

Sanguine

By

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SANGUINE

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*“Sanity and happiness are an impossible combination”
-Mark Twain*

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First developed and produced at Barter's Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights by Barter Theatre, Abingdon, Virginia; Richard Rose, Producing Artistic Director.

CAST: 2m, 2w

ABETTA Female, Late 20s-Early 30s.

BELLA Female, Late 20s-Early 30s.

ETHAN Male, Late 20s-Early 30s.

HARLAN Male, Late 20s-Early 30s.

TIME: Present day.

PLACE: The Asbury home in Irvin, GA.

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SCENE 1

The setting is the home of ABETTA ASBURY, in the small town of Irvin, GA, tucked in the corner of foothills between North and South Carolina. The house is clean and kept in perfect repair, but furnished as though it were the 1970s: coarsely upholstered brown couch, brightly colored walls, oddly shaped coffee table, fringe lamps, etc. A touch of the contemporary here and there provides a stark contrast, perhaps a smart phone on a speaker dock, a phone plugged into a charger, a flat screen television, etc. A decorative urn containing the ashes of Abetta's mother sits on the coffee table. Abetta is in the room with ETHAN WILMOT. Abetta is about thirty, pretty, reserved, compassionate, terrified. Ethan is about the same age and looks to be recovering from a long illness that has nearly bested him. He is missing random chunks of hair from where he has torn it out, although these patches are starting to grow back. They are in the middle of a heated discussion, Abetta fussing over him, Ethan apologetic.

ETHAN. Yes, I gave her my coat, but-

ABETTA. I thought we were past this.

ETHAN. We are. Mostly.

ABETTA. You can't save the world by giving away your clothes.

ETHAN. I know that. Or at least I'm accepting it until I know it. But giving Mrs. Perry my coat wasn't about that. She was shivering. It was a little cold. If anyone else told you he gave his coat to a shivering old lady while he helped her bury her cat, her only companion of sixteen years, you wouldn't think a thing of it.

ABETTA. You're not anyone else. Wait, Stephen died?

ETHAN. Last night.

ABETTA. How did you handle it?

ETHAN. Shouldn't we be more concerned about Mrs. Perry?

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ABETTA. I'll send her a card. How did you handle it?

ETHAN. I was fine. No, not fine. But I helped her dig the hole, throw dirt over the box, even held her hand, and not once did I feel the need to give her all the clothes off my back. In fact, I only offered the jacket when I noticed her shivering. But it didn't feel so urgent like it used to. It felt, I don't know, normal. Like something a normal person would do.

ABETTA. You are a normal person. Or at least well on your way to becoming one.

ETHAN. All thanks to you, Abetta. Ms. Asbury, I mean.

ABETTA. Abetta is just fine. And please, Mr. Wilmot, don't give me any credit in the matter.

ETHAN. I just feel as though you've-

ABETTA. I've done nothing but sit here and talk to you, and that only every week or so.

ETHAN. I just feel as though you're with me, somehow, even when I'm not here. Especially when I'm not here. At night, it feels like you're there, taking away my worry. Abetta-

ABETTA. Mr. Wilmot, please, as flattering as you may think that is, don't say it.

ETHAN. I'm sorry.

ABETTA. Don't be. (*BELLA ASBURY, Abetta's sister-in-law, enters from the kitchen. Ethan stands.*)

ETHAN. Mrs. Asbury.

BELLA. Ethan, please, Bella, for the last time.

ETHAN. Sorry, Bella. Never can be too cautious with familiarity. I wouldn't want Harlan to think-

BELLA. These days, Harlan wouldn't notice if we screwed in the bed beside him.

ABETTA. Bella, please.

BELLA. I'm sorry, Abetta. But he is getting worse. And even you can't deny it forever.

ETHAN. Worse?

BELLA. Withdrawn.

ABETTA. I hardly think Harlan's health need concern Mr. Wilmot.

ETHAN. Abetta, I'm-

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BELLA. Ethan, I'm sorry. I'm sorry to both of you. I disturbed what I'm sure was a perfectly nice conversation. Perhaps I should go get everyone some tea.

ETHAN. Actually, I was just on my way.

BELLA. Now I haven't frightened you off.

ETHAN. No, really, I was just leaving. I have a coat to retrieve.

BELLA. Retrieve?

ETHAN. A first time for everything.

ABETTA. Don't be mean, Bella. Goodbye, Mr. Wilmot.

ETHAN. Goodbye Ms. Abetta. I hope your brother improves soon.

BELLA. I have no doubt he will.

ABETTA. Thank you, Mr. Wilmot. *(Ethan exits.)* Bella, I wish you wouldn't go around advertising Harlan's moods.

BELLA. Moods, is that what you call it? A mood does not fester for months. Harlan is positively infected.

ABETTA. Still, there's no call to be dramatic about it, especially not in front of a guest.

BELLA. So that's the issue.

ABETTA. It has nothing to do with Mr. Wilmot.

BELLA. I didn't say it did.

ABETTA. Neither did I.

BELLA. Abetta, I never. You have a crush. Is there a little heart next to his name in your phone?

ABETTA. He's a very kind man.

BELLA. He's also a very crazy man.

ABETTA. He's gotten much better lately. He hasn't tried to give his clothes to anyone in public for months.

BELLA. But in private? Does he generously disrobe in the safety of a dark room?

ABETTA. Bella, please.

BELLA. I'm sorry. I'm just teasing you darling. And you're right. He has gotten better. I've noticed. *(Before Abetta can respond, HARLAN ASBURY peers around the corner. The women sense him before they see him, responding as though he were a phantom, sucking the warmth out of the room. He is shaggy, bearded, wearing a dirty bathrobe. He enters the room slowly, tentatively, and the*

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women remain frozen, unsure whether to address him or even mutually acknowledge his presence.)

HARLAN. Was that Ethan?

BELLA. Yes.

HARLAN. Is he gone?

BELLA. Yes.

HARLAN. Thank god.

ABETTA. Harlan, what have you got against Mr. Wilmot?

BELLA. Don't you know? Ethan and I are having an affair. *(They both ignore her.)*

HARLAN. Nothing. In fact I feel for him dearly. He's so fragile. I can't bear it.

ABETTA. Harlan, Mr. Wilmot's gotten much better.

BELLA. Yes, he's improving every day with dear Abetta's help.

HARLAN. Help?

ABETTA. I sit with him and talk.

HARLAN. And that's all?

ABETTA. Yes, that's all.

HARLAN. Are you sure?

BELLA. I don't believe she's screwing him, if that's what you're asking.

HARLAN. It's not. Wait, are you?

ABETTA. What?

HARLAN. Sleeping with Ethan?

ABETTA. No.

HARLAN. Or anything else?

ABETTA. No, Harlan.

HARLAN. Just be careful, Abetta. That's all.

BELLA. Harlan, honey, Abetta is a grown woman. She can handle herself.

HARLAN. Stay out of family business.

ABETTA. Bella is family, Harlan.

HARLAN. I'm sorry.

BELLA. Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air, dear.

HARLAN. No, I can't go out there.

BELLA. How about some tea, then?

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HARLAN. That's your god damn answer to everything, isn't it?
Have some god damn tea.

ABETTA. Harlan, please.

HARLAN. I don't want any god damn tea.

ABETTA. That's enough.

HARLAN. I should go back upstairs, where there's no god damn tea.

BELLA. Oh please don't. Please stay.

HARLAN. I should never have come down in the first place. I'm just not up for it. *(He starts to leave.)*

BELLA. Abetta, can't you say something?

HARLAN. No.

BELLA. But she could help, Harlan.

HARLAN. No. I mean, I'll be fine. I just need some rest. I'm worn out. *(He leaves.)*

BELLA. Worn out. All he does is sleep.

ABETTA. He's an Asbury, Bella. He feels deeply.

BELLA. That's not all Asburys do.

ABETTA. I have no idea what-

BELLA. You could help him.

ABETTA. Don't you think I would?

BELLA. I don't know why you don't but I know you could if you wanted to.

ABETTA. How?

BELLA. The same way you help Ethan.

ABETTA. I just talk to Mr. Wilmot.

BELLA. Stop it. You said it yourself, I'm family too. You don't have to lie to me.

ABETTA. Lie about what?

BELLA. I know why you have to hide, I do. But not from me. And certainly not from your own brother.

ABETTA. What do I have to hide?

BELLA. Your abilities. The abilities all Asbury women have. The abilities your dear aunt had.

ABETTA. Are you serious? That's a fairy tale, a silly town rumor, gossip, not even good gossip, going around Irvin ever since-

BELLA. It's true.

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ABETTA. That we have magical powers from the devil himself.

BELLA. I'm sure I don't know how they work or where they come from, but powers, yes, the women have powers and the men are cursed.

ABETTA. Bella, do you hear yourself?

BELLA. Then explain it. Explain Ethan.

ABETTA. I just talk to-

BELLA. You do not just talk to him. Every damn shrink from Florida. to Tennessee talked their expensive heads off to him until. his Mama died and it didn't do a bit of good. But suddenly. you start "talking" to him, and he's fit to associate with. folks again, go out in public without causing a scene, giving away the clothes off his back and running home half-naked. Explain it.

ABETTA. Bella, I-

BELLA. I know you don't hurt anybody. You heal.

ABETTA. This is ridiculous.

BELLA. The fact that you refuse to help your brother, that is ridiculous.

ABETTA. Why would I refuse to help Harlan?

BELLA. You tell me. You tell me why you're willing to save your boyfriend but not your own brother. Are you two screwing?

ABETTA. I wish you would stop using that word.

BELLA. Are you screwing Ethan, dear old Mr. Wilmot? Is that what it takes? Is that what Harlan would have to do for your help?

Wouldn't be unprecedented in this family, from what I hear.

ABETTA. Bella, stop.

BELLA. How can you sit there and watch him disintegrate and not even care?

ABETTA. I do care. Of course I care. But what you're suggesting is impossible.

BELLA. If you care, then help him. Why won't you help him? Why?

ABETTA. Because it's forbidden. *(beat. Bella sits down.)*

BELLA. So it is real.

ABETTA. You said you knew.

BELLA. I wasn't sure.

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ABETTA. You said all those awful things about me. And Mr. Wilmot. And Harlan.

BELLA. I had to be certain, dear.

ABETTA. So you made me feel terrible about myself?

BELLA. That turned out to be justified. You have these powers and you'll use them for tail but not your brother.

ABETTA. Mr. Wilmot isn't "tail." And I told you, I'm forbidden to bleed another Asbury.

BELLA. Bleed?

ABETTA. That's what we call it, bleeding, like doctors used to do. Cut into the soul and let the toxins out.

BELLA. So why can't you bleed Harlan?

ABETTA. Because it's forbidden.

BELLA. I know that. But why is it forbidden?

ABETTA. I don't know. Aunt Isabeth just taught me that it would have dire consequences.

BELLA. What kind of consequences?

ABETTA. I told you, dire.

BELLA. I said kind, not degree, dear.

ABETTA. She never said what kind.

BELLA. So you won't heal your brother because of some phony familial masochism passed through the generations.

ABETTA. I'm surprised you're willing to assume anything is phony about us.

BELLA. I've seen the effects of the bleeding. I've also seen enough people hold themselves down trying to live up to the misery of their ancestors.

ABETTA. I'm not making this up.

BELLA. You'd rather believe it because it's easier than taking a risk.

ABETTA. Yes, the thing this family lacks is risk. And I wonder why? It's always worked out so well for us in the past.

BELLA. Stop dodging. If I could do what you do, I'd risk anything to help Harlan.

ABETTA. It's Harlan I'm trying to protect. I don't care if there's risk for me. If that's all it was, I'd bleed him right now. But Harlan could

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very well be the one who has to live with the consequences if anything goes wrong.

BELLA. What could go wrong?

ABETTA. His pain, it's not like other people's pain. I can feel it. It's like he's holding on to it for dear life.

BELLA. Don't project your fatalism onto him.

ABETTA. I'm serious. I don't know what it would do to him if I took it away.

BELLA. It couldn't make things any worse.

ABETTA. Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure? I know he's been pulling away, but he's not completely gone, is he?

BELLA. I don't know.

ABETTA. Neither do I, and that's my point. Believe me, if I thought he couldn't get any worse, I'd try anything.

BELLA. Really?

ABETTA. He's my brother, of course I would.

BELLA. Then promise.

ABETTA. Promise what?

BELLA. Promise that if he gets to that point, where he can't get worse, that you'll help him. At least promise that you'll try.

ABETTA. Bella, it's-

BELLA. Forbidden, I know. But you said you'd be willing to risk any danger to yourself, and if Harlan couldn't get any worse, then why wouldn't you do it?

ABETTA. I don't know.

BELLA. I know what I'm asking you. And that it's unfair. I would put myself in danger if I could, but I can't, not the way you can. So please, at least promise me.

ABETTA. Ok.

BELLA. Ok?

ABETTA. Yes. If Harlan gets to the point of no return, I'll try bleeding him.

BELLA. Thank you.

ABETTA. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that.

BELLA. Yes, let's hope for that.

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SCENE 2

Harlan sits by himself in the living room, wearing a button down shirt and a blazer that looks too big. He seems anxious, repeatedly checking his watch, shifting in his seat, etc. He looks at the urn, licks his thumb, and rubs a spot, almost knocking it over. He quickly grabs it, holds it in place for a moment. He breathes heavily, then cradles the urn to his chest and sits back down with it. Bella enters and sees Harlan and the urn. Very gently, she tries to take the urn. He neither resists nor lets go, frozen, clutching the urn. Bella kisses his head. He lets go, and she takes the urn and places it back on the table.

HARLAN. I almost knocked it over.

BELLA. She's fine, honey. See, I put her right back where she was before.

HARLAN. Be careful.

BELLA. It's done. Over. See?

HARLAN. Ok.

BELLA. Why were you touching her in the first place?

HARLAN. She'd want to look nice for company.

BELLA. Ethan's hardly company at this point.

HARLAN. Does he have to come here?

BELLA. It means a lot to your sister.

HARLAN. I'd like to believe that she's right. That he's gotten better.

BELLA. He has. And you will too.

HARLAN. I'm cursed, remember.

BELLA. That's nonsense and you know it.

HARLAN. Yeah.

BELLA. Now, let's straighten you up. *(She does.)*

HARLAN. How do I look?

BELLA. Like a shut-in. *(Harlan laughs.)*

HARLAN. Thanks. *(Abetta enters. She moves around the room in a barely contained burst of energy, making sure everything is neat.)*

BELLA. Well, hello, busy bee.

ABETTA. Just making sure everything's ready.

BELLA. For your boyfriend?

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HARLAN. Boyfriend?

ABETTA. Bella is teasing me, Harlan. But it's not getting to me today.

BELLA. Good.

HARLAN. Wait, is Ethan your boyfriend?

ABETTA. No, Harlan. Mother looks nice.

BELLA. Harlan cleaned her up. For Ethan.

HARLAN. Actually, I—

BELLA. So what is Ethan's big announcement?

ABETTA. I told you I don't know. I'm not holding out on you. Mr. Wilmot just said he wanted us all to be here. Thank you, by the way, Harlan.

HARLAN. For what?

ABETTA. For doing this. I know you don't like having Mr. Wilmot around.

HARLAN. That makes it sound like I don't like him. He just breaks my heart. But if he's better, then good. I just hope it lasts.

ABETTA. It will. I can feel it.

BELLA. Good for Ethan, then.

ABETTA. Yes. Yes it is.

BELLA. And if there's hope for Ethan Wilmot, who knows what else could happen.

HARLAN. Who knows. *(There's a knock at the door.)*

ABETTA. That'll be Mr. Wilmot. Is everything ready?

BELLA. You look fine.

ABETTA. Thanks.

HARLAN. That's not what she asked. *(Abetta opens the door. Ethan enters carrying flowers. He is unsure whether to hug Abetta. He does not.)*

ETHAN. I brought some flowers.

ABETTA. I can see that. They're lovely. Let me put them in some water. *(Abetta takes the flowers from Ethan and into the kitchen.)*

ETHAN. Ok.

BELLA. Come in, Ethan. Make yourself comfortable.

ETHAN. Thanks, Bella. Hello, Harlan.

HARLAN. How are you, Ethan?

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ETHAN. Well. I'm very, very well.

HARLAN. That's good to hear.

ETHAN. And you?

BELLA. So what's this big announcement?

ETHAN. I'd like to wait until everyone's present and accounted. for, if it's all the same.

BELLA. Of course. (*Abetta reenters and puts the flowers, now in a vase, on the table, brushing the urn almost imperceptibly.*)

HARLAN. Careful. **BELL.** She doesn't mind. She loves flowers.

ABETTA. Sorry, Harlan.

HARLAN. It's ok. Isn't it, Bella?

BELLA. It's fine.

ABETTA. So, Mr. Wilmot.

ETHAN. Yes, my announcement.

BELLA. Please, we're all on edge.

ETHAN. Right. Here goes. I came here tonight to personally invite you all to a party. (*beat.*)

BELLA. That's the announcement.

HARLAN. I don't go to parties.

ABETTA. That's wonderful, Mr. Wilmot.

ETHAN. Damn it.

ABETTA. Really, it is.

ETHAN. This is going all wrong. I was trying to build suspense. I was counting on someone saying "a party for what?"

ABETTA. I'm sorry.

ETHAN. I ruined it.

BELLA. A party for what?

ETHAN. Now it's just forced.

BELLA. A party for what, Ethan?

ETHAN. It's the first benefit for the new non-profit foundation I'm starting, "A Change of Clothes."

ABETTA. A non-profit.

ETHAN. Yes, Abetta. It's a positive way to channel my, my—

ABETTA. Fancies.

ETHAN. Yes, exactly.

BELLA. So what is it for?

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ETHAN. We provide suits to people trying to enter the workforce who can't afford to buy their own interview clothes. We're already building partnerships with shelters, rehab facilities, and several local and state agencies to identify need and start planning to provide help. We should be fully operational within the next few months. I set up an endowment with the rest of mother's money.

BELLA. And the party?

ETHAN. To raise awareness, attract donors, and, of course, to have a good time.

BELLA. That's wonderful, Ethan. Isn't it wonderful, Abetta?

ABETTA. Are you sure it's wise to indulge your delusions like this?

ETHAN. What does it matter, as long as I'm doing some good in the world?

ABETTA. I'm just not sure you should be validating the very idea that has made you so depressed.

ETHAN. But Abetta, I'm not depressed, thanks to you. I feel great, and I'm finally doing something.

ABETTA. No, of course. It, it's just that Ethan, I mean Mr. Wilmot, I wasn't expecting.

BELLA. Look at us. We haven't provided our guest any of the refreshments you worked so hard on. Would you like to come help me in the kitchen.

ABETTA. Yes, of course, how silly of me. *(The women leave for the kitchen. Harlan and Ethan sit in awkward silence for a moment.)*

ETHAN. I thought she'd be happy for me.

HARLAN. I'm sure she is. She just worries. That's all. It's what we do. We worry.

ETHAN. I wonder if she'll ever trust that I'm better.

HARLAN. She will, Ethan. She does, in a way. You may just have to keep showing her.

ETHAN. I hope you're right. *(beat.)*

HARLAN. May I ask you a question?

ETHAN. Of course.

HARLAN. What's with the clothes? Why is that so important to you?

ETHAN. It's silly. Abetta's right, it's a delusion.

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HARLAN. Tell me anyway.

ETHAN. I just believe that everyone would be better off, everyone would be nicer, if they had some nice clothes. I see people walking around in public in sweat pants and t-shirts, and I think it's no wonder the world is so terrible. If you can be so casual in public, then what can't you do? Why should you care about anything if you can't even start with your own appearance? But if you're in a suit, well, you have something to live up to, an image to uphold, to match with your deeds. When I used to see people being mean, hurting others or themselves, I'd give them my suit so they'd be too embarrassed to keep doing those things, so they'd have to act the way they looked, and eventually they'd feel that way, too.

HARLAN. That is, its—

ETHAN. Insane.

HARLAN. Beautiful. *(The women reenter with some refreshments, which they serve on the table.)*

BELLA. Here we go.

ABETTA. I'm sorry for my outburst.

BELLA. I told you not to say anything. I told her not to apologize.

ETHAN. It's ok, Abetta.

HARLAN. Ethan's foundation is wonderful. I'd like to help any way I can.

ETHAN. We could use volunteers.

HARLAN. Any way I can without leaving the house.

ETHAN. Maybe it would a good reason to get out.

HARLAN. I appreciate it, Ethan, but I can't.

ETHAN. You can, I know you can. You can do it if you try and if you believe that you can get better. I know. I used to be just like you.

HARLAN. No. Don't. Don't put me out there.

BELLA. Harlan, honey, why don't you go upstairs and rest for a minute?

HARLAN. Yes, I think I will. *(Harlan exits.)*

ETHAN. I didn't mean to upset him. I was only trying to help.

BELLA. He's nothing like you.

ETHAN. Bella, I-

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BELLA. You did not used to be just like him. You cannot help him because you have no idea. You were always off. Weepin' Ethan Wilmot. Harlan was social, handsome, popular. And now he's crippled, having to live like this. Don't think for a second that he's like you.

ABETTA. There's no need to be hurtful.

ETHAN. I only meant—

BELLA. I know what you meant. And I know what people say about him, about us. And I can deal with it. But I cannot and will not deal with Harlan being lumped in with you.

ABETTA. Mr. Wilmot, I'm so sorry that you've been treated so poorly in my home.

ETHAN. It's ok, Abetta. I understand. I know what it's like to get the stares and hear the whispers. I have my whole life. But to go from being Harlan Asbury to Ethan Wilmot, that must be truly terrible, a kind of burden I've never known. I understand why you're upset, Bella, and I'm sorry.

BELLA. Do you see this? Do you see how well-adjusted he is, how rational? It's a travesty.

ABETTA. Bella, please, not in front of guests.

BELLA. He's almost too rational. He should be pissed. He has every right to. I was being awful.

ETHAN. I don't think so at all, Bella.

BELLA. See? Maybe he's healed too much. Maybe a little of that going in Harlan's direction would be good for everyone involved.

ETHAN. If I understood what was making me better, Bella, I'd share with Harlan, even if it meant sacrificing some myself.

BELLA. Thank you, Ethan. That would be very decent of you. That's what a decent person would do.

ABETTA. Bella, I'm serious. Stop it.

ETHAN. I hope you all will still come to the party. *(Harlan comes back in, carrying a suit on a hanger.)*

HARLAN. Here, Ethan, take this. I never wear it anymore.

BELLA. You need it for interviews.

HARLAN. I haven't gone on an interview in months.

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ETHAN. This is very nice, Harlan, but we're not ready to accept donations just yet.

HARLAN. Then take it and hold onto it for me until you're ready. Please.

ETHAN. I guess I could do that, but—

HARLAN. Thanks, Ethan. *(Harlan gives the suit to Ethan and then leaves. Bella tries to stop him but he doesn't notice her.)*

ETHAN. Perhaps I should be leaving.

ABETTA. I'm so sorry. You know we'll be at your party. Of course we will.

ETHAN. I can't wait.

BELLA. Ethan, I feel like I put you in the middle of something. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.

ETHAN. These spats happen. You should have heard my mother and I. It's no problem.

ABETTA. Thank you. We're so proud of you. *(Harlan comes back in carrying another suit on a hanger.)*

BELLA. Absolutely not. You only have the two.

HARLAN. They're my suits.

BELLA. You have to have a suit, Harlan.

HARLAN. Someone else needs it more.

ETHAN. Harlan—

HARLAN. Take it.

ABETTA. Mr. Wilmot was just leaving.

HARLAN. Take it. You have to take it.

BELLA. Let's get you to bed.

HARLAN. I am not a child. Please, just take my suit. I can wear my pajamas.

ETHAN. Harlan, you've already been more than generous.

HARLAN. You can't leave without it. I won't let you.

ETHAN. Maybe there's something else you can do for the organization.

HARLAN. Why are you trying to make me go out there?

ETHAN. Someday you'll have to.

BELLA. Oh, Ethan, no. *(Harlan pounces on Ethan, knocking him to the ground and pinning him.)*

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ABETTA. Harlan.

ETHAN. It's ok, Abetta, I can handle this.

HARLAN. Tell me it's not true.

ETHAN. It's not true.

ABETTA. Harlan, get off of him.

HARLAN. And say you'll take the suit.

ETHAN. I'll take the suit.

HARLAN. And my blazer. *(Throughout the following exchange, Harlan disrobes down to his boxers, piling his clothes onto Ethan.)*

ABETTA. Bella, do something.

BELLA. Why don't you?

HARLAN. And my shirt. All of it.

ETHAN. I can't take any of this.

HARLAN. *(Begins tearing out handfuls of his hair and throwing them onto*

Ethan.) Please, Ethan. Please, let me help.

ETHAN. Ok.

HARLAN. Just let me help. Let me help. *(Harlan starts to become hysterical, falls off of Ethan, barely conscious.)*

BELLA. Come on, baby, let's get you to bed. *(Bella helps Harlan up, drapes his arm over her shoulder, she starts to take him out, stops and turns back to Abetta.)*

BELLA. What's it going to take, Abetta? If it's not this, what could it possibly take?

SCENE 3

The house is dark. The front door opens and Bella, Harlan, Ethan, and Abetta all enter. Abetta frets over Ethan, who seems exhausted. Harlan casually drops his coat over a chair and proceeds toward the kitchen. Bella follows him, moon-eyed.

HARLAN. *(pausing at the door.)* Anyone need anything? A beer? Coffee? Ethan?

ETHAN. No thank you, Harlan. I just need to sit for a spell.

SANGUINE

BELLA. (*pushing Harlan into the kitchen.*) We'll be right back.

ABETTA. It was a wonderful party, Ethan.

ETHAN. Yes, indeed. I quite enjoyed myself.

ABETTA. You seem worn out.

ETHAN. The price of a good time. I hope everyone went home so worn out.

ABETTA. I'm sure they did.

ETHAN. Except Harlan.

ABETTA. You know him.

ETHAN. I haven't known him to be like that in a while. Years. He's a new man.

ABETTA. It is something. But let's leave Harlan to Bella. It really was a wonderful event.

ETHAN. Thank you, Abetta. (*Rubs his head.*) Not to be too pleased with myself, but we did some real good tonight. Between donations and pledges, we may hit our six month goal in a few weeks.

ABETTA. I'm very proud of you, Ethan.

ETHAN. You've stopped calling me Mr. Wilmot.

ABETTA. Have I? I'm so sorry. My manners tend to slip a bit when I'm this tired.

ETHAN. (*holding her hand.*) I'm very glad of it, Abetta.

ABETTA. Ethan, you don't seem well.

ETHAN. As I said, I'm quite tired.

ABETTA. Please, Ethan. It's more than that.

ETHAN. I'm fine, I promise.

ABETTA. Don't do that. I've spent the better part of a year listening, waiting, trying to help you by being your friend.

ETHAN. And it's changed my life.

ABETTA. Then meet me halfway. I can't always just sit and soak up your pain like a sponge. Talk to me Ethan.

ETHAN. You're right. And there is something weighing on me. But I don't want to worry you.

ABETTA. I want you to. I want to worry with you, not for you.

ETHAN. I'm not worried. Just concerned. Is it warm in here?

ABETTA. You sure you don't want Harlan to bring you something? Some water, maybe?

SANGUINE

ETHAN. Yes, I'm sure.

ABETTA. So what is it?

ETHAN. I just wonder what kind of message it sends, for me to wear this nice suit. I mean, shouldn't it start with me? How can I keep this when someone else needs it more?

ABETTA. Ethan.

ETHAN. I know. It's insane.

ABETTA. It's not. It's a good question and it shows how seriously you take this. But caring for others and caring for yourself are not mutually exclusive.

ETHAN. No, I suppose you're right. After all, there's not a finite number of suits in the world.

ABETTA. No there's not.

ETHAN. Of course that number can't be infinite either, can it?

(Harlan enters with a tray for tea service.)

HARLAN. I said beer. Bella said best not to open that seal. I said coffee. Bella said I was already plenty wound up. Bella said tea. I said, "what is it with you and tea? Did you have this whole argument just to get to tea?" But here it is. Tea for everyone. Abetta, could you move mother over a bit. *(Abetta moves the urn a bit. Harlan sets down the tray.)*

ETHAN. I think I'll pass on the tea, Harlan.

HARLAN. Are you sure I can't get you something?

ETHAN. You know, a glass of water might actually be nice if it's not too much trouble.

HARLAN. Of course not. *(Shouting off toward kitchen.)* Bella.

BELLA. *(off)* Yes?

HARLAN. Would you mind bringing Ethan a glass of water when you come in?

BELLA. *(off)* Why don't you come get it?

HARLAN. *(smiling, to Ethan)* Did they do this to you, Ethan? You start to convalescing and they lose all sympathy.

ETHAN. I don't mean to be any trouble.

HARLAN. Oh I'm just kidding. I'm more than happy to go get you a glass of water. *(Harlan leaves. Ethan rubs his forehead again.)*

ABETTA. Are you sure you're alright?

SANGUINE

ETHAN. Feeling drained, that's all. And Harlan's so improved. It's almost like he's siphoning off my energy.

ABETTA. That's ridiculous. Are we vampires as well as witches now? I thought you of all people would be above all those nasty rumors.

ETHAN. I wasn't being serious, Abetta.

ABETTA. It's a sensitive subject.

ETHAN. I didn't mean to be insensitive.

ABETTA. I'm sorry, Mr. Wilmot, I know you weren't, it's just-

ETHAN. Oh.

ABETTA. Oh?

ETHAN. You called me Mr. Wilmot. *(Harlan and Bella re-enter, Harlan carrying a glass of water that he hands to Ethan.)*

HARLAN. There you go. *(They all sit.)*

BELLA. It really was a marvelous event, Ethan.

ETHAN. Thank you. I-

HARLAN. And it's an amazing cause.

ETHAN. It means a great deal to me. *(Over the course of his speech, Harlan makes himself a cup of tea, absentmindedly pouring in milk. Then he takes the top off of the urn instead of the sugar bowl and stirs in some of the ashes. The others are too shocked and horrified to stop his momentum as he continues to talk and takes a few sips from the ash-tea.)*

HARLAN. Think about it. Giving people clothes, not just to make their lives better, but to make them better people, better members of society. To challenge them to be better. To make them happier, yes, but not because their happiness is an end. To make them happier because it makes everyone happier. I mean that's the root of all the world's evils, right? Unhappiness? I'm unhappy because I'm poor. So I steal. I'm unhappy because I'm rich, so I screw everyone else over. I'm unhappy because my wife cheated on me, so I kill her. But our good friend Ethan has found a way to fix a little unhappiness, to give people an opportunity to leave it behind, if they'll take it. Not all the unhappiness, of course, but a bit. Then again, how could you ever get rid of it all at once, even for just one person? Unless you just got

SANGUINE

rid of the person altogether. But you can't do that. Right? *(Harlan starts to take another sip. Bella puts her hand over the cup.)*

BELLA. You're drinking your mother. *(Harlan is silent and still. A tense moment. Then Harlan begins to laugh.)*

ABETTA. She's not joking, Harlan.

HARLAN. *(struggling to compose himself)* No, I know. I know. It's just, what a funny thing to say. It's a very odd string of words you don't often hear put together like that. You drank your mother.

ETHAN. Are you well?

HARLAN. Better than ever. I feel I have the strength of a grown man plus a dead woman. *(Harlan laughs at his joke.)*

BELLA. Harlan

HARLAN. Oh everyone stop being so serious. It's an unusual situation, but we can either fret about it, which won't undo it, or laugh about it. And what's the big deal anyway? It didn't even ruin the tea. Mother is surprisingly sweet. *(Harlan takes another sip and laughs, the others awkwardly join in.)*

ETHAN. I feel perhaps it's time for me to head home.

HARLAN. Oh, I've made our guest uncomfortable.

ETHAN. Not at all, Harlan. I just have a headache and a creeping fatigue.

HARLAN. You should be celebrating your tremendous accomplishment, not dealing with me being an ass.

ETHAN. I am celebrating, I assure you. Only I'm about celebrated out.

HARLAN. But it's so early.

ABETTA. Harlan, if Mr. Wilmot is tired, we should let him go on home.

HARLAN. I'm sorry. I ruined the mood. I shouldn't have assumed everyone would find my drinking mother as funny as I did.

ETHAN. I promise, it's not that.

BELLA. And besides, I think we can all admit that it was just a little funny.

ETHAN. I suppose so.

HARLAN. Let me walk you home, at least.

SANGUINE

ETHAN. That's really not necessary, Harlan. It's just around the corner.

BELLA. Really, Harlan. Don't you think Abetta could handle that better, anyway?

HARLAN. No, I insist. I have some questions for Ethan about the foundation, too.

ETHAN. Questions?

HARLAN. More like ideas, really. Come on. Let's get you home.

ETHAN. Well, alright. Yes. I'd like to go home.

HARLAN. Excellent.

ETHAN. Bella, Abetta, thank you for the hospitality.

ABETTA. Of course.

BELLA. It was our pleasure, Ethan. And don't let Harlan bother you too much on the way home.

HARLAN. Come on, Ethan, let's go before she comes along to keep an eye on me. *(Harlan pushes Ethan toward the door. Ethan stops and turns around.)*

ETHAN. Abetta.

ABETTA. Yes, Ethan.

ETHAN. I just wanted to say, again, thank you. I never could have done this without your friendship and encouragement.

ABETTA. Of course you could have. You're a remarkable man. If I helped out in any way, it was only reminding you of that.

ETHAN. Maybe that's what it took.

HARLAN. *(pulling Ethan out)* So the clothes are a great start, but I was thinking we could- *(Harlan and Ethan leave. Bella follows them to the door and closes it.)*

BELLA. I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I tried my best to get you two alone on that walk.

ABETTA. Did Ethan seem ok to you?

BELLA. Ethan? He was fine. Just exhausted. And rightly so, I'd say.

ABETTA. He really did work hard, didn't he?

BELLA. I'm not surprised. You've had a great influence on him. On both of them.

ABETTA. I'm not so sure.

SANGUINE

BELLA. Would you stop it with the humility? I thought we could be open about this now.

ABETTA. I don't mean Ethan.

BELLA. Then what do you mean?

ABETTA. Don't you think Harlan was acting a bit strange?

BELLA. No. I think Harlan has been acting increasingly strange for the better part of a decade. I think tonight, for once, he was acting perfectly normal.

ABETTA. Thinking that business with mother was funny is not perfectly normal.

BELLA. Who says? It is just ashes, after all.

ABETTA. Bella.

BELLA. So maybe it wasn't funny in the moment. But it will be. When we tell that story down the line it will be hilarious. Harlan's just ahead of the curve.

ABETTA. I'm being serious. I'm concerned. He's healed so fast. Too fast.

BELLA. If this is more of that curse nonsense I won't hear it.

ABETTA. He scares me, Bella. When I bleed him it doesn't trickle out like with other folks. It comes pouring out in waves. It's like the elevators in that god-awful movie with Shelly Duvall.

BELLA. You think of *The Shining* as "that movie with Shelly Duvall?"

ABETTA. That's not the point.

BELLA. And what is the point, exactly? That you're concerned he's gotten well?

ABETTA. Yes, with how quickly he's gotten well. And how rational and upbeat he's become.

BELLA. You're right, those are terrible qualities. He's deeply disturbed.

ABETTA. It doesn't take a disturbed person to get upset at consuming his own mother's ashes. In fact, I'd wager it takes a very particular kind of disturbed person not to.

BELLA. He is not disturbed. My husband, for once, is not disturbed.

ABETTA. Bella, I'm going to stop.

BELLA. Like hell you are.

SANGUINE

ABETTA. I'm going to stop bleeding Harlan.

BELLA. You do and I'll bleed you. And not in some hocus pocus way, in the good old-fashioned way of opening up veins. *(Abetta is shocked, on the verge of tears. Bella holds her hand.)*

BELLA. I'm so sorry, Abetta. I'm so sorry. You know what I've been through with your brother. And the idea that he could be better, it's hard to let go of that. But I promise, he's fine. And we'll both keep an eye on him. We'll watch him. So he was a little too casual about the tea incident. He was. But that's not really such a big deal, is it? Compared to hiding his life away in this house, his bathrobe growing to his skin like a crusty shell, his eyes burning out and disappearing into his beard. It's better, Abetta. Not perfect, but better. So he drank his mother's ashes and laughed it off. At least he can be among people.

ABETTA. It has been nice to see the old, happy Harlan.

BELLA. Then don't do it for me, or for Harlan. Do it for you. Have your brother back. Not to mention he gets along much better with Ethan than he did before.

ABETTA. He does.

BELLA. So you'll keep it going?

ABETTA. You promise you'll help me watch him? In case it goes too far on either side?

BELLA. The last thing I want is for Harlan to be unbalanced again.

ABETTA. So we'll be careful.

BELLA. Of course we will, Abetta. Of course we will. Now come on, help me clean up. Hey. I promise. He'll be fine. *(Abetta and Bella hug, then they grab the tray and cups and take them into the kitchen. After a minute or two, Harlan enters the living room. His face, hands, and shirt are covered in blood. He's smiling and whistling to himself.)*

BELLA. *(off)* That you, baby?

HARLAN. Sure is.

ABETTA. *(off)* Mr. Wilmot get home ok?

HARLAN. Ethan's fine. Great, actually. I think I'm going to follow his example. Try to find a way to help out the downtrodden. Pate 47

SANGUINE

BELLA. *(off)* How about helping your downtrodden wife and sister in the kitchen?

HARLAN. I imagine you two have it covered. I'm just going to shower. I feel like I've been baptized anew, and I'd like to get under some water.

BELLA. *(off, laughing)* Ok, you weirdo. Go get changed. I'll be up in a minute. *(Harlan exits. Abetta pokes her head onstage.)*

ABETTA. Harlan? *(Blackout.)*

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