

SY'S BARGAIN HOUSE

A play

by

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Cast of Characters (age range)

Sy Finberg (late fifties to sixties)

Rita Finberg (mid-fifties to sixties)

Goldie (fifties to early sixties)

Young Sy (twenties to thirties)

Young Rita (twenties to thirties)

Young Goldie (twenties)

Mama (sixties to seventies)

It is a summer evening. SY FINBERG and his wife, RITA, enter through the front door, having come home from their last day operating a mom-and-pop clothing store called Sy's Bargain House. RITA sets down some bags containing the last items from the store she wanted to save. SY falls into the man chair. RITA looks at SY, observing his weariness and sense of regret. Their clothing is dusty from the closeout of the store.

RITA

Something to drink?

SY

See if we have any soda.

RITA enters the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, and takes out a can of soda. She gets two glasses from the cupboard and pours soda into each. She brings the glasses into the living room, hands one to SY, places the other one on the coffee table, and sits on the sofa.

RITA

Here you are.

SY

Thanks.

RITA

How do you feel?

SY

Tired. It's been a long day. It's been a long month.

RITA

I know. But it's over. Now we can relax.

SY

Feel very strange waking up tomorrow.

RITA

Well, tomorrow's Sunday. You wouldn't work anyway.

SY

I used to. Took in two hundred dollars on a Sunday. Even brought Michael with me, but he wasn't much help. Kept complaining he needed a day off. Who needs a day off from high school? Girls and sports. That's all high school is.

RITA

It wasn't just girls and sports. He worked very hard. You should be proud of him.

SY

I am if I ever get to see him.

RITA

He's busy. He's a public school teacher.

SY

(pause) I rest my case. And Ben, not much better.

RITA

He's in California. Can't expect him to stop by for lunch.

SY

When's the last time he was here—two years ago? He's so busy being Foot Doctor to the Stars! I think he forgot about us altogether.

RITA

Stop it. He's busy.

SY

Too busy to call?

RITA

I'm sure he'll call—both of 'em will.

SY

Maybe, but let's face it. No one thinks about parents these days. 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 sons 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? Anyway, it was a great ride. Forty-three years at the same location and only two break-ins. Not bad, considering the neighborhood. And we sure had some laughs. I'll tell ya, between Mary the laundry queen, Florence with her underwear, and Tom "them's women is crazy," there was never a dull moment at Sy's Bargain House.

RITA

That's for sure.

SY

And how 'bout the help we had? First Billy, then Eleanor, then Betty. See, that's why we were successful—'cause we hired from the neighborhood. Gave the store a real family atmosphere.

RITA

You're right.

SY

And all the jobbers on Second Street: Bell, Sussman, Fickler. All gone. No computers then.

Business was conducted with a handshake. That's why I always told the boys, "Your word is your bond." You can't stay in business with a sullied reputation. Now you walk in those 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 we'll be fine.

RITA

What's the matter?

SY

I don't know. Just wish we could've passed it on. That would have made three generations of mom-and-pops in the Finberg family. Mom had the store thirty-one years, we had it forty-three, and who knows how long Michael or Ben could have kept it going.

RITA

Let's be honest. You didn't exactly make it easy for them—always finding fault.

SY

That's true. But there's a right way to sell and a wrong way and, given the choice, they always picked the wrong way. Still, we made our goal: to be the number one mom-and-pop shop in the city of Philadelphia! Now that's saying something, 'specially when you consider how many mom-and-pops there were, and some in better locations. Can't say we lived too shabby, either. Trips to London, Paris . . . and how 'bout those times in the Catskills, huh? Such entertainment—Totie Fields, Buddy Hackett, Eddie Fisher. Unbelievable!

RITA

(sarcastic) Unbelievable.

SY

And all those Christmas Eves. 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 are you saying?

RITA

Nothing.

SY

Come on, what are you trying to say?

RITA

Never mind.

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?

SY

That's right.

RITA

That's smelling like a rose?

SY

Damn right it is.

RITA

Well, excuse me, but I can think of some other smells to better describe that.

SY

Oh, I get it. You still wish I had stayed with the firm.

RITA

I think that sometimes. I'm allowed my dreams too, aren't I? Didn't I just finish forty-three 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'd wanted to sell I could have gotten a job at Gimbels or Wanamaker's 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. You had everything. You were working for Chapman Accounting with a chance for advancement. I remember how handsome you were in your dark suit.

Lights come up on kitchen. We see YOUNG RITA preparing breakfast. YOUNG SY enters wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and tie. YOUNG RITA turns.

YOUNG RITA

Look at you—a true professional. Here, let me straighten your tie.

YOUNG SY

Thanks.

They kiss, hold hands, and gaze at each other lovingly.

YOUNG RITA

You know what I love about you?

YOUNG SY

What?

YOUNG RITA

Your hair. How did you get such thick, beautiful hair? No one in your family has such hair.

YOUNG SY

My father had good hair. Too bad you never got to meet him.

YOUNG RITA

I know. Sit down, breakfast is ready.

YOUNG SY sits.

Coffee?

YOUNG SY

Thanks.

YOUNG RITA pours coffee into YOUNG SY'S cup. She messes up his hair.

YOUNG SY

Hey!

YOUNG SY and YOUNG RITA laugh. He pulls her to him and they kiss. Slow fade-out. Scene switches back to living room where ADULT RITA and ADULT SY sit.

RITA

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. So when Mom wanted to give up the store I pounced on it, and from that day on, not once did I have an ounce of regret. That store was my stage, and I relished every minute of it.

RITA

But at the same location? Sure, at one time it was a great street. There was Ohlbaum's, Goldberg's, 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

Stop it. Now just stop it.

RITA

You couldn't see the neighborhood was falling apart? I'm not saying they weren't nice people, but didn't you once think about moving? At least after the flood, with all the insurance money, that was the time to move.

SY

Where should I have gone? The suburbs? Imagine me there dealing with all those rich, educated snobs. They'd look at me like some kinda freak. And you seem to forget something.

RITA

Here goes.

RITA and SY

I was a fixture in the community.

SY

That's right, 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 and it's snowing did I get out, open the locks, just to sell a single pair of Buster Brown socks? 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 just anywhere. Try walking into Macy's a minute after closing. See if you get in.

RITA

I want to know something.

SY

What?

RITA

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

SY

Ask you?

RITA

That's right. I'll never forget.

Lights rise on kitchen as YOUNG RITA is preparing dinner.

I was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

YOUNG SY enters.

YOUNG SY

Honey, sit down. I have something important to tell you.

YOUNG RITA beams.

YOUNG RITA

I think I know what it is. You got a promotion, right?

YOUNG SY

Better. Sit down. I think you're gonna like this.

YOUNG RITA sits.

YOUNG RITA

Tell me!

YOUNG SY sits across from her.

YOUNG SY

We're taking over the store.

YOUNG RITA

What?

YOUNG SY

I had a long talk with Mom. You know her eyesight's getting worse and worse. So she's getting out and giving the store to me.

YOUNG RITA is shocked.

YOUNG RITA

What?

YOUNG SY

She's giving up the store and we're taking it over . . . sometime next month.

YOUNG RITA

What are you talking—taking over the store?

YOUNG SY

I just told you. Mom can't do it anymore. She wants to retire.

YOUNG RITA

This makes no sense. What about your sister? I thought she was taking it over.

YOUNG SY

She's not interested.

YOUNG RITA

Not interested? She's worked there since she was a kid.

YOUNG SY

You know Goldie. She can never make up her mind.

YOUNG RITA

I don't understand this whole thing. You have a job, a good job with a future.

YOUNG SY

You know I don't like working there. You see how upset I am when I get home. You should have seen him today—running up and down like a maniac. It all works out. I get to leave the firm and we take over.

YOUNG RITA

What am I supposed to do? I don't know the first thing about selling.

YOUNG SY

You'll learn.

YOUNG RITA

It's so far from here. It's the other side of town.

YOUNG SY

We'll have to move.

YOUNG RITA

Move where?

YOUNG SY

To the store.

YOUNG RITA

Stay where?

YOUNG SY

We'll live on the second floor. We'll have to move some boxes.

YOUNG RITA

Oh, my God. Tell me I'm dreaming.

YOUNG SY

You're not dreaming. We're taking over the store.

YOUNG RITA

What if I don't want?

YOUNG SY

I don't care.

YOUNG RITA

I'm not doing it.

YOUNG SY

Yes, you are.

YOUNG RITA

This whole thing makes no sense. We have a nice place. You have a good job. Now all of a sudden you want to change everything?

YOUNG SY

We're doing it and that's that.

YOUNG RITA

I'll leave you. I'm not doing it.

YOUNG SY

Really? Where you gonna go?

YOUNG RITA

I'll find a job.

YOUNG SY

Doing what? You have no skill.

Lights fade on kitchen. Scene switches back to living room where ADULT RITA and ADULT SY sit.

RITA

You were right. What could I do? I couldn't move back with my parents. But didn't my feelings count for anything?

SY

No.

RITA

But you could have asked. I think I deserved that.

SY

I can't believe we're discussing this. Life is not so democratic. I wanted the store and that was that.

RITA

But you could have asked.

SY

Okay, Rita, do you think we should take over the store? Oh, wait. I just sold the building to the Hispanics and they're turning it into a grocery—or bodega, I think they call it.

RITA

I'm sure he asked *his* wife.

SY

Maybe. But I know one thing. He did what he felt was best, same as me. You got anything else you want to talk about? I wanna watch the Phillies.

RITA

Yes.

SY

What?

RITA

Explain how I became your slave.

SY

What are you talking?

RITA

How did I become your slave? Finally, after ten years we move, and here I am calling every ten minutes to see if you're busy.

Lights go up in the kitchen. YOUNG RITA is speaking on the phone. YOUNG SY answers from center stage.

YOUNG RITA

How's everything?

YOUNG SY

Fine. You do what you have to do.

YOUNG RITA

Are you sure? I can come down if you need me.

YOUNG SY

I'm fine. Everything's under control.

YOUNG RITA

Okay, but call if you need me.

YOUNG SY

I will.

ADULT RITA

Then you'd come home and be angry.

YOUNG SY storms into the kitchen.

YOUNG SY

Where the hell were you? I got so busy, you wouldn't believe. All day I'm thinking, "Where is she? Why isn't she here?"

YOUNG RITA

You told me not to come in.

YOUNG SY

You couldn't tell I needed you to come down?

YOUNG RITA

You told me not to come in!

YOUNG SY

You're ridiculous.

Lights fade on kitchen area. Scene switches back to ADULT RITA and ADULT SY in living room.

RITA

Then when I came down you'd get mad if I couldn't find something.

SY

You're right—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 in the kitchen. 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. How many times did I remind you—the minute they walk into the store they are holding our money. They may be keeping it warm, but it's still our money. That's how you think when you're in business—the customer is the custodian of our money, and it's 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. 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

We have it! We always have it! 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 till he has an 11. Or maybe he wants a long-sleeved shirt of a certain design and we only have it in short sleeves, then you tell him, "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. 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 tear *(makes a tearing motion)* the label from a 16 and walla' (!) *(holds up an imaginary jean)* he has a 14 jean. Did they 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 enjoy parting with money. I mean, who else but your father *(takes dollar bills from his pocket)* pulls money out of his pocket just to

look at it?

There's a knock on the door, interrupting their argument.

SY

Who's knocking this time of night?

RITA walks to front door and looks through the peephole.

RITA

Oh, my God! It's your sister!

RITA opens the door. GOLDIE enters. She has a determined, angry look due to her strong moral compass. She gives the appearance of someone who has struggled most of her life. She wears a lightweight jacket.

Goldie! How are you? We haven't seen you in years.

GOLDIE

Hello, Rita. Is Sy in?

RITA

He's right here. Come in.

SY stands.

SY

Well, look what the wind blew in. Forty years you don't talk to me and now you come in?

GOLDIE

I drove past the store today, saw it was closed.

SY

That's right. I retired.

GOLDIE

I figured. You sell the building?

Yeah. **SY**

To who? **GOLDIE**

Puerto Ricans. **SY**

Get a good price? **GOLDIE**

Not bad. **SY**

Goldie, sit down. Like something to drink? **RITA**

I'm okay. **GOLDIE**

What do you want? You have something to tell me? **SY**

It's why I'm here. **GOLDIE**

What? **SY**

My cut. **GOLDIE**

Your what? **SY**

My cut. I want my cut. **GOLDIE**

SY

What the hell you talkin' about?

GOLDIE

What you owe me—my cut.

SY

I don't owe you shit.

RITA

Goldie, there was nothing in the sale said we owed you any money. What are you talking about?

GOLDIE

He knows what I'm talking about—*(to SY)* right, Sy?

SY sits silently.

Oh, my God! You never told your wife, did you? Or you gave her some cockamamie story. Well then, let me tell her.

GOLDIE turns to RITA as SY continues to sit silently.

Rita, you remember the first time we met?

RITA

I remember.

GOLDIE

I was working with Mom. In fact, I worked with Mom for many years. I think I was about ten when I sold my first item. You know I had long, curly hair. Everyone called me Goldilocks. I loved that place and especially loved working with my mother, and I was sure one day she'd give me the store, once it got hard for her. I mean, who was I? I 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. Everyone loved Goldie. In fact, Mom and I discussed changing the name to “Goldie’s” once she retired. Then in 1950 Mom suddenly falls ill, and her eyesight’s starting to fail her. Well, you can’t be a sharp merchandiser with faltering eyesight. 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 he wants the store, using all kinds of reasons and twisting her mind. And here’s my favorite: A man who barely sets foot in synagogue except on Yom Kippur is now this great Talmudic scholar and tells Mom as the oldest son of a Jewish family he’s *entitled* to the store. I work there since I’m a kid, but he’s *entitled* to it like he’s from some great line of Hasidic rabbis. Moreover, he tells Mom 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 Chapman was entirely based in Philadelphia. Of course I tried to convince her otherwise, but she was afraid to lose you. *(to RITA)* So Mom calls me in the back.

Lights go up on MAMA and YOUNG GOLDIE. MAMA sits at a table with two chairs while YOUNG GOLDIE stands behind a counter folding merchandise. MAMA is pained by what she has to say.

MAMA

Goldie, come here.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Be right there—just putting away a few things.

YOUNG GOLDIE approaches MAMA.

What is it?

MAMA

Sit down. I need to tell you something.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Tell me later. Someone needs to be in the store.

MAMA

I can see. Sit down.

YOUNG GOLDIE sits.

YOUNG GOLDIE

What?

MAMA

I need to tell you something. I made a decision.

YOUNG GOLDIE

About what?

MAMA

About the store.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Oh, you mean the sign? Never mind. We don't have to change. A new sign is too expensive anyway.

MAMA

Not that.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Then what?

MAMA

Goldie, please forgive me. I know how much you love the store, but I've decided to give it to your brother.

YOUNG GOLDIE is shocked.

YOUNG GOLDIE

What?

MAMA

I'm sorry. Your brother came to me and said he wants the store. I couldn't say no.

YOUNG GOLDIE

You couldn't say no? What are you talking? I've been working here since I was ten. He never put a day in his life in this place.

MAMA

I know, but he's the oldest son of a Jewish family, so he's entitled to it.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Entitled? Where'd you learn such a big word?

MAMA

Your brother. He told it to me.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Mama, we're not in Russia anymore. No one's entitled to anything. This is America. No one thinks like that.

MAMA

Well, I do. He says if he doesn't get the store he'll have to move, and I can't afford to lose him. I'm not young anymore.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Mama, you can't do this. This is all I know.

MAMA

I'm sorry.

YOUNG GOLDIE

What about me? What about my life? What am I supposed to do?

MAMA

He says you can work for him.

YOUNG GOLDIE

I'm gonna work for *him*? He hardly knows where the bathroom is. How many times the store's crowded and I say, "We could really use your help." Then he gives me some crazy face and runs off to be with his friends. Meanwhile, you and me are running up and down steps like a maniac while he's outside having a good time.

MAMA

I know.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Then why you giving it to him? He never gave this store a second thought.

MAMA

I told you. We're a Jewish family, and according to Jewish tradition the oldest son is the most important.

YOUNG GOLDIE

He doesn't even go to synagogue!

MAMA

On Yom Kippur.

YOUNG GOLDIE

That's it—one day a year. I can read Hebrew, he can't. Mama, please, you can't do this. I've put my whole life in this business.

MAMA

I'm sorry.

YOUNG GOLDIE gets down on one knee.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Mama, please, I beg you.

Scene shifts back to the living room with ADULT GOLDIE, SY, and RITA.

GOLDIE

Just explain one thing to me. You get out of the service, go to college, graduate in accounting. What suddenly possessed you to want it?

SY

I had my reasons.

GOLDIE

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

GOLDIE approaches SY.

Where's my cut?

GOLDIE slaps SY. SY remains seated, looking stoic.

Where's my cut?

GOLDIE slaps SY. SY remains unemotional.

RITA

Goldie!

GOLDIE

(points to RITA as she continues looking at SY) You stay out of this. This is between me and my brother.

RITA

What?

GOLDIE

(to SY) Where's my cut, huh?

GOLDIE slaps SY. SY appears angry, as he's had enough.

Where's my cut for ruining my life, you piece of shit!

SY catches GOLDIE'S hand as she's about to slap him again.

SY

Hit me again and I'll flatten ya.

SY and GOLDIE look at each other intently. GOLDIE slaps SY again. RITA approaches GOLDIE and slaps her across the face. Both GOLDIE and SY appear startled.

RITA

There is no cut! My husband wanted the store and he got it. We put forty years into that business, and you think you can suddenly show up and demand some cut? Are you out of your mind? We slaved day and night in that place. What you think—*(holds her arms out wide)* all this fell from trees? We suffered as much as you. Sorry it didn't work out, but Sy wanted that store and nothing was going to stop him—not you, not Mom, not even me. Now, get the hell out of our house, and don't you ever raise a hand to my husband again.

GOLDIE takes a tissue out of her pants pocket and wipes her eyes. She moves to the sofa, retrieves her jacket, walks to the front door, then turns to face SY.

GOLDIE

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

RITA

Get out.

GOLDIE slams the door behind her. SY and RITA look at each other; RITA fierce and determined, SY sitting stunned as lights fade. Lights open to reveal YOUNG GOLDIE standing behind a counter folding shirts and sweaters while MAMA sits at a table with a handbag resting on another chair. YOUNG SY enters.

YOUNG GOLDIE

Well, look what the wind blew in. What are you doing here? Came to help?

YOUNG SY gives YOUNG GOLDIE a crazy face.

YOUNG SY

Yeah, right. Where's Mom?

YOUNG GOLDIE

She's in the back. *(to MAMA)* Mama, got a surprise for ya. *(to YOUNG SY)* Go on, she'll be happy to see you.

YOUNG SY approaches MAMA.

YOUNG SY

Mama!

MAMA

Ziza!

YOUNG SY bends to kiss her.

YOUNG SY

Got out early so I thought I'd come and say hello.

MAMA

Such a surprise. Sit down.

YOUNG SY

How you feeling?

MAMA

Tired. And my eyes not getting better.

YOUNG SY

What the doctor say?

MAMA

What does he know? Take this medicine, take that medicine. He knows as much as me. Look, I want to show you something.

MAMA takes a paper from her handbag and unfolds it.

Don't tell your sister. I went to a sign maker. Here, look. This is the new sign. Like it? "Goldie's." We'll have to get someone to take down the old sign.

YOUNG SY

Mama, that's what I wanna talk to you about.

YOUNG SY turns to watch YOUNG GOLDIE fold items, then turns and leans to MAMA as lights fade.

End of Play