

Sy's Bargain House

Synopsis

Sy's Bargain House deals with the life of the Finbergs, a Jewish family comprised of Sy the father and husband; his wife Rita; and their two sons; Michael, a public school teacher, and Ben, a successful podiatrist. Sy's younger sister, Goldie; a neighborhood friend, Bernie; and Sy's friend, Norm Singer also appear prominently. Minor characters include Jenny, Michael's Vietnamese girlfriend; Mr. Benson, a school principal; and Selina Welsh, a teacher with whom Michael becomes romantically involved.

Act I opens with Sy and Rita returning home from their last day at *Sy's Bargain House*, a small mom and pop clothing store they operated for forty-three years in a working class section of Philadelphia. They sit in the living room and reminisce. Sy feels he met his goal "to be the most successful mom and pop shop" in Philadelphia. Rita, however, finds this a hollow victory countering that selling cheap dry goods is not what she ever imagined doing. Through dialogue and vignette we learn that Sy worked at an accounting firm when they were first married but decided to take over the store from his mother when she became ill. Rita is annoyed that Sy never considered her feelings with regard to taking the store. In addition, she is critical of the store's rundown location and feels he should have at least moved into more middle-class surroundings as the neighborhood gradually declined.

A knock on the door introduces Bernie, a family friend who congratulates them upon their retirement and also bring a box of pastries. After he leaves, Rita's criticisms continue. She laments becoming so emotionally attached to the store and how disorganized it was. A heated exchange follows which is only interrupted by another knock on the door. It is Goldie, Sy's younger sister. Goldie enters and asks Sy, "Was it worth it?" Rita does not understand what Goldie is referring to. Goldie tells Rita how Sy manipulated their mother into passing on the store onto him even though she had worked there since childhood. Goldie asks Sy again if taking over the store was worth losing her affection. Sy answers that it was and orders her to leave. Goldie exits and Sy walks toward the kitchen. Rita stops him mid-way. She has more to say but Sy refuses to listen. Instead, he tells of his own regrets. Hearing this Rita simply asks Sy to acknowledge how

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much she has done for him. Sy refuses and enters the kitchen while Rita returns to the sofa looking at the still unwrapped box of pastries as Act I comes to an end.

Act II opens with Rita, sons Ben and Michael, and Michael's girlfriend Jenny returning to Rita's home after visiting Sy's grave on the second anniversary of his death. Rita goes upstairs to change while Ben, Michael, and Jenny sit in the living room. Ben and Michael talk about their father. Ben speaks bitterly while Michael is willing to move on and let things pass. As they talk there is a phone call from Bernie. Rita informs everyone that Bernie has asked her out on a date. She remains noncommittal.

Later Ben enters Rita's bedroom to say goodnight. He mentions the issue of money and explains that she can protect her assets if she transfers her money to Michael and him whereupon she would receive an allowance. Rita is adamantly opposed as she relates that she received an allowance from Sy during their entire forty-six years of marriage. This is also an opportunity for Rita to tell of other more damning things about her marriage.

Bernie sits in a restaurant waiting for Rita. Rita enters, sits across from Bernie and they talk about living alone, their children, and reminisce about Sy. They order dinner and enjoy each other's company.

Ben calls Michael from his office in Los Angeles and asks him to come visit as he has a serious issue to discuss. Michael agrees and flies to see him. Michael enters Ben's office where he is shown a letter indicating Ben's date for arraignment. The alleged crime is Medicare fraud. Ben relates how one of their father's best friends, Norm Singer, was instrumental in introducing him to many important people and helping set up his practice. However, Norm is constantly short of money due to juggling numerous girlfriends. He thus asks Ben to falsify medical reports so that Norm can pocket the Medicare reimbursement as a means to maintain his lifestyle.

Though Ben resists at first, he relents since he feels some obligation for all that Norm has done for him. The FBI comes to investigate Ben's records. Ben calls Norm into his office and tells him about the FBI's investigation. Norm plays ignorant about the entire affair leading Ben to speculate that Norm set him up.

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After some deliberation, Michael suggests that there might have been a conspiracy between Norm and their father to “do you in”, a theory Ben thoroughly rejects.

Michael returns to Philadelphia. He enters Rita’s home, tells her about his trip to Los Angeles, but does not reveal anything about Ben’s legal difficulty. Bernie enters, greets Michael, then leaves with Rita to have dinner. Michael, alone in the living room, is consumed with anguish. He imagines Sy entering the house and sitting in the armchair. Michael speaks to him about Ben and Rita. Unable to control his emotions, he falls to his knees and cries uncontrollably on Sy’s lap. Sy looks down derisively upon his son.

Rita and Bernie sit in the same restaurant where they had their first date exactly one year ago. Bernie has decided to use the occasion to propose marriage and is just about to do so when Goldie’s daughter, Hedy, passes their table. They talk about the breach between Goldie and Sy. Though Rita says there are two sides to every story, Hedy states that a great injustice was done to her mother and thus Sy should have apologized. The exchange leaves Rita thoroughly agitated. Though now reluctant, Bernie nevertheless proposes marriage. Rita not only rejects his proposal but decides not to see him again.

Michael and Rita meet the following day. Rita is certain there is something wrong with Ben. Michael agrees to tell her but first asks to hear what happened at the restaurant. Rita recaps her encounter with Hedy and Bernie’s marriage proposal. When finished, Michael begins talking (inaudibly) as lights fade thus ending Act II.

Act III opens on the first day of school for teachers. The principal, Mr. Benson, introduces Ms. Catherine Evans from the Office of Curriculum and Development. She introduces a new program called *Achieve* which requires teachers to follow scripted lessons. Michael questions her on the efficacy of such a program. Later the same day Michael becomes acquainted with a new teacher, Selina Welsh. They eventually become romantically involved resulting in Michael ending his relationship with Jenny, his longtime Vietnamese girlfriend.

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Act IV begins with Michael visiting his brother in prison. With only three months before release, Ben is nevertheless worried that he may not survive given the high degree of anti-Semitism among the inmates. The next day Michael visits Norm Singer at his synagogue office. Norm admits that he set Ben up and explains his motivation for doing so. Though angry, Michael is nevertheless relieved to learn that Sy had nothing to do with Ben's difficulties.

Upon returning to Philadelphia, he meets with Mr. Benson. They agree on a day for Benson to conduct a formal teacher observation. During the observation Michael deviates from the proscribed script. Benson is furious and storms out of Michael's classroom. Jerry Feldman, the school's union representative, meets briefly with Michael to learn how the observation went. Michael tells him about it, packs his school bag, and enters Selina's classroom. There he discovers Selina and Chris Simmons, the school's gym teacher, in romantic embrace.

That evening Michael, Rita, and Ben have coffee in Rita's kitchen. They reminisce about when the entire family would meet for dinner every Sunday at the neighborhood diner. Sy appears. Ben, Michael, and Rita join him as they enter a restaurant. There they recreate the "shrimp scampi" scene Ben described in Act II, scene 1.

In the final scene Michael stands outside the nail salon where Jenny works and tries to speak to her as she leaves. She ignores him at first but is taken when Michael speaks to her in Vietnamese expressing how sorry he is and how much he misses her. After some thought, she smiles, points, and calls him "putz" as the play ends.

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Character Breakdown

Seymour (Sy) Finberg: Main protagonist of the play. Cold and uncaring, he connives to take the store from his sister Goldie and remains both critical and unappreciative towards his wife, Rita.

Rita Finberg: Sy's wife of 46 years. Together they operated *Sy's Bargain House*, a small mom and pop clothing store in a working class section of Philadelphia. Rita's dream of being married to a white collar professional is dashed when Sy comes home to announce that he's taking over the store from his mother. Nevertheless, she does everything to support her husband in spite of his unappreciative nature.

Michael Finberg: Sy's older son. Though he admits that his relationship with his father "was never good", he nevertheless defends him against his younger brother Ben's unsparing attacks. He flies to California to console him after Ben receives a notice to appear in court for an arraignment hearing. Later he becomes romantically involved with a fellow teacher and is defiant towards the school principal with regard to scripted lessons

Ben Finberg: Sy's younger son. A highly successful podiatrist living in the Los Angeles area, he expresses contempt for his father at the 2nd anniversary of Sy's death. He later falls victim to a plot hatched by a supposed benefactor.

Goldie: Sy's younger sister. Goldie expected to take over the store from their mother. However, Sy manipulated their mother to hand the store to him even though he had never showed much interest in it. The play reveals that Goldie spent most of her adult life in low wage retail jobs and died essentially penniless.

Norm Singer: Sy's friend of many years. Ben's supposed benefactor, he lures Ben into criminal activity resulting in Ben's imprisonment.

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- Bernie:** Sy and Rita's mutual friend. Upon the death of both Sy and Bernie's wife, Bernie and Rita begin a relationship. Later he proposes marriage only to be rebuffed.
- Hedy:** Goldie's daughter. Hedy meets Rita in a restaurant where they discuss the breach between Sy and Goldie.
- Jenny:** Michael's Vietnamese girlfriend. The relationship ends when Michael becomes romantically involved with a fellow teacher. In the last scene they reconcile.
- Mr. Benson:** The principal at Michael's school. He insists Michael follow scripted lessons. He becomes furious when Michael deviates from the proscribed script during a formal teacher observation.
- Katherine Evans:** A representative from the Office of Curriculum and Development. She visit's Michael's school to explain the *Achieve* program, essentially scripted lessons, to the staff.
- Selina Welsh:** A first year teacher at Michael's school. She seduces Michael but later becomes romantically involved with another teacher in the same building.
- Chris Simmons:** The physical education teacher at Michael's school. He becomes romantically involved with Selina Welsh.
- Jerry Feldman:** Union representative at Michael's school. He meets with Michael to find out the result of the formal observation.

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Suggested Roles

The play can be performed with a cast of 11. Below are the suggested doubling and tripling of parts:

1. Sy Finberg
2. Rita Finberg
3. Michael Finberg
4. Ben Finberg
5. Goldie, Katherine Evans, Norm Singer's secretary
6. Bernie, Mr. Benson, prison guard
7. Jenny
8. Norm Singer
9. Chris Simmons, waiter
10. Jerry Feldman, young Sy Finberg, Mark
11. Selina Welsh, young Rita Finberg, Hedy

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By Daniel A. Wolf

Cast of Characters:

Seymour (Sy) Finberg: Mid to late 60's. Short, heavy set.

Rita Finberg: Early to mid- 60's. Short, thin to average weight.

Young Sy Finberg: 25-30 years old. Thin build with thick, black hair.

Young Rita Finberg: 22-28 years old. Thin build with long, black hair.

Bernie: Sy and Rita's neighbor. Mid to late 60's. Tall and thin.

Goldie: Sy's younger sister. Early to mid-50's. Average height and weight.

Michael Finberg: Sy and Rita's oldest son. 35-40 years old. Average height and weight.

Ben Finberg: Sy and Rita's youngest son. 30-35 years old. Average height and weight.

Norm Singer: Sy's life-long friend and Ben's benefactor. 70-75 years old. Average height and weight.

Jenny: Michael's Vietnamese girlfriend. 30-35 years old. Slim, average height.

Selina Welsh: Teacher at Michael's school. 21-25 years old. Strikingly attractive.

Chris Simmons: Teacher at Michael's school. 25-30 years old. Athletic build.

Katherine Evans: School district official. Early to mid-50's. Average height and weight.

Jerry Feldman: School union representative. 30-35 years old. Average height and weight.

Hedy: Goldie's daughter. 30-35 years old. Average height and weight.

Mark: Hedy's boyfriend. 30-35 years old. Average height and weight.

Waiter

Prison guard

Television announcer (Voiceover)

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Act I

There is a living room, circa early 1990's. There is a rather large armchair and foot stool ottoman in one corner of the room, a long sofa, and an end table and lamp between the armchair and sofa. There is a coffee table alongside the sofa. Above the sofa are some wall paintings. There is a hallway leading to the kitchen area. Just before the hallway is the front door with a peephole. The kitchen is generic. It contains a kitchen table and four chairs, a refrigerator, sink, stove, and cupboards. There is a countertop near the sink. A telephone sits on the countertop. There are stairs leading up to a second floor.

It is a summer evening, 1993. Sy Finberg and his wife, Rita are now in the living room having just come home from their last day running a small clothing store called Sy's Bargain House. Rita sits on the sofa while Sy is just about to fall into the armchair. Both are casually dressed. Sy wears dark pants and a short sleeve shirt while Rita has on slacks and a simple blouse.

Sy: *(arms outstretched)* One, two, three *(falls into the armchair)*. That's it. No need to get up anymore. Now I can sleep as long as I like. No traffic, no fiddling with the keys, pulling up the gate...And tomorrow's a Wednesday yet. When's the last time I could sleep late on a weekday?

Rita: On any day. You used to work Sundays too, remember? Ten to one.

Sy: Sure. Took in almost 200 dollars some Sundays. Used to take Michael down with me though he wasn't much help. Kept complaining he needed a day off too. From high school. Who needs a day off from high school? Every day's a day off in high school. Girls and sports. How hard could that be?

Rita: It wasn't just girls and sports. You know that. He worked very hard in school. You should be proud of him.

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- Sy: I am... if I ever get to see him. Now all I get is a million excuses why he's too busy to visit.
- Rita: He is busy. He's a public school teacher.
- Sy: *(pause)* I rest my case. And our other son, not much better.
- Rita: Ben's in Hollywood. Can't expect him to suddenly stop by for lunch.
- Sy: But when's the last time he was here? Two years ago, wasn't it? He's so busy being *(mockingly)* *Foot Doctor to the Stars* (!) I think he forgot about us altogether. You know, he needs to get knocked down a peg or two. That'll wake him up.
- Rita: Now stop it. He's very busy out there.
- Sy: Too busy to call? Y' know, it's a funny thing about Ben. To this day he thinks I don't know how he suckered up to me all the time he was growing up. The problem is I never called him on it, so now he acts like he's so clever. But let me tell you something. As easy as it is to make money, it's just as easy to lose it... and more.
- Rita: Will you stop it? I'm sure he'll call. Both of 'em.
- Sy: Maybe, but let's face it. No one thinks of old people these days. Not even their own children. Look at Morris. Hasn't heard from his son in years. You should see him. Jumps like a rabbit every time the phone rings.
- Rita: See? Our boys are not like that. And be grateful they're not a burden. Money's not a problem with either of 'em.
- Sy: Why should it be? I got both through college debt free. How many kids can say that today? But, it was a good ride. Forty-three years at the same location and only two break-ins. Not bad considering what's happened to the neighborhood. And we sure had some laughs, didn't we? Such characters. I'll tell ya, between Mary Kennedy, Florence Doople, and Tom Walters there was never a dull moment at *Sy's Bargain House*.

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Rita: That's for sure.

Sy: And how 'bout the help we had the years? First Billy, then Eleanor, then Betty. And all from the neighborhood. Gave the store a real family atmosphere.

Rita: I'd agree with that.

Sy: And all the jobbers on Third Street: Bell, Sussman, Fickler. All gone now. There were no computers then. Business was conducted with a handshake. (*pointing*) That's why I always told the boys: "Your word is your bond." You can't stay in business long with a sullied reputation. Now you walk into some of those big box stores and they check ya when you enter and check ya when you leave. Anyway, no need to worry. The store provided a nice little nest egg and with social security and some other monies (*lower voice*) I never told you about (*normal voice*) we'll be fine.

Sy looks wistfully.

Rita: What's the matter?

Sy: Oh, I don't know. I just wish we could've pass it on to one of our sons. That would have made three generations of mom and pop shops in the Finberg family. Mom had it for thirty-one years, we had it for forty-three and who knows how long Michael or Ben could have kept it going.

Rita: They never did take to business, did they?

Sy: No, isn't that funny? They grew up with the store but neither showed any interest in it.

Rita: That is something.

Sy: Well, it might have been my fault. Maybe I was too overbearing. But I couldn't help it. There's a right way to sell and a wrong way and, given the choice, they always picked the wrong way. You need personality to run a store. That's how you sell, but the boys never showed any enthusiasm. Just moping around, looking at their watch, waiting to go home.

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I thought at least one of them would show *some* interest, but all they ever cared about was the Beatles. Still, at least we made our goal: to be the number one mom and pop shop in the city of Philadelphia! Now that's saying something especially considering how many mom and pops there were at the time and some in much better locations. And can't say we lived too shabbily either. Trips to London, Paris, getting a new car every few years... And how 'bout those times in the mountains, huh? Such entertainment-Totie Fields, Buddy Hackett, Eddie Fisher. Not like you have today. I was just reading about some singer called Eminem. Imagine naming yourself after a candy bar. And how we ate! Remember? A full course dinner at 3 AM. Unbelievable!

Rita: *(with a hint of sarcasm)* Unbelievable.

Sy: And all those Christmas Eves. Could you ever imagine a mom and pop taking in over five thousand dollars in one day? So many customers, I thought the floor would collapse. And all from the same location. I think that's what I'm most proud of.

Rita: *(more sarcastic)* Yep, that was some accomplishment.

Sy: What? What are you saying?

Rita: *(resignedly)* Nothing.

Sy: No, come on. I think I heard a little sarcasm in your voice. What are you trying to say?

Rita: Never mind. Forget it.

Sy: 'cause don't start telling me you weren't happy. We did the best we could and came out smelling like roses.

Rita: Staying at the same location for forty-three years to be the most successful mom and pop shop in Philadelphia?

Sy: That's right.

Rita: And that's smelling like a rose?

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Sy: You're damn right it is.

Rita: Well, excuse me, but I think I can come up with some other smells to better describe that.

Sy: *(pause)* Oh, I get it. That again. You still wish I had stayed with the accounting firm instead of taking over the store.

Rita: I think that sometimes. I'm allowed my dreams too, aren't I? Didn't I just finish 43 years making your dream come true?

Sy: It was your dream too.

Rita: No, it wasn't. It never was. Never did I ever think I'd wind up selling shmatas in Kensington and at the same location yet. If I wanted to sell I could have gotten a job at Gimbels or Wanamakers and not get yelled at. I was sure when I married you I was marrying a professional. The first person in your family to graduate college.

As Rita speaks young Rita is in the kitchen. She is at the stove preparing breakfast. Young Sy enters. He is wearing a well-pressed dark suit and tie. Rita turns, they kiss, and she straightens his tie. They smile, hold hands, and look at each other lovingly.

Rita: You had everything. You were working for a good firm with a chance for advancement. I remember how handsome you were in your suit and tie every morning-a true professional. You were thin then with such beautiful thick, black hair. Then you throw it all away to sell shmatas.

Sy: That's right. And why did I throw it away? Because I wanted to be my own boss. I never liked working for that firm, taking orders from old man Chapman every day, so upset every time I came home. So when mom wanted to give up the store I pounced on it and from that day on, in spite of the break-ins, the returns, the time the basement got flooded, and all the petty thievery did I ever once have an ounce of regret. That store was my stage and I relished every minute of it. And you know that.

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Rita: But at the same location? Sure, at one time it was a great street. There was Ohlbaums, Rosens, the laundromat, Hymie's deli but they all left. Why did you have to be the last Jew in Kensington? But I'll say this. At least you got your wish- a corner store. Sure, because the city knocked down every building on the right.

Sy: *(points at Rita, almost threatening)* Now stop it. Just stop it.

Rita: And such clientele. You should have sprayed them with cologne the minute they entered. I only prayed they didn't come in for shoes. The smell from those feet could have defeated Hitler without an invasion.

Sy: I said stop it! *(stands, moves to center of room)* That's where I stayed. So what? Where should I have gone? The suburbs? Imagine me there. They'd look at me like some kind of freak. "Come see the short, fat Jew!" Sorry the people were not up to your standards. Sorry they offended your pristine sensibilities. But they were good people, every one of them. I knew them as kids and later as they got married. I was a fixture in the community and I was proud of that. On Christmas Eve at 11:30 you could still run to Sy's and pick something up. And how many times I'm already in the car to go home and it's snowing did I get out, open the locks, pull up the gate, just to sell a single pair of seventy-nine cent Buster Brown socks? And why did I do that?

Rita: Yes, why did you do that?

Sy: Because I had a reputation to uphold. I was reliable. That was important to me. And that you can't find anywhere. Just try walking into Macy's a minute after closing. *(sits back in armchair)* Look what I'm dealing with on the day I retire yet.

There is a long pause as Sy sits looking disgusted while Rita sits patiently waiting for the right time to bring up the next topic for discussion. There is a knock on the front door. Sy motions for Rita to get the door. Rita stands up from the sofa and walks to the door. She looks through the peephole.

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Author's note: The pause between Sy and Rita could go on for quite some time as older married couples are wont to stop speaking to each other if one or both are angry. It could potentially be quite humorous.

This can occur again after Bernie leaves.

Rita: *(to Sy)* It's Bernie.

Rita opens door.

Bernie: Can I come in?

Bernie enters. He is mid to late 60's, tall and thin. He radiates good health as if he is thoroughly enjoying his retirement. He wears casual slacks and a short sleeve button down shirt.

Bernie: I didn't hear anything so I wasn't sure you were in. Then I saw your car outside so I figured you must be home.

Sy gets up from the man's chair.

Sy: We're here. Just reminiscing about the old days, that's all.

Bernie: Sure, I can understand that. How many years was it?

Rita: Forty-three.

Bernie: Forty-three and at the same place. How the two of you managed all those years in that neighborhood I'll never know. They should give you the Key to the City for God's sakes. Anyway, Gloria and I brought you a little something to celebrate.

Bernie hands Rita a small box. Rita takes the box but drops it.

Bernie: I got it.

He bends down, gets the box and hands it again to Rita.

Gloria would have come, but she's a little under the weather.

Rita: Thank you. Tell her I'll call her tomorrow.

Bernie: *(to Sy)* And you partner-don't look so glum. You have a brand new life ahead of you.

Sy: I know. It's an adjustment but we'll get through it. We always do.

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Bernie: Sure you will. Look, I've been retired for years. Believe me, you'll love it. Like I said, it's like starting a new life. You know, sometimes I can't even remember what job I did *(tongue in cheek)*. Something to do with cars, wasn't it?

Sy: You owned a car dealership, putz. No wonder the American car industry is falling apart.

Bernie: *(to Rita)* Glad to see retirement hasn't changed him a bit.

Rita: You can be sure of that.

Bernie: Saturday night, the diner? Say around seven?

Rita: *(to Sy)* We have no plans Saturday, do we?

Sy: We have no plans any day.

Bernie: Want us to pick you up?

Sy: No, we'll meet you there.

Bernie: Well, let me get going and once again, congratulations.

Sy: Thanks for stopping by.

Rita: And thanks for the gift.

Bernie: Just a little something from *Irene's*.

Rita: Apple danish I hope.

Bernie smiles and looks affectionately at Rita.

Bernie: Maybe. Oh, hear from the boys?

Sy: No, but I'm sure they'll call.

Bernie: Sure they will. See you Saturday.

Rita: Bye.

Bernie leaves. Sy returns to the armchair while Rita places the box on the coffee table then sits back down on the sofa. Like before, they remain silent for some time.

Rita: I want to ask you something.

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Sy: What?

Rita: Why didn't you ask me if we should take over the store?

Sy: What are you talking?

Rita: That's right. I'll never forget. I was in the kitchen cooking dinner

As Rita speaks young Rita is at the stove preparing dinner. Young Sy enters wearing a suit and tie.

Through mime he tells Rita to sit down because he has something important to tell her. Rita sits down and looks excited expecting to hear that he has received a promotion. He tells her that he's decided to take over the store. Rita looks shocked and profoundly disappointed.

and you come home telling me you have an important announcement. And I'm thinking you got a promotion at work. So you tell me to sit down, I'm all excited, and then you say we're taking over the store. Just like that. No discussion. No consideration how I felt. Just we're taking over the store. Didn't my opinion count for anything?

Sy: Frankly speaking, no. I wanted the store and that was that.

Rita: But it was my life too. You could have at least asked. I think I deserved that.

Sy: I can't believe we're discussing this forty-three years later. What did you want me to do, get a ballot box? *(displays an imaginary piece of paper in his left hand and points to it with his right)* "Here, check A or B. A, we're taking over the store. B, we're not taking over the store. Mark your ballot." Well, life doesn't work that way. It's not always so democratic. I wanted the store and that was that.

Rita: But you could have at least asked.

Sy: Okay, Rita, do you think we should take over the store? Oh, wait. We can't. I just sold the building to the Hispanics and they're turning it into a grocery or a bodega I think they call it.

Rita: Well, I'm sure he asked *his* wife.

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Sy: Maybe he did or maybe he didn't. But I know one thing. He did what he felt was best, the same way I felt was best. But don't start putting all this on me. Why didn't you say something at the time?

Rita: What could I say? I was already pregnant with Michael and the 1950's was not exactly the heyday of the Women's Liberation Movement. I was trapped and you knew it.
(stands) That's why you didn't ask. You didn't need to. And how I became your slave I'll never know. Finally, after five years living on top of the store, another one of my dreams, we move to the northeast

As Rita speaks young Rita is in the kitchen. She dials a telephone and mimes speaking to Sy. She smiles, hangs up, and then proceeds to set the table for dinner. Sy enters. He has just returned from the store. He is heavier now and more grey. He wears loose fitting pants and a plain button down short sleeve shirt with pens and pencils in the shirt pocket. Some papers protrude from the pants pockets. Through exaggerated arm movements and facial expression, he berates Rita for not coming to the store to help him. Rita stands motionless, afraid to speak.

and here I am every 10 minutes calling to see if you're busy. You'd say, "No, everything's fine" then you'd come home and get angry at me for not coming down. That somehow I should have detected in your voice that you needed me down there, making me feel guilty all night. Such a life. Then all the times I did come down you'd get mad if I couldn't find something. Can you believe? I drop everything, drive down, and you still get mad.

Sy: *(angry, annoyed)* So better you stayed home. You could never sell anyway.

Rita: How could I sell? How could anyone sell in that building? The place was such a mishmash. You had men's dungarees in the basement but men's khakis on the landing. Women's blouses near the register but women's sweaters on the second floor. Trying to find anything was like playing Treasure Hunt. *(holds up an imaginary piece of paper, acts*

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out the directions) “Oh, here’s a clue. Walk to the front door, turn left, middle row, third box from the top.” You had forty-three years. In all that time you couldn’t make a men’s section, a ladies section? You had no system.

Sy: I had a system. You just didn’t understand it. But the bottom line is you couldn’t sell.

Rita: Is that what you think?

Sy: That’s right. You never got it. (*stands, confronts Rita*) How many times did I have to remind you the minute they walk into the store they are holding our money? They were keeping it warm, but it was still our money. That’s how you have to think when you’re in business-the customer is the custodian of our money. And it is our job to extract it from him no less than a dentist extracting a bad tooth. But time after time you let them leave with our money. If we don’t have what they want then you offer them something else-a belt, a tie, shoelaces even- but you never let them leave with our money. That’s why they wanted me to wait on them. They wanted to part with money and you wouldn’t let them.

Rita: But if we don't have it, we don't have it.

Sy: (*screams, near primal*) We have it! We always have it! (*normal tone*) If a man measures an 11 shoe and we only have a 10 ½, you take the shoe in the back, you get the stretcher and you (*makes a twisting motion with his hand*) twist, and twist, and you twist until he has an 11. Or maybe he wants a long sleeve shirt of a certain design and we only have it in short sleeve, then you tell him (*sings and dances to the tune of “June is Busting Out All Over”*) “Spring is just around the corner.” I don't care if it's the first week of November. Spring is just around the corner. And if you say it nice enough, he'll believe it. Hell, I once sold a kid mittens in August because (*raises index finger as if giving helpful advice*) “You have to get ready before the weather changes.” And how many times did I cut the label off a boy's jean? He wants a 14, we don’t have it, so I cut (*makes cutting*

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motion) the label from a 16 and walla' (!) (*holds up an imaginary jean*) he has a 14 jean. Did they ever return it? No. Why? Because they figured he'll grow into it. That's how you do business. I sold crap for forty-three years because people actually enjoy parting with money. The only thing you need to do (*smiles mockingly*) is be pleasant. I mean really (*takes dollar bills out of his pocket and holds it out*) what good is this if you're not using it? Who else but your father takes money out of his pocket (*looks at money*) just to look at it?

There is a knock on the door.

Sy: Now who is it?

Rita looks through peephole of front door.

Rita: It's your sister.

Sy: What the hell does she want?

Rita: Probably what Bernie wanted, to say congratulations (*opens door*). Goldie!

Goldie enters. She is a plain looking middle age woman but with a strong moral compass. She gives the appearance of someone who has worked low wage retail most of her adult life. She wears a short sleeve blouse, loose-fitting pants, and a light-weight jacket.

Goldie: Hello, Rita.

Sy: What do you want this time of night? It couldn't wait till tomorrow?

Goldie takes off her jacket and places it on the sofa.

Goldie: Sit down. I want to ask you something.

Sy: Ask me what?

Goldie: Just sit down.

Sy: (*exasperatedly*) Oy, Goldie.

Sy returns to the armchair. Goldie sits on the ottoman directly opposite him. Rita remains standing.

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Goldie: Today you retired, right?

Sy: That's right.

Goldie: So now I want to ask you something. *(pause)* Was it worth it?

Sy: Was what worth it?

Goldie: You know exactly what I'm talking about. Was it worth it?

Rita: Goldie, what are you talking about?

Goldie: *(to Sy)* You never told your wife, did you? Well then, let me tell her. *(turns to Rita)* Rita, you remember when we first met I was working in the store with mom?

Rita: Sure, I remember.

Goldie: In fact, I had worked with mom for many years. I think I was about ten when I sold my first item there. You know I had such long, curly hair then. Everyone used to call me Goldilocks. I loved that place and especially loved working with my mother and I was sure one day she would hand the store over to me once it got too hard for her. I mean, who was I? I just barely graduated high school but at least I could sell. Everybody said so, even your husband. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think when we first met he said, "This is my sister, Goldie. She's a great saleswoman." Am I right?

Rita: I think you're right.

Goldie: And I was an honest saleswoman. I never cheated anyone. Of course, people came in to buy, but I really think a lot came in just to talk to me. Everyone loved Goldie. In fact, mom and I even discussed changing the name of the store to *Goldies* once she retired. Then in 1950 mom suddenly falls ill and her eyesight is starting to fail her. Well, you can't exactly have bad eyesight when you're selling merchandise. So now I figure it's only a matter of time before she hands the store over to me. But lo and behold your husband goes to our mother and says that *he* wants the store using all kinds of reasons twisting her

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mind. And here's my favorite. A man who barely steps foot in synagogue except on Yom Kippur is now this great Talmudic scholar and tells mom that as the oldest son of a Jewish family he's *entitled* to the store. I work there since I'm a child but he's entitled to it like he's from some great line of Hassidic rabbis. Moreover, he tells mom that if he doesn't get the store he may need to relocate to another part of the country. *(to Sy)* You bastard. Using that line when you knew damn well Chapman was based entirely in Philadelphia. Of course I tried to convince mom otherwise, but she was afraid to lose you. *(to Rita)* So mom calls me in the back room and tells me she's decided to give the store to your husband but that I could work for him if I wanted to. *(to Sy)* Hell, if I'd move one corpuscle making your life easier. But just explain one thing to me. You get out of the service, go to college, graduate with a degree in accounting. In all your life you never gave that store a second thought. Do you remember? The store would be crowded and I'd say, "We could really use your help right now." Then you'd give me some crazy look and run off to be with your friends. Meanwhile, mom and I are running up and down steps while you're outside having a good time as if giving us a half-hour was going to ruin your chance to play for the Yankees. So just tell me. What possessed you to suddenly want the store?

Sy: I had my reasons.

Goldie: I'm sure you did. Betrayal being one of 'em. So now I ask you again.

Goldie stands up from the foot stool approaches Sy and with both hands grabs his shirt collar.

Rita: Goldie!

Goldie: Was it worth it? *(on verge of tears)* Was it worth losing my affection all these years? Oh, Seymour.

Goldie breaks down and cries while bent over Sy. Sy wraps his arms around Goldie and also cries. Rita

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holds her mouth in stunned disbelief. Sy cannot long sustain such an outpouring of emotion and his hands gradually become fists. He moves his arms around to grab Goldie's hands. He rises and pulls Goldie's hands from his shirt on the third "yes".

Sy: Yes, yes, yes! It was worth it. Now get out of my house!

Goldie takes a tissue out of her pants pocket and wipes her eyes. She then moves to the sofa to retrieve her jacket and walks to the front door. She turns to face Sy.

Goldie: The bottom line is this. You took advantage of an ignorant old woman in failing health to take what was rightfully mine. Enjoy your retirement.

Goldie slams the door behind her.

Sy: Between Bernie and now my sister I can't get a moment's peace around here (*pauses, shakes his head as if trying to get the bad memories out of his mind*). The nerve of her coming in my house like that. She should be ashamed of herself. (*pauses, uncertain what to do next*) I'm going in the kitchen. The Phillies are on.

Sy begins to walk to the kitchen. Rita steps in front to block the path.

Rita: No, you're not! You're not going to bury things watching TV. That's always a convenient out for you. There's still things we need to talk about.

Sy: We talked enough! The past is past and you can tell Goldie that too. You took me for better or worse, remember? I'm sorry life didn't turn out the way you wanted, but I did the best I could. I didn't hear much complaining when the store was doing well, now did I? No, you were happy then. Trips to London, Paris, the mountains. You were in your glory. So don't start telling me about regret. You wanna hear regret? I have regret too. Think I enjoy being a short, fat man my whole life? Think I enjoy being out of breath every time I climb (*points to stairs leading to the second floor*) those steps? And how about this one? Think I enjoy seeing my old friends get sick and die? And here's a good

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one for ya. Think I enjoy having two sons who can't stand the sight of me? They only see me 'cause they want to see you. *(pounds the air with his fist)* And why can't they call? And here's a real doozie for ya. Think I'll enjoy getting up tomorrow morning with nothing to do all day? So don't start telling me about regret. You want to think your life was one giant mistake, go ahead, think that way. You want to wallow in misery, be my guest. But not me. I'm gonna try to enjoy whatever time I have left. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to watch the Phillies!

Rita: *(trying to break the tension)* Wait, you forgot one. The soup.

Sy: *(laughs)* That's right. I forgot. Think I enjoy going to a restaurant and the soup always coming out cold? How can French onion soup come out cold?

Both laugh.

Sy: Can I go now?

Rita: One more thing.

Sy: What?

Rita: Just tell me how much you appreciate all I've done for you.

Sy laughs then looks at Rita piercingly.

Sy: No.

Rita appears stunned as Sy passes her on the way to the kitchen. Sy enters the kitchen while Rita returns to sit on the sofa in the living room and stares at the still unopened box (from Bernie) on the coffee table. Sy turns on the television and a baseball game is heard.

TV announcer: Moradini's at the plate. He looks. Here's the pitch. Ball two, low and outside.

Moradini's batting .255 this year with two homeruns. He steps out. Hollins on deck.

Sy sits down at the kitchen table and watches the game.

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Now he's ready. Here's the pitch. Strike three called! And Moradini is not too happy. He has a few choice words with the ump but slowly makes his way back to the dugout.

Gradually both sound and lights fade.

Act II

Scene 1

Rita, Michael, Ben, and Jenny are outside the front door of Rita's home waiting to come in. They have just returned from the cemetery on the second anniversary of Sy's death.

Rita: Do you have it?

Michael: Wait, I got it.

Michael opens the front door and everyone enters. Michael and Ben are wearing suits and ties while Rita and Jenny are in well-tailored pants suits.

Ben: Ok, good. You don't mind if I take my jacket off, do you?

Rita: Go ahead, relax. It's been a long day. I know you kids are tired. Let me go up and change, rest a bit, then I'll put something together for lunch.

Ben: Sounds good to me.

Michael and Ben take their jackets off, loosen their ties and place the jackets on the far end of the sofa. Ben stretches.

Oh, that's better.

Michael: You sure you don't want to go out? We can go to the diner.

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- Rita: It's no problem believe me. You just sit down and relax. I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about. I'm just so happy we could all be together.
- Michael: That's right.
- Rita: Really, it was wonderful. We said the prayers, you boys talked to him...it was good.
- Ben: You still miss him?
- Rita: All the time. I know he wasn't easy to be with, but it's certainly better than being alone. I can tell you that. And I'm sure you boys miss him too.
- Ben: Absolutely. I'm just sorry Sherri and the kids couldn't make it, but you know with school and all it would have been hard.
- Rita: As long as you're here that's all that matters. Well, let me go up and change. I got some delicious cold cuts at Hymies. You remember Hymies, don't you? They had a place just down the street from the store.
- Michael: Now how can we forget Hymies? *(to Ben)* Hey, remember what we used to say when we went in there?
- Ben: No. What was that?
- Michael: You don't remember?
- Ben: No, what?
- Michael: We'd walk in and say, "Hey, Hoagie! Give me a Hymie."
- Ben: *(laughs)* Oh, yeah. You're right. I remember that.
- Rita: We sure had a lot of good times down there. Well, let me go up and change. I'll be down soon.
- Ben: Take your time.

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Rita goes up the stairs. Ben sits in the armchair while Michael and Jenny sit on the sofa with Michael between Ben and Jenny.

Michael: It's hard to believe. Two years already.

Ben: Tell me again. How'd you find out?

Michael: I was teaching and there was a call to come to the office. So I go down and the principal tells me to call home. I pretty much knew what to expect. Those last few days he could barely catch his breath. Anyway, I called home and mom tells me he died. I think the biggest surprise was seeing you at the funeral.

Ben: Right. As soon as mom told me I called the airline and caught a flight that night.

Michael: How 'bout that Shiva?

Ben: Yeah. I hadn't seen some of those people in years. Say, how's your friend, Eric, by the way? Did he ever find a job?

Michael: Nope. Still looking. *(pause)* Tell me the truth. Do you miss him?

Ben: Who? Eric?

Michael: No, moron! Pops!

Ben: *(laughs)* I know. Let me tell you, Mike, you wouldn't believe the kind of people I hobnob with. I mean some real Hollywood heavy hitters- movie stars, producers, directors. And you know what? These people are as dumb as rock salt. Then I think of Pops slaving away forty years in a rag shop and I think what a waste. With his intelligence and ability he could have really been something. A mogul even. I mean I know billionaires who can't complete, and I mean this, a simple grammatical sentence. But at least I learned one thing from Pops-how to hustle. Because if you're not willing to hustle out there you're dead. How 'bout you? Do you miss him?

Michael: To be honest, not really. It was never good. You know that. All we ever seemed to do was fight.

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Ben: That's because you didn't know how to play the game. See, I never challenged him. Of course I knew he was full of crap, but whatever he said I acted like he was a sage. But you with your high-minded ideals you made him feel inadequate. And no-one likes to feel inadequate. So I got treated like a prince, and you got treated like an orphan. So he not only paid my Bachelor's degree...

Michael: He paid mine too.

Ben: Yeah, but he threw in med school while you had to go nights to finally get your Masters. Say, did you ever tell Jenny about the time you were in the hospital? That story never escapes me.

Jenny: What happened? What hospital? *(to Michael, concerned)* You were in the hospital?

Ben: Do you want to tell her or should I?

Michael: I'll tell her. I think I was around 28 at the time. I developed some kind of infection on my hand so I went to Temple Hospital. The doctor looked at it and said I needed to stay a few nights. I called my parents and told them the story. That night they came to visit me and my father asked if I needed any money. I told him that they put my clothes in a locker so I could use a few dollars.

Ben: And what happened after that?

Michael: So Pops gives me a ten dollar bill. Two days later I get out and we meet for lunch.

Ben: Go on.

Michael: No, that's enough.

Ben: Tell her.

Michael: *(pause)* He asked for the ten dollars back.

Jenny: You're kidding.

Ben: No, he's not. Can you believe it? Asking for the ten dollars back. What father on this planet could do such a thing? And while we're at it, how did he get the store? Did you ever find out? From

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what I understand Aunt Goldie expected to take it over from grand mom. I mean she worked there since she was a kid. But then suddenly Pops has the store and Aunt Goldie's selling shoes at Sears. How did *that* happen?

Michael: I don't know. No-one ever talks about it.

Ben: Jenny, I don't know what the two of you are planning, but just remember one thing. This family has more skeletons than a science lab.

Jenny: What you mean?

Ben: Lab...lab'ratory.

Jenny: What's that?

Michael: *(to Jenny)* I'll tell you later.

Ben: *(to Michael)* Sorry.

Michael: It's alright.

Ben: Where was I? Oh, and how 'bout those times we all went out for dinner? *(to Jenny)* You gotta hear this. *(stands)* See, the four of us would go into a restaurant and the first thing he'd do is tell us where to sit. *(imitates Sy, points)* "Ben, you sit there. Mom will sit here. Michael, you sit there and I'll sit here." And this is not just with us. We'd be a party of ten and he'd do the same thing. He's telling people where to sit who don't even know him which caused all kinds of problems if you can imagine. Then the waitress would come and bring us the menus. Well, you could never order the right thing. No matter what you ordered he'd say, *(imitating Sy)* "When are you ever gonna learn how to order? Who orders that? You order something normal like veal cutlet or chopped sirloin. That's how you order." Well, one time I took a chance and ordered veal cutlet parmigiana to my everlasting regret. *(imitating Sy)* "Now what are you getting? Veal cutlet parmigiana? Veal cutlet's not good enough? You see the difference in price? It's two dollars

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more. You don't need the cheese. If you want something on top, you can get more tomato sauce. There's no charge for that." I think I was 20 years old when I finally experienced the taste of cheese which, by the way, was the same year I lost my virginity. And you know what? They taste about the same. *(laughs)* Sorry, Jenny.

Michael: You're disgusting.

Ben: You just found that out? Anyway, finally I decided to defy him altogether and ordered something, I can't exactly remember, like shrimp scampi or chicken marsala to which he said, *(imitating Sy)* "Fine, you want shrimp scampi then you better eat all of it. Don't leave anything on your plate. Shrimp scampi. Who orders shrimp scampi?" So now the meal arrives and usually the entre' is a bit hot so I like to order, say, something cold like pickled beets or cucumber salad which I can eat while waiting for the entre' to cool down. Well, you'd think I just gave the Germans the date for D-day. *(imitating Sy)* "Who starts a meal eating the vegetables? You start with your entre' first and then you eat your vegetables." So for the first 18 years of my life I'm going home with sores on my tongue from eating the entre' first. This is what we had to deal with growing up in this house.

Ben sits back in the armchair.

Michael: You're right. Anyway, it's over. Let it go already.

Ben: What are you so equanimitable about? *(aside)* Is that a word? You don't remember the last year of his life when he couldn't drive anymore and you had to take days off to schlep him all over the city for this and that? Then you stop for lunch and he'd never pick up the check. You used to complain about that all the time.

Michael: So what am I supposed to do? Carry that around the rest of my life? These are the cards we were dealt. Some have Einstein as a father and we had Sy Finberg. Meanwhile, we're not starving and to be honest, I think it's a sign of maturity to stop blaming others. Look, we went to his grave...

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Ben: Oh, that grave. *(laughs)* I love that stone: *(waves hand across)* Seymour *(Sy)* Finberg. *It was a great ride.* It should really read *It was a great ride... on us.* Honestly, Mike, do you think he ever saw you, me, and mom as anything more than a source of cheap labor? I don't. Oh, and you remember his goal? *(stands, imitating Sy)* "To be the number one mom and pop shop in the city of Philadelphia!" What an accomplishment! I mean why wait for the Phillies to win the World Series? Just have the mayor declare *Sy Finberg Day* and have a ticker tape parade down Broad Street. Then maybe you, me, and mom could wave *(waves)* from one of the cars in the back *(waves and smiles).*

Michael: *(stands, confronts Ben)* Now you're going too far. Just stop it. Let it go.

Ben: Yeah, you're right. *(sarcastically)* I mean why let an upbringing marked by constant abuse and browbeating ruin a perfectly lovely day?

Jenny: Come on, sit down.

Michael: *(smiles)* I should sock you one.

Ben: *(sticks out chin)* Go ahead. *(points to chin)* Right here.

Michael: Shmuck.

Ben: Putz.

Both sit. There's some pause.

Michael: So how's everything in la la land? Pretty good I guess.

Ben: You wouldn't believe. Like the goyim play bingo, Jews visit foot doctors. And let me tell you why. The kids are out of the house and too busy to visit, the grandchildren are so zoned out on the latest piece of technological crap they don't even know who their grandparents are or even what a grandparent is, and people live so far away from each other there is nothing you could call a community or a neighborhood. So the only opportunity for some type of normal conversation is

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with a doctor. They come in, I cut their nails, then listen to their bobbe-mysehes- their son this, their daughter that, then leave and come back two weeks later. I mean how much can a toenail grow in two weeks? This is what America has come down to. People are so lonely in this country their only chance for human contact is to visit a foot doctor.

Michael: That's sad.

Ben: It is. And how you doing? You're teaching first grade this year. Is that right?

Michael: That's right.

Ben: You like it?

Michael: I do. I get kids who can't read and by mid-year they're reading... Well, a little.

Ben: That's nice. Must give you a real sense of accomplishment.

Michael: Yeah, but I hear some big changes are coming.

Ben: You know what they are?

Michael: I have some idea.

Ben: Don't worry, you'll be fine.

Rita comes down the stairs wearing more casual clothes.

Rita: How you kids doing? Hungry yet?

Ben: We can eat.

Rita: Just a few minutes. Let me get things ready.

Jenny: Can I help?

Rita: *(to Michael)* What she say?

Michael: She asked if she could help.

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Rita: *(to Jenny)* That's ok, dear. You just relax. It's no trouble.

Rita goes into the kitchen to prepare lunch. She takes various items out of the refrigerator and places them on the counter near the sink then sets the table.

Michael: I'm just glad mom's had these few years without him. She'll never admit it, but these have probably been the happiest two years of her life.

Ben: You mean she's not running everywhere for mayonnaise? *(to Jenny)* Our father made her run everywhere looking for the cheapest jar of mayonnaise. What she used in gas cancelled any savings on the mayonnaise.

The phone rings.

Rita: *(shouts)* I'll get it.

Rita picks up the receiver and begins talking (silently).

Michael: *(to Rita)* Ok. *(to Ben)* Oy! Remember at the store when he'd tear the labels off the pants? How he could sell those pants with a straight face I still can't believe.

Ben: What are you talkin'? You remember my job? The shoe stretcher?

Jenny: What's that?

Michael: It's this kind of thing that stretches out shoes to make them bigger.

Ben: *(to Jenny)* That was my job. I'd be sitting in the back room and he'd bring me a pair of shoes. He'd say, "Here's an 8. Make them an 8 1/2." And there I am *(makes a motion twisting the shoe stretcher)* stretching shoes all day. I was just thinking about that, in fact. I wonder if that's why I became a podiatrist. I felt sorry for anyone who left the store wearing our shoes.

Rita leaves the kitchen and walks into the living room.

Rita: You'll never guess who just called?

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Michael: Who?

Rita: You remember Bernie? He was a good friend of daddy's. He owned a car dealership right here on Cottman Avenue.

Michael: Sure, we know Bernie. His wife died last year, didn't she?

Rita: That's right. Gloria-a lovely woman.

Ben: So what he want?

Rita: He asked me to go out to dinner with him.

Ben: Really? What did you say?

Rita: I said I'll think about it.

Ben: Why did you say that? Go out. Have a good time.

Rita: Have you lost your mind? This is the second yahrzeit. Maybe I'm not ready.

Ben: I'm sorry. I just want you to enjoy yourself, that's all.

Rita: I said I'll call him next week. I want to think about it first.

Ben: Ok.

Rita: Lunch is ready. Let's go.

Ben, Michael, and Jenny stand up. Jenny proceeds to the kitchen area while Michael and Ben stay behind.

Michael: *(to Ben, softly)* Did you talk to mom about the money?

Ben: I'll do it tonight.

Rita turns to see Michael and Ben.

Rita: Come on. You'll talk later. Let's go.

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Ben: We're coming.

Jenny: *(to Rita)* Is there anything I can do?

Rita: *(to Michael)* What she say?

Scene 2

It is night the same day. Michael and Jenny have left. Rita is in bed under the covers reading a book. There is a night table and lamp under which Rita is reading. There is a small armchair across from the bed. Ben knocks on Rita's bedroom door.

Ben: *(peeks in)* Can I come in?

Rita: Sure, come in.

Ben enters and stands by the bed.

Ben: Just coming to say goodnight.

Rita: Goodnight, dear. And thanks so much for coming. It meant so much to me. Of course

I wish you lived closer, but as long as you can come in from time to time I'm Ok.

Ben: Are you sure?

Rita: I'm sure. Don't you worry about me. I always have something to do.

I have my shopping, work at the synagogue, take my walks... I'm alright.

And if I need anything Michael's here. So you just enjoy your life out there. We're fine. Believe me.

Ben: I'm happy to hear that. Next time I'll try to bring everyone.

Rita: That would be wonderful. Kids growing up nice, aren't they?

Ben: Yes, a real blessing.

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Rita: So what time's your flight?

Ben: 1 pm.

Rita: Well, you better get to sleep. I'll have breakfast ready when you come down.

Ben: Look, mom, before I go there's something I'd like to discuss.

Rita: What's that?

Ben: Here let me sit down.

Ben grabs the armchair from the corner of the room, carries it to the side of the bed, and sits down.

Ben: It's about your finances. I know daddy left you off pretty well.

Rita: That he did. He didn't like to spend money when he was alive, but he left me pretty good.

Ben: Well, that's what concerns me. Do you ever think what might happen if you got sick and
Needed nursing care?

Rita: Now don't worry about that. I'm in excellent health for a woman my age.

Ben: I know you are. But just what if. Do you understand what happens to the money?

Rita: I use it to pay for nursing care which of course is never going to happen.

Ben: But let's just say hypothetically, you need to go into a home.

Rita: What are you saying?

Ben: I'm saying quality nursing care is very expensive in this country.

Rita: I know. So?

Ben: Well, what happens is that the state first exhausts all your assets and only then does it come in
to pay for your care.

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Rita: I know all that. That's what happened to your Aunt Goldie. So what are you saying?

Ben: What I'm saying is that there's a way around that.

Rita: How?

Ben: The way around it is for you to transfer all your assets to Michael and me.

Then if you need nursing care the state comes in immediately and pays your expenses. I believe there's a 4 or 5 year lag from the time you transfer your assets to the time you need nursing care, but at least your money is protected.

Rita: Then how am I supposed to live if I hand my money to you boys?

Ben: We pay you a kind of allowance or you just tell us how much you need and we transfer the money to your account.

Rita: Oh, I see. But what if you boys decide not to give me my allowance? How am I supposed to live?

Ben: What are you talking? You're our mother! We'd wouldn't do that. How could you even think such a thing?

Rita: I could. Believe me, I could.

Ben: Well, we'd never. *(laughs)* What you think? We'd throw you on the street?

Rita: It could happen. It's not likely but it could happen. Let me tell you something. Those days I work at the synagogue you can't believe the stories I hear. This brother's not talking to that brother.

This daughter's not talking to her mother. This son's not talking to either his parents. It's nearly impossible to find a Jewish family that's fully intact.

Ben: Well, it won't happen with us. I can assure you.

Rita: You know I'm glad you brought this up because there's something I'd like to say.

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No way am I living with an allowance. I never told you boys this, but I lived with an allowance for 46 years. That's right. Every Monday your father would give me my weekly allowance. I think by the time he died he was giving me a hundred and fifty dollars a week.

Ben: You're kidding.

Rita: No, I'm not. One hundred fifty dollars a week for food, gas, maybe picking something up at Macy's.... And that's not all. Say by Friday I'd be running a little short. So I'd ask him for an extra 20 or 30 dollars. Sure, he gave it to me but then, can you believe, he'd deduct it from the following week's allowance. So instead of getting one-fifty I'd get one-twenty or one-thirty.

Ben: Oh, my God. Are you serious?

Rita: That's right.

Ben: Then why didn't you say something?

Rita: You're right. Why didn't I say something? There I am 46 years standing at the kitchen table like some school girl while he sits there dolling out my allowance. That's the best thing about these past two years. I've had time to think about things. And some things are just not very pretty.

Ben: What else?

Rita: OK, how does a man not want to hold a woman's hand?

Ben: What?

Rita: Your father. He never held my hand. He said it looks silly for a short man to hold a woman's hand. Oh, wait. I forgot. A short, *Jewish* man. Did you ever hear such nonsense? What did being Jewish have to do with holding a woman's hand?

Ben: (*laughs*) It's a good thing you weren't on the Titanic. You'd be saying (*extends arm*) "Quick, take my hand!" and he'd say, "Sorry, it doesn't look right for a short, Jewish man to hold a woman's hand." (*continues to laugh*).

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Rita: And when we first took over the store how I cried almost every night. I didn't want that life. You think maybe once he'd put his arm around me, say something like "I know you're not happy, but this will all work out in the end." Not a word. But what really gets me sometimes is that in 46 years of marriage not once did you father ever apologize. Not once did he ever say "I'm sorry." I mean a man can't be right all the time, right? We'd have the most vicious fights and after it's over either I have to say something or we just go on like nothing happened.

Ben: So what's your point?

Rita: I'm just trying to tell you my quiet days are over. Not you nor your brother or anyone is ever going to tell me what to do again. If the state puts me in the poorhouse so be it. I'm sure both you boys can survive without my fortune. Anyway, it's getting late. You have to get up in a few hours.

Ben stands up, pauses, thinks about saying more on the matter but decides not to.

Ben: Goodnight, mom.

He bends down and kisses her cheek.

Rita: Goodnight, Ben.

Ben: Let me put the chair back.

Ben returns chair to its original position.

You should think about Bernie. He's a nice man.

Rita: I will. Goodnight.

Ben exits the bedroom, closes the door, pauses, then exits stage right.

Scene 3

Sy's Bargain House

Bernie sits at a restaurant table. He is wearing a sport jacket and tie. He is drinking a glass of wine. Rita enters stage right. She is wearing clothes appropriate for a dinner date. She carries a pocketbook.

Rita: Bernie?

Bernie: Rita! (*stands up*) How are you? Please sit down. Would you like something to drink?

Rita sits across from Bernie.

Rita: No, that's Ok. Water's fine.

Bernie: Are you sure?

Rita: Alright, a coke.

Bernie signals to a waiter.

Bernie: Waiter!

Waiter comes to the table.

Bernie: She'll have a coke. And can we see the menu please?

Waiter: Certainly.

Waiter leaves.

Bernie: It's so good to see you again. How have you been?

Rita: I'm doing fine. How 'bout yourself?

Bernie: Well, it's been a year now but how much can you mourn, right? Sure, I miss her but like my daughter keeps telling me you need to start living again. And she's right. I mean how long do we really have? So I decided to give you a call. I hope you weren't too surprised.

Rita: A little to be honest but it was nice to hear from you. How *is* your daughter by the way?

Bernie: Good. Florida, married, two kids. What's not to like? And how you been?

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: Alright I guess. Some days are hard but I get through it.

Bernie: Sure, I understand. *(pause)* Boy, the four of us had some good times together, didn't we?

Rita: We sure did.

Bernie: One thing about Sy, he could really tell a joke. I still tell people that one about the Seeing Eye dog. That's my favorite.

Rita: Oh, about the blind man who holds the dog's tale and spins him over his head? *(motions spinning something over her head)*

Bernie: That's right. Because he wanted to have a look around.

Both laugh. Waiter returns with Rita's drink and places the menus on the table.

Bernie: *(to waiter)* Thank you. *(to Rita)* How the boys?

Rita: Good. Michael's still teaching.

Bernie: Married?

Rita: No, but he has a girlfriend. An Asian girl, from Vietnam actually. To be honest, I can't understand a word she says, but he's happy so that's all that matters.

Bernie: And Ben?

Rita: Ben's doing great. You know he's a podiatrist in Hollywood.

Bernie: Sure I know. A good friend of Sy's helped set him up. What's his name again?

Rita: Norm Singer.

Bernie: That's right. How's he like it out there?

Rita: Loves it! Look, I brought something.

Looks through her pocketbook and pulls out a piece of paper. She hands it to Bernie.

Sy's Bargain House

He just sent me this. It's an ad he runs in a local newspaper.

Bernie: *(reads the ad)* "Dr. Benjamin Finberg- foot doctor to the stars". Wow, that's impressive. So some of his patients are movie stars?

Rita: That's right. Can you believe? My son Ben, cutting movie stars' toenails?

Bernie: Anything special about their toenails?

Rita: I'm sure they look like yours and mine.

Both laugh. Waiter returns to the table.

Waiter: May I take your order?

Rita: *(looks at menu)* One moment please. *(looks up)* What do you recommend?

Scene 4

Michael is standing in front of a blackboard on which are written examples of irregular verbs: swim-swam, write-wrote, run-ran, drink-drank. He is holding a pointer while speaking to a class. There is a teachers' desk and chair stage left.

Michael: We only have a few minutes before lunch. Let's quickly go over our verbs. Ready? I will point to the words and you repeat: swim-swam *(pause)* write-wrote *(pause)* run-ran *(pause)* drink-drank *(pause)*

Michael hears the vibration on his cell phone and answers it.

Michael: I'll be done in a minute. I'll call you right back.

School bell is heard.

Michael: Ok, boys and girls, time for lunch. Everyone line up at the door. Let's go. Now walk quietly across the hall. I'm watching.

Michael watches his class leave the room. He returns to the teacher's desk and calls Ben.

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Michael: What's the buzz, bro? How's everything? *(pause)* You can't tell me over the phone? *(pause)* It's that bad? *(pause)* I don't know. I'll have to check. *(pause)* All right! I'll try to catch a flight Friday night or Saturday. Now just calm down. I'll be there as soon as I can. *(pause)* Alright. See you soon. Gotta go. Bye.

Scene 5

Ben's office. Ben is sitting at his desk writing something. He is wearing a white doctor's uniform. The intercom sounds. Ben hits a button on the intercom.

Ben: Yes? *(pause)* Send him in.

Michael enters.

Ben: Mike!

They embrace.

Thanks so much for coming. How was the flight?

Michael: Not bad.

Ben: Let me pay you back. How much was it?

Michael: Never mind. What's the problem?

Ben: Sit down.

Michael sits down on a chair across from Ben's desk. Ben stands in front of his desk and hands him a piece of paper.

Ben: This is the problem.

Michael looks at the paper.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: You made me travel 3,000 miles to tell me you have jury duty?

Ben: Read it.

Michael reads the paper.

Michael: What's this? Your date for arraignment?

Ben: That's right. The day the judge decides if there's enough evidence to make me stand trial.

Michael: Trial for what?

Ben: Medicare fraud.

Michael: Are you serious?

Ben: Yes, I'm serious. I'm looking at maybe 3 years in prison and a quarter million dollar fine.

Michael: If the judge decides. Maybe he won't.

Ben: He will. I have no defense. Nothing.

Michael: Ben, wait a minute, wait a minute. Stop. What's going on here? What are you talking? Medicare fraud. How can they get you for fraud?

Ben: You remember a guy named Norm Singer?

Michael: Sure, he was one of Pop's closest friends. They fought in the war together. He helped set you up out here.

Ben: That's right. Soon after I got my license Pops gave him a call and asked if he could do something for me. Norm said yes so I fly out here and soon find out Norm's king of the Jews. He's president of the synagogue, head of the men's club and knows everybody. He takes me under his wing, introduces me to the Hollywood elite, sets me up in a shiny new office, and before you know it, I'm *Foot Doctor to the Stars*. There's only one problem. The man's shtuping every korva in Beverly Hills and is always short of money. I mean it takes a lot of money keeping even a mid-

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level where happy in this neighborhood. So Norm comes in for his monthly clipping which I should tell you is not covered by Medicare, and tells me about an idea he has.

A flashback with Michael watching. Norm enters Ben's office from upstage left center and sits across from Ben as Ben fills out information in Norm's folder. He is a white haired man of around 70-75 years old. He wears a sport jacket and well pressed khakis. Michael stands watching.

Norm: Look, I have an idea. Instead of writing down I had my nails clipped, put down I came in for a nail avulsion.

Michael: *(to Ben)* What's that?

Ben: *(turns to Michael)* It's a procedure in which a part or even the whole toenail is removed. It usually requires an anesthetic. I've done it hundreds of times.

Michael: So why does Norm want you to put down a...

Ben: Nail avulsion.

Michael: Nail avulsion.

Ben: Because a nail avulsion is covered by Medicare.

Michael: Which means...

Ben: Which means I get paid by Medicare which is a lot more that I get doing a simple clipping and polishing.

Michael: So Norm wants you to say he got a nail avulsion in which case he keeps the money you get from Medicare so he can continue his sport fucking.

Ben: Bingo!

Michael: And what did you say?

Ben: So I tell him...

Sy's Bargain House

Ben speaks to Norm in his office.

Ben: I can't do that. It's unethical and besides I could go to jail. Let me just give you whatever money you need.

Norm moves upstage, back to audience and takes a talis bag and yarmulke from his sport jacket pocket. He puts on the talis and yarmulke. Ben stands up from his desk and moves in front of it.

But Norm doesn't want to hear from that. He then goes on about how much he's done for me, setting me up, the introductions, and then makes a comment about all the young podiatrists in the area looking for work. So now I envision Norm going up to the bima on the High Holidays and saying:

Norm moves downstage between Ben and Michael wearing the yarmulke and talis. He addresses the audience as if speaking to a synagogue congregation. He holds a piece of paper.

Norm: First, I'd like to wish everyone here a very happy, healthy, and prosperous new year. I have just a few brief announcements. *(reads from the paper)* The Men's Club will meet this Thursday night at 7 PM. Herb Adelman will talk about his recent trip to Israel. Our Sisterhood will hold their annual donor dinner this Sunday starting at 6:30. *(looks up)* And, finally, stop seeing Ben Finberg. He's a lousy podiatrist.

Norm returns up stage, takes off the talis and yarmulke, puts them in the talis bag and exits.

Ben: So I get scared and agree to put down he came in for a nail avulsion. I send in the claim and fortunately nothing happens. Medicare sends me a check, I cash it and give the money to Norm. Now everyone's happy. I get Norm off my back, I continue my business, and Norm gets to fuck. Except Norm comes in two weeks later and tells me he's started to fuck his secretary and needs more money. The man's 75 years old and he's fucking his 40 year old secretary. Thank God for vitamin V, right? So he wants me to file another claim. In the meantime I'm looking on the internet and there are podiatrists all over the country doing this. Sure, they get caught but not until

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filing hundreds of false claims, and costing Medicare millions of dollars. So I figure what's the harm? Who's gonna care about a few nail avulsions when the government is losing billions of dollars a year? So I file another claim. Eventually, I submit a total of six at which point we agree to stop. Fine. Except last week I get a visit from the FBI who want to see my files concerning Norm's nail avulsions. I show them my notes which, of course, were completely made up and I'm telling them one lie after another. So now not only did I commit fraud, I'm now lying to the FBI which is another offense. As soon as they leave I call Norm, and ask him to come to the office. He comes in but now decides to play dumb.

Norm enters Ben's office as before. Ben stands facing him from behind his desk. Michael remains standing some distance from the conversation.

Norm: What's the matter?

Ben: The FBI was just here.

Norm: The FBI? For what?

Ben: They were investigating your nail avulsions.

Norm: Nail avulsions? What's a nail avulsion? What are you talking about?

Ben: The procedure I wrote down instead of a clipping.

Norm: Why would you write down nail avulsion? I just came in to get my nails cut. *(pause)* Oh, so that's it. You know some officers came to my house yesterday. One had a camera and took pictures of my feet. I couldn't understand why. Now I get it. They wanted to see if I got this, uh, what do you call it? Nail what?

Ben: *(downtrodden, realizes he's been played)* Nail avulsion. *(to Michael)* Then as he left he said something that really hurt.

Norm: You know, your father was right. You're not very smart.

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Norm exits.

Ben: So there you have it. Obviously, I was set up. But why would Norm do that? He was one of Pop's best friends. He's here to help me not hurt me, right?

Michael: Let me sit.

Michael sits on the sofa thinking. He then closes his eyes and shakes his head as he begins to realize what happened.

Michael: Unless...

Ben: Unless what? Talk! Unless what?

Michael: *(pause)* Unless Pops conspired with Norm to do you in.

Ben: You're insane. He wouldn't do that. What father on this planet could do such a thing?

Scene 6

Michael knocks on the front door of Rita's house. Rita opens the door. There is now a television in the living room and a remote control on the coffee table.

Rita: *(excited)* Come in, come in. Tell me everything. How's Ben? Did you see Sherry and the kids?

Michael: I saw everyone.

Rita: So tell me. How the kids? How's Sherri? Tell me. I'm so excited.

Michael: Everyone's fine.

Rita: And Ben?

Michael: Ben's good. Just working very hard. Life's a lot faster out there.

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Rita: Oh, thank God. I was starting to worry about him. He sounded so low the last time we talked. But he's Ok?

Michael: He's fine. Nothing to worry about.

Rita: Oh good. And how was the food?

Michael: Same as here.

Rita: Oh, come on. Nothing's better than the food here. You can't be serious.

Michael: You're right. We live in France.

Rita: There you go with your sarcasm. Anyway, Bernie will be here any minute. Guess what? He's taking me to the same restaurant we had our first date. Can you believe it's been one year already? Wait, I think he's coming now.

There's a knock on the door. Rita opens door.

Rita: Bernie, come in a minute. Michael's here. He just got back from seeing Ben in California.

Bernie enters. He wears a sport jacket and long coat.

Bernie: Nice to see you again, Michael. How you been?

Michael: Fine. You're looking well.

Bernie: *(pats his stomach)* Yeah, trying to stay in shape.

Michael: Mom tells me you're going to the same place you had your first date.

Bernie: That's right. Tonight is our one year anniversary. *(to Rita)* And what a wonderful year it's been.
Are you ready?

Rita: Just a moment. Let me get my bag.

Rita grabs her bag off the living-room sofa.

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Rita: OK, let's go.

Bernie: It was great seeing you again, Michael.

Michael: Me too. Have a good time.

Bernie: I'm sure we will.

Bernie puts his index finger to his lips to give the hush sign as he shows Michael a small ring box hidden his long coat side pocket. Michael nods accordingly.

Michael: I'll lock up. I have the key.

Rita: Guess you'll want to talk to Jenny, right? You really understand what she says?

Michael: Yes, mom. I understand perfectly.

Rita: Well, I don't. But, as long as you're happy...

Michael: *(emphatic, slightly annoyed)* Goodnight, mom.

Michael closes the door and walks around the living room in agony. He pulls his hair and face.

Oh, my God! Oh, my God! What am I gonna do? What can I say?

He sits down on the sofa in a kind of stunned disbelief. He hears the front door being unlocked. He stands up and looks at the front door. Sy enters appearing as he did at the start of the play. He carries a shoebox under one arm. He walks pass Michael, places the shoebox on the coffee table, takes the remote, and sits in the armchair oblivious to Michael's presence as this is all Michael's imagination. He fiddles with the remote control with both hands. Light is seen coming from the television but no sound. He continues to fiddle with the remote. Michael looks down at him.

Michael: Why dad? Why'd you do it? He was just a kid. Ben was always a kid. What was it? Jealousy? He was more successful than you? Had more friends? Better friends? Why did he have to pay for your failings? Who told you to sell crap in Kensington your whole life? Why make him suffer? Why

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make any of us suffer? Mom told me the day before you died you held her and said, "Thanks for everything." Thanks for everything. You were 74 years old! Why couldn't you say, "I love you"?
Oh, dad.

Ben falls to his knees and cries uncontrollably on Sy's lap while Sy continues to push buttons on the remote then looks down derisively on Michael as lights fade.

Scene 7

Bernie and Rita sit in the same restaurant where they had their first date. Each has a glass of wine. Bread, plates, silver wear, and napkins are on the table. Bernie holds up his glass of wine. Both are well dressed with Bernie wearing a sport jacket, white shirt, and tie.

Bernie: A toast to our one year anniversary. And if I may say, this has been one of the happiest years of my life. L'chaim!

Rita: L'chaim!

They touch glasses.

Bernie: You remember our first date?

Rita: How can I forget? It took me weeks to decide to meet you or not. But Michael insisted so I did.

Bernie: God bless Michael.

Rita: Yes, God bless Michael. Then I was so nervous coming here. Many times I thought of turning the car around. That's why I was so late. I think I told you I got lost, but I was really sitting in the parking lot deciding to come in or not.

Bernie: Well, I'm glad you did. (*pointing*) I think we sat over there if I remember.

Rita: That's right. Near the bar.

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Bernie: One year already. Hard to believe. We had some good times, didn't we? I really liked all those day trips- that time we saw a show in New York, the Holocaust museum, Cape May...

Rita: Let's not forget Lancaster with the Amish.

Bernie: Oh, that was funny- electric turn signals on their horse and buggies. Next they'll put air-conditioning in them.

Both laugh.

Yeah, it's been quite a year.

Rita: It certainly has. Sy could never do any of those things with his diabetes and all. Especially when his walking got bad. We couldn't go anywhere except around the neighborhood.

Bernie: I know.

Rita: Then when he needed a walker it was really bad.

Bernie: That was hard to watch. Such a robust man.

Rita: Robust?! You should have seen him at the store. Climbing three flights of steps like a gazelle.

Bernie: Anything to make the sale.

Rita: That's right. And if we didn't have it he'd have me or one of the boys run down to 3rd street to pick it up. That was quite a time. Funny how the mind works. I know I complained a lot, but for some reason I can only remember the good times. Isn't that something?

Bernie: You're right. It wasn't exactly a bed of roses with me and Gloria but like you say I only remember the good. Anyway Rita, there's a reason I wanted to bring you here tonight.

Rita: What's that?

Bernie: Well, like we were saying we've had some wonderful times this past year and I've been doing a lot of thinking recently. You know. About us.

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: What do you want to say?

Hedy and her boyfriend Mark enter stage right and pass Rita's table on their way out the restaurant. Hedy notices Rita.

Bernie: What I'm trying to say is...

Hedy: Aunt Rita?

Rita looks up.

Rita: Oh my God! Hedy! How are you? *(to Bernie)* This is my niece Hedy, Goldie's daughter. *(to Hedy)* How have you been? It's been so long.

Hedy: I'm fine. This is my boyfriend, Mark.

Rita: *(to Mark)* Nice to meet you. *(to both)* And this is Bernie.

Bernie: Hello.

Mark: Hi, everyone.

Rita: What's new with you? I haven't seen you in so long.

Hedy: I'm in school learning to be a nurse. Mark's studying to be a doctor.

Rita: That's wonderful.

Hedy: How's Ben? Michael?

Rita: Good. Michael's still teaching and Ben's in California.

Hedy: Still *Foot Doctor to the Stars*?

Rita: Yes, he is. Has two kids now. A boy and a girl.

Hedy: That's great. Well, give them my best and it was wonderful seeing you again. *(to Bernie)* Nice meeting you.

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Bernie: Me too.

Hedy and Mark begin walking away.

Rita: Hedy, wait. One moment.

Hedy and Mark stop.

Hedy: Yes?

Rita: I'm so sorry to hear about your mother.

Hedy: Thank you. She died peacefully thank God.

Rita: In the nursing home.

Hedy: That's right.

Rita: Believe me. She was always in my thoughts. Many times I thought about going to see her.

Hedy: She wanted to see you too, but how could she?

Rita: Wasn't that terrible? A brother and sister shouldn't talk? Why couldn't they just forgive and forget?

Hedy: With all respect, Aunt Rita, you couldn't exactly ask my mother to forgive.

Rita: I know, but like they say there's two sides to every story.

Hedy: No there's not. And especially not in my mother's case. A great injustice was done to her and you know that.

Rita: I know.

Hedy: So let's not try to rearrange history. All Uncle Sy had to do was say I'm sorry and my mother would have forgiven him. That's the kind of person she was.

Rita: You're right.

Sy's Bargain House

Hedy: Anyway, it was nice seeing you again.

Hedy and Mark exit the restaurant.

Bernie: What happened? I never understood why they stopped talking.

Rita: I'd rather not discuss it.

There is a long pause. Rita is clearly agitated by what just transpired between her and Hedy.

Bernie: Rita?

Rita: The last time I saw Goldie was the day Sy retired. Sometimes I'd see her shopping in Sears or Macy's, but she ran as soon as she saw me. Then once she entered the nursing home that was it.

Bernie: Well, at least she died peacefully.

Rita: Yes, I was happy to hear that. *(thinking about the evening of Sy's retirement)* So bad. *(pause)*
Anyway, as you were saying?

Bernie: Well, now I'm not sure this is the best time.

Rita: Go ahead. I'm fine.

Bernie: Are you sure?

Rita: I'm sure. What did you want to tell me?

Bernie: Well, like I was saying, this has been a wonderful year and I'm thinking. Why don't we make this more permanent?

Rita: What do you mean?

Bernie takes the ring box out of his sport jacket pocket.

Bernie: Rita, would you marry me?

Bernie opens ring box to display the ring. Rita looks shocked.

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: Bernie! What...?

Bernie: That's right. Will you marry me? I've been working up the courage to ask you for a few months now and I thought this would be the perfect time. We can work out the details later. Now I'm just asking you to marry me. *(pause)* Why you look so surprised? Don't tell me you haven't thought about this too.

Rita: To be honest, I never gave it a thought.

Bernie: You never gave it a thought? How could you not give it a thought after all we've done together?

Rita: People do things all the time together and don't think about marriage.

Bernie: I know that, but I'm asking you. Will you marry me?

Rita: And my answer is no.

Bernie: No?

Rita: That's right. No.

Bernie: You're kidding.

Rita: No I'm not. My answer is no.

Bernie: Well, I'm shocked. I thought we had something special.

Rita: It's been good. I wouldn't exactly call it special.

Bernie: You wouldn't?

Rita: What's so special? We meet once or twice a week, go somewhere to eat, then go home.

Bernie: And that's enough for you?

Rita: Yes.

Bernie: You're not looking for anything more?

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: No. Just leave it the way it is. Why spoil it?

Bernie: So getting married would spoil it?

Rita: Bernie, you seem to forget something. I *was* married. For 46 years. You understand? 46 years to the same man. So I don't need to get married again. And besides, this is the first time in my life I can do what I want. I get up when I want, go anywhere I want, and even have cereal for dinner if I want. So the last thing I need is marriage.

Bernie: But I need more.

Rita: Bernie, stop. I said no and that's that. And if you continue to talk about it I'm going to get up and leave.

Bernie: *(pause)* Did you ever hear of this thing called love?

Rita: *(getting angry)* Did you hear what I said?

Bernie: I'm talking about love.

Rita: I don't need to talk about love. I know all about love. I was married and had two sons. So believe me, I know love.

Bernie: You don't miss it?

Rita: Of course I miss it. Who doesn't need love?

Bernie: But you don't love me.

Rita: Bernie, I said stop. You're starting to look ridiculous. In fact, if you don't stop, this will be our last date. *(thinking)* You know what? This will be our last date.

Bernie: OK, I'm sorry.

Rita: No, I decided. I asked you to stop and you wouldn't listen.

Bernie: *(beginning to panic)* Alright, I'm sorry. I won't bring it up again. Let's just enjoy our meal.

Sy's Bargain House

(trying to change the subject) Did you talk to Ben this week?

Rita: I'm not eating. In fact, I'll take a taxi home.

Rita signals to waiter. Waiter comes to the table.

Could you call me a taxi please?

Waiter: Certainly.

Bernie: *(panicking)* Rita, please. Don't go. Fine. We'll continue like we always do- meet once or twice a week. I'm happy with that.

Rita: Since I have a few minutes before the taxi comes, I'd like to say a few things. Kind of like parting words. I remember one time Sy and I were driving home from the store. Anyway, I start playing with the radio. Somehow I hit the jazz station and Sy says, "Change that. I don't like jazz." Just like that. "I don't like jazz." Not some jazz I like but some jazz I don't like, but says "I don't like jazz." And that's the way he was. You always knew where he stood. Sure many times we argued but at least I knew where he stood. You, on the other hand, are never clear. I mean how many times we'd see a movie and you tell me how much you enjoyed it. Then I'd say, "Well, I didn't like it very much." Then you'd say, "You know, maybe you're right." Why can't you just say I liked the movie and stick with it? Why you always change your mind just because I said something different?

Bernie: I didn't realize I did that. Rita, please. Cancel the taxi.

Rita: No. And there's one more thing I want to say. How did you feel when you retired?

Bernie: What?

Rita: How did you feel?

Bernie: When I retired?

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: That's right.

Bernie: I felt good.

Rita: No regrets? You didn't miss working?

Bernie: No. I sold the business, got a good price. It felt good.

Rita: Do you remember your last day?

Bernie: Of course. I said goodbye to the staff, Gloria picked me up, and we went out to lunch.

Rita: That's all?

Bernie: What else is there?

Rita: You weren't sad? You didn't miss the customers, the routine?

Bernie: No. Who misses work? *(pause)* What? It was hard for Sy?

Rita: Very hard. Do you know every day for about a month he'd get dressed and drive down to the store? That's right. He acted like it was a normal day. He'd get up, get dressed, I'd make him his coffee, then he'd drive down.

Bernie: Really?

Rita: That's right. Then he'd park across the street, *(stands up and looks forlornly)* get out the car, and look at the store.

Bernie: So what are you saying? I should have done the same? Wake up at 6:30 and drive to the lot?

Rita: No, I'm not saying that. But how could you just walk away from something you put so much of your life into? That's what I'm saying. How could you not feel anything? All those years, the success, the failures- didn't that mean anything?

Bernie: No. It was a job. A way to make money and support my family.

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: What did you do the first full day of your retirement? Do you remember?

Bernie: Of course. I played golf.

Waiter comes to table.

Waiter: You're taxi's here.

Rita: *(to waiter)* Thank you. *(stands up)* Goodbye, Bernie.

Bernie stands up, grabs her arm.

Bernie: Rita, please.

Rita takes Bernie's hand from her arm and exits. Bernie sits down dejectedly.

Scene 8

Michael and Rita sit at the kitchen table across from each other drinking coffee.

Michael: Tell me all about your date.

Rita: We went to the same restaurant we met the first time.

Michael: I know. So how was it?

Rita: I'll tell you later. First, you need to tell me about Ben. I know you said everything's fine, but I still feel something's wrong. Every time I call he acts so down. I want to know. What's going on over there?

Michael: Tell me about your date first. Then I'll tell you.

Rita: What's there to tell? We went out for dinner.

Michael: That's all? Nothing unusual happened?

Rita: What are you saying? *(pause)* Did you talk to Bernie?

Michael: Maybe.

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Rita: So you know. That *alter kocker* proposed marriage. Can you believe? I'm soon going to marry again? Is he crazy? Then he asks me if I love him. After one year I'm supposed to love him? I'm married to your father for 46 years, and I'm still not sure I loved *him!*

Michael: So what did you say?

Rita: I said no and I even said I didn't want to see him again. I took a taxi home.

Michael: That was some night.

Rita: Wait. There's more. While we're having our drinks who should walk by?

Michael: Who?

Rita: Your cousin Hedy.

Michael: Hedy? We haven't seen her since Aunt Goldie's funeral. How's she doing?

Rita: Good. Still heavy but good. She even has a boyfriend. He was there, but I forget his name.

Michael: Did you talk to her?

Rita: (*exaggerated*) Oh, yes. We talked. Oh, did we talk.

Michael: What about?

Rita: Your father and why they stopped talking to each other.

Michael: You mean Aunt Goldie.

Rita: That's right.

Michael: What did you say?

Rita: I told her there's two sides to every story.

Michael: Then what did she say?

Rita: She told me I was wrong, that it was your father's fault they didn't talk.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: Of course I could ask you to tell me the story, but you never will.

Rita: That's right. So Hedy and her boyfriend leave, I'm completely disgusted, and that's when Bernie decides this is the perfect time to propose marriage. I mean why not wait till I'm in a car accident?

Michael: Sounds like quite a night.

Rita: Oh, that it was. So now tell me about Ben. I told you my story now you tell me yours.

Michael begins speaking inaudibly as lights slowly fade.

Act III

Scene 1

It's the first day back for teachers at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School. There is a banner reading "Welcome Back!" draped across the room. Four teachers are in the auditorium milling around a table on which are juice, donuts, cups, plates and napkins. They are Michael, Jerry Feldman, Chris Simmons, and Selina Welsh. Stage right are Mr. Benson, the school principal and Ms. Katherine Evans, from the Office of Curriculum and Development. They stand and chat with each other. Chairs divide Benson and Evans from the four teachers. Chris and Selina chat. Jerry pulls Michael aside.

Jerry: How's Ben?

Michael: He's getting out soon.

Jerry: That's great. You plan to see him?

Michael: Over Christmas.

Jerry: Well, give him my best.

Michael: I will.

Jerry: Let's meet the new teachers. *(looks at Selina)* Man, is she hot.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: Calm down.

Michael and Jerry approach Chris and Selina.

Jerry: Welcome to Wilson. I'm Jerry Feldman and this is Mike Finberg.

Chris: Nice to meet you. Chris Simmons.

Chris shakes hands with Jerry and Michael.

Michael: And you are?

Selina: Selina Welsh.

Michael: Been teaching long?

Selina: No, this is my first year. I just graduated in May.

Jerry: Well, welcome to Wilson. I'm sure you'll be happy here.

Selina: I hope so.

Jerry: *(to Chris)* Is this your first year too?

Chris: No, it's my third. I'm forced transfer.

Michael: What do you teach?

Chris: Phys. Ed

Michael: *(to Jerry)* That's right. Henry retired.

Jerry: You're right. I forgot. *(to Selina)* And what are you teaching?

Selina: Second grade.

Michael: Oh, I'm first grade. You'll probably have some of my students.

Sy's Bargain House

Benson: Can I have everyone's attention? Could everyone please take a seat? I'd like to get started. I promise you'll have time later today to get your rooms ready. Just a few things we need to go over.

Teachers sit randomly. Ms. Evans takes a seat near Mr. Benson.

First, welcome back. I hope everyone had a pleasant and restful summer. Before I begin why don't we have our new teachers introduce themselves? Mr. Simmons?

Chris: Hello, everyone. I'm Chris Simmons, the new gym teacher. Pleasure to meet you.

Benson: Thank you. Ms. Welsh?

Selina stands.

Selina: Hi, everyone. My name is Selina Welsh. I'm a newbie! Yeah, fresh out of college. I just want to say it's great to be here, and I look forward to working with all of you.

Selina sits.

Benson: Thank you. Well, if you remember on our last day in June I told you to expect some changes this school year. I think some of you already know what I'm about to say, but I brought in a guest to explain things in greater detail. So let me introduce Ms. Katherine Evans from the Office of Curriculum and Development.

Benson sits. Evans rises from her chair.

Evans: Good morning, everyone.

All: Good morning.

Evans: Now you can do better than that. *(loud)* Good morning, everyone!

All: *(loud)* Good morning!

Sy's Bargain House

Evans: Great. Oh, one thing before I begin. Who ate the chocolate glazed donut? My favorite.

Jerry raises his hand.

Jerry: I did.

Evans: Mr. Benson, write that teacher up!

Everyone laughs.

Benson: I'll get right on it.

Everyone laughs.

Evans: As your principal said, I'm from the Office of Curriculum and Development and this year we are launching an exciting new program. A program I'm sure all of you will wholeheartedly embrace. It's called *Achieve*- a literacy program that I believe marks an historic break from how we've been teaching in the past. So let me explain as briefly as I can how *Achieve* works. I'm sorry, what's your name?

Feldman: Jerry Feldman.

Evans: Mr. Feldman, if you'd be so kind, could you hand out these papers?

Jerry distributes papers to each teacher.

Evans: Thank you. Now if everyone will please turn to page 2 at the top.

Everyone turns to the second page.

Let me read. "*Achieve* is a literacy program designed to meet both the academic and linguistic needs of each individual student. Teachers are provided with day by day pedagogically sound procedures in the delivery of specific content." What this means is, if I may put it in my own words, *Achieve* takes the guess work out of teaching. It tells you exactly what lesson to teach and how best to teach it.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael raises his hand.

Evans: Yes?

Michael: You're talking about scripted lessons.

Evans: Exactly. And really what's wrong with that? For one thing your lesson plans are already done for you. Let me tell you. Before I took this position I was a grade teacher and every Sunday night I couldn't go out. Why? Because I had to develop my lesson plans for the following week. But now with *Achieve* you can copy directly from the teachers' manual. Very easy. And even better, *Achieve* tells you what to teach and how to teach each day of the year. You will notice when you get your teachers guide each lesson provides step by step procedures. In other words, all you need to do is faithfully follow the *Achieve* program and you are assured a successful school year. Understand Mr....?

Michael: Finberg. I understand. But let me ask you something. If we are just following a script where do we as teachers come in? I mean where do we have a chance to display our own unique talents as educators? And one more thing I'd like to ask. What happens to those students who can't keep up with the *Achieve* program? What do we do in that case?

Evans: Let me answer your second question first. The answer is simple. If you follow the *Achieve* program you will *not* have students fall behind. It all depends how faithfully you follow it. And as to your first point, what was that phrase you used?

Michael: Our unique talents.

Evans: Yes. I'd like to ask you something, Mr. Finberg. Would you say you are a kind of funny teacher? Someone who likes to do funny things in the classroom? Like to make students laugh?

Michael: Not all the time but sometimes.

Sy's Bargain House

Evans: So let me give you some advice. There are a number of comedy clubs in this city. I've been to a few in fact and I notice most have an open mic night. You know, where you can get up in front of an audience and tell jokes. So may I suggest if you want to be funny, go to a comedy club. Understand what I'm trying to say? Wilson is one of the lowest performing schools in the city. Only 25% of your students are reading at grade level so I think it's fair to say that a teacher designed curriculum has not done this school much good lately And let me clue you into something and this is for all of you. Downtown is looking for any reason to turn Wilson into a charter school and I think you all know what that means. Most or all of you would be gone and that includes you too, Mr. Benson.

Benson: I know.

Evans: And who's the union representative here?

Jerry raises his hand.

Evans: Oh, the donut thief. You, sir, would no longer have that position. There are no unions in charter schools. You live at the whim of an administrator. Is that what you want? No due process? No protection? Is that what you want?

Everyone: No.

Evan: What?

Everyone: *(loud)* No!

Evans: Good. So no more talk about your *(mockingly)* unique talents. Simply follow the *Achieve* program and I assure you, you will not have any problems. *(checks her watch)* Well, I have to get to another school so let me end by just saying I wish everyone a happy and productive school year and don't forget, the key to success is through, everybody...?*(raises fist)*

Everyone: *Achieve!*

Sy's Bargain House

Scene 2

There is a wall dividing two classrooms. Stage right is Michael's classroom composed of small chairs and desks, a white board and a teachers desk. Stage right is Selina's classroom organized the same way. Michael and Selina are decorating bulletin boards outside their respective classrooms. Michael's reads: We Beelong in 1st grade! with cut-out pictures of bees surrounding the lettering. He is stapling the bees onto the board. Selina's board reads: Welc me Back! She looks in a bag for an "o" to complete the word Welcome. She approaches Michael.

Selina: Oh, that's so cute! *We Beelong in 1st grade.*

Michael: I use it every year.

Selina: I really like it. I didn't know what to put up so I'm just doing a boring *Welcome back!*

Michael: Nothing wrong with that.

Selina: But there's a problem. I'm missing an "O" for the word welcome. I was wondering if you might have an "O".

Michael: Let me see. *(looks through a stack of letters)* Oh, here's one.

He hands the letter to her.

Selina: Thanks. Well, don't let me bother you.

Michael: No, that's all right. I can talk. So it's your first year?

Selina: Yes. I'm so nervous I can hardly sleep.

Michael: Look, I'm not going to lie to you. The kids here are tough. But the staff is great and always ready to help. And if there's anything you need I'm right next door. I had a lot of you students last year so if anyone gives you any trouble let me know and I'll come right over.

Sy's Bargain House

Selina: That's good to know. I'm sure I'll be calling you. Well, let me get back to work (*starts walking away*) and thanks again for the "O".

Michael: Hey, anytime you need an "O" I'm right here.

Selina: (*smiles*) I'll remember that.

Scene 3

Michael stands in front of his (imaginary) first grade class. Behind him is a blackboard and in front are rows of desks and chairs.

Michael: OK, class, settle down. Now last week if you remember we learned how to make something more than one. Can anyone tell me how we make things more than one? (*pause*) Robert? (*pause*) That's right. We add an "s" to the ending of the word. Good. Now can someone give me an example? First, say the word as one thing then say the same word with the "s" at the end. Let me give you an example. (*shows the class a pencil*) This is one pencil. Now watch. I get another pencil. (*shows two pencils*) Now I have two pencils (*puts stress on the "s" sound*). OK, can anyone do it? But don't use pencil. Think of something else. Good, Diane. (*pause*) Very good. Did everyone hear? She said I have one book and now I have two books." Wonderful. Now here's what we're going to do. I'm going to give each of you a blank piece of paper. (*demonstrates*) First we're going to fold the paper in half like this (*folds paper*)

Benson enters and sits at the back of the room. He carries a legal pad and begins to write.

Oh, look. We have a special guest boys and girls. Let's all say good morning to our principal, Mr. Benson. On three. Ready? One, two, three-Good morning, Mr. Benson.

Benson: Good morning boys and girls. Please continue, Mr. Finberg.

Michael: So again, class, we fold the paper in half like this. Then we draw a line down the middle. Let me show you (*draws line down middle of paper*). Now on the left side at the top we will write

Sy's Bargain House

the word One (*writes One*) and on the right side we will write the word Two (*writes Two*). See? (*shows paper*). So on the right side I'd like you to draw a picture of one thing. It could be anything. One horse, one dog, one elephant... Then on the other side you will draw two of the same thing. Let me show you. So I will draw one cat (*draws and shows paper*) and now I will draw two cats. (*shows paper*) Understand? (*pause*) Good. I will now hand out the paper and Steven could you please give everyone some crayons? Thanks.

Benson stands up.

Benson: Mr. Finberg. Could I see you in my office at the end of the day?

Michael: Certainly.

Benson: Thank you.

Benson leaves room.

Scene 4

Benson sits in his office behind a desk. He is perusing the Achieve teachers' manual. Michael enters.

Michael: You wish to see me, Mr. Benson?

Benson: Yes, sit down.

Michael sits across from Benson.

Mr. Finberg, do you know what day this is?

Michael: It's Wednesday.

Benson: No, I mean in terms of your teaching. Do you know where you should be today according to the *Achieve* teachers' manual?

Michael: I'm sorry. I don't.

Sy's Bargain House

Benson: You don't look at your manual? You're lesson plans come directly from it. Am I right?

Michael: That's right.

Benson: So you should know what you are expected to teach today. Let's see. Today reads Week 3, Lesson 2 and here's what it says. "Students will form the past tense of a regular verb by adding an "e-d" at the end. For example, walked, cooked, played". Nowhere does it say students will form the plural of a noun by adding an "s". In fact, I have to go back (*turns pages*) to Week 2, lesson 1 to see that lesson. So could you please explain to me why you were on Week 2, lesson 1 when you should have been on Week 3, lesson 3?

Michael: With all respect, Mr. Benson, I have a number of students this year whose first language is not English and others are still struggling with basic letter/sound relationships. And some still don't know the alphabet. So they're simply not ready for verbs and verb tenses. But they're a smart group. We'll catch up. I can assure you.

Benson: But not fast enough. (*pause*) Mr. Finberg. May I remind you that things are different this year. Whether you like it or not, we as a school are married to the *Achieve* program.

Michael: I know.

Benson: And there are no exceptions. We march in lock step. All of us-you, me, the entire school. This (*holds up the manual*) is your bible. This tells you what you need to teach and what day to teach it. The next time I walk into your room I expect you to be exactly where the book tells you to be. Do you understand?

Michael: Yes.

Benson: And what is the operative word this year? Do you remember? What word should each teacher have tattooed on their brain?

Michael: Rigor.

Sy's Bargain House

Benson: That's correct. We teach with rigor. And what, by the way, were you doing with crayons? If I'm not mistaken you're teaching first grade. Not art. We already have an art teacher.

Michael: Again, with all respect, I was trying to match my lesson to students' learning styles. Drawing helps students who are more visual or more tactile for instance. You even encouraged that last year.

Benson: I remember that. We spent entire days looking at learning styles. And where did that get us? Did you see last year's standardized test results?

Michael: Yes.

Benson: Horrible. Embarrassing even. So no more talk about learning styles. From now on it's all paper and pencil. You stand, you teach, they learn. That's it. You heard Ms. Evans. If we don't get our scores up, heads will roll. I don't know your situation, but I have a wife, two kids in college, and a killer mortgage (*getting angry*) so hell if I'm going to lose my job because some teacher is concerned about learning styles! Do you understand, Mr. Finberg?

Michael: Yes.

Benson: Good. I will see you tomorrow.

Michael exits. Benson remains reading the manual.

Scene 5

Selina picks up the telephone in her classroom and calls Michael. Michael sits at his desk correcting papers.

The phone rings. Michael gets up and answers it.

Selina: Mr. Finberg, could you come here please if you have a moment.

Michael: I'll be right there.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael walks to Selina's classroom. Selina waits for him at the door to her classroom.

Michael: What's the problem?

Selina: *(points)* Him. He's been out of his seat all day. He won't do his work, he's bothering the other students. I've already called his home but there's no answer. Do you know him?

Michael: Sure. That's Oscar. Everybody knows Oscar. *(shouts)* Oscar, get over here. *(to Selina)* I had him last year. *(to Oscar)* What's your problem? Why can't you stay in your seat? You're making Ms. Welsh very unhappy today. Do you like making Ms. Welsh unhappy? *(pause)* I understand that. But you need to sit down and do your work. I tell you what. I'll come in later. If Ms. Welsh gives me a good report I have a little treat for you. OK? *(pause)* Do we have a deal? *(pause)* Good. Let's shake on it. *(gives the handshake motion)*. Now where's your seat? *(pause)*. Wow, you're so lucky. You get to sit up front. Now let's see you go to your seat and sit down. Can you do that? *(pause)* And sit quietly? *(pause)* And do your work? *(pause)* Good. And one more thing. Do you have anything to say to Ms. Welsh? *(pause)* Thank you, Oscar. Now let's have a good day. I'll be in later. *(to Selina)* What can you do? Every class has someone like Oscar. Some even more.

Selina: Thanks so much.

Michael: Anytime.

Fade to black.

Scene 6

Selina enters Michael's classroom.

Selina: Can I come in?

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: Sure, come in.

Selina: I just want to thank you again for your help today. He was much better after you left.

Michael: I'm glad to hear it. Listen, I don't want to sound like a know-it-all but the important thing is to build a relationship with him. Just yelling is not going to work. He gets enough of that at home. See it's a kind of trick. He can't see his future, so he's not going to work for something he can't see. But if you can gain his trust, he'll work hard for *you*. You understand?

Selina: Yes, very interesting. I see what you mean.

Michael: Try it. Otherwise, you'll just wear yourself out.

Selina: I already am. Well, let me go and thanks again.

Selina starts to leave.

Michael: Selina?

Selina: *(turns)* Yes?

Michael: I was wondering. Would you like to meet sometime for a drink if you have time that is?

Selina: You mean like a date?

Michael: Well, yes.

Selina: I'd love to. Got some paper?

Michael grabs a slip of paper from his desk and hands it to her.

Michael: Here.

Selina writes her phone number and hands the slip to Michael.

Selina: Here's my number. Call me.

Michael: Thanks.

Sy's Bargain House

Selina: I'll be waiting. Bye.

Michael: Bye.

Selina leaves. Michael is ecstatically happy.

Scene 7

Selina stands at the door to Michael's classroom. Michael is sitting at his desk marking papers.

Selina: Mr. Finberg, may I come in?

Michael: Sure, Ms. Welsh. But could you close the door please? It's hard to concentrate with all the noise in the hall.

Selina closes the door. Michael gets up from his seat and together they move to an area where they can't be seen.

Selina: You're right, Mr. Finberg. *(touches his crotch area)* It is *hard* to concentrate.

They hug and kiss passionately.

Fuck me.

Michael: Here? We'll get fired.

Selina unbuttons her blouse.

Selina: So what? Then we'll raise sheep in Nepal. Who cares? Just fuck me. Here, on your desk.

Selina sits on Michael's desk and pulls Michael towards her.

Michael: We'll wrinkle my students' work. And how can I explain how the papers got so sticky? I mean talk about Show and Tell.

Selina: Guess you're right.

Selina buttons her blouse, fixes her hair and adjusts her skirt.

Sy's Bargain House

Tonight. 8 o'clock. Bring some Merlot.

She opens the door. Suddenly formal.

Thank you for all your help, Mr. Finberg.

Michael: Anytime, Ms. Welsh. Always happy to help.

Scene 8

Jenny is in the kitchen area of Michael's apartment. She wears jeans and a blouse. The apartment is divided between the kitchen (downstage right) and a living room (downstage left). The living room contains a sofa, some chairs and a coffee table. On the table are pictures, one of Jenny. A front door leads into the living room area. Jenny's coat is on a hook near the front door. She is cutting carrots on a counter near the sink. She opens the refrigerator and takes out some lettuce and cucumbers. She looks at the lettuce distastefully and places it on the counter. Michael enters carrying a book bag over his shoulder. He places the book bag on the floor and sees Jenny.

Michael: Hello. When did you get in?

Jenny: About an hour. Do you see this? *(shows him the lettuce)*. I can't make salad with this. It no good.

Michael: Sorry. I forgot to go shopping. Do we have anything else?

Jenny: Some carrots, cucumbers but I need lettuce to make a salad. Why you forget? You tell me I buy for you.

Michael: You're right. Just use the carrots and cucumbers. That's enough. I had a late lunch so I'm not too hungry.

Jenny: Good. I want to make pho' and it takes about one hour.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael takes off his jacket, hangs it up on a hook near the front door and sits down on the sofa while Jenny continues to cut the cucumbers. He looks at her.

Michael: Jenny, come here. I want to talk about something.

Jenny: I can't. I'm busy. I want to make the salad.

Michael: It can wait. Just sit down.

Jenny: What do you want?

Michael: Come here. I need to tell you something.

Jenny: I know. You're busy this weekend. No problem. I can work.

Michael: No, not that. It's something else.

Jenny: Wait.

Jenny stops cutting and sits on one end of the sofa while Michael sits at the other end.

What?

Michael: I need to tell you something.

Jenny: I know. What?

Michael: *(pause)* I met someone.

Jenny: Good. *(stands up)* Let me finish the salad.

Michael: Could you please sit down.

Jenny: *(getting annoyed, sits again)* What?!

Michael: I said I met someone.

Jenny: OK, who is he?

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: It's not a he. It's a she. A girl.

Jenny: What's her name?

Michael: Selina.

Jenny: Good. Now can I get back to work?

Jenny gets up and returns to the kitchen. Michael looks up exasperated.

Michael: You don't understand. I like her.

Jenny: Good. Everybody should like everybody.

Michael: I don't mean like a friend.

Jenny begins to understand. She stops cutting. Returns to living room area.

Jenny: What you mean?

Michael: I mean, you know, romantic.

Jenny: Like a girlfriend?

Michael: Yes.

Jenny: Who is she?

Michael: Her name's Selina.

Jenny: I know. Selina. What she do?

Michael: She's a teacher.

Jenny: Your school?

Michael: Yes.

Jenny: She Vietnam?

Sy's Bargain House

Michael : No, she's American.

Jenny: I'm American.

Michael: I mean she was born here.

Jenny: So she speak good English.

Michael: Yes, she was born here. It's her language.

Jenny: You like her. She speak good English.

Michael: It's not about her English. It's other things.

Jenny: What things?

Michael: We like the same things. You know, books, travel, politics...

Jenny: What politics?

Michael: Politics. Like the government, the president.

Jenny: You...sek?

Michael: Please don't ask that.

Jenny: You sek? Tell me.

Michael: *(pause)* Yes.

Jenny: Where?

Michael: Sometimes here, sometimes her place.

Jenny: You do here?

Michael: Sometimes. It's not a problem.

Jenny: Here's my picture *(takes picture from coffee table)*. She see my picture.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: I put it in the closet.

Jenny: You crazy. She crazy.

Places picture back on the table.

Michael: It's not about sex. We communicate.

Jenny: What you mean?

Michael: We understand each other.

Jenny: 'cause she speak good English.

Michael: No, it's nothing to do with English. Your English is fine.

Jenny: So what you mean? You want end?

Michael: *(pause)* I don't know.

Jenny: No I don't know. Tell me. Yes or no. You want end?

Michael: Jenny, it's not easy. We've had great times together.

Jenny: But you want end.

Michael: *(pause)* Maybe.

Jenny: So we end. No problem.

Michael: Please, don't be angry.

Jenny: I not angry. It's OK. We end. I can do. *(stands)* I tell you many times. My life not easy.

Michael: I know.

Jenny: My father rich man in Saigon. After war north come and take anything. I want go school, study fashion, but cannot. I need go work. Then I come US but what I can do? Sister tell me

Sy's Bargain House

work nail salon but I no English. Customer say something. I no understand. She say, "How long you here? Why you no speak English?" I smile but I sad.

Michael: I know. You've had a hard life.

Jenny: So why I say it no problem. But I tell you. You crazy man. I give you anything but you not happy.

Michael: I am happy. I just think we need a change.

Jenny: OK, you can change. But I tell you. You not find lady like me. You go Asia every summer. I stay here and work. I know what American man do in Asia.

Michael: I go to relax. Look at the temples.

Jenny: I no stupid! I know what you do. My friend think I crazy you go Asia, but I love you so I say nothing.

Michael: You're wrong.

Jenny: I no wrong. I little girl but I see anything. American man think Asian girl easy. But she not easy. She poor. She need money so she do. My sister go with American man. *(nearly crying)*
My father not happy, but she do anyway.

Michael stands up, tries to hug her.

Michael: Oh, Jenny.

Jenny pushes him away.

Jenny: No. We over. No call me anymore. You call I never answer.

Puts her hand in her pocket and takes out key.

Here.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael reluctantly takes key from her hand.

Say bye to your mom.

Jenny takes her coat from the hook and leaves. Michael remains standing.

Act IV

Scene 1

The waiting room at a prison. There is a long table with two chairs on either side. A prison guard stands more or less at attention. Michael paces the room waiting for Ben to enter.

Guard: He'll be out shortly.

Michael: Good. I haven't seen him in almost a year. How's he doing?

Guard remains silent.

He look OK? Lose any weight?

Guard stays silent .Ben enters wearing prison garb.

Ben: Michael!

Michael: Ben!

They are about to hug.

Guard: There is no touching.

Ben and Michael drop their arms.

Sy's Bargain House

Ben: Let's sit down.

They sit across from each other.

Ben: How's mom?

Michael: She's doing fine. We're all just waiting for you to get out.

Ben: I'll visit right after my release. Make sure you tell her that. And how you doing? How's Jenny?

Michael: We broke up.

Ben: Are you serious?

Michael: Yes.

Ben: Why?

Michael: I met someone.

Ben: Who?

Michael: A teacher.

Ben: At your school?

Michael: Yes.

Ben: You dog.

Michael: I know. I'm not proud of myself, but you should see this girl. I mean...

Ben: Go on.

Michael: No, that's enough.

Sy's Bargain House

- Ben: Hey, you get me all excited and now you stop? You're cruel, *holms*. See, I picked up some prison slang here.
- Michael: You'll see her when you get out. How *you* doing? And don't lie to me.
- Ben: Hey, I'm at the Ritz. How do you think I'm doing? But I should at least be grateful for one thing. They never stop reminding me I'm Jewish. I'm the "Jew kike"! All day "Hey, Jew kike!" Now, of course, I could explain that Jew kike is redundant. Either call me Jew or call me kike. But then I'd have to explain what redundant means so I let it go.
- Michael: You only have three more months. Then you'll be out.
- Ben: If I make it.
- Michael: Of course you'll make it. Why wouldn't you make it?
- Ben: Michael, there are Nazis in here. Real Nazis. I almost got killed a few times. But there's this guard. A Jewish guy can you believe? Sheldon Abrams. Every time I see him I do my Jerry Lewis. *(does a Jerry Lewis impression)* "Hey, Sheldon!" He protects me. But on his day off I'm terrified.
- Michael: Thank God for Sheldon.
- Ben: Yeah, thank God for Sheldon. You plan to see Norm?
- Michael: I'm thinking about it.
- Ben: I'm going to kill him when I get out.
- Michael: No, you're not. You're gonna take care of your family, find a job, and get your life back.
- Guard: Two minutes.
- Ben: I know. *(pause)* Hard to believe. I was Pop's golden boy. Now look at me. You get to walk and I go back into this hell.

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: It's not much longer. You can do it.

Both stand.

Ben: Thanks so much for coming. Give my love to Sherry and the kids.

Michael: I'll seeing them tomorrow.

Ben: Say I'm doing fine.

Michael: Of course. And I'll be here the day you get out. I promise.

Ben: Thanks. You're a great brother.

Michael: Shmuck, I love you.

Ben: I love you too.

The guard walks Ben back to his jail cell. Michael and Ben wave goodbye.

Scene 2

An elderly secretary sits at a desk squinting at a computer screen, typing slowly. Norm Singer sits at his desk which is divided from the secretary's office space. He wears a long sleeve white shirt and tie. A sports jacket hangs over his chair. He reads some report and turns pages. Michael enters. He wears slacks and a sports jacket.

Secretary: Can I help you?

Michael: Yes, my name is Harold Kasner. My family just moved into the area and we're looking to join a synagogue. I was hoping I could speak to your president if he or she's available.

Secretary: Just a moment.

She calls Norm on an intercom. Norm answers.

Norm: Yes?

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Secretary: There's a young man who'd like to see you. He just moved into the area and is interested in becoming a member.

Norm: Good. Just tell him to wait. I'll be right there. What's his name?

Secretary: *(to Michael)* What's your name?

Michael: Harold Kasner.

Secretary: *(to Norm)* Harold Kasner.

Norm: Thanks.

Norm puts on his sport jacket and straightens his tie. The secretary opens a small bottle of Wipe-Out and applies it to the computer screen. Michael notices.

Michael: I'm sorry, you can't erase with White Out. Here let me show you.

Michael leans over desk and hits a key on the computer keyboard.

You hit this key. It will erase what you typed.

Secretary: Oh, thank you. This is all very new to me. I think I need to take a course.

Norm opens the door.

Norm: Mr. Kasner, please come in.

Michael: Thank you.

Michael enters Norm's office.

Norm: I'm Norm Singer, the president of the synagogue. My secretary tells me you just moved into the area. Please take a seat.

Michael: Thank you.

Michael sits across from Norm.

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Norm: Where are you from if I may ask?

Michael: Philadelphia.

Norm: Philly! I had a great friend there. Died unfortunately a few years ago. Maybe you know him? Sy Finberg? Had a mom and pop store in the Kensington area if I remember. Forty years at the same location. Can you believe it? I kept telling him, "Sy, you got two sons. You got to expand." Shmuck. He could have had an empire by now.

Michael: Mr. Singer. I knew Sy Finberg

Norm: Really? How did you know him?

Michael: I'm his son, Michael.

Norm: Oh.

They look at each other. There's a long pause.

Well, *(pause)* how's your mom?

Michael: Good.

Norm: And her health?

Michael: It's good.

Norm: Happy to hear it. Important to stay active as you get older. And how you doing? I think your father said you were a teacher. Is that right?

Michael: Yes.

Norm: What grade?

Michael: First.

Norm: First? That must be quite a challenge.

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Michael: It is.

Norm: Yeah, your father never stopped talking about you boys. Michael this, Ben that. He was really proud of you kids. I'm sorry I only got to Philly once after the war. I think you were about five and your brother was just born.

Michael: Yes, I remember that.

Norm: Of course, I wanted to attend the funeral but it was just too hard to get away. But I really loved your father. I'm sure you know we were in the army together. You should have seen him then. Short, but very strong. 'specially those legs. Could have been a fullback if he wanted. Yeah, I'll never forget. Soon after the war ended we were given a week pass. So your father and I went to Paris. The things we did there (*laughs then serious*) But that's not why you're here.

Michael: No.

Norm: How's he doing?

Michael: He'll be out in three months.

Norm: Happy to hear that.

Michael: Really?

Norm: Sure. He's a good kid.

Michael: He's not a kid.

Norm: I know. It's an expression. So what do you want?

Michael: The truth.

Norm: Oh, whether I had anything to do with Ben getting in trouble.

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Michael: That's right.

Norm: Like maybe I set him up.

Michael: That's what we think. Did you?

Norm stands and moves to where Michael is sitting.

Norm: Alright, *(sarcastically)* Mr. Kasner. I suppose I could say no and have you leave. *(points to door)* But you're Sy's son so I will answer you. Yes, I set him up.

Michael: Why?

Norm: Why? That's the easy part. The better question is why a sharp guy like Ben would fall for such an obvious trick. That's what you should be asking. But ok, let's start at the beginning. One day I get a call from your father. Tells me Ben just graduated med school and asks if I could do something for him. Of course I can't refuse your father so I say yes. So there I am at the airport waiting for Ben to arrive, and I'm expecting someone, I don't know, short, heavy-set, round shoulders, glasses-you know the type. Then suddenly this tall, handsome young man comes up to me. "Are you Mr. Singer?" he says. I'm in shock. Here I am expecting your typical nebbish and I'm looking straight at King David. A few months go by, I help set up his practice, introduce him to a few Hollywood honchos, and before you know it he's *Foot Doctor to the Stars*. He then marries a lovely young lady, has two adorable children, and becomes active in the synagogue- so active, in fact, that many begin to see him as a future president. All good, right? Except for one thing. You see, I've been skimming off this place for years, and there's no way I can let your brother get near the books.

Michael: So you set him up.

Norm: What choice did I have? You tell me. Thousands of dollars pass through here. A tsaddik couldn't resist. Plus you have the idiot secretary, there's money on chairs, on desks, and I'm

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soon gonna give that up? Well, excuse me, Michael, but blank you. It took me too many years to reach this position and no way am I going to give it up for some young up- start no matter whose son he is. So now the question becomes how do I get rid of him? Well, that wasn't too hard. I mean after all the things I had done for him, he simply couldn't resist helping me out.

Michael: Falsifying the medical reports.

Norm: That's right. Poor guy. Probably thought I was helping out of some sense of kindness or something to do with your father.

Michael: That's what he thought.

Norm: I know and had he been anything less none of this would have happened. But he simply posed too much of a threat. Anyway, it worked perfectly. He filed some false claims, I contacted the authorities, and he was gone. I just don't understand how Ben could have fallen for it and so easily.

Michael: He was afraid you'd steer business away from him. You threatened as much.

Norm: Pure bluff. I couldn't even if I wanted. He was too popular and rumors had been spreading about me for years. Anyway, like you say, he'll be out in a few months.

Michael stands, grabs the lapels of Norm's sports jacket.

Michael: Then what? You ruined his life!

Norm pulls Michael's hands down.

Norm: Better he should ruin mine? Let me explain something to you and I'm surprised your father never told you this. People like me are everywhere. We burrow into different organizations, establish ourselves as men of honor, then when no-one's looking or maybe when everyone's looking we steal.

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Michael: And you call yourself a Jew?

Norm: That's right. The best there is, buddy boy- a survivor. But don't be so naïve. Let me ask *you* something. Did you ever wonder how your father was able to afford a middle-class life style selling crap? How'd he do it? Huh? Had a good home, drove a nice car, put you boys through college, one through med school. How'd he do it?

Michael: He worked hard.

Norm: You're as dumb as your brother. *(mockingly)* He worked hard.

Michael: Then you tell me.

Norm: He cheated! They all did. You had to or you would never get anywhere. It was all cash and carry in those days so you under-reported your income. *(laughs)* He worked hard. *(laughs)* Why do you think your father wanted that store so much? Huh? He graduated with a degree in accounting. You understand? Accounting. Imagine with that kind of knowledge in a cash and carry business that place became a goldmine. So don't start questioning me about being Jewish. You want your Jewish pure, join a yeshiva. I prefer *real* life. Anything else? I have to get to a Shiva soon.

Michael: One last question.

Norm: What?

Michael: *(pause)* Did my father have anything to do with it?

Norm: You mean with your brother?

Michael: Yes.

Norm: Now why would you think that?

Michael: I just want to know.

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Norm: No and what a strange question. *(pause)* Let me tell you a story about your father and then I must get going. You know we fought in the war together. Anyway, one night your father and I were sent on patrol, just the two of us. We were coming around the side of a church and there we were face to face with a German soldier. *(recreates scene)* Your father had his gun out so he had the drop on him. All he had to do was shoot. So your father looks him in the eye and with his gun *(makes waving away motion)* waves him away. I said, "Sy, why'd you do that? You let him get away." He didn't say anything and we never spoke about that again. That's the kind of man your father was-a lot of bark but basically a decent man. Feel better now?

Michael: Yes.

Norm: I know your father didn't treat your mother very well and what he did to your Aunt Goldie was terrible. But, well, life goes on. Anyway, it was good seeing you and if you think of going to the police I have my tracks covered.

Michael: Maybe I'm wearing a wire.

Norm: No you're not. Nice Jewish boys don't do that. Anyway, give my best to your mom.

Michael stands up. Norm puts on his jacket.

And give my best to Ben. *(pause)* No, maybe not. The secretary will see you out.

Set goes dark.

Scene 3

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Michael sits across from Benson in Benson's office. Benson has the Achieve teachers' manual on his desk in front of him.

Benson: As you know, Mr. Finberg, I'm required to do at least two formal observations a year and your time has come up.

Michael: I know.

Benson: So looking at my schedule I'd like to come in this Thursday morning.

Michael: That's fine.

Benson: Good. Well, let's see what it says in the teachers' manual.

Benson opens teachers' manual.

That would be Unit 3 (*turns pages*), Week 2, Day 4. Is that correct?

Michael: That's right.

Benson: Oh, here it is. (*reads*) "Students will form the present continuous tense by adding i-n-g at the end of a verb. For example: walk-walking, talk-talking, go-going." The lesson even provides a hand-out for students to add the i-n-g. Doesn't look too hard. Just explain the form then have the students complete the hand-out. I'll see you on Thursday then.

Michael: See you then.

Michael stands and exits Benson's office.

Scene 4

Michael stands in front of his (imaginary) class. Benson sits in a chair in the back of the room with a yellow legal pad and pen ready to take notes. On Michael's desk are the hand-outs for the lesson as well as a stack of 3x5 cards. Michael stands in front of a blackboard.

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Michael: Good morning, children. *(pause)* Thank you. That's very nice. I hope you had a good night's sleep. So today we're going to learn a new verb ending. Yes, Harry? *(pause)* No, not e-d. We studied that last week. No today we are going to add *(writes on blackboard and speaks)* i-n-g. It's pronounced ing like in ring or sing. Understand? And who can tell me when we use the i-n-g form? *(pause)* Mary? *(pause)* Right! Very good. We use it to describe something we are doing now.

Michael goes to his desk and takes the hand-outs.

So I have here a hand-out. *(displays paper to the class)*. On this side is the verb and on the other side we write the verb and simply add the i-n-g. Does everybody understand? *(pause)* Good.

Michael is about to hand out the papers but stops himself. He looks down at a student, then looks at Benson, then looks again at the student and smiles. It is the moment of truth.

No, I have a better idea.

Michael puts the papers back on his desk and gets the 3x5 cards.

How many of you would like to be an actor or an actress? You know, like in the movies or TV? *(pause)* Good. Almost everyone. Well, today we're going to do a little acting. Let me show you. *(displays one 3x5 card)* Who can read this word? Jimmy? *(pause)* You got the first part of the word. It's throw, what? *(pause)* Good! Throw-ing. See the i-n-g? So here's what we're going to do. I'm going to hand each of you a card with the verb on the back. Please don't show anyone your word. Then when you're ready, you'll come to the front of the class and act your word and we'll try to guess it. Understand?

Benson: Mr. Finberg. *(louder)* Mr. Finberg! *(stand up)* This is not what we discussed!

Benson takes his pad and leaves angrily.

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Scene 5

It's the end of the school day. Michael is in his classroom putting papers in his book bag. Jerry enters.

Jerry: How'd it go?

Michael: Get ready to represent me.

Jerry: You defied Benson?

Michael: Yes.

Jerry: Why?

Michael: Jerry, I've told you a million times. I hate scripted lessons. I didn't become a teacher to follow some ridiculous pacing schedule. He wants to write me up, fine. I used to have some respect for him, but now he's just your typical corporate hack probably angling for a position with *(raises fist, mockingly)* Achieve!

As they speak, Chris Simmons passes Michael's room and enters Selina's. They hold hands, smile, then kiss.

Jerry: Mike, no-one likes scripted lessons but you gotta play the game. Look, we've kissed a lot of ass in this place for a lot of years. So just kiss some more.

Michael: Jerry, I may not know my students as well as I should, but I certainly know them better than some faceless bureaucrat from downtown. Anyway, I gotta go. We'll talk tomorrow.

Jerry: Alright. Have a good night.

Michael: You too.

Jerry leaves. Michael puts on his jacket, turns off the light, closes the door, and walks to Selina's room. He enters to find Chris and Selina kissing. Set goes black.

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Scene 6

Michael and Rita are standing in Rita's kitchen (stage right). She is making coffee. There is a plate of danish in the center of the table. Stage left is a restaurant table with four chairs. The table is covered with a white table cloth and place settings. Menus are stacked in the middle of the table.

Rita: Did you try calling Jenny? Maybe she'll take you back.

Michael: Mom, you don't know Asians and especially Vietnamese. Once they make up their mind they never change. How do you think they won the war?

Rita: You can at least try.

Michael: *(pause)* I did.

Rita: And?

Michael: *(shakes his head)* No. *(pause, shouts)* Come on, everything's ready.

Ben: *(off stage)* Be right there.

Ben enters the kitchen stage right.

Michael: There he is. *Foot Doctor to the Felons.*

Ben: *(amusingly)* Shut up.

Rita: Leave him alone. Let's just be thankful we're all together.

Michael and Ben sit. Rita pours each coffee and sits. Each takes a danish from the plate.

Michael: Have you given any thought what you might do?

Ben: I don't know. I mean there's always Israel. I think I can practice there.

Sy's Bargain House

Rita: Oh, so now it's Israel? California's not far enough?

Ben: I'm just thinking. Nothing's definite. Now I just need to recover. How 'bout you? Any more love interests?

Rita: Didn't Michael tell you? I'm getting a cat.

Ben: Sounds good.

Rita: A female.

Ben: Even better. *(to Michael)* And what are you gonna do?

Michael: About school?

Ben: Yeah.

Michael: Bend down and pucker up.

Ben: That's it? You're not gonna fight?

Michael: *(resignedly)* I can't.

Ben: Hey, where's all those high-minded ideals?

Michael: Got lost in a paycheck.

Ben: Yeah. I know all about that.

There is an uncomfortable pause as all drink and eat.

Michael: *(puts his hand over Ben's hand)* You'll be fine.

Ben: Thanks.

Another pause as all eat and drink.

Michael: Mom, do you ever think about those Sunday dinners at the diner?

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Rita: All the time. 7 o'clock sharp. Oh, how your father got so angry if either you boys came late.

Sy slowly enters stage left and stands midway between the kitchen and the restaurant table.

Ben: I remember.

Rita, Michael, and Ben smile at each other, stand, and walk towards the restaurant table. Sy meets them.

Sy: *(to Michael and Ben)* Why can't the two of you ever get here on time?

Waiter enters stage left.

Waiter: How many?

Sy: Four.

Waiter leads them to the table.

Waiter: Here you are. I'll be back in a few minutes to take your order.

Sy: Thank you.

Waiter exits stage left.

OK. Ben, you sit over there *(points)*. Michael, there *(points)*. Your mother will sit here and I'll sit next to your mother.

All sit. They pass around the menus and look what to order.

Ben, you know what you want?

Ben: I think I'll try the shrimp scampi.

Sy: Shrimp scampi. Who orders shrimp scampi? Fine, you want shrimp scampi then you better eat all of it. *(disgustingly)* Oy, shrimp scampi. When you gonna learn how to order? How 'bout you, Michael?

Sy's Bargain House

Michael: I think I'll have the chopped sirloin.

Sy: Good. *(to Ben)* See, now that's ordering like a normal human being.

All look up at Sy as lights fade.

Scene 7

Michael stands outside the entrance to the nail salon where Jenny works. There is a sign above the entrance called Super Nails. Jenny exits the salon to go home. She wears jeans and a blouse. As she exits she turns to say goodbye to a colleague.

Jenny: Goodnight. See you tomorrow.

Michael: Jenny, wait.

Jenny sees him and walks by.

Jenny!

Jenny continues walking. Michael speaks Vietnamese.

Lam on dung lai. Toi muon noi chuyen voi em. [Please stop. I need to speak to you.]

Jenny turns back to look at Michael.

Jenny: What you say?

Michael: Lam on dung lai. Toi muon noi chuyen voi em.

Jenny approaches Michael.

Jenny: You speak Vietnam language?

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Michael: I'm trying. I study every day but it's very hard.

Jenny: Yes, your Vietnam sound very bad.

Michael: I know. Maybe you can help me?

Jenny: Ask your girlfriend. She can help you.

Michael: I don't have a girlfriend.

Jenny: *(sarcastically)* I so sorry.

Jenny turns and continues walking. In desperation, Michael speaks Vietnamese again.

Michael: Lam on tha thu cho toi. Toi xin loi. Toi nho em rat nhieu. [Please forgive me. I'm so sorry. I missed you.]

Jenny hears Michael's words and stops. She wipes a tear from her eye. She turns and looks at Michael.

Jenny: Anh muon em tha thu cho anh? [You mean it?]

Michael: Vang. Anh muon nhu vay. [Yes. I mean it.]

Jenny approaches Michael, looks at him intently, smiles, then points.

Jenny: Putz.

Jenny and Michael smile at each other as lights dim.

End of play

Sy's Bargain House