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SF PERUSALS

Black Jack:
The Thief of Possession

by Rosary Hartel O'Neill

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

IRENE SONIAT DUBONNET – (Nicknamed MIMI), Sixty+. A ravishing matriarch. Her family has roots in the nineteenth century, and she still presides over a vast Garden District house in New Orleans. Irene is artful in her choice of clothing, with baroque blouses, adding glamour to any occasion and Gucci accessories. Her conversation is studied light and overlaid with a contrived naiveté which is often cruel, a distemper agitated by failing health. She can only leave her wheelchair for brief periods. Smart, Irene manages to fasten onto something peripheral about a subject if it concerns her and make it central to the conversation.

LUISA GARCIA – Early twenties. A Hispanic medical student, too pretty for her office as Irene's companion. Sleek and firm, she is poured into a shirt, jeans, and a nurse's jacket. She has vitality, a wondrous optimism, and thick hair resembling the mane of a stallion. An essential sturdiness of character and largeness of spirit flow into her work. Luisa has an instinct for pleasing people, for finding out what they like to do, and for somehow arranging for them to do it.

BUNKY DUBONNET LEGERE – Mid-twenties. A rock star and Irene's grandson. He has mood eyes that change colors and wild hair. Alternately deceitful boy and outraged actor, Bunky dresses in a rhinestone cowboy outfit and suede boots. His reactionary clothing defies his background from a formidable if oppressive family. Talking rapidly and cleverly, he is a magnet for attention, rendering familiar words exotic through emphasis. There is something pernicious about him—a haunted awareness behind the wry smile. He has considerable talent but is somewhat volatile and insecure, picking up on people's moods quickly.

JAMES BEAUREGARD ELLIS – (Nicknamed BEAU), fortyish. Bunky's stepfather. Athletic and tanned, he dresses in Ivy League, navy and black blazers with shirts and sweaters of gray, blue, and wine. The streaks of gray in his hair give it a transparency like gilding from the sun. Beau learned the art of Southern story telling as simply as he breathed, his family having been landed gentry in Saint Martinville for generations. He went to Harvard at age 16, wrote his first novel when he was 18, and was a professor at Tulane University by 25. While heir to the revenues from an oil and gas plantation, Beau with the help of his third wife Kaitlin has exiled himself in Paris and created a brilliant career as a novelist and lecturer on romantic poetry.

KAITLIN ELLIS – Bunky's mother, fortyish, a delicate beauty with the clearest eyes and a porcelain complexion just beginning to crack from the strain of illness. Kaitlin moves with nonchalance, an elegance acquired from living languidly in rooms festooned with ancestral portraits and lush furnishings. Even when unkempt, Kaitlin dresses with breathless wonder. She has a reputation for vagueness which she finds useful not to discourage. From her earliest days, it was obvious Kaitlin had a destiny and was different from everyone else. She may seem self-absorbed but is in fact very observant, very shrewd about people.

RORY DEBANGO – Mid-forties to fifties. Single. There is something striking about her, an exotic strain of wild, unpredictable whimsy. Rory is precocious and charismatic with absolutely wonderful eyes and a devious smile. Socially ambitious, Rory is a dizzy, desperate woman with a zigzag character. Rory is flirtatious, fey with the determination of a deliciously coquettish tart. Teenagers follow her around like puppies, infatuated with the flashy clothes, the too high heels, the outrageous earrings. Most men are utterly charmed by the way Rory talks and moves, and they fall one by one.

THE SETTING

The deck and lounge of the Dixie Queen Paddleboat, departing from New Orleans, Louisiana up the Mississippi River to Natchez, Mississippi.

TIME

ACT ONE: The Present. New Year's Eve. Four o'clock.

ACT TWO: Later that night.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

(The lounge and deck of the Dixie Queen. The abstract set seems timeless as the characters relate to the expansive horizon: the brown Mississippi River and transparent skies. Luxury is felt through detail: crystal glasses, a vintage brass lamp, blush carpeting. The set evokes grandeur and isolation, elegance on the verge of collapse.)

(**SOUND:** *The paddle wheel churns.)*

(**LIGHTS:** *It is the coldest New Year's Eve in New Orleans in thirty years.)*

(**KAITLIN ELLIS** *waits, sipping a second glass of sherry and reading a program.)*

KAITLIN. When I was a girl, I wouldn't pray for power, for the end of the world, but for a perfect marriage. Perhaps in the South, I thought marriage would be great because I was bored so beautifully as a girl. All those long, lonely Julys on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Swinging in the hammock, staring through the oak trees at the endless sky. My cat, Visalia, lying by me, her green eyes shining, licking her paws. *(Combs the dock, her eyes welling with tears)* My husband is a writer with a certain reputation. Beau Ellis, that's right. We live in Paris. After eight years, my hormones are finally cooling down. They like to drove me stark raving nuts in the beginning, whenever Beau brushed my hair, rubbed saffron on my skin, or kissed me with the fullness of pleasure. In Beau's study when it rains, I can still smell his cologne. *(Checks a diamond watch on a chain round her neck)* Lord, where's Beau? I can't face my mother without him. Same faces at the same cruise table for one long week. *(Smiles)*

*(***SOUND:** *Throughout the play, we hear canned programming through the speakers.)*

RADIO. WELCOME ABOARD THE DIXIE QUEEN'S NEW YEAR'S CRUISE, A WEEK OF PLEASURE FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NATCHEZ ON THE ONLY PADDLEWHEEL STILL IN EXISTENCE.

*(***LUISA GARCIA** *pushes* **IRENE DUBONNET** *in a wheelchair.* **IRENE** *is crouching under a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and a lap blanket.* **ATTENDANTS** *follow, dragging* **IRENE's** *luggage.* **IRENE** *barrels over* **LUISA***, who is shouting in Spanish.)*

IRENE. What awful decorations. Glamorous but not daunting. It's not the beauty that stuns you, it's the gaudiness. These shocks of temperature do violence to the skin. Stop that Spanish.

LUISA. *(In Spanish.)* How splendid everything is. Glamorous like Beau Ellis, your son-in-law. The Dixie Queen, the only paddlewheel boat still in existence.

LUISA. *(In English)* Miss Irene. It's your daughter.

IRENE. Nice of you to identify her. Every time I see her, she gets messier and messier.

RADIO. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE CRY "STEAMBOAT DEPARTIN'" WOULD STIR THE SOUL AND FAMILY MEMBERS WOULD JOIN TOGETHER WITH LOVE AND AFFECTION.

*(***KAITLIN** *is shocked by the wheelchair)*

KAITLIN. Mama. You always look lovely. I'm glad you sent the annual cruise invitation.

IRENE. Did you have to drag along your husband? I suppose Beau's here to see how soon you'll be inheriting my money. Kitten...

KAITLIN. Kaitlin, I changed my name. Remember?

IRENE. How annoying.

KAITLIN. I didn't know you'd trouble walking, Mama.

IRENE. I'm tired at the beginning of a trip. It's called age.

*(***IRENE** *glares over her sunglasses, then, satisfied that she has upset* **KAITLIN***, she tosses off her hat and lap blanket, and rises.)*

KAITLIN. Oh, Mama!

IRENE. There's a lot you don't know, Kitten.

LUISA. *(In Spanish)* It's Kaitlin.

KAITLIN. Who is the pretty girl?

IRENE. *(Ironic)* A student caring for me since my daughter won't. It's extortion at forty-nine bucks an hour.

LUISA. I'm Luisa Garcia. A trained nurse.

IRENE. Sit over there. No one asked you to talk.

LUISA. *(In English)* Aaaah. Whatever, Miss. Irene.

IRENE. Stop calling me that. I don't want to be your friend. The sitters are taking my pills. Aspirin. My heart patches. Agnes finally quit on us. I hid them in my safe. Agnes found the combination. Stop the Spanish.

LUISA. *(In Spanish)* For what do I want to hear this? Neurotic bullshit!

KAITLIN. *(Laughs)* Why keep obsessing about pills?

IRENE. I started hiding my pills in the lining of my luggage. But I'm already thinking of a new place for when she finds them. *(Brooding)* I don't have any real children or help. These maids come and go. They call them sitters. Aptly.

LUISA. You're married to Beau Ellis?

KAITLIN. Yes.

LUISA. Beau's a ... a giant of the page. And you've got that famous son. Bunky Legere. What do you do?

KAITLIN. *(Laughs)* Fortunately I don't have to feel guilty about not making any money...

IRENE. Everyone should see Beau, but everyone shouldn't have to see him over and over.

KAITLIN. I went to my twenty-fifth high school reunion, Mama. Black tee shirts, extra-large, with Bugs Bunny slogans, "That's forty-three, folks." Silver balloons. And Sazerac drinks.

IRENE. There were thirty-one girls in your class.

KAITLIN. Nineteen showed up. Six are on unemployment. Eight are childless. Five have serious health problems. Most are single, remarried, or divorced. The unfocused ones, they're the happiest.

*(***BEAU** *enters, noting something in his writer's journal)*

RADIO. THE WORLD HAS CHANGED SINCE STEAMBOATS RULED THE RIVERS. BUT THERE IS NO MORE THRILLING SIGHT THAN ONE OF THESE SOUTHERN LEGENDS. QUEENS...

LUISA. *(In Spanish)* The king of romance. That's him. So gorgeous, and he writes like a god. All those readers...

BEAU. *(Crosses and kisses* **KAITLIN***)* Darling. Have you been waiting long? All those women wanted signatures— Hello, Mrs. Dubonnet.

IRENE. Hello. Who can stop the "inheritor of the mantle of Thomas Wolfe"?

BEAU. *(Smiling, he puts his arm around* **KAITLIN***)* We're sailing into the sunset.

LUISA. *(In awe, aside)* Ageless body.

IRENE. *(To* **LUISA***)* Back.

BEAU. *(Nuzzles her hair)* In life, there're moments of grace. Life's on hold, like in a parenthesis.

LUISA. Pardon me, Mr. Beau, could you sign this cocktail napkin?

IRENE. Have you resolved to move home, Kitten?

KAITLIN. Kaitlin. My goal is to get you to Paris.

IRENE. So you can spend my money? Yes, daughters should be a comfort. But now I'm able to do less, 'course I don't see Kitten.

KAITLIN. Kaitlin.

BEAU. Mrs. Dubonnet, my wife is here because she wants to renew her relationship with you.

IRENE. Well, so do I. But in France they believe that husbands are harmless, which is something I've never adhered to.

BEAU. What exactly are you after, Mrs. Dubonnet?

IRENE. Never ruin a conversation for the sake of honesty.

*(***BUNKY** *enters)*

BUNKY. Hi, Grandma.

IRENE. Don't call me Grandma.

BUNKY. Mimi. Everybody. I'm on Hollywood time, ten minutes behind.

BEAU. He's up, but he ain't running.

BUNKY. My chauffeur looked for a parking space while my bodyguard walked me in.

IRENE. Terminally disorganized.

BUNKY. I always arrive with what I need. I don't want to be too late for the things I'm late for already.

KAITLIN. You're so tall, muscular. I can't get over it... grown up.

BUNKY. The worst thing I have to do, Ma, is walk center stage and sing a famous line.

IRENE. After awhile even traveling around the world becomes ordinary.

KAITLIN. I'd nothing to do with your success.

IRENE. I raised Bunky. Someone had to cover the guitar lessons and the bounced checks.

BUNKY. A broken family. Who doesn't have one?

KAITLIN. I didn't know when I left you with Mama at sixteen that she'd steal you.

BUNKY. Aw, look at men in history, Ma. Their mothers were the brains behind them.

KAITLIN. You've forgiven me? Why didn't you return my calls? Or come visit.

BUNKY. I thought about it. Lots. But I never got 'round to it.

IRENE. Better buy yourself a "round to it," you want to see this son.

*(***KAITLIN** *removes a crystal pendulum from her pocket and squeezes it in her fist)*

KAITLIN. Bunky has meaningful eyes, like Baudelaire.

BEAU. Don't start.

KAITLIN. Born April ninth, the same day as Bunky. But reborn every day. Reading Baudelaire is my secret passion. Baudelaire was searching for God. The last year of his life was spent in complete silence.

BUNKY. A voiceless poet?

*(**BEAU** pulls **KAITLIN** to the side)*

BEAU. You want them to find out about the hospital?

KAITLIN. No.

BEAU. Then, keep quiet.

RADIO. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE'VE REACHED THE OPEN ZONE. THE CASINO IS OPEN FOR BLACK JACK. TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN.

(The conversation of **LUISA** *and* **BUNKY** *on one side of the stage overlaps that of* **KAITLIN** *and* **BEAU** *on the other)*

LUISA. *(Coyly to* **BUNKY***)* Your boots are held together by a pin.

BUNKY. They were my father's riding boots. He's dead.

BEAU. Smell the air, darling. It smells different.

KAITLIN. Lighter.

LUISA. Your father.

BUNKY. Whenever I wear these boots I feel, "I'm ready."

LUISA. Ready for what?

BEAU. My skin comes alive by the water.

KAITLIN. Good to get away.

*(***BEAU** *hands* **KAITLIN** *a white Christmas rose;* **KAITLIN** *strips the petals)*

KAITLIN. Mmmm. He loves me. He loves me not.

BEAU. In Paris, they say, "He loves me. He loves me a lot. He loves me passionately. He is crazy in love with me. He doesn't love me at all."

KAITLIN. He loves me passionately.

BEAU. How're you feeling, Kaitlin?

KAITLIN. You're always so concerned.

BEAU. Seriously?

KAITLIN. Seriously.

RADIO. YES, WE'RE STEAMBOATIN' INTO OUR SECOND CENTURY. PURSUING A LEGEND AND EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED.

*(***RORY DEBANGO** *enters flustered, reattaching a giant earring)*

RORY. I thought that rain was gone. But it's raining on one side of the ship. In New Orleans, you need pockets. You can't carry purses.

IRENE. The older the woman, the bigger the earring.

RORY. I only wear jewelry when I take a taxi, but I couldn't find one.

IRENE. The cab business in the daytime is gone.

RORY. At night, taxis are great because people are afraid to die. Last time I went out to dinner I almost got mugged. I felt so bad I forgot my Mace.

*(***RORY** *shows the group the Mace she carries)*

RORY. I travel alone throughout Louisiana without being harassed, molested, raped, and beaten. I'll kill any bastard who bothers me.

BUNKY. There's a dark quality about that lady.

BEAU. I can't get a handle on it. It's like grabbing smoke.

RORY. I read you boys were here in the Social Column. So I said, now's the time to take a vacation from power. Deliver that tax folder in person and enjoy stars up close.

IRENE. You shouldn't be in taxes. You should be selling hats on a beach.

RORY. *(Hands* **IRENE** *a folder while watching* **BEAU***)* Rory DeBango.

IRENE. Rory's a boy's name.

RORY. They use it at the firm to pass me off as a man. I'm from the black sheep side of the family, the cousin who committed suicide. Daddy called me Crummy at birth, and it stuck.

BUNKY. I remember Crummy. You have a short brother.

RORY. With an equally short wife.

BEAU. But you've gotten so—

RORY. Old. When you're old you've more estrogen, less wrinkles. You know the saying, "Off the hips, onto the face." And "Practice makes perfect."

KAITLIN. Who's practicing?

RORY. Are you anybody? The little wife? You look fresh as a daisy. Or should I say, "As a magnolia"? I'm single by choice. Married women are more nervous than single women. They're more tired. And less competent at every task, including childcare.

BUNKY. I can't get enough of Rory.

BEAU. Because she's so toxic.

RORY. I don't want to be married. I don't want to be bound. I walk by myself and feel great. *(Passing* **BEAU** *her autograph book)* Indulge me. I've the signatures of three hundred celebrities. A harmless obsession.

BEAU. What shall I write?

RORY. *(Whispers)* I'd like to take a long nap with you in the rain.

IRENE. Miss DeBango has her B.A., her M.A.

BUNKY. Her B.S.

IRENE. Everything but her M.R.S.

(SOUND: *Lifeboat drill, a whistle sounds.)*

RADIO. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, FOR SAFETY REASONS A MANDATORY LIFEBOAT DRILL WILL NOW BEGIN. LIFE PRESERVERS ARE LOCATED UNDER ALL SEATS AND BEDS. SELECT THE PROPER LIFE PRESERVER FOR YOUR BODY SIZE. YOU CAN INFLATE THE JACKET BY BLOWING INTO THE MOUTHPIECE.

*(***BUNKY** *hands out life preservers)*

BUNKY. Get your bulletproof vests.

RORY. Somebody help.

LUISA. *(In Spanish, assisting* **IRENE***)* Come here, Miss Irene.

RORY. I'm going to drown. Yeeeeek.

*(***BEAU** *crosses to* **RORY***)*

BEAU. You can scream all night long. The jacket's not going to hook any better. Lift your arms, Rory.

RORY. I didn't learn to swim until I was thirty years old.

BEAU. This strap goes through here.

RORY. I'm still petrified of water. *(Sighs as* **BEAU** *pinches her)* Ooh. You got me. That felt good.

BEAU. *(Embarrassed)* There's no way to gracefully get these things on, and look like—

RORY. James Beauregard Ellis? An unusual name separates you... gives you something to fulfill.

BEAU. You're all zipped up.

RORY. I've been in love with your name since I first heard it.

RADIO. LADIES AND GENTS. THE DRILL HAS ENDED. RESUME YOUR NEW YEAR'S ACTIVITIES.

(The characters retreat to various activities. **BUNKY** *exits, returning the vests.* **KAITLIN** *watches* **BEAU** *and* **RORY.***)*

KAITLIN. *(To herself)* This is not happening. I don't exist. I'm screaming to the marrow of my bones. You've got to see that woman there. And ignore her. You didn't marry a hometown boy who wanted a small-time life.

RORY. *(To* **BEAU***)* Don't assume anything unless you've tried it. *(Exits)*

KAITLIN. *(Paces downstage talking to herself)* Women like her are parasites. Remnants from the ice age. You can't annihilate them. They survive because they'll do the ultimate. They've no guilt.

*(***LIGHT:** *Twilight sheds its fragile mauve over the pale wood.)*

*(***KAITLIN** *removes the crystal from her pocket. She shivers in the harsh breeze, buttons up the sweater, and talks to the audience.)*

KAITLIN. I love cashmere at night. It's extravagant. When my soul hurts, I put on cashmere. This sweater is twenty-five years old. It's the most famous sweater worn in my high school class. At least thirty girls looked good in this thing. *(Lifts her arm, exposing a rip)* There's a rip up the seam, but this sweater won't unravel. Cashmere is immortal. Just like crystal. *(Shrieks out suddenly and rushes to the door.)* I've got to visit the little girl's room.

IRENE. Go smooch on some lipstick—

LUISA. Your daughter moves like she had surgery.

IRENE. *(To* **LUISA***)* I had a hysterectomy at forty. What a relief it was, too. I never go to gynecologists who fuss with me. My brother-in-law took care of me. After he died, I never go. *(Smiles)* Kaitlin's forgotten that slogan, "Don't Work for the Next Wife." The first wife, she lets herself go. Roams around disheveled as a mad fairy. Only to have the next wife loaded with minks and jewels travel around the world.

BEAU. I'm pretending I didn't hear that.

IRENE. Why bother? For God's sake, Kaitlin, run a comb through that hair and change that awful sweater. *(Exiting with* **LUISA***)*

BEAU. *(Crossing to* **KAITLIN***)* Are you all right?

KAITLIN. *(Takes a pill)* If I were you, I'd eat that question.

BEAU. You can't take those pills all the time. They'll make you dizzy.

KAITLIN. *(Laughs, squeezing the crystal)* It's the crystal. Makes me feel jittery. Don't you just love it? Rory's striking?

BEAU. She's okay.

KAITLIN. Do you think I'm that striking?

BEAU. You're great.

KAITLIN. Should I fix my hair like that?

BEAU. I like you the way you are.

KAITLIN. You think I'm pretty as Rory?

BEAU. I met her by chance—

KAITLIN. The only way to keep you is to never let you out of my sight.

BEAU. Look, we're in the middle of the river. Weather's so variable. Mauve skies and thin slips of cloud.

KAITLIN. Are you taking notes?

BEAU. When I write, I'm trying to explain our life to myself.

KAITLIN. Or your relationship— *(Exiting with* **BEAU***)*

RADIO. THEY'RE LIGHTING TORCHES IN THE PLANTATION FOR A WEDDING CELEBRATION. ROMANCE IS IN THE AIR.

*(***BUNKY** *and* **LUISA** *enter, inhaling the salty air.* **BUNKY** *walks to the railing and* **LUISA** *follows)*

BUNKY. The Dixie Queen. Can you feel the energy in the wood? Nothing's been changed since the nineteenth century. It's a big dream for you to ride the Dixie Queen?

LUISA. Yes.

BUNKY. The older I get, the more I realize I'm addicted to travel. Yeah. Keep me infected.

LUISA. You live in Hollywood?

BUNKY. The entrails of civilization. They kill people with real bullets there. Hollywood has always attracted the mentally unstable. But now they carry guns. Ribs of buildings with no cement. An earthquake a night. It's the most depraved place I've ever been...Actually I kind of like it.

LUISA. Being surrounded by killers!

BUNKY. My limo has dark windows, so I'll be okay...

LUISA. I thought people went into singing for the glamour?

BUNKY. It's hand to mouth. Only it's a bigger hand and a bigger mouth. *(Resignedly)* The music industry is in deep shit. Yeah. Every new star is ten or twelve years old, and one person a week kills himself. My agent would voluntarily steal from me. The man wears a coat and tie to the beach.

*(***SOUND:** *We hear a blues song—sung by* **BUNKY***—blaring over the radio.)*

*(***LUISA** *rushes over and turns it up.)*

BUNKY. My last hit.

LUISA. You are*...(Searches for the right word)*...in a dry period?

BUNKY. A desert, yeah.

LUISA. What's the trend?

BUNKY. The trend is sometimes I work. And sometimes I don't. All I've got is a bag full of jewels. *(***BUNKY** *removes a pouch from his pocket, leans over the railing)* I traveled from Los Angeles to the Fiji Islands with a

sack of stones at my side. Diamonds, sapphires, pearls. I'd pull one out when I needed a connection. Have one.

LUISA. I couldn't.

BUNKY. I worked my whole life for a fistful of stones.

LUISA. *(Enthralled)* How's your career?

BUNKY. I just made a jingle for a Brer Rabbit cartoon. If you're in it for the art, now's the time to get out. I'm still a major—"to do" in California? But I'm blocked. I've to drag myself kicking and screaming to the guitar. If I don't do anything, next year, I'll be just important. If you have a hit, they'll talk to you for a while.

*(***LIGHTS:** *Lights flash on upstage. The lounge door swings open and* **IRENE** *enters, followed by* **BEAU**. *He seats* **IRENE**, *then walks vaguely to a newspaper rack, slips out a New York Times.)*

IRENE. *(Calls out indignantly)* Bunky, leave my sitter alone.

RADIO. NOT TO WORRY. SEEMS THE MISSISSIPPI TAKES A STRANGE LOOP HERE THAT SENDS US IN THE WRONG DIRECTION FOR ABOUT A MILE.

(The boat dips, and **LUISA** *falls into* **BUNKY's** *arms, her lips turned toward his mouth)*

RADIO. BUT SOON THE RIVER STRAIGHTENS OUT TO A SENSIBLE DIRECTION.

*(***BUNKY** *and* **LUISA** *drift upstage)*

IRENE. *(Hollers)* Luisa. I'll have to run her down because she sneaks off. On a scale of one to ten, this is the dumbest sitter in the world. She gets a one. Beau. I want to applaud you for this rudimentary form of conscience in returning South. With your...ailing wife. How many miscarriages have you put her through?

BEAU. I had hoped maybe we'd start out polite.

IRENE. You don't plan to inherit my money? Oh, I know you have means, Beau, but not big money.

BEAU. What are you after, Mrs. Dubonnet?

IRENE. I'm considering setting up a trust for you and your novels. Then you can focus on creating, not hawking yourself.

BEAU. What's the hitch?

IRENE. I want Kaitlin to spend some time with me.

BEAU. *(Adjusting the paper in the twilight)* You're so unpleasant.

IRENE. Don't play the troubled husband.

BEAU. *(Talks into his paper)* Anybody is obliging until you ask him to do something. I'm asking you not to pry into my marriage.

IRENE. Kitten's had two miscarriages, I bet.

BEAU. *(Rustling through the papers)* I don't want to be an in-law in this family.

IRENE. My daughter won't talk to me, because you've brainwashed her against me. Fine. Egocentric couples.

BEAU. She's here now.

IRENE. Hardly...You wouldn't notice because you're so absorbed—

BEAU. My wife has to put an ocean between you and her. Kaitlin wakes up to your voice like some broken tape. She even loves that specter-like picture of you at the Rex ball. Her body's frail.

IRENE. Why not let her spend some time with me? —Wouldn't you like some writing time?

BEAU. No, I'm independent. I work like I want.

IRENE. You're sufficiently shallow to write anywhere and please the public?

BEAU. Excuse me, Mrs. Dubonnet. I don't know how your daughter can stomach you.

*(***SOUND:** *The cruise ship orchestra practices faintly at a distance.)*

*(***KAITLIN** *enters, pale with an obsessed look to her eyes. She slips a pill between her lips.)*

BEAU. Come inside, honey. Remember how we used to dance? *(Motioning toward the music.)*

KAITLIN. *(Smiles and rambles on to herself)* I dread the holidays because I recall less—

IRENE. I hope you're not hitting up the pain pills again. Ruining my holiday with total self-absorption. With that prescription, Kaitlin can sleep standing up. They're a dead man's pill.

KAITLIN. *(Her fingers twitch as she crosses her arms)* A critique is fine, but a capsule would be better. Can't wait until it kicks in. *(Laughs shrewishly)* Maybe I'm not a wife today or a daughter. I've multiple personalities. Put me in a room, you get a group.

IRENE. A river cruise is a good place to glamorize ailments. There're so many people to make over you. It's like the maternity ward, where Luisa used to work.

KAITLIN. I didn't have a baby.

IRENE. Well, that should make you happy.

KAITLIN. I've had one child and everyone else's. Beau's here tonight; maybe we'll have one by tomorrow.

IRENE. You've no time for children, Kaitlin. You're the wrong type.

KAITLIN. What do you mean, Mama?

IRENE. At the zoo, there's a glass room where students dressed like monkeys care for the chimps whose mothers have left them. Some females reject their offspring.

*(***KAITLIN** *clutches the crystal)*

KAITLIN. I can't understand whether Mama is alien to me because she's sick or whether she's sick because she's so alien.

IRENE. Tell me about your miscarriages, Kaitlin?

BEAU. Darling, let's go—

IRENE. With the last miscarriage—

KAITLIN. What are you talking about? Beau!

IRENE. How bad was the surgery?

BEAU. I didn't go into things. I simply said—

KAITLIN. It's amazing. To find myself living inside and outside my life. In a way I never expected to.

BEAU. I'm trying to love you—

KAITLIN. Now the men in my dreams are beginning to look good.

BEAU. My job's...taking care of you—

KAITLIN. You told Mama! What should I do in the good Southern tradition? Take an overdose? Seek revenge? *(***KAITLIN** *runs downstage, grabs the crystal, spins it)* Do you know how to use a crystal? It's got a soul different from the person holding it. Ask it a question. It'll swing one way for yes, another for no. I'm going to tell you this. Because I can see you'll understand. I use the crystal to contact Baudelaire. Watch. Baudelaire, should I punish my husband? Now don't trick me. Sometimes he fools me. *(The crystal swings for no)* No! Ha. Marriage is a complex activity. It both connects you and underscores your solitude.

*(***SOUND:** *A band plays a French love song, something like "La Vie en Rose .")*

*(***RORY** *charges in, flaunting a vulture headdress and a robe of Cleopatra.)*

RADIO. YOUR STEAMBOATIN' VACATION BEGINS WITH THE MISS FLOOZY COSTUME CONTEST. LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL, LADIES. LAISSEZ LES BON TEMPS ROULER.

RORY. I gave my asp to the captain and my bangle to the bartender. That just goes to show that men are interested in mature love affairs. *(Parading around in her costume)* I'm Cleopatra. The Egyptian queen. At mating time, vultures perform exciting displays. They will shoot upward, and join claws in midair.

IRENE. There's one in every group that's the strangest.

RORY. I was born on Saint John's Eve, June 23. It's a mystic day from Celtic times when women went mad in the heat of the night. I'm not a nice girl. The first thing I read is the obituaries. That's where the money is. And you've got no client to negotiate with.

*(***BUNKY** *enters costumed as Hamlet, followed by* **LUISA**, *dressed as Ophelia.* **BUNKY** *waves a bottle of champagne)*

BUNKY. A round of bubbles for anyone? For any two? I'm Hamlet and she's sad Ophelia.

IRENE. *(Assessing* **BUNKY***)* For any beverage, use real crystal, darling, never plastic. You can't buy class, but you can be very visible with your money.

RORY. *(Glancing around)* Beau's lost his wife. Good. *(Spies* **KAITLIN***)* Oh, no. There she is. Come dance, Beau. Be nice to us old empresses.

BEAU. You want to dance, Kaitlin?

KAITLIN. *(Plays restlessly with her sweater)* No one expects you to live in a funny sort of limbo.

*(***SOUND:** *A tango plays.)*

BEAU. You know I love to tango.

KAITLIN. Well, don't just slip a look. Buy.

BEAU. *(His face set in headstrong denial)* A tango, Miss DeBango?

RORY. In a matter of minutes, I'm important, all of a sudden. To get ahead you've got to be a good dancer.

*(***RORY** *dances upstage with* **BEAU***)*

KAITLIN. An old-fashioned holiday on the river.

IRENE. *(Glancing at* **KAITLIN***)* You work so hard to go to these reunions to hide your marriage from looking like itself. Luisa! Come dance.

LUISA. *(Joining her)* Two women?

IRENE. If I wait for the right man, I may never dance. Who made up those rules anyway?

LUISA. There are plenty of nice men.

IRENE. I don't want to share my room. I look in my bed and say get out.

BUNKY. The champagne's so thick, it's cresting over.

LUISA. I wish I could put words together like you, Bunky.

IRENE. One reason celebrities talk so well is they've learned to talk money out of people. Big dog personalities in brains the size of gnats. *(Crosses to the railing, catching her breath)*

BUNKY. My songs haven't got real value, until I die.

IRENE. *(Watches* **BUNKY** *relishing the champagne)* Bunky acts like his dad. He was a gangster.

BUNKY. Gambler.

IRENE. In the horse business in Virginia. Breakfast at noon, dinner at ten.

BUNKY. He accommodated my grandmother by dying right on schedule.

IRENE. I went to the funeral to make sure he was dead.

LUISA. *(Touching his shoulder)* I would like to have known your father.

BUNKY. Me too. There was something hard but important about him.

LUISA. I'm glad I got to meet your mother. I see where you get your dreamy eyes and—

BUNKY. Being a singer has turned me into a sly person. Deaf in one ear. *(***BUNKY** *coughs)* I lived for those moments of glory...

*(***BUNKY** *refills their glasses, his eyes strangely soothed by the fizz of the champagne.* **LUISA** *hovers by him, high with adoration)*

BUNKY. You got me thinking too deep.

LUISA. Humph. About your daddy?

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