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O. HENRY'S GUIDE TO THE PRESENT was first produced by Olathe South High School in Olathe, Kansas, on November 16, 2022. The director was David Tate Hastings, the student lighting designer was Alex Secor, the assistant director and stage manager was Jay Allen, the original score was by Peter Kavanaugh, and the technical director was Phillip Leonard. The cast was as follows:

O. HENRY ..... Julianna Bowles
DELLA ..... Gracie Akers
JIMMY JACKSON, OSCAR ..... Caleb Mitchell
HELEN ..... Rachel Sullivan
FRANK/RAMONTI, RILEY ..... Bryan Swilor
JOHN DELANEY, MR. ALSEF ..... Alex Howell
WILLIAM ..... Sam Moore
TRUMAN ..... Lake Sowles
BEHRMAN ..... Josef Kuehnen
JOHNSY ..... Skylar Saragusa
SUE ..... Chloe Klemme
GILLIAN ..... Josh McCall
LAWYER TOLMAN, WIGMAKER,
RESTAURANT OWNER ..... Jachelle Jones
LAWYER SHARP, WIDOW MAYO,
EXCITED PASSENGER, DOCTOR FLECK ..... Abby Dodds
MISS STEVENS,
CRANKY PASSENGER ..... Mikayla Arias
MRS. SKIDDER, HARRIET WILLIAMS ..... Maddy Angell
JAMES WILLIAMS,
ALL BUSINESS PEOPLE ..... Easton Echols
TOUR OPERATOR, STORE CLERK,
GROCER ..... Gabriela Moya
GUEST, DONOVAN ..... Alex Wood

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CHARACTERS

O. HENRY, a writer.

DELLA, nineteen, new to New York City, a bride.

WILLIAM, thirty-seven, in prison.

PASSERSBY, ignoring William.

DEPARTMENT STORE CLERK, selling decorative combs.

OSCAR, Della's husband.

CRANKY PASSENGER, on a rubberneck auto.

EXCITED PASSENGER, on a rubberneck auto.

TOUR OPERATOR, of a rubberneck auto.

HARRIET WILLIAMS, on her honeymoon.

JAMES WILLIAMS, on his honeymoon.

RILEY, a police officer.

DONOVAN, a police officer.

LAWYER TOLMAN, the executor of a will.

LAWYER SHARP, the co-executor of the will.

GILLIAN, beneficiary of the will, resident of the Vallambrosa rooming house.

HELEN (at ages thirty-eight and eighteen), owner of the Vallambrosa.

TRUMAN, a prison guard.

MISS STEVENS, a communist calligrapher, resident of the Vallambrosa.

SUE, an artist, resident of the Vallambrosa.

JOHNSY, an artist, resident of the Vallambrosa, Sue's roommate.

BEHRMAN, sixty, an artist, resident of the Vallambrosa.

THE WIDOW MAYO, Helen's mother.

JOHN DELANEY, twenty, an unsuccessful suitor, (later MR. ALSEF).

FRANK, a newlywed, (later RAMONTI).

MR. SKIDDER, a writer.

BUSINESS PEOPLE 1–4, Della's prospective employers.

RESTAURANT OWNER, a client of Della's.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER

A GROCER

JIMMY JACKSON, an ambulance driver.

A GUEST, not human, not welcome.

DOCTOR FLECK

A STORE CLERK

A WIGMAKER

In O. Henry's day lots of important jobs were reserved for men. Lawyers, police officers, doctors, and business people were mostly male. But this play is designed to be performed by an ensemble. Feel free to cast those roles with female actors. Likewise, you're free to make the characters of Behrman and Mr. Skidder women. For a great example of how to divvy the roles, look at David Hastings' casting for the original production.

PLACE

The play takes place in the Vallambrosa rooming house, but with quick jumps to other New York City locations and a prison cell in Ohio. In life, the Vallambrosa is four stories but onstage it's flat.

NOTES

Also available and highly recommended by the playwright is a recorded musical score that invokes the romantic era of classical piano music in which the story takes place. Composed by Peter Kavanaugh, the score greatly enhances the play and includes period-correct sound effects.

The audio cues are supplied as both a set of individual .wav files (24-bit, 44.1kHz), and also as a duplicate set indexed into a QLAB playlist, for productions that use QLAB to sync audio with their sound system.

If you plan to use an intermission, place it after the summer section.

The following note should appear in the program:
O. Henry was an American short story writer who lived from 1862 to 1910. He wrote almost six hundred stories—published in magazines and then anthologies—and in his day he was world-renowned. The plot of this play is adapted from six of those stories: *The Skylight Room*, *Sisters of the Golden Circle*, *The Thing's the Play*, *One Thousand Dollars*, *The Last Leaf*, and *The Gift of the Magi*.

O. HENRY'S GUIDE TO THE PRESENT

O. Henry, our narrator, enters or is already onstage. Della enters, then William does. Della and William are not together, not even aware of each other. They're both new to the city. Della has long, long hair but holds a fancy hat. William tries to talk to passersby, but keeps getting ignored.

O. HENRY. New York. 1905. You arrive in the city—

DELLA. Eight hundred and forty times the size of my hometown—

WILLIAM. The most creative city in the world—

O. HENRY. And everything is possible.

WILLIAM. I brought my pen.

DELLA. I brought my husband.

WILLIAM. I'm going to write a masterpiece.

DELLA. I'll get a job as a typist, and Oscar will prove that he's better than my family thinks he is.

WILLIAM. *(To a passerby.)* Excuse me. Is this the Vallambrosa?

But the passerby, in a hurry, doesn't even slow.

O. HENRY. In a new town, there's always one detail that represents your future happiness. For Della, in a picture window—

DELLA. *(Mesmerized.)* Oh my.

O. HENRY. Combs. *Art* that you could *wear*. Perfect for the one thing she was secretly vain about: her long, beautiful hair. For William, it was—

WILLIAM. The Vallambrosa rooming house.

O. HENRY. Four floors but a hundred stories. A building famous, in certain circles, for the people who occupied it: painters and musicians and writers. Someday he'd belong there.

WILLIAM. *(To no one in particular.)* I thought there'd be a sign.

O. HENRY. My name is O. Henry. I wrote stories about New York, the only city with people who lived in the clouds. But I wasn't interested in those people, mostly. I wrote about the people down below, looking up at them—

Which William is.

—or pressing their foreheads against the shop windows.

Which Della is. She raps on the window, to get a clerk's attention.

DELLA. Excuse me! How much are those combs?

DEPARTMENT STORE CLERK. These are forty dollars.

DELLA. Forty dollars!

DEPARTMENT STORE CLERK. They're tortoiseshell.

DELLA. Well, they're beautiful.

O. HENRY. My canvas is New York City, "Bagdad-on-the-Subway," so let's start off with a tour of that canvas, on a rubberneck auto.

Oscar, Della's husband, enters, agitated.

OSCAR. Della, we've got to go.

DELLA. I'm coming! I can't wait!

She follows him off.

WILLIAM. *(Yet another passerby pays him no mind.)* Excuse me!

O. HENRY. New York has four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and Christmas.

WILLIAM. Why is everybody ignoring me?

He follows the passerby off.

O. HENRY. This is spring.

And now the ensemble, not including O. Henry, become passengers on a rubberneck auto, an open-topped tour bus.

Della and Oscar are on the second-to-last seats, in front of a well-off couple: Harriet and James Williams. Della is having the best time of anyone in the world.

CRANKY PASSENGER. It's crowded in here.

EXCITED PASSENGER. I've never ridden in an auto-mobile.

DELLA. *(This is hilarious.)* You're going thirty miles an hour!

The tour operator speaks through a megaphone.

TOUR OPERATOR. As we come around the corner, you'll get your first glimpse of…

DELLA. The Statue of Liberty. And my wedding ring.

TOUR OPERATOR. Feast your eyes to the east…

DELLA. The Brooklyn Bridge! And my wedding ring.

TOUR OPERATOR. The New York Stock Exchange.

DELLA. And my wedding ring.

O. HENRY. On the highest rear seat of this auto, I beg you to observe yet another new bride—Mrs. James Williams, Harriet Williams that was—once the belle of Cloverdale, Missouri. On Mrs. James Williams' face was recorded a little library of the world's best thoughts in three volumes. Volume number one:

HARRIET. Mr. James Williams is the best man in the world.

O. HENRY. Volume two:

HARRIET. The world is a very excellent place!

O. HENRY. Volume three:

HARRIET. In occupying the highest seat in a rubberneck auto we are traveling the pace that passes all understanding.

O. HENRY. Dear kind fairy, please give us just a teeny-weeny bit of our wedding trip over again. Just an hour, so we can remember how the grass and the poplar trees looked, and the bow of those bonnet strings tied beneath her chin.

HARRIET. *(To Della.)* I like your hat.

DELLA. Thank you! I love roses and I love grapes, so when I saw them both on the same hat, I just had to have it.

O. HENRY. And as the two women's eyes met, between two ticks of a watch—

DELLA. Wink—

HARRIET. —Smile nod—

DELLA. —Nod smile—

HARRIET. —Laugh—

DELLA. —Laugh harder—

The husbands ignore each other.

Whisper.

HARRIET. Whisper.

DELLA. Even quieter.

HARRIET. Even quieter.

DELLA. Laugh!

O. HENRY. As they bend their heads low and speak of the world, their hopes and fancies, let me whisper you sit tight…

TOUR OPERATOR. And feast your eyes to the right…

O. HENRY. For things are about to happen on this carriage.

A policeman, Riley, steps in front of the carriage, hand up to stop it. Oscar, Della's husband, climbs out of the carriage, drops to the ground out of sight of the policeman.

CRANKY PASSENGER. Why are we stopping?

O. HENRY. Upon being stopped, Della's husband, Oscar, slid over the edge of the car, hung lightly for an instant, and then disappeared.

Another policeman, Donovan enters.

TOUR OPERATOR. *(To Riley.)* What's eatin' you?

RILEY. Keep her at anchor for a minute. There's a man on board we want. A burglar from Malvern, Pennsylvania named Pinky McGuire. *(Re: Mr. James Williams.)* There he is on the back seat! *(To Donovan, who has moved to the side.)* Look out for the side, Donovan.

DONOVAN. Come down, old sport. We've got you. It's back to sleepytown for you. It ain't a bad idea hiding on a rubberneck, though. I'll remember that.

TOUR OPERATOR. Better step off, sir, and explain. The car must proceed on its tour.

James Williams deeply amused, stands with his wife and they get off the rubberneck.

(To the passengers.) And we'll continue on uptown.

ALL THE OTHER PASSENGERS. No/Don't/Stop!/I wanna see what happens!

CRANKY PASSENGER. *(To the tour operator.)* What have you got that's more interesting than this?

RILEY. You'll come with us, please. What's so amusing, if you don't mind my asking?

JAMES WILLIAMS. It's going to be a good story, telling people I was mistaken for a burglar.

DONOVAN. A detective saw you on the rubberneck down at the Statue of Liberty and phoned us to take you in.

JAMES WILLIAMS. My name is Mr. James Williams, of Cloverdale, Missouri.

RILEY. Pinky Maguire's description fits you like a flannel washed in hot suds.

JAMES WILLIAMS. I have letters in our hotel that will prove who I am.

RILEY. Do your explaining down at the station house.

JAMES WILLIAMS. Harriet, they're in the hotel safe.

HARRIET. Go with them quietly, Pinky, and maybe it'll be in your favor.

RILEY. Your girl gives you good advice. Come on, now.

The rubberneck starts to move off.

TOUR OPERATOR. Nothing more to see here!

As the rubberneck moves off, O. Henry takes the megaphone from the tour operator.

O. HENRY. As the car rolled away Mrs. James Williams threw a kiss—at someone high in the seats of the rubberneck.

Harriet blows the kiss as the rubberneck exits.

At that moment, madness descended upon James Williams.

JAMES WILLIAMS. My wife seems to think I'm a burglar. I never heard of her being crazy, therefore I must be. And that'll explain the crazy thing I'm about to do.

O. HENRY. And he's off!

James Williams sprints—in place, most likely.

DONOVAN. Stop him!

O. Henry uses the megaphone to narrate the chase.

O. HENRY. Feast your eyes to the north, ladies and gentlemen, as Mr. James Williams bolts between a horse and an auto-mobile, blocking the policemen's view. Coming up on his right—the duty cop from uptown joins the chase! Zig! Zag! He makes his flight appear random but it's not; he has a plan.

JAMES WILLIAMS. I have to make it to the Vallambrosa—

O. HENRY. —Where his wife's Aunt Helen lives.

JAMES WILLIAMS. She'll let me in and I'll wait until this blows over.

O. HENRY. Nine minutes until he makes it to the Vallambrosa. Let's spend two of those minutes at the offices of—

The law offices of Tolman and Sharp. Gillian, early twenties, stands before the two lawyers.

LAWYER TOLMAN. Lawyer Tolman—

LAWYER SHARP. And Lawyer Sharp.

O. HENRY. Where we'll meet another of our heroes.

LAWYER TOLMAN. Young Gillian.

GILLIAN. Yes!

LAWYER TOLMAN. Are you paying attention?

GILLIAN. One thousand dollars.

LAWYER TOLMAN. One thousand dollars. And here is the money. Twenty fifty-dollar bills.

Lawyer Tolman hands Gillian an envelope.

Is something amusing you, young Gillian?

GILLIAN. A thousand dollars. It's such a confoundedly awkward amount. If it had been ten thousand a fellow might wind up with a lot of fireworks and do himself credit. But a thousand: just enough to tempt me into all sorts of bad behavior. Did Sue Hayden get anything? I ask not because I like her but just ordinary curiosity.

LAWYER SHARP. Have you been drinking?

GILLIAN. When?

LAWYER SHARP. Are you currently intoxicated? It's one in the afternoon. How do you spend your days?

GILLIAN. It's not all fun, if that's what you mean. Right after this, I have to go watch my friend Jonah's football game.

LAWYER TOLMAN. Had you been listening to the reading of your uncle's will, you would know that his ward Sue got the same as everyone else: ten dollars and a seal ring.

GILLIAN. Poor Sue.

LAWYER TOLMAN. I must remind you of one detail of your own inheritance. You are required to render us an account of the manner of expenditure of this thousand dollars as soon as you have disposed of it.

GILLIAN. You want me to itemize.

LAWYER TOLMAN. That's right. As soon as you've spent it, but no later than the end of the year. The will stipulates that. Do you understand and agree?

GILLIAN. You may depend on it. A thousand dollars. Enough to unsettle my life. Not enough to change it.

Gillian exits.

O. HENRY. The Vallambrosa rooming house is composed of two old-fashioned brownstone residences welded into one. Among the Vallambrosa's roomers are writers, musicians, shopgirls, artists, and other people who lean over the banister rail when the doorbell rings. At this moment, Mr. James Williams is one-third of a street block from reaching the building. Seventeen seconds away. Our fugitive is going to make it!

James Williams sprints on, exhausted, makes it to the door of the Vallambrosa, rings the jangly buzzer bell. Helen—imperious—enters, and opens the door.

HELEN. Yes?

JAMES WILLIAMS. Helen Parker, I'm James Williams, the husband of your niece Harriet. We were married two weeks ago.

HELEN. James? I was sorry I couldn't come to the wedding.

JAMES WILLIAMS. Can I come in?

HELEN. Is Harriet here now?

JAMES WILLIAMS. No.

HELEN. Why are you out of breath?

JAMES WILLIAMS. It's a little hard to explain. If I could come in first…

HELEN. No. Explain first.

JAMES WILLIAMS. It's quite silly. I need to get off the street as soon as possible because the police are chasing me.

HELEN. The police!

JAMES WILLIAMS. But they shouldn't be.

HELEN. Step back so I can get a good look at you.

He steps back into the street. She shouts!

POLICE! POLICE!! *He's over here!*

She slams the door.

JAMES WILLIAMS. Wait! Aunt Helen, please!

He bangs on the door. Donovan runs in.

DONOVAN. There he is! Hands up.

The police surround James Williams as he puts his hands up.

What did you say your name was?

JAMES WILLIAMS. McDoodle the Pink, or Pinky the Brute. But you can bet I'm a burglar.

DONOVAN. Let's go then.

RILEY. Down to the station. **O. HENRY.** Down to the station.

And we jump to the police station.

O. HENRY. Where Mrs. James Williams was waiting with proofs of the hero's innocence.

RILEY. Well, it all seems to check out. Mr. James Williams. Of Cloverdale, Missouri.

JAMES WILLIAMS. Just as I told you to begin with.

RILEY. So why did you run? Why did you pretend to be a copyrighted burglar?

JAMES WILLIAMS. I'm afraid that will have to remain between me and my wife.

Who he goes to now.

If you can please explain… They mistook me for a burglar, which was understandable *since you told me to go with them and called me Pinky*.

HARRIET. Dear, listen. It was an hour's pain and trial to you. I did it for her. I mean the girl who spoke to me on the coach. I was so happy. So happy with you that I didn't dare refuse that happiness to another. Jim, they were married only this morning, those two. When her husband slipped over the side and ran away, I watched her.

O. HENRY. The strangest of optical illusions. As he ran away, he got smaller in the field of her vision, but he stayed exactly the same size in her heart.

HARRIET. She wanted him to get away. So I did too. He slipped away while they were chasing you. Thank you.

JAMES WILLIAMS. Did she know her husband was a burglar?

DELLA. No. I didn't. Of course I didn't.

Della has entered.

My parents kept saying he was a good-for-nothing.

HARRIET. Hello!

DELLA. I came in case you needed a witness.

HARRIET. How are you?

DELLA. My marriage turned out the way my parents said it would, only much faster.

HARRIET. Now you'll go back to Malvern?

DELLA. No. I'll have the marriage annulled. But the plan was to move here. I'm going to stay, make a life.

HARRIET. Do you have money to get you started?

DELLA. I used my savings to buy a Densmore Premier typewriter. It cost fifty-three dollars.

HARRIET. Fifty-three dollars!

DELLA. It was an investment. Typing is skilled, in-demand labor.

HARRIET. But how much actual money do you have right now?

DELLA. Three dollars.

HARRIET. Della, that's not enough.

DELLA. I'll make it be enough.

HARRIET. You should go home. Come back when you're better set.

DELLA. That's not an option.

HARRIET. Where are you going to stay tonight?

DELLA. I'll find someplace.

HARRIET. My aunt Helen runs a rooming house at Park and eighteenth.

JAMES WILLIAMS. She's crazy.

HARRIET. She's strict but she keeps her prices low because she likes the building full.

DELLA. Park and eighteenth. Thank you. I'll go right now.

HARRIET. It's called the Vallambrosa.

Della starts to exit.

Della. Eighteenth is *that* way.

She turns, exits the other way as William enters.

WILLIAM. Excuse me. Is this the Vallambrosa?

But, just as during the opening, the passerby passes by.

O. HENRY. William Sidney Porter dreamed of the Vallambrosa. He had seen it once on a visit to the city of four million: full of painters and singers and novelists, people who created a life by creating.

WILLIAM. *(To another passerby.)* Do you live in the Vallambrosa? Why is everybody ignoring me?

And now the world takes a turn for the surreal. The people passing by aren't just ignoring him. They're somehow in a different realm, part of a recurring dream.

O. HENRY. But every morning William woke and craned his head and he could still see the sign: Ohio Penitentiary.

William at a desk, writing. A guard, Truman, enters.

TRUMAN. Prisoner 30664. I've been looking for you. Why are you here?

WILLIAM. Where's Edward?

TRUMAN. Edward got fired for stealing from the cafeteria.

WILLIAM. Fired? For stealing from a prison?

TRUMAN. And arrested. If he's convicted you might see him again. Why are you in the laundry room?

WILLIAM. As long as I finish my duties in the pharmacy the warden lets me sit and write from three thirty to six.

TRUMAN. The question was, why in here?

WILLIAM. Because it's quiet. *Nobody interrupts me.*

He attempts to go back to writing, but Truman doesn't move.

TRUMAN. You taught Maslow to read.

WILLIAM. Yes.

TRUMAN. I want you to teach me.

WILLIAM. Have Maslow teach you.

TRUMAN. Maslow's getting out. Next week.

WILLIAM. Good for Maslow. But there are other people who could teach you.

TRUMAN. He says you're a great teacher. No one else was able to do it his whole life but you found a way.

WILLIAM. Maslow was a fellow prisoner. You're a guard.

TRUMAN. This is my lunch hour.

WILLIAM. But you're not allowed to just sit with me.

TRUMAN. I am. The warden's my uncle. How else does a man who can't read get a job as a guard?

WILLIAM. This two-and-a-half hours is the only part of my day that's not spoken for.

TRUMAN. You know why you have this two-and-a-half hours? Because you taught Maslow to read.

WILLIAM. That's not true.

TRUMAN. Yes it is. Made the warden think kindly of you. You have three years left on your sentence.

WILLIAM. He told you that?

TRUMAN. Three years and fourteen days. Helping me could reduce that. You teach me. The warden reduces your time here.

WILLIAM. He doesn't have that power.

TRUMAN. He has influence.

Beat.

I have a son. He's four.

WILLIAM. I don't care! Let's discuss this at a time that is not my only time in the day to write!

TRUMAN. You know what the scariest words in the world are? "Papa, can I read you a story?" The only argument between me and my wife. She says "How can you not want your son to read?"

"I do! But not yet!" When I was looking for you, I saw the picture of your little girl. How old is she?

WILLIAM. She's five.

TRUMAN. Can she read?

WILLIAM. Yes. I write her letters telling her about Paris, where I'm on a business trip at the moment.

TRUMAN. That's gonna be one long trip.

WILLIAM. Three more years.

TRUMAN. Paris is a terrible place. Teach me to read and let's get you back to her.

A buzzer takes us to the Vallambrosa. Della at the door.

HELEN. You're looking for a room.

DELLA. That's right. Your niece Harriet sent me here.

This doesn't have quite the effect that Della had hoped it would.

HELEN. I think you'll find the double parlors on the first floor most suitable.

She opens the doors to the double parlors, which we can tell just from Della's reaction are beautiful.

Twenty dollars a week. The gentleman who lived here for the last eight years was a doctor. Look at that view.

DELLA. Beautiful.

HELEN. Isn't it? In this closet he kept anesthetics and in that closet he kept a skeleton.

O. HENRY. Skeleton in a closet. A joke she made every time, but Della was thinking only of the three dollars in her pocket.

A young woman, Miss Stevens, passes by.

HELEN. That's Miss Stevens, the communist calligrapher.

MISS STEVENS. *(Overheard it.)* Well, really.

And she's gone.

HELEN. I'm afraid this is the largest room I have available.

DELLA. It's really beautiful. But do you have anything on a *(Meaning "cheaper.")* higher floor?

Two young women, Sue and Johnsy, pass them. One carries a blank canvas. Though imperious, Helen loves to be surrounded by artists.

SUE. Hello! We both got good news today!

JOHNSY. Sue got a manager.

HELEN. I don't know what that is.

SUE. Someone to look for work for me while I concentrate on the painting. Johnsy's news is bigger.

JOHNSY. I got asked to submit work for a big ad campaign.

HELEN. Johnsy, congratulations! That's wonderful.

JOHNSY. It's just a submission. But it's huge if I get it. Suddenly, boom! I'll be a working artist.

HELEN. What's the product?

JOHNSY. It's a secret. But it's a Christmas campaign.

HELEN. Christmas!

JOHNSY. They're starting early 'cause they want it to be special and memorable.

HELEN. Get to work!

JOHNSY. I will!

Sue and Johnsy continue on their way. Helen opens a door.

HELEN. Here's the second story back. I used to let it to Mr. Tanbury for nine dollars until he went to Miami to manage his brother's orange plantation. I could charge eight for the right kind of person.

DELLA. It's also very nice but I just moved here today.

HELEN. Are you an artist, Miss Leeson?

DELLA. I wish. I have no talent whatsoever, unfortunately.

HELEN. The third-floor back parlor is being painted but it's the same shape as the front parlor.

She opens a door to find Behrman.

BEHRMAN. I LIVE HERE.

HELEN. Excuse me, Mr. Behrman. I didn't know you were in. This young woman is considering the building. Mr. Behrman is also a painter. We're infested with painters. *(To Behrman.)* How goes the masterpiece?

BEHRMAN. The same.

HELEN. I'm sorry to hear that.

DELLA. (*Re: a most-likely invisible painting on a wall.)* Is this your work?

BEHRMAN. From a long time ago.

DELLA. It's beautiful. *(Re: an easel that faces away from Della.)* And this is the masterpiece?

BEHRMAN. That's right.

DELLA. Can I look?

BEHRMAN. No.

He hands Helen some cash.

Here. I meant to give you this. Last week's rent.

HELEN. Thank you.

Della and Helen leave Behrman's room.

The third-floor rear rents for six dollars a week.

DELLA. It's due in advance?

HELEN. Of course. How much are you willing to pay for rent?

DELLA. At the moment, I only have three dollars.

HELEN. You might have saved us both time by telling me that. For three dollars you will not find a quality room anywhere in the city.

DELLA. Mrs. Parker, would it be possible for me to say here tonight?

HELEN. No.

DELLA. Just for the night. And whatever one night costs, I'll pay double.

HELEN. I don't rent by the evening.

DELLA. I'm from Malvern, Pennsylvania and I would prefer not to be outside after dark on my first night in New York City.

HELEN. That is not my problem.

DELLA. I could sleep in a hallway.

HELEN. I have my other guests to think of.

DELLA. I can earn the money by the end of the week.

HELEN. Are you as naive as you seem?

DELLA. No one is as naive as I seem.

HELEN. Come back when you have a job or a man.

A go-your-own-way handshake.

You're married.

DELLA. Technically. I'll get it fixed tomorrow. I had the world's shortest marriage.

O. HENRY. Helen thought but did not say:

HELEN. Perhaps not the shortest.

O. HENRY. She thought back to that afternoon twenty years ago, her own wedding day. Back to a little store where notions and stationery were sold. In the rooms above the store, Helen was married to Frank Parker.

Helen transforms to her eighteen-year-old self.

The day had started badly and ended worse.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. Mom, they printed my picture in the paper.

The Widow Mayo enters.

THE WIDOW MAYO. I know they did. I arranged it.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. But look at the way this caption sits.

THE WIDOW MAYO. Oh dear.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. It looks like I'm the "Wholesale Female Murderess from Butte, Montana."

THE WIDOW MAYO. Well, are you?

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. No.

THE WIDOW MAYO. Good! Another reason for Frank to love you.

O. HENRY. Frank Parker had a best friend, John Delaney. They were such close friends that not even their rivalry for the hand of Helen Mayo could come between them. When Frank won Helen's hand, John served as best man at the wedding. But after the ceremony, upstairs, as she packed her bag for the honeymoon in Old Point Comfort…

Helen's packed. The Widow Mayo, now downstairs, calls up.

THE WIDOW MAYO. *(Offstage.)* Helen, Frank's asking about you!

HELEN. I'm just about ready!

John Delaney enters from the fire escape.

JOHN DELANEY. You're making a terrible mistake.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. *(Startled.)* John! What were you doing on the fire escape?

JOHN DELANEY. Frank isn't good enough for you.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. Frank is the most wonderful man in the world.

JOHN DELANEY. I'm going to do so much more with my life.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. You can't be in this room.

JOHN DELANEY. Come with me to the Riviera, or the Bronx, or any place where there are Italian skies.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. Did you have a second glass of champagne?

JOHN DELANEY. I can make you so much happier.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. I have no idea why you think you can say that to a respectable married woman, but you cannot. Even if I had been interested, which I am not, my interest would have evaporated the moment you did this disrespectful-to-your-friend stunt.

His confidence melts away and shame takes its place.

JOHN DELANEY. I'm sorry, Helen. It was an irresistible impulse.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. Take the next fire escape down.

JOHN DELANEY. I will. I just…

He bends down on one knee.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. *Leave, John.* Somebody might come in.

JOHN DELANEY. One kiss. On your hand. As a farewell.

She extends her hand. He kisses it. They freeze.

O. HENRY. Ladies and gentlemen, is there anything more wonderful than to have the fellow you want already your husband, and to have the one you don't want come with a damp curl on his forehead and—

JOHN DELANEY. Blah blah blah blah—

O. HENRY. To congratulate yourself, as he presses his last kiss upon your knuckles. Oh, it's galluptious, that kiss:

John and Helen are still frozen. O. Henry takes the kiss from the back of her hand, shows it to the audience.

It's tiny, but it means so much.

Frank enters.

FRANK. What are you doing?

JOHN DELANEY. Nothing!

John flees! Probably out the fire escape.

FRANK. You were letting him kiss your hand?

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. I can explain!

Frank takes the kiss from O. Henry.

FRANK. You can explain this?

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. He was so insistent!

FRANK. This required two people!

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. It was just to make him go away!

FRANK. This was making him stay!

Frank tears up the kiss.

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. I'm glad you did that! Thank you!

FRANK. Never will I look upon your face again!

HELEN, AGE EIGHTEEN. Frank, please!

The Widow Mayo has appeared at the doorway. He pushes past her.

THE WIDOW MAYO. He'll come back.

O. HENRY. But he did not.

As O. Henry speaks, Helen transforms back, from a confused, disappointed eighteen-year-old to the stern woman we've met.

And Helen inherited the shop and the brownstones above it, and when the shop stopped making money, she turned her home into many homes.

Back to the present.

DELLA. Well, thank you for your time.

She starts to go.

HELEN. Wait. There's one more room to look at. The skylight room.

Della doesn't see it.

DELLA. Is there a back staircase?

HELEN. No. It's this ladder. It's carpeted so it won't hurt your feet.

They peer up, up, up.

Take a look if you like.

As Della mimes climbing the ladder.

O. HENRY. The skylight room occupied seven feet by eight feet of floor space. Its four bare walls seemed to close in upon you like the sides of a coin. Through the glass of the little skylight you saw a square of blue infinity.

DELLA. *(Calling down.)* How much is this room?

O. HENRY. The skylight room rented for four dollars.

DELLA. *(Louder.)* I SAID, "HOW MUCH IS THIS ROOM?"

HELEN. IT'S TWO DOLLARS AND FIFTY CENTS, DUE EVERY SUNDAY EVENING BEFORE FIVE O'CLOCK!

DELLA. I'll take it!

O. HENRY. As Della relaxed for the first time that day, she took a better look at her new home. A chair…

DELLA. And my wedding ring.

O. HENRY. A washstand.

DELLA. And my wedding ring.

O. HENRY. An iron bed.

DELLA. And my wedding ring.

She tries to take off her ring. She pulls and pulls but it won't come off.

O. HENRY. She pulled, twisted, and yanked.

Pulls some more. It's probably painful.

But the ring had decided not to come off.

She gives up for a moment, looks upward. Della bounces back quickly.

DELLA. *(Charmed.)* Oh hello little star. What's your name?

O. HENRY. The star (whose name was Jimmy) didn't answer.

Freeze on Della staring up at the star.

Central Park. Birds and shadows. Johnsy has a shotgun aimed almost straight up at something that's not moving.

JOHNSY. Bang.

Something like a bush falls from the sky: it's the size of a tumbleweed, but green.

O. HENRY. Summer.

JOHNSY. Perfect!

She exits with the bush.

O. HENRY. The heat wave of 1905.

MR. SKIDDER. MY ROOM IS TOO HOT TO WRITE IN!

O. HENRY. Days are long but tempers are short.

HELEN. KEEP THE BLINDS DOWN DURING THE DAY!

MR. SKIDDER. THEY DON'T CLOSE RIGHT BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T INSTALLED RIGHT!

O. HENRY. The Vallambrosa is a wedding cake made of heat. Floor one:

GILLIAN. It's unbearable.

O. HENRY. Floor two:

MISS STEVENS. Let me get one more wet cloth.

O. HENRY. Floor three:

JOHNSY. Just call your brother and ask if we can stay over.

O. HENRY. And the skylight room, so hot it was dangerous.

Della, alone. With no one to see her, Della doesn't have to put a good face on it.

In the rest of Della's world, things were no better.

Quick hits of rejection from the ensemble.

BUSINESS PERSON 1. Typing? We don't have anything right now.

BUSINESS PERSON 2. Nothing I can think of.

BUSINESS PERSON 3. Check in next week.

BEHRMAN. How can you still not have spent that thousand dollars?

We transition to Behrman and Gillian in Behrman's room. Gillian examines a racing form.

GILLIAN. It's the thought of itemizing; it's driving me crazy. I have a guaranteed winner in the 5:20 race. You want in?

BEHRMAN. No thank you. I thought the late Septimus Gillian was worth something like half a million dollars.

GILLIAN. He was. He left all of it to a hospital for research on a microbe.

BEHRMAN. You've always had plenty of money to spend.

GILLIAN. Tons. Uncle was the fairy godmother as far as allowance was concerned.

BEHRMAN. Were there any other heirs?

GILLIAN. Just Sue.

BEHRMAN. Sue?

GILLIAN. She was his ward growing up.

BEHRMAN. I forgot that.

GILLIAN. He left her ten dollars and a seal ring. I need to hurry.

BEHRMAN. *(A dollar.)* Put this on the best horse, please. Hello, Della!

DELLA. Hello!

Gillian exits as Della enters.

Today's the day. Masterpiece Day.

BEHRMAN. I thought Masterpiece Day was tomorrow.

DELLA. You say that every time.

BEHRMAN. How goes the job hunt?

DELLA. Good!

BUSINESS PERSON 4. *(In their own space.)* We prefer men typists with their longer fingers.

DELLA. I came to repay your two dollars.

BEHRMAN. The rule was that you pay me back when you find a job.

DELLA. My Thursday restaurant client keeps me afloat. Take the two.

She hands him the two dollars.

BEHRMAN. You need to have a doctor look at that hand.

DELLA. It's a ring stuck on a finger.

BEHRMAN. It could be keeping away potential suitors.

DELLA. I'm not looking for potential suitors.

BEHRMAN. Don't you want love in your life, Della?

DELLA. I have my mother and my father and my sister.

BEHRMAN. You know what I mean.

DELLA. I made that mistake. Quite recently.

BEHRMAN. You fell in love with a man you didn't know was a burglar. That's an easy mistake not to repeat.

She's gone a little dizzy.

Are you all right?

DELLA. I might need to sit for a second.

He gets her a chair.

BEHRMAN. Are you getting enough to eat?

DELLA. It's just the heat.

She fishes out a picture.

This was the mistake.

BEHRMAN. He's handsome. Why are you still carrying his picture?

DELLA. I don't know. I can't explain one thing about me and Oscar. We got married six weeks after we met. He passed me on the street and said "I like your hair. Have dinner with me." I didn't think "he's shallow." I thought "lucky me." That whole six weeks I was convinced he did not have a single flaw.

BEHRMAN. That happens.

DELLA. Not like this. You know you're smitten when you think, "I love the way he spits."

I remember thinking, "He's charming when he drinks. I'm glad he drinks so much."

Or later, "I'm so glad I found a man who knows just when to be rude to a waiter."

And then… *(This is hard to say.)* this is just between us.

BEHRMAN. All right.

DELLA. I *did know* he was a burglar. When I found out I didn't think "dishonest," I thought "resourceful!" He'll change and we'll put that cleverness to good use. I thought we were on our honeymoon but I think it was actually a getaway. Then: He abandoned me in New York City with no money and no food and no shelter. I thought, "Finally. A flaw!"

BEHRMAN. Thank you for telling me.

DELLA. You must think I'm ridiculous.

BEHRMAN. No. But I do think you should cut up that picture. You were right about what today is. It's Masterpiece Day.

DELLA. Honestly?

BEHRMAN. My turn to be ridiculous.

DELLA. It's not finished.

He shows her the canvas. It's blank.

BEHRMAN. It's not started. Something about the pressure of getting it right. That first brushstroke. It just seems so…so…

Suddenly it's Behrman who needs taking care of.

DELLA. Do you know you're my favorite person in New York?

BEHRMAN. You know you're mine?

Sue enters, urgent, holding the bush that Johnsy shot from the sky.

SUE. I need your opinion fast. Do you know what this is?

BEHRMAN. A bush.

SUE. What kind of bush?

A stumper:

DELLA. I've never seen leaves with holes like that.

SUE. That's from buckshot. That's how Johnsy harvested it.

Johnsy enters, angry.

JOHNSY. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

SUE. Research.

JOHNSY. I didn't give you permission to share that!

SUE. No one has any idea what this is!

Miss Stevens enters, holding two envelopes.

MISS STEVENS. That bush? It's mistletoe.

JOHNSY. Thank you, Miss Stevens! And what does mistletoe make you think of?

MISS STEVENS. Pillaging. Mistletoe is a parasite, like the banking industry.

JOHNSY. It only ever takes you ten seconds to annoy me.

MISS STEVENS. Well, really.

SUE. She's making my point. This is a huge opportunity and I don't want you to waste it by sending out a picture of *this*.

JOHNSY. It's a good sample.

SUE. No, it's terrible. *(Johnsy is stung.)* You can do better.

JOHNSY. I already sent it out.

SUE. When?

JOHNSY. Last week.

SUE. You sent a sketch of *that* to J. Walter Thompson.

JOHNSY. Yes! So can you please stop talking about what a bad idea it is?

Miss Stevens holds out an envelope.

MISS STEVENS. J. Walter Thompson? This just came. *(To Sue.)* And for you, from your fancy manager.

JOHNSY. Is it a good sign or a bad sign that it came so quick?

SUE. Open it.

JOHNSY. *(She's too nervous.)* Somebody open it for me.

Miss Stevens opens the envelope, and reads.

MISS STEVENS. "Thank you for your submission, but at the present time it does not meet our needs."

JOHNSY. It's not even personalized?

SUE. I'm sorry, Johnsy.

Sue opens her own envelope. It startles her a little.

Oh.

JOHNSY. Bad news or good?

SUE. Unexpected news. I got the job.

JOHNSY. Which job?

SUE. Your job. The Christmas job.

JOHNSY. You applied for the same job without telling me?

SUE. I didn't know what I was applying for.

JOHNSY. How is that possible?

SUE. My manager asked me to send him a drawing that represented Christmas. I sketched a Santa Claus.

Tomorrow, Johnsy will be happy for Sue. But at the moment she needs to be alone.

(Follows her off.) Johnsy.

DELLA. *(In the sky.)* Look. There's Jimmy Jackson. I can see him from down here too.

BEHRMAN. Who?

DELLA. It's that star. Not the big one that twinkles. The steady blue one near it. It's Jimmy Jackson.

MISS STEVENS. Well, really. That's actually Gamma, of the constellation Cassiopeia. It's nearly of the second magnitude.

DELLA. Jimmy Jackson is a better name. He doesn't show up very well from down here but you ought to see him from my

room. You know you can see stars even in the daytime from the bottom of a well. My room is like the shaft of a coal mine, and it makes Jimmy Jackson look like the big diamond pin that Night fastens her kimono with.

A buzzer takes our attention to the entrance. All the residents of the Vallambrosa hear it. The man at the entrance is bearded and mysterious.

HELEN. How may I help you?

RAMONTI. I'm looking for lodgings. The discord and clatter uptown offend my ear.

HELEN. I'm afraid I don't have anything available at the moment.

RAMONTI. Thank you for your time.

As he goes, she somehow notes for the first time that he has a violin.

HELEN. You play the violin.

RAMONTI. Yes.

HELEN. What do you do for a living?

RAMONTI. I play the violin. Last night I played a concert at the new venue on fifty-seventh street. Carnegie Hall.

HELEN. I am the most absent-minded person in the world. I do have one room. The best room, in fact. Mr…

RAMONTI. Ramonti.

HELEN. Mr. Ramonti.

RAMONTI. Not Mr. Ramonti. Just Ramonti.

HELEN. What happened to the Mr.?

RAMONTI. I lost it in a legal battle.

Ramonti touches the bottom of his chin.

HELEN. Let me show you, the double parlors.

Behold! She opens the door to the magnificent double parlors: so beautiful they might amuse him.

The gentleman who lived here for the last eight years was a doctor. In this closet he kept anesthetics and in that closet, he kept a skeleton.

This makes him laugh hard, the way infatuated people do.

RAMONTI. How much is this gorgeous room?

HELEN. Fifteen dollars a week.

RAMONTI. It's paradise.

Elsewhere, in the world:

RESTAURANT OWNER. No work today, Della.

DELLA. Are you not still printing specials on Thursday?

RESTAURANT OWNER. A print shop opened on twenty-sixth street. It's cheaper. And faster. We won't be needing your services anymore.

O. HENRY. For reasons oatmeal related, Sue passed through the main hall at 9:34 every day.

As she passes, she just happens to run into Gillian.

SUE. Gillian, do you want a bowl of Cream of Wheat?

GILLIAN. No, thank you. *(Gets up his nerve.)* I was hoping to speak to you about something.

SUE. What's that?

GILLIAN. Something on the personal side.

This pleases her, which pleases him.

SUE. Speak away!

GILLIAN. It's just, how to phrase this…

SUE. Do you have a message for me?

GILLIAN. A message.

SUE. From Jonah? Your football friend? He's been working up his nerve to say something.

GILLIAN. No, he hasn't.

SUE. Trust me on this. Somehow he always ends up talking to me after the game.

GILLIAN. He's married.

SUE. Oh. Happily?

GILLIAN. Very.

SUE. He doesn't wear a ring.

GILLIAN. Not when he plays football.

Sue is devastated but brave.

SUE. Oh dear. Please don't mention this to him.

GILLIAN. Of course not.

SUE. It's so easy to mistake kindness for flirting.

GILLIAN. Are you all right?

SUE. My nose just got a little runny.

GILLIAN. Here.

He takes out a handkerchief. It's shaped like a heart, and she allows this to amuse her back toward happiness.

SUE. A handkerchief shaped like a heart! Where did you get this?

GILLIAN. Siegel-Cooper.

She blows her nose in the heart.

SUE. So clever. Was it expensive?

She blows her nose again.

GILLIAN. A little bit.

SUE. Thank you. I'll wash it.

She continues on with her oatmeal. We find Truman and William in a frustrated moment.

TRUMAN. Why doesn't it rhyme with anger?! A-N-G-E-R!

William is a cranky writer but a patient teacher.

WILLIAM. I can't explain it.

TRUMAN. Seems like the only rule is that there is no rule!

WILLIAM. I agree. But the word is "manger." You're doing so well.

TRUMAN. I need to read by Christmas. On Christmas Eve is when I want to read his first story.

WILLIAM. Let's put this aside for the day and play a game. *(Re: letters outside the window, not for the first time.)* Let's hear those letters again:

TRUMAN. O-H-I-O space P-E-N-I-T-E-N-T-I-A-R-Y.

WILLIAM. Which spells.

TRUMAN. Ohio. Penitentiary. But that's not reading. That's just knowing.

WILLIAM. Eventually they become the same thing. What we're going to do is use the letters in "Ohio Penitentiary" to make other words. Do you see what I mean? For example, I can make "poetry." P from penitentiary, o from Ohio, e from penitentiary. T from penitentiary. R from penitentiary. Y from penitentiary.

This is going way over Truman's head.

Try it. Sometimes the word is already there in front of you. Start with the t. The first t.

TRUMAN. T…

WILLIAM. What's the next letter right after it?

TRUMAN. E.

WILLIAM. After that.

TRUMAN. N.

WILLIAM. What does T-E-N spell?

TRUMAN. Ta-en. Ten.

WILLIAM. Good! Find another word.

TRUMAN. A.

WILLIAM. Fair enough. Find another word.

TRUMAN. I.

WILLIAM. Can you find one a little longer?

TRUMAN. Penitentiary.

WILLIAM. Let's stop for the day. You're doing well.

TRUMAN. I'm supposed to give you a message. From the warden. He's thinking about recommending you for early release.

WILLIAM. Thank you!

TRUMAN. But there's one condition. You have to admit to your crime.

WILLIAM. I didn't do it.

TRUMAN. Admit it anyway. Get back to your wife and daughter.

WILLIAM. My wife passed away.

TRUMAN. When?

WILLIAM. Two years ago.

TRUMAN. I'm sorry for your loss.

WILLIAM. Tuberculosis. I was out of the country. I heard she had taken a turn for the worse so I came home to see her. That's when I got arrested.

TRUMAN. Where's your daughter?

WILLIAM. She's with my sister. She's well taken care of.

TRUMAN. Still, all the more reason to admit your guilt.

WILLIAM. The world will think of me as a criminal.

TRUMAN. The world already thinks of you as a criminal.

WILLIAM. I'm going to change my name.

TRUMAN. To what?

WILLIAM. I don't know. In Honduras they called me "Chico."

TRUMAN. Honduras.

WILLIAM. Yes.

TRUMAN. You were in Honduras.

WILLIAM. Have you been there?

TRUMAN. No. But it's famous in my line of work. There's no treaty of extradition. *Guilty people go there to escape from the law.*

WILLIAM. I knew I was going to be arrested. That doesn't make me guilty.

TRUMAN. But you came back when your wife got sick.

WILLIAM. Yes.

TRUMAN. So…you were in Honduras. You'd escaped. But you learned your wife was dying. You could stay there and be free. Or you could come back and see her one more time. Freedom or love. You chose love. Is that right?

WILLIAM. Essentially. Yes.

TRUMAN. You should write about that.

WILLIAM. Absolutely not.

TRUMAN. It's a good story.

WILLIAM. No it's not. What makes something a good story is that it happens to someone else.

A clattering of keys pulls our attention to Della typing furiously while a prospective employer watches.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. And…stop. That's five minutes.

This was a typing test. She hands him the paper.

DELLA. Here you go!

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. Seventy-two words a minute. Impressive.

DELLA. I told you I was fast.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. Not one error.

DELLA. I can start tomorrow if you like.

He notices something.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. Miss. Leeson, may I see your hand?

She shows it to him.

This job involves typing eight hours a day every day.

DELLA. I understand that.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. That was a five-minute test, but it made your finger swell up.

DELLA. I'm used to it.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. Can you take off the ring?

DELLA. No.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER. I'm sorry. You'd never last here.

Helen writes a letter in her study.

O. HENRY. Helen's quarters were above what used to be the store. The hall space she had furnished as a sitting room and office combined. There she sat of evenings in a bright red light and sewed or read.

Ramonti enters.

RAMONTI. May I join you?

HELEN. Please do. The whole building has been buzzing about you all day.

RAMONTI. *(Modest.)* Ohhhh.

HELEN. You were in the *Tribune* and the *Herald*. They said your concert was a triumph!

RAMONTI. The critics have always been kind.

HELEN. You must have played since you were a little boy.

RAMONTI. I didn't pick up the violin until I was twenty-six. One day, as I practiced, a man passing my window told me I was producing a particularly rich sound. He taught me, then became my manager, and within two years he booked me my first European tour.

Miss Stevens pops in.

O. HENRY. From the very first day, Helen had noticed something odd about Ramonti. When he lied—

MISS STEVENS. Ramonti, there you are. What did you think of my manifesto?

RAMONTI. I found it very persuasive.

O. HENRY. —he touched the bottom of his chin.

It's an unconscious gesture: Ramonti touches the bottom of his chin.

No sooner had she confirmed this habit, than she noticed something even stranger.

RAMONTI. *(To Helen.)* One day in India, while I was riding an elephant, the animal reared as she passed a man with a basket—

O. HENRY. The things that sounded the most like lies—

RAMONTI. Because the basket was full of cobras.

O. HENRY. —were generally true. And some of the most ordinary-sounding details—

RAMONTI. I attended Jackson elementary school.

He touches his chin.

O. HENRY. Were lies. But why? What was the pattern in those lies?

Out in the world.

DELLA. Excuse me. Are you throwing away that potato?

GROCER. It's rotten at one end.

DELLA. I don't mind. I'll cut it off. Thank you.

GROCER. This carrot's not looking its best either. If you could take it off my hands I'd appreciate it.

DELLA. Thank you very much.

Sue exits the Vallambrosa as Della enters.

SUE. Della, I'm heading down the street to get a freeze pop. Can I get you one?

DELLA. No, thank you, Sue,

Sue exits.

(Difficult.) Three steps up the stoop, twelve steps to the second floor, twelve steps to the third floor, eighteen rungs.

In her room, she bites into the potato, peel and all. Eats it greedily. Checks to see if Jimmy's there.

How are you, Jimmy Jackson?

She blows a kiss up at Jimmy.

Maybe Miss Stevens is right. Maybe you are just Gamma of the constellation Cassiopeia. But no, I don't think so.

She cuts up Oscar's picture, then lies back on her bed.

Goodbye, Jimmy.

An anguished yell brings the entire building, minus Della, into the hall.

HELEN. What happened, Mr. Skidder?

MR. SKIDDER. Another rejection!

HELEN. I thought you were hurt!

MR. SKIDDER. My room is too hot to write in! You need to fix those blinds.

The commotion brings in Gillian and Behrman.

HELEN. Your lack of success as a writer is not the fault of my building!

MR. SKIDDER. Don't say things like that to me.

HELEN. In my own home, thank you very much, I will say what I wish.

MR. SKIDDER. I know your secret.

HELEN. My long-ago comedy of a marriage isn't secret. Just because I don't sell it to magazines doesn't mean I've packed it in mothballs.

MR. SKIDDER. That's not the secret. Do you think I haven't noticed? Why don't you read the paper on Tuesdays?

HELEN. I do.

MR. SKIDDER. No you don't. Mr. Waggle doesn't deliver the paper on Tuesdays. You have the dairy delivered, and the meat, and the furniture. You have everything brought here because *you never leave the house.*

HELEN. I never need to leave the house.

MR. SKIDDER. You can't leave.

HELEN. Of course I can.

MR. SKIDDER. You want me to stop talking about your shoddy maintenance? Walk out the door and touch the wall of the next building!

HELEN. No.

MR. SKIDDER. Just touch the other building! I dare you.

At some point, the commotion has pulled Miss Stevens into the room.

GILLIAN. I've got a million dollars on Helen.

Anxiety wells up within Helen, then rage.

HELEN. Leave this room right now or I'll evict you!

MISS STEVENS. Well, really. *(To Helen.)* Just do it and get it over with.

MR. SKIDDER. *(As he leaves.)* Fix my blinds.

Helen is left alone with Ramonti and Behrman.

HELEN. I'm afraid that must have made you think less of me.

RAMONTI. It didn't. Not at all.

But, alas, his hand touches his chin.

BEHRMAN. Have either of you seen Della?

HELEN. Last I saw her, she was going to take her typing test. That was yesterday.

BEHRMAN. No, it was the day before.

O. HENRY. So Mr. Behrman climbed the carpeted ladder.

Behrman climbs the ladder to the skylight room.

BEHRMAN. Della? Della? DELLA?

He pushes open the hatch, goes to her still form.

Della? Della? I need an ambulance!

We hear a siren. The ambulance driver enters.

MISS STEVENS. She's in the skylight room. You have to go all the way up the stairs, and then—

AMBULANCE DRIVER. *(A touch of anger.)* I know what a skylight room is.

The ambulance driver climbs, goes to Della.

BEHRMAN. We've tried for half an hour. We can't wake her.

The ambulance driver examines her.

Can you tell what's wrong?

AMBULANCE DRIVER. Weakness, brought about by starvation.

BEHRMAN. Will she be all right?

AMBULANCE DRIVER. I'm going to have to drive like H-DASH-DASH-L.

The ambulance driver waves something under Della's nose. Its obnoxious scent wakes her.

There you are… Can you sit up?

She can't really.

That's all right. What's your name?

DELLA. Della Leeson. What's yours?

AMBULANCE DRIVER. My name is Jimmy. Jimmy Jackson.

This makes her bolt up.

DELLA. It's what?

AMBULANCE DRIVER (JIMMY JACKSON). Easy…

DELLA. Say your name again.

JIMMY JACKSON. Jimmy Jackson.

DELLA. You mean like…

She points up at the skylight.

JIMMY JACKSON. Like what?

The ring falls from Della's outstretched finger with a little chime as it hits the floor.

Your ring fell off.

He picks it up, offers it to her.

Here you go.

We freeze on this tableau for a moment: Jimmy holding the ring out to Della,

O. HENRY. Autumn.

In their studio room, Sue paints while Johnsy stares out the window, counting something.

JOHNSY. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

The downstairs buzzer rings. Helen goes to the front door to find a man named John Alsef. Like Ramonti, he's bearded.

ALSEF. *(To Helen.)* I was told you have excellent rooms.

O. HENRY. That voice.

HELEN. Come in out of the chill.

ALSEF. I will. Thank you.

O. HENRY. What was it about that voice? Something about it ran through Helen, thrilled her in a way she didn't understand.

ALSEF. *(Re: the foyer.)* I like it already.

O. HENRY. All she knew was that she needed to hear more of it.

HELEN. I have two of my coziest rooms available at the moment.

Ramonti has appeared in the doorway.

Ramonti, this is Mr…

ALSEF. Alsef.

As they see each other, an odd moment:

RAMONTI. Have we met before?

ALSEF. No I don't believe so. Pleased to meet you.

RAMONTI. Pleased to meet you as well.

Ramonti touches his chin.

HELEN. I'll show you the room while you tell me all about yourself.

She leads him off. Johnsy alone now, counts again:

JOHNSY. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

O. HENRY. There was another guest that autumn, a cold, unseen stranger stalked about the city, touching one here and one there with his/her icy finger.

The guest enters. The guest is humanoid, but clearly not human. It goes to Sue and Johnsy's room.

JOHNSY. Did Sue let you in?

GUEST. I came in through the door.

JOHNSY. The door's closed.

GUEST. I came in through the closed door.

It might take Johnsy a moment to absorb this.

JOHNSY. That must be a useful skill. What's your name?

GUEST. Pneumonia.

JOHNSY. Nice to meet you, Pneumonia. I'm Johnsy. How long are you staying?

GUEST. Not long. Three days, maybe.

JOHNSY. Well, we'll have to make the most of it!

GUEST. I need you to do something for me.

The guest whispers to her.

Can you try it?

She does what the guest asks, which is to cough.

Good girl. Again.

She coughs again, and again and again, so violently that Sue enters. She doesn't see the guest.

SUE. Are you all right?

JOHNSY. Have you met…

SUE. Have I met who?

Sue feels Johnsy's forehead. It panics her.

Johnsy, you're burning up. I'll get the doctor.

Della and Jimmy Jackson, on a walking date.

DELLA. Night walks are my favorite thing about the city.

JIMMY JACKSON. Me too.

A beat.

The city's cutting our pay by half.

DELLA. Half, why?

JIMMY JACKSON. They say it's budget problems.

DELLA. My housemate Miss Stevens would say you should strike.

JIMMY JACKSON. Ambulance drivers can't go on strike. It's immoral. *(Up ahead.)* And…there it is. The Brooklyn Bridge.

DELLA. Gorgeous.

JIMMY JACKSON. The eighth wonder of the world.

DELLA. I've never seen it at all lit up at night.

As she looks out at the bridge, he sneaks a glance at his watch. She sees him do this. It concerns her.

JIMMY JACKSON. Are you cold?

DELLA. No, I like a little chill in the air.

A moment.

Jimmy, this is our seventh time out on the town.

JIMMY JACKSON. Thank you for keeping track.

DELLA. Do you ever feel like you're spending too much time with me?

JIMMY JACKSON. No!

DELLA. Or wish you were back at the firehouse with your friends?

JIMMY JACKSON. Of course not. Why?

This has been weighing on her.

DELLA. Every once in a while I catch you sneaking a look at the time.

JIMMY JACKSON. That's not true.

DELLA. Yes it is.

JIMMY JACKSON. I've never once checked the time when I'm with you.

DELLA. I've never once been out with you when you haven't done it.

JIMMY JACKSON. You have never seen me check the time.

DELLA. You did it thirty seconds ago.

JIMMY JACKSON. I'm not checking the time. I'm looking at my watch.

Which he now takes out.

It was my grandfather's and then my father's.

DELLA. It's beautiful.

JIMMY JACKSON. I know. But you're right, I shouldn't look at it when I'm with you.

DELLA. Of course you should. But you shouldn't look at it on the sly. You should pull it out proudly.

JIMMY JACKSON. The watch is gorgeous. But this old leather strap is ugly.

DELLA. Not so bad. Take the watch out whenever you want. We can look at it together.

A shy moment of silence.

I *am* a little bit chilly.

Jim puts his arm around Della.

JIMMY JACKSON. Better?

DELLA. Much better.

As they walk off, we hear thunder.

That storm's coming in fast.

Johnsy has the doctor's stethoscope to her back and the guest at her side. She counts something out the window.

JOHNSY. Four, five, six…

DR. FLECK. Breathe again. Deeper.

JOHNSY. That's two less than this morning.

DR. FLECK. Lie back and rest.

The doctor leaves Johnsy's side, goes to Sue, out of Johnsy's hearing.

SUE. How is she?

DR. FLECK. Not good I'm afraid. Miss Hayden, you should prepare your mind for the possibility that your friend will leave us. She has probably one chance in ten.

This is devastating.

SUE. I don't understand. She's young. She was healthy until a day ago.

DR. FLECK. Your little lady has made up her mind that she's not going to get well. Does she have anything she's looking forward to?

SUE. She wants to paint the Bay of Naples someday.

DR. FLECK. Paint? Bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking about twice? A man, for instance?

SUE. A man? No, there is nothing of the kind.

DR. FLECK. Well, it is weakness then. She's not fighting the disease and I can't fight it for her. She needs something to look forward to.

SUE. I told you, she wants to paint the Bay of Naples.

DR. FLECK. She needs an appropriate goal for a woman.

SUE. That is an appropriate goal.

DR. FLECK. See if you can get her interested in the fall fashions.

He exits.

JOHNSY. Another one fell!

Sue goes to Johnsy.

SUE. What is it, Johnsy?

JOHNSY. Now there's only five.

SUE. What are you talking about?

JOHNSY. Leaves. On the ivy vine across the way. Didn't the doctor tell you? Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It made my head ache to count them. But now it's easy. They're falling so fast. When the last one goes I must go too.

SUE. That's ridiculous. What do old ivy leaves have to do with your getting well? The doctor was just saying that your chances of getting better were ten to one. How about a little bit of broth?

GUEST. No, we don't need broth.

JOHNSY. No, I don't want any.

SUE. Take a little broth and let Susie get back to her painting. If I finish the Santa Claus just right I'll be able to buy some chicken for my sick friend and pork chops for my greedy self.

JOHNSY. There goes another. That leaves just four. I want to see the last one fall. Then I'll go too.

SUE. I'm going to pull down the shade.

JOHNSY. No don't.

SUE. I don't want you looking out at those silly ivy leaves.

JOHNSY. I want to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down just like one of those poor, tired leaves.

SUE. I have to go up and have one more session with Behrman. Promise me not to look out the window.

A flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder give us an instant transition.

BEHRMAN. She'll die when the last leaf falls? That doesn't make any sense.

SUE. She's ill and weak and the fever has left her mind full of strange fancies.

BEHRMAN. Why do you allow that foolishness to get into her brain?

SUE. Henrik, she's going not going to make it.

BEHRMAN. Oh I'm so sorry.

SUE. Let's just focus on this for the moment. Put your cap on.

He puts on a Santa Claus cap.

BEHRMAN. Ho ho ho.

William at a desk, writing.

WILLIAM. Dear Margaret, Paris is full of electric lights and horses and a tower that's a thousand feet tall. The only thing it doesn't have is you, and I'm so sorry to miss your fifth birthday. By next year I'm sure my business here will be done and we'll have the biggest party ever.

Truman enters holding an envelope.

TRUMAN. You got a letter from a magazine. I thought you'd want to see it.

WILLIAM. I do.

TRUMAN. Do you want the bad news first or the good news or the news so amazing you won't believe it.

WILLIAM. The bad news.

TRUMAN. The letter is a rejection. I'm sorry.

WILLIAM. What's the good news?

TRUMAN. I could read it. Not all of it but…"we"…"regret." I guessed at the rest.

WILLIAM. That's an even two dozen rejections.

TRUMAN. Don't be discouraged.

WILLIAM. I'm thirty-seven years old, unpublished, and in prison. I think I'm allowed to be a little down.

TRUMAN. What kind of stories do you write?

WILLIAM. I write…stories about regular people: artists and workers and writers and gamblers. Policemen. People who are down on their luck but they keep going. People who've made mistakes but they find clever ways to start over, maybe get what they want. Or if they don't, then they change their circumstances, or they change themselves. And if they can't do that, then they try hard to find it funny. Stories that have a twist.

TRUMAN. Time for the amazing news that you're not going to believe. Will you believe it anyway?

WILLIAM. Sure.

TRUMAN. I dreamed about you last night. Nobody believes me but sometimes I have dreams where I can see a person's whole future laid out like a road. When you get out of here you're going to be a famous writer. The whole world will read your stories. Do you believe me?

WILLIAM. No.

TRUMAN. You don't think you'll be famous?

WILLIAM. I don't think you can dream the future.

TRUMAN. No one ever does. Too bad. You're going to write a story that lasts a hundred years. You'll change your name and the world will forget you embezzled that seven hundred dollars.

WILLIAM. I didn't do it.

TRUMAN. Repent!

WILLIAM. I didn't.

TRUMAN. *(Spelling out the window.)* R from penitentiary. E from penitentiary. It's actually all from penitentiary.

We start to hear the storm again, back at the Vallambrosa. Night. Over the storm, a buzzer.

Miss Stevens emerges from her room in her nightcap. She opens the front door cautiously to find:

MISS STEVENS. Mr. Behrman.

BEHRMAN. I couldn't get my key to…

His hands are shaking.

MISS STEVENS. Well, really. It's three o'clock in the morning. What were you doing out? You're soaking wet.

As she starts to close the door, she sees something off to the side.

Did you leave something out here? Did you leave a lantern?

But he's collapsed.

Mr. Behrman, are you all right? We need to get you to a doctor!

BEHRMAN. Just take me to my room.

She leads him off. The storm subsides. It gets light, and we hear morning sounds. Johnsy is with the guest.

GUEST. It's morning. Look at the vine.

Johnsy sits up in bed.

JOHNSY. Sue, open the shade.

SUE. No.

JOHNSY. Open it. All the leaves will have fallen.

SUE. If you know what you're going to see then why do you need to see it?

JOHNSY. I'll crawl to the window if I have to.

SUE. *(At the shade cord.)* But if the branch is bare it doesn't mean anything.

Sue raises the window blind.

JOHNSY. There *is* a leaf. The last one. Look how the yellow is flecked with red at the edges. Beautiful.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!



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