



# **Olive and the Bitter Herbs**

a play by Charles Busch

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Characters

Olive

Wendy

Trey

Robert

Sylvan

December 20, 2010

## OLIVE AND THE BITTER HERBS

### PROLOGUE

Olive's apartment living room in the East Thirties in Manhattan. There is a large decorative mirror hanging above the sofa and another mirror hanging on the wall that leads to the bedroom. A small dining room table is downstage. Two in the morning. The room is dark except for the street lights coming in through the windows.

Olive, a woman in her seventies, enters from the bedroom in her night gown. She crosses the living room and exits into the kitchen. We see the spill from the kitchen light and hear her opening a cabinet. The kitchen light goes off. Olive leaves the kitchen holding a box of Ritz crackers. As she returns to her bedroom, her eyes meet her reflection in the mirror near her bedroom door. Something attracts her attention. She squints not sure of what she's seeing. She looks closer. She then turns around and looks in the mirror above the sofa. She's looking for something and it's disturbing her. It appears that what she sees in the mirror near her bedroom is reflected in the mirror above the sofa. She moves closer to the mirror searching for something beyond her reflection.

OLIVE

Don't go. Please, don't go. I'm not afraid.

BLACKOUT

## ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Four pm. Wendy, an energetic woman around fifty, is straightening the spread on the sofa. Olive enters, looking presentable in slacks and an attractive blouse.

OLIVE

I sent you next door to make their lives miserable, not invite them over.

WENDY

They seem like nice people. Cultivate them. What if you have an emergency in the middle of the night?

OLIVE

They're despicable human beings.

WENDY

You've never even spoken to them.

OLIVE

Wendy, you're not in this apartment twenty-four hours a day. You never hear them at their worst. These walls are wafer thin. The opera recordings. The entertaining till nine o'clock at night. The laughter. It's been like a Nazi persecution.

WENDY

We had a lovely chat just now and I found them to be utterly charming

OLIVE

You wouldn't find them so charming if the smell from their baked cheese was permeating *your* walls. They must subsist on a steady diet of eggplant parmigiana and potatoes gratin.

WENDY

You're not getting me riled up. You're making me salivate.

(Wendy gathers a pile of newspapers.)

OLIVE

Watch what you throw out. I haven't done the puzzle yet.

WENDY

I'm putting the papers in a nice neat pile. Just a little sprucing up.

OLIVE

They won't be here long enough to appreciate your sprucing.

WENDY

I thought things would improve when the woman upstairs moved out.

OLIVE

That was an unendurable torture. The stomping around at all hours.

WENDY

And it turned out she was a tiny dwarf.

OLIVE

That little person had thighs like Mike Tyson. I give up. In this building I'm dismissed as a chronic complainer, a crank. If I owned this apartment, and wasn't just a lowly renter, believe me, it would be a whole different ballgame. This morning I was getting the mail and I ran into the President of the co-op board, Carol Kandel. I was calmly telling her about my situation with the monsters next door and not only did I receive no compassion, she accused me of turning the Tenant's Association meetings into a forum for character assassination. I told her she was a pretentious, overly botoxed, ageist pig.

WENDY

You didn't.

OLIVE

She fancies herself an interior decorator. I told her what she's done to this lobby is a *shandeh*. A disgrace. This is an apartment house. Not a Tuscan villa. (*She winces in pain.*) Ow.

WENDY

What's wrong?

OLIVE

When I'm in a bad mood, I immediately feel it in my metatarsals.

WENDY

Olive, I made an appointment for you to see my podiatrist, Dr. Parvati Gupta-Kapoor. It's in your date book. Next Monday at one thirty. I'll go with you.

OLIVE

You and your doctors. I should just rent a permanent suite at Beth Israel. Before you leave, fix the cable box again. Off with your head if I miss NCIS.

(Wendy unconsciously rolls her eyes.)

OLIVE

Was that an eye roll? You're very testy today.

WENDY

I'm just tired. I was all morning with Doris Blau. Poor thing broke her shoulder. Oh, she's a wonderful actress.

OLIVE

She can't act.

WENDY

She won a Tony Award.

OLIVE

She stinks.

WENDY

You should give her a call. She'd appreciate it.

OLIVE

We no longer speak.

WENDY

You no longer speak to half the membership of Actors Equity. I've never known anyone with more feuds.

OLIVE

There's something in my body chemistry that provokes people to hurt me. The one time I attended the Cleo Awards, a total stranger came up to me on the red carpet and stole my wiglet. I've never picked a fight with anyone in my entire life.

(Wendy steps into the tiny kitchen barely off-stage. They continue their conversation.)

WENDY

You've never picked a fight?

OLIVE

Not in my entire life. Now how many times do you want me to repeat that?

WENDY

Not in your entire life have you ever instigated an argument?

OLIVE

Not in my entire life. That's three times I've said that now.

(Wendy reappears with a bottle of Windex and a piece of paper towel.)

WENDY

There's not a single person on the face of the earth who hasn't started a fight at some point.

OLIVE

I haven't but you're trying to start one right now.

WENDY

I'm just completely flummoxed by that outrageous statement.

(Wendy starts to spray Windex on one of the mirrors.)

OLIVE

Well, remain flummoxed. What the hell are you doing to that mirror?

WENDY

Giving it a breast reduction. What do you think I'm doing? I can hardly see my face.

OLIVE

Put that thing down.

WENDY

Didn't Carmen dust when she was here yesterday?

OLIVE

(with surprising ferocity)

Just leave the mirror alone. If I want it dusted, I'll dust it myself.

WENDY

You see your attitude? You're combative.

OLIVE

You're confusing anger with vocal color; a sign of good theatrical training. Now put the Windex away. I mean it!

WENDY

All right. The mirror shall remain as is. You know, Olive, I've always assumed you never had any formal acting lessons.

OLIVE

Well, you assumed wrong. I'm not just some hack who made her living doing commercials.

WENDY

Have *you* thought about teaching?

OLIVE

Teaching what?

WENDY

The Power of Positive Thinking. No, Acting. Hey, maybe you should teach a course in commercial acting. You were in one of the classic commercials of all time.

OLIVE

That's the most idiotic notion you've come up with yet.

WENDY

I just want to see you doing *something* before I go away.

OLIVE

Get the job first, then deal with me.

WENDY

I'm not trying to "deal" with you. I'm concerned.

OLIVE

I'm concerned that you're pinning all your hopes on this still somewhat nebulous opportunity in California.

WENDY

It could change my entire life.

OLIVE

I'm not so sure this is even the best job for you.

WENDY

Why not? I'm ready for an executive position. I've put in fifteen years as a Broadway company manager. Why am I not right for it?

OLIVE

You want my honest opinion? You're very adept at cleaning up other people's messes.

WENDY

What's that supposed to mean?

OLIVE

I'm saying you're extremely competent but I don't see you as an inspirational figure.

WENDY

SAG isn't hiring me to replace the Dalai Lama.

OLIVE

I'm not trying to disparage you, Wendy. Convince me. Pretend I'm your potential employer. You consider yourself a take charge kind of gal? You can cut through decades of red tape? You can negotiate with dominating personalities and bend them to your will?

WENDY

I-I- hold my own.



OLIVE

Really?

WENDY  
(diminished)

They can't expect miracles. And I'll only be involved in Health and Welfare. You think I'm overestimating my capabilities?

OLIVE

Your problem, darling, is you lack confidence. And confidence is what makes a leader. This position may not be a perfect fit.

WENDY

I think my people skills should serve me well.

OLIVE

Wendela love, then go to LA. Tour the movie star homes. Have a colonic. Go.

WENDY

I worry about you, Olive. I shouldn't. You're not my relative. You're not my responsibility. But I can't help getting involved.

(Wendy returns to the kitchen to put away the Windex.)

OLIVE

That says more about you than it says about me.

WENDY

I think it's important to share your life with others. I feel a genuine sense of failure that I've never known the joy of marriage.

(Wendy returns.)

WENDY

I turned down several proposals. They didn't feel right. A few years ago, my trainer at the gym wanted very much to engage me in a Sapphic relationship. I'm not inclined that way but maybe I was wrong not to encourage it. She was bossy but very tender.

OLIVE

We're all alone, kid. Don't fight it.

WENDY

I fight it by keeping busy. *(She points to a small notebook on the credenza.)* I filled up that notebook with wonderful suggestions. I bet you've never even opened it. Number five was certainly worth consideration. People tell me you used to be very involved in local politics.

OLIVE

Never again. Within ten years, I was given the royal boot by the Martin Luther King Jr. Democratic Club, Democratic Socialists of America and the League of Character Actresses in Pursuit of Change. The only change I believe in now are four quarters to a dollar.

WENDY

Olive, human beings *are* capable of change. It's essential. When people are static they deteriorate. Now, you've had a series of minor strokes --.

OLIVE

Hold on a minute, sister. I had two and they weren't strokes. They were episodes. That's what the neurologist called them. If they were strokes he would have called them strokes.

WENDY

Okay. Episodes. And thank God, you're doing marvelously. But taking a Coumadin blood thinner isn't enough. You need to pull yourself out of the mire. Get out of this apartment. Embrace life.

OLIVE

Enough all ready! I'm not helping anyone's cockamamie campaign for city council, I'm not gonna teach and I'm not sticking my ass in the air taking yoga for seniors.

(The door bell rings.)

OLIVE

SHUT UP!

WENDY

What do you want me to do?

OLIVE

Let them in if you want. I could care less.

(Wendy opens the door.)

WENDY

Hello! It's been a lifetime! Fifteen minutes! Come in.

(Robert and Trey enter. Robert is a charming, attractive man in his mid-sixties and Trey, a sour pickle, is ten years younger. Olive becomes distracted by something she sees in the mirror.)

ROBERT

Such a different lay-out than ours.

TREY

This is what our place would look like if we did nothing to it.

WENDY

I know you've seen each other in the hall but I'd like to officially introduce you to Olive.

ROBERT

I'm Robert and this is Trey.

(Olive is still pre-occupied with the reflection in the mirror.)

WENDY

Olive, this is Robert and Trey?

ROBERT

Hello?

TREY

Is she all right?

OLIVE

(returning to them)

Yes, she's all right. You're Robert and Trey. I got it.

WENDY

You seemed distracted by something.

OLIVE

So now we're supposed to be all warm and runny like cheddar cheese, your favorite; the smell of which consistently permeates my wall.

ROBERT

We are making an effort.

WENDY

My God, I feel like I've brokered a truce in the Mid East. How long have you guys lived in the building?

ROBERT

We've *lived* in the building for twelve years --.

OLIVE

What nonsense is that? Irma Sonkin lived next door to me for three decades until her death a year ago.

TREY

If you'd let Robert finish, you would have heard that we've lived on the other side of the building for twelve years but six months ago we moved to this line. A decision we've bitterly rued.

WENDY

Why'd you move? I don't mean to pry.

ROBERT

We had a two bedroom, but we really didn't need the extra room. Since I've retired as an editor and Trey hasn't been working, we've had to tighten our belts.

TREY

Excuse me. You weren't just "an editor." His modesty is nearly pathological. Robert Brannigan's perhaps the most influential editor of children's books, ages four to six, in the history of publishing.

ROBERT

Thank you, but that doesn't pertain to why we sold the apartment.

TREY

It pertains to why I'm currently deemed unemployable as an illustrator. Robert and I were considered very much a team. You probably don't know anything about children's literature but we did the Purple Tugboat series.

WENDY

Yes, I do know those books. You drew those pictures? My nephew was obsessed with Florence, the purple tugboat. Olive, the tug boat had this adorable face. The windows were her eyes and her nose was the propeller.

OLIVE

I'm not one for gentle whimsy.

TREY

When Robert retired, the perception in the industry was that I'd also left the business. It's really ugly out there. Children's literature, like the planet Earth, is rapidly headed for obliteration.

ROBERT

This one makes it sound so grim, but we're having a wonderful retirement. Trey is the most delightful of companions. We could have moved but we love this neighborhood. I've always felt that there's a beautiful mystery to it.

OLIVE

Kips Bay? It's not uptown, downtown or midtown. It's no man's land. There's no charm or local color. We have a great abundance of dry cleaners.

ROBERT

Do you know there is an Icelandic coffee bar only a few blocks from here? They serve absolutely authentic Icelandic crullers.

WENDY  
(with true enthusiasm)

How could I have missed that?

ROBERT  
And I love this building. I was very involved in the lobby renovation. We're now living in a Tuscan villa.

TREY  
I painted the trompe l'oeil grapes over the intercom.

ROBERT  
Do you own this apartment?

OLIVE  
I'm the last surviving of the rent controlled tenants. And I ain't going anywhere.

ROBERT  
Were you friends with Mrs. Sonkin?

OLIVE  
Not friends. She was an extremely disagreeable woman. I was, however, the one who discovered the body.

WENDY  
Really? I didn't know that.

OLIVE  
She's putting on an act for you. She's heard this story a million times. No one had seen Mrs. Sonkin for quite awhile and then gradually a terrible rotting stench began permeating my wall. Almost as bad as what I've experienced with you. It took two weeks of complaining before the super got around to unlocking her door and we found Mrs. Sonkin. She was propped up in bed, her eyes wide open. She had been dead for over a month and was in an advanced state of decomposition. There were flies and mosquitoes swarming all over the bed and around the corpse.

TREY  
Thank you. We bought her bed from the estate.

ROBERT  
Well, I'm sorry our habitation has caused you such distress.

WENDY  
Hear what he's saying, Olive?

TREY

Robert's not apologizing. He's merely stating that the walls in this building are practically made of tissue paper. Consequently, we haven't appreciated each time you've taken your HAMMER and banged on the wall.

OLIVE

It wasn't a hammer. It was the end of my plastic swiffer.

TREY

Whatever implement you employed, Missy, it was both violent and unnecessary. Last month, Robert was horribly sick. It was probably undiagnosed swine flu. He couldn't get out of bed. You should know that only a few years ago he had major heart surgery.

ROBERT

Trey, please.

TREY

The man was on the operating table for seven hours.

ROBERT

You're embarrassing me.

TREY

He's got a zipper scar down his chest like the front of a Dolce and Gabbana knit. So I put on a recording of Debussy's "La Mer" to help him relax and within five minutes, yes, five minutes, you were banging on the wall, and not with a swiffer, but a mallet. The force of which, knocked over and smashed one of Robert's precious porcelain balloon lady figurines. I'd say that was uncalled for.

WENDY

This has really gone too far.

OLIVE

There's something wrong with you. Borderline personality, bipolar, Tourettes. I'm on the look out for a facial tic.

ROBERT

There's nothing wrong with him.

OLIVE

Whatever the ultimate diagnosis, I'm taking the high road and offering you something to drink.

ROBERT

I wouldn't object to a glass of water.

TREY

Robert, don't. The elderly aren't great at rinsing out their glasses. You can practically see the E Coli prancing.

OLIVE

You and I are about the same age, aren't we?

TREY

No. I'm fifty-five.

OLIVE

With those jowls?

ROBERT

Wendy says you're an actress. I love the theatre. I've probably seen you in a million things.

OLIVE

I don't work in the theatre any more.

WENDY

Olive was the queen of commercials in the eighties and nineties.

TREY

Jesus, you're the "Gimme me the sausage" lady.

WENDY

I loved those commercials. The close-ups of your face. The perpetual sneer.

ROBERT

Those commercials were classics.

OLIVE

A silly tag line. Besides which, my agent negotiated a buy out. I got totally screwed.

ROBERT

Do you have any commercials currently running?

OLIVE

I had a national spot for a vaginal cream for seniors. It was yanked off the air by the Conservative Right. Ironic considering how often Republican men have contributed to vaginal dryness. Anyway, I've done other things besides commercials.

WENDY

Just a few weeks ago, she shot an episode of Manhattan Coroner.

ROBERT

What do you play? Is it a fun part?

OLIVE

A holocaust survivor. I'm playing older than my years.

WENDY

I was with her on the set and saw her scenes on the monitor. She's incredible.

ROBERT

When will it be on?

WENDY

Next week. I can hardly wait.

ROBERT

Well, we'll all have to watch it.

TREY

I gather you two have known each other a very long time. Decades?

WENDY

No. We only met like eight months ago. I'm a theatrical company manager. I handle payroll and contracts etcetera. I was working on a production of "The House of Bernardo Alba" in Montclair, New Jersey. It was connected to the College. Spanish Tragedy! University theatre! Montclair, New Jersey! You've gotta be kidding. Hello. I'M MISS BROADWAY! --

OLIVE

You're pushing, dear.

WENDY

Olive was playing the warm, understanding housekeeper.

OLIVE

The director was a Professor at the college who had no business directing a skit, let alone a tragedy by Lorca. I refused point blank to bend over the kettle.

TREY

What's so awful about that?

OLIVE

And fart.

WENDY

By mutual agreement Olive left the production before it opened.



OLIVE

That's it. No more theatre for me.

WENDY

We bonded on the bus back and forth to New Jersey. Not long after, Olive had two *very* minor episodes. Disorientation. Dizziness. Double Vision. Temporary loss of memory. Unsteady gait. She's fully recovered but I got in the habit of checking in on her.

OLIVE

In case I croak. She's got her eye on my new crock pot.

(Olive looks towards the mirror over the sofa. She thinks she sees something again.)

ROBERT

At first, I assumed you were relative. A niece or a cousin.

WENDY

As far as I know, Olive doesn't have any family. Olive, are you all right?

OLIVE

I thought I saw something in the mirror.

WENDY

Was it a bug? I keep telling her she needs screens.

OLIVE

It's nothing.

TREY

What did you see?

OLIVE

I can't explain it.

WENDY

Try.

OLIVE

When you look in this mirror, you can see the mirror on the opposite wall. And some times, I think I see someone in the mirror within the mirror.

WENDY

You see someone?

OLIVE

It's fleeting. I see this figure moving very quickly. Just a glimpse.

WENDY

You've never mentioned this before.

OLIVE

I don't want to be carted out of here in a straitjacket.

ROBERT

It might just be a floater. I get them some times.

OLIVE

It's a man. I've never seen his face. But he's got a long neck, a cowlick and protruding ears... And I think I love him.

BLACKOUT

## ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

Late afternoon. Wendy and Robert have gone. Olive and Trey are standing in front of the mirror. Trevor's glass of wine is on the coffee table.

TREY

I felt something as soon as I came in here today.

OLIVE

You felt something?

TREY

Something present in the room, both near and far away.

OLIVE

I really don't go in for any of that ethereal jazz. This is totally out of character for me.

TREY

I can see why you wouldn't want to discuss this in front of Wendy. She seems like a salt of the earth kind of gal. And forget about Robert. He won't even check out his horoscope. But I keep an open mind. That's why I came back after they were gone.

OLIVE

I wonder if I'd see him better if I moved that mirror slightly to the right.

TREY

One can't be literal-minded when dealing with the metaphysical.

OLIVE

His name is Howard.

TREY

You're on a first name basis?

OLIVE

I don't engage in conversation with him. I'm not a nutcase.

TREY

Then how do you know his name is Howard?

OLIVE

I just know.

TREY

Does he have a last name?

OLIVE

Only his first name came into my head.

TREY

Some people believe that spirits are energy given off in death. He's in the vapor.

OLIVE

He's in real estate. Verbalizing makes it sound so ludicrous.

TREY

I pass no judgment.

OLIVE

Details of his life float into my consciousness, like a magic eight ball.

TREY

I once knew a Howard. He died in a hot tub. Performed in drag on weekends.

OLIVE

My Howard is not a transvestite. Now let's forget about the mirror.

TREY

You wanna keep your ghost to yourself. Fine. I'm sure it wasn't him.

(Trevor sits down and continues drinking his wine.)

TREY

Besides, I met him a long time ago in Key West.

OLIVE

Howard lived in Key West.

TREY

How do you know?

OLIVE

I just know.

TREY

And you love him?

OLIVE

Disregard that previous statement. I shouldn't have said it.

TREY

Don't be embarrassed.

OLIVE

I've only seen him from the back. At first, I thought it might be my brother, Kippie. Of all my family I felt the least animosity from him. But it's not Kippie.

TREY

My mother was the only person who's ever loved me without reservations.

OLIVE

That's not saying much about your friend next door.

(He pours another drink.)

TREY

Robert's emotionally constipated. It manifests itself in this kind of perpetually happy, enthusiastic exterior.

OLIVE

I generally equate a cheerful demeanor with a lack of intelligence.

TREY

I could demand that we see a counselor. But the last thing I ever want to do is hurt Robert. Not everything needs to be expressed. Were you ever married?

OLIVE

Uh huh.

TREY

Widowed? Divorced?

OLIVE

Not everything needs to be expressed.

TREY

Forget I asked.

OLIVE

Divorced. For over thirty years. Curiosity satisfied?

TREY

Are you friendly with your ex?

OLIVE

No. He married the woman with whom he betrayed me. My husband had a music store in Yonkers. We built up the business together. I was the book keeper. Later, I encouraged him to open a music school in the storage room. Among his faculty was a lonely widow, who specialized in woodwind instruments. I'll say no more

TREY

Well, I doubt Robert has fooled around. He's not highly sexed like I am.

OLIVE

How nice for you. What if I moved that mirror two feet to the right?

TREY

It won't change the angle of your view, if that's what you're hoping. The challenge has been with both of us home all the time. Robert's been trying to persuade me to do some volunteer work. Maybe I should.

OLIVE

I'd think twice.

TREY

They say it's good to get out of yourself.

OLIVE

Wanna be at the top of the sucker list? Don't let me stop you.

TREY

You don't know what you're talking about.

OLIVE

Oh, really? For your information, I was co-founder of an organization providing services for homeless, crack addicted single moms. I sacrificed everything for those women, even gave up a recurring role on *Guiding Light*. When the organization expanded, I was pushed out. Kicked to the curb. And not one of those women stood up for me. Don't tell me about serving the community. The community can go shove it.

TREY

Robert's been encouraging me to teach a drawing class. That might be interesting.

OLIVE

In theory.

TREY

What do you mean "in theory?"

OLIVE

Unless you're on the faculty of a first rate school, you'll end up with a class full of losers.

TREY

If there's only one student with a spark, it's worth the effort.

OLIVE  
(dismissively)

Mr. Chips.

TREY

It's good to give back.

OLIVE

And what have you gotten out of life that you need to give back? That's a silly cliché. Look at you. I've never seen anyone more miserable. Wendy's been putting the screws on me to teach a commercial acting class. I'd rather clean urinals in Afghanistan.

TREY

Yeah, most things end up in bitter disappointment.

(Trey rises and looks in the mirror again.)

TREY

It might be for the best that you can't see Howard's face. At some point, I developed these awful creases that make me look like I'm smelling something rotten. Not so bad today. Is it the lighting in here? People used to tell me I had a lovely smile. (He *smiles in the mirror and then greets his reflection.*) Hello. Anyone home? Howard? You there?

(The doorbell rings.)

OLIVE

Get away from that mirror. This could be the super.

TREY

Why do you need the super?

OLIVE

I can't even remember anymore. There are so many things wrong with this apartment and I'm always ignored. Every foot of this joint is Gerry-rigged.

(She opens the door. It's a dignified man in his seventies, SYLVAN GUZICK.)

SYLVAN

Mrs. Fisher?

OLIVE

You're not the super.

SYLVAN

No, I'm not the super. Sylvan Guzick. My daughter is the board President, Carol Kandel.

OLIVE

She sent her father? She can't face me herself?

SYLVAN

Are you gonna make me stand in the hall like a Fuller Brush Man?

OLIVE

I'm not sure how I want to handle this situation.

SYLVAN

It's not a situation. Look. I'm gonna come in. (*He enters the apartment. He sees Trey.*)

Hello. Sylvan Guzick.

TREY

(trying out his new "old" smile)

Hello. Trey Chamblay. I live next door.

SYLVAN

Mrs. Fisher, I understand this morning you had a contretemps with my daughter.

OLIVE

Is that what she called it?

SYLVAN

She used stronger language. That's why I'm here. To apologize for her behavior.

OLIVE

Well, this is a first.

TREY

Would you like to sit down?

SYLVAN

Thank you. (*He sits in the easy chair.*) I won't waste too much of your time. I don't live here. I'm just visiting from Florida. I love my daughter, Carol. She's a wonderful girl, but she can be tough. She takes her role as board President very seriously.

OLIVE

She's struts around like Boss Tweed. I feel like a guttersnipe at Buckingham Palace.

SYLVAN

I know. She can be very persnickety about her living quarters. She gets it from her mother; a remarkable woman, but not liked by many.

TREY

Your wife passed?



SYLVAN

Carol's mother died years ago. However, it's been just over a year since I lost my last wife; likewise an extraordinary woman and also a handful.

OLIVE

Your last wife? How many wives have you had?

SYLVAN

I've been married and widowed three times.

TREY

That's terrible.

OLIVE

I don't mean to be offensive, but there's something a little creepy about it.

SYLVAN

I'm not a serial killer. I've lost two wives to cancer and one to heart disease. I loved each of them dearly, and I suppose all could be deemed volatile. My life today is peaceful to be sure, but I frankly miss the sturm and drang.

TREY

You think you'll marry again?

SYLVAN

I dislike being alone. I went straight from my mother's home into the army and I married my first wife while I was in the service.

OLIVE

Well, don't come sniffing around here. I've no intention of becoming Bluebeard's fourth wife.

SYLVAN

(laughs)

I'll take due note. So what was the *fracas* this morning between you and Carol?

OLIVE

I was simply relating to your daughter the untenable situation I'm in with my horrible next door neighbors and not only did I receive no sympathy, she was downright abusive.

SYLVAN

(to Trey)

You live on this floor. Is it dreadful for you too?

TREY

I'm the horrible neighbor.

OLIVE

Trey and I are engaged in a civilized conversation. I'm not the harridan your daughter and the rest of this building paint me as.

TREY

We're calmly discussing the ghost in Olive's mirror.

SYLVAN

You have a ghost?

OLIVE

Damn it, Trey! No, I do not have a ghost. I don't know what the hell he's talking about.

TREY

I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood you. But now that we're on the subject, since Jews don't believe in Heaven, can they believe in ghosts?

SYLVAN

That's a question fit for a rabbi, not a retired lingerie manufacturer.

TREY

Olive? Thoughts?

OLIVE

You presume I'm Jewish?

TREY

You're not?

OLIVE

I come off pushy and aggressive?

TREY

No.

OLIVE

Because I detect a subtle tinge of anti-Semitism.

SYLVAN

It was an innocent remark.

OLIVE

Open to interpretation.

TREY

I will not be accused of being prejudiced.

OLIVE

Fisher isn't necessarily a Jewish name.

TREY

I know. So Fisher's your maiden name?

OLIVE

No. I retained my husband's name after the divorce.

TREY

What's your maiden name?

OLIVE

Blechman. Olive Blechman.

SYLVAN

That's not Jewish?

OLIVE

This topic is terminated.

TREY

When I was growing up in Indiana, I was best friends with the one Jewish kid in my class. We were the town misfits. The cocksucker and the hebe. I loved having Passover at the Rabkins. It was so theatrical. The symbolic dishes. Reading the Haggadah. You know, Passover is coming up this week. Are you gonna do anything?

OLIVE

I haven't observed Passover in years.

SYLVAN

My daughter has a very grand Seder. Catered, rehearsed and with a theme. I'm not looking forward to it.

TREY

Should we have a Seder?

OLIVE

You've gotta be kidding. You've got to make a brisket. It's an enormous undertaking.

TREY

Forget it.

SYLVAN

You kids give up easily. You preheat your oven to 350. Salt and pepper the meat, place it in a roasting pan, throw in onions, carrots and beef broth and let it sit for a couple of hours. How difficult can it be?

OLIVE

It's the whole thing. I detest holidays of any kind.

TREY

It's nice giving and receiving presents. When I was working, I must say I enjoyed the tradition of the Secret Santa.

SYLVAN

Oh, the Secret Santa. I forgot all about that. I used to enjoy that too.

OLIVE

What kind of sick people are you? The last time I participated in that disgusting ritual was when I was doing an Odets play in Indianapolis five years ago. For the first time in my career, I felt a genuine sense of family with this company. After the final matinee before Christmas, the whole cast and crew gathered in the green room and we exchanged our ten dollar presents. People were getting really nice things; a jar of gourmet roasted peppers, an expensive fashion magazine. I gave the ingénue a lovely box of note cards. My secret Santa was the young man running the lights. I pull off the ribbon, tear off the pretty wrapping paper, open the box, remove the colorful tissue paper, and what do I find but a small, dried dog turd. A canine bowel movement scooped up off the street. He thought it was funny. The girl playing my daughter doubled over with laughter. The actor playing my son was holding his ribs, he was guffawing so hard. The entire cast, the stage manager, the dressers, the prop crew. All heaving with laughter. (*Olive's tough exterior crumbles. She begins to cry.*) I never spoke another word to anyone associated with the production for the rest of the run. So much for Secret Santa. So much for the holiday spirit. So much for stinking humanity.

TREY

Wow. You're Sweeney Todd.

SYLVAN  
(dazzled)

You're wonderful.

(Olive sees something moving in the mirror within the mirror. She appears to be receiving a message. Is Howard somehow suggesting she have a Passover Seder?)

TREY

The staff in this building might as well be actors, the way they pretend to be helpful the week before Christmas so you'll add another twenty to their envelope. Hey, Sunshine, how much did you tip the super and doormen this past Christmas?

OLIVE

I'll do Passover.

SYLVAN

Is that an invitation?

OLIVE  
(perplexed)

Yeah.... I guess it is.

END OF SCENE

## ACT ONE SCENE THREE

A few nights later. In the middle of the room is a linen covered card table with five chairs. Robert is setting the table, and speaking to Olive, who's in the kitchen.

ROBERT

Well, I must say, I'm in the mood for a celebration. I had a lovely day. I had my usual six month check up with the cardiologist and passed with flying colors. And I discovered the most fascinating little shop that only sells antique irons. I had no idea there were so many models and all dated within five years of my birth. Olive, can you believe at my advanced age, I've never attended a Passover Seder? When I was growing up, we barely had Christmas. I was raised by a grandmother who was a confirmed atheist. She had a gravy boat just like this. Do you know, in Philadelphia there's a wonderful shop that only sells gravy boats.

(Trey comes out of the bathroom.)

TREY

Honey, who were you talking to? The man in the mirror?

ROBERT

Olive kicked me out of the kitchen. I was still trying to converse with her.

TREY

She's an old woman. She can't hear you.

ROBERT

Shhhhh.

(Trey pulls Robert further away from the kitchen.)

TREY

(sotto voce)

You gotta check out the bathroom.

ROBERT

And why?

TREY

For starters, I don't think she's paid for one product. Under the sink there's an enormous box filled with miniature travel shampoos and conditioners and about a hundred tiny hotel bar soaps, some of which are so old, she could sell them on Ebay.

ROBERT

I imagine you opened the medicine cabinet.

.TREY

You think I'd be that uncouth?

ROBERT

What did you find?

TREY

I gagged at the sight of two decaying black widow spiders. They were, upon closer inspection, a pair of glue encrusted false eyelashes. She must have worn 'em first to the premiere of *Birth of a Nation*.

ROBERT

She's on a fixed income.

TREY

I don't care what she says. She made a mint from all those commercials.

ROBERT

Not necessarily. You don't know what kind of deal she got.

TREY

Oh, you're just too good to be true.

ROBERT

What did I do? What did I say?

TREY

I don't want to get into this with you. What's the point?

ROBERT

Get into what? Olive Fisher's money market account?

TREY

This OCD habit of seeing both sides to everything.

ROBERT

That's bad?

TREY

In life, Robert, some things are great and some things are shit. They just are. With you, everything is "Well...maybe the salesman had a fight with his boyfriend. Well...perhaps there was a fire in the kitchen. Well ... she didn't mean to let her kid run over you with his scooter." When I get into an altercation with a salesperson or a waiter or a neighbor, I demand one hundred per cent sympathy from my partner. Okay? I'm not looking for an objective analysis of the situation.

ROBERT

But you get into these altercations every day.

TREY

Oh, so you're saying I have rage issues? That I create these situations? That it's all in my head? That I'm insane?

(Trey accidentally catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and instinctively smiles and greets his reflection as if he were an old friend.)

TREY

Hello.

ROBERT

Trey, do you see the man in the mirror?

TREY

No, I see me.

(Olive enters carrying a few small dishes.)

OLIVE

What are you boys gabbing about?

TREY

I was commenting that one would never guess this was the apartment of an actress.

OLIVE

I should have a velvet divan and a spot lit portrait of myself?

TREY

I meant, it's an apartment of a woman of many interests.

OLIVE

It's the apartment of a former book keeper from Yonkers. We should start dinner soon. Don't want the meat to get tough. I wonder if the jus (*pronounced: jew*) is reducing.

ROBERT

(innocently)

I can't imagine Mr. Guzick would find any of this fattening.

OLIVE

Not Mr. Guzick. The jus. The jus. The juices from the brisket. Speaking of which, what's keeping the Merry Widower? He should be here by now.



ROBERT

Trey said he was a charming fellow.

OLIVE

The jury is still out. Trey, would you help me set the small dishes?

TREY

Of course.

(He goes into the kitchen.)

ROBERT

What are these? Are they a holiday symbol of something wonderful?

OLIVE

The Haroset is a mixture of apples, nuts, wine and spices. It symbolizes the mortar the enslaved Jews made for the torturous building of the Pyramids. And the Zeroa is symbolic of the lamb slaughtered as a Passover sacrifice.

(Trey comes out with two more dishes.)

ROBERT

A hard boiled egg and a dish of parsley. Does this symbolize birth and renewal?

(Trey returns to the kitchen.)

OLIVE

The hard boiled egg is the food of mourning. The parsley is dipped in salt water to represent the misery and tears of the Jewish people.

(Trey comes out with two more dishes.)

ROBERT

This could be horse radish and this other one just looks like water. Isn't water usually a symbol of hope? And the horse radish certainly is a bright cheerful color.

OLIVE

The horse radish is the Maror, a bitter herb that symbolizes the agony of the enslaved Israelites. (*Sincerely and with no irony*) I forgot how much I enjoyed this holiday.

BLACKOUT

Lights up and Olive, Robert, Trey and Sylvan are in the living room area having drinks.

SYLVAN

I still don't understand. Did you kill the boy or not?

ROBERT

She probably signed a confidentiality clause not to reveal the plot.

OLIVE

I could care less. You're led to believe I bumped off the kid but the twist ending is that the boy's father did it. Okay. Now you don't have to watch.

SYLVAN

I wouldn't miss it for the world.

TREY

Not every day you see the "gimme the sausage" lady in a meaty role.

OLIVE

Very amusing. Anyway, enough about show business. I honestly can't remember the last time I had anyone over for dinner.

SYLVAN

Everything smells delicious.

TREY

Was your wife a good cook?

OLIVE

Which one?

TREY

Your most recent.

SYLVAN

The worst. It was a crime what that woman could do to a piece of liver. I sound disloyal, but she had a great sense of humor about it. We ate most of our meals out. It was a pleasure and a necessity.

OLIVE

In the early years of my marriage, I took my cooking very seriously. Every night a three course gourmet dinner for the shmuck.

TREY

Robert does most the cooking in our household.

ROBERT

But you're pretty good when you're in the mood.

TREY

I can make a Chicken Gallantine but don't ask for scrambled eggs.

ROBERT

Don't ask him for anything after he's had a few drinks. Even boiling water becomes an ordeal.

TREY

That wasn't nice.

ROBERT

It wasn't meant as criticism. I exaggerate. Trey knows where to draw the line.

TREY

When we met, I was barely out of my teens, and just to be sociable, I would nurse a sloe gin fizz for three hours. Robert *learned* me the pleasures of the extended cocktail hour.

ROBERT

As beautiful as he was, he was insecure about his lack of formal education. A few drinks helped him combat his shyness.

TREY

I came to New York straight out of high school. Was I ever a rube? Robert educated me on wines and food and music. Sent me to art school. I was his Eliza Doolittle. Of course, I had to endure plenty of digs from his sophisticated circle of friends. There were those I won't mention, who called me to my face "a gold digging syphilitic whore."

ROBERT

Who said that?

TREY

I don't want to ruin any of your long standing friendships.

ROBERT

Who would say something like that?

TREY

Darling, I'm not gonna tell you. But you went to college with him and he lives on East Fifty-Fourth Street. Believe me, I put up with a lot. The snubs. The humiliations. And even after a thirty year Caldecott Award winning career, I'm still dismissed in certain quarters as a beautiful but untalented whore.

SYLVAN

My friend, you suffer from low self esteem. Here's an exercise. Come up with one word that people would use to define you. One word.

TREY

Whore.

SYLVAN

This isn't working. Look. It's never too late to start anew. In fact, I decided today that I'm going back to school. I want to study computer photo shop. I've been fiddling around manipulating old family photographs. Giving them different colors and backgrounds. I want to learn more about it.

ROBERT

Trey does beautiful things on the computer. I'm sure he could give you some tips.

TREY

(focused on his drink)

Yeah. Any time.

OLIVE

Sylvan, you're not going back to school.

SYLVAN

What do you mean?

OLIVE

That's one of those ideas that come and go. And if do enroll, ten to one you end up dropping out.

SYLVAN

I don't think so. I'm the type that follows through.

OLIVE

Even so. How many photographs are you gonna retouch? Two or three? Then you lose interest and tossed away good money.

SYLVAN

I don't think so. I do a lot of crafts. Decoupage. Gluing shells on picture frames.

TREY

I used to do that.

OLIVE

You'll see I'm right. You'll regret it.

(Sylvan laughs heartily.)

OLIVE

What's so funny?

SYLVAN

You're just a little bully, aren't you? Olive, I toast you. I enjoy a provocateur or should I say, a provocateuse.

(Sylvan drinks in her honor. Olive, unsettled that she wasn't able to undermine his enthusiasm, decides to get things moving.)

OLIVE

It's time we start reading the Haggadah. Shall we go to the table?

(Olive, Trey and Robert move over to the table. Olive takes a match out of a box of kitchen matches and lights the candles.)

ROBERT

It's too bad Wendy can't be with us.

OLIVE

Just as well. The way she performs for the two of you, every time she opens her mouth, it's open mike night at the Gay and Lesbian Center.

TREY

I think she's fun.

OLIVE

She had some sort of dinner date. She'll join us for dessert. Before we begin, I just want to say, I'm glad you've risked entering the lions' den and are with me tonight for Pesach.

ROBERT

This is not only Passover but Armistice Day.

SYLVAN

L'chaim.

OLIVE

Was your daughter very upset you're not at her Seder?

SYLVAN

Not *that* upset. I would have appreciated a tear or two. As long as she enjoys herself.

TREY

Well, I'm really in the mood to read the entire Haggadah.

OLIVE

My angel, we'd be sitting here all night.

TREY

Yes, but it's beautiful.

OLIVE

It's endless.

SYLVAN

Olive has a point. I don't know any family, except the most orthodox, who read the entire thing.

TREY

Robert may never get another chance to hear it.

ROBERT

That's all right.

TREY

No, Robert, I want you to hear it.

OLIVE

Let's not get into a snit about this.

TREY

Who's in a snit?

OLIVE

We'll do the abbreviated Haggadah.

TREY

Babe, it's your party. *(Beat)* Howard told you to have the Seder. Didn't he?

ROBERT

Who's Howard?

OLIVE

Trey, you know how I am about Howard.

TREY

What's the big deal?

OLIVE

I'm in a pleasant mood. Don't wreck it. *(To Robert)* Howard is a friend. And I'm trying my best to be open to new friendships, despite their imperfections and petty cruelties.

*(She picks up her Seder book and they all follow suit.)*

OLIVE

Sylvan, do you read Hebrew?

SYLVAN

Some. You want me to read the opening blessing?

OLIVE

Please.

SYLVAN  
(reading)

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha'alam  
Asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu  
Ner shel Shabbat v'shel Yom Tov.

ALL

Amen.

(Olive picks up a piece of matzoh.)

ROBERT

We all get to read?

OLIVE

We go around the table, each taking turns reading a passage. .

ROBERT

Like a parlor game. I love it.

OLIVE

“This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat.” Blah, blah, blah, blah.

TREY

Ts, ts, ts, ts. What's with the blah, blah, blah?

OLIVE

It's just repetition. “This year we are here; next year in Jerusalem.” I was offered an Israeli tour of “Fiddler” playing Yente. For the money they were paying, I wouldn't go to Ogunquit let alone Jaifa. Blah, blah, blah, blah. “Next year we will be free people.” Enough with the Matzoh. The second cup of wine is poured. In this next part, a child asks the first of the four questions. Sylvan, you be the child.

SYLVAN

“What makes this night different from all nights?”

OLIVE

“On all nights we need not dip even once, on this night we do so twice.” Skip to the next big paragraph. Your turn, Robert.

ROBERT

(reading fast and with little inflection)

“We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord, our God, took us out from here with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. If the Holy one had not taken our fathers out of Egypt-

OLIVE

You have a bus to catch? I can't understand a thing you're saying.

TREY

Maybe you need to get your hearing checked.

OLIVE

Maybe you should stop being a wise ass and read the next passage.

ROBERT

I haven't finished.

OLIVE

We got the gist.

TREY

(reading in a very cultivated voice)

“It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarphon were reclining at a seder in B'nei Berak. They were discussing the exodus from Egypt all that night, until their students came and told them –

OLIVE

Don't read in that phony voice.

TREY

I'm not reading in a phony voice.

SYLVAN

I found it very effective.

OLIVE

He's reading like Joan Crawford. Just read it like a normal person.

TREY

“—until their students came and told them; “Our Masters! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema!”

OLIVE

Oh, come on. That's too much.



TREY

Do you see the exclamation point after “Shema”? An exclamation point indicates “with emphasis.”

OLIVE

Oh my, I didn’t realize I was dealing with a member of the Old Vic.

TREY

I didn’t realize you were now functioning as director.

ROBERT

Trey’s merely being enthusiastic.

OLIVE

He’s making a camp travesty of a holy ritual.

TREY

You’re the one making this Seder a travesty with your constant interruptions, editing and criticism.

OLIVE

Are you through?

TREY

Yes, I’m through.

OLIVE

Then I’m gonna read the second question. “When will this fucking night ever end?”

BLACKOUT

Lights up. They are eating the brisket in stony silence. The front door opens and Wendy arrives, breathlessly. She throws off her coat.

WENDY

I’m so sorry I’m late.

OLIVE

You said you were going to be late.

TREY

(pointedly)

Where ever you were, I hope *you* were having a good time.

WENDY

Hello. I’m Wendy. You must be Sylvan.

SYLVAN

You haven't arrived a moment too soon. Did you have a pleasant evening?

WENDY

I had dinner with this guy from LA. He's with the Screen Actors Guild and they're considering me for an important position with the union. P.S. He's gay. Bodes well.

ROBERT

You'd be moving to Los Angeles?

WENDY

If I get it. They'd want me to start immediately.

(It's clear by Olive's grim expression and silence, that's she's not too pleased about this.)

ROBERT

How do you feel about that?

WENDY

Excited. Tantalized. But the idea of starting all over in a strange city. Oh boy.

TREY

Good jobs are hard to come by. You're looking at a gentleman of enforced leisure.

ROBERT

This is one New Yorker who's no LA basher. I love the weather. The dry heat, then the way it cools down in the evening.

SYLVAN

I'm with you, pal. The palm trees. The smell of the Jacaranda. Olive, you spend much time in Los Angeles?

OLIVE

No. My work in television and film was mostly in New York. Pass the yams.

WENDY

I hope I didn't miss everything. I love Seders. This afternoon, I was actually reading the Passover service on my new kindle.

SYLVAN

Kindle. It sounds like one of Tevye's daughters.

WENDY

I've read several complete histories of the Jews. I say this without exaggeration; it is my great sorrow that I was not born a Jew. Tortured, scorned, exiled, exterminated. I have always felt the weight of their two thousand years of oppression.

OLIVE

What the hell have you been smoking?

WENDY

I'm just saying, I feel in my heart of hearts that I am a Jewess.

OLIVE

You were born a Catholic. Enjoy being a Catholic.

WENDY

I identify with the plight of the Jews. I always have. Ever since I was a kid and I saw the movie "The Ten Commandments." Over the years, I've put in many hours of volunteer work for Jewish charities.

OLIVE

So why haven't you converted?

WENDY

I'm not an electrical switch plate. I don't have to undergo some sort of conversion to feel what I feel.

SYLVAN

She enjoys lox and bagels. Don't call the police.

OLIVE

But it's ridiculous. If it means so much to you to be a Jew, you take the courses at the Shul and you become officially Jewish.

WENDY

Why are you making such a big deal over this?

OLIVE

Because it's silly. And even a tad offensive.

TREY

If she wants to be a Jew, for Christ's sake, let her be a Jew.

ROBERT

Our Little Purple Tugboat series touched on this issue. Flo was ridiculed and ostracized by the other skiffs, sailboats and yachts in the harbor. And yet when push came to shove, that little tugboat, with her purple paint peeling, and her two big windows splashed with rain, had the strength and courage to pull a large ship into port during a horrendous storm.

OLIVE

What madness are you jabbering about?

ROBERT

I'm talking about compassion and tolerance.

TREY

All peoples should be respected.

OLIVE

That's a dumb thing to say.

ROBERT

Don't call him dumb.

OLIVE

The conversation around this table is crazy talk.

TREY

What was so crazy about what I said? All people deserve respect? That's such a dumb thing to say?

OLIVE

Not all people deserve respect. Bigots, Mormons with multiple wives, child abusers. None of them deserve my respect.

TREY

I meant Jews, Gentiles...the Cherokee. I personally represent several minorities that are unfairly prosecu---persecuted.

OLIVE

Seriously, I'd like to know what persecuted minority other than gay you represent.

TREY

(slurring his words)

Let's just say, it's not easy living in New York City if you don't tow the official political party line.

SYLVAN

(whispering to Robert)

He shouldn't drink any more.

ROBERT

It's all right.

OLIVE

The party line? What party line?

TREY

If you're not Miss Liberal Democrat, forget it.

OLIVE

Next you're gonna tell me you're a Republican. That would be the perfect capper to this rotten evening.

ROBERT

Trey's family is very conservative.

OLIVE

Trey, did you vote Republican in the last Presidential election?

TREY

Once you pull the curtain closed, it's a private ... thing.

WENDY

Shall we read about the ten plagues?

SYLVAN

What page, dear?

OLIVE

Well, who did you vote for?

TREY

That's a complicated question.

OLIVE

I'd say it's a very simple question.

ROBERT

Trey doesn't have to answer anything.

WENDY  
(reading)

"It is said that the Holy One set against the Egyptians his full anger, fury --."

OLIVE

Wendy, cool it. This is my table and I want to know how you voted in the last election?

TREY

I'm a fiscal Republican. I have strong concerns about the financial security of this country.

OLIVE

Are you one of those log cabin lunatics?

ROBERT

Hey, come on. Stop it now.

OLIVE

No. I want him to clarify his political position, if he can.

TREY

I told you, I'm a fiscal Republican. I wasn't entirely in favor of the Democratic platform.

OLIVE

But you're gay. That's like me, a Jew, voting for Eichmann. You vote for someone who doesn't want you to exist?

SYLVAN

Perhaps you're more of a Libertarian.

WENDY

You're for gay marriage, aren't you? My friends Chip and Kyle are tying the knot.

TREY

Robert and I have no need to embrace an antiquated heterosexual ritual. Anyway, I have other concerns beyond gay rights. I have a much wider view of the world.

OLIVE

Your view is ridiculous.

ROBERT

We may not all agree with his politics but it's his right to express them.

OLIVE

How do you sleep at night? You've betrayed your own tribe.

TREY

I don't have to take this.

ROBERT

You *don't* have to take this.

TREY

Thank you, Robert, for once being a hundred per cent on my side.

ROBERT

You didn't come here to be insulted.

WENDY

How many of the four questions have you asked?

OLIVE  
(to Wendy)

Three and here's the fourth. "Why don't you stick your head in the toilet?"

ROBERT

We're going.

(Robert and Trey get up from the table.)

WENDY

I didn't take it personally.

SYLVAN

Everyone, come back. I brought a gorgeous apple cinnamon crumble.

OLIVE

Are you for real? You're like a kindly Jew from Central Casting. It's obnoxious.

SYLVAN  
(stands up)

To hell with the crumble. You don't talk to guests like that. You don't talk to me like that.

OLIVE

Guzick, like it or lump it.

(Robert and Trey have almost reached the front door. Olive follows them.)

OLIVE

Trey, the only way I can reconcile your voting Republican is that you're a sad, self-hating homosexual.

TREY

No. I'm just a homosexual who hates you.

OLIVE

Sincerely, you need psychiatric help.

TREY

I wonder what a shrink would say about an old woman who has a gay real estate agent named Howard stuck in her mirror.

WENDY

What are you talking about?

OLIVE

Go on and try to humiliate me. Join the thousands who've succeeded.

ROBERT

Trey, I'm leaving.

TREY

You recall our hostess revealed that she sees a man in the mirror within her mirror. Well, she didn't tell you that his name is Howard and coincidentally enough, Robert, you and I met him in Key West years ago. Remember, at Kevin's Halloween party, he came as Phyllis Diller?

OLIVE

Shut up. Just shut up!

SYLVAN

What's going on here?

TREY

I'm sorry. I forgot that you want to keep him to yourself.

ROBERT

Her ghost is Howard?

WENDY

Oh, my God. Oh my God. Howard is my brother!

END OF ACT ONE



## ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

A few days later. The door bell rings. Olive comes out of the bedroom with her coat on. There's a new spring in her step. She answers the door. It's Wendy.

OLIVE

Darling, love the skirt. Very becoming. Thanks for stopping by but I've got that appointment at one thirty with the podiatrist.

WENDY

I know. That's why I'm here. To accompany you.

OLIVE

I forgot you said you'd do that. I'd really like to go alone.

WENDY

You're mad at me.

OLIVE

I'm not mad. I just want to go alone. It looks like a nice day out.

WENDY

I'll walk you half way. And we can discuss what happened at the Seder.

OLIVE

What do you mean, what happened?

WENDY

Well, you know, that the man in your mirror happens to be my brother. That's kind of a big deal.

OLIVE

I see it more as a jolly coincidence. For instance, and this is completely true, I'm somehow distantly related through marriage to both Queen Latifah and Toshiro Mifune.

WENDY

What I'm talking about is a bit more direct than that.

OLIVE

Perhaps. So Mazel tov to both of us. It looks like beautiful weather. Let's enjoy it.

WENDY

You're very chipper. I've never seen you like this.

OLIVE

I'm not my usual crabapple self? Did you see today's Times?

WENDY

I haven't had a chance to read it yet.

OLIVE

In the TV listings, they ran a picture of me from my Manhattan Coroner episode. You know, it's on tonight.

WENDY

I know. I've got it circled on my calendar.

OLIVE

Here let me read this to you. (*She picks up the newspaper.*) "A holocaust survivor is the prime suspect in the slaying of a teen age Neo-Nazi gang member. Olive Fisher guest stars." Guest stars. Can you believe that? I wasn't contracted to have that kind of billing.

WENDY

You had a very big part.

OLIVE

But still. Guest star? And a picture? Big names receive that sort of attention from an episodic. The Times had to get this from a press release. Is it possible that the producers are positioning me for an Emmy nomination?

WENDY

Is that how it works?

OLIVE

In this business, one can't assume or predict anything. I've been getting calls all morning. People I haven't heard from in ages saw the picture in the paper and are so happy for me.

WENDY

And wait till they see your performance. Remember, I was there.

OLIVE

I was good. Wasn't I?

WENDY

You were more than good. You were devastating.

OLIVE

It was a well written part. I had four great scenes. I wasn't even sure I could memorize the whole thing and TV is so damn fast. You've gotta nail it in two takes.

WENDY

And you did.

OLIVE

Yes, I did. I'm a professional. I came in prepared. I sailed through those scenes. I was helped by the director. He knew what he was doing.

WENDY

I thought you said he was an untalented fraud.

OLIVE

I groused a little. When I wrapped for the day, I knew he was pleased with me. Does it sound foolish to say I'm feeling a kind of pride? I've earned my living as an actor for these many years and I've maintained a semblance of integrity, even doing all those silly commercials. I'm not one for patting myself on the back, but a lot of the ideas for the original "Gimme the Sausage" campaign came from me. The ad agency and the client didn't really know what they wanted. And today it's considered one of the classic commercials of all time. It's not Ibsen but perhaps it's not something to be dismissed.

WENDY

I'm so glad to hear you say that.

OLIVE

Now this episode is something special. I finally got a chance to show on film that I'm not just an ethnic sight gag, and was allowed to express a range of emotion. Maybe this could lead to other opportunities for dramatic roles. Am I being ridiculous?

WENDY

Not at all.

OLIVE

Strange that this should suddenly happen.

WENDY

How is it strange? You've paid your dues.

OLIVE

Please don't think I'm going soft, but I've been searching for some kind of a sign. A dollop of encouragement as I move into the third act of my life.

WENDY

And you got it.

OLIVE

I got it this morning. I knew he wouldn't let me down.

WENDY

He? Who's he?

OLIVE

Did I say "he?"

WENDY

Yeah, you said "he."

OLIVE

I guess I meant God. Should I have been very feminist and said "she?"

WENDY

I just thought you may have meant --- forget it. Hey, can I come over tonight and watch the show with you?

OLIVE

No. I've gotta watch this one alone. I'll be too nervous.

WENDY

Then you should have someone with you. I'll bring over a bottle of champagne.

OLIVE

That's very sweet of you, but no.

WENDY

Please, let me watch it with you. It would be an honor.

OLIVE

An honor?

WENDY

I feel invested. I accompanied you to the studio. Sat with you in the makeup trailer. It would mean a lot to me to share the final part of the experience with you.

OLIVE

All right. But no talking. I know how you like to gab and comment on everything.

(While Olive is talking, Wendy surreptitiously steals a glimpse in the mirror.)

OLIVE

I haven't seen myself on television in a long time. The last thing I did was a bit part in some awful Lifetime movie. Wendy, what are you doing?

WENDY

Listening.

OLIVE

No, you're not. You're stealing a glance at the mirror.

WENDY

Okay, I'm trying to see Howard. He's my brother. Is that a felony?

OLIVE

You're being duplicitous. You come here feigning enthusiasm over my TV appearance when you're really on a ghost hunting expedition.

WENDY

Did I not mention from the moment I walked in that I wanted to discuss my late sibling's appearance in your mirror?

OLIVE

Darling, I've only seen him myself for a split second a couple of times.

WENDY

Olive, your mirror is a portal to the afterlife. Reunite me with my brother, please. I beg of you.

OLIVE

My powers are limited. I don't command his presence. Wendy, I've gotta go.

WENDY

I'm not budging.

OLIVE

In case you've forgotten, this is my apartment. Rent controlled, yes, but still mine.

WENDY

Olive, in the months we've known each other, you've been the complete focus of our attention. Your wants. Your needs.

OLIVE

I never asked you to look in on me.

WENDY

No, it was my choice. Regardless of that, I thought as months went by, you might have shown some interest in my life.

OLIVE

Here's a question for you. Did you brother ever do drag?

WENDY

He did a pitch perfect Phyllis Diller. But it remained a hobby. He flirted with many careers. I was always very judgmental. The last day of his life we had a terrible fight on the telephone and I hung up on him. Before I could call back and apologize, he had a massive heart attack while soaking in a friend's hot tub. Olive, I need closure.

(A knock at the door.)

OLIVE

That must be the super. For a month I've been asking him to fix that radiator. At night, I can't tell you how I suffer from the heat.

(She answers the door and it's Robert.)

OLIVE

No such luck.

ROBERT

I saw the photo in the Times. I just had to congratulate you.

OLIVE

(coldly)

Yes, it's very exciting.

ROBERT

Hello, Wendy. May I come in?

OLIVE

I'm on my way to an appointment.

(Robert steps all the way into the apartment.)

ROBERT

That picture was so dramatic.

OLIVE

It's a highly dramatic role.

WENDY

She's got four big scenes.

ROBERT

You're not going to watch this alone, are you?

OLIVE

I had hoped.

WENDY

I twisted her arm and now we're gonna watch it together.

ROBERT

Well, then, I'm joining you.

OLIVE

No, you're not. I hate watching TV with a group.

ROBERT

I've got the most marvelous jar of tapenade and some incredible duck liver pate.

OLIVE

All right, you can join us. But you can't bring Trey. He's the type that never shuts up.

ROBERT

His feelings might be hurt if he's not at least invited?

OLIVE

None of you were invited.

ROBERT

He's still miffed at you. You could invite him and he might not come.

WENDY

That's sort of risky.

OLIVE

I guarantee you; he will spoil this night for me. When he drinks, he can be very cutting and sarcastic.

ROBERT

He can be a little dyspeptic. Peevish.

OLIVE

I don't get it. You give every appearance of being a sensible person. Why do you put up with Trey?

ROBERT

I love him. Now as far as me coming over tonight, I could tell him I'm visiting my friend, Clark. He hates him with a passion.

WENDY

We'll be next door. Trey might hear us.

ROBERT

We'll just have to talk very softly. And we could turn the volume low.

OLIVE

No. We're not turning the volume low. This whole thing is a terrible idea.

ROBERT

This is what we'll do. We'll keep the volume of the TV normal. I'll simply say I'm going to Clarks and I'll leave the apartment and go to the elevator. He'll hear the elevator door open and close. And if you keep your door slightly ajar, I can just slip in.

WENDY

That sounds doable.

ROBERT

Oh, but what about the tapenade? How do I get that out of the apartment?

WENDY

You brought it with you to Clarks.

ROBERT

It's a known fact that Clark has a million food phobias. He survives on nothing but Dipsy Doodles. I can put the tapenade in a bag but Trey might ask what's in the bag. I can make sure he sees me packing DVD's and then when he's not looking, I can go into the kitchen and grab the tapenade and the liver pate. But what if he has a sudden craving for tapenade and goes into the fridge and it's not there. I could go back to the store now and get something else for us to eat and bring it here earlier. But he's gonna want to go out this afternoon. He was hoping we'd go to a movie. I may not be able to get to a store without him seeing me. I suppose I could leave him after the movie and tell him I was—

OLIVE

LET HIM COME! I'm sure I'll live to regret it.

ROBERT

I suppose I'm a bit over protective. .

(Robert surreptitiously tries to look in the mirror.)

OLIVE

I'm warning you, if he acts up, it's gonna get ugly. I'm usually very blasé about this sort of thing. But there seems to be a kind of buzz about my appearance on this episode and -- Oh, no. You too? This is so rude.

ROBERT

What? What?

OLIVE

You know what I'm talking about. Hoping to see Howard. You should be ashamed of yourself. I really thought you had some interest in my good news.

ROBERT

Stop that. I'm genuinely excited for you.



OLIVE

Uh huh.

ROBERT

Yes, I was looking in the mirror. But that doesn't negate my very real enthusiasm for your show.

OLIVE

All right. You're still invited. But only because I'm in such an exuberant mood. Look, I'm kicking you both outta here. I'll be late for my appointment.

WENDY

It's so stifling. Am I getting a hot flash?

OLIVE

I told you the heat goes on in the afternoon and in the middle of the night and it's unbearable.

ROBERT

The radiator just needs to be turned down.

WENDY

Let me take a look at it.

OLIVE

That makes up a bit for your bad manners. I've really gotta go.

WENDY

Go. Go. I've got a key. We'll let ourselves out.

OLIVE

I know what you're both after. Go ahead and look in the mirror all you want. I doubt you'll see anything. But next time, you pay in cash or on a major credit card.

(She exits. Wendy immediately stands in front of one mirror. Robert goes to the other.)

ROBERT

What do you see?

WENDY

Eternity. What do you see?

ROBERT

My scar.

It's hardly visible.

WENDY

To me it's lit up with neon.

ROBERT

You had a bi-pass?

WENDY

If it was only that. An aortic aneurism. It usually kills you within the hour.

ROBERT

That must have been terrifying.

WENDY

It was. And I didn't have any God to pray to. I tried but I have no concept of it. I only had Trey. And he rose to the occasion. The doctors and hospital staff were ready to kill him, but I got attention worthy of a head of state. And later when I was recuperating at home, he was so loving and tender. Anticipating my every need. Knowing exactly when to be firm and when to be silent. When to hold me and when to let go. So do I tell him we're coming over tonight? I guess not. What he doesn't know won't hurt him.

ROBERT

END OF SCENE

## ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

Later that afternoon. Olive enters the apartment. She's followed by Sylvan, who's carrying a large framed mirror. He puts it down.

SYLVAN

How the hell did you get this into a cab?

OLIVE

The man in the thrift shop helped me. But when I tried to get it out of the cab, did you notice that neither the super nor the doorman would lift a finger? No one believes that I'm being persecuted. My biggest regret, and I have many, was not buying this place in '79 when I was offered a low insiders' price.

SYLVAN

How low?

OLIVE

Thirty thousand. At the time, my accountant said it was a risky investment. He should rot in Hell.

SYLVAN

Regrets are futile.

OLIVE

Regrets provide fine entertainment when there's nothing on cable. It was a lucky break you happened to be walking in the building when you did. I'm grateful.

SYLVAN

You're obviously gonna need help putting this up. What room is it going in?

OLIVE

This room.

SYLVAN

Three mirrors in one room? I guess it makes it look bigger.

OLIVE

No, it's replacing that mirror.

(She points to a smaller mirror on the wall; the one she looks into to see Howard.)

SYLVAN

Ahhh, that's the mirror in which you see -- you know who. Okay. You want me to put it up now?

OLIVE

Thank you. That would be wonderful.

(He lifts the old mirror off the wall.)

OLIVE

(to herself)

I wonder how long they stayed?

SYLVAN

Who?

OLIVE

Wendy and Robert. I left them in here when I went out to do my errands. They were ostensibly fixing my radiator but they were really hoping to see -- you know who. Do we need to change the picture hook?

SYLVAN

I think the one you have will more than suffice.

(He lifts the new mirror and places it on the hook.)

SYLVAN

Is it straight?

OLIVE

It's tilting to the right. That certainly won't do in this apartment.

SYLVAN

It certainly won't. Olive, I share your passionate liberal beliefs, but you were out of line at Pesach. You don't lash out at people you've invited over for a brisket.

OLIVE

Criticism accepted. I over reacted.

SYLVAN

Many men would not have forgiven you so quickly. I don't want you looking upon my generosity of spirit as a sign of weakness.

OLIVE

I don't. But you've got to understand, Sylvan. I've been living in this uncharted territory between Third Avenue and the hereafter. It can be very trying.

(Olive looks in the mirror, attempting to see if this would make her access to Howard any easier.)

OLIVE

Well, this definitely gives me a better view of his world.

SYLVAN

Is he in there? I make it sound like he's on the toilet. Forgive me. This is none of my affair.

OLIVE

He's not here. At the moment. You must think I'm out of my mind.

SYLVAN

I should but you don't seem like a crazy person.

OLIVE

Maybe I am. You'd like to hear more, wouldn't you? You'd like to hear what a comfort he is? How his mere presence in the mirror seems to set me on the right track? You want me to explain something I'd be the first to dismiss and laugh at in others?

SYLVAN

Olive, I like you. And the more you like someone, the more you respect their privacy.

OLIVE

(almost childlike)

I don't understand, given my behavior each time we've met, why you like me.

SYLVAN

It must be a deeply ingrained streak of masochism. I'm fascinated by feisty women.

OLIVE

Feisty? In the theatre I've been referred to numerous times as a .... It's a very nasty, vulgar phrase I would never use myself. I've often been called a crazy cunt.

SYLVAN

You're peppery.

OLIVE

I can be impossible.

SYLVAN

I wish I could be a bit more "impossible." I was born with a placid temperament.

OLIVE

That's not a disability.

SYLVAN

It used to drive my mother wild. She'd go on the warpath about a roller skate lying on the floor and she couldn't scare me. I'd be sympathetic to her plight. She used to say I accepted everything too readily, that you could kick me in the ass twenty times and I'd come back for more. She thought it displayed an inherent low expectation of the human race.

OLIVE

I'm sorry but your mother was wrong. You have great empathy for people. It's a sterling quality. Sylvan, come with me to the mirror.

SYLVAN

You don't have to do this.

OLIVE

I want to. Look in the mirror within the mirror.

SYLVAN

Olive, please. I don't like gazing in reflective surfaces. It's not an age thing. Believe me. It's just that I'm finding my face in repose doesn't reflect my personality anymore. It's a downward, disappointed face. That's not who I am. I'd much rather look at you. You're an attractive woman.

OLIVE

Sylvan, you're flirting with me. Nobody's flirted with me since Nixon resigned.

SYLVAN

I hope you enjoyed it.

OLIVE

Nixon's resignation? I got out the good silver.

SYLVAN

I meant my flirting.

OLIVE

I'm not opposed. But it's not gonna get you anywhere. Don't think because I'm an actress, I'm an easy lay. And I don't know how to put this, but I've never "been" with anyone your age. People think I'm Methuselah's grandmother because of those sausage commercials. I wasn't even fifty when I started making them. I've always played older than my years.

SYLVAN

I would imagine we're contemporaries.

OLIVE

Possibly... Anyway, I don't think it's a good idea.

SYLVAN

You're assuming I'm some kind of a wolf. Maybe I'm a romantic who would prefer to take this in increments. We could test the waters with a simple kiss.

OLIVE

Are those all your teeth?

SYLVAN

I have some permanent bridgework on this side. Are those all your teeth?

OLIVE

Yes. Well, I have porcelain veneers. They photograph better. But they don't come out.

SYLVAN

I'm something of a dental fanatic. I brush my teeth three times a day and every night with seven different brushes.

OLIVE

That's eccentric but reassuring. All right. Come here.

(They kiss.)

OLIVE

You're a good kisser. And you have a very appealing masculine scent. You don't overdo it with the after shave.

SYLVAN

Should we sit down on the sofa?

OLIVE

I don't know. You sit and then before you know it, garments come off.

SYLVAN

Let's take the risk and sit.

(Olive and Sylvan sit on the sofa.)

SYLVAN

It's a comfortable couch.

OLIVE

Well worn.

SYLVAN

I wish I could have seen you on the stage.

OLIVE

You make me sound like Lillian Russell.

SYLVAN

I'm looking forward to seeing you on television tonight.

OLIVE

I'm excited by it too. I haven't felt excited about anything in a very long time.

SYLVAN

Maybe that's why you're looking particularly pretty today.

OLIVE

(enjoying the flirtation)

Here you go again.

SYLVAN

You know, Olive, I have show business in *my* blood. My Aunt was a star of the Yiddish Theatre. Ever heard of Bella Maisel?

OLIVE

Of course, I've heard of Bella Maisel. In fact, in the early seventies, for a brief moment, I was in her company. I think it was her farewell appearance. She did a weekend of performances at Town Hall.

SYLVAN

I was at every one of those shows. Who did you play?

OLIVE

I was still married at the time. I wasn't really in show business yet. I was one of the townspeople. I had one line in Yiddish that I learned phonetically.

SYLVAN

My Aunt had a wonderfully biting sense of humor. Did you get to know her at all?

OLIVE

For some reason, Madame Maisel took an instant dislike to me. In front of the entire company, she would mock and ridicule my pronunciation of my one line.

SYLVAN

That sounds like her. But she was a very loving Aunt. You know, I was nearly killed that final Sunday matinee. I went backstage after the performance and the stage manager told me to wait for my aunt in the wing. Everyone seemingly had left the theatre. Aunt Bella



came out of the dressing room and was engaged in conversation with one of the actors. Finally, I moved from my spot to see what was detaining her and at that very moment, a lighting instrument from high above came crashing to the floor, barely missing me by inches.

OLIVE

I think she was detained by me. I'll never forget. I stopped by her dressing room so she could sign my program and to apologize for my terrible line reading. She said, "Today was my farewell performance and it should be yours as well. My, dear, you have absolutely no aptitude for the stage."

SYLVAN

I'm sorry to hear that, but you know, if you hadn't been there, I would have remained on that spot and most likely been killed. I owe you my life, Olive Fisher. May I come over tonight and watch your show with you?

OLIVE

(yielding)

I'd like that. It feels good having you around.

SYLVAN

May I kiss you again?

(He moves in closer. Distracted, Olive looks towards the mirror.)

OLIVE

(with a haunted sensitivity)

What would happen if I hung the third mirror on that other wall? Would I see more?

(Sylvan is getting the feeling that he may be involved in a romantic triangle.)

END OF SCENE

## ACT TWO, SCENE THREE

That night. Wendy, Trey, Robert, Sylvan and Olive are all seated in front of the television. The sound has been turned off. The coffee table is filled with plates of crackers, dip and cheese. The third mirror has replaced a painting on the wall.

WENDY

I'm madly in love with this cheese. Where did you get it?

TREY

We belong to a cheese club. At the first of every month we get in the mail two artisanal cheeses.

OLIVE

At the first of the month? I knew it. That's when the stench is at its worst.

ROBERT

This one is an Epoisses de Bourgogne. You want me to put some on a cracker for you?

OLIVE

No, thank you, I have an aversion to cheese. Cheddar, brie, blue, all kinds.

SYLVAN

That's terrible. You can't even enjoy a slice of pizza?

OLIVE

I can tolerate a bland mozzarella. Now may we please turn up the volume?

ROBERT

Why? The show's not on yet.

TREY

We'll know when the show is about to start. The previous program is still on.

OLIVE

You're making me extremely nervous. This show is very important to me.

ROBERT

Of course it is. That's why we wanted to watch it with you.

OLIVE

None of you are fooling me. Except for Sylvan, who I believe is genuinely interested in my TV appearance, the rest of you are all here for one reason and one reason only; to take a gander at "he who shall not be named." Didn't you both get your fill this afternoon?

WENDY

I did not receive atonement.

OLIVE

How long did you stare in that mirror? The truth.

WENDY

An hour and twenty-two minutes.

OLIVE

You didn't see anything, did you?

WENDY

No. But now that you got a bigger mirror and added a third one, who knows what solace we might find.

SYLVAN

This place is looking like a carnival fun house.

ROBERT

I didn't see any spectral figures today, but I found it to be a wonderful meditation. I had made up my mind not to tell Trey the truth that we were coming over tonight.

TREY

I don't know why you have to tell them this.

SYLVAN

It's interesting when people make changes in their behavior.

OLIVE

Is the show starting?

TREY

No. It's a preview of what's coming up.

WENDY

So how did Robert alter his behavior? This intrigues me as well.

ROBERT

Old habits are hard to break. I started out with my well rehearsed alibi.

TREY

A long song and dance about visiting his friend Clark tonight and that he was going to force Clark to try the tapenade even though it's a known fact that Clark only eats Dipsy Doodles.

OLIVE

Here we go again with the tapenade and the Dipsy Doodles.

ROBERT

I stopped mid-sentence. I was as if there was some external force compelling me to speak the truth.

TREY

The great confession that he was coming over here to watch TV.

ROBERT

I was afraid you'd be upset if you found out you hadn't been invited.

TREY

I told him I could care less.

OLIVE

Then why are you here?

TREY

Because, hostess with the mostess, I didn't want to be by myself, okay? .

SYLVAN

You were lonely. Nothing to be ashamed of. It grabs you when you least expect it. I tell ya, I'll be watching the Oscars and some beautiful young couple walk the red carpet hand in hand and suddenly I'm doubled over with loneliness like I've got an ulcer.

OLIVE

Sylvan, you're still in mourning. I think my show's starting.

SYLVAN

No, it isn't. I've been in and out of mourning so many times, I've worn out my black Burberry suit. I'm beginning to feel guilty when I ring a woman's bell, as if I were the harbinger of ill fortune.

ROBERT

I'm sure that will pass. You seem pretty together.

SYLVAN

Antidepressants. For a year now. I don't come off like a zombie? Because at optimum, I'm not what you'd call "mercurial."

WENDY

Like this Epoisses de Bourgogne, I think you're delicious. All right, guys, since tonight is all about truth telling.

OLIVE

Tonight is not all about truth telling. It's about watching my show in silence. And even though I'm recording it, I wanna watch in real time. Look. It's about to start.

WENDY

No, it isn't. Everyone, I've got big news. I can't hold it in any longer.

TREY

You got the job in LA.

WENDY

Yes, I got the job. They called just before I left the house.

SYLVAN

Congratulations.

ROBERT

This is something you really wanted.

WENDY

Absolutely. I'm so excited. It's a very big move.

TREY

Do you know people there?

ROBERT

We have great friends we'd be delighted to connect you with.

WENDY

Thank you. My brother had two very close friends who live in Santa Monica, who said they'd take me under their wing. They're female impersonators. They have their own cabaret called "Illusions." Olive, I feel so guilty leaving you.

OLIVE

I'm a big girl. But do you really want to go to LA? I mean, really? Cause I sense some genuine hesitation.

WENDY

Of course I want to go.

ROBERT

How are you sensing hesitation? She's overjoyed.

OLIVE

I know you're concerned about the driving.

SYLVAN

So she takes a few lessons before she goes. I'll rent a car and take you driving.

WENDY

I'm not that afraid of driving. It's just been awhile.

OLIVE

I'm not trying to influence you one way or another. But have you thought this out? Once you give up a New York apartment, you can never come back.

TREY

That's not true.

OLIVE

It is true. I know what she pays in rent. She'll never get that again. And you're the kind that likes to do things at the spur of the moment. Drop in and visit. Go to a movie. That's not done in LA. It's such a pain in the ass to find parking that people stay locked up in their homes. Sylvan talks about loneliness. Loneliness is endemic to Los Angeles. They have one of the highest suicide rates in the country, particularly among older single women.

SYLVAN

Don't do this to her.

OLIVE

I care. Yes, I'm painting a grim picture but, Wendy, I know you. Under the breezy, brassy facade, you're extremely vulnerable. You think I don't listen to you, but I do. You've told me how often you cry alone at night. Multiply that by ten in LA. Everyone assumes you make friends easily but we both know that's not true. And don't expect too much from the female impersonators. By profession they're self-centered and imperious. Within weeks, you'll find yourself their hand maiden and at their beck and call. (*Wendy looks totally beaten down.*) Aaaaahhhh! Turn up the sound! The show's starting!

END OF SCENE

## ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR

An hour later. The show has just ended. Sylvan turns off the set. They sit in silence. Olive is frozen in her crushing disappointment. She continues to stare in disbelief at the dark TV screen. Sylvan, his face registering total sympathy, is completely at one with her.

ROBERT

(awkwardly)

Well, you were brilliant. It was a brilliant scene.

TREY

(trying to be positive)

I don't even see where the other scenes would have been. I mean, it was a very tight, suspenseful show.

WENDY

(heartbroken)

But they were wonderful scenes.

ROBERT

The one scene left was the emotional high point of the episode.

(Sylvan subtly gestures to Robert to refrain from speaking anymore.)

Olive, devastated, gets up from the sofa, slowly crosses to the door and opens it. She's unable to utter a single word. The others, feeling her profound disappointment, rise from their seats. As if attending a funeral, they silently gather up the cheese plate and tapenade.

Wishing they could provide Olive with some words of comfort, her stricken face makes any platitude seem foolish. They silently file out of the apartment.

Sylvan is the last to leave. He feels for her so deeply and attempts a gesture of affection but Olive wearily raises her hand to silence him. Sensitively, he gets the point and leaves.

Olive returns to the sofa and stares once again at the dark TV screen.)

END OF SCENE

## ACT TWO, SCENE FIVE

The following morning. Olive, still in last night's clothes, is lying on the sofa. She opens her eyes and realizes she's been there all night. The phone rings. She doesn't move to answer it. After four rings, the machine automatically picks up. The doorbell rings. She pauses, considering her next move, gives up and answers the door. It's Wendy.

WENDY

May I please come in?

OLIVE

There's nothing to say.

WENDY

Did you sleep in your clothes? I've been so worried about you. I kept flashing back to your face when you realized that all those scenes were missing.

OLIVE

I'm glad I provided grist for your viewing pleasure. It certainly wasn't on the screen. You should be home packing. You've got a lot of work to do if you're gonna relocate.

WENDY

I'm not going. I'm not taking the job.

OLIVE

You were so over the moon about it.

WENDY

Then reality hit. I can't give up my life here. I'm very established in the theatre. And I have my volunteer work. All the ladies I do things for. And you're right. I've got a nice studio apartment in a good neighborhood at a decent rent. I just can't shake everything up. I'm too old. I've made the right decision. What can I do to make you feel better?

OLIVE

I keep asking myself, "Why would they butcher that episode?" "Why?" Those scenes added so much to the story.

WENDY

I agree.

OLIVE

That lovely tender moment with the son. Yeah, it was a bit tangential to the plot, but it said so much about Rose's character.

WENDY

I remember. It was beautiful.



OLIVE

And the scene when she was ready to plead guilty. And the little scene with the husband. Take all that away and what's left but me expressing rage. Anger is the easiest emotion for an actor. Hey, maybe they looked at it in the editing room and thought I stunk.

WENDY

That's impossible.

OLIVE

Perhaps I was over the top. I don't know. There may be a reason I'm never up for dramatic roles.

WENDY

Don't do that to yourself. You were brilliant in those scenes. I looked around and even the crew was moved.

OLIVE

What makes me so furious is that I allowed myself to get excited. I should have known better. But the picture in the paper and everyone calling. Then they watch it and think I exaggerated how big my part was. I'm so humiliated. And after the director and the executives on the set told me how extraordinary I was, and they don't even have the goddam decency to phone and warn me that most of my part was cut. You know, I partially blame your late brother.

WENDY

What's that supposed to mean?

OLIVE

He was never here. I was projecting all sorts of nonsense on this so-called "Howard." I'm just a lonely old bag who was experiencing a manic episode. I was waiting for a signal from him; a ray of hope to keep me from obsessing about old age and death. So when the picture came out in the paper, stupid me thought it was a cosmic sign.

WENDY

I wanted to believe too.

OLIVE

You just have to accept that nothing is out there. No spirits. No angels. No God. Life is a supermarket going out of business. Grab what you can because nobody's restocking.

WENDY

Has it occurred to you that the director might also be upset about the cuts? You don't know. I bet the writer's devastated at seeing his work eviscerated.

OLIVE

I feel bad for him. He wrote a good script.

WENDY

Why don't you give him a call? What's his name?

OLIVE

Jeffrey something. Jeffrey Beaman. I think I saved the contact sheet.

WENDY

Jeffrey Beaman? When I saw it on the credits, I thought it was familiar.

OLIVE

You know Jeffrey Beaman?

WENDY

He was a friend of Howards. Was he on the set? Did I meet him?

OLIVE

He was around.

WENDY

Years ago, he wrote and directed a little independent film. It was called – *Breaking Even*. Howard and I were supposed to go on the opening day to help boost the gross.

OLIVE

I saw that movie.

WENDY

It won awards.

OLIVE

I didn't realize it was his. You know, I think I was also at the opening day. Isn't that wild? I might have run into you years before I met you. And Howard was there? Maybe I met him.

WENDY

I remember the name of that movie because it was the day Howard died.

OLIVE

What? I might have met Howard the day he died?

WENDY

I don't know because I wasn't there. You see, back then I was helping this actress, Lillian Gurney. I met Howard at the subway and then suddenly I had a feeling I should call and check up on Lillian.

OLIVE

You were helping old actresses even then?

WENDY

Even then. I called her and my sixth sense was right. She'd gone to a voice over audition that morning and fallen. She was very upset. Well, I had to tell Howard that I couldn't go to the movie.

OLIVE

Lillian Gurney. We were often up for the same things. In fact, if I'm correct I may be the reason she fell.

WENDY

How's that possible?

OLIVE

I don't remember what I ate for dinner yesterday but I remember the day I saw *Breaking Even*. Earlier that morning I'd been to a voice over audition. I was in the waiting room along with Lillian Gurney. We got in a huge argument over who had arrived first. Lillian started it. She was so furious she threw her cane at me and tripped over a waste paper basket. Isn't that something? If she hadn't lost her temper with me, she wouldn't have fallen and you would have been at the movie with your brother.

(The doorbell rings.)

OLIVE

The heat is still blasting away at night. Maybe this is the super.

(She opens the door. It's Robert, Trey and Sylvan.)

OLIVE

No such luck.

ROBERT

We wanted to see how you were doing?

OLIVE

You left some knives and a cutting board in the kitchen.

SYLVAN

I left the jar of pickled herring. You said you didn't like it.

WENDY

We just discovered an amazing coincidence. The day Howard died, I was supposed to go to a movie with him, but I had to cancel at the last minute because a lady I was helping had an accident. It turns out that not only was Olive also at the movie that day but earlier she was at a voice over audition with the lady I was helping and inadvertently caused the accident that forced me to miss the movie.

SYLVAN

Olive, that's so remarkably similar to what happened to me backstage at Aunt Bella's farewell performance. Your very presence changes lives.

TREY

I'll tell you something even more interesting. I saw Howard the day he died.

WENDY

You did? Why didn't you tell me?

OLIVE

Why didn't you tell *me*?

TREY

I didn't want to compete. I mean, you're his sister. And you're his conduit to the mortal world.

ROBERT

I didn't know you saw him again after we met him in Key West.

TREY

I couldn't really tell you, if you um know what I mean.

ROBERT

Oh?

WENDY

You got together with him?

TREY

This is rather awkward. Robert and I have a longtime strict policy of "Don't ask, don't tell."

ROBERT

And while I may not have asked, you're still gonna tell.

TREY

I feel like I must. May I continue?

SYLVAN

You've gone this far.

TREY

It was late afternoon. I got out of work early, so I decided to stop in a café around the corner and have a cocktail. Well, who should walk by but Howard? I called out to him and he came inside. He said he had moved back to the city and was working for

Corcoran. He was looking very cute and well, I knew you were going to be working late, so I brought him home with me.

ROBERT

I never thought you'd have sex with someone in our bed. That was one rule I was sure neither of us would ever break.

TREY

Howard was staying in Astoria. I was extremely nervous entering the building with him. I was afraid we'd run into that old gossip, Essie, who used to park herself in the lobby all day. Thank God, by some miracle, she wasn't there.

OLIVE

Essie. An awful old crone. We were always at odds. You know, I think I may be responsible for why she wasn't in the lobby that day.

TREY

How is that?

OLIVE

If it's the same day we're talking about, eight years ago, I came home and got into an ugly altercation with Essie. She turned away from me, tripped and popped her meniscus.

WENDY

So basically, you caused two old women to fall down in one day.

SYLVAN

Olive, I sit in awe. You're like a mystical High Priestess who bends time and space.

OLIVE

I don't know about that, but to this day I walk gingerly on that cracked pavement.

TREY

Howard and I had a very pleasant siesta. When the news spread that he died, I figured out that I'd been with him that day. I've always felt bad because after we finished fooling around, I became paranoid that you might come home early. I practically threw his clothes at him. We barely said goodbye. Naturally, I wonder if I was the last person to speak to him.

WENDY

You weren't. Because I phoned him around eight pm. And we had a huge fight. He had given a total stranger an antique gold filigreed chain that belonged to our grandmother. I was so fed up with his wildly impulsive gestures that I hung up on him. A few hours later he died and I'm left with horrible guilt feelings. All because of that stupid gold chain. I was probably the last person to speak to him and it was fraught with rage.

ROBERT

Would it help you to know that I may have been the last person to speak to him?

TREY

You?

ROBERT

Yeah.

TREY

You kept in touch with Howard after Key West?

ROBERT

I did.

TREY

I don't believe you.

ROBERT

He found me attractive. And I needed that. You had long ago stopped wanting anything to do with me physically.

TREY

So you tricked with Howard and it's all my fault.

ROBERT

I did more than trick with Howard. About a month after we met, I flew back to Key West and spent a long weekend alone with him. I told you I was visiting my cousin in Vermont. But I was with Howard. Actually, I flew down there twice. Both times it was lovely. When he returned to New York, he called. We got together a few times but never at our place.

TREY

So you had a major affair with this guy.

ROBERT

It certainly was major to me. That morning Howard phoned and invited me to a party that this screenwriter Jeffrey Beaman was throwing to celebrate the opening of his movie. The party didn't begin till after nine o'clock. I really wanted to go but what excuse could I give you? I was coming home from the office and heading down Second Avenue. I saw an old woman walking her dog. Just then, another woman turned the corner and the dog suddenly lunged at her causing the owner to trip and fall flat on her face. I helped the old lady up and except for some scratches, she was basically all right. That provided me with my alibi. I phoned you and said I was escorting this woman to the emergency room and that it might take several hours.

TREY

Well, you're just a big, fat liar. Aren't you?

ROBERT

I had to see Howard. It was as if I knew I'd never see him again.

OLIVE

I was the woman the dog lunged at. It was a vicious Doberman. He nearly took a bite out of me.

SYLVAN

You were responsible for yet another old woman's tumble?

OLIVE

Boy, that day I was knocking 'em down like bowling pins.

ROBERT

Well, then, Olive, I wouldn't have been at that party if weren't for you.

SYLVAN

Again, you appear to be the force field at the center of the Universe.

OLIVE

Who knew?

TREY

So after I accepted your lie, you got there and--

ROBERT

It was a wild party. All men.

SYLVAN

Oh my.

ROBERT

There was a roof top terrace with a hot tub.

SYLVAN

Oh my.

ROBERT

Sylvan, please. I found Howard in the hot tub and joined him. Once again, he was so affectionate. Trey, I can accept that you've lost all interest in me sexually. After all these years, it's almost to be expected but if you were only more pleasant. Except for the six weeks when I was recovering from my heart surgery and you were an absolute angel, you've been so relentlessly sour and negative. You're an armadillo that can't be touched.

And the drinking doesn't help. It makes it worse. I refuse to believe this is the real you. The real you is the boy I fell in love with and the man who took such care of me when I was ill. If by patronizing you or keeping you dependent, I'm responsible for the other Trey, then I am truly and deeply sorry.

TREY

So what you're saying is; I've become a nasty, alcoholic queen.

ROBERT

I wouldn't put it that way. Yes.

TREY

Why have you never told me this before?

ROBERT

I didn't want to hurt your feelings. I thought I was protecting you. May I continue?

TREY

I'm an evil gin soaked lizard. I can take anything.

ROBERT

There's not much more to say. I had to get back home, so I climbed out of the tub and advised Howard that he shouldn't stay in much longer. He winked and said he'd be careful. And I left. I suppose shortly after that, he had his heart attack.

WENDY

Golly. All of us saw him that day, except for Olive... and of course, Sylvan, who doesn't count.

ROBERT

I left out an interesting detail. Jeffrey had a TV on the terrace. It was set to a music video channel and one of Olive's commercials came on. Howard said that was an amazing coincidence because he had just met you earlier that day at Jeffrey's screening.

TREY

Honestly, how the hell do you remember that?

ROBERT

Because Howard beckoned me to join him in the hot tub by saying...

SYLVAN

"Gimme the sausage."

WENDY

(to Olive)

So you did meet Howard.



OLIVE

Yeah.

WENDY

Why haven't you said anything?

OLIVE

I truly only figured it out a few minutes ago. That afternoon, I left the voice-over studio in Tribeca and since it was a nice day, I walked. I passed by the Cinema Village. There was a crowd of people waiting outside. This fellow asked me for the time. He said he never wore a watch. Didn't believe in it. I don't usually talk to strangers, but we hit it off. We were snapping back and forth with the quips in a very congenial manner. When it was time for his movie to start, he asked if I'd care to join him. Very out of character for me but I said, "Why not?" The movie was cute. However, I think I enjoyed it more because my companion had such an infectious laugh. I found myself laughing along with him and I'm not a vocal laugher. When the movie was over, neither of us was in a particular hurry. As I said, it was a beautiful day, so we walked across town to the East Village and sat in Tomkins Square Park. All these years, I would have sworn that we never exchanged names. But perhaps I've romanticized and edited the events of that afternoon. Or maybe I'm confused because I've lost a lot of brain cells from my, shall we say, episodes. It's possible he did tell me his name was Howard and that he'd worked in real estate and that he'd lived for a time in Key West. Maybe he did tell me all that. The thing is that none of that information seemed important. What you do? Where you live? What's your name? So what did we talk about for nearly three hours? Well, there was a cluster of tiny sparrows searching for crumbs on the ground in front of us. We gave them names and improvised dialogue between them. Sounds nauseatingly cutesy but that's what we did. He told me his favorite song was "I'll Tell The Man In The Street." I love that song too. So we sang a duet, which segued into "Glad To Be Unhappy" and much of the score of "Kismet." We spent about a half hour trying to hold a conversation without either of us ever starting a sentence with the word "I." It's very difficult. Try it some time. Now, you would think that after several hours I would have figured out that he was gay. But I didn't. Despite my long career in show business, I'm still in some ways a rather provincial lady from Yonkers. I just got a kick out of him. And he seemed so taken with me. Most of my life, I've felt I had to be a real shtarker. A tough guy. Keep my fists at the ready. But I relaxed them that day. I don't generally like myself but I liked that lady. The afternoon was getting on. What do you do? Exchange phone numbers? Make another date? I think we both knew we shouldn't screw up something so magical by being greedy. I told him that I would never forget that afternoon for the rest of my life. He said, "Well, just to make sure you won't forget me, let me give you something." And he pulled over his head this delicate gold chain. I hadn't noticed it before. It was hidden beneath his sweater. He placed the chain in my hand and said it was terribly old and he wanted me to have it. At that moment, for the first and only time, I knew what it was like to love and be loved. We kissed each other goodbye and I walked away.

(She reveals the gold chain that she's been wearing around her neck and under her blouse. There is a moment of silence)

WENDY

I see now that it was predestination that I should meet you in Montclair.

TREY

We're all a part of God's perfect plan.

SYLVAN

Every living organism has its purpose.

ROBERT

I think it was Melville who wrote "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men."

WENDY

And now at long last, my Grandmother Minnie's precious gold chain can be restored to me.

(She reaches out her hand.)

OLIVE

Are you nuts? I'm not giving it to you.

WENDY

You've got to. It belonged to my grandmother Minnie.

OLIVE

-- who gave it to your brother, who in turn gave it to me.

WENDY

He had no right to do so.

OLIVE

He had every right. If he had gotten married he would have passed it on to his child.

WENDY

But he wasn't married to you or got you knocked up. You met him once, went to the movies and sat in the park. If you had a scintilla of compassion, you would hand over that necklace pronto.

OLIVE

If you had an ounce of sensitivity, you would understand that this chain has enormous emotional profundity to me. Look. How's this? I'll stipulate in my will that upon my death, it should go to you.

SYLVAN

Ladies, that's a reasonable compromise.

WENDY

I can't wait that long. I think you're being incredibly selfish. At least, you had that meaningful experience with him. I didn't. And I didn't because your belligerent, argumentative personality caused Lillian Gurney to hurt herself, which denied me a last afternoon with my brother. Furthermore, your acceptance of the necklace prompted an ugly altercation between Howard and me, and now you won't return it, denying me with the closure I so desperately seek.

OLIVE

Oh my, how you're carrying on. Get over it.

WENDY

Give me that necklace or I'll take you to court.

OLIVE

You'd lose.

TREY

Give her the goddam necklace.

OLIVE

This is none of your affair.

ROBERT

It is our affair. Four of us shared that last day with Howard.

OLIVE

But I'm the only one whose time with him meant anything.

WENDY

You miserable bitch. Everything has to be about you. You, you, you. I'm sick of you.

OLIVE

Now the venom is released.

WENDY

For months, you've bossed and bullied me. I was warned that you were a horror. But I felt pity for you. The same as I felt for all the other mean spirited old ladies I've slaved for. Sylvia Samuels, Lillian Gurney, Doris Blau, Grace Chen. I get this insane notion that I can make a difference. Guys, you see that notebook on the desk? I wrote in it the phone numbers of all sorts of places that could improve Olive's depressing solitary existence. Opportunities to do volunteer work, to teach, to build herself up physically. She's never even opened that notebook. All for naught. Well, I've had it. I'm going.

TREY

Where? I'll go with you.

WENDY

I'm going to LA. I'm taking that job. Oh, yes. And I'm going to be young. I'm going to learn to para-sail off the Pacific coast. I'm going to roller blade on Santa Monica pier. I'm going to ride the waves at Zuma Beach. And for at least the next fifteen years, I never want to hear the phrase "I'm getting a chill," or "I feel the humidity in my bones." I never want to hear "Make me some tea." "Is the meat lean?" "Don't I get a discount?" The chains of bondage are broken. The waters have parted. Free at last. Oh, dear Lord, I'm free at last!

(She exits.)

ROBERT

Olive, you've lost a good friend. Come on, Trey. Let's go home.

TREY

You really want me with you? I broke a cardinal rule.

ROBERT

Can you forgive me for telling so many lies? I thought I was protecting you.

TREY

You don't have to protect me. I won't break.

ROBERT

Let's try to be more forthright.

TREY

I had sex with your cousin Monty.

ROBERT

Monty's gay?

TREY

A troubled bisexual. It was grisly.

ROBERT

I had sex with Mark Novello.

TREY

Mark Novello? Who was Mark Novello?

ROBERT

Your gastroenterologist.

TREY

You had sex with Dr. Novello?

ROBERT

Are you very upset?

TREY

He's gorgeous. How did that happen? Was he any good? Hairy chest? Big dick? Circumcised? *(to Olive)* We've got to go.

ROBERT

There are more truths to be told. Olive, I don't like you. I tried but I'll never like you.

TREY

Now, it's my turn. Olive, you're toxic. And that kind of poisonous behavior is contagious. I'm susceptible to it, so I can't come anywhere near you. And if you start banging on the wall again, we'll simply call the police. Goodbye.

ROBERT

Goodbye.

*(Trey links his arm in Roberts and they exit.)*

SYLVAN

Olive, they're all speaking in the heat of anger.

OLIVE

I could care less. I'm me. Olive Blechman. I can't change my DNA. So, fella, you can also take your leave.

SYLVAN

Why me? What did I do?

OLIVE

There's something wrong with you. You go after these difficult women, because what? You're missing something in your own personality? Your mother was right. How many times do you have to get kicked in the ass?

SYLVAN

*(simply)*

I always think I can help.

OLIVE

You're like a vampire. You want my anger and spirit. Well, you can't have 'em.

SYLVAN

You need to be loved. And not by a dead person, but a live human being. I'm not even suggesting that it might be me. But look to the living. They're out there.

OLIVE

That's a ridiculous over simplification. I'm not a character in a Yiddish folk tale.

SYLVAN

Olive –

OLIVE

This conversation is terminated.

SYLVAN

You gotta have the last word. Don't you?

OLIVE

I don't.

SYLVAN

You do.

OLIVE

I don't.

SYLVAN

You do.

OLIVE

Sylvan, please. I'm not in the market to be loved.

SYLVAN

No one should be allowed to say that.

OLIVE

I'm unlovable. I can give you references. Now, I'm asking you to leave.

SYLVAN

I never thought I'd say this, but I, for one, am looking forward to a restful time in Boca.

(He exits. Olive is alone. She goes over to the mirror and searches for Howard.)

OLIVE

No way am I giving her this chain. She'll just have to get over it in sunny right wing California. Who needs her? And I certainly don't need those two next door. Or Carol Kandel's father. I'm a very self reliant woman. Always have been.

(She notices the notebook on the table. She opens it. )

## OLIVE

What am I supposed to do with all this? Let's see. (*She dials the first number and waits.*) Hello, HB Studios? This is --- Oh, Christ, it's a machine.... Administration. Press two. Hello, this is Olive Fi --- Press one. Hello, this Olive Fi--- Who the hell do they think they are? Okay, Okay, I'll just leave a message. This is Olive Fisher. I'm interested in teaching a class in acting for commercials. I have over thirty years of experience and have landed numerous national spots. I'm the "Gimme the sausage" lady. You can reach me at 212 691 8389. (*She hangs up.*) Okay. Let's what else do we have here? That's stupid. What the hell was she thinking? Okay. Let's try this. (*She dials another number.*) Hello? I'd like to sign up for a yoga class. What times are the --- (*She presses the numbers on the phone.*) One... Two.... Hello? Here we go again. My name is Olive Fisher. I'm interested in taking a Yoga class. Please call me at 212 691 8389.

(She hangs up and looks at the list again. She dials. The doorbell rings.)

## OLIVE

Now the super comes. (*Shouts*) Door's open!

(Focused on her phone call, she doesn't immediately see Sylvan enter the apartment.)

## OLIVE

Hello? Hello? Unbelievable. Another machine. This is outrageous. Say yes for English. Yes. Hello, is this the Jewish Federation for the Blind? Another prompt. Just give me a goddam operator! The machine doesn't understand my reply.... Yes... Hello? My name is Olive Fisher. Is this the volunteer program? ... Another recording.

(Olive looks up and sees Sylvan. He tries to suppress his delight at seeing her reaching out to the world. Olive, inwardly amused at his pleasure, continues on the phone and perhaps is even performing a bit for her audience of one.)

## OLIVE

My name is Olive Fisher. I'm a professional actress and I'd like to read or record for the blind... Yes for further options. Yes.... I can't believe this. When I get someone on the line, they're gonna wish they were deaf ....No....This is ludicrous. I have a lot to offer. I'll take my talents elsewhere. . No...This is cruel and inhumane. Who invented this phone system? The Marquis de Sade? No! Please, for the love of God, let me talk to a LIVE HUMAN BEING!! Yes! I swear, in two seconds if they don't.... Yes! I'm gonna give them one more ... YES! YES! YES!

(Lights fade out on Olive making a concerted though frustrating attempt to change her life. Sylvan, feeling remarkably at home, stretches out on the sofa. And perhaps a faint warm glow is seen in the mirror.)

END OF PLAY