

Audition for Murder

A Murder Mystery Comedy in two acts

By

Howard Volland and Keith McGregor

Grace and Doris are at it again—with another cast of oddball characters. This time they have an accident on a deserted stretch of icy road. Shaken up, but not hurt, they seek help in an isolated building which turns out to be a community theatre. They arrive just in time for *Audition for Murder*.

Give your backstage volunteers and your production budget a break. The set for this play requires a bare stage, a couple of tables, some folding chairs, and a white board. Props, costumes and technical requirements are also very simple. *Audition for Murder* is great for touring, tight budgets, or that slot in your season where technical and support personnel need a breather.

Audition for Murder is a one-set, two-act comedy with a cast of eleven (4m-7f, including one female walkon). It has a running time of approximately two hours plus intermission.

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The Cast

In order of appearance

Susan Benson—Late 40s. Oldest of the four Benson siblings. A walk-on character. She can easily be doubled with Bernice; but if she is, her face should not be recognizable from the audience.

Grace Sharp—60+. A widow and retired school teacher. Very alert. Grace and Doris are close friends who travel together.

Doris Brooks—60+ and active. A widow and retired nurse practitioner. Very sarcastic. Grace and Doris are close friends who travel together.

Hap Miller—60+ and very active. A hard-of-hearing womanizer. He is uncle to Susan, Tom, Rhonda, and Helen, a brother and three sisters.

Rhonda Benson-Squash—Mid 40s. Recently divorced and bitter. Younger than Susan and Tom.

Margo Benson Stevens — Mid 20s. Niece to Susan, Rhonda, Helen and Tom. A fast talker, but intelligent and more attractive than she looks and dresses.

Peter Grogan—Late 20s. Indolent and a smart-ass, but sexy and capable of being sincere. Helen's stepson.

Tom Benson—Late 40s. Arrogant and ironic. Younger than Susan and older than Rhonda and Helen.

Helen Benson-Grogan—40ish. Self-centered and vain. She dresses well, and is the youngest of the Benson siblings.

Rory Toppman—Mid 40s. Pompous and self-important. A local police officer.

Bernice Sharp-Squash—50s, but looks younger. Stylish and sophisticated. Grace's considerably younger half-sister.

NOTE: Although there are eleven characters, they can be played by ten actors—six women and four men. Character ages have a good bit of flexibility (up or down), as long as the relationships work. Grace and Doris are the “wise old women” of the group, but they must be spry and alert. Hap needs to be in the same age range as Grace and Doris or older, but other than his “hearing problem” he must have a lot of energy. Susan, Rhonda, Helen, Bernice, Tom and Rory are the middle-aged group. Margo and Peter are the youngsters, but they should still be adults.

The Setting

Note: *Audition for Murder* was conceived for a standard proscenium stage, with legs masking the offstage area on either side and a curtain across the back of the stage, leaving room for a crossover backstage. It was initially staged in this type of theatre. At that theatre there were steps leading down from the stage on either side of the proscenium opening, and there were entrances into the auditorium on either side of the proscenium arch. The staging notes in this script were taken from that production. The staging in a thrust or arena theatre space may not be easy—but, no doubt, a creative director can make it work well.

Time: Current; Late Sunday afternoon in early January.

Place: The empty stage of an isolated community theatre, in a cold part of the United States.

The set is the stage of a community theatre which has been prepared for an evening of auditions for an upcoming production. The director is the kind of “artist” who wants to see his auditioners move around the space while they’re doing cold, script-in-hand readings from the play for which they are auditioning, so an “acting space” has been created with folding chairs, work tables, and crates.

Upstage center is an easel with a whiteboard placed on it. Across the top is written, “SIGN IN,” and below that, on either side, are written in big letters, “Name” and “Age Range.”

To stage left of the whiteboard/easel is a 6’ folding table with half a dozen metal folding chairs around it.

To stage right of the whiteboard/easel is a folding card table with four metal folding chairs around it.

Downstage right are two folding chairs with a crate between them, suggesting a chair/side table grouping. The grouping angles to face downstage and center.

Downstage left are three folding chairs grouped to suggest a sofa. The grouping angles to face downstage and center. If there’s room another crate could create an end table at the downstage end of the sofa.

On the 6’ table are paper towels, bottles of water, note pads, ten or more coffee mugs (all different and obviously well used), spoons, a sugar bowl, and a bottle of instant creamer.

Upstage left, right at the base of one of the wings, is an old tin bucket.

Audition for Murder

Act I

*(The lights come up on the stage of a community theatre that is set for auditions as described in the set description. **Susan Benson** enters from downstage right. She is wearing a bulky coat, gloves, hat and a very long woolen scarf that hides most of her face—it is wrapped around her neck and the lower half of her face, and it still hangs at least to her waist. She whistles or hums to herself intermittently (and unpleasantly) as she moves around the stage, making sure everything is set to her liking.*

(At the upstage left edge of the stage she pauses and turns to look back at the stage, still whistling. A pair of black gloved hands reach from the wings and grab the scarf, choking Susan, and gagging her at the same time. She abruptly stops whistling and struggles. She is unable to escape and is gradually pulled offstage left, but we still see her legs and lower body as her struggles gradually become weaker and weaker. In a last jerk she kicks an old metal bucket, which noisily bounces onto the stage. Her struggles end and her lower body goes limp. It is then slowly dragged offstage left.

(Almost immediately we hear the sound of a door slamming from the theatre lobby.)

GRACE

(Unseen, calling from the lobby.)

Hello? ...Hello? Is anyone here?

*(**Grace Sharp** and **Doris Brooks** enter from the back of the house and move down an aisle toward the stage. Both are in their 60s and are heavily bundled up in coats, gloves, hats and scarves. Grace should appear rather helpless, but we discover that she is anything but. She is in a long skirt and Doris is in slacks, and both wear walking shoes or boots suitable for snow. Doris carries a small, efficient-looking handbag and has a dry, sarcastic humor. Grace carries a very large, overstuffed tote bag.)*

DORIS

(As she enters the theatre.)

It's warm! Actually warm! Another two minutes out there and I would have turned into a popsicle.

GRACE

(Good-natured banter between two old friends)

And given your mood, the flavor would have to be vinegar.

DORIS

Thank you for sharing.

GRACE

You're welcome.

(Calling again.)

Hello? Hello? ... Is there anyone here? *(To Doris)* There must be someone here.

DORIS

Maybe not. Maybe they had the good sense to stay off the roads. How I ever let you talk me into that "shortcut"....

(She takes off her gloves and scarf.)

GRACE

It's thirty miles shorter and a beautiful drive.

DORIS

I'm sure it is, Grace—but not in January!

GRACE

It was gorgeous. Like a sleigh ride out of Currier and Ives.

DORIS

I was driving! All I saw was a ribbon of ice between two sets of white knuckles. Tell me—how many times have you taken that cutoff in the winter?

*(As soon as they reach the stage, Grace makes a show of putting her heavy tote bag down. As the conversation continues, the women come out of their hats and coats—making themselves as comfortable as possible. Once the audience's attention is focused on stage, **Peter Grogan** enters at the back of the house and sits down quietly in the audience. He should do this without attracting attention so that if anyone notices, it appears that he is just a late arrival.)*

GRACE

I've always wanted to, but my sister usually goes to Florida this time of year.

DORIS

At least someone in your family has some sense. Why haven't I met this sister of yours?

GRACE

Bernice is actually my half-sister. We mostly see each other at weddings—hers.

DORIS

So why didn't she go south this year?

GRACE

Some trouble in James' family.

DORIS

Her husband?

GRACE

Her third husband. Or was he her second?

(She thinks a moment, then continues, using her fingers to count.)

Second—Steve, JAMES, Charles, Fred—or was he a Frank—no, Fred. Then Charles again, and now Larry.

DORIS

Quite the collector.

(Once Grace has her wraps off, she begins to look around the space. She checks out the chalkboard first.)

GRACE

Six marriages and five husbands. The current one should be history next month.

(Doris rolls her eyes.)

Now, let's find a phone and give her a call.

DORIS

We could've called from the car if you'd remembered your cell phone.

GRACE

(Looking into her huge bag.) I was sure I had it in my bag.

DORIS

Probably took it out when you put in the kitchen sink.

GRACE

Look—I'll go this way *(Indicating stage right)* —you check over there.

(Pointing off stage left, in the direction that Susan disappeared.)

See if we can find a phone, or someone who can help us out.

DORIS

(At the edge of the stage, looking off.)

It's awfully dark.

GRACE

(Moving back toward her bag.)

You want a flashlight?

DORIS

I'll just feel my way. If anything happens to me, it's your fault.

(She exits into the wings before Grace can respond. Grace rummages through her bag pulling out a few oddments, but before she finds what she's looking for, we hear a scream from offstage left.)

GRACE

Doris? Doris, what is it? What's the matter?!

DORIS

(Rushing back onto the stage.)

I was pinched! Someone back there pinched my...

*(She stops before she says the word, but she does rub her...hip, tenderly. Hap Miller enters from stage left. Hap is 60+, eccentric, and he always talks too loudly. He is carrying a mug of coffee in one hand and singing the first two lines of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," which he often hums or sings at odd times throughout the play.)**(Outraged.)* You dirty old man! You pinched me!

HAP

(Loudly.) Hey Babe! You're a hot one. Must be new in town. Welcome to Benson Springs.*(He gestures, reaching toward her in a suggestive way.)*

DORIS

(Backing away.) Keep away from me! And keep your hands to yourself!

HAP

Don't mind if I do. But only if you'll join me, sweet cheeks.

*(He moves a chair at the table and sits. He pats the chair next to him, indicating that Doris should join him. He then holds out the mug to Doris.)*Here ya' go—fresh Java. Just what the doctor ordered. *(Suggestive)* We can share it.*(Grace and Doris are thrown by Hap's seemingly irrational behavior. There is a pause. Hap holds out the mug to Doris, but she back away. He then holds it out for Grace. She hesitantly takes the mug—humoring Hap, but keeping out of reach as well.)*

GRACE

Why thank you, Mister....? Uh, Mister....

(Hap just smiles and gestures for her to sit by him.)

Is there a telephone here?

HAP

(Points.) On the table.

(Grace crosses to the table and puts the mug down, trying to figure if there is phone anywhere on the table that she could be missing.)

DORIS

Must be a cell phone there somewhere.

(Hap stands up, goes to the table, and picks up a spoon and sugar bowl and starts to spoon sugar into Grace's mug.)

HAP

How much ya' want?

GRACE

(Grace decides that Hap must be hard of hearing. She shouts and mimes talking into a phone with her free hand.)

NO, no, not SUGAR. I need a PHONE! A TELEPHONE!

HAP

(Spooning more sugar into Grace's mug.)

You do have a sweet tooth.

(Hap gets several spoonfuls into Grace's mug before she stops him by grabbing his hand.)

GRACE

No! STOP! STOP!

HAP

(Shaking her hand with the spoon still in his.)

Nice to meet you, too, Dot. Everyone calls me Hap. Hap Miller.

GRACE

(Pulls her hand away.) GRACE! My name is GRACE! GRACE SHARP!

HAP

(Shakes his head.) Nope. It's Filbert. Filbert Community Hall.

(Moves toward Doris holding out his hand.)

And what's your name, Babe?

DORIS

(Backing away.) Keep away from me, you old coot!

HAP

Naw. I work backstage. *(He keeps moving toward Doris.)*

DORIS

Keep away! *(Keeps backing away.)*

HAP

(Asking Grace.) She always this bashful?

GRACE

(Laughing, in spite of the situation.) Doris? Bashful?

HAP

Flora? That 'er name? Flora! I knew a Flora once. She don't look like no Flora to me.

(Stops pursuing Doris.)

Well, I'll leave her be, for the time bein'. She'll come around in the end.

DORIS

(Threatening) Come around where?

HAP

Saskatchewan. *(Shakes his head.)* Came from Saskatchewan, that Flora did. She was as cold as them Canadian winters and twice as hard. *(Looks at Doris.)* But not you, Babe! You look soft, warm and cuddly. *(Winks at Doris.)* Now, you make yourself comfy, and I'll go get you some Java.

(Moves toward stage left, talking to himself as he goes out.)

Flora? She's too hot to be a Flora.

(He's disappeared off stage.)

GRACE

I don't think he hears very well.

DORIS

It's not his hearing that bothers me.

GRACE

(Rubbing it in, chuckling at the thought.)

“Soft,” and “warm” and “cuddly”? “Flora.”

(Takes a sip of her coffee, grimaces and puts it down.)

DORIS

Oh shut up! Let’s find that phone and get out of here.

(Rhonda Benson-Squash comes hurrying onstage from stage left, wearing slacks and an old sweater. She carries a coffee thermos. She sees Grace and Doris and stops—surprised to find someone there, and apparently not happy about it.)

RHONDA

Who are you? What are you doing here? *(Recovering.)* I don’t believe it. Someone actually came to auditions. *(Gives a mirthless cackle.)* Although you are about an hour early.*(She continues to the card table and puts down the thermos.)*

GRACE

Oh, no, we’re not here to audition. We had an accident. Could we use your telephone?

RHONDA

Afraid there’s no phone here.

DORIS

Not even a cell phone?

RHONDA

Nope. We’re in one of those no-service areas.

GRACE

Would it be possible for someone to give us a ride into town? We’d be happy to pay.

RHONDA

It’d have to be Tom.

DORIS

Not that deaf old man with the pincers? *(She gestures suggestively, with both hands.)*

GRACE

Doris, his name is Hap. You should pay attention when you meet new people.

DORIS

I was paying attention—to his hands.

RHONDA

So you've met Uncle Hap?

DORIS

The word "met" doesn't quite convey the full experience.

(Margo Benson Stevens enters stage left, holding several scripts. She heads toward Rhonda. Margo usually talks fast and tends not to pay attention when others are talking. She's in her mid-twenties and dressed in a drab, shapeless blouse and long skirt. Her hair is wrong, as is her makeup, which all work to make her look more unattractive than she actually is. When she enters she doesn't notice Grace and Doris at first.)

MARGO

(Disgusted.) Aunt Rhon, have you read this script?

(She notices Grace and Doris, but pauses only briefly.)

Oh, hello.

(She sees the old metal bucket. She crosses and picks it up; then carries it offstage right and quickly returns, talking the whole time.)

What's that bucket doing out here? Someone could trip and break their neck. "Kick the bucket." *(She snickers—not amused.)* Fits right in with this script, though. What a depressing piece. It makes "Hamlet" look like a Neil Simon comedy. Everyone dies. And horribly. All on stage. Stabbed, strangled, shot, smothered—there's even one guy who gets impaled. And we top it all off with a grand double defenestration.

RHONDA

A what?

MARGO

De-fen-es-tra-tion. It's when they toss you out the window. The higher the better. Wonder how Aunt Sue plans to stage that? Maybe Peter with a dummy could do a swan dive onto a pile of mattresses. Then opening night we could move the mattresses. Now there's a thought to brighten the day.

(Margo dumps the scripts onto the table.)

RHONDA

I vote for Tom instead of a dummy.

MARGO

No! Aunt Sue!

RHONDA

Why not Tom and Susan? You did say it was a double.

MARGO

But that leaves out Peter.

RHONDA

He could be stabbed...or strangled.

MARGO

Impaled!

RHONDA

So Peter gets stuck and Tom and Susan take a flying leap. Perfect casting.

MARGO

Not a leap! They have to be thrown. Leaping is suicide. Defenestration is homicide.

RHONDA

Sorry. My mistake.

(Hap enters stage left with two mugs of coffee and walks up to Doris, who quickly backs away.)

HAP

Here ya' go, babe. Java. *(Emphasizing the rhyme...)* Fresh and hot. From the pot.

(He holds the mug out for Doris. She takes it cautiously, then moves away.)

Say what cha' doing tomorrow night? Greg Holman's showin' slides of his trip to the La Brea Tar Pits down at the Methodist basement. Them ol' church pews is nice and cozy.

(Winks and leers at her.) What cha' say...babe?

DORIS

I say, NO WAY!

HAP

Great! Pick ya' up at six-thirty sharp. It's a potluck, so bring somthin' tasty. Oh, where you parkin' that sweet little backside of yours?

DORIS

(Almost screaming in her frustration.) NO! NO! NO!

HAP

Is that East Main or West?

(Margo grabs Hap by the arm and turns him around to face her.)

MARGO

(To Hap loudly, as she seats him in one of the chairs.)

Hap, come over here and sit down. SIT! SIT!

(He sits, sullenly. Margo turns back to Grace and Doris.)

Sorry 'bout that. He forgets to change the batteries in his hearing aid. I think he does it on purpose. You're here for auditions, right?

(Grace tries to respond, but Margo just keeps right on. Pointing to the scripts.)

The scripts are there if you want to look. Now, do you prefer to be stabbed, strangled, shot or smothered? Impalement and defenestration are only for the men. They have all the fun.

GRACE

We're not here to...

MARGO

(Jumping in.) You know, the more I think about it, Peter is perfect for impalement. The actor has to be stripped naked—but this isn't New York so we'd have to use a diaper. Then a sharpened pole is driven right through his bare chest. Hard to fake that. Maybe we'd have to go for the real thing. *(A malicious chuckle.)*

GRACE

(Finally catching a pause, she jumps in.)

Excuse me. We're not here to audition. Our car went into the ditch when Doris, here, had a nicotine fit and tried to light a cigarette

DORIS

Only because you wouldn't light it for me.

GRACE

You're trying to quit. I was being helpful.

RHONDA

(To Margo.) They need a ride. Tom can do it before auditions.

MARGO

No he can't. The battery on the van is dead.

RHONDA

Not again!

MARGO

I keep telling him he needs a new one, but he's too cheap. Too bad Jeff's already left.

RHONDA

(Surprised and annoyed.) What was he doing here?

MARGO

Dropped off Helen. She decided to come after all.

RHONDA

(Suspicious.) I wonder why?

MARGO

Who knows? *(To Doris and Grace.)* Anyway, looks like your stuck with us unless someone comes to auditions....

(She and Rhonda exchange looks and Margo burst out laughing.)

DORIS

What's so funny?

RHONDA

No one around here is stupid enough to volunteer for one of my sister's productions. Especially after the last one.

MARGO

We rehearsed "Arsenic and Old Lace" for ten months. It started as a summer show...for the tourists.

RHONDA

Both of them.

MARGO

Then it was going to be for Halloween. Finally, we opened a week before Christmas, so we added carolers. *(Sings.)* "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." That was my idea. And it's pretty funny if you remember how many gentlemen the two sisters poisoned.

RHONDA

We went through two Teddy's, three Abbys, four Jonathans and about a half-dozen Dr. Einsteins.

MARGO

I was Elaine.

RHONDA

(Bitter.) I was Martha. And while we were rehearsing week after week after week, my husband was—well, let's just say I got the house and he got . . . out!

GRACE

Oh, I'm sorry.

RHONDA

(Snaps.) Why? You had nothing to do with it...did you?

MARGO

I'm afraid the theatre is very much a Benson family thing. Aunt Sue runs it and ropes the rest of us in. Oh, by the way, I'm Margo.

GRACE

(Offering her hand to Rhonda.)

I'm Grace Sharp and this is my "very dear friend," Doris Brooks.

(Hap jumps up and grabs Doris' hand and begins to shake it vigorously. She tries to pull away, but Margo and Rhonda have to free her.)

HAP

Glad to meet ya' Flora! Glad to meet ya'!

MARGO

Let her go! Uncle Hap! Let her go!

(Hap lets go and sullenly lets himself be seated again.)

DORIS

(Once she's free, she backs further away from Hap.)

Where's a judge? I want a restraining order!

MARGO

It'll take more than a piece of paper to discourage Uncle Hap. *(Chuckles.)* He never used to be this bad. Seems the less he hears, the more he uses his hands.

GRACE

We don't want to be any bother. Someone must live nearby who has a phone or could give us a ride.

(Peter rises in the audience and moves lazily to the stage—no one notices.)

MARGO

No one lives around this old Grange hall anymore.

DORIS

Maybe we could flag down a passing car.

MARGO

Hardly any traffic and it's too cold to stand around.

GRACE

I don't suppose we could walk to town?

MARGO

It's about five miles.

DORIS

Piece of cake. Grace, why don't you stroll into town? I'll wait here.

GRACE

And cuddle with Uncle Hap? I'm sure he'll keep you nice and warm.

HAP

Hot...Java, Dot? Want some more?

(Hap grins and begins to stand but Margo quickly pushes him back down.)

MARGO

SIT! SIT!

(Peter approaches the stage and clears his throat for attention. Everyone turns toward him except Hap. Margo and Rhonda are obviously surprised to see him. Peter's attitude and tone are lazy, sarcastic and insolent.)

PETER

(Lazily.) I could ski into town for you...if I had my skis. Or take you there in my hot air balloon...if I had a hot air balloon. Or I could drive you there in Helen's Seville...if she let it out of the garage in winter.

MARGO

(A dig. Hostile.) And if your driver's license hadn't been revoked.

PETER

Suspended.

MARGO

My mistake. *(To Grace and Doris.)* This is my cousin, Peter—the black sheep of the family.

PETER

One of many.

MARGO

By far the blackest. *(To Peter)* I didn't know you'd come with Helen. How long have you been out there, spying on us?

PETER

Long enough to hear you plotting my untimely demise...in a diaper, no less.

(He lazily takes off his coat and drops it onto a chair.)

Should I strip now, or wait 'til you've sharpened the stake?

(As the conversation continues, everyone forgets Hap, who quietly puts down his mug, gets up and gradually moves around until he is right behind Doris.)

RHONDA

Where's Helen?

PETER

When Dad dropped us off, my dear stepmother went looking for Tom. Seeking an ally, I think, for the next skirmish in the battle of the Benson buttonhooks.

RHONDA

(Outraged.) Buttonhooks my eye! She's after Great Aunt Betsy's diamond brooch. We agreed that was mine!

MARGO

You agreed it was yours, Aunt Rhon.

PETER

(Mock confusion.) I thought only Susan had to "agree." I mean she is the grand executor of Daddy Benson's last Will and Testament.

RHONDA

Father should have divided everything before he died. I told him if he left it up to Susan, nothing good would come of it.

PETER

You mean nothing good would come to you.

RHONDA

Shut up, Peter. You're not a Benson.

PETER

(Drops to his knees in a mock praying position.)

For which I thank my lucky stars each and every day.

MARGO

(Tired voice, as if its an ongoing argument.) Give it a rest, Peter.

PETER

(Sitting back on his heels.)

As you wish. *(Chuckles devilishly.)* However, you might want to know, my darling stepmother had a little heart-to-heart with our attorney this afternoon—at three hundred bucks an hour.

RHONDA

What about?

PETER

(Ignores Rhonda's question) ...after which she wanted to see Tom in the worst way.

(A new thought, purely to aggravate Rhonda and Margo.)

Strange expression, “Worst way.” When fastest, quickest, most expeditious...way...is what is meant?

MARGO

You sound like Uncle Tom.

PETER

I've been practicing. *(He stands up.)*

MARGO

Besides, you're just making it up. Attorneys don't work on Sundays.

PETER

(Shrugs.) Have it your way. All I know is that Helen went to see him Friday afternoon, and...

(Makes a show of looking at his watch.)

... approximately one hour and forty-seven minutes ago, he called her.

RHONDA

(Snaps.) What's your point?!

PETER

Point? There's no point. I was just trying to answer your question.

(Rhonda is obviously annoyed.)

MARGO

(Gives Peter a dirty look. To Rhonda...)

Don't pay any attention to him, Aunt Rhon. He doesn't know anything.

(Making light of it—trying to placate Rhonda.)

You know Peter—always looking to stir up trouble.

PETER

(He sprawls into one of the chairs with a satisfied smirk.)

It's my mission in life.

MARGO

(Snaps.) Find a new one! *(Moving on, or trying to.)* Now...I'll go collect everyone else, so we can get started.

RHONDA

(Still angry.) You do that. *(Turns and starts out to stage left.)*

MARGO

Where are you going?

RHONDA

(Curtly) Someone should get the rest of the refreshments.

(Rhonda exits stage left. Margo gives Peter a disgusted look.)

MARGO

You're a big help!

(She turns and goes off stage left, after Rhonda.)

PETER

(As Margo exits, he rises and calls after her, trying for her attention.)

But I do know something, Margo. I really do.

(There is a pause, and briefly it looks as if Peter may regret the way he aggravated Margo. But he quickly shrugs it off and turns to Grace and Doris, with all his defenses up.)

And how are you this evening? Enjoying the show so far? I'm Peter Grogan. The one Margo wants to defenestrate and/or impale.

DORIS

I vote for impalement.

PETER

And the blunter the stake, the better. Right?

(He pauses but Doris doesn't say anything.)

PETER (*CONT'D*)

Glad to see I can still make a first impression.

GRACE

How do you do? I'm Grace Sharp.

PETER

So I heard.

(He turns to Doris.)

And you're Doris. The latest object of Hap's undying and unbearable devotion.

(Doris ignores Peter.)

DORIS

Grace, what are the chances your sister will come looking for us?

(As the conversation continues, Tom Benson enters quietly from stage right. He is in his late 40s and has an ironic and arrogant manner.)

PETER

(He sits down.) No one will come near this place with Susan holding auditions.

DORIS

So what are you doing here?

PETER

(Stretching back in the chair, with his hands behind his head.)

Blackmail.

DORIS

What's she got on you?

PETER

You don't really expect me to answer that, do you?

TOM

(Joining the group.) Ah...Peter. What a disagreeable development. I might have said "surprise," except Helen told me you were here. So I can't be surprised, can I? Annoyed. Irritated. Aggravated. But not surprised. And the day can now be declared an unmitigated fiasco.

(Turns toward the chalk board, then back to Doris and Grace.)

You ladies had better sign in, or Susan will also be annoyed, irritated, and aggravated; but probably not surprised.

(He gestures toward the chalk board.)

PETER

They're not here for the audition.

TOM

No one ever is.

PETER

They need a ride into town.

TOM

So do we. Any suggestions?

PETER

How about a good old-fashioned slumber party?

TOM

You brought pajamas?

PETER

I sleep in the nude.

TOM

Then you'll be sleeping outside. Can't have you exposing yourself to these good ladies. However, I'm told that snow is a superior insulator. The temperature inside an igloo can get quite above freezing...of course then it starts to melt.

(Hap has finally moved, without being noticed, to a point where he can gently put his arm around Doris' waist. Doris gives a little squeal when she realizes that he is so close. She moves away from him.)

HAP

Hey, Flora, don't be so skittish. I ain't goin' to hurt ya' none.

(Everyone turns to look. Doris backs away from Hap, who continues to pursue Doris, but slowly, as if he is trying to capture a skittish kitten. As he edges closer, Doris edges away. Grace ignores Doris and sits down.)

TOM

I see Hap has found a new inamorata. But where's Susan? It is not like her to be tardy to her own mandatory meeting.

PETER

Haven't seen her.

TOM

How fortunate for you.

(Rhonda enters from stage left with a plate of cookies. As the conversation continues, she puts them on the table. and automatically prepares a mug of coffee for Tom, gives it to him, and then makes one for herself. When he can, Peter grabs a mug for himself.)

RHONDA

(Aggressive) Tom, what were you and Helen talking about?

TOM

She didn't tell you?

RHONDA

She said she'd tell me later. I want to know now.

TOM

I'm afraid you'll have to enjoy the joy of anticipation...the wonder of wondering...the expectancy of expectation...because you're not getting it from me.

RHONDA

Why not?

(Doris slips into a chair next to Grace.)

TOM

First, it's Helen's discovery. She should have the pleasure of revelation. Second, it's family business, which should not be discussed in front of...

(Gestures toward Doris and Grace.)

Third, it frustrates Peter, which trumps all other considerations.

PETER

(Smugly.) I already know.

RHONDA

I want to know now, Tom!

TOM

(To Doris and Grace.) Do excuse us kind ladies. Father's death has created an atypical level of interfamilial tension over a few bits of bric-a-brac of inconsequential value.

RHONDA

(To Doris and Grace.) My brother loves words. He's been reading the dictionary since he was ten—still doesn't understand the plot.

MARGO

(Entering from stage left and talking fast as she does so.)

I can't find Aunt Sue anywhere. And I've looked everywhere. Her office, the kitchen, the rest rooms, the green room, the costume room, the props closet, the furnace room, even in the storage rooms—all of them. Not a sign of her. Uncle Tom, she wasn't outside with you, was she?

(Hap tries to sit down next to Doris, but she works to block him. At first the competition between them is tentative but it gradually becomes more aggressive and Hap starts humming "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.".)

TOM

Margo, you babble faster than I can listen. I haven't seen her.

MARGO

We can't start without her.

TOM

Indeed. Our presence here is otherwise pointless. Although, one might argue that it is pointless regardless.

PETER

What's the rush? We'll be here all night anyway unless someone comes to auditions.

(Doris gives Grace a dirty look.)

RHONDA

I'm sure Rory will drop by...eventually.

PETER

I can hardly wait.

MARGO

He always does, unless he's—

(She stops and everyone stares at Doris and Hap until Doris notices and stops resisting. Hap sits down next to her and slides his chair close to Doris. Doris slides the other way until she is blocked by Grace's chair.)

DORIS

What are you all staring at?

PETER

The World Wrestling Federation? Senile Seniors Division?

RHONDA and MARGO

(In unison.) Shut up, Peter!

MARGO

(Goes to Hap. Shouts and points stage left toward Susan's office.)

HAVE YOU SEEN AUNT SUSAN?

HAP

Poached on toast. *(Pauses and then puzzled.)* Why?

MARGO

AUNT SUSAN! WHERE IS AUNT SUSAN?

HAP

I'd look in the refrigerator.

MARGO

(Turns away and shakes her head.)

He's hopeless without his hearing aid.

(Hap grins devilishly and gooses Doris. Doris gives a little scream, hands her mug to Grace, and stands up.)

PETER

Not so hopeless.

DORIS

Excuse me, Margo

(Doris gently moves Margo aside and gives Hap a good slap.)

PETER

(Hoots with laughter.) It's a reversal to Big Mama!

GRACE

(Jumping up.) Doris! Really!

DORIS

(Turning toward Grace.) Grace, when words fail—

(Hap grins broadly and gives Doris a solid slap on the behind.)

HAP

Whoa, babe! You're a feisty one. How 'bout a big kiss.

(He stands up and puckers up.)

PETER

(Drops to his knees, hooting loudly.) It's Hapless Hap back on top!

(Doris grabs Grace's tote bag.)

HAP

(Still puckered up.) C'mon babe, give us a kiss.

DORIS

I'll give you a kiss, all right! Right across the chops!

(Doris tries to smack Hap with the tote bag, but its weight makes her lose her balance, and she staggers into Hap's arms. He keeps her from falling and uses the opportunity to give her a big, smacking kiss.)

HAP

That's my babe! I told ya' she weren't no Flora!

(Peter is now almost rolling on the floor in laughter. Doris, embarrassed and furious, fights to recover her balance and her dignity. Grace isn't much help although she tries. Tom watches with detachment. Rhonda and Margo seem at a loss as to what to do.)

*(Offstage **Helen Benson-Grogan** gives a very theatrical long and loud scream that freezes everyone. Even Hap hears it. Helen staggers onstage from stage left. She is 40ish and stylishly dressed in slacks and a nice top.)*

MARGO

(Recovers first and moves quickly to support Helen.)

What is it? What's the matter, Aunt Helen?

PETER

(Sarcastic.) She saw a mouse.

RHONDA

Shut up, Peter.

HELEN

(Helen acts stunned, her mouth moving soundlessly. Finally she speaks.)
 ...The props closet. ...Behind the props closet door.

PETER

I told you it was a mouse.

MARGO and RHONDA

(In unison.) Shut up, Peter!

HELEN

Horrible! Her head. All bloody...blood everywhere.

(Tom heads offstage, in the direction of the prop closet. Grace is right behind him, and Peter goes off too.)

DORIS

(To Margo) Help her into a chair.

MARGO

Come on, sit over here.

(Margo moves Helen toward a chair. Helen sits and Margo sits beside her. Doris moves quickly to Grace's bag and begins to dig.)

DORIS

Grace always keeps brandy handy. Let's see...

(She begins to rummage, pulling things out as she goes.)

Here it is. *(Pauses to read the bottle. Disgusted.)* Sherry?!

(Searches again, going deep and pulling out several odd items)

She could open a thrift store with what's in this bag. Here, maybe...

(Looks and is disappointed.)

Pickled onions?! There's has to be brandy in here somewhere. Here's the fruitcake.

RHONDA

Perhaps if you pulled everything out...

DORIS

This table's not big enough.

(She finally pulls out a bottle of brandy.)

Aha! I knew she'd have brandy.

RHONDA

Too late. The patient's dead, buried and the will probated.

(Doris pours a good dose into an empty coffee mug and gives it to Margo who gives it to Helen. Helen drinks some, and coughs.)

HELEN

It's so horrible. She...

DORIS

Don't talk. Just drink.

(Helen stops sobbing and sips. She glances around furtively, watching what goes on—obviously she's been playing it up for effect. She pats her hair, a nervous primping action that she does periodically, and often at inappropriate times. Hap begins to hum and sing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen." Peter is the first one back followed by Grace and Tom. Peter goes straight to the brandy, takes a long swallow straight from the bottle. Doris grabs it from him.)

Save some for the rest of us.

GRACE

Doris, would you—

DORIS

(Cutting her off.) I'm retired!

(Grace looks at her, expectantly. It doesn't take Doris long to give in.)

Oh, all right.

(Doris wipes the top of the brandy bottle and takes a swig.)

Show me the way.

(Doris puts the brandy bottle down on the table, takes her purse and starts off. When she approaches Tom, he exits and Doris goes off, following him. Hap, now acting as Doris' protector, follows closely. As the conversation continues Rhonda moves about the stage, unable to settle.)

PETER

(Recovering.) Unless she can raise the dead, she won't be much use.

GRACE

We must be certain. Doris was a nurse.

MARGO

(Shakily.) How...? I mean, what happened?

GRACE

Looks like she fell and hit her head. From the ladder going up to that loft.

MARGO

Fell?

PETER

Almost like a defenestration.

MARGO

Peter!

PETER

Sorry. She must have fallen from near the top. And...it looks like she hit her head on the radiator...*(weakly)* or something.

MARGO

(This upsets Margo more than might be expected. She loses control.)

Oh no! Just like Mother!

(Margo buries her face, crying. Grace is very interested and thoughtful.)

PETER

(Moving to sit beside her, comforting her.)

Don't think about it, Margo. It's not the same thing at all.

MARGO

(Choking back her tears.) But it is! It is!

(Peter hesitantly puts an arm around Margo. Doris enters, looking grim, with Hap close behind. Tom enters last.)

GRACE

What is?

(Margo stares at Doris, unable to answer.)

RHONDA

Margo's mother—our eldest sister, Patty—died last year, from a fall down the stairs.

GRACE

(Thoughtfully.) I see. Both fell, and...both died.

MARGO

Aunt Sue is really dead?

TOM

She has unquestionably directed her last play.

DORIS

We need to call the police.

RHONDA

(Surprised.) The police?

TOM

Of course. They must be notified in any unattended death. The question is how?

PETER

We'll just wait for Rory.

GRACE

Who is this Rory person?

PETER

(Sarcastic.) Benson Spring's finest! He should be here any time now.

DORIS

Does he use a crystal ball or is he a psychic?

PETER

A mooch is more like it. Whenever he sees us here, he stops by, just to "check things out." What he's really looking for is free coffee and cookies, and a reason not to work.

GRACE

Let's hope he holds true to form. *(A new thought, to everyone.)* In the meantime nothing should be disturbed around the body. Understood?

HELEN

I have no intention of going anywhere near it.

(Everyone else nods except Hap, who nods after he sees everyone else do it. Hap moves behind Doris, rather like her shadow.)

GRACE

(All business and taking charge.) Good. And since we have to wait here anyway, I suggest we prepare for the police.

TOM

What do you mean 'prepare'?

GRACE

Well, for example, they'll want to know where you all were when Susan fell. I don't suppose anyone heard the fall?

(Everyone replies or shakes their head except Hap, who shakes his head only after he sees everyone else doing it.)

TOM

Of course not. We would have investigated.

GRACE

(Grace tries another line of inquiry.)

When did everyone get here?

TOM

I picked up Susan, Hap, Rhonda and Margo around three so we were here shortly after that.

GRACE

And, Helen—you and Peter?

HELEN

(Shrugs.) My husband dropped us off. I don't like to drive on these winter roads.

DORIS

Neither do I! So what am I doing here, Grace?

GRACE

Feeding your martyr complex. *(Back to questioning Helen)* When did you and Peter arrive?

(Helen hesitates, so Peter jumps in.)

PETER

Not much before five. *(Devilish.)* After that high-priced attorney called, Helen had to do a little plotting with Dad.

(Rhonda is obviously annoyed but bites her tongue.)

GRACE

What did Susan do when she got here?

TOM

Went to her office.

GRACE

And the rest of you?

TOM

We cleared the last of the “Arsenic” stuff. Then Margo went to work on costumes and Rhonda to the kitchen while Hap set up the stage for auditions. I worked out in the storage shed.

PETER

(Helpfully.) It’s his favorite hiding hole from Susan. Best place to catch him alone, isn’t it stepmother?

(Rhonda takes the bait and looks even more agitated.)

GRACE

Helen—after talking to Tom, what did you do?

HELEN

Went to the kitchen. *(Pats her hair.)* And stayed there until I came up ...and found her.

GRACE

And you, Peter? Did you come straight in here?

PETER

(Pulls out a pack of cigarettes.)

Susan won’t...or should I say “wouldn’t,” let us smoke in here, so I had a cigarette outside first.

(He pulls out a cigarette and starts to light up.)

MARGO

(Grabs the cigarette.) You still can’t smoke in here. This place is a firetrap.

DORIS

(Standing up and pulling out a pack of cigarettes.) Come on, Peter. Let’s go outside and trash our lungs before I have another nicotine fit.

GRACE

You've had your nicotine fit for the day. That's how we ended up in the ditch.

TOM

You're a nurse, and you smoke?

DORIS

Retired.

(She grabs the brandy bottle to take with her.)

I also drink, but only for medicinal purposes.

(To Peter)

Grab my coat there, would you please?

(Grace crosses to Doris and takes her pack of cigarettes away from her.)

GRACE

(Firmly) You're trying to quit.

(She puts Doris' cigarettes into one of her pockets.)

We need to talk this through. Have your nicotine fit if you must, but keep the noise down.

(Peter grins and sits down. Doris looks outraged and fidgets around the stage. Hap follows Doris anxiously and stands behind her when she finally stops, but Doris doesn't notice. Grace turns back to the rest, and collects her thoughts.)

So, none of you saw Susan again after she went to her office?

(Everyone shakes their heads or responds negatively; everyone except Hap, who once again shakes his head only after he sees the others do it.)

MARGO

Maybe Uncle Hap did.

(Grace looks at Hap, who is now behind Doris. Doris looks behind her, gives a surprised yelp.)

DORIS

Can we lock him up?! Or tie him down? If I have to stay here a minute longer with him.... *(Words fail her.)*

GRACE

(No nonsense.) He's harmless, Doris. Quit acting liking a nine-year-old, whining to the teacher.

(Doris is so stunned and furious at Grace that she lets Hap pull her down into a chair. He sits beside her. She even lets Hap put his arm around her. He is surprisingly gentle as if he is surprised she's actually allowing it.)

MARGO

*(Gets up and walks over to Hap.)**(Loud.)* UNCLE, WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW AUNT SUE ALIVE?

HAP

Happy Hour at The Triple Junction Bar.

(He offers Doris his hand and she simply stares at it.)

You'll like it there, babe? They got great pickled pigs feet.

HELEN

He's hopeless without his hearing aid.

(Margo shakes her head at Hap who looks disappointed. Margo sits down.)

DORIS

Question—How long does it take to heat this...”barn” up?

RHONDA

Most of a day. Tom came out this morning and turned the furnace up.

DORIS

Is there no heat in Susan's office?

RHONDA

Plenty. Why?

DORIS

She was all bundled up when she died.

GRACE

Excellent point, Doris.

DORIS

(Sarcastic) Thank you, teacher. Do I get a gold star?

GRACE

Five house points. *(Back to business.)* Now, could she have fallen right after you arrived?

TOM

(Snaps.) Of course not! We were all over the stage. We would have heard her.

MARGO

Maybe she went back outside for something.

GRACE

Helen, Tom, you didn't see her outside?

(Helen pats her hair as she shakes her head.)

TOM

We keep telling you, No! Negative! Not!

GRACE

Could she have overheard your conversation?

(Helen shrugs and pats her hair.)

TOM

(Annoyed.) Look, Lady, who appointed you police chief?!

DORIS

Here, here! Grace makes a habit of appointing herself chief muckity-muck in all situations.

GRACE

(Fully justified, in her own mind, at least.)

I'm just trying to save us time when the police do arrive.

(Pauses and looks around, but no one says anything. Doris slips away from Hap and works her way behind him out of his sight.)

Now, about that ladder—it's built-in and looks as if it leads to a...loft?

TOM

Yes. It's only used for long-term storage.

GRACE

Why would Susan go up there?

TOM

Who knows?

PETER

(Being funny.) Maybe she was doing research on defenestration.

MARGO

(Disgusted.) Peter!

(Stands up and moves away.)

GRACE

Margo? When you were looking for Susan, did you look back by that ladder?

MARGO

The door of the prop's closet was open, so you really can't see back there.

GRACE

So, Helen, how did you come to look there?

HELEN

(Pats her hair.) I wanted to make sure that everything we'd borrowed for "Arsenic" had been returned. After I'd checked the prop's closet, I shut the door...and...and I saw....

(She shivers unconvincingly and pulls a handkerchief from her pocket, which she uses to wipe non-existent tears from her eyes.)

It was awful. I don't think I'll ever be sleep again.

PETER

(Not buying Helen's tears and sorrow.)

Wandering the castle corridors in her sleep, washing her hands and crying...

(Quoting, but over the top.)

"Out, out, damnéd spot!"

HELEN

(Snaps angrily.) What's that supposed to mean?

PETER

You don't recognize your Shakespeare? Hint. She kills the king because her husband isn't man enough to do it. *(A brief pause.)* Give? Okay, it's from...

MARGO

(Cutting him off.) Don't say it!

HELEN

Don't say what?

MARGO

It's bad luck to say the name of that play in a theatre.

PETER

(Teasing.) Margo! You're superstitious.

MARGO

I'm not! ...But just don't say it.

PETER

I bet you don't whistle in dressing rooms either? *(He laughs.)*

DORIS

What does that have to do with any of this?

PETER

Theatre superstitions. Things that cause bad luck. Speaking of bad luck...this hasn't been a lucky year for the Benson clan, has it?

(Turns toward the others.)

Three deaths, so far. One almost wonders who's...next. Tom, perhaps?

TOM

(Thundering.) Enough Peter! Shut your big trap.

PETER

(Pretending confusion.) Trap? My big trap? Oh...you mean my oral cavity, or what normal people would call my mouth.

HELEN

What he means is shut up! Peter! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

(Helen is very agitated as she speaks. She rises and gestures strongly with her hands. Something flies from the handkerchief in her hand.)

RHONDA

What was that?

(Helen frantically looks for what she has dropped. Hap gets up to help look but Peter finds it first.)

PETER

(He holds up a large, and gaudy, piece of jewelry.)

My goodness, what do we have here? So big and shiny. *(To Helen)* Is it yours? It couldn't be Great Aunt Betsy's diamond brooch?

(Helen grabs it from Peter, but not before Rhonda sees the piece.)

RHONDA

(Almost screaming) What are you doing with that!?

HELEN

(Defiantly.) Susan gave it to me. *(Pats her hair.)*

RHONDA

When did she give it to you? When!? She only got back last night.

HELEN

Well...it was...I...

PETER

(Helpfully.) I've never seen you with it before, stepmother.

HELEN

Don't call me stepmother!

(Hap grabs the brooch out of Helen's hand and holds it up.)

HAP

Betsy's pretty bauble. Right pretty thing. Nice to see Susan wearin' it today.

(Rhonda snatches the brooch away from Hap and he sits back down without noticing where Doris is.)

RHONDA

You...you...you took it off...Susan's body, didn't you?

MARGO

(Shocked.) After she was dead?

TOM

I don't believe Susan would have allowed it while she was alive.

RHONDA

(Threatening) How did you get this brooch?

(Helen looks around at everyone, who are all looking at her.)

HELEN

(Self-righteously.) All right. I took it—to keep it safe. Otherwise, it would have disappeared...at the funeral home...or on the way there.

(She pats her hair, nervously.)

You can't trust anyone these days.

PETER

You got that right.

RHONDA

(Disgusted.) So you find the body, and... and... and search it! Then you scream like a banshee and stagger out here acting like you were horribly shocked. *(Applauding)* Bravo! What a performance!

PETER

Well, after all, this is a theatre.

HELEN

(Deciding her best defense is a good offense.)

Don't be a hypocrite, Rhonda. I haven't seen any tears from you.

(Looks around, and her focus lands on Peter.)

Or anyone else, for that matter.

PETER

Don't look at me. Why should I cry?

(Has a new thought and begins to look around at the others.)

As for the rest of you... how does the tangled web of the Benson family wills and testaments play out now?

(Turning back to Helen, enjoying himself immensely.)

And I think that brings us back to you, dear stepmother?

(Helen glares at Peter but doesn't speak.)

RHONDA

(Dangerous.) What is he getting at?

TOM

This is hardly the time—

RHONDA

I want to know!

(Helen doesn't answer.)

PETER

I'll tell.

DORIS

I thought you might.

TOM

(Angry.) Peter...!

PETER

The key point, as I...overheard it, is that great-grandfather Benson's Will is invalid, kaput, defunct. So all that very valuable lakefront property around that broken-down family "castle" can now be subdivided and sold, for oodles and oodles of greenbacks. The key question is—who gets the cash? Isn't that right, stepmother?

(Helen pats her hair and looks at Tom.)

TOM

That's no secret. Under Father's will, the oldest surviving direct descendant inherits the entire property.

PETER

Which would be you.

MARGO

But what about Aunt Sue's will?

TOM

Whoever was to inherit had to survive Father by four months, so her will is of no consequence.

PETER

Fascinating. *(Playing with the rhyme.)* Patty and Sue went up the hill to fetch a pail of water. Patty fell down and broke her crown, and Sue came tumbling after.

MARGO

(Heatedly.) That's not funny!

PETER

(Snaps back.) It wasn't meant to be. Think about it. How long ago did your grandfather die?

TOM

Four months...tomorrow.

(Hap suddenly misses Doris, jumps up, looks around and spots her. Then they begin a slow dance around the stage. Hap trying to get close and Doris trying to keep away.)

PETER

Then Father Benson's Will still governs...for a few more hours. If I were you, Tom, I'd be very careful until the cock crows tomorrow morn. *(Suggestive.)* Unless, you have no reason to worry.

TOM

Peter, you're being completely nonsensical. Father died of a well-documented case of pancreatic cancer. As for Patty, it was late, she was exhausted, she'd had a brandy—more likely three or four—and she stumbled at the top of the stairs. Susan shouldn't have been on that ladder in the first place. Everyone knows she got vertigo. But you could never tell her anything.

RHONDA

(Dangerous.) Maybe not, but you can tell me what you and Helen are plotting?

TOM

We aren't plotting anything. Helen simply told me that according to her attorney the restriction in great grandfather's will against dividing and selling the property is not valid. It probably never was.

HELEN

(Providing the happy conclusion.) If father had known that, he would have divided the property equally among us.

TOM

That's irrelevant. He didn't do it.

HELEN

(Tom is not supporting Helen as she expected. It confuses her, but she continues with the line of thought they had earlier agreed upon.)

But...my attorney thought it would give us grounds to challenge the will.

PETER

He would, at three hundred bucks an hour.

RHONDA

You mean break father's will?

(Helen looks uneasy and pats her hair nervously.)

HELEN

Daddy didn't know he could divide the property, or else he would have.

RHONDA

But he didn't!

HELEN

That doesn't matter. Not if we agree to splitting it among us.

RHONDA

Are you willing to share with us, Tom?

HELEN

Of course he is.

RHONDA

Tom?

TOM

(Back-peddling, and being pompous about it.)

It's an exceedingly complex issue.

HELEN

What is?

RHONDA

(Scoffs.) See, Helen? He doesn't want to share.

PETER

(Turns to Doris and Grace.) It's not a very sharing family.

TOM

I didn't say that. But it is complicated. What about Susan's heirs? And Margo?

(Margo looks down at her feet.)

PETER

Yes. What about Margo? Her mother was your oldest sister.

HELEN

This has nothing to do with you, Peter!

PETER

(Turns to Grace and Doris.) Don't you love watching a family fight over money?

DORIS

Who's fighting who? I need a scorecard.

PETER

As you wish.

(Goes to the chalkboard, wipes it clean and then writes down names and relationships as he explains. See diagram at the end of the script.)

It started with their great grandfather—Hiram P. Benson, founder of Benson Springs.

PETER (CONT'D)

(He writes "H.B." at center top.)

He built the old family 'castle' on a big piece of land on Lake Benson—the property currently being disputed. But old Hiram is long defunct...kicked in the head by a horse.

(He draws and "X" through "H. B..")

Until four months ago, as of tomorrow, Roger Benson—their father (indicating Tom, Rhonda and Helen)—owned the land.

(Writes "R. B." below "H. B." and connects them with a dashed line.)

He was Hiram's grandson. And he is also defunct.

(Draws and "X" through "R. B..")

Roger had five children. The oldest was Patty—Margo's mother, who fell down the stairs. Defunct.

(Peter draws a horizontal family tree line below Roger with five branches for the five offspring. He writes "Patty" below the left branch. Under "Patty" he draws another vertical line and under it, writes "Margo." He draws an "X" through "Patty.")

Roger's next oldest child was Susan. Just defunct.

(Writes Susan under the next branch and then draws an "X" through it.)

Which leaves Tom as the oldest survivor. For the moment.

(Writes "Tom" under the next branch, and then "Rhonda" and "Helen.")

Then comes Rhonda and the baby of the family is my dear stepmother, Helen.

GRACE

Where does Hap fit?

DORIS

(As she dodges Hap again.)

In a cage!

PETER

(Chuckles.) Roger Benson's brother-in-law. Not in line to inherit.

(He writes in Hap next to Roger.)

DORIS

What about you?

PETER

Me? I have the great...mis-fortune of being Helen's stepson. But not a Benson.

(Writes "Peter" somewhere near Helen's name.)

GRACE

Thank you, Peter.

PETER

Any questions?

DORIS

(facetiously) Oh, no. None. It's all perfectly clear.

HELEN

(Back to the matter at hand.) So, Tom, what's it to be?

(As the family squabbling resumes Grace moves upstage, out of the scene, and gestures for Doris to join her. No one else notices except Hap, who rises and follows Doris. Grace and Doris talk quietly for a moment.)

TOM

This is not the time for this. We have too many unresolved issues. We don't know the land's value, nor the cost of development, or whether the county will allow it to be developed. Only after we have the answers to these and other questions can we have a profitable deliberation.

HELEN

(Snaps.) And that will be long after Father's will has been settled! *(Coldly.)* No. We settle it now, or we'll see you in court.

TOM

I assure you, I intend be reasonable about this.

HELEN

You bet you will.

(Doris exits quietly upstage left, with Hap right behind her.)

TOM

(Soothing.) As I said before—

(Tom notices Doris exiting. To Grace...)

Hey, where's she going?

*(Grace doesn't know exactly what to say. She starts to move back toward the others, trying to decide what to tell them. Before she can start, **Rory Toppman** enters through the audience, heading to the stage. He is bundled up for the weather wearing cowboy boots, cowboy hat, rawhide jacket and gloves. He is officious and self-important.)*

RORY

(Loudly, from part-way back in the audience.)

Anybody here own that big Crown Victoria in the ditch 'back a ways toward Triple Junction? *(Taking off his gloves.)*

PETER

(Announcing) Lo and behold—it's Rory!

RORY

What'd ya' say?

PETER

Just announcing your arrival.

RORY

Can't they see that for themselves? Now, who owns that Crown Vic?

GRACE

We do.

RORY

(Importantly.) You gotta' fill out an accident report. Where's your husband?

GRACE

I'm not married.

RORY

(Crossing to Grace)

No wonder you went in the ditch. *(Flips open a notebook.)* Name.

GRACE

(Bristles.) I wasn't driving.

RORY

Where's your boyfriend then?

GRACE

Boyfriend? Who are you?

RORY

Ma'am, I'm Officer Toppman of the Benson Springs Police Force.

TOM

(To himself.) A null force if there ever was one.

GRACE

Thank goodness. There's been an accident.

RORY

Why thearnation ya' think I'm here?

PETER

For a free cup of coffee.

RORY

Button yer lip, Grogan. *(To Grace.)* Now where's that boyfriend of yours?

GRACE.

But you don't understand...

RORY

Ma'am, I asked ya' a question.

GRACE

(Flustered.) But Officer Toppman—

RORY

Ma'am, do I have to take you into the police station? I will not warn you again.

PETER

(To Grace.) You can't win with Rory. Better confess.

RORY

Grogan, one more crack out of you and I'll run you in for interferin' with a police officer in the line of duty. Now, Ma'am, where's your boyfriend?

GRACE.

(Icily.) Eternal Rest Columbarium.

RORY

Well, go get him.

(Peter loses it totally—laughing. The others try and keep a straight face.)

(Angry.) What's so damn funny, Grogan?

PETER

(Recovers.) Not a thing, Officer Toppman. *(Keeping a straight face...almost.)*

TOM

(Pompous.) A Columbarium is for cremains.

RORY

What?

RHONDA

It's a type of cemetery, for remains that have been cremated.

RORY

(Still angry.) Why'd didn't you say so in the first place. Ma'am, I warned you not to get smart with me!

GRACE.

(All innocence.) The last "boyfriend" I had was laid to rest three years ago at Eternal Rest Columbarium. I have every reason to believe he is still there.

RORY

(Forcefully.) Ma'am, then who was driving that vehicle?

GRACE.

(Coldly.) Ms. Doris Brooks.

RORY

Where's she?

GRACE.

The prop's closet.

RORY

What's she doin' there?

GRACE.

Examining a dead body.

(Tom, Rhonda, Helen and Margo all look surprised at this.)

RORY

(Assumes the dead body is a prop.) She can do that later. Go get her, Peter.

PETER

Yes, Sir, Officer Toppman.

(Snickering, Peter exits stage left.)

RHONDA.

(Dryly.) Coffee, Rory?

RORY

Yeah. Thanks Rhonda. Cold as a witch's— *(Glances at Grace.)* Damn cold out there.

(Rhonda pours out coffee and hands it to him.)

So what play you doin' this time?

TOM

(Picks up a script and looks at the title.)

“Deadly Defenestration.”

RORY

Hope it's Peter ya' throw out the window.

TOM

(Obviously surprised Rory knows the word.)

I don't think we'll be defenestrating Peter or anyone else. At least not theatrically

RORY

What ya' mean by that?

(Doris enters briskly from stage left followed by Peter and Hap, who starts singing “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” when he sees Rory. Doris keeps trying to put some distance between her and Hap, which results in an intermittent dance around the stage.)

DORIS

(Seeing Rory)

You're new.

(To Grace)

Does this mean we've been rescued?

RORY

(To Doris.) You the driver of that Crown Vic in the ditch?

DORIS

What?

RORY

Ma'am, I'm Officer Toppman of the Benson Springs Police. Are you the driver of that vehicle in the ditch back down the road a ways?

(Doris looks at Grace questioningly.)

GRACE

You better just answer him, Doris. We can—

RORY

(Interrupting.) Were you drivin' that vehicle in the ditch?

DORIS

I don't drive in ditches! I find that roads give a much smoother ride.

RORY

Don't get smart with me, ma'am! Or I'll run you in. Now, are you the owner of that vehicle?

DORIS

Yes, but there's been an accident.

RORY

I know that! Why the dickens ya' think I'm here? Now, were you and that woman there *(points at Grace)* the only occupants?

DORIS

Along with most of the contents of her house.

RORY

Were either of you hurt?

DORIS

No, but—

RORY

(Interrupting.) You know you have to file an accident report?

DORIS

Yes, but—

RORY

(Interrupting.) Good. Pick one up at the Benson Springs Police Station. I radioed Cotton Mather's Towing Service for ya'. He'll have your car at his shop by nine tomorrow. Looks like ya' got lucky. Didn't see no damage So it'll only cost ya' a coupl'a hundred for the tow.

DORIS

(Outraged.) "Coupl'a hundred!?" I've got Triple "A"! My card's in my purse.

RORY

Should've told me that afore I called. Anymore coffee, Rhonda?

(Rhonda tops off Rory's mug, while Doris fumes.)

GRACE

(Respectfully.) Officer Toppman?

RORY

Ma'am?

GRACE

Now will you please go and look at the body by the prop's closet?

(She tries to lead him backstage.)

RORY

(He chuckles) Ma'am, I'm too smart to fall for no fake body ya'll put together for some sort of theatrical thing.

(Peter snickers.)

TOM

You can never be too smart.

HELEN

But Rory, there is a body. It's my sister Susan. *(Pats her hair.)* She fell and—

RORY

(Interrupts.) Yeah, right. And you want to confess to her murder.

HELEN

Certainly not! No one said anything about murder!

GRACE

Officer Toppman. Please go look. If we're lying, you can arrest us all.

DORIS

I guarantee you, she is quite dead.

RORY

Yeah, so are all dummies.

TOM

(Sarcastic.) I wouldn't say that.

HELEN

For God's Sake, Rory, go and look!

RORY

*(Reluctantly.) ...Okay...**(He starts out. Grace leads the way. When Rory gets almost off, he turns...)*

But I'm warning every one of ya' if this is some kind'a joke....

(Rory exits.)

TOM

The only 'joke' is that Rory presumes himself to be an officer of the law.

HELEN

(Pats her hair.) Yes, but now we can get out of here.

TOM

I doubt it.

HELEN

What do you mean?

TOM

It's like that nosey woman said. The police will have questions for all of us. And I don't mean Rory.

HELEN

But Susan fell. It was an accident.

TOM

So did Patty. You weren't there, but it took them hours to release the body. And they questioned all of us before—

(Rory tears back across the stage holding his hand to his mouth as if he's going to throw up. He jumps off the stage and exits, running through the audience. Grace follows him on stage and stops, looking disgusted.)

I would never have believed Rory could move with such alacrity.

DORIS

I don't suppose he's running for help.

PETER

Only time I've seen him move that fast was for free beer.

GRACE

Is that man really a police officer?

TOM

Benson Springs is an undersized town with an undersized budget. You get what you pay for.

DORIS

You mean you pay for that?

GRACE

Why isn't he in uniform?

DORIS

They probably can't afford 'em.

GRACE

Doris, we'd better go see how he's doing.

(She picks up her coat and puts it on.)

DORIS

I have no intention of freezing my tail off to comfort some officious cop with a feeble stomach!

(Grace doesn't say a word. She simply pulls Doris' pack of cigarettes out of her pocket and holds them up for Doris to see. Then she grabs her tote bag and begins to exit through the audience, still holding up Doris' cigarettes, like a carrot.)

I do not make house calls!

(She looks after Grace, obviously longing for a cigarette, and quickly gives in. She grabs her coat and purse. To the others on stage, as she starts out hurriedly after Grace.)

There's a lesson here. Never befriend a bossy, nose-y, retired school teacher during a lunar eclipse.

(Doris follows Grace through the audience.)

HAP

Hey, Flora, where ya' goin'? It's cold out there. Wait up! I'll keep ya' warm.

(When Doris realizes that Hap is after her, she speeds up and both exit through the audience. Helen crosses to Tom.)

HELEN

(Pointedly) Tom, I need some help in the kitchen.

RHONDA

(To Tom.) We both do.

TOM

(Hesitates and then gives in.) Oh...all right.

(Helen, Rhonda and Tom exit stage left watched by Peter and Margo.)

PETER

We could listen at the door.

MARGO

(Sick of the infighting.) Why? We know Aunt Helen and Aunt Rhon will put the screws to Uncle Tom. He'll put them off, and in the end they'll get nothing. None of us will.

(She goes to the chalkboard and stares at her mother's name.)

You're lucky, Peter. At least you're not related to them by blood.

PETER

(Gently as he moves toward Margo.) Nor to you, for that matter.

MARGO

What's that supposed to mean?

PETER

Just an observation.

(Changing the subject and moving closer to Margo.)

What ever happened to that dress you wore in "Arsenic and Old Lace."

MARGO

You're changing the subject. *(Pauses.)* Which dress?

PETER

The blue one. You looked terrific in it.

MARGO

As opposed to my normal dowdy self?

PETER

I didn't say that. I didn't think it either.

MARGO

It's true. What difference does it make to you anyway?

PETER

You look fine.

MARGO

(Doesn't mean it.) Stop it, Peter.

(There is an awkward silence. Margo crosses and picks up one of the scripts from the table.)

PETER

(Keeping the conversation from dying.) You think the theatre will keep going?

MARGO

Not without Aunt Sue.

PETER

You could take it over. You love theatre. Lots of other people will get involved if you do. I'll even help.

MARGO

(That gets a chuckle from her.) Doing what?

PETER

(Realizing he'd managed to cheer her up a bit.)

The last I knew, you had me all set for a starring role... impaled, wearing nothing but a diaper.

MARGO

Aunt Sue picked that show. I'd do fun shows, like... "Harvey".

PETER

I'd make a great rabbit.

MARGO

You would—since he's invisible. *(Smiles slowly, relenting some.)* We have to get past this mess first.

(She puts down the script and turns toward Peter.)

Peter? Do you really think... that something's...going on?

PETER

(Hesitates, then shrugs.) What do I know? But if somehow Tom were to fall down the basement stairs and take Rhonda with him...say before tomorrow.... Helen would be dancing in the streets. I sure would hate to see that.

(Doris enters through the audience rather furtively, looking behind her constantly as she heads for the stage. She is carrying her coat and purse.)

MARGO

Why do you dislike Aunt Helen so much?

PETER

I don't "dislike" her. "Loathe", "detest", "hate"—those are much better words. After what she's done to poor ol' Dad. She's got him so deep in debt— My darling stepmother's idea of economy is to cut her shopping trips in half, and spend three times as much.

(He sees Doris.)

We've got company.

DORIS

(Coming up onto the stage, stage right side.)

I think I lost him.

PETER

Rory, I hope?

DORIS

He's playing with his radio. I meant that dirty old man with the acute case of pinchitis!

HAP

(Enters through the house at a trot and calling out.)

Hey, babe! Where are ya'? Come to yore daddy. I'll protect ya', Flora.

DORIS

The person I need protecting from is you! *(She exits quickly stage right.)*

(Hap switches songs and starts singing and humming, "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" as he trots onto the stage.)

HAP

Where'd she go? Which way did my Flora go?

(Margo points stage left at the same time Peter points stage right. Margo kicks Peter and he changes to pointing stage left. Hap exits stage left.)

MARGO

(Crossing right and calling off.) He's gone.

(Doris emerges from stage right and takes off her coat.)

DORIS

Who does he chase when I'm not here?

MARGO

He's usually not this bad.

PETER

(Hoots.) Right, and it usually doesn't snow around here in January.

MARGO

Well, it's only when his hearing aid doesn't work. And he really likes you. Normally he would be giving just as much attention to your friend. After all, you two are the only people here he's not related to.

(Rory enters through the house.)

PETER

I am not related to Hap.

MARGO

You know what I mean. You're not a woman.

PETER

I glad you noticed.

DORIS

(Pours some Brandy into a mug.)

All I know is that he is driving me to drink. After which I will not be responsible for my actions.

(Takes a drink of the brandy while still holding the bottle.)

RORY

(Calling while still in the house.) What's that ya' got there?

DORIS

Spirits of oblivion.

PETER

I don't think I can take any more of Rory right now. *(To Margo)* Shall we...find that blue dress.

(Peter offers his arm and Margo takes it. They exit quickly stage left as Rory comes onstage and grabs the brandy bottle from Doris, who grabs it back.)

DORIS

I didn't offer to share. Besides, you shouldn't be drinking on duty.

RORY

I ain't on duty.

(Takes back the bottle and takes a swallow.)

I'm just waitin' 'til the county medical examiner gets here.

DORIS

Interesting definition of "on-duty."

(Grabs the brandy bottle back.)

That's for medicinal purposes only!

RORY

(Grabs the brandy bottle.)

What's that friend of yours mean, she thinks it might be a suspicious death, and I should take a closer look? I ain't lookin' at that body again. No way.

DORIS

(Grabs the bottle back before he can take a drink.)

You should. I don't think Susan fell and hit her head on the radiator at all. It doesn't look right.

(Takes him by the arm and tries to lead him toward stage left.)

Let me show you.

(Rory pulls his arm away and grabs the brandy bottle.)

RORY

Look lady. I ain't exactly used to dead bodies. Not like you and that friend of yours... and that hotel thing.

DORIS

Grace told you about that, did she?

(Grabs the brandy bottle back.)

It was just a charming old inn in New England. Flying knives, a gun, a meat cleaver...but only three or four bodies.

(The sound of several heavy falling objects is heard from the upstage side of stage right and then the old metal bucket rolls onto the stage from upstage stage right.)

Oh, and a poltergeist.

RORY

What the tarnation was that?

DORIS

A sort of ghost that throws things.

RORY

I know that! I meant the noise.

DORIS

Sounds like something fell over. You should go look?

RORY

They're not disturbing the body are they? Your friend said they knew not to disturb the body. If they touch that body, the medical examiner'll run my tail through a paper shredder.

DORIS

That's a vivid image. But last I knew the body was over there *(points stage left with the brandy bottle)* and the noise came from over there *(points stage right.)*

RORY

Oh. Yeah. *(Rory exits stage right.)*

DORIS

Have some more brandy, Doris. It's going to be a long night.

(She adds some brandy to her mug and takes another drink from the bottle. She picks up one of the cookies, examines it closely, smells it, and then she tries to break off a piece of it. She can't break it, so she puts the cookie back onto the plate. .)

(Helen enters stage left as Rory comes from stage right.)

HELEN

What was that noise?

RORY

Just some junk that fell over.

(Hap rushes in from stage left and manages to get an arm around Doris. She gives a little shriek of surprise.)

HAP

There's my Flora!

DORIS

Can't you arrest him?

HAP

Where ya been hidin'? I've been worried sick. Now that I got ya', I'm not lettin' ya' go!

(Rory just grins at Doris, then picks up a cookie and looks at it dubiously, but he's hungry so he puts a whole cookie in his mouth. When he bites down on it he reacts to how tough it is, and he starts to chew it. He chews carefully, and for a very long time.)

DORIS

(To Helen.) Do something!

(Helen takes Hap in hand and sits him down. Hap starts to get up as soon as Helen starts to turn away. Helen turns back sharply and slaps him not all that hard on the side of the head—more to get his attention—and shakes her head “no” at him. Hap sits down looking impish. Helen gestures for him to stay, and turns back to Doris.)

HELEN

(Brusquely.) That's the best I can do. Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into him. Susan was at her wits end. She was going to have him committed.

(That gets a reaction out of Hap, but nobody on stage notices it.)

DORIS

He lived with Susan?

HELEN

(Nods.) In the old house.

DORIS

What happens to him now?

HELEN

Unless Rhonda wants him, he'll have to go to some kind of home. He's not living with me, and I know Tom won't put up with him.

(Rhonda enters from stage right. Grace enters through the house wearing coat, hat and gloves and carrying her bag.)

RHONDA

Have you seen Tom? We were going to move the rest of the “Arsenic” flats to the shed.

HELEN

Why bother? Theatre in Benson Springs is as dead as Susan. *(To Rory.)* When are we going to be able to get out of this hole?

(Rory is still chewing on the cookie and just shrugs.)

DORIS

If we're lucky, it'll be before we have to eat any of those cookies.

GRACE

(Stepping onto the stage.) Oh, I think we can do better than that.

(Everyone watches with astonishment as Grace pulls out food for a modest picnic to include two bottles of red wine—two of the same variety. When the wine is placed on the table, Rory immediately begins to open one bottle.)

DORIS

(aghast.) Screw tops?!

GRACE

It's quite drinkable and more convenient for traveling.

RORY

(Finally swallowing the cookie forcefully as he watches Grace setup.)
That's all I ever drink. Wow, look at all the stuff she's got.

GRACE

I believe in being prepared for a wide range of possibilities.

HELEN

Including death?

GRACE

Death is not a possibility—it is an eventuality. I'm sorry, but death is just another event that must be dealt with.

HELEN

You make my sister's demise sound like an inconvenient change in the weather!

DORIS

I think Grace would put it more in the category of changing a flat tire.

GRACE

That's not what I meant. Life is full of unexpected events—some large, some small—they all have to be dealt with. It's better to face them and move on.

DORIS

(Sarcastic.) Grace could be a Zen master...if she didn't talk so much.

GRACE

That's because I have to explain everything to Doris in words of one syllable.

RORY

(Stuffing his face.) Boy, this sure beats Susan's cookies.

DORIS

She must have inherited them from her great-grandmother—and I don't mean the recipe.

RHONDA

Actually, she found the recipe in a health-food magazine. Supposed to be loaded with fiber.

DORIS

Cotton or wool?

RHONDA

(Chuckles.) Probably nylon.

DORIS

Grace. What were you doing outside for so long?

GRACE

I took a little walk. Living in the city one forgets how utterly magnificent the night sky can be. Looking up at all those stars can be extremely therapeutic in shrinking our oversized egos.

DORIS

(Dryly.) Then you should do it more often.

(Margo screams offstage. Everyone freezes except Hap, who runs to Doris and puts his arm around her. Doris doesn't notice. Margo enters from stage right at a run, carrying a blue dress.)

MARGO

(Shocked.) It's Uncle Tom! He's... There's blood all over—his head's all—I mean it's—
(Stops and takes a deep breath, breaking down in tears.)

GRACE

Where?

(Margo points stage right. Everyone looks where she's pointing. Rhonda goes to Margo. Grace goes off toward the body, calling over her shoulder as she goes.)

Doris?

(Doris shakes off Hap and grabs Rory by the arm.)

DORIS

Let's go, Officer Toppman. Got your barf bag handy?

RORY

(Through a mouthful of food.) What?

(Doris and Rory move off followed by Hap. Peter enters from stage left at a run.)

PETER

(Frantic.) Margo? Where's Margo?

(Peter sees her and runs to Margo, who collapses into his arms.)

MARGO

Oh, Peter. It's Uncle Tom. He's...he's.... I think he's dead.

(Margo bursts into tears. Rhonda gets the brandy and pours some into a mug for Margo, and gives it to Peter. Helen pats her hair. Everyone is looking off stage. Suddenly Rory races across the stage, holding his hand over his mouth, jumps off the stage and exits at a gallop through the house.)

Blackout.

End of ACT I