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The Sisters

by Richard Alfieri

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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FRENCH**

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THE SISTERS was first produced at the Pasadena Playhouse in Pasadena, California on July 16, 1995. The performance was directed by Arthur Allan Seidelman, with sets by Gary Wissman, costumes by Dawna Oak, lighting by Kevin Mahan, sound by Frederick W. Boot. The Production Stage Manager was Tami Toon. The cast was as follows:

GARY SOKOL	Paul Regina
DR. CHERBIN	Pat Corley
DAVID TURZIN	Matthew Letscher
MARCIA PRIOR GLASS	Meg Foster
OLGA PRIOR	Season Hubley
VINCENT ANTONELLI	Tony Musante
ANDREW PRIOR	Craig Wasson
NANCY PECKET	Tammy Lauren
IRENE PRIOR	Charlotte Ross
HARRY GLASS	Alan Feinstein
NURSE	Pamela Sam
PARAMEDIC ONE	Ty Biggs
PARAMEDIC TWO	Bill Ritter

CHARACTERS

GARY SOKOL
DR. CHEBRIN
DAVID TURZIN
MARCIA PRIOR GLASS
OLGA PRIOR
VINCENT ANTONELLI
ANDREW PRIOR
NANCY PECKET
IRENE PRIOR
HARRY GLASS
NURSE
PARAMEDIC ONE
PARAMEDIC TWO

SETTING

ACT I

Scene 1: The faculty lounge of Manhattan Crest College on the Upper East Side of New York City. Late afternoon.

Scene 2: The same. Two hours later.

Scene 3: A hospital room and waiting area. Later that evening.

ACT II

The faculty lounge. Four months later.

To my parents
Etelvina and Sam Alfieri

ACT I

Scene 1

(As house lights dim, piano music, the haunting strains of Schumann's "Of Foreign Lands and People," rises, then:)

(Curtain rises on the faculty lounge of Manhattan Crest College on the Upper East Side of New York City. The split-level room is large and lavishly designed, betraying the building's original purpose as a sumptuous private residence. Twin staircases lead down from each end of an upstage balustraded mezzanine to the main room downstage. A large mahogany conference table and chairs dominate the mezzanine. In the main room below, an overstuffed leather chair faces a fireplace right, a baby-grand piano stands beside the left wall, and an elongated upholstered seat emerges from the wainscoting between the twin staircases. Mahogany tables and floor lamps with period shades complete the club-room decor.)

(On the mezzanine level, there is an interior door upstage left and an exterior glass-and-wrought-iron door upstage right, which opens onto a small terrace with steps leading down to a portion of flagstone courtyard below right. On the upstage wall above the conference table, a wide three-paneled bay window faces onto the courtyard. Through the window, late-afternoon sunlight illuminates the foliage of summer, and stately Georgian buildings are visible on the opposite perimeter.)

(Portraits of former college presidents line the walls of both rooms and gaze upon the scene like a collective superconscious. Prominent among these portraits is that

of August Prior, the father of the three sisters. The artist caught his stern, handsome face in a half-smile that seems designed to draw the viewer forward – not to welcome, but to assess.)

(Three faculty members are on stage as the scene opens.

DR. CHEBRIN, *sixties, wearing a well-worn blazer with college insignia, sits reading the newspaper by the fireplace in the main room. He seems quite oblivious to the activities of the two younger professors engaged in a rather vocal game of chess at one corner of the conference table above. DAVID TURZIN is a thirty year-old philosophy professor; he stares at the board and patiently endures the rantings of his slightly older opponent, GARY SOKOL, a political science professor. Piano music fades as:)*

DR. CHEBRIN. *(reading aloud to no one in particular)* Ah! Three people killed by a gunman in a subway car in Queens! We're like rats in a maze – scurrying around, devouring each other.

DAVID. Doctor, did you buy another paper with only bad news in it?

SOKOL. Jesus, would you shut up! What are you talking to him for? Concentrate on your next move.

DR. CHEBRIN. Ah! A Bronx cabbie was robbed and strangled with a G-string by two twin sisters who were topless dancers!

DAVID. If they were twins, there could only have been two of them, Doctor.

SOKOL. Move already! God, it's like playing with statuary! I'm imposing a two-minute time limit...

(checks his watch)

...starting...now!

DAVID. No time limit. We agreed.

SOKOL. You didn't tell me you suffered from A.D.D.!

(MARCIA PRIOR, a beautiful woman in her early thirties, tastefully dressed, rushes into the courtyard right carrying packages and a shopping bag. As she ascends the steps to the terrace, she calls behind:)

MARCIA. Hurry, Olga...!

(OLGA PRIOR, also burdened with packages, enters a few steps behind her sister. She is an attractive but severe-looking thirty-five, wearing a skirt suit befitting a professor. As she climbs the steps behind MARCIA:)

OLGA. Honestly, Marcia, I can't have my students see me bolting about campus like a hyperactive Clydesdale.

DR. CHEBRIN. Ah! A woman in the Bronx was locked in a closet for three days for starching her husband's boxer shorts!

DAVID. *(turns to DOCTOR suspiciously)* You made that one up.

SOKOL. *(snapping his fingers impatiently)* Hey!

DR. CHEBRIN. It's right here, David. *(shaking his head)* It's a violent world out there.

(MARCIA bursts in from upstage right door and unceremoniously deposits a box on the conference table. The young professors look up, astonished, as OLGA enters behind her.)

MARCIA. Good evening, gentlemen.

DAVID. Hello, Marcia...Olga.

OLGA. David...Gary.

SOKOL. Oh great, another distraction.

MARCIA. Thank you, Mr. Sokol, it's always lovely to see you, too.

(MARCIA makes her way down the right staircase with the rest of her packages.)

MARCIA. *(smiling)* Dr. Chebrin. You came.

(DR. CHEBRIN lowers his newspaper and beams when he sees MARCIA.)

DR. CHEBRIN. Dear Marcia. Of course. All I have to do evenings is grow older and read my newspaper.

SOKOL. And follow homicide detectives around town for late-breaking atrocities.

OLGA. *(removing cake from box on table)* What a beautiful cake, Marcia!

DAVID. Is Irene coming soon?

OLGA. She has a class until six.

(checks her watch)

My God, Marcia, not a moment to spare!

MARCIA. *(rushing up the stairs)* I told you we should have started sooner.

(to DAVID and SOKOL as she removes decorations from bag)

Gentlemen, we're pressed for time.

(She sweeps the chess pieces into the bag and removes the board.)

Checkmate.

(SOKOL and DAVID cry out in protest as MARCIA, undeterred, hands them decorations. DR. CHEBRIN, SOKOL, and DAVID assist MARCIA in tacking streamers to the walls and placing party items about the room as the scene progresses.)

OLGA. I've been behind schedule since my lecture class this morning. The question and answer was interminable.

DR. CHEBRIN. They were trying to fathom your profundities.

OLGA. Please. The girls were all mentally filing their nails and the boys were deciding who in class is the worthiest recipient of their next erection.

(MARCIA laughs.)

No one listens anymore.

DAVID. That's hard to believe. There's a long wait list to get into any of your classes.

MARCIA. Oh, Olga knows that. It's just a ploy for reassurance.

(**OLGA** stops and stares at **MARCIA**; a line has been crossed.)

OLGA. I don't think being married to a psychologist qualifies you to practice on unwilling patients – and in public.

MARCIA. I'm your sister and these are our friends. Don't be so sensitive.

(checks her watch)

Where is Harry, anyway? And Andrew?

OLGA. Changing the subject after saying something cruel and *insensitive* is a tactic Marcia learned as a child and never quite outgrew.

(off **MARCIA**'s stony stare)

I'm your sister and these are our friends.

MARCIA. Let's hurry up with this. She'll be here before we're set up and ruin the surprise.

SOKOL. You give her a surprise party every year. Do you think she's not expecting it? And would you want her not to? It would mean a serious flaw in her reasoning powers.

MARCIA. We told her we didn't have time to arrange a party this year. If she believed us that's not stupidity, Mr. Sokol, it's suspension of disbelief.

SOKOL. Suspension of disbelief is a literary device. When employed in life it's called *psychosis*.

(There is a tentative knock at the upstage left door.
Everyone freezes.)

OLGA. Oh my God, there she is.

DAVID. Why would she knock?

SOKOL. She wants to make sure we're ready to surprise her.

MARCIA. Damn, and half of us aren't here. Let's yell loud to compensate.

(lifting her voice)

Come in!

(As the door opens everyone in the room yells a deafening "SURPRISE!" VINCENT ANTONELLI, a robust-looking man in his mid-forties, corporately dressed, stands stunned in the doorway with a tentative smile on his face.)

SOKOL. Oh look! She surprised us back by coming in drag! Irene, you card.

VINCENT. Do I have the right room? I'm looking for the Prior sisters.

OLGA. We're the Prior sisters. At least, two of them.

VINCENT. I'm Vincent Antonelli.

(MARCIA and OLGA share a blank look.)

I was your father's teaching assistant in Charleston.

OLGA. *(crossing to him)* I remember. Just before he came to New York to accept the chancellorship. I'm –

VINCENT. Don't tell me...Olga. The serious one.

OLGA. That's right.

VINCENT. I remember you all as girls –

SOKOL. Good memory.

(VINCENT takes OLGA's hand, bows slightly, and kisses it.)

VINCENT. It's a pleasure to renew your acquaintance.

OLGA. Likewise, Vincent.

(turning to MARCIA)

Do you remember my sister –

VINCENT. Don't tell me....

(stares at MARCIA for a moment)

Marcia. You were the...

(He hesitates, with an awkward glance at OLGA.)

OLGA. The beautiful one. You can say it.

(with a tinge of sarcasm)

She's my sister and these are our friends.

VINCENT. (to MARCIA) And you're still beautiful.

MARCIA. (somewhat embarrassed – and intrigued) Thank you.
And welcome...

(As MARCIA crosses toward the left staircase to greet
VINCENT, he begins crossing down to her.)

VINCENT. No, please. Let me come to you.

SOKOL. (to DAVID and DR. CHEBRIN) This guy's like a day in
Finishing School.

DR. CHEBRIN. (to DAVID and SOKOL) It's that Southern thing
– if they're not kissing your hand they're lynching you.

(MARCIA and VINCENT meet on the staircase. He takes
her hand and kisses it.)

MARCIA. I remember you now. You were in love with that
hysterical girl who was always praying.

VINCENT. Yes. Helen. I married her.

MARCIA. I'm so sorry.

(then, quickly)

I mean, not that you married her. But for my rude...

SOKOL. (to DAVID and DR. CHEBRIN) It's terrible to see
charm floundering like this. Like watching a cat lose
its balance and fall in the toilet.

VINCENT. Please don't mention it. That was years ago.

MARCIA. We all said that about Helen because we had
crushes on you...

SOKOL. (to DAVID and DR. CHEBRIN) Countering her insult
with a clumsy compliment.

MARCIA. (chagrined) I mean, we didn't all say it...Oh my.

VINCENT. (good-naturedly) We have two lovely little girls now,
and I adore them.

MARCIA. I'm so glad.

(leading him into the main room)

Please meet our friends and faculty members. Dr.
Chebrin, the head of the English department.

VINCENT. It's a pleasure, Doctor.

DR. CHEBRIN. Don't call me Doctor. I can't cure anything.

MARCIA. David Turzin, professor of philosophy.

VINCENT. (*shaking hands*) Oh...philosophy.

DAVID. Is that an expression of approval or disapproval?

MARCIA. David's a bit defensive about the subject.

DAVID. In a materialistic society questions of ethics and logic are considered luxuries no one can afford.

VINCENT. Ethics and logic are necessities, not luxuries, in my line of work.

MARCIA. What is your line of work, Mr. Antonelli?

VINCENT. Vincent, please. I work for an image-consulting firm.

SOKOL. Image consultant. David, you finally met someone with a job more expendable than your own.

(**VINCENT** *laughs*.)

MARCIA. Vincent, this boorish man is Gary Sokol, political science professor.

(*As VINCENT shakes SOKOL's hand:*)

Mr. Sokol prides himself on being completely candid – and irritating.

VINCENT. Those are just external mannerisms. Our true character lies within, I believe, beyond our cognitive powers.

SOKOL. If you can't perceive it, it's not there.

MARCIA. In your case, I'm sure that's true, Gary.

VINCENT. (*referring to decorations*) Am I interrupting a private party?

MARCIA. You're not interrupting at all. You must stay and be our guest.

OLGA. It's a surprise birthday party for our sister Irene.

VINCENT. Irene – the baby.

MARCIA. Still the baby, yes, even at twenty-two.

(**ANDREW PRIOR** *rushes up the terrace steps and enters the mezzanine through the upstage right door. He is*

*thirty, pleasant-looking, on the soft side, casually dressed.
He anxiously scans the room.)*

ANDREW. Is Nancy here yet?

OLGA. No, and neither is Irene.

(pointedly)

It's Irene's party, you know.

MARCIA. Andrew, come meet Vincent Antonelli – from Charleston.

(As ANDREW starts down the right staircase:)

DR. CHEBRIN. *(to DAVID and SOKOL)* Charleston – the magic word that brings people down that staircase.

MARCIA. He was Father's teaching assistant. Don't you remember?

ANDREW. I, uh...

(As VINCENT shakes ANDREW's hand:)

VINCENT. Of course you don't. I was much older. You were just a boy. I remember you were always called...

(VINCENT seems suddenly at a loss.)

ANDREW. The brother. In a house full of sisters that was my only term of distinction.

SOKOL. *(to DAVID and DR. CHEBRIN)* The serious one, the baby, the brother, and the *beautiful* one. I'd say Marcia lucked out when they were assigning nicknames in Charleston.

ANDREW. *(to VINCENT)* Welcome.

(to CHEBRIN, DAVID, SOKOL)

Gentlemen.

(DR. CHEBRIN, DAVID, and SOKOL greet Andrew.)

MARCIA. We were just convincing Vincent to stay for Irene's party.

VINCENT. *(checks his watch)* I really just stopped by to say hello, since I'm in town on business.

ANDREW. Irene would love to meet anyone from Charleston – the mythical city.

OLGA. That's true. She's heard all the stories, but was too young to remember anything.

VINCENT. She's never been back?

MARCIA. No. We still own the house on King Street, but we've been renting it out for years. As soon as the current lease is up we're going to go back and make a home of it again. Back to a simpler life. Do you still live there?

VINCENT. Not for years. My company's based in Baltimore.

DR. CHEBRIN. Is that where you lost your regional accent?

VINCENT. I'm second generation Italian, Doctor. Just enough time to lose the old country accent; not enough time to acquire a Southern one.

SOKOL. That difficult transition from immigrant to red-neck.

VINCENT. Mr. Sokol, I appreciate your humor and look forward to discovering your *other* positive qualities.

DR. CHEBRIN. Don't hold your breath.

SOKOL. (*to VINCENT*) That was pretty vicious coming from an image consultant.

(NANCY PECKET runs up the terrace steps and bursts into the mezzanine through the upstage right door. She is a very pretty young woman in her early twenties with obvious make-up and a thick mane of hair. She wears a "party" dress that is a little too short, too tight, and too shiny. She begins talking before getting her bearings.)

NANCY. (*breathless*) Am I late? Is she here yet? Where's Andrew?

SOKOL. Yes. No. Down here.

(ANDREW bounds up the stairs to NANCY.)

ANDREW. Hi, babe.

NANCY. Hi, babe.

(ANDREW gives NANCY an intimate kiss. They grope for a moment before ANDREW draws her to the balustrade to present her to the group. OLGA and MARCIA wear strained smiles in NANCY's presence.)

ANDREW. Nance, I think you know everyone.

NANCY. Hi all around.

SOKOL. Hi right back at you.

ANDREW. And this is Vincent Antonelli from Charleston.

(proudly to VINCENT)

This is Nancy Pecket, my fiancé.

(OLGA flinches visibly at the word. MARCIA seems to develop a sudden headache.)

VINCENT. I'm pleased to meet you.

NANCY. Likewise. Where's Irene? Where's Harry?

MARCIA. Harry's probably with a particularly crazy patient who's having either a breakdown or a breakthrough—someone who just realized his father's a bastard and his mother's a bitch and is either elated or crestfallen by the discovery.

VINCENT. What?

OLGA. Her husband's a psychologist.

MARCIA. *(to NANCY)* Irene has a class until six.

NANCY. *(checking her watch)* It's six now!

MARCIA. They're not beaming her over. It'll take her a few minutes to walk here.

OLGA. Still, the candles aren't even on the cake yet. Andrew, help me.

NANCY. I'll help.

(NANCY begins assisting OLGA in the mezzanine.

MARCIA remains in the main room below.)

VINCENT. Irene's a student here?

MARCIA. Graduates this spring.

(indicating her father's portrait)

We're all drawn here like moths to Father's big flame.

(**OLGA** gives **MARCIA** a disapproving look, which **MARCIA** either does not notice or ignores.)

MARCIA. (*cont'd*) Irene's an English major. Olga teaches English Lit. I met Harry here when he was taking one day a week from his practice to give a lecture course on Jung – a bunch of bullshit, really, but I was too young to realize it at the time. And Andrew was a graduate student in music and is now an associate professor. That's how he met Nancy.

NANCY. Extension course. I wasn't a full-time student.

MARCIA. Nancy thinks that takes the onus off screwing the professor.

NANCY. (*aghast*) I...

MARCIA. Just kidding. You were both adults. Who cares? That's how I met Harry, rue the day.

ANDREW. It's not what you say, Marcia, it's how you say it.

MARCIA. Oh, it's not my content, but my form? Maybe Mr. Antonelli can help me polish up my social presentation. Start with me and work his way up to Mr. Sokol.

SOKOL. (*to MARCIA*) I think you're the far greater challenge this evening.

ANDREW. It's not your form or your content that disturb me, Marcia – it's your *intention*.

MARCIA. (*innocently*) My intention is merely informational. I was explaining that, as a clerk at Bergdorf's, Nancy heard the call and was mesmerized. "I'm a shopgirl," she said, "with no time for a degree, but I can take an extension course at night –"

OLGA. (*apprehensive*) Marcia...

ANDREW. (*warning*) Marcia...

NANCY. I can tell my own story, you know. It's *my* story.

MARCIA. Oh, I think I can tell it much more interestingly with my objective distance. That's what a good biographer is for.

SOKOL. (*to DR. CHEBRIN and DAVID*) She used me as a temporary diversion to get herself off the hot seat, then she lifted her dress and put her ass right back on it.

DR. CHEBRIN. (*trying to avoid a disaster, gently*) Marcia, why not let Nancy tell it.

MARCIA. Well, I'll tell my version first and you see if it isn't better. So, after a long day of selling black pantyhose to middle-aged Upper-East-Side women obsessed with cellulite and varicose veins, Nancy was drawn to Manhattan Crest College like Trilby to Svengali, like Tsarina Alexandra to Rasputin. A voice in her head kept repeating, "You don't have the patience to get a degree, but why not take an extension course instead? Wow all the other clerks with your knowledge of great music. Smugly identify all the Mantovani tunes as they come over the Muzak."

ANDREW. How obnoxious! Really, Marcia, I don't know what's come over you lately.

MARCIA. Oh, where's your sense of humor? Nancy sees the fun in all this.

SOKOL. Yeah. Not since her head-on collision has she had such a great time.

NANCY. No, I don't, Marcia. Really, I don't.

MARCIA. I'm sorry. Then you tell your version. Or, better yet, you can tell the story of how I met Harry to get back at me.

ANDREW. Oh, stop now.

(*ANDREW draws back, then stops, noticing that NANCY has not moved. She seems to be considering the challenge.*)

SOKOL. The invitation didn't say anything about psychodrama.

NANCY. You really want me to tell it?

MARCIA. (*as if to a child*) Do-you-know-it?

NANCY. (*almost sweetly*) I think so.

MARCIA. Then tell it.

OLGA. Oh, enough.

VINCENT. Perhaps I should leave. I feel somehow responsible.

MARCIA. Don't be ridiculous. You're as incidental as the spectator at an ancient Greek tragedy. The play is really an offering to the gods, not the audience.

(to **NANCY**)

Go ahead, Nancy, make your little offering.

(**NANCY** steps to the balustrade.)

NANCY. Let's see...

MARCIA. Terrible start. Just launch right into the narrative.

NANCY. Alright. You were a lonely woman in her late twenties who had just had an unhappy love affair – your latest – that left you suicidal – again.

MARCIA. I like that use of the unflattering modifier for emphasis. Very effective.

NANCY. Thank you. And nobody could convince you to go into therapy, but you agreed to attend some psychology lectures instead –

MARCIA. (to **VINCENT**) It's true. We're a family of scholars.

NANCY. And you met Harry, who was attracted to you because you were so *fucked-up*.

ANDREW. Stop this.

OLGA. Yes.

MARCIA. No. It's true. I *was* fucked-up. A walking textbook. Harry looked right past my physical attributes to what really got him hot – a damaged psyche.

(to **NANCY**)

So go on.

NANCY. So he thought he could make you happy, so he married you, but instead of making you happy you've made him miserable and depressed. And you won't have any children –

ANDREW. This is horrible and primitive, stop it now!

MARCIA. No, Andrew. You've given Nancy your balls, now let her use them.

SOKOL. (*fascinated*) This is a *major* offering to the gods. They'll be belching and farting this one for days.

NANCY. You won't have any children because you're too selfish, and unstable, and you might hurt them emotionally – or *physically*.

(MARCIA is stunned for a moment, then composes herself.)

MARCIA. There. I think Nancy topped me with that story, don't you, gentlemen?

SOKOL. Definitely.

MARCIA. More probing, more vicious. Although almost completely lacking in humor. And I think even Nancy would have to admit she borrowed some of the three and four-syllable words from Andrew. A regurgitation of his family ruminations, but a creditable one which Nancy managed to imbue with her own direct style. Brava!

(MARCIA extends her hand up to the balustrade for NANCY to shake. NANCY hesitates a moment, reaches down tentatively, then stops.)

MARCIA. Come on. I'm not going to pull you down. The fall wouldn't kill you, just get you a lot more sympathy from Andrew.... Come on.

(NANCY reaches down again, but before their hands can touch, OLGA cries out:)

OLGA. *(looking through the bay window)* Oh my God, here she comes. Quickly, help me light the candles.

(ANDREW helps OLGA light the candles. NANCY and MARCIA turn away from each other without clasping hands.)

(IRENE crosses up the terrace steps and enters through the upstage right door. She is a pretty, fresh-faced twenty-two year old, simply dressed, carrying a book bag. She is delighted to see the room full of people and laughs gleefully when they yell "Surprise!" almost in unison.)

(IRENE's reactions to situations throughout the scene are slightly exaggerated, but, given the circumstances, this goes virtually unnoticed by the others.)

IRENE. Oh... you all! I had a feeling!

SOKOL. Call it a crazy hunch.

(MARCIA, OLGA, and ANDREW rush to embrace IRENE.)

MARCIA. Happy birthday, darling.

ANDREW. Happy Birthday!

OLGA. Sweet thing.

(As OLGA finishes lighting the candles, guests on the lower level make their way up to the mezzanine and gather around the table.)

IRENE. Oh, Nancy!

NANCY. Happy birthday, Irene.

IRENE. Thank you.... Doctor Chebrin!

DR. CHEBRIN. Many happy returns, darling.

IRENE. Oh, thank you. Thank you for being here.... David!

DAVID. Happy birthday, Irene.

(DAVID embraces IRENE and gives her an awkward and prolonged kiss which embarrasses IRENE and raises eyebrows among the guests.)

SOKOL. Gee, David, why not use Irene's birthday as an excuse to explore her digestive tract with your tongue.

(DAVID turns suddenly and angrily on SOKOL.)

DAVID. Why don't you just shut up, Gary! You're really rude and offensive, you know that?

SOKOL. (surprised at the outburst) Of course. You just noticed?

IRENE. Please, David, he was just kidding.

MARCIA. (to IRENE) Don't worry. It's been like this all evening. Must be planetary.

(drawing VINCENT forward)

Irene, this is Vincent Antonelli – from Charleston.

DR. CHEBRIN. Charleston! So much for getting a piece of cake any time soon.

IRENE. (taking VINCENT's hand) Oh my. It's a pleasure.

SOKOL. (before VINCENT can speak) The pleasure is always his.

VINCENT. Thank you, Mr. Sokol.

MARCIA. Vincent was Father's teaching aid in Charleston.
He knew us as girls.

IRENE. Really!

MARCIA. Yes, and Nancy and I helped fill him in on some
of our *recent* family history.

OLGA. (*quickly*) Okay! All lit! Make a wish!

(*IRENE stands before the cake and stares, transfixed, at
the circle of light.*)

IRENE. Just being here with you all –

SOKOL. No. Make a good wish – something involving major
appliances or real estate.

IRENE. Wait. I've got it.

(*IRENE takes a deep breath and blows out the candles.
Everyone cheers and claps.*)

ALL. Speech!

IRENE. Okay, okay! ...I know I'll always be the baby in the
family, but I'm not a baby anymore. Father said some-
thing to me when we were still in Charleston....

(*MARCIA and OLGA exchange a conspiratorial look.*)

He said your most precious possessions are your family.
They are the supporting beam of your life, the light
that guides you, the sacred bosom that –

SOKOL. Three metaphors and you're out.

DAVID. (*angrily*) Would you just –

IRENE. No, Gary's right. This is so corny. I just want to say I
love you all, and even though I know you'll always be
there to support me –

SOKOL. Like a beam.

IRENE. (*smiling*) Right, Gary, like a beam – I want very much
to be strong enough to support myself and you, if you
need me. That's my goal for twenty-two.

(*shrugs*)

That's all.

(**OLGA** and **MARCIA** kiss **IRENE**.)

MARCIA. That was lovely, darling.

SOKOL. I feel like I was just hit with a stack of Hallmark cards.

DAVID. (*disgusted by SOKOL*) Brother.

IRENE. Gary's right. Let's eat.

OLGA. I'll cut the cake.

ANDREW. Marcia, could I speak to you for a moment?

MARCIA. Sure. Shoot.

ANDREW. Downstairs, please.

SOKOL. Uh-oh.

MARCIA. Everyone knows you're pissed off, so why not be open about it and get it over with.

OLGA. Oh, please, not now.

IRENE. What happened?

OLGA. Nothing.

ANDREW. (*angrily to MARCIA*) Everyone knows I'm pissed off, but they don't know exactly how pissed off I am, or how I'm going to express it! I'd like to share those details with you alone.

(**MARCIA** stares at **ANDREW** for a moment, then walks down the stairs. He follows. **IRENE** looks after them in bewilderment; **OLGA** tries to distract her.)

OLGA. (*handing cut cake to IRENE*) Here, darling, help me pass these around. Maybe you'll play the piano for us later.

IRENE. Sure....

(*OLGA keeps the party going upstairs as ANDREW and MARCIA speak downstage.*)

MARCIA. I know what you're going to say, but you know I can't stand that vulgar girl and you insist on foisting her upon your sisters and me. I can no longer disguise my true feelings about her –

ANDREW. You won't even give me the satisfaction of chewing you out! What are you chastising me for? You should be apologizing. You attack her and embarrass her with your vicious humor –

MARCIA. I ran out of charm with her a long time ago.

ANDREW. You ran out of everything, Marcia – including basic human decency. You impugn my masculinity in front of everyone!

MARCIA. Wait till she finishes with you, Andrew. I don't want to hurt you, I want to *warn* you. You see her as a girl, but I know the kind of woman she is. I know what she's capable of doing to a man.

ANDREW. You *should* know. You've been doing it to your husband for five years.

MARCIA. Perhaps. Call me a bitch, a shrew, a harpy. *That one (indicates NANCY) could give me lessons.*

(At that moment, HARRY enters through the upstage left interior door. HARRY is in his late thirties, dressed in suit and tie.)

HARRY. Am I terribly late?

SOKOL. You certainly missed all the juicy stuff.

HARRY. *(crossing to IRENE)* I'm so sorry. Happy birthday, Irene.

IRENE. Thank you. Relax, Harry. Have a piece of cake.

HARRY. *(looking around)* Where's...?

(spots MARCIA)

Oh.

(HARRY crosses down the left staircase to greet MARCIA.)

MARCIA. *(rushed, quietly to ANDREW)* I'm sorry, Andrew. I'll be better. I'm sorry. Don't hate me.

(MARCIA kisses ANDREW, who responds grudgingly, as HARRY approaches.)

HARRY. Am I interrupting something?

ANDREW. No. Not at all, Harry. Let's join the others, shall we?

MARCIA. I'll be up in a minute.

(ANDREW nods and crosses up the stairs.)

(HARRY crosses to MARCIA and kisses her perfunctorily on the cheek.)

HARRY. Sorry I'm late.

MARCIA. I know. I heard.

HARRY. Jesus, Marcia, I had a patient.

MARCIA. I've heard that, too.

HARRY. *(checks his watch)* How late is this going to go?

MARCIA. You just got here!

HARRY. We have the Waldmann soiree this evening.

MARCIA. We have no such thing.

HARRY. I told you about it. You said yes.

MARCIA. How could I have said yes? It's my sister's birthday.

HARRY. You said yes, we'd stop by later.

MARCIA. Never!

HARRY. Maybe you're blocking it because you don't want to go.

MARCIA. Maybe I blocked it, repressed it, denied it, and sublimated it, but I'll guarantee you this – I am not going to spend the evening with those two ossified old farts.

HARRY. They head the foundation, and the foundation supplies most of my referrals. Or did you think my patients just walk in off the street when they're feeling a little crazy?

MARCIA. I don't care if they're airlifted from Bellevue, I'm not going.

HARRY. You take no responsibility for maintaining my career, which maintains your lifestyle.

MARCIA. Which maintains your career! What would you do without a well-dressed wife to display to that group of overeducated dullards and closet loonies you call your colleagues. It's symbiosis, Harry. But, here...

(MARCIA removes her earrings, necklace, bracelet, and rings. Guests in the mezzanine stop their conversations and turn to stare at MARCIA and HARRY.)

MARCIA. *(cont'd)* Let's break the cycle. You take the ornamentation,

(handing her jewels to HARRY)

I'll take the evening off.

HARRY. *(with a glance toward the mezzanine)* You love these little spectacles, don't you? They validate you somehow.

MARCIA. And you, too – the good and caring doctor with the mad wife. Patiently enduring me like an ongoing homework assignment.

HARRY. Your state of mind is nothing for me to be proud of; it's a professional liability – and so are you!

MARCIA. As usual, you made it from pompous to obnoxious without stopping at amusing.

HARRY. *(placing the jewels back in Marcia's hand)* Keep those. You lose all your charm without them.

(MARCIA angrily throws the jewels across the room.

HARRY turns, crosses up the left staircase, and exits through the upstage left door.)

OLGA. *(whispering)* Maybe you should play now, dear.

(IRENE drifts to the piano and begins softly playing Beethoven's "Für Elise.")

(MARCIA stands quietly for a moment. Conversation has stopped completely upstairs; everyone looks at MARCIA. She turns away from them and faces downstage.)

MARCIA. *(quietly)* Well, this is no fun. Let's open the presents.

(Piano music continues as curtain falls.)

Scene 2

(Piano music continues as curtain rises on faculty lounge. Two hours later. Night.)

(MARCIA and VINCENT are alone, dismantling the last of the decorations and clearing the party remnants. Several of the lights have been shut, creating a mood somewhere between romantic and eerie.)

(Music fades as:)

MARCIA. You really didn't have to do this.

VINCENT. I wouldn't have considered leaving you alone.

MARCIA. It's nothing new to me, believe me. But, won't your wife be concerned about you?

VINCENT. My wife's in Baltimore.

MARCIA. Oh.... Excuse me. That was shamelessly coy and indirect of me.

VINCENT. But the answer to your question is "no," she wouldn't be too concerned.

MARCIA. It's none of my business, really. Bearing my emotional scars in public is a distasteful habit I've acquired; I have no right to ask you or anyone else to do the same.

VINCENT. Why not? It's really just a search for some kindredness and consolation, isn't it? What a desolate sadness to think that you're the only person who suffers in marriage. My marriage is an abysmal failure, a barely-manageable disaster.

MARCIA. But why stay – ?

VINCENT. Why stay in it? You barter away so many pieces of yourself in a long relationship, I'm not sure I remember which are mine or how I would go about reclaiming them.

(MARCIA nods.)

And then there are my girls. They're the light of my life, and I couldn't bear to lose them. But I'm sure your father felt the same way about you girls.

MARCIA. Exactly. Wanted us with him all the time. Every goddamn minute – for eternity, really. Father’s voice echoing in our heads, (*turning to the portrait*) his portraits and photographs plastered on our walls. Father marching through time with us, his presence...*indelible*.

VINCENT. I had no idea you –

MARCIA. Hated him a little bit? It’s natural for a child to resist authority, don’t you think? And Father was the ultimate authoritarian. The deadliest kind – the charming kind. The kind you want to please even when you know they’re wrong. And then later, much later, you realize you’ve violated part of yourself. So here I am, years after his death, resisting my father’s authority.

(*to portrait*) No, Father, it’s alright to be alone with Vincent. I won’t go home yet!

(*to VINCENT*) Delayed reaction, huh? But better late than never.

VINCENT. Your family always seemed so happy together. For years, I suppose, I’ve held you as an ideal to strive for with my own family.

MARCIA. Not an ideal – an illusion. The surface of things. Of course we *seemed* happy. After Mother died, we were rewarded with Father’s approval by doing exactly what he expected of us. Father had wanted his first child to be a boy, so Olga gave up her femininity for him. With Mother gone, I became the woman of the house at fourteen – hostessing dinners and faculty gatherings – a gracious Southern belle.

VINCENT. I remember. It was charming.

MARCIA. It was unsavory. I was a midget Scarlett O’Hara, a child-prodigy Martha Stewart. It took me years to understand that it wasn’t me, but a role I had adopted.

VINCENT. I’m so sorry. But you seem to have realized yourself.

MARCIA. Yes. As evidenced by my performance this evening, I’ve learned to become almost completely charmless, graceless, and tactless.

VINCENT. Honest, I would call it.

(MARCIA looks at VINCENT for a moment – appreciatively.)

MARCIA. Thank you.... I suppose I fared better than poor Andrew, who had to hand his balls over to Father. Only one pair allowed in the house, you know. After Father died, Andrew got them back; but, strangely, he keeps looking for someone else to give them to. Olga and I passed them back and forth for a while, but we really didn't want them. Finally, Andrew found a real taker in Nancy, who, it seems, had been looking for an extra pair for some time.

VINCENT. (*smiling*) And Irene?

MARCIA. Irene was so young when Father died, I really think she's emerged unscathed. Most of her recollections of Father are actually stories Olga and I have repeated to her – Father's Greatest Hits – or things we simply invented. Like the story she told tonight over her birthday cake. Father never said those things to her. We did.

(VINCENT says *nothing*.)

What? I know when someone's looking or thinking askance at me.

VINCENT. It's just that you pride yourself on your honesty, and you're brutally honest with yourself –

MARCIA. And lots of other poor unfortunate souls.

VINCENT. (*smiling*) Yes. And yet you spin fantasies for Irene.

MARCIA. Not fantasies. Simply a refined reality. Why not give her something solid to build on?

VINCENT. Because it's imaginary, fragmentary, it's not whole –and on some level, she must realize that. Ultimately, it's not a true foundation.

(MARCIA is *silent*.)

VINCENT. (*cont'd*) I'm sorry. Perhaps I've overstepped –

MARCIA. No, you may be right in theory. But all you have to do is look at Irene to see she turned out pretty well.

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