Margaret and Agnes put on their new HILDA'S DINER*

HILDA'S DINER

aprons.)

AGNES. Why do we have to do all the grunt work when (*catches herself.*) ...

EDNA. Go ahead- out with it-

MARGARET. It's just the new *ownership* has made a lot of changes and... well/

EDNA. I see what's happening here. A young, smart, capable woman is running a business and you busybodies gotta knock her down.

MARGARET. That's not it-

AGNES. Mama Rosie let us come in when we wanted, she didn't make us wear (*Indicates apron.*) these things-

EDNA. The free ride is over ladies. It's time you earn your pay, now go set the tables. The paper should have our picture front and center today so let's get this place in order. (*EDNA exits preparing tables etc.*)

AGNES. Even if things turn around it doesn't make up for the months of tumble weeds blowing through this place.

MARGARET. Mama Rosie's husband opened this place and put everything they had into it. When he passed on it kept her going -it'd be sad to see it go.

AGNES. It's not hers anymore, remember?

MARGARET. I really hope Hilda knows what she's doing.

AGNES. Oh she 'knows' what she is doing...

MARGARET. What I wouldn't give to have what she has-

AGNES. (*Mocking Hilda's appearance.*) Tighten up that dress and you too can be a "capable" woman. (*Margaret sees Hilda enter. She gestures to Agnes to busy herself. The two exit, busy with "work." Hilda stands taking in the diner. She is holding a bouquet of flowers.*)

HILDA. It's beautiful. I can't believe it's mine. (*Enter Edna.*)

EDNA. Let me help you with that Mrs. Young.

HILDA. Oh Eddy, please call me Hilda, I couldn't do this without you.

EDNA. Oh, that's too kind. I've been around long enough is all. You'll get the hang of it. (*As Hilda speaks, she and Edna are dividing the flowers into little vases for the countertop.*)

HILDA. Once a week when Lyle was away, I would buy a small

HILDA'S DINER

bouquet of flowers and keep them on the kitchen table. I'd look at them and they'd remind me that life is beautiful and well worth the struggle. Mama Rosie kept this place going for the same reason. You remember when the announcement came in that the war was over? Mama Rosie put the radio as loud as it would go, and the small crowd of patrons cheered so loud we could barely hear the news. Truman said, "victory was due to the stamina and spirit of free men and women united in determination to fight." I understood what he meant when I looked at Mama.... *this* was how she fought- keeping stomachs full and the lights on when so many other places went dark. Now...it's my turn. Let's hope we can pick up where she left off- (*Edna and Hilda carry the vases to the tables. Edna takes a newspaper from her apron.*)

EDNA. I think you're doing just fine. Cover page and all.

HILDA. (*Reading the headline.*) "Hilda's Diner formerly Rosie's Place stays in the family and in the hearts of local Burton residents serving homemade food at affordable prices- a place for the whole family."

EDNA. Exciting about the paper, great exposure for the diner.

HILDA. It is- I hope it's enough.

EDNA. The mills were all but closed until the war and now look at them. Lots of work and no sign it'll be slowing down. The world is moving forward, the war taught us that.

HILDA. I do appreciate your confidence, Eddy. Oh, I've been working on the sauce again, maybe you could tell me what you think?

EDNA. It'd be my honor.

HILDA. Great. Why don't you come to the house for dinner tonight. It'll just be us. Lyle hasn't had much appetite these days-

EDNA. Oh- how is he?

HILDA. (*Making light.*) Sick of casserole, I'm sure!

EDNA. (*Playfully.*) I guess you can have *too much of a good thing*, after all. I can come after my shift.

HILDA. (*Smiling.*) Lovely. Lyle will be relieved. (*The two continue setting tables.*)

HILDA'S DINER

SCENE 5

LYLE is at home in the clothing he slept in. He is trying to reach Dr. Cline from the VA hospital. He is upset and holding a letter. He shakes as he gets worked up. He is sweating and uses all his energy to make this call.

LYLE. Yes, I said Lyle Young...Correct, for Dr. Cline. No, I don't have an appointment. I'm not interested in making one either. I'm a patient of his and I need to speak with him about an urgent matter... No, no I'm not going to the hospital. It's not a medical emergency, it's a matter about his findings, or rather lack of findings... I-I understand that he is in with a patient, but I've called several times already---No- no, I don't want to speak with a nurse. Listen! I will not hold! I've been back and forth already and... and... I'm not well. I'm sick and no one will listen and-- (*Defeated.*) I see. Fine. Tell him to call me as soon as he can. Thanks. (*Lyle hangs up the phone then for good measure picks it up and slams it down. His hands are visibly shaking.*)

SCENE 6

Later that evening. Hilda is preparing dinner. She enters the living room where Lyle is laying.

HILDA. Eddy will be here soon.

LYLE. Oh, you two have been chummy lately.

HILDA. Why not lay down in your room? You'll be more comfortable/

LYLE. And you won't have to be embarrassed by the likes of me-

HILDA. I didn't say that-

LYLE. You don't have to.

HILDA. Lyle, I don't know how to respond. Nothing I do is good enough. You're angry all the time and/ (everything I say makes you mad.)

LYLE. I'm sick Hilda! Damn it! I'm sick.

HILDA. The letter from Dr. Cline- says you just need more time/

LYLE. Don't start in about the letter, I'm getting worse-

HILDA. He says you need more rest and no psychological stress so your mind can heal-

HILDA'S DINER

LYLE. I'm not some mental case.

HILDA. I didn't say that-

LYLE. I'm just one big disappointment, aren't I Hilda?

HILDA. What? W-what are you/ (even talking about.)

LYLE. They cancelled my disability check. Dr. Cline found "no evidence of impairment." Read the backside- (*Lyle turns over the letter and hands it back to her.*)

HILDA. How can they just do that?

LYLE. Says it's a case of Shell Shock. A phase a lot of the boys go through when they come home.

HILDA. Did you tell them everything? The nightmares/

LYLE. The cold sweats, how when I'm out I feel as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room of rocking chairs. Those kinds of things fit with what the boys at the VA hall talk about but it's more than that for me. This isn't a phase, Hil. You gotta believe me... I can't hold my hand still, my left side is numb, I have terrible headaches, I never feel hungry and can't even force myself to eat anymore...

HILDA. What happened to you Lyle?

LYLE. What?

HILDA. Over there.

LYLE. What does it matter. I'm sick here.

HILDA. I don't want to pry but did something more happen when you were over there.

LYLE. No.

HILDA. You can tell me... (*The silence is heavy.*) You know, I've been talking with folks that come in the diner and a wife told me in confidence (*Almost a whisper.*) her husband was a part of something confidential/

LYLE. Hold your tongue. You don't know what you're talking about neither does she/

HILDA. It's true- her husband was promised *things* if he cooperated...

LYLE. You can't believe what you hear Hilda/

HILDA. Whatever it was it was bad, and it got me thinking about how you boys don't like to talk much about your time over there/

HILDA'S DINER

LYLE. (*Frustrated.*) Enough! I don't know who's been telling you this garbage-

HILDA. Some soldiers come in now and again too. Sometimes I sit with them/ (and talk a bit)

LYLE. That's got nothing to do with me!

HILDA. Ok. Lyle. I just want to understand/

LYLE. You can't.

HILDA. It's like you want to protect *them* even after they refused to listen to you.

LYLE. You don't understand/

HILDA. I understand that there's things you're not telling me. It might do you good to talk/

LYLE. (*Appeasing.*) No. Maybe the doctor is right, I need more rest.

HILDA. You don't believe that-

LYLE. Leave it alone Hil. Please. (*Lyle is in visible pain. Hilda goes to the table and opens a drawer and brings him his medication.*)

HILDA. Here. It's worse when you get yourself worked up.

LYLE. Isn't Eddy on her way?

HILDA. I'll phone her and cancel. She's still at the diner.

LYLE. Don't. I've cost you enough you deserve to have visits.

HILDA. I deserve to have my husband back. I know your vow to them is strong, but it can't be stronger than the one we took. (*Hilda reaches for Lyle's hand*).

LYLE. You're the only thing that keeps me going Hil. You know that?

HILDA. I want to help you get well but I'm not sure how. If there's anything that could help us sort out what's going on I want you to tell me. Ok? (*They sit in silence on the couch. Hilda is frustrated in her inability to reach her husband.*) Fine. I see we aren't going to get anywhere with this. A man's pride is a dangerous thing. (*Lyle contemplates telling her more. Hilda stands to leave-*)

LYLE. Wait. There may be a bit more that I haven't told you. (*Hilda turns back to Lyle.*) I went on with an advanced party to London. We were coordinating our next move and we had to haul supplies and load equipment. We were housed in a civilian tenant building. Mundane

HILDA'S DINER

really. Or so I thought. (*Hilda sits back down.*)

LYLE. In the distance it sounded like the sputtering of a Model T Ford going uphill, but everyone around me had their eyes fixed to the skies. Turns out the Nazi's were sending retaliation...

HILDA. What was it?

LYLE. 'Buzz Bombs'- rockets that stood four stories tall and sounded like 10,000 hornets swarming the sky. But it was when the engine cut out you had moments to seek cover.

HILDA. That's terrifying. Didn't the sirens go off?

LYLE. All the time. I found myself praying, 'Please let them go further and fall somewhere else.' Some brave soldier your husband was/

HILDA. You can't do that to yourself. You had to be panic-stricken.

LYLE. Panic. There wasn't time for it. I don't remember much about the explosion other than this ringing in my ears. I was coughing and spitting, the air was thick. I went to check for more of my unit but the back half of the flat was wide open, our truck was gone. The ceiling gave way, and I stumbled back and that's the last thing I remember. I must've fallen and hit my head. When I woke it was dark and I was slung over a shoulder being carried to a makeshift first aid station. My head was bleeding and throbbing, my left arm just dangled off my side, they gave me morphine and plasma.

HILDA. Oh you poor thing!

LYLE. Soon after they took us to a civilian hospital and gave me something that knocked me out for half a day. They fixed my dislocated arm and stitched up my head wound.

HILDA. You're lucky you were found in all that rubble-

LYLE. I was down the hall when the colonel came to give the soldier who saved me the purple heart. I was grateful but I - I couldn't bring myself to thank him. I had to get out of there, I couldn't sleep. The sirens were still going off even as far out as the hospital. I got word the unit was moving to Edinburgh any day and I didn't want to miss that- they let me go/

HILDA. Why didn't you tell me?

LYLE. No need for you to worry and the censor didn't want us saying

HILDA'S DINER

too much in our letters.

HILDA. Since you've been home did you do all the scans the VA asked for?

LYLE. Yes. 'Unremarkable.'

HILDA. And all the treatments-

LYLE. Yes- well, mostly. For us 'head cases' the only treatment is shock therapy. Dr. Cline didn't like that I refused and well- we know how he responded.

HILDA. I can't believe that they can just deny you like this especially after everything you've been through- what they put you through/

LYLE. Hey- hey, I don't want you worrying about things. I have a friend at the VA and they're going to help me appeal the decision. I'll get better- I just need more time, right? *(SFX: Knocking at the door.)*

HILDA. We'll figure this out. You do need rest. That must be Eddy- I'll tell her to head home/

LYLE. Don't you dare. Have a nice dinner, besides if you want me to get well, I can't eat another bite of your newest casserole.

HILDA. You're terrible, you know that?

LYLE. *(Calls.)* She's coming, Edna!

HILDA. Thank you for telling me. We'll get you well.

LYLE. Sure, dear. *(Hilda kisses Lyle's forehead. She straightens her dress and heads for the door.)*

SCENE 7

At the diner two weeks later. AGNES and MARGARET are cleaning up after the evening shift.

MARGARET. Today wasn't bad. Made some decent tips, you?
AGNES. Not enough.

MARGARET. Oh- you saving up?

AGNES. Uhh-yeah- I suppose...

MARGARET. Oh---

AGNES. Well, if you must know I have my eye on a little number at Bloomfield's.

HILDA'S DINER

MARGARET. That sailor fella finally taking you on a proper date?

AGNES. Hopefully not. (*Margaret and Agnes share a laugh.*) I was going to talk with 'Hilda the Great' about getting a raise since I've been covering shifts. I could really use the money but guess she's too busy at the salon to come to work-

MARGARET. Hun- come on now-

AGNES. What? Oh, I know-I know, 'she's a new owner cut her some slack.' You're starting to sound like Edna

MARGARET. Hey now- what's gotten into you?

AGNES. You think I want to stay in Burton my whole life?

MARGARET. Fair enough, but you have time.

AGNES. We have plans, we're getting out of this town. I don't expect you to understand Margie/

MARGARET. I grew up here too I get it. It's just well, maybe lay off Hilda a bit...

AGNES. Why?

MARGARET. Come here--You didn't hear it from me, ok? But I heard Edna on the phone and Lyle's condition has gotten worse. He's in the hospital.

AGNES. What do they think it is?

MARGARET. They don't know. Ran a bunch of tests but no word yet. Hilda has been going back and forth to Brightlook bringing him comforts from home-

AGNES. Like her casserole?

MARGARET. I suppose - why?

AGNES. No reason.

MARGARET. You're like a dog with a bone- out with it.

AGNES. All I'm saying is he's been getting worse since he's been home and nobody has been around him but Hilda.

MARGARET. She waited all this time for him to come home to what- to get rid of him? You saw her crying that day they announced the troops were coming home.

AGNES. Yes, but the diner ain't exactly doing as well as expected is it...

MARGARET. Hush. First you accuse her of flirting with the customers and now this-

AGNES. You weren't exactly innocent either-

HILDA'S DINER

MARGARET. You've gone too far/

AGNES. Have I though? You said yourself she always gets what she wants.

MARGARET. I meant a handbag or new dress not... (*Whispers.*) She's over at the hospital now. Devastated.

AGNES. (*Coy.*) I'm sure she's something alright...

MARGARET. Ok then what's your proof...

AGNES. The casserole.

MARGARET. (*Realizes.*) You think she's poisoning him?

AGNES. Desperate times call for desperate measures. She probably has some life insurance on him by now. Maybe one of those men that she flirts with in the diner is blackmailing her--

MARGARET. Slow down there. Ever since you saw *The Big Sleep* you've been acting like you're Lauren Bacall or something- try making out during the movie like a normal person.

AGNES. When I'm right, what'll you give me? How about two weeks wages?

MARGARET. Now who's blackmailing who?

AGNES. You'll see, her hands are dirty somehow. It'll all come out in the wash.

MARGARET. Lyle will be home convalescing in no time, and you'll have to leave the mysteries to the big screen. (*SFX: A car horn honks. Agnes looks up.*) If it isn't your leading man right on cue...

AGNES. He's no Bogart but he'll get me outta my mother's house. Told ya' we're going places.

MARGARET. I thought Hilda was the one out for her own?

AGNES. All us girls gotta be. Ain't no fault in that as long as I get mine along the way. You get the lights?

MARGARET. Yeah, yeah get outta here-and stay out of trouble. (*Agnes adjusts her dress and throws her apron to Margaret.*)

AGNES. (*Teases.*) Yes, mother. (*Agnes exits. Margaret sweeps a bit more. Stops and thinks about what Agnes has proposed. She shakes it off.*)

HILDA'S DINER

SCENE 8

A couple weeks later. Rosie is at the young's home. She's gathering Lyle's uniform. Hilda enters in her robe. She is caught off guard.

HILDA. Mama? What are you doing here?

ROSIE. The funeral director asked for his clothes... so I... / (came to get them) (*Rosie fumbles with a box containing her son's uniform. She nearly drops it. Hilda embraces her and then ushers her to sit.*)

HILDA. Let me handle this...you should rest-

ROSIE. I dressed him for his first day of school and I'll dress him one more time. (*Beat.*) Sorry. I didn't mean...

HILDA. No need to apologize.

ROSIE. I want to honor his wishes, but my boy wasn't a soldier. My boy had hopes and dreams that had nothing to do with winning battles or decorations. You know, he liked to help me in the kitchen and would climb on the table to break the eggs. The love of food we shared is why I opened the diner in the first place. He'd climb up on the stool, still in his diaper and order pie. Before I knew it, that little boy wasn't so little anymore, and my baby boy was off to college.

What a future he had ahead of him. When he was drafted, he didn't fight for a deferment or burn his draft card. No, not my Lyle, he always did what he was told, such a good boy he was. He didn't deserve to die like that-

HILDA. It was a stroke Mama- nothing anyone could do.

ROSIE. They say it was a stroke because they don't know what it was. He was never the same since he came home. You know that. (*Hilda nods in silent agreement.*)

ROSIE. I know you did all you could Hilda, don't think I'm saying different daughter. I don't know what I'm saying- my heart is broken. I walked in and expected to hear him. I'll never hear his voice again.

HILDA. The silence is the worst. All the trips to the hospital, all the doctors, it was the 'buzz' of constantly trying to figure out what was wrong that kept me going. He was right-when the quiet hits, that's the most terrifying part.

ROSIE. I'm glad he had you. I'll get this down to the parlor. I brought my bag but don't bother with it, the couch will be fine.

HILDA'S DINER

HILDA. What do you mean?

ROSIE. You're not alone dear. I'll stay and help you prepare for the service. We'll have everyone back to the diner after. I'll run by there and let the girls know to prepare for this weekend.

HILDA. Oh- that's ok Mama you don't have to do that/

ROSIE. I won't hear otherwise. I'll leave my place to Bill and his family since he's coming in with the grandkids and all.

HILDA. If that's what you want. You don't have to put yourself out/

ROSIE. It's settled. Go back up to bed dear it's early. I know you won't sleep but you can rest.

HILDA. Yes, Mama. Thank you for...everything. (*Hilda exits. Rosie steadies the box and heads for the door. She sees a picture of Lyle and Hilda. She kisses it. ROSIE exits.*)

SCENE 9

Hilda sits alone at a table in the diner. She is dressed in black. Edna enters also in black with an apron. This is the evening of the funeral service.

EDNA. You should head home. I can close. (*Hilda stares off.*) It was a beautiful service.

HILDA. It was.

EDNA. Can I get you some water or/

HILDA. I know what they're saying Eddy.

EDNA. Who?

HILDA. The girls. (*Gestures to the back kitchen.*)

EDNA. Margaret and Agnes? Oh, I wouldn't worry about the likes of those two.

HILDA. They think I give too much attention to the male patrons. I see them watching me.

EDNA. They like stories is all/

HILDA. There's no manual for what to do when they come home. Some come back and chat over coffee, some don't leave the house, and some are sick in ways we don't understand. I was trying to understand him/

HILDA'S DINER

EDNA. You don't owe anyone an explanation. I've been with Rosie a long time and she never liked one of Lyle's lady friends but when he married you her eyes glowed at the thought of having a daughter. That's all I needed to see to know how good you were for the family.

HILDA. Thank you for that.

EDNA. I'll let the girls close. How about we get you home and have a cup of tea?

HILDA. That's ok, Rosie is staying with me. She said she was going to rest a bit, if she could. I should get back and check on her though.

EDNA. Give her my best.

HILDA. I will. (*Hilda exits. Edna clears the last of the tables. Margaret and Agnes enter wearing their coats.*)

MARGARET. See ya Edna, we're heading out.

EDNA. Girls come here a second.

AGNES. What'd we do now?

MARGARET. We? If anyone deserves to get chewed out its, you/

EDNA. Girls, I've been a good boss, right? Would you say, fair?

AGNES. Sure, why?

MARGARET. You aren't quitting, are you?

EDNA. I want you to listen- what we do here is take care of folks. We brighten their day; we serve a smile with a cup of coffee. If that becomes something you all can't do anymore let me know and I'll fill your shifts myself.

AGNES. Did we do something wrong?

EDNA. Am I clear? (*Margaret elbows Agnes.*)

MARGARET. Yes, of course a smile and a cup of coffee- got it. Right Aggie?

AGNES. Right.

EDNA. Ok then. (*She stares at them a moment.*) I'll head out the back after I bring this to the kitchen- lock up the front on your way out, will you?

MARGARET. Of course.

EDNA. (*Threatening.*) And remember what I said. (*Edna exits with a tray into the kitchen.*)

HILDA'S DINER

MARGARET. Whoa- what was that?

AGNES. That was strange.

MARGARET. (*Accusatory.*) What did you do?

AGNES. Me?

MARGARET. Well, she's upset about something.

AGNES. Who knows what crawled into her britches.

MARGARET. Maybe it was the funeral service this evening. Did anything happen?

AGNES. (*Daydreaming.*) Yeah, I don't think I've ever seen so many men in uniform.

MARGARET. That's not what I asked and don't talk like that-

AGNES. Like what?

MARGARET. You know what.

AGNES. I was stating a fact, Marge.

MARGARET. Sure, that's all your doing---

AGNES. It was sad though-

MARGARET. Yeah, Lyle was so young- and Hilda a widow. It's all so/

AGNES. Interesting...

MARGARET. Oh no- Don't start that- that's the kind of stuff Edna will fire you over. She's not kidding around.

AGNES. She's a blow hard. Maybe she saw the sheriff come in...

MARGARET. So? Why would she care about him coming-

AGNES. Hasn't been in before-

MARGARET. He was paying his respects.

AGNES. Maybe *someone* called him.

MARGARET. It's a small-town Aggie, soldiers are local heroes. Lots of folks came.

AGNES. Oh really, he seemed pretty interested in some things I had to say-

MARGARET. Wait. You didn't! YOU called him?!

AGNES. No crime in talking.

MARGARET. I saw him go into the kitchen. That was on account of you?

AGNES. Have you ever noticed there's a lot of rat poison in the back

HILDA'S DINER

closet.

MARGARET. No. Why would I, we don't have a rat problem.

AGNES. Exactly. Well, not the four-legged kind.

MARGARET. Aggie?! What's that supposed to mean?

AGNES. Mix it into the casserole and you have a meal that's *to die for*-
(Margaret pulls Agnes closer and hushes her.)

MARGARET. You can't talk like that! I thought you were just playing around about Hilda, I didn't know you were taking this seriously- *the law* Aggie?!

AGNES. Don't look at me like that... if I'm wrong, I'm wrong. But if I'm right...

MARGARET. You're not right and we're both going to lose our jobs. Sherriff Cramer, Aggie? What'd he say after/(looking around)

AGNES. He said it was a bit odd and he'd look into things/

MARGARET. Bit Odd!/? What were you thinking?

AGNES. I saw her putting a bunch of cash in the safe right after the funeral and it all just made sense.

MARGARET. Some folks gave envelopes with cash-

AGNES. No these were stacks. Stacks Marge.

MARGARET. That doesn't mean anything/

AGNES. I bet she hid the rest somewhere in her house. They always have a stash--

MARGARET. Stashes? What?/

AGNES. Come on Marge she couldn't wait to cash in!

MARGARET. You have no idea what she was doing and now the Sheriff is involved in your fantastical story/

AGNES. Who else do you tell when you suspect murder?

MARGARET. Shhh- you're the only one suspecting! Don't involve me!

AGNES. You won't think so when she's on the cover of the papers.

MARGARET. The only thing you'll need the papers for is looking for a new job.

AGNES. Fine way to thank someone for doing their civil duty.

MARGARET. You're a real national treasure- now get going before Edna hears what you did if she doesn't already know.

HILDA'S DINER

AGNES. She should be thanking me/

MARGARET. Out! Your anchor-clanker boyfriend is waiting on you. Wait- does he know what you did?

AGNES. Don't worry about him he's not exactly the listening type.

MARGARET. Good. Don't go flapping your gums to him or anyone else about this- I'll grab the lights.

AGNES. Oh, and Marge?

MARGARET. What now?

AGNES. I started bringing lunch from home maybe you should too-
(Agnes exits. Margaret looks around.)

MARGARET. The Sheriff? *(Beat.)* What have you gotten us into Agnes? *(She turns off the lights, locks the front door. Margaret exits.)*

END OF ACT ONE

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