

Audition for Murder

by
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Cast List

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, as long as she is bundled up and unrecognizable.

Grace Sharp—60+ and active. 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, Jeff, Rhonda, and Helen. (The actor cast for this role must not be physically threatening to Doris.)

Rhonda Benson-Squash—Mid 40s. Calm and self-controlled, with a dry humor. Needs to appear strong enough to drag a body. Younger than Susan and Jeff.

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

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

Jeff Benson—Late 40s. Arrogant and ironic; the spoiled only son. Younger than Susan and older than Rhonda and Helen.

Helen Benson-Grogan—Around 40. Self-centered, vain and spoiled as the youngest of the Benson siblings; Dresses well. Needs to appear strong enough to drag a body.

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

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

NOTE: 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, Jeff and Rory are the middle-aged group. Margo and Peter are the youngsters, but they should still be adults.

The Setting

Time: Current; Late on a Sunday afternoon in early January.

Place: The stage of an isolated community theatre, in a cold part of the United States. Around the edges and at the back of the stage, black curtains mask the offstage area. There are two “entrances” on each side of the stage; one as far upstage as possible and one as far downstage as possible. On each side of the stage, steps from the front of the house lead up to the stage.

Onstage, upstage center is an easel with a whiteboard (approximately 24” x 36,” oriented vertically) placed on it. Across the top of the whiteboard is written:

PLEASE
SIGN IN
AND
SIT DOWN

A column of numbers (1,2,3,4, etc.) runs down the left side of the board. A whiteboard marker and an eraser are in a tray at the bottom of the board. There should be crossover space between the easel and the rear curtain.

Stage right is a round table (card table size) with four folding chairs around it.

Stage left, a rectangular table (about 6’ long) angles from downstage left toward upstage center. The table has five folding chairs around it—two on each side and one on the downstage end. A garbage can is on the floor at the upstage end of the table.

There is one more folding chair on stage—as far downstage right as possible, with its back against the proscenium.

On the rectangular table, near the downstage end, are at least eleven mismatched coffee mugs, a half dozen bottles of water, several spoons and a sugar bowl, and a canister of instant creamer.

Prominently placed on the seat of the downstage right chair is an old tin bucket.

For production photographs, please visit the playwrights’ website at www.ravenwriters.com

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 down 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.*

(First she crosses up to the whiteboard. She grabs the eraser and erases the word “PLEASE.” Then she takes the marker and draws several emphatic lines under “SIT DOWN” and adds a couple of exclamation marks after it.

(She sees the bucket, picks it up and takes it to the upstage left corner of the stage, and puts it down.

(At the upstage left corner of the stage she pauses and turns to look back at the stage, still whistling. A pair of darkly covered, unidentifiable arms reach from the wings and grab Susan, gagging her at the same time. She abruptly stops whistling and struggles. As she is pulled offstage. In a last jerk she kicks the metal bucket, which noisily bounces onto the stage.

(The stage lights fade to black for a few seconds to indicate the passage of time, and then come back up. We hear the sound of a door slamming from the theatre lobby.

*(**Grace Sharp** and **Doris Brooks** enter from the back of the house and move toward the stage. Both are in their 60s and are bundled up in coats, gloves, and scarves. Grace wears a skirt and Doris is in slacks, and both wear walking shoes or boots suitable for snow. Doris has a small, efficient-looking shoulder purse; Grace carries a very large, overstuffed tote bag, which is actually a piece of carry-on luggage.)*

GRACE

(Calling as they come down the aisle toward the stage.)

Hello? ...Hello? Is anyone here?

DORIS

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

GRACE

(Good-natured banter between two old friends)

What flavor? Definitely something sour.

DORIS

Thank you for sharing.

GRACE

(Calling again) Hello? Hello?...Is anybody here? *(To Doris)* There must be someone here. The door wasn't locked.

(When they reach the stage, they go to the stage right steps and up onto the stage, crossing to the round table, Grace puts her bag down on the downstage chair of the table. As the conversation continues, the women come out of their hats and coats and lay them over chairs. 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.)

DORIS

Maybe not. Maybe they had the good sense to stay off that road. Why I ever let you talk me into that "scenic shortcut"—

GRACE

It's thirty miles shorter, and a gorgeous drive. 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, Grace; how many times have you taken that road in the winter?

GRACE

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

(Once Grace has removed her coat and gloves, she pulls a towel from her bag, sits in one of the chairs, and wipes her boots. Doris begins to explore the space—looking around.)

DORIS

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

GRACE

Bernice is my half-sister. I mostly see her 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? ...Second—Erik, JAMES, Charles, Fred—
or was he a Frank—no, Fred. Then Charles again, and now Larry.

DORIS

Quite the collector.

GRACE

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

I was sure I had it in my bag.

DORIS

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

GRACE

And where was yours?

DORIS

You know perfectly well.

GRACE

Cell phones don't like washing machines, do they? *(She chuckles)* Look, I'll go this
way. *(Indicating stage right)* You check that side.

*(Grace indicates off up left, in the direction that Susan
disappeared.)*

DORIS

(At the edge of the stage, looking off) It's awfully dark back there.

GRACE

Let me get you a flashlight. *(Grace starts rummaging through her bag.)*

DORIS

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

*(Doris doesn't wait and exits into the wings. Before Grace can
find a flashlight we hear Doris scream—or squeak really—
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.

***Hap Miller** enters from stage left. Hap is 60+, eccentric, and he always talks too loudly. He carries a mug of coffee in one hand and sings the first two lines of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," which he often hums or sings at odd times throughout the play.)*

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.

DORIS

Keep away from me!

HAP

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

(He pulls out the two chairs on the onstage side of the long table, turns them around to face center, and sits in the upstage chair.

He pats the chair next to him, indicating that Doris should join him. He then holds out the mug to Doris.)

Fresh, hot Java. Just what the doctor ordered. *(Suggestive)* We can share.

(Grace and Doris are thrown by Hap's behavior. There is a pause. Hap holds out the mug to Doris, but she backs away. He then holds it out for Grace. She hesitantly crosses and takes the mug—humoring Hap, but keeping out of reach as well.)

GRACE

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

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

Is there a phone here somewhere?

HAP

(He points.) On the table.

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

GRACE

I don't see it.

(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 telephone receiver.)

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 another spoonful into Grace's mug before she stops him by grabbing his hand.)

GRACE

No! STOP! STOP!

HAP

(Shaking her hand while still holding the spoon in his hand.)

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

GRACE

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

HAP

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

(He moves toward Doris holding out his hand.)

And what's your name, Babe?

DORIS

(Backing away to the right of the SR table.)

Keep away from me, you old coot!

HAP

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

DORIS

Keep away! *(Keeps backing away.)*

HAP

(Turning back to Grace.) She always this bashful?

GRACE

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

HAP

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

(Hap starts down stage left, talking to himself as he goes out.)

Flora? She's too hot to be a Flora. *(He exits downstage left.)*

GRACE

(Crossing to Doris) 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.”

DORIS

Oh shut up! Let's find a phone and get out of here.

(Rhonda Benson-Squash enters from down stage left, wearing slacks, a lightweight sweater and a sleeveless vest. She carries a coffee carafe. When she sees Grace and Doris she stops—surprised to see them.)

RHONDA

What...? Who are you? *(Recovers.)* Good grief. Someone actually came to auditions. *(Gives a mirthless chuckle.)* Although you are about an hour early.

(Rhonda puts the carafe down on the stage left table.)

GRACE

Oh, no, we're not here to audition. Our car went in the ditch and we need a phone.

RHONDA

(Shakes her head.) Afraid you're out of luck. There's no phone here.

DORIS

Not even a cell phone?

RHONDA

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

Maybe Jeff—

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 people.

DORIS

I was paying attention—to his hands.

RHONDA

(Sighs.) So you've met Uncle Hap.

DORIS

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

(Margo Benson Stevens enters downstage left, holding several scripts. Margo usually talks fast and tends not to pay attention when others are talking. She's early to mid-twenties and dressed very unflatteringly so that she looks much less attractive than she actually is. She doesn't notice Grace and Doris at first.)

MARGO

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 picks it up; then carries it off upstage 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." Fits right in with this script, though. It makes "Hamlet" look like a Neil Simon comedy.

(She crosses left and puts the scripts down on the upstage end of the long table, then comes down to Rhonda.)

Everyone's killed. Stabbed, strangled, shot, smothered—one guy gets impaled. And to top it all off, a double defenestration.

RHONDA

A what?

MARGO

Defenestration. 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 diving onto a pile of mattresses. Then opening night we could "forget" the mattresses.

RHONDA

Let's forget the dummy, too. And make it Peter and Jeff.

MARGO

No! Aunt Sue!

RHONDA

Jeff and Susan? What a delightful thought.

MARGO

But that leaves out Peter.

RHONDA

He could be stabbed...or strangled.

MARGO

Impaled!

RHONDA

Perfect! Peter gets stuck and Jeff and Susan take a flying leap.

MARGO

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

RHONDA

Oh. My mistake.

(Hap enters downstage left with two mugs of coffee and crosses right to Doris.)

HAP

Here ya' go, babe. Java. Fresh and hot. From the pot.

(He holds the mug out to Doris. She takes it cautiously, then moves away, backing stage right and up around the round table. Hap follows her.)

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. What cha' say...babe?

DORIS

I say no way!

HAP

Great! Pick ya' up at six-thirty. Where you parkin' that sweet little backside of yours?

DORIS

Wouldn't you like to know?

(Margo crosses and grabs Hap by the arm and forcibly directs him to the chair that is downstage right.)

MARGO

(To Hap loudly, as she seats him.)

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. You're here for the auditions—right?

(Grace tries to respond, but Margo continues.)

The scripts are there if you want to look. You can 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

(Margo has a thought, and rushes back to Rhonda)

You know Aunt Rhon, the more I think about it, Peter is perfect for impalement. The actor is stripped naked—but this isn't New York, so we'll have to use a diaper. Then, a sharpened stake is driven right through his bare chest. Awfully hard to fake that.

GRACE

Excuse me, but we're not here to audition. Doris had a nicotine fit and drove us into a ditch trying 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.) Jeff can give them a ride into town.

MARGO

(Shakes her head.) Nope. The battery on the van died.

RHONDA

Not again.

MARGO

He's too cheap to buy a new one. And Tom's already gone.

RHONDA

Tom? What was he doing here?

MARGO

Delivering Helen. She decided to come after all.

RHONDA

(Annoyed.) I wonder what changed her mind?

MARGO

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

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

DORIS

What's so funny?

MARGO

No one in their right mind would audition for one of Aunt Sue's "productions".

RHONDA

My sister is... "difficult to work with." She goes through actors like Henry the Eighth went through wives. Our last production was "Arsenic and Old Lace"—

MARGO

(Jumping in) It started as a summer show for the tourists—then it was going to be for Halloween. Finally, we opened right before Christmas, so we added carolers.

(Sings.) "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

(From his seat in the corner, Hap begins to sing along, and does a line or two of the song. Margo continues.)

Which is pretty funny if you remember how many gentlemen the two sisters killed.

RHONDA

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

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

MARGO

(Changing the subject.) By the way, I'm Margo.

GRACE

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

(Doris raises her hand to wave "hello." Hap jumps up and grabs Doris' hand and begins to shake it vigorously. She tries to pull away, but Margo has to intervene.)

HAP

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

MARGO

Let her go! Uncle Hap! Let her go!

(Margo points, emphatically, at the chair Hap was in. Sullenly, he returns to his corner and sits.)

DORIS

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

RHONDA

I'm afraid a piece of paper won't stop Uncle Hap.

MARGO

He didn't use to be this bad. The less he hears, the more he seems to use his hands.

DORIS

Someone must live nearby who can get us out of here.

RHONDA

Not anymore.

DORIS

What about flagging down a passing car?

RHONDA

You can try, but you're more likely to get frostbite than a ride.

GRACE

I don't suppose we could walk to town?

RHONDA

It's five miles, and well below freezing.

DORIS

Piece of cake. Grace. You go. I'll wait here.

GRACE

And cuddle with Uncle Hap?

HAP

(Hap grins and jumps up.) Hot java, Dot? Want some more?

MARGO

(Pointing sternly for Hap to sit back in his chair.)

SIT! SIT!

(From the back of the audience, Peter approaches the stage. Everyone turns to watch his entrance. Peter's attitude and tone are lazy, sarcastic and insolent. He comes up the steps on the stage left side of the stage.)

PETER

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

And if your driver's license hadn't been revoked.

PETER

Suspended.

MARGO

My mistake. *(To Grace and Doris.)* This is Peter—Aunt Helen's stepson.

PETER

I claim her not.

MARGO

(To Peter) How long have you been spying on us?

PETER

Long enough to hear you plotting my untimely demise....

(He lazily takes off his coat and drops it onto the chair at the downstage end of the long table.)

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

RHONDA

Where's Helen?

PETER

Talking to Jeff. Seeking support, I believe, for the next skirmish in the battle of the Benson buttonhooks.

RHONDA

Buttonhooks my eye! She's after Great Aunt Betsy's diamond brooch. That's mine.

PETER

But isn't that up to Susan? She's the grand executor of Daddy Benson's last will and testament.

RHONDA

I told father that if he left it up to Susan, nothing good would come of it.

PETER

You mean nothing good would come to you.

RHONDA

Peter, this is no business of yours. You're not a Benson.

PETER

(He drops to his knees in a mock praying position.)

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

MARGO

Give it a rest, Peter.

PETER

As you wish. Although, you might want to know—my darling stepmother had a little heart to heart with our attorney this afternoon—

RHONDA

What about?

PETER

...after which she wanted to see Jeff in the worst way. Strange expression, "worst way." When fastest, quickest, most expeditious way is what is actually meant.

MARGO

You sound like Uncle Jeff.

PETER

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

MARGO

You're just making it up. Attorneys don't work on Sundays.

PETER

Have it your way, Margo. All I know is that Helen went to see him Friday afternoon,

(Makes a show of looking at his watch.)

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

RHONDA

And...?

PETER

I'm not supposed to know. You'll have to ask Stepmother.

(Rhonda is annoyed but tries not to show it.)

MARGO

(Gives Peter a dirty look. To Rhonda:)

He doesn't know anything. You know Peter—always looking to stir up trouble.

PETER

(He sprawls into the chair at the downstage end of the long table with a satisfied smirk.)

It's my mission in life.

MARGO

Find a new one! *(Trying to move on.)* Now, I'll go round everyone up so we can start.

RHONDA

I'll get the rest of the refreshments...if you want to call them that.

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

MARGO

You're a big help. *(She goes off downstage left, after Rhonda.)*

PETER

(Calling off) But I do know something, Margo. I really do.

(Briefly it looks as if Peter may regret the way he aggravated Margo; but he shrugs it off and turns to Grace and Doris.)

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

DORIS

Oh, I vote for impalement.

PETER

And the blunter the stake, the better—right? Glad to see I can still make a first impression.

GRACE

How do you do? I'm Grace Sharp.

PETER

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

DORIS

(Ignoring Peter.) Grace, what are the chances your sister will come looking for us?

PETER

No one will come near this place with Susan holding auditions.

DORIS

So what are you doing here?

PETER

Blackmail.

DORIS

What's she got on you?

PETER

You don't expect me to answer that?

(Jeff Benson enters upstage left. He is in his late 40s and has an arrogant manner.)

JEFF

Ah...Peter. What a disagreeable development. I might have said "surprise," except Helen told me you were here. So I can't be surprised. Annoyed. Irritated. Aggravated. But not surprised.

(He looks at the dry erase board, then back to Doris and Grace.)

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

PETER

They're not here to audition.

JEFF

No one ever is.

PETER

They need a ride into town.

JEFF

So do we. Any suggestions?

(Jeff sits in the upstage chair on the onstage side of the long table—the one Hap sat in at the beginning of the show.)

PETER

A slumber party!

JEFF

You brought pajamas?

PETER

I sleep in the nude.

JEFF

Then you'll sleep outside. I've read that snow is a superior insulator. The temperature inside an igloo can get quite above freezing...of course then it starts to melt.

(As Jeff talks, Hap rises and moves to stand beside Doris. At the end of Jeff's line, Hap gently puts his hand on Doris' shoulder. She reacts—jumping up with a squeal and quickly moving upstage and behind the table, putting the table between her and Hap. He follows her and they circle around the table.)

HAP

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

(Once Doris has circled around to the downstage right side of the table and Hap is upstage of the table, she grabs the stage right chair and pulls it out, using it to block Hap's progress. Hap pauses, and smiles sweetly at Doris.)

JEFF

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.

JEFF

How fortunate for you.

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

RHONDA

Jeff, what were you and Helen talking about?

JEFF

She didn't tell you?

RHONDA

No. I haven't seen her yet.

JEFF

Then I'm afraid you'll have to enjoy the joy of anticipation...the wonder of wondering...the expectancy of expectation....

RHONDA

(Annoyed.) Jeff...

(Doris takes Grace's bag out of the downstage chair at the table and puts it in Grace's lap. Grace puts it on the floor upstage of her chair. Doris then places the downstage chair next to Grace and sits down beside her as the scene continues.)

JEFF

No. It's Helen's discovery and she should have the pleasure of revelation. It's also family business, which should not be discussed in front of...our visitors. Third, it frustrates Peter, which trumps all other considerations.

PETER

I already know.

RHONDA

And so should I, Jeff.

(As the scene continues, Hap takes the chair that Doris used to block him and moves right beside Doris, and then steps away. After a moment Doris notices the chair and pushes it away.)

JEFF

(To Grace and Doris) 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.

(Hap edges toward the chair to sit and he notices that it isn't where he placed it. So he moves it back beside Doris.)

RHONDA

My brother loves words. He's been reading the dictionary since he was ten—he still doesn't understand the plot.

MARGO

(Entering downstage left and talking fast.)

I can't find Aunt Sue anywhere. Her office, the kitchen, the rest rooms, the green room, the costume room, the props closet, the furnace room, even the storage rooms—Uncle Jeff, did you see her outside?

(Doris notices that Hap has moved the chair back to beside her, and again she pushes it away. This game goes on another time or two, escalating as it proceeds.)

JEFF

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

MARGO

We can't start without her.

JEFF

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

PETER

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

MARGO

I'm sure we can count on Rory to stop by.

PETER

I can hardly wait.

JEFF

A mixed blessing, but better than spending the night....

(By this point the battle between Doris and Hap over the chair is a full blown shoving match—Doris is still seated, but both of them are pushing the chair aggressively. Doris finally realizes that everyone is watching them. She stops resisting and Hap places the chair beside her and quickly sits.)

DORIS

What are you all staring at?

PETER

The World Wrestling Federation? Senile Seniors Division?

MARGO

Peter!

(Margo rises and crosses to Hap. She speaks to him very loudly.)

UNCLE HAP! HAVE YOU SEEN AUNT SUSAN?

HAP

Poached on toast. Why?

MARGO

AUNT SUSAN! WHERE IS AUNT SUSAN?

HAP

I'd look in the refrigerator.

RHONDA

He's hopeless without his hearing aid.

(Margo turns to look at the others. Hap grins devilishly and pinches Doris' thigh. Doris jumps up. Grace also rises.)

PETER

Not so hopeless.

DORIS

(Calm and polite) Excuse me, Margo

(Doris gently moves Margo aside, steps in front of Hap, and gives him a good slap.)

PETER

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

GRACE

Doris! Really!

DORIS

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

HAP

(Rising) Whoa, babe! You're a feisty one.

(Hap grins broadly, and gives Doris a solid slap on the behind. She turns quickly to face him. He grabs her face and gives her a kiss—a good one. Doris is stunned by his action.)

HAP

(Pulling back after the kiss.) That's my babe! I told ya' she weren't no Flora!

(Peter is laughing, almost hysterically. Doris, embarrassed and furious, fights to recover her dignity. Grace isn't much help although she tries. Jeff is laughing. Rhonda and Margo seem at a loss as to what to do, but are trying not to laugh.)

*(Offstage **Helen Benson-Grogan** gives a very theatrical loud scream that freezes everyone; even Hap acts as though he heard it. Jeff rises and moves upstage, looking off. Helen rushes in from upstage left, into Jeff's arms. She is 40ish and stylishly dressed in an outfit that is trying to look "young.")*

JEFF

Helen? What's the matter?

PETER

(Sarcastic.) She must have seen a mouse.

RHONDA

Not now, Peter!

HELEN

Behind the props closet. Horrible! Just horrible!

PETER

I told you it was a mouse.

MARGO

Shut up, Peter!

HELEN

It's Susan. There's blood everywhere.

JEFF

Rhonda! *(He gestures for Rhonda to help Helen.)*

(Jeff heads offstage stage left followed by Grace and Peter. Doris watches them go, then moves to Grace's bag, places it on the round table and begins to dig, standing upstage of the table. Hap looks at Doris, hesitates, and then follows the others offstage.)

RHONDA

(Gently.) Over here, Helen.

(Rhonda moves Helen to sit in the chair that Jeff just vacated. Margo helps and then sits beside Helen. Helen sits keeping her head bowed and sobs rather theatrically. Margo puts her arm around Helen and Rhonda moves to help Doris.)

DORIS

Grace always keeps some brandy handy. The trick is finding it.

(She begins to rummage, pulling some things out as she goes handing them to Rhonda.)

Here it is.

(Pauses to read the bottle. Disgusted.)

Sherry?! Yuck!

(Searches again, going deep and pulling out several odd items and handing them to Rhonda, loading up her open arms.)

RHONDA

She could open a thrift store with what's in that bag.

DORIS

You should see her house!

(Keeps digging and then pulls out a fruitcake.)

Here's a fruitcake! There's got to be brandy in here somewhere.

RHONDA

Maybe if we pulled everything out...?

DORIS

The table's not big enough.

(She finally pulls out a bottle of brandy.)

Ah! I knew she'd have brandy.

(Doris quickly moves to the downstage corner of the long table, grabs a clean coffee mug and pours some brandy into the mug.)

RHONDA

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

(Rhonda moves to the upstage right side of the round table and proceeds to unload all the stuff that Doris gave her.)

HELEN

It's so horrible. I feel...light-headed...like I'm going to... I don't know how....

(Doris gives the mug to Margo who gives it to Helen.)

MARGO

Here. Drink this.

(Helen sips and glances around furtively, watching what goes on—obviously she’s playing for effect. She pats her hair, a nervous primping action that she does periodically. Hap is the first to return from upstage left, humming and then singing “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.” He is followed by Grace and Jeff. At the same time Peter comes in downstage left. He spots the brandy, grabs it and takes a long swallow directly from the bottle. Doris takes it from him.)

DORIS

Save some for the rest of us.

GRACE

Doris, would you...verify the condition?

(Gesturing in the direction of the props closet.)

DORIS

I’m retired!

(Grace looks at her and she gives in. She wipes the top of the brandy bottle and takes a swig.)

Show me the way.

(Doris puts the brandy bottle on the table and starts off upstage left. When she approaches Jeff, he exits toward the body and Doris follows. Hap, now acting as Doris’s protector, follows closely.)

RHONDA

(Puzzled.) What’s Doris...?

GRACE

(Moving centerstage) She was a nurse.

PETER

(Recovering) Unless she can raise the dead, she won’t be much help.

(Peter moves the chair from the downstage end of the long table—the one with his coat on it—beside Margo’s chair and sits beside her.)

MARGO

How...? I mean, what happened?

GRACE

It looks like she fell and hit her head.

MARGO

Fell?

PETER

Sort'a like a defenestration.

MARGO

Peter!

PETER

(Contrite.) Sorry. She must have fallen from the top of the loft ladder and hit her head on the radiator.

MARGO

(This upsets Margo more than might be expected.)

Oh no! Just like Mother! *(Margo buries her face in her hands.)*

PETER

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

MARGO

But it is! It is!

GRACE

(Crossing right, to Rhonda) What is just like what?

RHONDA

Margo's mother died last year from a fall down the stairs.

(Doris enters upstage left, looking grim, and removing a pair of latex gloves, which she throws into the garbage can. Hap is right behind her, and Jeff follows. As the scene continues, Grace puts the things that Doris took out of her bag back into the bag.)

MARGO

(Looking up.) Aunt Sue is really dead?

JEFF

She has unquestionably directed her last theatrical production.

(Jeff crosses to the down right corner of the stage, grabs the chair that is there, turns it around, and sits in it backwards.)

DORIS

(Moving center stage) We need to call the police.

HELEN

(Surprised) The police? It was an accident.

JEFF

Still, 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?

JEFF

(Sarcastic) Benson' Springs' finest. He should be here any time now.

DORIS

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

JEFF

A mooch is more like it. Whenever he sees us here, he stops by—just to “check things out.” He’s mainly looking for free coffee and cookies, and an excuse 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.

GRACE

(Pulling a small notepad and pen from her jacket pocket.)

Good. Now I suggest we prepare for the police.

JEFF

“Prepare”?

DORIS

Grace channels Sherlock Holmes at every opportunity.

(Doris knows what Grace is up to. She crosses to the onstage chair at the round table and sits, settling in for the duration.)

RHONDA

You’ve done this before?

GRACE

(Moving centerstage) As it happens, I have. Now, the police will want to know where you all were when Susan fell. I don’t suppose anyone heard the fall?

JEFF

Of course not. We would have investigated.

GRACE

When did you all get here?

JEFF

Just after three. Except for Helen and Peter.

HELEN

My husband dropped us off around five. I don't like to drive on these roads in winter.

DORIS

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

GRACE

Feeding your martyr complex.

PETER

(Devilish) After that high-priced attorney called, Helen needed to do a little plotting.

HELEN

I had to...get dressed, and do my hair. *(She pats her hair)*

GRACE

What did Susan do when she got here?

JEFF

Went to her office.

GRACE

And the rest of you?

JEFF

We cleaned up the last of the "Arsenic" stuff. Then Margo went to costumes, and Rhonda to the kitchen, while Hap set up the stage for the auditions. I worked out in the storage shed.

PETER

He likes to hide out there. Best place to catch him alone, isn't it, Stepmother?

GRACE

So Helen—after talking to Jeff, what did you do?

HELEN

Went to the kitchen.

GRACE

And you, Peter?

PETER

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

(He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, and starts to pull one out.)

MARGO

You still can't smoke in here. This place is a firetrap.

DORIS

(Standing up and pulling out a pack of cigarettes.)

Then come on, Peter. Let's go 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.

JEFF

A nurse who smokes?

DORIS

I'm retired. I also drink, but only for medicinal purposes. *(To Peter)* Grab the brandy, would you please, Peter?

(Peter rises and grabs the brandy, finding the bottle cap and replacing it. Grace takes Doris's cigarettes away from her.)

GRACE

You're trying to quit.

(She puts Doris's 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, puts the brandy bottle on the long table, and sits down. Doris looks outraged, but returns to her seat. Hap quickly slips into the chair beside Doris, without her noticing. Grace turns back to the rest, and continues.)

GRACE (CONT'D)

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

MARGO

Maybe Uncle Hap did.

(Everyone turns to Hap, and Doris notices that he's sitting right beside her. She jumps up.)

DORIS

Can we lock him up?! Or tie him down? If I have to stay a minute longer with him—

GRACE

(Losing her patience—becoming very stern with Doris)

Doris, he's harmless! Quit acting liking a nine-year-old, whining to the teacher.

(Doris is so stunned and furious at Grace that she lets Hap comfort her and guide her back into the chair; and then he sits beside her, comforting her.)

MARGO

UNCLE HAP, WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW AUNT SUE ALIVE?

HAP

Happy Hour at The Triple Junction Bar. *(To Doris)* You'll like it there, babe? They got great pickled pigs feet.

RHONDA

He's hopeless without his hearing aid.

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

DORIS

Question—Is there no heat in Susan's office?

JEFF

Certainly. Why?

DORIS

She was all bundled up when she died.

GRACE

Excellent point, Doris.

DORIS

Thank you, Teacher. Do I get a gold star?

GRACE

Five house points. *(To the group)* Could she have fallen right after you arrived?

JEFF

We were all over the stage. We would have heard her.

MARGO

Maybe she went back outside for something.

GRACE

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

HELEN

No. I never saw her at all.

JEFF

We keep telling you, No, we didn't see her—anywhere; anytime.

GRACE

Thank you. ...Now about that ladder?

(Grace moves upstage left, looking off in the direction of the props closet.)

JEFF

(Aggravated, but answering anyway.)

It's leads to a storage loft and then up to the attic. It's all long term storage.

GRACE

Why would Susan go up there?

PETER

Maybe she was doing research on defenestration.

(Margo punches Peter in the arm.)

GRACE

Margo? When you were looking for Susan, you obviously didn't see her back there....

MARGO

The door of the props closet was open—it blocked the ladder.

GRACE

So, Helen, why did you look there?

(Grace moves downstage left, on the stage left side of the long table, moving to the downstage left corner of the stage.)

HELEN

I was just doing a quick check of the props closet, to make sure that everything we borrowed for "Arsenic..." had been returned. When I shut the door...I... 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 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

What's that supposed to mean?

PETER

You don't recognize your Shakespeare? Hint: The lady kills the king and will never sleep again. *(A brief pause.)* Give? Okay, it's from—

MARGO

Don't say it!

DORIS

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 am not! ...But just don't say it.

PETER

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

DORIS

What does that have to do with any of this?

PETER

Theatre superstitions. Things that cause bad luck. Speaking of which, this hasn't been a lucky year for the Benson clan, has it? Susan's the third Benson to die in less than a year...one almost wonders who's next, Stepmother? Jeff, perhaps?

(He looks meaningful around the stage.)

JEFF

Enough, Peter! Shut your big trap!

PETER

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

HELEN

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

*(Helen angrily rises and gestures strongly as she speaks.
Something drops to the floor from the handkerchief in her hand.)*

RHONDA

What was that?

(Helen frantically looks for what dropped but Peter finds it first.)

PETER

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

My goodness, what do we have here? *(To Helen)* It couldn't be Great Aunt Betsy's diamond brooch, could it?

(Helen grabs it from Peter.)

RHONDA

(Accusing) What are you doing with that?

HELEN

(Defiantly) Susan gave it to me.

RHONDA

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

HELEN

Well...it was...I—

PETER

I've never seen you with it before, Stepmother. *(He returns to his chair and sits.)*

HELEN

Don't call me stepmother!

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

HAP

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

(Rhonda snatches the brooch away from Hap, and moves to confront Helen.)

RHONDA

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

MARGO

(Shocked.) After she was dead?

JEFF

I don't believe Susan would have allowed it if she were alive.

RHONDA

(A demand.) Helen?!

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

HELEN

All right. I took it—to keep it safe. Otherwise, it could've disappeared—the police; the funeral home—who knows where? You can't trust anyone these days.

PETER

You've got that right, Stepmother.

RHONDA

So, Helen, you find Susan's body and...search it. Then you scream like a banshee and stagger out here, pretending to be shocked. *(Applauding)* Bravo! What a performance!

PETER

Well, after all, this is a theatre.

HELEN

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.

PETER

Don't look at me. Why should I cry? I'm not a Benson. 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)

And I think that brings us back to you, Stepmother?

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

RHONDA

What does he mean?

JEFF

This is hardly the occasion—

RHONDA

(A demand) Oh yes it is!

(Helen doesn't answer.)

PETER

Then I'll tell.

DORIS

I thought you might.

JEFF

(Warning) Peter...!

PETER

(Innocent) I really don't know what all the fuss is about. I mean it's good news, isn't it? For a loving, sharing family....

RHONDA

(Dryly.) Get to the point, Peter.

PETER

Very well. The key point, as I...overheard it, is that great-grandfather Benson's will is invalid— null, void, and kaput. So all that lakefront property around that decaying family "castle" can now be subdivided, developed and sold for tons of money. The only question is—who gets the cash? Isn't that right, Stepmother?

JEFF

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

PETER

Which would happen to be...you, Jeff.

MARGO

But what about Aunt Sue's will?

JEFF

Whoever inherits must survive father by four months. Susan...failed to do so, which means 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

That's not funny!

PETER

It wasn't meant to be. Think Margo—How long ago did your grandfather die?

HELEN

(Before Margo can think of the answer.)

Four months ago...tomorrow.

PETER

So his will still governs...for a few more hours. If I were you, Jeff, I'd be very careful until the cock crows tomorrow morn.

JEFF

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—probably more—she stumbled at the top of the stairs. Susan shouldn't have been on that ladder in the first place. Everyone knows she was subject to vertigo. But you could never tell her anything.

RHONDA

(Crossing down right to talk to Jeff.)

But you can tell me what you and Helen are plotting.

(Hap counters up right, behind the round table.)

JEFF

Nothing. Helen just 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

(Moving down right to join the family discussion)

If father had known that, he would have divided the property equally among us.

JEFF

That's supposition.

(Jeff is not supporting Helen as she expected. It confuses her, but she continues with the idea they had earlier discussed.)

HELEN

My attorney said it would give us solid grounds to challenge the will.

PETER

He would, at three hundred bucks an hour.

(As the family discussion continues, Grace signals Doris to join her downstage right. Doris rises and crosses to Grace.)

RHONDA

You mean we could break father's will?

JEFF

Expensive and highly doubtful.

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, if we all agree to share.

RHONDA

Jeff is the only one who needs to agree.

HELEN

He already did.

RHONDA

Jeff...?

JEFF

It's an exceedingly complex issue.

HELEN

What is?

RHONDA

See, Helen? He won't share.

PETER

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

JEFF

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

PETER

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

HELEN

This has nothing to do with you, Peter!

PETER

(To Doris and Grace) Don't you enjoy watching a family fight over money?

DORIS

Who's fighting who? I need a scorecard.

PETER

As you wish.

(Peter rises and goes to the dry erase board, wipes it clean and then writes down names and relationships as he explains.)

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

(Writes "HB" at center top.)

He built the old family "castle" on a large piece of land on Lake Benson—the property currently under discussion. Old Hiram is, of course, defunct.

(He draws and "X" through "HB" and then draws a dashed line down a bit, and writes "RB" below "HB")

His grandson Roger Benson—their father *(indicating Jeff, Rhonda and Helen)*— then owned the land until four months ago—as of...tomorrow—when he became defunct.

(He draws and "X" through "RB")

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 "P" below the left branch. Under "P" he draws another vertical line and under it, writes "M." He draws an "X" through "P.")

The next oldest was Susan. Defunct tonight.

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

Which leaves Jeff as the eldest survivor. For the moment.

(Writes "J" under the next branch, and then "R" and "H.")

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

GRACE

Where does Hap fit?

DORIS

In a cage.

PETER

Roger Benson's brother-in-law. Not in line to inherit. *(He writes in "H" next to "RB")*

DORIS

And you?

PETER

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

(Peter writes "P" below Helen's name.)

GRACE

Thank you, Peter.

PETER

Any questions?

DORIS

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

(Peter returns to his seat and Hap moves up center to get a better look at the diagram on the whiteboard.)

HELEN

So, Jeff; what's it to be?

(As the family squabbling resumes Doris slips quietly out the downstage left exit. No one notices except Hap, who quietly slips out the upstage left exit.)

JEFF

All in due time, Helen. There are too many unanswered questions—the value of the land, the cost of development, county regulations. When we have the answers to these, and other unknowns—only then can we have a productive deliberation.

HELEN

And how many years will that take? No—we settle it now, or we'll see you in court.

JEFF

I assure you, I intend be reasonable about this.

HELEN

You bet you will.

JEFF

As I said before...

(He notices that Doris has disappeared.)

Hey, where did...your friend go?

*(Before Grace can start to explain, **Rory Toppman** enters through the audience, heading to the stage. He is bundled up for the weather wearing boots, coat and baseball cap. He is officious and self-important, but not overly intelligent.)*

RORY

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

Anybody here own that big Crown Victoria in the ditch 'back toward Triple Junction?

PETER
Lo and behold—it's Rory!

RORY
What'd ya' say?

(Grace moves a few steps toward center stage, trying to see who's walking up the aisle.)

PETER
Just announcing your arrival.

RORY
Can't they see that for themselves? Now, who owns that Crown Vic?
(Rory comes up on the stage left side of the stage.)

GRACE
We do.

RORY
You gotta' fill out an accident report. Where's your husband?

GRACE
I'm not married.

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

GRACE
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.

JEFF
A null force if there ever was one.

GRACE
Thank goodness. There's been an accident.

RORY

Why the tarnation 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

But Officer Toppman—

RORY

Ma'am, do I have to take you into the police station?

PETER

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; laughing.)* What's so damn funny, Grogan?

PETER

Not a thing, Officer Toppman. *(Controlling his laughter...almost.)*

JEFF

A Columbarium is for cremains.

RORY

What?

RHONDA

A type of cemetery, Rory, for people who've been cremated.

RORY

Why didn't you say so in the first place? Ma'am, I told you not to get smart with me.

GRACE.

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

Then who was driving that vehicle?

GRACE.

Ms. Doris Brooks.

RORY

Where's she?

GRACE.

The props closet.

RORY

What's she doin' there?

GRACE.

Examining a dead body.

(Jeff, Rhonda and Helen 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 rises and heads off upstage left. Margo follows him to the edge of the stage but can't bring herself to go off. Rory turns to the long table and picks up one of the empty mugs.)

RHONDA.

(Dryly.) Coffee, Rory? *(She crosses the stage to the carafe and pour coffee for Rory.)*

RORY

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

(Rhonda pours coffee into the mug.)

So what play you doin' this time?

JEFF

“Deadly Defenestration.”

RORY

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

JEFF

I don’t think we’ll be defenestrating anyone. At least not theatrically.

(Doris enters from upstage left, removing latex gloves which she throws into the garbage can. She is followed by Peter and Hap, who is singing or humming “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.” Doris crosses center, to Grace.)

DORIS

(Seeing Rory) You’re new. *(To Grace)* Does this mean we’ve been rescued?

GRACE

Dream on.

RORY

You the driver of that Crown Vic in the ditch?

DORIS

What?

RORY

Ma’am, I’m Officer Toppman of the Benson Springs Police. 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! 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? Were you and that lady there the only occupants?

DORIS

Along with most of the contents of her house.

RORY

Were either of you hurt?

DORIS

No, but—

RORY

You still got'ta file an accident report. Pick one up tomorrow. Looks like ya' got lucky. I didn't see no damage, so it's only gonna' cost ya' a coupl'a hundred for the tow.

DORIS

“Coupl'a hundred!?” I've got Triple “A”!

RORY

Should've told me that 'fore I called Cottom Mather's Towin'. Anymore coffee, Rhonda?

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

GRACE

(Respectfully.) Officer Toppman?

RORY

Ma'am?

GRACE

Will you please go and look at the body by the props closet?

RORY

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

JEFF

You can never be too smart.

HELEN

Rory, it's Susan. I found her. *(Pats her hair.)* She fell and hit her head. It's awful....

RORY

Right. And you want to confess to her murder.

HELEN

Certainly not! No one said anything about murder!

GRACE

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

DORIS

I guarantee you; she is quite dead.

RORY

Yeah, so are all dummies.

JEFF

I wouldn't say that.

RHONDA

Rory, it's true.

RORY

Okay... For you, Rhonda, *(To Grace)* Show me where this "body" is.

(Grace leads the way. When Rory gets almost off, he turns...)

But I'm warning all of ya', if this is some kind'a joke....

(Rory turns and exits, followed by Grace and Hap.)

JEFF

The only 'joke' is that Rory presumes himself to be a sentient being.

HELEN

Well at least we'll get out of here.

JEFF

Don't count on it.

HELEN

What do you mean?

JEFF

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.

JEFF

So did Patty. You weren't there. It took them hours to release her body. And they questioned all of us for—

(Rory tears across the stage, gagging and holding his hand to his mouth as if he's about to throw up. He jumps off the stage and runs out through the audience. Grace follows him on stage and stops, looking disgusted. Hap brings up the rear.)

JEFF (CONT'D)

I would never have believed Rory could move such alacrity.

DORIS

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

PETER

Only time I've seen him move like that was when they were running out of free beer.

GRACE

Is that man really a police officer?

JEFF

Benson Springs is a small town with a small 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 one.

GRACE

Doris, we'd better go see how he's doing. *(She crosses to collect her coat and bag.)*

DORIS

I'm not going to freeze my tail off to comfort some officious cop with a feeble stomach!

(Graces 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. Then 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 retired, bossy and very nosey English teacher.

(Doris starts to follow Grace out through the audience.)

HAP

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

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

HELEN

Jeff, you and I need to talk. In private.

RHONDA

Yes, we do.

(Helen wasn't intending to include Rhonda. She's not amused.)

JEFF

(Hesitates and then gives in.) Very well. The kitchen?

(Jeff, Helen, and then Rhonda exit downstage left.)

PETER

We could follow them.

MARGO

Why? We know they'll put the screws to Uncle Jeff. He'll put them off, and in the end they'll get nothing. None of us will. You're lucky, Peter. At least you're not related to them by blood.

PETER

Nor to you, for that matter.

MARGO

What's that supposed to mean?

PETER

Just an observation.

(An awkward pause. Margo starts straightening the chairs on the right side of the stage, returning them to their original positions.)

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.

MARGO

But you thought it.

PETER

I did not.

MARGO

What difference does it make to you anyway?

PETER

You look fine.

MARGO

Stop it, Peter. *(But she doesn't really mean that.)*

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. Even me.

MARGO

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

PETER

Last I knew, you had me precast in a starring role—stripped and impaled on a pointy stake.

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

PETER

(Shrugs.) I don't know. But I do know that if Jeff were to fall down the basement stairs tonight and take Rhonda with him—Helen would be dancing in the streets. I'd sure hate to see that.

(Doris enters through the audience, looking behind her as she heads for the stage. She carries 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 old Dad. She's got him so deep in debt. Her idea of economizing 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 right side of the stage) 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

(Calling out from the back of the audience)

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

DORIS

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

HAP

(Coming down the aisle, stopping in front of the stage.)

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 stage left. Hap comes up onto the stage and exits stage left.)

MARGO

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

(Doris emerges from stage right, takes off her coat, and puts it over the back of one of the chairs at the table.)

DORIS

Who does he chase when I'm not here?

PETER

He really likes you.

MARGO

He's usually not this bad.

DORIS

I guess I must be "special."

(Doris crosses to the long table, grabs the brandy, and pours some into a mug.)

MARGO

Well, you and your friend 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'm glad you noticed.

DORIS

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

(She takes a drink of brandy, from the bottle, while holding the mug of brandy she just poured for herself in her other hand.)

RORY

(Calling while still approaching the stage.) 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)* Let's go find that blue dress.

(Peter and Margo exit quickly downstage right as Rory comes onstage left and grabs the brandy 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.)

I seriously doubt that Susan fell and hit her head on that radiator. There are too many... inconsistencies. *(Starting off upstage left)* Let me show you.

RORY

(Rory grabs the brandy bottle.)

That can wait for the medical examiner. I ain't exactly used to dead bodies. Not like you and that friend of yours...and that hotel thing.

DORIS

So Grace told you about that? *(Grabs the brandy bottle)* It was just a charming old New England inn. Flying knives, a gun, a meat cleaver...a few bodies.

(The sound of heavy falling objects is heard from the upstage right and then the bucket rolls onto the stage from upstage 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. Maybe 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 shredder.

DORIS

Such a vivid image. But last I knew the body was over there *(points stage left with the brandy bottle)* and the noise seemed to come 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.

(Doris adds some brandy to her mug and takes another drink from the bottle. She picks up one of the cookies, examines it, smells it, and then she tries to bite off a piece. She can't bite it, so she throws it into the garbage can. Helen enters downstage left as Rory comes in from upstage right.)

HELEN

What was that noise?

RORY

Some of your theatre set stuff fell over.

HAP

(Rushing in from up left.) Where's my Flora?! Is she's safe?!

(Doris moves down right to escape Hap, but he catches her and puts his arm around her shoulder.)

DORIS

Can't you arrest him?

(Rory ignores Doris and moves to the table, eyeing the cookies. As the scene continues, he sits at the long table and puts a whole cookie into his mouth. When he bites down on it he reacts to how tough it is, and he starts to chew. He chews carefully, and for a very long time.)

HAP

Where ya' been hidin'? I been worried sick. I'm not lettin' ya' go ag'in!

DORIS

(To Helen.) Do something!

(Helen takes Hap in hand and sits him down, downstage right. Hap starts to get up as soon as Helen turns away. Helen turns back, gestures with her finger, and shakes her head “no” at him. Hap sits down looking impish. Helen gestures for him to stay, and turns back to Doris.)

HELEN

Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into him the last year. Susan was at her wits end. She was going to have him committed.

(That gets a major reaction out of Hap—he obviously heard exactly what was said—but nobody on stage notices it.)

DORIS

He lived with Susan?

HELEN

In the old house.

(Grace comes in through the audience and comes up on the stage left side of the stage, moving to the stage left side of the long table. She is wearing her coat and has her bag. She puts the bag down on the table.)

DORIS

What happens to him now?

HELEN

That's up to Rhonda. He's not living with me, and I know Jeff agreed with Susan.

(Rhonda enters from downstage left.)

RHONDA

Anyone seen Jeff? 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 here?

(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

Oh, I think we can do better than that.

(From her bag Grace begins to pull out supplies for a modest picnic to include two bottles of red wine with screw tops—two of the same variety. When the wine is placed on the table, Rory immediately begins to open one bottle. As the scene continues, Grace pulls several Tupperware of various foodstuffs from her bag and places them on the table.)

DORIS

(Opening the second bottle of wine.) Screw tops?

GRACE

It's quite drinkable, and more convenient for travelling.

RORY

(Finally swallowing the cookie.) That's all I ever drink.

DORIS

Why am I not surprised?

GRACE

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

HELEN

Including death?

GRACE

Death isn't a possibility—it's an eventuality. It happens to everyone. It's just another event.

HELEN

You make my sister's death sound like a change in the weather.

DORIS

Or a flat tire.

GRACE

Life is full of unexpected events, large and small. You either struggle against them, or deal with them and move on. I prefer the latter.

DORIS

Grace could be a Zen master—if she didn't talk so much.

GRACE

Only because I have to explain everything to Doris—in words of one syllable.

RORY

(With is mouth full.) This spread sure beats Susan's cookies.

DORIS

Grace, what were you doing outside for so long?

GRACE

I took a little walk. One forgets how magnificent the night sky can be. So therapeutic for shrinking our oversized egos.

DORIS

Then you should do it more often.

(Offstage right Margo screams. Everyone freezes. Margo enters from upstage right at a run, carrying a blue dress.)

MARGO

It's Uncle Jeff! He's—there's—blood all over his—his head's all—I mean it's—
(Margo breaks down, gasping, in tears.)

RHONDA

Margo!

(Rhonda holds her arms out and Margo rushes to her. Grace heads off up right to investigate, calling to Doris as she goes.)

GRACE

Doris?

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

DORIS

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

RORY

(Through a mouthful of food.) What?

(Doris pulls Rory as they move off followed by Hap. Peter runs in from upstage left.)

PETER

Margo? Where's Margo?

(Margo rushes to Peter.)

MARGO

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

(Margo bursts into tears and buries her face into Peter's chest. Rhonda and Helen, on opposite sides of the stage, turn slowly to look intently at each other.)

(Suddenly Rory races across the stage, gagging and holding his hand over his mouth, jumps off the stage and exits at a gallop through the house.)

Blackout.

End of ACT I