

TIME'S PRICE

By

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Cast of Characters

DORA: Female (White), about 50
JILL: Female (White), about 50
HEATHER: Female (White), 14
PAUL: Male (Black), 16

Scene

A house in a small country town about two hours' drive from the metropolis. The living room/dining room. Patterned wallpaper, Currier & Ives prints, antique furnishings, a fire in the fireplace. Front door, stage right; kitchen, upstage center; stairway to second floor, stage left.

Time

January, in the first half of the 2010 decade. Act I: Friday afternoon. Act II, Scene 1: Saturday evening. Act II, Scene 2: Sunday morning. Act II, Scene 3: Sunday afternoon.

ACT ONE

1

Friday afternoon.

The door bell rings. Dora, wearing a homey dress and apron, enters from the kitchen and opens the front door.

DORA

You must be Jill.

JILL

(Off stage.)

Yes.

DORA

Come on in.

(Brief pause.)

Well, come on!

(Briefer pause.)

Quick!

(Pulling Jill on stage by her arm.)

Before I freeze!

Jill enters, dressed in jeans and a coat.

DORA

(Closing the door.)

It is a good thing for you that I got off early today.

JILL

You told me your name is...what? "Dora?"

DORA

Is that what I told you?

JILL

Yes. On the phone. Unless it wasn't you I spoke to this morning.

DORA

Oh, but it was. At **five fifteen!**

JILL

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called till later.

DORA

I had to get up at seven, anyway. Give me your coat.

Jill removes her coat. She wears a bulky sweater underneath.

DORA (cont'd)

(Taking the coat, hanging it on a clothes tree.)

I phoned around as soon as I hung up on you. Woke up half the teachers in the district, and finally found someone willing to substitute for me this afternoon. Good thing for you I did.

JILL

It was thoughtless of me. I imposed myself, didn't I? And on such short notice, too.

DORA

Ah, it's no imposition. I could have told you "no." If I hadn't made it home by now, you would be stuck.

JILL

I would have waited for you.

DORA

Where? Out in the deep freeze?

JILL

No. In...I don't know. A coffee shop.

DORA

Coffee?! Not for you, my dear! Not now. Not here.

JILL

Or at the public library.

DORA

It is **tea** time!

JILL

I intend to spend the weekend reading, anyway.

DORA

Time for a pot of Earl Grey at my simply darling country cottage!

JILL

(Looking around, and up the stairs.)

Some "cottage!"

DORA

Well, it **is** big.

JILL

Smells great.

DORA

Five bedrooms, but perfectly adorable.

JILL

As advertised.

DORA

Actually, the village library is a great place to hole up. And there's lots more on its shelves than you would expect in a backwater like ours.

JILL

I brought my own book.

DORA

Yes, Jill, at my place, you get the full treatment: oodles of old-fashioned rustic charm, even now, in the deadest part of winter. No one comes here this time of year.

JILL

It was kind of you to have me. Thank you.

DORA

You're welcome.

JILL

Why didn't you tell me "no?"

DORA

You sounded desperate. For starters, I have fresh-baked blueberry muffins. You're not a dieter, are you?

JILL

Should I be?

DORA

No...

(Looking Jill over.)

...you aren't fat enough. The blueberries themselves were frozen, of course. I made a tart, as well, and slathered it with globs of whipped cream right from one of our picturesque local cows. Fat people always fuss about how they **really shouldn't**. Come on over here. "Oh," they say, "the place is so quaint, and your baking smells simply delectable, but no, I really shouldn't..." They then proceed to inhale every edible in sight. Sign there.

Jill puts on reading glasses, signs a register, and then takes the glasses off.

DORA (cont'd)

And...your credit card.

JILL

Oh...I left my purse in the car. That was stupid, wasn't it?

DORA

You can get it later.

JILL

I mean, someone might break in and steal--.

DORA

In this little town?

JILL

(Laughing.)

Of course. I forgot where I am.

DORA

Ha! You're damn right someone could break in. Steal your stuff, take the whole...

(Puts on the reading glasses attached to a lanyard she wears around her neck, and reads the register.)

...Jaguar, for that matter.

(Taking the glasses off.)

Brand new, huh?

JILL

It's already five months old.

DORA

Yeah, even here folks make trouble. "Folks," I said. You like that?

JILL

What do you mean?

DORA

As in "folksy!" It is just the word to use in this, my homey, old-time refuge from the world. And I want you to get what you're paying for.

JILL

I'm paying for a couple of days' peace, that's all.

DORA

And I'm throwing in...fantasy! Idyllic fantasy!

JILL

You're being sarcastic.

DORA

Me?!

JILL

I don't like sarcasm.

DORA

Well, then...how 'bout truth? You do like truth, don't you?
(Brief pause.)

Good. Out here in the boonies, not so far beneath the Norman Rockwell surface, you will find---

JILL

I do not care to know.

DORA

Oh. Then you **don't** like truth?

JILL

(Laughing ruefully.)

"Truth" has been tearing me up.

DORA

Okay, then. You came here to escape the truth. Yes?
(Pause.)

Right. It is none of my goddamn business. And you, Jill, ought to tell me so. Why don't you...
(Clowning, makes a face.)

...look daggers at me and say, "Dora, it is none of your goddamn business!?"
(Brief pause.)

You don't do that because you are courteous. Unlike me.

JILL

But you've made me feel welcome already.

DORA

How courteous of you to say so. Of course, all I've done is antagonize you. It is this place...this precious never-never house: **that's** what makes you feel welcome. Look around!

JILL

It is warm.

DORA

Very warm.

JILL

Very comforting.

DORA

It caresses you, does it not?

Are you mocking me? JILL

Does it caress you? DORA

Yes. It is so...evocative. JILL

Now: take another whiff. DORA

Mmmm. The baking. JILL

And the oak fire. DORA

And the incense. Sandalwood? JILL

Uh-huh. DORA

Dora, this is great. JILL

It isn't real. DORA

It is very real. And very sad you think it isn't. JILL

(Happily.) DORA

Okay: to hell with the truth! You're running away from it, and I...truth to tell, Jill: the truth has been tearing **me** up, too.

Oh? JILL

So, let's disregard truth altogether. What do you say? DORA

(Another rueful laugh.) JILL

I don't think I can.

Forget the truth! DORA

(Holding out her arms and doing a 360 degree turn in place.)

(MORE)

DORA (cont'd)

Jill, you have flown beyond it! You have arrived! You have come down some place...**somewhere**, that's it!

(Singing.)

Somewhere over the rainbow!

JILL

Oh, that song is such a joy!

DORA

(Suddenly, with rock-hard bitterness.)

It is escapist bullshit.

(Pause.)

I go to the library a lot, myself.

JILL

Do you?

DORA

Ever since the kids moved in.

(Pause.)

Be glad, Jill, that I didn't go on singing. I have a lousy voice. And my range is pathetic: less than an octave.

(Pause.)

An eighth.

JILL

Of an octave?

DORA

My range is one eighth of one octave, exactly.

Jill, amused in spite of herself, shakes her head.

DORA (cont'd)

Our library is very peaceful.

JILL

Is it?

DORA

An excellent place to read.

JILL

If you say so.

DORA

You sound skeptical.

(Brief pause)

I mean, don't you believe me?

JILL
Why should I?

DORA
Why shouldn't you?
(Brief pause.)

Jill, this is the **library** we're talking about! I make a concrete, boring statement about...next to **nothing**, and you act as if I...I'm lying!

JILL
Aren't you?

DORA
Why would I---?!

JILL
You said: "forget the truth."

Dora screws up her face.

JILL (cont'd)
Well, you did.

Dora growls. They both laugh.

JILL (cont'd)
Are they noisy, then? Those kids of yours?

DORA
They aren't mine. Are you a mom?

JILL
A grandma.

DORA
Shall you have your tea now, ma'am, or do we fetch your luggage first?

JILL
You advertise this as a quiet retreat.

DORA
Oh, they're quiet enough. It's only me. I am hypersensitive. Not used to company.

JILL
Sure you are. You take in guests.

DORA
Placid adults, yes. Customarily in the sleepy summertime.

JILL

These children are not placid, then?

DORA

Paul is. As for Heather...if she bothers you, you can have your money back.

JILL

So...the girl is a problem?

DORA

Not really. She's just a teenager.

JILL

Then what truth, exactly, has been tearing you up?

DORA

I told you: "folks" here make trouble. Like people everywhere. Like people everywhere, they stink.

JILL

People...people mean well. They aspire, they yearn. And, when they act, it...sometimes it comes out wrong. Dora, don't be sour. Don't ruin my weekend for me.

DORA

(Pause.)

Sit down. Please.

Dora exits to the kitchen, then enters with a tray holding plate, cup, saucer, cream, sugar, napkin, utensils. She sets the table for one.

JILL

You honestly don't think I'm fat?

DORA

(Lifting Jill's sweater for a peek.)

Nah.

Dora exits back to the kitchen. Jill sits. Dora enters from the kitchen with a tray of pastries and pot of tea. She sets the stuff on the table.

DORA (cont'd)

Is there anything else you would like?

JILL

(Sighing.)

To have my whole life back.

DORA

All of it?

JILL

Everything.

DORA

I once had acne. Big juicy zits like you wouldn't believe. You ever have big juicy zits? If you did, you wouldn't want **them** back.

Dora takes a bell from the shelf, puts it on the table.

DORA

Here. Ring if you need me.

Dora exits to the kitchen. Pause. Jill looks at the bell, then rings it. Dora enters from the kitchen.

DORA (cont'd)

Yes?

JILL

You can't be serious.

DORA

Sorry?

JILL

Pull up a chair, will you?

DORA

No, thank you. I am only here to serve.

Dora exits to the kitchen. Pause. Then Jill rings the bell. Dora enters from the kitchen.

JILL

(Holding the bell up.)

What do I need this for?

DORA

To get my attention.

JILL

I could call.

DORA

That would not be in keeping with the...

JILL

...the ethos of the place?

DORA

Good word choice.

JILL

Dora, your kitchen is five steps away. You would hear me even if I didn't raise my voice.

DORA

I have worked very hard to establish a...

JILL

...a certain feel, yes? To---shall we say?---evoke, enhance, and purvey the cozy experience of simpler times.

DORA

That's good! I am going to post that line on my web site!
 (She grabs a file box from a shelf.)
 This is my quote collection.

JILL

Kindly get yourself a cup and a plate and take off that Ma Kettle apron and sit down there!

DORA

(Setting the file box on the table.)
 Off-season clientele!

Dora exits to the kitchen. She re-enters sans apron, with utensils, cup and saucer, plate. She sets them on the table, pulls up a chair, sits, pulls a blank index card out of the file box, puts her reading glasses on, and writes. She then shows what she's written to Jill.

DORA

Did I get it right?

JILL

(Reads.)
 Uh-huh.

DORA
 (Pouring tea.)
 What book did you bring?

JILL
 An anthology.
 (Sipping the tea.)
 Ah, this hits the spot.

DORA
 (Pause.)
 Well?
 (Pause.)
 You wanted company. What's up?

JILL
 Make small talk.

DORA
 Anthology of what?

JILL
 Short stories.
 (Pause.)
 I should be celebrating.

DORA
 Yeah...?

JILL
 I...uh...

DORA
 I'm listening.

JILL
 Well, finally---thank heaven---I have made it through "the change."

DORA
 (Raising her cup.)
 Mazel tov.

JILL
 Isn't your last name Italian?

DORA
 I have a friend who has corrupted my vocabulary.

JILL
 Do you take hormones?

DORA
I'm still regular.

JILL
Forgive me. I thought---

DORA
No, no. I am of a certain age. But my mom didn't stop till she was fifty-three, so why should I?

JILL
Is this friend of yours a man?

DORA
His name is Lennie Lefkowitz.

JILL
Does he live in town?

DORA
How could he? The folks who live here all have names like "Atkins" and "Finch" and "Rutherford Hayes."

JILL
I'm on hormones. Haven't been for long, but my doctor's already suggesting that I stop. It's up to me to decide.

DORA
Our townsmen, they are ruddy; and our women fair! Mangia.

JILL
Oh, but I---

DORA
---really shouldn't!

Dora bites into a muffin.

JILL
What grade do you teach?

DORA
Second.
(Pronouncing the name with an Indian accent: flapped "r", each "p" distinctly plosive. Unselfconscious and facile, without pause)
Geeta Pratap is such a doll.

JILL
Geeta...?

DORA

(Munching away.)

Pratap. My substitute. Helpful, pleasant. Just what I am not. When the blueberries are fresh, it does make a difference. She dropped everything to come fill in. Sorry about my misanthropic crack before. It's just, some of Paul's schoolmates...the way they treat him, I get so mad. The cream really is from this morning's milking. Paul never complains, but I know what's been going on.

(Serving herself a piece of tart.)

Try a slice.

JILL

How do you know?

DORA

Come on! I whipped the cream myself.

JILL

I mean, if Paul doesn't tell you...

DORA

Lennie works at the high school. He keeps me up to date.

JILL

Does he teach there?

DORA

No. We locals got together and asked
(Perfect and unselfconscious
Mexi-Spanish pronunciation.)
Hernando Gutierrez---Hernando's dairy farm is that way, a quarter mile down the road---to hold a bit of his production back from the cooperative, and let us buy from him direct. And so, Jill...

(Biting into her tart.)

Mmm. How 'bout it? You **are** on vacation.

JILL

Vacation? Hardly. But okay. Give me a piece of the tart.

DORA

(Cutting the tart.)

They bait him. Paul, I mean. Not all of them. Just a...a certain crowd.

JILL

A **small** piece.

DORA

His sister Heather, on the other hand, fits right in. There! An itty-bitty chunk of tart. With lots and lots of crumbs. They have no calories. You can eat crumbs to your heart's content.

JILL

You mean if I eat them, I'll overcome its discontent?

DORA

Hey, what's the problem? That your car's not new any more?

JILL

No. That **I'm** not.

DORA

(Unselfconscious, facile Arabic pronunciation: guttural "h in the surname.)

Hassan Al-Ahmed has a Jaguar, too. He's my insurance agent. What do **you** do?

(Pause.)

Hassan is on the planning commission. He's very civic-minded.

JILL

I'm a writer, actually.

DORA

What kind of writer can afford to buy that car?

(Pause.)

So...Heather's been running around with boys from the very crowd that baits her brother. Those kids are wild. I was a wild kid, myself.

JILL

I wasn't.

DORA

This bunch, though, they...they get hateful. My sister Christine was wilder than **me**.

JILL

I stayed in line, on the straight and narrow. Married my high school sweetheart.

DORA

Marriage never crossed my mind.

JILL

He was my very first lover. The only lover I ever had.

DORA

Christine and I, we had so many guys, we couldn't keep count of 'em.

JILL

My only lover, that is, until three months ago.

DORA

(Pause.)

You ought to go for a walk. Tomorrow. They say it will be sunny, not so cold. This town is stunning in the winter, when the shadows of the maples' bare branches stretch out even at noon. Won't you have a muffin?

JILL

(Brief pause.)

Sure.

Jill takes a muffin.

DORA

Who wrote the short stories?

JILL

Women.

DORA

Yes, indeed: I was hellish when I was young. But Christine! She was way, way out there. And then, at the end, she was so wasted, and so helpless.

JILL

I'm leaving my husband. I told him last night.

DORA

After what? Thirty years?

JILL

"Think about it," he said. "Once you're gone, I will never, ever take you back." Thirty-two. College together, then his career and our first house and our family. Then our next house, and more family. Then my career, and another house and...and then more family. Our grandson's first birthday is next Wednesday.

DORA

Bad timing for a breakup.

JILL

"Think about it," he said. "Go away for the weekend, and think." Courteous as I am, I agreed.

DORA

At five-fifteen this morning.

JILL

No, at three-thirty. I found your web site by four. And started dialing your number then and there. But...caught myself.

DORA

Four A.M.?!

They laugh.

JILL

So: I am here as a courtesy to my husband. Here to bide my time till Sunday night.

DORA

You mean: you're here to **think**?

JILL

No. My thinking's done. Sunday, we officially call it quits. We will go to the birthday party Wednesday, though. I would never miss it; neither would he. We will go...together.

DORA

I never could keep up with that sister of mine; and had the good sense not to want to. I took precautions, she had babies. I smoked my drug of choice, she shot hers up and she drank. It was her liver finally did her in. Did having children make it all worthwhile?

(Pause.)

For Christine, as it turned out, motherhood swept her away. It became everything. I can't give myself to those kids the way she did.

JILL

Instinct guides you when they're your own. It sure guided me.

(Laughing.)

I still have instincts.

DORA

No?!

JILL

Yes! Animal spirits!

DORA

A fat old bag like you?

(Pause.)

Anyway, her kids are in **my** charge now.

JILL

You'll feel your way.

DORA

I don't know what that means.

JILL

They'll do what they do, and you'll respond. You'll reach inside, deep down, to where the love comes from. And then you'll do the best you can.

DORA

I won't reach anywhere. I'll just do what's right. So: you've been having fun, huh?

JILL

Yes. I'm enjoying myself very much. Thank you.

DORA

For the past three months, I mean.

JILL

It's been...good.

DORA

Is that all?

JILL

It has been...fabulous.

DORA

(Brief pause.)

There's a dig nearby. An Indian village. Pre-Columbian. Be sure to see it before you leave.

JILL

I envy you.

DORA

An archaeologist and her students work there every summer.

JILL

Because your life has been...interesting.

DORA

It has?

JILL

Colorful. You know: adventurous.

DORA

I had kicks when I was young, that's all.. And when I was...not so young. The dig is on private property. Its owner is

(Vietnamese pronunciation: "ph" a "p-h" sound, not an "f;" and "ng" very nasal, masking the "g." Facile and unselfconscious.)

Kam-Yin Phuong. She'll let you in if you ask.

JILL

Yet another old-time American name.

DORA

I didn't mean to spoil the down-home atmospheric.

JILL

I have chosen to let the atmospheric sweep me away. And so...well, God bless all of them. Lefkowitz included.

DORA

He lives above the Spice and Flower Shoppe. That's where you want to buy your souvenirs. The couple who run it couldn't be more delightful.

JILL

And what might their names be?

DORA

Guess.

JILL

Each is...five; no, seven syllables, right? And, transliterated into our alphabet, totally unpronounceable.

DORA

Ogden and Ida Pritchett.

A silent take between the two.

JILL

Do you spend a lot of time there?

DORA

I'm not a tourist.

JILL

Above the shop, I mean.

DORA

(Standing up.)

Would you like to see your room?

JILL

I'd like to stay here and have more tea.

DORA

(Pouring tea into Jill's cup.)

I have dishes to wash.

Dora exits to the kitchen.

JILL

(Pause.)

Dora?

(Pause.)

Dora!

Pause. Jill rings the bell. Pause.
She rings more. Dora enters and
takes the bell, puts it on a shelf.

JILL (cont'd)

(Pause.)

How long have you had them here?

DORA

Since September. I never wanted kids.

JILL

How old are they?

DORA

He's sixteen. She's fourteen.

JILL

Are you strict?

DORA

Ah, they're bound to misbehave from time to time. Let 'em.
As long as they aren't vicious. To deliberately hurt someone
is impermissible.

JILL

But, if you were to hurt somebody inadvertently...?

DORA

Well...that can be tricky, can't it? Figuring out other
people's intentions when they go about doing what they do?

JILL

Even figuring out your own.

DORA

What it all boils down to...it boils down to decency. I
demand decency.

JILL

Have you ever been in love?

DORA

Why are you reading those stories?

JILL

I haven't read any of them yet.

DORA

Here you are having a crisis---

JILL

No, I'm not.

DORA

You should be giving your situation long, hard thought...hard and solitary. Not falling back on some parochial compendium of other people's attitude.

JILL

It isn't "attitude." It's literature.

DORA

Not if it segregates itself. Women are human beings, you know? Not some sub-species with a culture all its own.

JILL

(Pause.)

What does Lennie do at the high school?

DORA

He's the janitor.

JILL

(Pause.)

I wouldn't call it a crisis. I mean, I've already made my decision. It's a...hiatus. A hiatus and a...a juncture.

(Pause.)

The **janitor**?!

DORA

Yeah. You should see **his** car.

JILL

(Pause.)

I'd like to tell you about myself. But it would bore you.

DORA

I'm sure it would.

(Pause.)

Tell me.

JILL

Why would you let me bore you?

DORA

Decency. I told you I'm big on decency; and I practice what I preach.

JILL
There are different kinds of love.

DORA
So they say.

JILL
I have discovered a kind I never knew.
(Pause.)
What does he drive?

DORA
Jill, I am willing to listen. So get on with it, and stop bringing Lennie up.

JILL
But Dora, he's beneath you. You live in this marvelous house, and you are...well, I like you---.

DORA
Why?

JILL
I can't help liking you in spite of yourself, and this man---

DORA
---cleans toilets.

JILL
Is he your boyfriend?!

DORA
I would not label him.

JILL
"Boyfriend" is not a label.

DORA
It is one of those words that summarily mislead, oversimplify, and demean.

JILL
It is a characterization. Dora, this is language. It is what we who are not nitpickers---

DORA
---who are not petulant.

JILL
I would call you..."testy." It is what amiable people---and difficult ones, too---use to communicate.

(Pause.)

(MORE)

JILL (cont'd)
 Just where in your life does Lennie fit?
 (Pause.)
 You're being courteous.

Dora smiles.

JILL (cont'd)
 Be yourself.

DORA
 Repeat the question.

JILL
 Where in your life does Lennie fit?

DORA
 (Matter-of-fact, thrown away. No feeling
 at all.)
 It's none of your goddamn business.
 (Pouring.)
 More tea?

JILL
 (Pause.)
 I am more confused than I've been pretending.

DORA
 But you're leaving your husband anyway.

JILL
 That's right. The confusion is emotional, not practical.
 (Pause.)
 If you let me, I would ask if you love Lennie.

DORA
 Ask.

JILL
 So you can tell me again it's none of my goddamn business?

DORA
 Well..."love" is just another label.

JILL
 It has a definition.

DORA
 It has baggage. It is so weighed down with innuendo, and
 expectation, and eons of misuse, that we should scrap it.

JILL

What you call "baggage," I call "resonance."

DORA

Lennie drives a Ford Fairlane; or what's left of it. He scours ancient junkyards for spare parts to keep it going.

JILL

I am in love.

DORA

Okay.

JILL

Thank you.

DORA

What for?

JILL

Listening. I have so been wanting to talk. For weeks and weeks. But I've been crazy busy with work, and so have all my friends. What little spare time I've had, I've spent with...with *him*.

DORA

Your new flame.

JILL

It's been---for me---it's been a resurrection.

DORA

I always did think marriage bizarre, but come on, Jill: it can't have been the same as death.

JILL

What's your idea of a romantic getaway?

DORA

Oh, something that was in the moment once, that since has settled into memory in...a certain way. Nothing I would preconceive.

JILL

How about a week on the town in Milwaukee?

DORA

Bratwurst, beer and polka. What's wrong with that?

JILL

At the "National Model Railroad Association's 75th Anniversary Annual Convention And Train Show?" That is my husband's idea of romance.

DORA

So, then: your new gentleman friend does not himself enthuse over locomotives and cabooses?

JILL

Or over tank cars, or flat cars, or stock cars, or hoppers, or boxcars boxcars boxcars!

DORA

Sarcasm!

Dora puts on her reading glasses and rummages through her card file.

JILL

I did not mean to be sarcastic.

DORA

(Reading from a card she's pulled out.)

"...boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow..."

JILL

Sarcasm is corrosive.

DORA

"...through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night..." That's from "Howl."

JILL

From what?

DORA

The poem. You know. Well, maybe you don't.

JILL

My "friend," as you call him---unlike my spouse---enthuses over **me**. And so, once again and at long last, I have hope.

DORA

"Hope!" Another word that **resonates**.

JILL

Yes!

DORA

Girl, you have got me absolutely quivering!

JILL

(Stung.)

A moment ago, I thought your indulgence generous. I did not expect you to turn patronizing.

(Pause.)

Have you read many women?

DORA

I've read all sorts of authors.

JILL

I simply want to speak to you as a woman.

DORA

Right.

JILL

What does that mean to you?

(Pause.)

To me, it means an unrestricted give-and-take.

DORA

If you want an unrestricted taker, I'm all ears.

JILL

Why won't you be a giver?

(Pause.)

Oh, I'll just read my book. If it's any good, it will be full of words with "baggage," as you call it.

DORA

Well, if you end up deciding it might help, I would still be happy---and I mean it---to hear everything you have to say.

JILL

In order to cut me down?

(Pause.)

I treasure words like those. The very ones you snipe at. Resonant words, each with its own aura. Words that, when they dance together, make life rich.

DORA

Life is rich. Or it isn't.

JILL

Whatever anyone says?

DORA

Or doesn't say.

JILL

I disagree.

DORA

This new guy must really sweet-talk you.

JILL

The talk is sweet, the smiles are sweet, the embraces...they are honey itself: the sweetest devastation.

(Pause.)

(MORE)

Silence? JILL (cont'd)

Restraint. DORA

JILL
Dora, open yourself. To the possibilities...to the transformative power of expansive expression.

DORA
You sound like a commercial.

JILL
Why shouldn't I? I write commercials.

DORA
Flannery O'Connor!

Dora puts on her reading glasses and rummages through her card file.

JILL
Who?

DORA
(Pulling out an index card.)
Here she is: "...the answer to the question 'Who speaks for America today?' will have to be the advertising agencies...no one has ever accused them of not being affirmative." You **have** read **her** stories, I hope?

JILL
I don't think so. The name...no, it doesn't ring a bell. But I will look her up. I like the quote.

DORA
It does come off as positive.

JILL
Very!

DORA
However, she goes on: "...no one has ever accused them" (meaning people like you) "of not being affirmative. **Where the artist is still trusted**, he---." This is a generic usage of the pronoun, you understand.

JILL
Sure.

DORA

"...he" (the artist) "will **not** be looked to for assurance. Those who believe that **art** proceeds from a healthy, and **not** from a **diseased**, faculty of the mind will take what he shows them as **revelation**, not of what we **ought to be** but of what we **are** at a given time and---"

Heather, with a book pack on her back, enters by the front door. She is dressed like any high school girl, and for the weather.

HEATHER

How cold is a witch's tit?

DORA

Heather! We have a guest.

HEATHER

Everyone is saying that's how cold it is. Me, I'm not so sure.

(To Jill.)

Are you a witch?

DORA

This is Jill.

HEATHER

Hi.

JILL

(Shaking Heather's hand.)

Pleased to meet you.

HEATHER

If you **are** a witch, will you let me feel **your** tit?

DORA

Where is your brother?

HEATHER

The debate ran late. But he'll be here in a flash. How can he not? He's always breathing down my neck.

(To Jill.)

I didn't mean no offense. **I** get felt up all the time.

Heather exits to the kitchen.

JILL

(Pause.)

I'll go get my stuff.

DORA
 No. Wait. For Paul. He'll help you.
 (Pause.)
 He's on the debating team.
 (Pause.)
 I'm sorry.

JILL
 I was once a teenage girl myself.

DORA
 But well-behaved.

JILL
 Too well-behaved.

DORA
 You should hear Paul in competition. Arguing
 about...anything and everything. He's amazingly persuasive,
 whatever side he takes.

JILL
 It sounds so fake: taking whatever position they tell you
 to.

DORA
 But, Jill, isn't that what **you** do? Someone pays you, so you
 make their case.

JILL
 Someone offers a product. I present that product.

DORA
 You don't "present" anything. You seduce people into
 thinking they have to have what they don't have to have.

JILL
 Dora, there is an essence in things. In sea and sky---.

DORA
 In air and light and life itself!

JILL
 All right, ridicule me. But there is an essence. Not just in
 bright and flowery things. In broken pencils, too, and rusty
 hinges.

DORA
 Professional opinion: is my web site good, or what?

JILL
 I'm here, aren't I?

DORA

I can't tell you how excruciating it was for me to hype this place.

JILL

I'm sure.

DORA

Every phrase I wrote, and didn't delete---every phrase I **kept**, because I knew it worked---I cringed. Do you write slop like that day in, day out?

JILL

I write in a similar vein. And fortunately, when I do, I am not---as you were when you wrote that page---at odds with myself. Now, if you ever wanted to go into advertising, and write copy consistent with who you are rather than who you're not, you would find that---sickeningly enough---there is more opportunity in the industry for people like you, than for people like me.

DORA

For witty people?

JILL

For flippant people.

DORA

I'm flippant?

JILL

And for ironists.

DORA

Who's ironic? I'm a cynic.

JILL

You certainly are, but---. But that---what you just said---**that** was **ironic**.

(Pause.)

Stop trying to confuse me.

DORA

To confuse you even **more**, you mean.

JILL

They assign me a product. I identify its essence. Then I find words to convey that essence.

(Pause.)

You are being courteous again.

Dora shrugs.

JILL

Does Heather have fabulous dreams?

DORA

Huh?

JILL

Oh, I had---. When I was her age, the dreams I had...

DORA

"Dreams!" Yes! Essences and dreams.

JILL

Aha! The courtesy is breaking down.

DORA

You, Jill, are verbally incontinent.

JILL

All of us, Dora---from our first flush of consciousness---have dreams. The years go by, and our dreams, frustrated, take refuge, deep down, within our hearts. That's our essence: those dreams within. And that essence of ours within craves other essences: essences without. I convey those other essences, I serve people's dreams.

DORA

Verbally incontinent and rhetorically flatulent.

JILL

I try to serve my own dreams, too.

DORA

You seem to be succeeding.

JILL

Yes. Romance!

DORA

I was thinking of that car of yours.

JILL

It is not the money! They pay me well, but I believe in what I do! I believe in language that rouses our hearts, and sweeps us away. And I believe in...in romance!

DORA

Romance, if it be there, is something that you live. Not something you believe in.

JILL

I do! I believe in it, **and** I live it. Yes, am living it...**now**! I believe in the romance of my romance, and of all romance!

Paul enters by the front door with his books. He is dressed like any high school boy, and for the weather.

PAUL

We won!

(Noticing Jill.)

Oh. Hello.

Heather enters from the kitchen with a beer.

DORA

Heather!

HEATHER

It's Friday.

DORA

You do not drink alcohol without asking me first. Jill, this is Paul.

PAUL

(Extending his hand to Jill.)

How do you do?

Jill shakes Paul's hand.

HEATHER

When I come home on Friday, I have a beer.

DORA

With my permission!

(To Paul.)

Jill will be a guest here for the weekend. Her luggage is in her car.

PAUL

(To Jill.)

The Jaguar?

JILL

Yes.

PAUL

I'll go get it.

DORA

Give Paul your keys.

JILL

My keys? Oh, they...they're in my right-hand pocket. That coat, there.

PAUL

(To Dora, as he gets the keys.)

We won in a walk. Next week won't be so easy.

DORA

(To Jill.)

Next week they debate the toughest team in their league.

PAUL

So pick an issue, Aunt Dora. I need you to keep me in form.

DORA

(To Jill.)

He uses me as a sparring partner on weekends.

HEATHER

(To Jill.)

You want to know why?

JILL

Do tell.

HEATHER

Because this woman here can't stop arguing.

PAUL

Heather, you could have asked for that beer. You know she wouldn't have turned you down.

HEATHER

Butt out.

Heather exits up the stairs.

PAUL

(To Jill.)

I use my aunt because she's sharp. I hope you like it here.

JILL

It's very nice.

PAUL

Heather...sometimes she makes people uncomfortable. But she's okay, really.

JILL

Certainly, she is.

PAUL

She's a city kid, you see, so living in this little town kind of shakes her up.

DORA

It should shake **you**.

PAUL

Aunt Dora, I told you: those jerks don't bother me.

DORA

Paul, Heather has not been shaken up. And "those jerks" are her friends.

PAUL

Don't worry. I'll keep her out of trouble.

(To Jill.)

Thanks for cutting my sister a little slack.

Jill's keys in hand, Paul exits by the front door.

DORA

You want your money back?

JILL

I haven't paid you yet. Relax, Dora. I like the girl.

DORA

You like my false advertising, too?

JILL

It wasn't false.

DORA

But the townies have such funny names. And my nephew's out of kilter with the fantasy I peddle.

JILL

He's a nice boy.

DORA

I take that back. Paul is as in kilter as can be. He brings tradition to life.

JILL

What tradition?

DORA

Our oldest, Jill. The one that's indestructible. Paul
revives it just by being here. Those friends Heather has
would truly make our forebears proud.

###END OF ACT ONE###

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

Saturday evening.

Dora sits, wearing glasses, reading and laughing. Jill enters by the front door. She takes off her coat and hangs it on the clothes tree.

JILL

I didn't laugh. And I read every story in that book.

DORA

(Taking off her glasses.)

Some of them are good!

JILL

They are uninspired. **All** of them.

DORA

It must be starry tonight.

JILL

It's cold. The publisher's marketing was deceptive.

DORA

It was warmer this afternoon. I told you to take your walk in the sunshine.

JILL

I bought what I thought was an anthology about women's dreams, and their trials and...and their---

DORA

---their "passions"? **That's** a word that "resonates."

(Pause.)

It's a new moon, isn't it?

JILL

I didn't see any moon.

DORA

Exactly. And it isn't cloudy. The stars must be really bright.

JILL

Why don't you go look at them, then?

DORA

I want to finish this before you leave.

JILL

There's no hurry. You can keep it.

DORA

A perfect night, and no city lights to dim the sky. You really ought to stargaze while you're here.

JILL

Don't tell me what I ought to do.

Dora puts her glasses on, and reads.

JILL (cont'd)

Heather's patience is wearing thin.

Dora takes off her glasses.

JILL (cont'd)

We had a chat after dinner.

DORA

She has no patience.

Dora puts her glasses on, and reads.

JILL

Aren't reading glasses horrible?

(Pause.)

She wants to spread her wings, to revel in her glory.

DORA

(Still reading.)

Jill-speak.

JILL

Reading glasses, hormone replacement, painful gums and dried out, spotted skin.

Dora takes off her glasses.

JILL

I was talking about myself.

DORA

Yes: you tend to do that.

JILL

You close down.

DORA

Okay, Dora: be nice. Open up. My back hurts, my knees ache, and my hips do, too. As for reading glasses...I would not be without them.

Dora puts her glasses on, and reads.

JILL

At least we have the aches and pains in common.

Dora takes off her glasses.

DORA

Look, I am not like you. And **you** are not like **me**.

JILL

No. You're right. I'm more like Heather.

DORA

Heather, to my knowledge, does not ache all over.

JILL

Oh, yes she does.

DORA

Resonantly speaking.

JILL

It is breathtaking: the way girls flower. The way sex comes achingly upon them.

Dora puts her glasses on, and reads.

JILL

She can't stand Paul.

Dora takes off her glasses.

DORA

It is his concern for her that she can't stand. His mom depended on his reliability and devotion. Heather doesn't know their worth. As for the book---the **marketing** of the book---I agree with you: it is totally misleading.

JILL

Once sex has come on some of us, it stays.

DORA

Every story I have read in here has its own perspective. Every author has her own concerns. And not a one of them offers facile assurance, or comes to neat conclusions.

JILL

The sex may not always go full throttle, but it doesn't stop.

DORA

No, of course it doesn't. Even while it idles, it purrs along, waiting for Prince Charming to climb on board and kick it into overdrive. The dust jacket does lead you to expect pandering and special pleading. Well, they have to package to sell, I guess.

JILL

Is Lennie *your* Prince Charming?

DORA

How Lennie and I feel about each other is for *us* to know. I will tell you, though, that I haven't stayed with him overnight since the kids arrived. Because Heather is at that very juncture you've been sentimentalizing. She needs someone who is always here for her, and steady.

JILL

She has Paul.

DORA

Whom, you say, she can't stand. Well, he's a kid, too, and they both need a dependable adult. Like you were, I suppose, once upon a time.

JILL

I was never celibate.

DORA

It's good to know that for all your husband's faults, there has been that physical bond between you.

JILL

We sleep in the same bed...always have. Every so often, nature takes its course.

DORA

I have forged so many bonds, and not just physical. So many...most of them long withering away. But my bond with Christine lasted. We did test it. Over and over. It always held strong. Heather and Paul bonded in the confused and ugly circumstances of their earliest years, and their bond, so far, has lasted, too. All I want is that it still be intact when the time comes for them to leave.

JILL

Whether or not they turn out "decent?"

DORA

Oh...decency. That's just *my* preoccupation. It's Christine's preoccupation that matters most to me. She wanted her kids to stick together: no more, no less. I promised her I would see they did.

JILL

Well, then: just you hold your ground.

DORA

Really? Why not keep singing hosannas to Heather's impudence?

JILL

Oh, my daughter popped into mind. They **can** be obnoxious at that age.

DORA

And have obnoxious friends.

JILL

Are you sure those friends of hers are all that bad?

DORA

They torment my nephew.

JILL

Well, some kids...simply don't like others. It's always been that way.

(Pause.)

Dora, don't tell me they pick on him because he's African-American. You yourself joke about who lives here. About the amazing diversity of even this little place. Old categories have broken down. Don't tell me those guys pick on Paul because of color.

DORA

There was a black family moved in several years ago. They didn't stay long.

JILL

Because they were mistreated?

DORA

Not as far as I could see. Now, Paul is here, and he's the only black in town.

JILL

We live in a new demographic, Dora. We've been living in it since you and I grew up. You see it in the faces at my office. It shapes my product. We have elected a black President! Those kids you say are picking on Paul were born into this new world. It isn't novel to them, it isn't alien, it isn't threatening. It is the way things are.

(Pause.)

May I tell you about my boyfriend?

DORA

Without fear of derision, you mean?
(Pause.)

Go ahead.

JILL

My lover is twelve years younger than me. Six feet one,
sea-green eyes, thick wavy hair.

DORA

Will you marry him?

JILL

I don't know. **He's** not divorced yet, either.

DORA

But he's given you---as you told me yesterday---"hope?"

JILL

Yes, but the hope I have is not an expectation of marriage.

DORA

Then what is it?

JILL

It isn't any expectation.

DORA

But doesn't it anticipate the future?

JILL

No. No...it really doesn't. Without it, well...sure: the future is inconceivable. But hope exists in the present, and it isn't fanciful...not fanciful at all. It has taken hold of me because someone loves me in the here and now. And it has transfigured me, not because of anything that may yet come, but because of what is.

DORA

So, then: this guy loves you, and your husband doesn't?

JILL

My husband **says** he does.

DORA

There is a bond between Lennie and me. Has been for...well, a hell-of-a-lot less than thirty-two years. Which is just as well. If I had met him that far back, we would have consumed each other in a couple of months.

JILL

Oh, then he was wild, too.

DORA

Not at first. As Lennie tells it, when he was a teenager, he was affectionate and shy. Girls like me ignored him, and fell for preening idiots. **There's** some excitement you missed out on, Jill. Unless, of course, your husband was an idiot.

JILL

No. He was a bit of a clown. Funny as could be. Confident, too, but self-effacing, and always considerate. He hasn't changed.

DORA

So, fast-forward and Lennie now is over twenty, but still a virgin. He figures the only way to get some ass is to act like one. He does. It works.

JILL

Does Lennie agree with you that marriage is "bizarre?"

DORA

He tells me I'm judgmental. But he doesn't want to marry, any more than I do. Says "if the conversations you thrive on are the ones you have with yourself, you should live alone."

JILL

I'm going to tell my husband that tomorrow.

DORA

"For people," he says, "who need a **foil**, marriage is the way to go."

JILL

For people who need **companionship**.

DORA

What Lennie calls his "Don Juan phase" lasts ten years or so. He has a grand old time, and catches up on what he missed. No more need to keep acting like a jerk.

JILL

Maybe it isn't that marriage is for some, and not for others. Maybe it's for some early on, and others later.

DORA

Does your husband need companionship?

JILL

Oh, he'll have his boxcars: double-door, and plug-door, too. When's your debate---your mock debate---with Paul?

DORA

Tomorrow.

JILL
Why not have it tonight? I'd like to listen.

DORA
Paul is out.

JILL
Tell me what Lennie's like now.

DORA
He's...himself. "There is no more futile effort," he once told me, "than the effort it takes to be what you're not. It's an effort worth making once," he said, "to find that out."

JILL
Where did Paul go?

DORA
I don't know. Maybe a movie. The Yarborough girl's a movie buff.

JILL
Who?

DORA
His date. She lives seven or eight blocks from here. "After you've been who you're not," Lennie says, "you can gladly be who you are."

JILL
Paul is on a date?

DORA
It's Saturday night, he's a high school junior.

JILL
But...

DORA
What?

JILL
Nothing.

DORA
But...there are no black girls in town.

JILL
Is that right?

DORA

I just told you. So: Lennie claims he was affectionate when he was young, and then for ten years, he squelched it. He sure is affectionate now. You wouldn't like him, though, Jill. He isn't upbeat. Sees the world for what it is. When he's cheerful, he grins, but looks forlorn. When he gets glum, it makes him twinkle.

JILL

You are in love.

DORA

It's wonderful to be with Lennie. What you can't understand is that it's also wonderful to be alone. When I go walking by myself, it restores me. When you do, you fall apart.

JILL

I have **been** restored.

DORA

By Prince Charming, yes. Well, for Lennie and me, at least, marriage would not be wise.

JILL

That...or you and Lennie aren't wise yourselves.

DORA

Would you have let your daughter date a boy who looks like Paul? Would it have been "wise?" No, don't even try to answer. "Wisdom" does not interest you. And as far as I'm concerned---even though it appeals to me and I can't help using it---"wisdom" is just another abstract, impossible word.

JILL

It's an attractive word.

DORA

For its substance? Such substance as it may or may not have? Or for its ring? For the "resonance" in it, that you might find some way to exploit? Here's a word **I** find attractive, Jill: "candor." Will you be candid?

JILL

I have been.

DORA

You're having a fling.

JILL

It's more than that. It's intimate dinners in quiet places. His glance, his touch, his breath. It's a pouring out, hour after hour after hour, of all we've been holding inside, year after year after year.

DORA

You *pour* to him?

(Brief pause.)

I suppose you do. You keep *gushing* to me. Anyway: you are not "in love," define "love" as you will. Unless it be with your husband.

JILL

To hell with my husband!

DORA

Yeah, sure.

JILL

To hell with transformers! With crossings! With turntables, and turnouts, and switches.

DORA

This is not *candor*.

JILL

Okay, Dora: here's candor for you: to hell with my husband, and to hell with...with *love*! Yes! With love itself! And up with passion and...and *lust*! I am crazed with lust, possessed by it, and I have a man who's crazed and possessed, and who devours me! *Me*! Over and over and over again! This "fat old bag!"

DORA

That was---

JILL

I know: when you called me that, you were making a joke. *We* joke, too. And we fuck. We laugh, and fuck some more. We confide, and we sympathize, and we soothe each other, and...oh, my, how we fuck *then*! After that, we get silly: we tussle, we play and we...fuck again. So tell me, Dora, one more time. Tell me I'm not Heather! That I'm not a female in full flower! That I'm not the woman *you* were when *both* of us were young! Tell me I should know myself, and be myself, and *I'll* tell *you*: I will *not* give in! I will not capitulate to time!

Paul, bloodied, enters
half-limping, half-hopping, by the
front door. Dora jumps up.

DORA

(Grabbing Paul's arm.)

Paul!

PAUL

I'm okay.

DORA

(To Jill.)

Get me bandages and antiseptic. Second floor bathroom.

(Sitting Paul down.)

Who did this to you?!

PAUL

(Putting his lame foot up on a chair.)

Nobody.

DORA

I **know** who did it!

(To Jill.)

Go on! The cabinet under the sink. Bottom drawer.

Jill rushes upstairs.

PAUL

Aunt Dora, you're hysterical.

DORA

I do not **get** hysterical. Where were you?

PAUL

At the pond. We went skating.

DORA

You don't have ice skates.

PAUL

I borrowed Mr. Yarborough's.

DORA

You don't know **how** to ice skate.

PAUL

She was teaching me.

Dora feels Paul's ankle.

PAUL (cont'd)

Ouch!

Jill rushes downstairs and hands Dora the first-aid paraphernalia. Dora goes about administering to Paul.

DORA

Then where did you go?

PAUL

Back to her house. We had cocoa with her parents, and I headed home.

DORA

So early?

PAUL

Oh, she has to get up first thing in the morning. Eight-thirty church service, then some 4-H field trip.

DORA

How many of them did you fight?

PAUL

If it had only been one, he'd be a lot worse off now than I am.

DORA

That's enough bravado, Paul. I think your ankle's broken. I'm calling the police.

PAUL

Don't!

DORA

Then tell me this was not a hate crime.

PAUL

I started it.

DORA

I don't believe you.

Dora gets her phone out.

PAUL

Stop!

(Brief pause.)

I left the Yarboroughs', and headed home. Then I heard a ruckus. There was this crowd, and kids throwing rocks at the window-pane remnants in the abandoned gas station near the post office. Heather was with them. I would have moved on, but...they weren't just rowdy. They were beyond that---kind of scary---and I figured they were drugged. Maybe on coke; more likely, crank. So I took her hand, and told her to come with me.

DORA

No doubt she took her hand right back.

PAUL

Go easy on her, Aunt Dora. She's just a kid.

DORA

Then what?

PAUL

One of them asks, why am I bothering her? I tell him "she's my sister." As if he didn't know. "Sister?" he says. "What do you mean 'sister?'" "We had the same mother," I tell him. "The same mother?!" he says. "What kind of mother is **that**?!" Aunt Dora, let's drop it, okay? If you think my ankle's broken, take me to the emergency room.

DORA

What did he say then?

PAUL

"I'll tell you what kind of mother that is." Look, it's going take us over an hour to get there, and then we sit and wait, and then there are X-rays and we probably wait again, and finally they put me in a cast. I want to get it over with.

DORA

So do I.

PAUL

Then let's go!

DORA

We will.

PAUL

Now!

(Pause.)

"That kind of mother," he says, "is called a whore." I did tell you **I** was the one who started it.

DORA

Physically.

Heather enters by the front door.

HEATHER

Damn you, Paul!

Heather makes for the kitchen.

DORA
Hold it, Heather! Right there!

HEATHER
Oh, I'm sorry Aunt Dora. I forgot. May I pretty please have a beer?

DORA
No. Why didn't you come home with him?

HEATHER
Why should I?

DORA
He's your brother. That's why.

HEATHER
I came home anyway.

DORA
Did you just stand there while they beat him up?

PAUL
She's only a girl. What was she supposed to do?

HEATHER
(To Dora.)
Yeah, what was I supposed to do?
(To Paul.)
I came home because they were laughing at me. On account of **you**.

DORA
You watched them, and didn't say a single word?

HEATHER
What was I supposed to say?
(To Paul.)
Hey, Paul, did you want me to say something?

PAUL
It wouldn't have been any use.

HEATHER
You fought good.

PAUL
Thank you.

DORA
They ganged up on him. It wasn't fair.

HEATHER

That's true. But what you said before: that isn't true at all.

(To Paul.)

Paul, she said you're my brother.

PAUL

I am.

HEATHER

Aunt Dora, that can't be right.

PAUL

Heather, I am and always will be.

HEATHER

No...no, you can't be my brother. How can you be my brother?! You don't even **look** like me!

Dora strides up to Heather, rears back, and smacks her. Heather holds her ground, and looks Dora in the eye. Then, with defiant deliberation, she exits upstairs. Jill stands in place, watching.

###END OF ACT TWO, SCENE ONE###

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

Sunday morning.

No fire. Paul sits at the table, dressed as he was the night before. His leg is up on a chair, his ankle in a cast. He sports several bandages. Crutches stand against the wall. Jill, in a bathrobe, comes downstairs.

Good morning, Paul. JILL

Good morning. PAUL

When did you get back? JILL

A while ago. PAUL

JILL
(Looks at Paul's cast, gently touching it.)

No signatures. (Pause.)

Did you get any sleep?

Some. PAUL

Did your aunt? JILL

Some. PAUL

Where is she? JILL

Out. PAUL

JILL
Well...when is she coming home?
(Pause.)

Do you think she would mind if I used the kitchen?
(Brief pause.)

Under the circumstances. Do you think she would mind?

PAUL
No.

JILL
I'll make you breakfast. What would you like?

PAUL
Nothing.

JILL
Did you sleep in the car?

PAUL
The waiting room.

JILL
How 'bout some juice for starters?

PAUL
No, thank you.

JILL
Paul, Heather is just a kid. You said that yourself.
(Pause.)
Do you have a pen?

No reply. Jill finds a pen on the shelf by Dora's card file.

JILL (cont'd)
(Signing the cast.)
There! I am the first to sign. I make a great omelet.
(Pause.)
Paul, there is a bond between Heather and you. Surely it can hold up to a few impulsive words.
(Pause.)
Everyone says stupid things at Heather's age.
(Pause.)
It was words, Paul! A manner of speaking. Don't you understand? Heather is bursting with life, and you've been trying to rein her in. So she lashed out. She didn't know what she was saying.
(Pause.)
Your aunt never wanted kids. How strange. Stingy with her feelings. Stifled in her imagination. With a heart of...well, with a heart that's hard. But is it so hard, do you think, that it will not break if you and your sister fail to stick together?
(Pause.)
I knocked on Heather's door before I came down. No answer. And I bet I know why. Because she feels awful. She's ashamed, Paul. So mortified, she won't even show her face. Will you let her know that you forgive her?

(Pause.)

Yours is a bond of flesh-and-blood. Not a business association, or a friendship, or...or a marriage. You can't undo it just like that!

(Pause.)

Listen, maybe you can get along fine without a sister. But without a brother, she will have no hope. All she will have is a testy aunt who would rather be alone.

(Pause.)

Say something.

(Pause.)

You can not possibly care to know, but I am breaking up with my husband. Dissatisfied with him though I am, however, I admire him for this: he doesn't close down altogether. When it's time for talk, he talks. He tells me what he thinks.

(Pause.)

You say Heather is just a kid. Well, so are you. But **she** is a baby and **you** are on the verge of manhood. Can't you see...**begin** to see with a grownup's eyes? What hope will **you** have if you cut her off? Unloved yourself and...and unloving?

(Pause.)

My husband even tells me what he **feels**. Doesn't show it, though.

(Pause.)

Will you tell her you still love her? Really, Paul: you are **not** a child---not any more. And a grownup understands---or ought to---that when someone who loves you wrongs you, you nevertheless must keep on loving back.

(Pause.)

I suppose the roads were icy, huh?

(Pause.)

I'd better start home early. What with the temperature going back and forth across the freezing point, ice will be a lot less trouble in the day time. And...my husband will be waiting.

(Pause.)

Paul, Heather was hideous! But the viciousness, the spite, the cruelty...you know that isn't her. Tell her you love her. Just telling her that can start the healing. **Ought** to start it, anyway. Don't you think?

(Pause.)

Give me the word, and I'll go right upstairs and send her down.

(Pause.)

Why are you so unforgiving?

(Pause.)

Imagine how bad she feels.

(Pause.)

Worse than unforgiving, Paul: vindictive! Shame on you!

You shut up!

PAUL

Pause. Jill exits to the kitchen. She returns with two glasses of orange juice, and sets them down.

JILL

I wish my husband would lose it like you just did. I wish he would reveal himself.

Jill exits to the kitchen, then returns with a couple of bowls of cereal and spoons, and sets them down.

JILL (cont'd)

You hate Heather, don't you?

Jill exits to the kitchen, then returns empty-handed.

JILL (cont'd)

I can't find any milk.

Jill sits at the table.

JILL

Oh, well.

Jill pours the juice over the cereal.

JILL

Why shouldn't you hate her?
(Eating.)

Now, Paul, weird as it may be, this cereal goes great with orange juice!

(Pouring the other glass of juice into the other bowl of cereal)

No need to starve yourself.

Jill eats a few spoonfuls, then stops.

JILL

Do you hate her, Paul? Or else, is it...is it maybe the opposite? That Heather is so dear to you...so very, very dear?

Brief pause. Then Paul breaks down and cries. He goes on crying.

JILL (cont'd)

Oh, yes: of course she is. And you are dear to her. I believe that. I really, really do. You will make up with her, won't you? Not now. No. First, you have yourself a cry. I bet your sister's crying, too. It's good to cry. **I've** cried. As for my husband...who knows? If he **can** cry, I'd like to see it. To see him like I'm seeing you. So go on: cry a bit. Then calm yourself, and ask for Heather. She will sit with you, and hold your hand, and the bond between you will become so much stronger than it ever was. He says he loves me. Talk, talk, talk.

Paul, as he goes on crying, starts to sob.

JILL (cont'd)

(Her hand on Paul's shoulder.)

Now, now, Paul: easy. Don't get overwrought

(Removing her hand.)

I'm going to leave him. Once and for all, I will tell him so, tonight. Even then that man won't shed a tear.

Paul sobs harder.

JILL (cont'd)

Hey, take it easy. Shall I make some cocoa?

Paul sobs harder yet.

JILL

It **is** good to cry. But...but don't go overboard.

Paul sobs uncontrollably, and keeps on doing so.

JILL

(Pause.)

For five minutes, you sit here like a stone. And now **this**?

(Pause.)

Calm down!

(Pause.)

Stop it, Paul.

(Pause.)

Where did this come from?!

(Pause.)

Stop! You're scaring me!

(Pause.)

Enough, Paul!

(Pause.)

Paul, stop it!

(Pause.)

Stop!

(Pause.)

(MORE)

Stop, damn it! Stop!

JILL (cont'd)

Jill watches, as Paul sobs and shudders and moans. Pause. Dora enters by the front door with two old-fashioned glass milk bottles, which are full. She takes in the scene, puts the bottles down, removes and hangs her coat, then sits beside Paul and holds his head to her breast. Paul continues sobbing.

JILL (cont'd)

We were talking...I was trying to...it wasn't my place, but---.

(Grabbing the milk bottles.)

I'll put these in the fridge.

DORA

Leave them there.

Jill puts the bottles back down.

DORA (cont'd)

Go get three glasses.

Jill exits to the kitchen, then returns with three glasses, and puts them down.

DORA (cont'd)

(Nods toward a bottle.)

Pour.

Jill fills the glasses.

DORA (cont'd)

Drink.

Jill drinks.

JILL

It's warm.

DORA

Right from the cow. Just the way Paul likes it.

(To Paul, who is still sobbing.)

Don't you?

(Pause, as she sips some milk.)

You want a pain pill?

Paul lifts his head from Dora's breast, shakes it "no," then puts it back down, and goes on crying as his sobbing starts to subside.

JILL
I'll go shower. Then I'll pack.

DORA
(To Paul, who is simmering down.)
Here. Have a sip.

Paul lifts his head, and shakes it "no."

JILL
I'll be leaving early.

DORA
(Holding a glass to Paul's lips.)
Come on.

Paul sips.

DORA (cont'd)
How's it goin', kid?

PAUL
(Joking, as he starts to compose himself.)
Super.

JILL
I'll be leaving town right after lunch. I want to try that restaurant in the old mill house.
(She drinks some more milk. To Paul.)
Fresh and warm. I like it that way, too.

Jill starts up the stairs.

PAUL
Jill?!

Jill turns back.

PAUL (cont'd)
I apologize.

JILL
For what?

PAUL
I was rude to you.

JILL
Oh, Paul. How could you even have *listened* to me?

Jill again starts up the stairs.

PAUL
Tell Heather...

Jill turns back.

PAUL (cont'd)
...tell her to come down.

DORA
What are you going to say to her?

PAUL
I don't know. This has been tough on you, Aunt Dora.

DORA
(With a laugh.)
Goes with the territory.

PAUL
What "territory?"

DORA
(Mere banter.)
Oh...that wonderful realm where people live together, and drive each other nuts.

PAUL
It's been tough on you ever since we got here.

DORA
So?

PAUL
Heather and I should reconcile.

DORA
Paul, whatever you do, don't do it for *my* sake.

PAUL
I don't want to break your heart.

DORA
Break my heart?! Ha! Not a chance. Look, go the extra mile, if you want to. Do it...maybe do it for **your mother's** sake.

PAUL

No, not for the the sake of the dead. For my sister's sake,
and for mine.

(To Jill.)

Isn't that right?

(Brief pause.)

Please tell her to come down.

Jill exits up the stairs. The sound
of knocking on a door. And more
knocking. Pause. Then Jill appears
at the top of the stairs.

JILL

She's gone!

###END OF ACT TWO, SCENE, TWO###

ACT TWO, SCENE THREE

Sunday afternoon.

No fire. Paul sits with his leg up, as before. Dora, holding a phone, paces.

DORA

Our proposition, Paul: what shall it be?

PAUL

I can't focus at a time like this.

DORA

They *will* find your sister.

PAUL

When?

DORA

Today, maybe. Or tomorrow.

PAUL

Or five years from now?

DORA

"The Earth is flat:" that's it. That's what we debate. *I* argue in favor.

PAUL

Sure you do. The other side isn't any fun.

The phone rings.

DORA

(Into the phone.)

Yes?!...Who?...He did?!...Where?...I don't care if you can't vouch for the reliability of the information...I know you have to...Yes, but you do have a lead, officer. Follow it!...Yes! I told you I phoned every last person who knows her! She is absolutely not around, you understand?! Gone! And it is up to you---!...No...no...I didn't mean to...I know you're doing your best, but...I appreciate it...Really, I do...Oh, please: just keep looking. As hard as you can...Thank you...Thank you very much.

Dora switches off the phone.

DORA

Someone saw a girl hitching on route seventy-four just before dawn. Fifty miles west of here.

PAUL
Which way did Lennie go looking?

DORA
South.

PAUL
Lots of runaways never get found.

DORA
Okay, Paul: **you** argue **for**.

PAUL
That's no proposition: "the Earth is flat!" It's plain stupid.

DORA
Then **you** pick a proposition.

PAUL
I can't focus! How can you?! You **are** hard-hearted.

DORA
Fine. Let's drop the debate, and sit around wringing our hands.

PAUL
You're hard, Aunt Dora, and you would rather be alone. With Heather gone, you're half-way there.

DORA
(Pause.)
She's quite the conversationalist, isn't she?

PAUL
Who?

DORA
That woman.

PAUL
She has a name.

DORA
And a unique perspective.

PAUL
It **would** seem unique to **you**. Jill values human relationships.

DORA
Jill values her own rhetoric. And her perspective is the perspective of someone around whom the entire universe

(MORE)

DORA (cont'd)
 revolves. Whatever she said to you, she said for her own benefit, not yours.

PAUL
 You hit Heather! If you hadn't, I would still have a sister in my life.

Pause. Stunned, Dora exits to the kitchen. She comes back, grabs her card file, sits and thumbs through it. Then she gets up, puts the file back, climbs the stairs. She stands at the top, then comes slowly back down and sits again.

DORA
 (Brisk and cheerful.)
 How do you like that car Jill drives?!

PAUL
 It's okay.

DORA
 It is *gorgeous!*

PAUL
 Jill is torn, Aunt Dora. She says she's going to break up with her husband. I'm not convinced.

DORA
 Does it matter?

PAUL
 Yes. A lot. This is a crucial moment in her life.

DORA
 I would call it a *mawkish* one.

The phone rings.

DORA (cont'd)
 (Into the phone.)
 Yes?!...Oh, Lennie! Where are you?...Some guy told the police he saw her headed west on seventy-four...Hours ago...We're okay. Not happy. But I, at least, am in good company. As for Paul: he'll have to speak for himself.

Dora offers Paul the phone. He shakes his head "no."

DORA (cont'd)

He's in rotten company...That's very nice, but I don't want you out on icy highways after dark...All right, if you promise...Be careful, sweetie.

(Switching off the phone.)

Lennie's going to turn west. If he doesn't find her by an hour before sundown, he'll make for home.

PAUL

People who find their runaways years afterwards often wish they hadn't. I've seen those streets they find them on.

DORA

Paul, if they don't find Heather---and find her right away---I will blame myself until the day I die. You say I'm hard. I guess I am. If I weren't, though, I would tell you again: that I will blame myself. And I would tell you again, and again, and the telling would be furious. I...I would tear my hair---I swear I would---and I would wail, and turn myself into an object of pity. But I **am** hard. I've said what I have to say: once and simply, once and for all. What pity there is belongs to your sister and to you.

PAUL

If you hadn't hit Heather...**I** would have left.

(Pause.)

I would. Broken ankle and all.

DORA

If so, then not for long. Once gone, you would brood about...about how **I** must feel. And then...you would come right back.

PAUL

What do you think Jill will do?

DORA

Damned if **I** know. But you can rest assured that right now, somewhere between lunch and home, she is cobbling up verbiage to sugar coat whatever decision she makes.

PAUL

Why do you belittle what she's been going through?

DORA

It belittles itself.

PAUL

She feels deeply.

DORA

Uh-huh.

PAUL

And suffers for it.

DORA

If what Jill has been going through is "suffering," then what do you call what **you're** going through? And **you** don't deserve a bit of it. You are so...so unfathomably kind.

PAUL

She's kind, too.

DORA

Where did you get that idea?

PAUL

She sounded very caring.

DORA

"Sounded?!" Of course she did. When she speaks, she doesn't so much **talk**; she **sounds**. In order to manipulate anyone in earshot; and for her own listening pleasure.

PAUL

I can not believe that she isn't just as caring as you.

DORA

Paul, we each have our time. And each of us pays for it. Our losses pile up as we go. The longer we're here, the higher the price.

PAUL

Which is...?

DORA

At any given moment: everything you ever were before.

PAUL

Then when you've paid, what does that leave you with?

DORA

Who you are **now**. Someone who ought to be more insightful than the someone you **have** been. Loss is something Jill can never own. She reacts to it with empty affirmation, so she condemns herself to superficiality. Do not credit her with qualities that spring from understanding.

PAUL

I don't know where her qualities **come** from, Aunt Dora. But they are not one single bit less admirable than yours.

DORA

All right, Paul. Our proposition, then, is this: "Jill is a gasbag."

The phone rings.

DORA (cont'd)

(Into the phone.)

Hello!...Really?!

(To Paul.)

Someone else spotted a girl.

(Into the phone.)

How far?!

(To Paul.)

Sixty miles.

(Into the phone.)

When?

(To Paul.)

Just after dawn.

(Into the phone. Delighted, excited.)

On highway seventy-four?...Wonderful! That fits! Twenty minutes later, ten miles down the road!

(Into the phone.)

...Oh...I see.

Dora switches off the phone.

PAUL

Sixty miles...**west**?

DORA

(Funereal.)

East.

PAUL

(Pause. Then, flipping a coin to Dora)

Catch!

Dora catches the coin.

PAUL (cont'd)

"Jill is a gasbag." Argue in favor, if you dare. Heads: you go first. Tails: I do. Toss it.

Dora looks at Paul; then at the coin, which she is about to toss when the door bell rings. She opens the door.

DORA

I thought you had left.

Jill enters.

JILL

I went for a walk after I ate. And I didn't have a chance earlier to say good-bye. Any news?

DORA
Nothing definite.

JILL
(Extending her hand to Paul.)
Well...

PAUL
(Shaking her hand.)
Good-bye.

Jill kisses Paul on the brow.

JILL
You were wrong, Dora. I do know how to be alone.

DORA
(Couldn't care less.)
Great.

JILL
I took that walk, I was alone, and I found peace.

DORA
(Extending her hand formally.)
Enjoy your life as a single woman.

JILL
As a **married** woman. I have decided to stay with my husband.

Dora, unresponsive, stands stock still with her hand extended. After an awkward pause, Jill clasps Dora's hand; and then, after a moment's hesitation, tries to embrace her.

DORA
(Backing away.)
Oh, give me your credit card. So I can get the charges posted back to your account.

JILL
Why?

DORA
I told you that if---

JILL
---if Heather **bothered** me. She didn't. She reminded me, that's all. Reminded me how we make choices. And how, even while we wrestle with their consequences, we go on making new ones. New choices like the old ones, that arise from

(MORE)

JILL (cont'd)

rage, from pain, from fear, and self-disgust. From pride and vanity, too, and arrogance, and avarice, and---yes---from passion. But if, over time, paying time's price along the way, we come to...to *wisdom*, we make, when love is there, choices that uplift us with hope.

Jill exits by the front door, closing it behind her. Dora turns to Paul. Their gazes meet, and lock. She tosses the coin into the air. Blackout.

###THE END###