

CROSS WORDS

By

Scott Gibson

CROSS WORDS

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CROSS WORDS was originally produced at Vintage Theatre in Denver, CO by Vintage Theatre, featuring the following cast:

Flora.....Molly Turner

Tim.....Luke Rahmsdorff-Terry

Emory.....Elton Tanega

Clarissa.....Jan Cleveland

CAST: 2 Women, 2 Men

FLORA 40s-50s, frustrated former actress

TIM 40s-50s, Flora's n'er-do-well husband, former actor

EMORY 20s, sweet-spirited grocery delivery boy

CLARISSA 50s-60s, no-nonsense, humorless attorney

TIME: The present

PLACE: The elegant, but faded living room of wealthy dowager Aunt Rosamunde

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ACT 1
SCENE 1

Lights up on the parlor of ROSAMUNDE's home. It's both cozy and cluttered in appearance, and suggests in various ways a time gone by; very little in the room is of modern vintage. The overstuffed sofa and chairs have a faded kind of elegance, and the end tables and shelves hold an overabundance of objects, suggesting that control of the room has just recently begun to elude its occupants. Plates sit atop stacks of books; mugs and half-filled glasses nestle among vases, lamps and candles. The area would not be described as slovenly, though it might be headed that direction. A small wooden table and two wooden chairs sit SL. There are exits SR (leading to an unseen front door) and SL (leading to other parts of the house, including a staircase—of which the bottom steps may be visible—and second floor).

At rise, FLORA (30s to 50s) sits at the table, pencil in hand, working a crossword puzzle. She pauses, frowning down at her puzzle, as her husband TIM (30s to 50s) enters from SL, carrying a silver tray which holds a variety of dishes.

FLORA. What's an eleven-letter word for somber? *(Tim pauses a few steps in the room to consider this.)*

TIM. Somber? ...Hm. ...Sadness?

FLORA. Not enough letters.

TIM. Sad... liness?

FLORA. Not a word. *(Tim continues into the room. He places the tray on the coffee table in front of the couch and then sits on the couch.)*

TIM. Melancholy?

FLORA. *(doing a quick mental calculation)* That's only ten.

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TIM. I don't know, then. Wait!How about unhappiness? *(Tim and Flora both mentally count the letters. Flora nods. She applies pencil to paper, then pauses.)*

FLORA. No, it doesn't fit with the letters I already have Dammit. This is depressing. *(quickly counts the number of letters in 'depressing,' then shoves the paper away)* And no, that doesn't work, either.

TIM. Well, no wonder: *Somber. Melancholy. Unhappiness.* You just need to find a more cheerful puzzle.

FLORA. No, I need to find something to do besides crosswords, that's what. *(gesturing offstage the direction Tim entered)* How's Her Highness?

TIM. Contentious. *(in the process of eating something off of the tray, pausing, gesturing to Flora's paper)* Hey, contentious! That's a great word for a puzzle. See if that's in there someplace. *(Flora stands and crosses to the couch, taking the paper with her, which she drops in Tim's lap.)*

FLORA. You look; I'm done. *(poking through the remnants on the tray)* It doesn't look like she touched anything. *(Both Flora and Tim continue to eat things from the tray for the next few minutes.)*

TIM. She didn't. Not much. The lettuce was too wilted. The bacon was too crisp. The toast was too brown. The mayonnaise was too...
mayonnaise-y.

FLORA. For someone who doesn't like anything we fix, she's a very large woman.

TIM. Maybe contentiousness is fattening.

FLORA. More likely she's got a stash of chocolates hidden up there somewhere.

TIM. Where's she getting them? Shinying down the drainspout at night after we go to bed? *(Beat. Both Flora and Tim try to picture this. They laugh.)*

FLORA. I'd like to see the drainspout that could stand up to *that.* *(beat; her amusement fading)* I hate my life.

TIM. You mean *our* lives.

FLORA. No, just mine. I'm not really all that concerned about yours.

TIM. Thank you.

FLORA. Sweetheart, I can be compassionate, or I can be sincere. I figured you'd appreciate the latter.

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TIM. You can't be both?

FLORA. In this particular instance, no. And isn't it a comfort, knowing you're with someone who'll tell you the truth, no matter how painful? It's really much more useful in the long run.

TIM. You're a treasure, all right.

FLORA. *(nodding)* I know.

TIM. This isn't such a bad existence, all things considered.

FLORA. Really? What else have you been considering?

TIM. We have a roof over our heads. One we don't have to pay for.

FLORA. *(glancing upward)* Not with money. Just our souls.

TIM. Three square meals a day. More, if we want them. An open account with all of the local shop keepers. Including the liquor store.

FLORA. *(nodding)* There is that. In fact, now that you mention it...

(Flora crosses up to pick up a bottle of bourbon amongst the clutter. She crosses to the table where she was doing the crossword puzzle and picks up a glass. It still has a small amount of something in it, which she drinks, and then proceeds to pour a small quantity of bourbon into it instead. Tim watches this.)

TIM. Isn't it a little bit early for that?

FLORA. Define "early."

TIM. It's just past one.

FLORA. *(taking a gulp of bourbon from the glass)* One person's "early" is another person's "just in time." *(taking another sip with satisfaction)* Ahhh... *(Flora settles on the couch. Tim pushes the tray towards her.)*

TIM. At least eat something if you're going to do that. You'll be staggering around the place by three and passed out face down in the rose bushes by four.

FLORA. It's a good plan, don't you think? *(Flora eats an item or two from the tray.)*

TIM. Sweetheart... Flora... I know you think you're being funny...

FLORA. *(mocking)* No, Tim... *Sweetheart...* I'm coping. That's what I'm doing. *(raising her glass)* This is a coping mechanism. *(She takes another sip, then sets her glass on the table and pours another small amount of*

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bourbon into it. Tim watches this. Finally, in resignation, he looks around him for another available glass.)

TIM. Fine. *(Amidst the clutter, he spots one and gets up to retrieve it, taking the crossword puzzle with him. As with the glass Flora found earlier, there's a small amount of liquid in it. Tim studies it, then dumps the contents into a nearby potted plant. He drops the crossword on the upstage table.)*

FLORA. That's my boy. *(Tim crosses to Flora and holds out his glass. She pours him a shot or so. They both drink. Flora studies her glass.)* So this is what we've come to. ...“Six months,” you said. “Maybe a year.”

TIM. “Probably.” I said “*Probably.*” The doctors said she couldn't last much beyond that.

FLORA. That was all she needed to hear. What was the word you used earlier? ...*Contentious?* Now she's going to hang on for all she's worth, just to be contentious. If only the doctor had told her she was going to live another twenty years, instead. She'd have up and died the next day, just to be spiteful.

TIM. Well, she isn't going to last another twenty years. Nobody's *that* contentious.

FLORA. Don't bet the farm on that. Not that you have one to bet. Or anything else, for that matter.

TIM. But I will. *(gesturing expansively around the room)* All of this. Everything. Will be mine. Ours.

FLORA. *(looking around the room)* That's not as impressive as you seem to think.

TIM. Of course it is.

FLORA. Sweetheart... The plumbing's a disaster. The staircase bannister is wobbly, and the carpeting has started to pull loose on the top few steps. The other night, I caught the toe of my shoe and nearly went head over heels all the way down. The roof leaks, and the furnace is on its last legs. Which reminds me, it's supposed to turn cold and rainy tonight.

TIM. So? When the time comes, we'll sell the place. That was the plan all along, wasn't it?

FLORA. To who? Who in their right mind is going to buy a decrepit old house out in the middle of nowhere?

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TIM. We just walk away from it, then! Who cares? We cash in the stocks and close out the bank accounts, and we move someplace where it's always warm and nobody ever needs a furnace. Nobody's ever even heard of one. And somebody can wait on us, for a change! *(There is a knock from off. Tim and Flora look.)*

EMORY. *(off)* Hello...? Hello, it's me, Emory.

TIM. Speaking of not in their right mind...

FLORA. Knock it off. He's a good kid. *(calling)* We're in the front room, Emory! *(taking another gulp of bourbon)*

EMORY. *(off; closer now)* Hello...

TIM. *(amused; calling)* In here! *(EMORY enters. He pauses just inside the doorway. He's in his mid-twenties, dressed in slacks, a button-down shirt and wears a windbreaker that is too small for him; its sleeves ride a couple of inches up his lower arms. He is very good-looking and possesses a sweet face, though there is a somewhat vacant look in his eyes. He carries a cardboard box filled with groceries. Once inside the room, he appears to be just slightly intimidated. He looks from Tim to Flora and back to Tim again.)*

TIM. Hey, Emory! How's it going?

FLORA. *(offhandedly)* Hi, Emory.

EMORY. I brought your stuff.

TIM. *(standing)* Wow, that was fast. I only called the order in this morning. I told Mr. Benson we didn't need it until tomorrow. *(crossing to Emory)*

EMORY. *(repeating himself, as if he needs acknowledgment that they heard him)* I... brought your stuff.

TIM. *(holding out his hands to take the box from Emory)* So you did. *EMORY does not relinquish the box.*

EMORY. We put it in a box this time. We... We put it in a box

TIM. *(trying to take the box from Emory)* That was smart. Probably easier to carry it this way.

EMORY. We put it in a box because of what happened last time. Because of the bread. Because I squeezed the bread so bad.

TIM. Well, it wasn't that bad. It still tasted just fine. Here... Let me take that, all right? *(finally succeeding in prying the box loose from Emory's*

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hands) I'll go put it in the kitchen. *(Tim exits. Emory watches him go, then turns back to look at Flora.)*

EMORY. I squeezed the bread.

FLORA. I remember.

EMORY. When I brought things in the plastic bags. I didn't even know I did it. Until I got here and you took it out and we saw it, and it was squeezed.

FLORA. It was squeezed, all right. *(Emory crosses to the table SL and picks up the crossword puzzle to study it.)*

EMORY. Mister Benson, boy, Mister Benson, he was mad. He was so mad. He told me I should be more careful. He told me I should know better. You have to be gentle with bread. And eggs. And plums. You have to be gentle with all those.

FLORA. How did Mr. Benson know about the bread? We didn't tell him. We wouldn't have told on you, Emory. *(Emory crosses close to Flora and the coffee table. His attention has been drawn to the tray of food.)*

EMORY. I told him. I felt bad for what I did, and so I told him. I said I squeezed the bread.

FLORA. You didn't have to say anything, you know. It could have been a secret.

EMORY. *(pointing to the tray)* What's that?

FLORA. *(glancing to where he is pointing)* The sandwich? It's a BLT. Bacon, lettuce and tomato.

EMORY. Is that your lunch?

FLORA. No. It was... Well, it's nobody's, now. Would you like to have it? You're welcome to it, if you like. *(Beat. Emory steps forward and sits in the chair next to the couch. He rests his hands on his knees, still looking at the sandwich. He looks at it for a few seconds before speaking.)*

EMORY. No, thank you.

FLORA. Are you sure? It's a long way from town. Maybe you're hungry after riding your bicycle all that way. *(Emory looks at the sandwich another second or two, then looks at Flora.)*

EMORY. It's rude to have secrets.

FLORA. What? No. Not necessarily. Who told you that?

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EMORY. Mrs. Dexter. From the school. She said it. She said it makes people feel left out when other people have secrets. It isn't nice.

FLORA. Oh. Well... yes, I see her point. But not all secrets are like that. In fact, sometimes, it can even be good to keep secrets. Like when there's going to be a surprise party for somebody. Then you don't want to spoil the secret by telling them ahead of time. Or if telling somebody something would make them feel bad. You don't want to make people feel bad, do you? *(Flora looks at Emory, who merely looks back at her blankly.)* That's kind of how it was with squeezing the bread. See, we didn't mind, and when you told Mr. Benson, then he felt bad when he didn't need to. Understand? *(Beat. Emory continues to look at Flora.)*

EMORY. Really truly, nobody is going to eat that sandwich? *(Flora looks at Emory. She smiles and shakes her head. She slides the plate his direction.)*

FLORA. Nobody, unless you do. *(Emory very hesitantly picks up half of the sandwich and begins to eat it. Flora pours herself another shot of bourbon and takes a sip. She watches Emory eat, then mutters amused)* "Too mayonnaisey," my ass. *(beat; to Emory)* Would you like a glass of milk to wash it down with? *(Emory shakes his head while still eating. Tim enters, talking as he comes in.)*

TIM. Okay, everything's put away. Either they were out of lemons, or I forgot to ask for any. *(spotting Emory eating; he grins)* Well, at least someone appreciates my cooking.

FLORA. I wouldn't exactly call slapping together a BLT "cooking," but yes. Emory's a true gourmand. *(Tim crosses and places a hand on Emory's shoulder. The reaction is not what he expected. Emory puts the rest of the uneaten half of his sandwich back on the plate. He stands with his head bowed.)*

TIM. No, Son, you don't have to... I want you to finish it. Please.

EMORY. *(shaking his head)* No, thank you. I better go.

FLORA. Let me wrap up the other half for you to take with you. It'll go to waste, otherwise. *(Emory shakes his head.)*

EMORY. *(mimicking Mr. Benson)* "Don't dilly-dally, Emory. Deliver those things, and come right back. I mean it, now." *(Tim pulls a couple of dollar bills from his pocket and attempts to give them to Emory.)*

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TIM. Well, take this, at least. For your trouble.

EMORY. *(shaking his head)* No, thank you.

TIM. Come on, now. You never want to take anything. Don't tell me you can't find a use for a couple of dollars. You earned them. *(There is a rumble of distant thunder. They all look up.)* Don't you like to go to the movies? Or buy yourself something? *(fingering the sleeve of Emory's too-small windbreaker)* Save up for a new coat, maybe?

EMORY. It's gonna rain. I need to get back.

TIM. *(putting the money back into his pocket)* All right, then. We'll see you next week, probably. Good-bye. *(As if waiting for those words in order to be dismissed, Emory nods and crosses briskly to the R. He pauses in the doorway, then turns and crosses back to Flora.)*

EMORY. Thank you for the sandwich.

FLORA. You're welcome. But I wish you'd take the rest...

EMORY. Good-bye now. *(Emory exits. A few seconds pass, and then the slamming of a door is heard.)*

FLORA. Wow.

TIM. Yeah, "wow."*(sitting down and taking up his glass of bourbon)* Why do you get the thank you? I'm the one who made the sandwich.

FLORA. Oh, poor you. Going through life all unappreciated. *(Another rumble of thunder. They look up.)* Yeah, just like they threatened. I'd better get some buckets for the leaks. And you'd better make sure there's plenty of kindling for the fireplace in Her Majesty's bedroom in case the furnace conks out again.

TIM. That poor kid. He's going to be drenched by the time he rides his bike all the way back into town. Maybe I should get the car out and give him a lift. *(The sound of a tinkling bell is heard. They both look up once more.)*

FLORA. You're being summoned.

TIM. How do you know it isn't you she wants?

FLORA. I already assisted her in and out of the bath today. Helped her with her toilet. Laundered her fine washables. Whatever she wants now, it's your turn.

TIM. Fine. *(gulping the last of his bourbon, he stands)*

FLORA. *(smiling sweetly)* Remember: "It's just for six months or so."

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TIM. *(smiling back at her)* Bitch. *(The sound of the bell ringing is heard again. It rings longer and more insistently this time.)* I'm on my way, Aunt Rosamunde! *(to Flora)* That damn bell. I hear it in my sleep sometimes, and then I'm not sure whether she really needs something, or if I just dreamt it. *(taking the last gulp of bourbon from his glass and setting it on a table)* The woman is perfectly capable of going up and down the stairs. She ought to do it more often.

FLORA. *(crossing to exit)* Bite your tongue. Do we really want to be subjected to that scowl of hers any more than we already are? Be glad that she prefers to sit upstairs and order us around.*(exiting.)*

TIM. You might feel differently if you were the one running up and down those steps twenty or more times a day.

FLORA. *(off)* No...I don't think I would. And look at it this way... *(Flora re-enters, carrying three small buckets.)*...You're getting a great cardiovascular workout, *and* it's giving you a nice, tight little ass. That's my reward. *(Flora swats Tim on the butt as she passes him.)*

TIM. You are such a bullshitter. *(Yet, as he starts to exit, he glances over his shoulder at his rear end. He exits)*

FLORA. *(calling after him)* Find some gum or a mint before you go in. Or else don't stand too close. She'll smell the bourbon. *(There is another rumble of thunder. She inspects the buckets she is carrying, muttering to herself)* I hope we haven't sprung any new ones since last time. Let's see... The spot in the foyer... *(She sets two buckets on a table and exits carrying the third bucket. Off)* Right about... there, I think. ...No, wait ... There. *(Flora re-enters, empty-handed, still muttering to herself)* The one in the upstairs hall... And the bedroom. *Our* bedroom, naturally. *(counting on her fingers)* Two... three... *(remembering)* Oh, wait! Dammit...*(thinking for a few seconds, then raises her voice, in case TIM can hear her upstairs. calling)* We need to get hold of some more buckets... *(pausing, mid-word)* Oh. Hold on. *(She's just spotted a very bedraggled-looking potted plant tucked amidst the clutter on the other side of the room. She crosses and picks it up, studying it for a few seconds.)* What the hell.

(Flora turns, crossing R, holding the plant. She has just reached the exit when she nearly collides with CLARISSA GALBREATH who appears very

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abruptly in the doorway. Clarissa (50s-60s) is a tall, imposing woman, smartly dressed in business attire and carrying a briefcase or business-type bag slung over her shoulder. The near-collision startles Flora, but Clarissa maintains a stern and unruffled expression.) Oh! Ms. Galbreath! You nearly scared the sh- (catching herself before the entire word slips out) I... I didn't hear you come in. (Clarissa Galbreath typically speaks in the calm, but firm tone of someone who is generally in command of any and all situations.)

CLARISSA. I knocked. No one answered.

FLORA. I didn't notice, I guess. I was distracted, and Tim is upstairs with his aunt...

CLARISSA. So I let myself in. What are you doing with that plant?

FLORA. I... Oh, I was going to put it in the foyer. Under the leak. We don't have enough buckets.

CLARISSA. Leak? What's leaking?

FLORA. Nothing, yet. But it's getting ready to rain, and when it does—
(Clarissa moves into the room. She moves as one whose intentions are never questioned.)

CLARISSA. —It isn't going to rain. The storm is already moving off to the south. It's one of those autumn squawls that's all thunder and dark clouds, and no action. *(Clarissa spots the two buckets sitting on the table. She eyes them distastefully and reaches out to barely touch one of them. Flora moves slowly back into the room. During the following conversation, Clarissa moves around the room, glancing at things here and there, occasionally lifting or touching items.)*

FLORA. Oh. Well, that's a relief, then. I wasn't sure what we were going to do, since we're running out of buckets—

CLARISSA. —Leaks, you say? Down here? How is that possible? There's an entire floor above this one.

FLORA. *(irked, but trying hard not to show it)* Well, not over the foyer, there isn't. And the others are upstairs. In the hall, and in our room—

CLARISSA. —Mrs. Archway hasn't mentioned anything of the kind.

FLORA. That's because it isn't happening in any of her rooms.

CLARISSA. Are you sure you haven't imagined it? The leaks, I mean?

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FLORA. Well, the water has to be coming from somewhere. And since it only happens when it rains, I made that assumption. *(Clarissa crosses to the table. She picks up the crossword puzzle Flora was working earlier.)*

CLARISSA. I'll mention it to Mrs. Archway when I go up. You say that Timothy is with her now?

FLORA. Yes.

CLARISSA. She asked me to be here at one-thirty. *(looking at her watch)* It's past that, now.

FLORA. She hadn't said anything to us. About you coming today, I mean.

CLARISSA. Is that a problem, for some reason?

FLORA. No, of course not. I just didn't know. *(Tim, breathless, enters, talking as he comes in.)*

TIM. Aunt Rosamunde was wondering whether or not that old hatchet-face... *(spotting Clarissa, he stops, then tries to amend his words)* ...hat... hand... handsome friend of hers was here yet. Hello, Clarissa.

CLARISSA. Timothy.

TIM. Nice to see you, like always. We... I didn't know you were coming. Until just a few minutes ago, that is.

CLARISSA. So your wife was just remarking.

TIM. Well, Aunt Rosamunde doesn't always keep us in the loop.

CLARISSA. Is that so? ...Well, she has her reasons, I suppose. May I go up, then?

TIM. Of course! Can I bring you some coffee or something?

CLARISSA. *(crossing L)* This isn't a social call, Timothy. I'm here on business. Unless Mrs. Archway requested some refreshments?

TIM. No. No, she didn't.

CLARISSA. Well, then. ...I'll mention the leaking problem to her while we talk. *(Just before Clarissa exits, she turns back and gives the room a final appraising glance. There is something vaguely judgmental in the way she looks around. Then she exits. A second or so passes, and both Tim and Flora sigh with relief.)*

TIM. Those rumbles of thunder should have told us something scary was on the way.

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FLORA. Ssh! (*Flora crosses hastily to stand in the open doorway through which Clarissa just exited. She looks out for a few seconds, then turns back into the room.*)

FLORA. She might have stopped to listen. You've got to be careful, Tim.

TIM. You told her about the leaks?

FLORA. Yes, I told her about the leaks. She caught me setting out the buckets. What was I supposed to tell her?

TIM. What did she say?

FLORA. That maybe I was just imagining the water dripping through the ceiling.

TIM. I'm not sure this is good.

FLORA. What? The leaks? No, I'm pretty sure they're not.

TIM. You know what I mean. Old Hatchet-Face blabbing to Aunt Rosamunde. They'll probably blame us. Especially with the spin that Clarissa is likely to put on it.

FLORA. Blame us? What are they supposed to think? That we climbed up on the roof and deliberately punched holes so that the rain would cascade through?

TIM. No, not that. Just... Well, that I'm not doing an adequate job of looking after the place. I'm letting things fall apart.

FLORA. Well, you aren't. And they are.

TIM. Oh, thank you very much.

FLORA. It's not your fault. We've told her about the furnace. And the wobbly bannister. The peeling wallpaper. I've even mentioned the leaks to her already. She refuses to listen. I think she thinks we just want to spend her money.

TIM. We do. Just none of it on repairing this dump. (*They laugh.*) And what in God's Name are you doing, cradling that plant? (*Flora looks down at the plant in her arms. She's completely forgotten she was still carrying it. She sets it on a nearby surface.*)

FLORA. It's a long and pointless story. (*looking overhead*) The old shrew is here on business, she says. I wonder what.

TIM. Well, she's Aunt Rosamunde's attorney and business advisor. It could be practically anything.

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FLORA. Or it could be practically something. It makes me nervous. The way the two of them are. Whenever Clarissa is up there, and I go into the room for one reason or another, they stop talking. The entire time I'm in there, whether it's putting away towels or laundry, or setting out coffee and cake, they watch me. Through beady little eyes, silently scrutinizing everything I do. The hostility just rolls off of them in waves. It's all I can do to keep from bolting out of the room as soon as I'm done.

TIM. You're letting your imagination get the best of you.

FLORA. Can you blame me? They're like a couple of old crones. Really, all that's missing is a steaming cauldron bubbling and boiling in the middle of the room.

TIM. (*amused*) Well, now that you bring it up... They would be perfect as two of the three witches for the opening scene in *Macbeth*. If I was still doing theatre, that is.

FLORA. Don't *do* that! You know you're not supposed to say the name! You're supposed to call it The Scottish Play! Now you have to turn around three times and spit over your shoulder.

TIM. (*laughs*) I can't believe you're still superstitious after all these years! And anyway, Sweetheart, that only applies if you say *Mac--* (*stopping himself from saying it a second time as Flora winces*)...If you say the name when you're inside a theatre.

FLORA. I don't care! It's tempting fate, no matter where you say it. And if you're not going to ward off the curse, then I am. (*Flora turns around three times to her left and spits over her shoulder.*)

TIM. (*amused*) That's kind of disgusting. (*looking at the floor*) And now it's going to look like we've sprung another leak.

FLORA. I don't care. We don't need any more bad luck. (*Flora crosses to retrieve the bourbon bottle and to pour herself another shot.*)

TIM. You sure you want to do that, Lady M, with two of the three crones right overhead?

FLORA. I'll take my chances. (*She downs the shot in a single gulp. Tim watches her.*)

TIM. (*after a beat*) Do you ever regret it?

FLORA. Regret what?

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TIM. Giving it up. The theatre. (*Flora gives this some thought, tipping her empty glass from side to side.*)

FLORA. Do you?

TIM. Every day. (*Tim crosses to retrieve his own glass and pours a small amount of bourbon into it.*) But I think I'd have regretted it more, staying. Getting older... Growing more and more bitter, watching younger, less-talented but better-looking actors assume the roles I'd once played, while being relegated to the character bits. Plus, in your twenties, there's a certain romance to sharing a squalid little one-bedroom apartment with three other people, getting by on Raman Noodles and canned soup five nights a week. Bumming cigarettes, drinking too much... (*looking down at the glass in his hand, amused by the irony of what he's saying*)

When you're young, it's bearable, because you know your big break is just days away. Weeks, maybe. Months, at the most. (*turning to FLORA*) No. No, this is much better. Sharing a big squalid house... (*Flora crosses to Tim.*)

FLORA. Drinking too much... (*Flora puts her arms around Tim, resting her face against his chest.*)

TIM. ...Waiting for our big break, which I know is just days away. Weeks, maybe...

TIM./FLORA. (*unison*) Months, at the most... (*They laugh. Tim kisses the top of Flora's head. They step away from one another and Tim finishes his drink. Flora gathers up the tray and dishes left over from the unfinished lunch and picks them up.*)

FLORA. I just worry, is all.

TIM. About what?

FLORA. I... I don't think Clarissa likes you. (*Flora exits L with the tray.*)

TIM. I know she doesn't. That doesn't come as much of a revelation. Who cares? (*Tim moves around the room, straightening things here and there as the conversation proceeds. He glances at the crossword puzzle.*)

FLORA. (*off*) You should. She has your aunt's ear.

TIM. That's fine. I certainly don't want it. I doubt anyone else does, either.

FLORA. (*off*) I'm serious, Tim. Clarissa has a lot of influence over Rosamunde.

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TIM. Maybe. But when it comes right down to it, nobody can make Aunt Rosamunde do anything she hasn't already set her mind to do. What, exactly, has you so concerned about all this? (*Flora comes back into the room, wiping her hands on a dish towel.*)

FLORA. Tell me again about the arrangement your aunt first proposed when you and she talked about us coming here.

TIM. Sweetheart, you've heard it all before.

FLORA. I want to hear it again. (*Tim crosses down and sits on the couch.*)

TIM. She'd had a disagreement with her housekeeper, and sent her packing. She wanted to know if I was ready to "give up the non-career I'd been pursuing for more years than she cared to remember," and if so, would you and I be willing to move in here and look after the place. And her.

FLORA. In exchange...

TIM. ...In exchange for which she would make it well-worth our whiles. Our living expenses met. And exceeded, she said.

FLORA. And..?

TIM. And, our futures seen to, following her eventual passing.

FLORA. That's it. That's the part I'm wondering about. That's how she phrased it? "Our futures seen to?"

TIM. Yes. Or something close to that.

FLORA. It's a pretty nebulous phrase, don't you think? "Futures seen to?" Tim... Have you checked? Have you ever actually asked?

TIM. Asked what? Whether I'm in the will?

FLORA. Yes! Absolutely!

TIM. I didn't have to. She showed it to me. Spelled out in black and white. In fact, Clarissa was there, as well. So it's all nice and tidy and legal. (*Flora moves around the room, idly swatting the backs of chairs with her hand towel. Tim watches her.*) So... Are we good?

FLORA. I don't know. I guess. (*Flora continues to dust halfheartedly. Tim continues to watch.*)

TIM. You're beat, I know. Staring at these same walls, day after day. It's depressing. Look, Maybe we can get away for a long weekend, or something. Maybe we can find someone. Hell, maybe Clarissa knows

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someone who could watch Her Majesty for a day or two. Give you a change of scene.

FLORA. No...

TIM. Why not? It's worth asking, at least.

FLORA. What's the point? The whole time, I'd be thinking about how we're just going to wind up back here at the end of it, anyway. And besides, I think it's more important that we just stay close. For right now, anyway.

Clarissa appears in the doorway. The others don't notice her right away.

TIM. Stay close? What's that supposed to mean?

FLORA. It's just a feeling I have. I— (*Flora turns, spotting Clarissa for the first time.*) —Oh! Ms. Galbreath!

TIM. (*standing*) Finished upstairs already?

CLARISSA. (*moving a few steps into the room*) Mrs. Archway wanted to look over a few documents, is all. Approve some adjustments. These things don't take long if you're organized. The world in general could do with more organization, I happen to think. (*noticing that the lunch tray has been removed*) As you've begun to do in here, I see. Not strictly on my account, I trust.

TIM. (*smiling, but a trace of defiance in his tone*) It has nothing to do with your account, I promise you.

CLARISSA. (*considering this for just a fleeting second*) That's good. Well, I suppose I should tell you—

FLORA. (*taking a few steps toward Clarissa*) —What ... What adjustments were you making? For Aunt Rosamunde, I mean. Is it something that, you know, we should be concerned about? (*Tim is shaking his head and making a facial expression trying to discourage Flora. Clarissa smiles benignly.*)

CLARISSA. Well, I wouldn't know whether it concerns you or not, since I am not privy to which of Mrs. Archway's business dealings she has chosen to share with you. Perhaps that is a matter better taken up with her. (*turning to Tim*) Timothy, your aunt asked me to ask you to send up some tea and toast in the next little while.

TIM. Sure.

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CLARISSA. And she asked that you take care to be sure it isn't as blackened as what you served her at lunch, if you would be so kind.

TIM. Got it. Lightly browned, this time. Maybe bread just waved in the general vicinity of a candle for ten seconds, or so. *(Clarissa studies Tim sharply, but he remains straight-faced. Finally she turns back to Flora.)*

CLARISSA. Oh, and I mentioned to Mrs. Archway your concerns about possible leaks. *(taking a self-important pause)* She's seen no evidence of such things. However, she does appreciate your vigilance in looking after her property. I'm to engage the services of a roofing inspector to come out one day soon and take a look at things. In the meantime, she says it's perfectly okay to purchase more buckets. Two or three, I think. There's no need to get carried away.

FLORA. All right...

CLARISSA. *(looking at her watch)* Now, I've other errands to run. Good afternoon. *(Clarissa crosses and exits.)*

TIM. *(calling after her)* Goodbye! *(muttering)* Bring your winged monkeys next time. They're such fun. *(turning to Flora)* Why did you beard the lioness in her den like that? Asking about whatever papers she'd brought for Aunt Rosamunde?

FLORA. I don't know. I just sort of blurted out before I thought.

TIM. Did you really think she was going to tell you? It just gave her one more chance to smack you down. You know how she loves doing that.

FLORA. No. I just... I don't know...

TIM. But, hey, on the bright side, you won the battle of the leaky roof. You know it stuck in Clarissa's craw to tell you that Her Highness had instructed her to have a roofing guy come out here to take a look at things. *And we get to order more buckets!*

FLORA. *(small laugh)* But only two. "No need to get carried away."

TIM. She had to get one final dig in. If she could have it her way, as long as Aunt Rosamunde is high and dry, you and I could be standing knee-deep in water.

FLORA. Or up to our necks, more likely.

TIM. Or over them! Oh, and congratulations on your other little victory, as well. *(Flora looks at Tim, puzzled.)*

FLORA. What other victory? *(He gestures to the table where the*

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crossword puzzle is lying.)

TIM. Fourteen down? “Despondence.” *(Flora continues to stare at Tim.)*
The eleven-letter word for “somber.” It’s “despondence!” You figured it out! *(Flora crosses to the table. She picks up the crossword and studies it. She shakes her head.)*

FLORA. ...I didn’t do it.

TIM. What?

FLORA. I didn’t put that in there. That’s not my handwriting. *(Tim takes the paper from Flora and looks at it. Then he looks up at her.)*

TIM. Well, then... Who did? *(They stare at each other.)*

FLORA. I... *(There is a sudden thump from overhead. They look up.)*

TIM. What the hell..? *(calling)* Aunt Rosamunde? *(Tim hands the paper back to Flora and dashes L, heading for the doorway. Calling louder)*
Aunt Rosamunde? Are you okay? *(Tim exits. Off; calling)* I’m coming!
I’m on my way! *(Flora has watched him go. She looks up at the ceiling, then down at the puzzle in her hand. She lets the paper drop to the floor as she rushes L, following Tim out of the room.)*

FLORA. *(off; calling)* Aunt Rosamunde?

TIM. *(off; fainter)* Aunt Rosamunde? *(Lights fade to black.)*

SCENE 2

Some hours later. Nothing has changed in the room, except the crossword puzzle Flora had dropped on the floor is back on the table again and the bag that Clarissa had with her earlier sits on one of the chairs. At rise, the room is empty, although Clarissa can be heard OFF, talking to someone.

CLARISSA. *(off)* Have you been able to re-schedule my afternoon meeting? ...Yes, that should work. *(Clarissa enters, talking on her cell phone.)* And I’ll be in the office at the usual time tomorrow, so nothing else needs to be shifted. ...No, she says she’s fine, that it was just a mere tumble. Lost her balance, or tripped on the leg of a chair, or something. The doctor just left, and he seems to concur. Not that I trust his

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diagnosis, in particular. Frankly, I think he goes along with whatever Rosamunde Archway wants, like practically everyone else she knows. Too afraid of losing his best meal ticket, if you ask me. Anyway, I'm getting ready to leave, now. ...What? No, we will certainly bill her for my time this afternoon. I'm heading back now. There's nothing else I need to do here right now. *(Flora appears in the doorway. She wears the same clothes she had on earlier. In her arms, she holds some folded towels. She listens to the end of the conversation. Clarissa has her back to Flora and is unaware of her presence.)* Can you stay another hour or so? I'm carrying those papers for the Brandywine settlement. I'd like you to process and file them with the court first thing in the morning. I don't need to be there for that, and there's no point in holding up the process any longer than is absolutely necessary. *(Clarissa ends her call and puts her phone in her bag. She turns and sees Flora.)* And how is our patient?

FLORA. She seems to be fine. She was consoling herself with a box of chocolates when I left her.

CLARISSA. That was an unfortunate incident. Do you have any idea how it occurred?

FLORA. Not really, no. Both Tim and I were down here when it happened.

CLARISSA. *(putting her cell phone into her bag)* One just has to be on one's toes at all times, I suppose. *(picking up her bag)*

FLORA. Thank you so much for reminding me. *(Clarissa turns to Flora, apprising her coolly.)* Tim and I can look after Rosamunde without anyone else's guidance. We're perfectly capable. *(Clarissa appears to be about to say something, but Flora cuts her off.)* And before you say something haughty or dismissive, like, "Well, based on this afternoon's events, it doesn't appear that you are," I would like to add that we've been taking care of her—and this place—for almost a year, now, without incident. And as far as her fall today is concerned, I'd point out that you'd barely walked out the front door yourself when it happened. You know full well there was no negligence on anyone's part. *(Clarissa studies Flora. Gradually, a smile spreads across her face. She enjoys taking back control in these kinds of confrontations.)*

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CLARISSA. What on earth makes you think I was about to call your abilities—or your intentions, for that matter—into question?

FLORA. I... Well, I mean, it just seems as though—

CLARISSA. (*cutting her off while maintaining complete, pleasant equanimity*) —And let's not be bandying about terms like that: *Negligence*. It carries a legal connotation, you know. I'd like to remind you that you introduced it into the conversation, not me. Have I in any way cast aspersions on the way in which you and your husband carry out your duties?

FLORA. (*flustered*) Well... no. Not in so many words.

CLARISSA. (*benevolently*) Not in *any* words.

FLORA. We take our responsibilities seriously, Ms. Galbreath, and I don't think you, or Aunt Rosamunde for that matter, realize some of the challenges that come with handling this place. And her.

CLARISSA. I'm quite sure I don't, Flora. I'm only out here once or twice a month, whereas you're here all the time. If I have falsely given the impression that I don't think you're doing your job, then I apologize. (*Sincerely.*) Believe me, you're not the only one who comes up against Mrs. Archway's stubbornness and inviolate demands. (*Clarissa steps around Flora and starts to exit. She turns back.*) And isn't it about time you started calling me "Clarissa?" "Ms. Galbreath" is so tedious to be repeating all the time. We both work for Timothy's aunt, after all. We don't have to be enemies, wouldn't you agree? Good day. (*Clarissa exits. Flora watches her go and after a few seconds, turns back, facing the room. After a moment, she crosses to where she's left the bourbon bottle and picks it up. She starts to pour some into a glass, then pauses, thinking. After another second, she sets the bottle and glass back down without pouring any. Tim enters.*)

TIM. Where is she?

FLORA. Who?

TIM. "Who?" Who do you think? (*lowering his voice slightly*) *Hatchet-Face*.

FLORA. (*glancing over her shoulder and then back at Tim*) I wish you'd stop calling her that. Sooner or later, she's going to hear you. And it's not nice.

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TIM. (*crossing a few steps*) Since when do you care about nice?

FLORA. I don't. It's just... Well, she's not *that* horrible. Just a minute ago, she... she acted almost human.

TIM. Yeah, check to see if she casts a reflection in the mirror before you make any hasty judgments. (*looking past Flora off.*) How's Aunt Rosamunde?

FLORA. Okay, I think. She wouldn't let me poke around too much, even after you left the room. She kept swatting me away as I tried to check. There aren't any cuts. No broken bones. I suppose we'll have to wait a day or so to see if there's any bruising.

TIM. She fell on that big plush rug. There shouldn't be too much damage. Except to the floor.

FLORA. She's about a hundred years old. People her age break hips all the time.

TIM. Well, I guess she's fortunate, then.

FLORA. Tim... There were some papers sitting on her desk. Legal pages, I mean. I noticed them when I was helping her back into bed.

TIM. Yeah? Probably the things Clarissa brought over this afternoon. (*Flora moves further into the room in order to talk more discreetly.*)

FLORA. They look like changes.

TIM. "Changes?"

FLORA. They're part of a codicil, or something.

TIM. "A codicil?"

FLORA. Yes. For her will.

TIM. "For her will?"

FLORA. (*very nearly—but not quite—in unison with him*) "For her will," yes. Will you stop repeating everything I say?

TIM. What... what kind of changes?

FLORA. I only got a quick glance, but it's something about revoking previous bequests and substituting new ones, instead.

TIM. New bequests? For who? And what about the old ones? What about *me*? ...Us, I mean.

FLORA. I was trying to get a better look when she told me to go, that she wanted to be alone.

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TIM. You should have stalled for time.

FLORA. I tried. I pretended to tidy some of the things around the room, but I think that only annoyed her. And probably made her suspicious.

TIM. You should have been more subtle, then.

FLORA. More subtle, how?

TIM. I don't know... Pretended to accidentally knock some things onto the floor, including those papers, and then gotten a good look at them while you were picking everything up.

FLORA. And what, exactly, is subtle about that?

TIM. You were an actress, For God's Sake! You could have pulled it off! Now, instead, we're down here, going crazy, wondering why she and her Gorgon attorney have cut me—*us*— out of her will.

FLORA. Fine! Next time your aunt hops out of bed and face-plants in the middle of the floor, *you* can be the one who gets to feel for broken bones, to touch her all over to make sure she's still in one piece. And you can be the one with the presence of mind to sweep a bunch of papers onto the floor and take your own sweet time gathering them up, so "*subtly*" that she has no idea what you're actually doing.

TIM. I'm just saying—

FLORA.—I know what you're *just saying!* But you weren't there! She's no fool, Tim. She's old, and she's heavy, and she's none too steady on her feet, but she's sharp as a tack. If you think it's so easy, then why don't you go up there? You can take her dinner tonight and then loiter around the desk, making small talk while she eats, and see what's in those pages. You were an *actor*, after all. You should be able to pull it off.

TIM. Fine. You're right. ...I'm sorry. I just... I panicked, I guess. The thought of getting nothing, after what we've put up with for the past year and a half... Everything we've done for her. How hard we've worked. It would be a bitter pill to swallow.

FLORA. Oh, well, let's be honest. We haven't worked *that* hard. I think it's safe to say we've done just about the bare minimum, is all. Is that it, do you think? She wants to teach us a lesson for not doing more? But why?

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When I say we've done the bare minimum, well, isn't that pretty much all she's wanted from us? She's been pretty clear about things, after all. Run her errands. Bring her four or five—or six—meals a day. Do a little light housekeeping. (*Both Tim and Flora glance skeptically around the cluttered room.*) I said "light," remember? Do the laundry. Change her sheets and pillowcases twice a week, as quickly as we can and create as little disturbance as possible in the process. And to otherwise stay out of her way. We're to be her silent companions. Not her friends. She was pretty clear on that. We were *actors*, after all. I think she would have found it slightly less embarrassing if I'd been a whore and you'd been a drug addict.

TIM. Actors *are* whores and drug addicts, didn't you know that?

FLORA. I knew we were doing something wrong. Well, too late now.

TIM. (*an idea has just occurred to him*) Hey, wait a minute...

FLORA. No, it's too late, trust me. We've got enough bad habits already. Plus, it would take too much effort to start sleeping around at this stage of the game. I'd have to shave my legs, for starters. But, if *you* want to it a go...

TIM. No, I just thought of something... It doesn't matter what's in those papers. Not yet, anyway.

FLORA. What do you mean?

TIM. Well, you can't just *insert* changes into a will, can you? Not simply by writing something out on a piece of paper. That would never hold up in court. Just like a will itself, a codicil would have to be signed. And witnessed. And notarized! And that hasn't happened!

FLORA. Are... Are you sure?

TIM. Pretty damn sure, Flo. Rosamunde hasn't left the house in months. And who's been out here, except for that damn attorney of hers? Who could have witnessed anything, even if she'd signed it? No... Auntie may be planning some changes, but nothing is official yet. We're still in the clear. For now.

FLORA. For now. ...But what about later?

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TIM. I don't know. But at least now, I have time to think things through. To come up with a plan. *(Tim appears to be thinking hard. Flora watches him. A few seconds pass. Tim looks at her.)* You wouldn't shave your legs just for me? Is that really what we've come to?

FLORA. *(momentarily taken aback; and then)* Of course I would. If it was a special occasion. Like our anniversary. Or you were dying, and it was going to be our very last time together. *(Tim moves to put his arm around Flora's waist. They smile at each other.)*

TIM. Oh, well, thanks for *that*.

FLORA. And why do I have to do all the shaving? You could do with a little man-scaping here and there, yourself.

TIM. I thought it was the hair that made me sexy.

FLORA. Not in your ears. *(Tim releases her, smiling and steps away.)*

TIM. Oh, picky, picky. *(Flora crosses to pour herself a drink and then flops on the couch.)*

FLORA. You know... When we first heard that awful crash... When she slipped and fell... For just the first second or two, I thought she'd come out into the hallway. That maybe she'd taken a header down the stairs.

TIM. *(turning to her)* Me, too! That's what it sounded like at first. I could almost picture it... her stumbling...

FLORA. *(nodding)* Falling head over heels...

TIM. All the way to the bottom... *(Both seem to be transfixed, picturing the image. A few seconds pass before they shake themselves out of their reverie.)* But she didn't.

FLORA. No. She didn't. ...Thank goodness.

TIM. ...Thank goodness. ...Can you imagine what that would have been like?

FLORA. She wouldn't have survived. All those steps..? And the hardwood floor at the bottom?

TIM. Oh, no question. She wouldn't have made it.

FLORA. *(beat; not terribly convincing)* That would have been terrible.

TIM. *(equally unconvincing)* ...Terrible.

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FLORA. I guess it's good that she almost never goes anywhere near the stairs anymore. So nothing like that is likely to happen.

TIM. No. Probably not...*(crossing and pouring himself a drink)*

Interesting.

FLORA. What's interesting? *(Tim takes a drink from his glass.)*...Tim?

TIM. Timing. Just thinking about... the timing.

FLORA. Why?

TIM. Speculating, is all. If Aunt Rosamunde's fall had been worse... If it had left her incapacitated. Or... *you* know. Well, then, it would be too late to make changes to... anything.

FLORA. *(watching Tim closely)* But it isn't.

TIM. No. It isn't.

FLORA. Because she's fine.

TIM. Yes. Fine. And isn't that a relief? Aunt Rosamunde will be with us for a while yet. A good... *long* while. *(Tim downs the last of his drink and sets down the glass. He smiles at Flora.)* Well, I suppose there are a few things I should be getting to. *(Tim starts to exit.)*

FLORA. It won't work. *(Tim stops. He turns back to look at Flora.)*

TIM. Huh?

FLORA. Planting your little seeds.

TIM. Darling, what are you talking about?

FLORA.*(amused)* "Darling?" Oh, please. You never get effusive unless you're up to something.

TIM. What? I'm not allowed to use a simple term of endearment when I'm addressing my lovely—

FLORA. —I'm not going to help you shove your dear auntie down the stairs before she has a chance to change her will. *(Beat. Tim looks at Flora.)*

TIM. Well, certainly not. Where did you get the idea that I was even hinting at such a thing...

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FLORA. “If her fall had left her incapacitated. Or... *you* know.” Yes, Tim. I know. I know when I’m being manipulated. Or at least being *gently steered* to an idea.

TIM. Don’t be silly. That wasn’t what I was doing. It was just a stray thought, is all. A notion. *(Tim starts to exit.)*

FLORA. Anyway, that would be too sloppy.

TIM. Pardon?

FLORA. That’s leaving entirely too much to chance. *(Intrigued, Tim crosses back into the room a few steps.)* She might die. She’d probably die. But then again, she might not.

TIM. Flora..? Sweetie..?

FLORA. With her dying gasp, she might raise one pudgy finger and point it at us. Right in front of the investigating officer.

TIM. I wasn’t seriously suggesting that we—

FLORA. —And even if she didn’t, it would still look awfully suspicious. Rosamunde, expired at the bottom of the steps. And just you and me around at the time. You think the authorities aren’t going to be asking all kinds of ugly little questions if that happens? Especially when they see that you’ve been designated her sole heir. In the current will, anyway. *That* would certainly raise a few eyebrows.

TIM. But... accidents happen.

FLORA. They do. Yes, they do. It’s just... so very important... that there’s no doubt that’s what it was.

TIM. *(sitting)* Why do I suddenly feel as if you’ve been giving this a lot of thought?

FLORA. Not at all. You brought it up, remember. I’m just... extrapolating.

TIM. “Extrapolating?”

FLORA. Exploring the possibilities. Figuring out the angles. Purely as an academic exercise, of course.

TIM. All right... Let’s hear the angles. Let’s hear your... extrapolatings. *(Flora shakes her head and starts to rise.)*

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FLORA. Like you said, we both have things to do...

TIM. No, no. You can't leave me hanging. This is just a silly little game we're playing, after all. So tell me... How would we kill the fatted calf... and get away with it? *(Beat. Flora remains standing, looking at Tim.)*

FLORA. This is just a game.

TIM. Of course.

FLORA. We're agreed.

TIM. Certainly *(Flora sits on the couch once more.)*

FLORA. She would have to be dead ahead of time.

TIM. I beg your pardon?

FLORA. Dear Aunt Rosamunde would need to be deceased even before her fateful journey down the stairs. Just in case the tumble didn't quite finish the job.

TIM. But... that would mean—

FLORA. —And there would need to be a witness. Someone standing... *(Flora stands and crosses up R, gesturing to a spot just to the R of her)...* right about here... when it happened.

TIM. A witness?

FLORA. Someone whose testimony would be very nearly unimpeachable. Better still, someone distinctly unsympathetic towards us, thereby making their account of the events all the more credible.

TIM. It sounds to me like you're talking about ... Clarissa Galbreath. Hatchet-face. But that would be crazy!

FLORA. Would it?

TIM. *(standing)* Yeah, about seven kinds of crazy, actually! And how would you propose that we even get her to come out here? She doesn't take her orders from us. You don't think she would instantly be suspicious if we called her? Neither of us ever has! Aunt Rosamunde always summons Clarissa from her little tower up there. And how would we stage any of this, anyway? Do you realize the kind of precise timing this would involve? *(Beat.)*

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FLORA. You're right. It's all just a flight of fancy. Something we'd never actually be able to pull off.

TIM. *(suddenly wary)* No. Don't turn this into some kind of a challenge. Don't go trying to appeal to my competitive side.

FLORA. What on earth makes you think I was trying to—

TIM. —Oh my dear sweet Flora, we've been together too long, don't you see? We know each other inside out. Or we think we do. You think telling me something can't be done will make me all the more determined to find a way. But that was for stage plays. Special effects. Quick scene and costume changes. Collapsible knives. Guns firing blanks. This is real life. And real death.

FLORA. No. It's not. Because we aren't really going to kill anybody. You are right about one thing, though, Timothy. I was approaching all of this as though I were blocking a play. Old habits die hard, I suppose. But that's all. The malice is strictly figurative. *(Flora begins to tidy up. She puts away the bottle of bourbon, gathers up the drinking glasses and sets them on a tray. She neatens stacks of papers, moving around Tim as she does so. Tim seems momentarily lost in thought. Then:)*

TIM. You could do it.

FLORA. *(still tidying up)* I could do what?

TIM. You could pretend to be Rosamunde. On the phone. Calling to tell Clarissa you want to see her. *(Now Flora has stopped cleaning. She turns to Tim.)*

FLORA. No...

TIM. Of course you could! You've mimicked her voice a hundred times, making fun of her. And you're not half-bad! Come on; do it. Say something as Aunt Rosamunde right now.

FLORA. I'm not going to do that.

TIM. Come on, do it! Say... *(in a slightly altered voice)* "Timothy, this sandwich is inedible!" *(in his own voice)* Say... *(in the altered voice)* "This coffee is far too strong! What do you take me for, a lumberjack?"

FLORA. *(amused)* No.

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TIM. Come on, just say it! Just try it.

FLORA. *(heaving a put-upon sigh, then clearing her throat; speaking in an elderly lady- crone-type of voice)* “Timothy, this coffee is far too strong!” *(Beat. Flora looks at Tim.)*

TIM. Oh. You used to do it better than that.

FLORA. *(defensively)* I was never trying to *be* her! I was just *mocking* her. You’re the one who said I was good at it.

TIM. Yeah... You’re right. *(Tim turns and walks away. Flora, her back to Tim, tries it one more time.)*

FLORA. *(in the crone-voice once more, sounding slightly different)* “Timothy, I can’t imagine why the simple act of making a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich is beyond your capabilities! It hardly requires culinary expertise, after all.” *(Tim turns around grinning. Flora, facing downstage and still not looking at Tim, smiles also.)*

TIM. Now, *that*... *That* sent chills down my spine. It was like she was right here in the room.

FLORA. It wasn’t that great.

TIM. Are you kidding? It would have fooled Aunt Rosamunde herself!

FLORA. I can do it better than that. I’d just need to practice.

TIM. If you say so! *(They look at each other. They are caught up in the enthusiasm of make-believe once more.)* Okay, I’m with you so far... We could trick Clarissa into coming out here, using some excuse or other. *(Tim crosses up to stand where Flora was standing earlier, pointing to the spot Flora had indicated.)* And she’s standing here, because... *(Flora crosses up to stand near him. She gestures off.)*

FLORA. ...Because from here, you can see the lower half of the staircase, but not the top. She would witness the dreadful result of Aunt Rosamunde’s fateful plunge down the steps without seeing quite how it began.

TIM. With Rosamunde being pre-deceased, and all that.

FLORA. Exactly. Now, here comes the tricky part. You and I must both have alibis. Clarissa must conclude that neither one of us was anywhere

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near the top of the stairs when the accident happened.

TIM. Of course. ...And how do we do that?

FLORA. (*patiently repeating what she just said*) By neither one of us being anywhere near the top of the stairs when it happens. ...Or so it must appear. One of us will be right here, greeting Clarissa, and, without appearing to do so, prevent her from stepping any further into the room than this spot.

TIM. And... the other of us..?

FLORA. Will need to be very, very fast. This person should probably be right outside in front, I think. Raking, or weeding, or something diligent and obvious when Clarissa first pulls up. Whoever it is will say hello to her, perhaps express surprise or puzzlement since we weren't expecting her. The second she's in the door, this person will drop the rake, haul ass around and in the side door and up the back stairs. Aunt Rosamunde's mortal remains will have been previously positioned so that a brisk little shove will send her toppling down the steps in a macabre sort of final, grand entrance. And while Clarissa and whichever of us is here alongside her are expressing shock and horror and attempting some feeble ministrations in a futile effort to revive Auntie, this other person will dash back down the back stairs, around the house, and burst inside, breathless, having heard the dreadful commotion. The entire scenario will have played out so rapidly that even the most suspicious brain would find it quite inconceivable that anyone could have managed to leave their post outside, carry out such a nefarious act and be back just seconds later, walking in to the horrifying scene awaiting them in the front hallway. (*Flora looks at Tim to gauge his reaction.*)

TIM. And I'm guessing that the person doing all the dashing, climbing, shoving and running back downstairs would be me?

FLORA. I never said that.

TIM. Well, how about this? Which of these persons would be the one doing the actual deed? You know; inflicting the actual blow? Hitting her with something that would look consistent with an injury she might receive

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while cartwheeling down a flight of steps?

FLORA. *(after just the slightest uncomfortable hesitation)* Oh, I don't think we need to make that particular designation, do we? After all, this whole thing is just conjecture, after all. *(Beat. Flora looks at Tim, who again appears deep in thought)* ...Tim?

TIM. Oh, yes. Conjecture. That's all. *(Flora crosses and picks up the tray on which she'd stacked the glasses earlier. She is just about to exit when Tim speaks again.)* It would require quite a few rehearsals, don't you imagine? To get everything worked out perfectly? ...If this were more than mere speculation, I mean. *(Flora looks back at Tim with just the slightest amount of concern on her face. Tim, not looking her direction, appears to be in deep thought once more. Flora exits. The lights fade.)*

END OF ACT ONE

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