

CARDS AND SPINNERS

A Play by Dan Smirlock

e-Mail: dsmirlock@gmail.com

Phone: 518-221-3855

Number of Characters: Four

Estimated Running Time: 70 to 75 minutes

Characters

David Oxenblatter and Mary Smith, a married couple in their late 50s.

Brian and Julia Fitzpatrick, a married couple in their late 40s.

Place:

An upscale suburb in the Hudson Valley.

Scene 1: Mid-June, 2019, about 6:30 in the evening. Somewhere outdoors.

Scene 2: Immediately afterwards. The living room of the Fitzpatricks' suburban home.

Scene 3: Mid-February, 2020, about 8:30 PM. The Fitzpatricks' living room.

Scene 4: Immediately afterwards. Outside the Fitzpatricks' house.

Scene 5: January 20th, 2021, a little after 10 in the morning. The identically-furnished living room of David and Mary's suburban home.

Scene 6: Immediately afterwards. The Fitzpatricks' living room.

Scene 7: Immediately afterwards. David and Mary's living room.

Scene 8: An early Saturday evening in May, 2022. The Fitzpatricks' living room.

(A note on staging, costumes, and music: The play has a single set, described at the start of Scene 2. The two couples occupy it alternately in scenes 5, 6, and 7. It is designed to be performed without an intermission and with as little time as possible between the four clusters of scenes. If the director prefers, the characters can wear the same "business-casual" clothing they wear in the opening scenes during most of the play. There can be brief intervals between the clusters of scenes to permit such costume changes as are required or desired. The play can also be performed with brief musical intervals between the clusters of scenes to permit costume changes and signify the time shifts within the play. One possible approach would be to use

Marshall Crenshaw's "Fantastic Planet of Love" before the start and after the end of the play; The Pet Shop Boys' "I Want a Dog" after Scene 2; The chorus and last verse of James McMurtry's "Candyland" after Scene 4; and [as called for in the script] Taj Mahal's "Cakewalk" after Scene 7. All music, including "Cakewalk," can be dispensed with if the rights are problematic or the director prefers.)

Scene 1

(David enters right front. A completely darkened stage is behind him. He is dressed in business-casual clothing—not a suit, but not jeans. He is holding a wooden cane, but conspicuously not using it.)

DAVID (*addressing the audience*): When you have a weird name like David Oxenblatter, as I do, you want to preserve the balance of the universe by marrying someone with an ordinary name like Mary Smith, as I did. Now, Mary has a sister who lives in Queens, and the day came not long ago when her sister needed major surgery, and Mary of course wanted to be there for her. Our brother-in-law is a heavy smoker, and Mary, with her asthma and allergies, can't handle the cigarette smell that pervades their house. But who wants to stay at a hotel in Queens? So Mary books a hotel in Manhattan, packs up her crappy generic suitcase, drives to Manhattan, checks in, meets her sister at the hospital in Queens the next morning, waits while she has the surgery, stays in her hospital room overnight, takes her home the next afternoon, and turns her over to her husband.

A stressful situation, obviously, and I figured we could both use a night together in Manhattan, so the day after the surgery I made a dinner reservation at our favorite Manhattan restaurant, packed up *my* crappy generic suitcase, parked the kids with the au pair, left work early, and took the train to the City. When I get to the hotel, I go to the front desk and say "I'm Mary Smith's husband. She told you I'd be coming." And they give me the room key. I get to the room. There on the floor is Mary's crappy generic suitcase. There on the desk is Mary's phone, charging; she must have forgotten it. But no Mary; apparently she's not back from Queens yet. I'm kind of tired, so I lie down on the bed to have a rest and wait for Mary. And I wait and I wait and I wait. There's no point in calling her, because she doesn't have her phone. More time passes. We miss the dinner reservation. Still no Mary. I'm starting to get really worried. No, actually, I finish getting worried, and move beyond worried to frantic. Now of course, I'd rather have a root canal without an anesthetic than call Mary's sister a few hours after she gets home from surgery, but what else am I going to do? So I call. Is Mary still there? No, she left three hours ago.

Oh-kay. Don't panic, I tell myself. Just read your book. I try to read my book. I read the same paragraph a dozen times without a single word of it penetrating. I might as well be reading Sanskrit. So that didn't work. Why don't I take a shower? That usually helps me relax. But that doesn't quite work either. See, I'm completely useless in a crisis, because I veer between the extremes of helpless, paralyzed panic and total ironic detachment. So there I am in the shower, and half of me is still going nuts, but now the other half, the dissociative half, makes an appearance, and is viewing this whole thing from a distance, as if it were a movie involving

someone else. And that half is chuckling to himself a little and shaking his half a head and thinking “What a *really bad day* for the Smith sisters.” Not helpful.

So I get out of the shower, I can’t be bothered with the nicety of a towel, I’m dripping wet, I’m naked, and I’m so agitated I start pacing around the room. On my rounds, I pass by Mary’s phone and see it’s open to Spotify. After a few circuits, I think to myself, why don’t I find out what was the last music she listened to before she died? I’m a sentimental guy, I might want to play it at the funeral. I check the phone. It’s hip-hop music. Gee, I think, as I keep pacing, you’re married to someone for twenty years, you imagine you know her intimately, and it turns out you really don’t—I thought Mary hated hip-hop. I do another circuit around the room. Something is stirring faintly in the back of my half brain. There’s a dim, formless light, it’s shimmering, it’s taking shape, if only I could get it in focus, no, I can’t quite, if only I could see it clearly I might...but I keep blinking just before I...

And then the scales fall from my eyes. I look at the phone again. It’s not Mary’s, though it’s close. I look at the crappy generic suitcase again. It’s not Mary’s, though it’s close. I rifle through the drawers. There’s a train ticket in the name of Mary L. Smith. That’s not my wife’s generic name, though—duh--it’s close.

Holy shit! Wrong room! I have to get out of here! I’m still dripping wet. I grab my suitcase, which fortunately I haven’t unpacked. I leave the room. I step into the hall. Ahh...I made it. Now I’ll just close the door quietly and...oh, wait, I’m not wearing any clothes. I go back in the room, I put on my clothes, I leave the room, I go down to the front desk. This time, they give me the right key, as long as there’s not a third Mary Smith staying at the hotel. I go to the right room. I unlock the door. Mary A. Smith, my wonderful wife, is standing there. She’s alive. My legs buckle. I actually fall to my knees, put my arms around her legs, hold her tightly, and start weeping with relief. (*He exits right.*)

Scene 2

(As David exits, the lights come up quickly on the living room of the Fitzpatricks’ suburban home. There is a door right rear, to the right of which, nearly offstage, is a standing coat rack. In and towards the center are a medium-sized couch and two armchairs, close enough to permit conversation among all their occupants. There are good-sized end tables on either side of the couch and next to the two chairs. When the lights come up, Mary is sitting at one end of the couch. Julia is sitting in the armchair more nearly opposite Mary. There are filled wine glasses on the end tables adjacent to both women. They, too, are dressed in business-casual clothing.)

JULIA: My God, Mary. That’s quite a story. And what did *you* say?

MARY: Exactly what anyone would say at such a tender moment when somebody’s four hours late, weeping uncontrollably at your feet, dripping water all over you, and has deprived you of the best osso buco in New York: Where the *fuck* have you been?

JULIA: Of course. (*They drink.*) Listen, Mary. You know Brian got fired, right? (*Mary nods.*) He’d never ask this himself, but I...(*Julia pauses as she hears the door start to open; it opens*

and Brian enters. He is dressed more casually and carelessly than the others. As he walks towards them, she resumes, loudly enough to be for Brian's benefit.) So when is the interview?

BRIAN: *(To Julia.)* Hi, Sweetheart. *(To Mary.)* Mary! So good to see you. It's been...what? Since September? *(He walks over to her. She rises, a bit hesitantly and awkwardly. They embrace briefly, and she sits back down.)* Still don't have your sea legs, I see. How's your hip?

MARY: Pretty good, actually, for something that sets off metal detectors.

BRIAN: Do you need a cane?

MARY: Only as...I was about to say "a crutch." As a security blanket. In fact, I left it at CVS last night. Leaned it against the wall while I was getting a prescription and then forgot about it. David's supposed to pick it up on his way here.

BRIAN: What's this about an interview?

MARY: Yes. Next week. I was just telling Julia. One of the TV newsmagazines.

BRIAN: Which one?

MARY: I honestly don't remember. 48 Hours? 60 Minutes? Seven Seconds? Several Eternities? One of those.

BRIAN: So camera crews? Makeup artists? Hairdressers?

MARY: No, no; this is just a pre-interview interview. I imagine they want to see if we're telegenic, articulate, and animated enough for prime time.

BRIAN: And why you?

MARY: Oh, you know how journalists are. They know the story they're going to tell, and then they go looking for it. They're doing a feature on parents who use surrogates to have kids, and I gather they wanted *(ticks off criteria on her fingers)* a straight, old couple with young kids, preferably twins, who used an egg donor and a separate surrogate, and aren't celebrities or obscenely wealthy. We're the only ones they could find. Hell, we may actually *be* the only ones.

BRIAN: And you're doing this because...?

MARY: Because David wants to.

BRIAN: Why on earth?

MARY: You know how he is. If he could inject favorable attention into his veins, he would.

BRIAN: And he thinks this will be favorable?

MARY: He admits he's not sure. He says we'll do the pre-interview and see how we feel. He knows I've got veto power.

BRIAN: And how *are* the twins?

MARY: (*Drawn out*) Well... we just found out that...

(*A knock at the door. Brian answers. David is standing there, carrying the cane.*)

BRIAN: David. Come on in. (*They shake hands warmly.*) Long time. Great to see you. (*David follows Brian in.*)

DAVID: Your living room's all different. What did you do to it?

JULIA: We liked your layout so much that we copied it.

DAVID: I knew it looked a bit familiar.

MARY (*To Julia*): He doesn't miss a thing, does he?

DAVID (*Walking over to Julia*): Julia, my love. We've missed you. (*They embrace briefly.*) Sorry I'm late. There's no such thing as a quick trip to CVS.

BRIAN: That's a universally-true axiom.

MARY: Like "never order anything that's misspelled on the menu."

BRIAN: Or "the aggregate weight of a married couple is a constant."

DAVID: Or "anything that can go wrong, will, unless something else goes wrong first."

JULIA (*serious*): Or "you reap *exactly* what you sow."

(*A brief, slightly awkward pause*)

DAVID (*handing Mary the cane*) Your alpenstock. (*She leans the cane against the side of the couch; David sits at the other end of the couch.*)

MARY: Thank you, David. Any problems getting it back?

DAVID: Nope. I went to the Customer Service Desk, said to the kid behind the counter, "My wife left her cane here last night. Did you happen to find it?" The kid sort of smirks, reaches under the counter, and comes up with a fistful of canes. "Which one's hers?" he says. I said "I guess this happens a lot with us older folks." "Yup," he said.

BRIAN: David, I know you're a Cabernet guy. We have a decent one. I'm about to have some. Are you interested?

DAVID: Acutely.

BRIAN: Back in a moment. (*He exits left.*)

DAVID: Just came from the doctor myself, Julia. Amazing what happens as you zero in on sixty. You know about Mary's hip. Doctor says I'm in pretty good shape for a guy my age. But still... where does this shit come from? You never hear of it until you get old, and then there's an infestation. DeQuervan's Syndrome? Peyronie's Disease? Dupuytren's Contracture? Haglund's

Deformity? And then, down the road, if you're extra lucky, Alzheimer's. What do you have to do to get a disease named after you? Discover it? Invent it? Cause it? Have it? Die from it?

MARY: You're being pretty humorous about all this for a guy who went to the ER three days ago. (*To Julia*): He went in for chest pains.

DAVID: Actually, I had them when I got there. I admit I was a little panicky about it, but it turned out just to be heartburn. That's another thing about aging; you worry about stuff that wouldn't have fazed you five or ten years ago.

JULIA (*changing the subject*): David, do you remember my colleague Alex Mormino?

DAVID: I met him at a conference, didn't I? A partner at your firm. We talked about you once we made the connection.

JULIA: So I gather. He remembers you too. I saw him yesterday, and he said to me, that friend of yours, David Whatsisname, does he have an identical twin? I could have sworn it was him I ran into on the train the other day, but I introduced myself, and it wasn't.

MARY (*irked*): David, did you do it *again*?

DAVID (*embarrassed to have been caught*): Uh...yeah, I suppose I did.

JULIA: It *was* you, wasn't it? That's kind of what I figured, though I didn't tell Alex that.

MARY: He's done this before. If it's someone who sort of recognizes him but doesn't know him, and he's not in the mood to talk, he'll say the guy is confusing him with someone else.

DAVID: Look, I love that leisurely early morning ride to the City, and I've spent enough time on it talking to people to know that I don't want to talk to people. Sometimes I can't avoid it, but when I can, I do. And I can't just tell people I'm not in the mood, can I? I hate to be discourteous.

MARY: Yes, your manners are exquisite. Has it occurred to you that it doesn't happen more often because people are avoiding *you*? Have you made the connection between things like that and our narrow social life that you always complain about? (*To Julia*:) Now he's started trying to avoid big family events like weddings.

DAVID: Look. I enjoy talking to my family. I even enjoy talking to *your* family, although they don't get me at all. Except the bands at weddings—or the DJs; when was the last time you saw a band at a wedding?—are so loud that conversation is impossible. And I don't dance. So what am I supposed to do? Sit with my thumbs up my ass for three or four hours or drink myself into a solitary stupor? So weddings—or confirmations, or bar mitzvahs, or First Communions, or graduations, or Sweet Sixteens, or anniversary parties, even when the anniversary in question is the 60th and the people in question wouldn't be able to dance even if you promised them immortality in exchange—aren't my thing. As my father used to say: I'd give them twice the gift if I didn't have to go.

MARY: We'll have to make sure we mention that in our next gift card. You know damn well your father didn't mean it. He was convivial to a fault. *You* actually do.

DAVID: You know what my favorite family events are? Funerals. You know why?

JULIA: Just a wild guess: because they're quiet.

DAVID: Right. The downside is that people are unhappy, maybe even grief-stricken. The upside is that you can hear them when they say something.

(Brian enters, carrying two very large and nearly full glasses of red wine.)

BRIAN: *(Handing David his glass)*: Here you go. I think you'll find it flavorful and robust, if a bit forward. *(He sits in the other armchair.)*

DAVID: Thanks. *(Eyeing the huge glass a bit incredulously)*: A generous pour. *(He swirls the wine in his glass, sips, rolls it around his mouth, and considers for a moment)*: Yes, it's...assertive. Pushy. Brazen. Almost...insulting. I like it.

JULIA: So glad you could make it tonight.

DAVID: Our pleasure. How are your kids doing?.

JULIA: Well, you already know that Shannon's home for the summer. And Jeff's in Boston, not working on his dissertation full-time.

MARY: What's he doing with the other part of his time?

JULIA: No, I mean not working on it is his full-time job. He's a genius at devising avoidance behaviors. He plays bridge. Who the hell plays bridge anymore? He plays fantasy baseball. He reviews old sci-fi movies on a blog nobody reads. The further removed from reality an activity is, the more he does it.

MARY: It was so sweet of Shannon to offer to babysit.

JULIA: It was, but she also needs the money. She's having trouble finding a summer job that she doesn't regard as beneath her. For some mysterious reason, museums aren't hiring kids halfway through college as curators, even if they're art history majors.

BRIAN: How long has it been since you've been out for an evening?

MARY: Four months or so. Reliable babysitters are hard to find.

DAVID: You know my biggest regret about having kids at such an advanced age? That our parents never got to see them. You know my second biggest regret? That our parents never had to babysit for them.

BRIAN: What happened to your au pair?

MARY: We sent her home early.

JULIA: She was from Germany, right?

MARY: Yep. Sophia.

BRIAN: Didn't we warn you about au pairs?

MARY: You did. We should have listened.

JULIA: We had three of them. One was from Brazil. One was from France. One was from Thailand. And each of them totaled our car. I think we were about to be investigated for insurance fraud.

MARY: Yes, Sophia did that to David's, too. The first week she was here.

BRIAN: So you sent her home?

DAVID: Oh, hell, no. We were so desperate at that point that we'd have hired Eva Braun. Besides, the boys weren't with her when it happened. But one day, she *was* out in my car with the kids....

MARY: ... a different car, obviously, than the one she wrecked—and I get a call in the middle of the day from Officer McCarthy of the local police. He has stopped her for making an illegal left turn. Where was this, Officer? Well, about two miles away from where they were at that moment...

DAVID: ... because she'd been texting while driving for five minutes and didn't notice the cop's flashing lights or, for the last minute or two, his siren. That was enough for us.

MARY: That poor girl.

DAVID: Are you kidding?

MARY; Oh, you just lack the milk of human kindness.

DAVID: I've got at least the yogurt of human kindness. But Sophia ate it all, like she did everything else.

MARY (*addressing the Fitzpatricks*): She was horribly lonely and homesick, and food was her only friend.

JULIA: So you're stuck at home with two four-year-olds, Mary?

MARY: You got it. Unless and until I can figure out someplace to park them for the summer.

JULIA: How do you like being a stay-at-home Mom?

MARY: Oh, *Christ*. I am counting the minutes until I can go back to work. You know, when I was a kid, my father was never home. Stayed out late Monday through Friday, sometimes even Saturdays. If I meet him in the afterlife, I'll say "Dad: I know now what you were doing on all those late nights. You weren't playing poker with the boys. You weren't out drinking. You weren't chasing women. You were...*working*. *But not because you had to.*"

JULIA: Yeah, I remember how it was when our kids were little. The hardest day at work was easier than the easiest day at home.

MARY (*sardonically*): Yes, but so much less gratifying.

DAVID: And speaking of work—We heard about your job, Brian. It was absolutely outrageous that they did that to you.

BRIAN: Hey, you live by the sword, you die by the sword. One politico appoints you, another can fire you.

DAVID: We heard you had some enemies in the administration.

JULIA: He isn't important enough to have enemies; just people who dislike him.

BRIAN: Only one person, really. Jim Woodward. He loathed me, and the feeling was mutual. Unfortunately, he was my boss.

DAVID: I heard Jim was having heart trouble.

BRIAN: You mean aside from not having one?

DAVID: I never found him especially toxic, but he was never my boss.

BRIAN: I guess I got off on the wrong foot with him.

JULIA (*butting in*): Please. Allow me. Do you know the story of his first encounter with Jim? (*David nods.*)

MARY: I don't.

JULIA: Before he joined that agency, Jim was widely advertised as humorless and touchy. And on Jim's first day on the job, Brian was holding a closed-door meeting in his office. Jim knocks, enters, and says "Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt." And Brian says "Yet here you are." It was downhill from there. (*To Brian.*) Sometimes I think you're too stupid to live.

MARY (*awkwardly changing the subject*): So how's the job hunt going?

BRIAN: A couple of interviews, but no offers.

MARY: I'm sorry.

JULIA: Don't be. He keeps fucking up the interviews.

MARY: (*To Brian*) How do you do that?

JULIA: He gets to the end and then says something repellent.

BRIAN: You know me--I just can't resist a good line when I think of one. One interview was with the City Law Department. The interviewer and I seem to be hitting it off, looks like maybe I'm even going to get an offer right then and there. We finish, we stand up, we shake hands, and by way of conclusion he says to me "Well, I hope you have an appetite for hard work." And the

Succubus that inhabits me says “Come on. If I had an appetite for hard work, I’d be going to the private sector.” I thought I said it humorously, but on reflection, perhaps not.

MARY: Hmm. How did he react?

BRIAN: He didn’t say anything, possibly because he immediately turned to stone.

JULIA: The other one was even worse. Tell them.

BRIAN: Then I’m back at the Attorney General’s office, interviewing for a job that pays about half of what I used to make there, still a managerial position. The discussion makes clear that warm fuzzies and kid gloves are job requirements.

JULIA: Right up his alley, of course.

BRIAN: The interviewer asks me about my old job and suddenly I hear myself saying “you know, people say state workers are lazy and indifferent to their work. I found just the opposite. All the people who worked for me took enormous pride in their work. I used to say to them ‘no, don’t take pride in your work; it’s not that good.’”

MARY: Dear me. What happened then?

BRIAN: She turned to stone, just like the other guy.

JULIA: Too bad nobody’s hiring basilisks. *You. Asshole.* You’re *proud* of this, aren’t you? And the lines weren’t even that funny. You just like not having to go to work. Sleep ‘til 9:30, two hours at the gym, read a little, play some fantasy baseball, veg out online a lot, have a couple of those ridiculous jumbo glasses of wine and pretend you’re not drinking a full bottle. A 48-year-old slacker. Well, we can’t afford that much longer, not with a second mortgage and two more years of Shannon’s college to pay for. Listen, David. Brian won’t ask you, but I will: if you hear of anything that might be a fit, please keep him in mind.

DAVID: I will, but you know how things are right now--no one’s doing much hiring.

BRIAN (*Whimsically; trying to keep things light*): Maybe I could be your au pair.

JULIA: And fuck up their kids the way we fucked up ours?

(*Awkward pause*)

BRIAN: Uhh...how *are* your kids?

DAVID (*hurriedly*) They’re okay.

MARY: (*simultaneously*) Well....

JULIA: There appears to be something less than unanimity on this subject.

DAVID: Oh, they’re fine. Except...

MARY: Except we just got told that Austin is on the autism spectrum.

JULIA: Oh, God. I'm sorry. I think. What does that even mean? I've never quite understood.

MARY: We have no idea. Neither does anyone else. People pretend they understand it, but no one really has a clue. Nobody knows what causes it, nobody knows how it works, nobody knows where to find it in the body or the brain, nobody even knows that any one kid who's supposedly on the autism spectrum has the same thing wrong with him, organically, as any other kid who behaves the same. Nobody is even certain that there *is* something wrong. At one extreme, if the diagnosis is accurate, it means that Austin is eccentric, self-absorbed, and socially inept. Like his father. At the other extreme, who knows? Group homes? Round the clock care? Maybe nothing at all. Maybe he's just an immature kid. We're just starting down this road. Who knows where it ends up? All I know for sure is that en route there will be lots of cocktails of unpronounceable medications. (*David has been fidgeting conspicuously.*) Something you want to contribute?

DAVID: Look, Mary. Sometimes, the guilt, shame, anger, anxiety, and despair I feel about this are so overwhelming that I wonder how I can possibly draw another breath.

MARY: Oh, spare me the melodrama. Why? It's not your fault.

DAVID: You know perfectly well why, and yes it is. (*To the Fitzpatricks.*) There's definitive research out there suggesting that older fathers are at an enhanced risk of having autistic children. It just wasn't extant when we decided to have our kids rather than adopting.

MARY: Sure it was. You just didn't look very hard. Are we really going to have this same conversation whenever I express some dissatisfaction with life? Or is it because you've got an audience now? After five failed IVF pregnancies, nearly bankrupting ourselves to pay for a surrogate, and being stuck at home with two four-year-olds rather than doing the work I love while you go every day to a job you don't just because it pays more, I think I'm entitled to some occasional mild disgruntlement. This could have happened—it does happen—to anyone. And anyway, it didn't happen to you; it happened to Austin. I don't blame you for wanting to perpetuate your genes; if there's one thing we're naturally selected for, it's that. Everyone feels that impulse; it just took you 30 more years than everyone else to grow up enough to feel it yourself. (*To Brian and Julia*) Do you remember his mantra? "No wives, ex-wives, kids, pets, or plants." He was very proud of that; told it to me the night we met. For some insane reason, it didn't scare me away. (*To David*) You were 0 for 5 then, but you're four for five now, and I am those kids' mother in every way that matters, and they know it, and I love them unreservedly, and, inexplicably, I love you too, but I swear you're going to be 5 for 5 if you don't stop this shit. You've suffered a narcissistic wound because you've got an imperfect kid? I'm a psychotherapist, David, but not *your* psychotherapist. Talk to *him* about it, not to me. Get over it or don't, but keep it to yourself. Austin's your son, David, and you can't send him back to the kid store now, and he needs you just as much as his brother does, so man up and don't tell me again about how empty your heart feels when you look at him.

BRIAN: Uh...kids? Kids? Time out?

MARY: What?

BRIAN: David, do you have an ex-wife you haven't told anyone about?

DAVID: Not that I recall, though evidently I'm working on it now.

BRIAN: So if I'm keeping score correctly: I know you've got kids, plants, and—for the moment— a wife. You have a pet? What, you got your kids some goldfish or turtles or something?

DAVID: Well...not exactly.

JULIA: You're not going to tell us you got a dog.

DAVID: No, of course not. Don't be silly.

MARY: Yes, Julia, what's the matter with you? *(Beat)* We got two dogs.

JULIA: *(To David)* You? You have a dog? Excuse me, dogs?

DAVID: Yeah. Maxie and Minnie. We got them at a shelter.

BRIAN: *(To David)* You adopted two dogs?

MARY: Did you think we used IVF? We just use that for humans.

JULIA: What kind of dogs?

MARY: They're, um, hybrids. Small, white, curly hair. Poodle? Bichon? Maltese? All of the above, probably. We got them for the boys. They like the dogs and the dogs like them, and maybe it won't take as long to get the dogs housebroken as it did the kids. At the moment, they'll urinate on anything that happens to be on the floor—boxes, toys, table legs, unoccupied shoes, occupied shoes, children. The kids actually seem to enjoy it.

JULIA: And one dog wasn't enough?

MARY: As far as I was concerned, it was. But Minnie caught the eye of Mr. No-Pets here as we were leaving with Maxie, and suddenly we were in can-I-take-her-home-Mom-please-can-I territory, and he wore me down. And now he and that dog are inseparable.

DAVID: This has to be the dumbest dog in the universe. I came across something online called "Test Your Dog's IQ." First test: Wrap a dog treat in a tissue. If the dog manages to unwrap it and get to the treat, she's smart. So I wrap up a treat in a tissue and put it in front of Minnie. She unwraps it. Then she eats the tissue.

(A buzzer or alarm sounds offstage.)

JULIA: That means dinner's ready. Brian, come help me get it on the table.

MARY: Can we help?

JULIA: No, please; you two lovebirds sit and chill for a bit.

(She exits; Brian rises and starts to leave.)

DAVID: Uh, Brian? *(Brian pauses, looks at David.)* Well-played.

BRIAN: *(Smiling)*. Occasionally, I manage to do something right. *(He exits.)*

DAVID: Sweetheart?

MARY: Yeah.

DAVID: I'll cancel the interview. It was a stupid idea to begin with.

MARY (*without affect*): Do what you want. But if you do it, you're doing it by yourself.

DAVID: Mary, I'm sorry. About all of it. About being me.

MARY: I'll get over it. I always do.

DAVID: I won't. (*She looks at him with terminal exasperation, then gives a tight half-smile and shakes her head.*) Thank you for loving me...

MARY (*interrupting*): If you say "I know I don't deserve it," I'm leaving right now to file divorce papers.

JULIA (*poking her head in*): All set; come on in. We're having a light, fresh, seasonal dinner: salmon mayonnaise and an arugula salad with a sesame-balsamic dressing, followed by a peach semifreddo. (*She exits.*)

DAVID (*to Mary*): You hate salmon.

MARY (*to David*): You hate mayonnaise.

DAVID: You hate sesame.

MARY: You hate balsamic vinegar.

DAVID: You hate arugula.

MARY: You hate peaches.

DAVID: And we'd both hate semifreddo if we knew what it was. What do we do?

MARY: What can we do? Ask for a hamburger? Get takeout? Leave? We've already been rude, and now we're going to be even ruder with an elaborate dinner on the table? We can't offend them. They're the only ones who ever invited us anywhere even before we had the twins. We probably wouldn't be here now if Brian didn't need a job. Just try to be gracious—hard as I know that is for you—and eat as little as you can get away with without being impolite or starving.

DAVID: Good thing alcohol counts as food.

MARY: Technically, it's a drug.

DAVID: Same thing.

JULIA (*calling from offstage*): More wine, anyone?

DAVID and MARY (*simultaneously*): Yes. Please. (*They exit, and the lights dim.*)

Scene 3

(The lights come up again on the Fitzpatricks' living room. There are now two overcoats on the coat rack. David and Mary are seated on the couch, exactly as they were in the preceding scene. Mary's cell phone is on the end table next to her. A glass of white wine is on the end table next to Julia's chair. As the lights come up, Brian and Julia enter Left. Brian is again carrying two large glasses of red wine. Julia has a bottle of spring water.)

BRIAN: Here you go. *(Handing the glass to David.)* Cabernet as requested. And a bottle of chilled spring water for the designated driver. *(Julia hands Mary the bottle, which Mary opens and sips from. Brian sits, puts his glass on the end table.)* Plus some more Cabernet for Daddy. We got a bit of a head start on you. Or I did, anyway. *(Over the course of the scene, while the others sip occasionally from their drinks, Brian drinks all or most of his.)*

JULIA: Sorry you couldn't make it for dinner.

MARY: Us too, but our babysitter wasn't available until 8.

JULIA: Who did you get?

MARY: Oh, a girl from our neighborhood. Ashley. 10th Grader, just turned 16. She's sat for a couple of our neighbors, and their kids survived unscarred, so we're giving her a try.

DAVID: She made us feel very old.

JULIA: Well, you are. But what in particular did she do?

MARY: When she arrived, I had an oldies radio station on. While I was showing her around the house, Simon and Garfunkel came on. It caught her ear, and she said "who are these guys?" And I said "Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel." And she said, "There are three of them?"

(Julia and Brian take a moment to figure it out, then laugh a bit.)

JULIA: Right. The Garfunkel triplets.

BRIAN: Later on, I thought we'd play a game.

JULIA: I have no idea where he's going with this, but I guarantee you we won't like it.

DAVID: I'm always game for games. I'm obliged to tell you, however, that I am now a Grand Master at Candyland.

MARY: He plays it with our kids all the time.

DAVID: It's the best game ever, because it's the most like life. At least the vintage game is. They have a spinner instead of cards now.

JULIA: You're joking. A spinner in Candyland? Is nothing sacred?

DAVID: There's even online Candyland. But not in our house. It's cards or nothing. And once the cards are shuffled, the outcome is ineluctable. It doesn't matter what you do, skill is irrelevant, whatever you do, your destiny and everyone else's destiny is already established. You don't have to make choices, just follow directions. And sometimes you win, but mostly you lose.

MARY: He feels a need to share this view with his four-year-olds. They play by the hour, and they only learned not to eat the pieces about a week ago, and he's sitting there explaining the Protestant Reformation and the differences between Calvinism and Lutheranism to them.

JULIA: How are the boys?

MARY: Okay, all things considered. Adam's holding his own against Asperger's. But Josh has now been diagnosed with ADD.

JULIA: I've never understood whether that's a real thing. Or if it is, what it means. It has a bad rep. Some say that all it means is that you're lazy.

DAVID: It's real as hell—trust me. Once it looked like Josh might have it, I got evaluated for it. I had to fill out a long questionnaire. I figured it would have questions like “do you sometimes have trouble paying attention”—you know, the kind of thing that indicates that 80% of the population suffers from this awful disorder so you should buy this book or get that treatment or join some group. But it didn't. The questions were incredibly detailed and circumstantial, about things like sex and driving and handwriting. And I will tell you—it hit the center of the target. It was like reading my biography in interrogatory form. It explains a lot. It looks like laziness, and I'd be the last to deny that I'm lazy to the bone, but the ADD is there too. And it's not just that it compromises you at work or at school. You know that Woody Allen line about 80%, 90%, or whatever it is of life being just showing up? Well, having ADD means you have trouble showing up—that you're not there when everyone else is. Life passes you by. It's been passing you by since the moment of conception. And you're stuck inside your own head. And you're hard-wired for it, and there's not really much you can do about it.

JULIA: You always seem so focused.

DAVID: That's because I've had almost 60 years to figure out how to fake it. I hope it doesn't take Josh that long.

MARY: In 10 years if Josh is lucky or in 100 years if he's not, someone will invent a pill that hits the exact correct synapse in the exact correct frontal lobe. But until then... We keep asking ourselves: what did we think we were doing? Who did we think they would take after? Everything one or both of our kids have is a very concentrated, fun-house-mirror version of what one or the other of us has.

DAVID: She means mostly me.

MARY: Anxiety? Check. Inattention and distractibility? Check. Poor impulse control? Check. An inability to read other people? Check. An addictive personality? Check and double check.

DAVID: Sometimes I think we should just give them the heroin now and let them get an early start on rehab.

MARY: What about your kids?

BRIAN: Shannon is okay; enjoying those last few months before she absolutely has to think about what happens after college.

MARY: How about Jeff? How's the dissertation going?

JULIA: The dissertation is gone.

MARY: He finished it? Yay!

JULIA: He abandoned it.

MARY: Oh. Boo. So what's his next move?

JULIA: You aren't going to believe this. Divinity School.

MARY: What kind of divinity does he want to be?

DAVID: Did he get religion? Where did he get it from? Not you guys.

JULIA: No. He just says that the only subject worth studying is God.

MARY: What does that even mean?

BRIAN (*making an outburst*): It means fuckall. What it means is that our family motto is "when in doubt, go to school." Medical school's too tough, an MBA's out of the question because he hates everything about business except the money it produces, and because we're both lawyers he considers law school a surrender. I really can't believe he's going to do this. But he's actually been admitted to three different divinity schools, and been offered decent-sized scholarships—as long as he takes out loans for the rest of the tuition. These graduate schools are like loan sharks; they'll give you just enough with no strings attached so that you borrow huge amounts more at extortionate rates. And *those* strings never come loose, even after you can't find a job, which, predictably, you can't, because there are thousands of people in the same boat.

JULIA: We just have to let it go. Maybe he'll come to his senses. He knows how we feel about it. (*Pause; changing the subject.*) David, I heard you retired.

DAVID: Yep; about three months ago.

JULIA: How do you like it?

DAVID: I will tell you something. You know that feeling—and it doesn't matter whether you love your job or hate it—first thing in the morning, before you open your eyes, of "oh, shit, I have to go to work"? Well, the feeling that follows it after you retire—"oh boy, no I don't"—does not get old.

JULIA: How are you spending your time?

DAVID: Well, it's a little different for me than for those other guys whose toughest decision is whether to play the front nine or the back nine. Mary's still working, so I've become a domestic deity. Cooking, shopping, laundry, sewing. All those years of living alone paid off, because I'm pretty good at doing all that stuff. But the boys are in full-time pre-K, so there's some time left over to do other things.

MARY: Tell them about your new gig.

DAVID: Ah. Community Theater.

JULIA: Really? I didn't know you were an actor.

DAVID: I'm not. I did a bit in college, and nothing since. It wasn't high on my bucket list, but I figured I had only a short window to play the distinguished *older* guy before I could only do decrepit *old* guy, so I better start now. I'm pretty bad. The director says "inhabit your character." Hell, I don't even inhabit myself.

JULIA: So you got a part?

DAVID: Yeah, a small one. In *Much Ado About Nothing*. Performance in May. I play an Italian priest.

JULIA: *You??*

DAVID: Hey, the priest is an Italian Catholic. Just like my mother.

JULIA: I always forget that about you.

DAVID: I thought Mom's Mass of Christian Burial might have been the tipoff.

JULIA: Sure...but you always seem so...so...

DAVID: Would that be Orthodox So, Conservative So, or Reform So?

JULIA: So...secular, I was going to say.

DAVID: Same thing.

JULIA: Have you started rehearsals?

DAVID: Only just this past week. I'll tell you something. Those actors are pretty damn refreshing. I spent my entire career working with politicians and the people who enable them, and you could never believe anything anyone said about anything. There was always a hidden agenda, an ulterior motive, a secret treaty. And these were supposedly people who wanted you to think they were straight shooters, who tell it like it is. But even in the privacy of their own offices, where you'd think they'd let their hair down, they weren't.

JULIA: And actors are different? How? I mean, they're actors. They dissemble by definition.

DAVID: Yeah, but they're really big dogs. Scratch their bellies, and they're affectionately yours. But I never met a politician, even the ones who seemed as emotionally needy as Golden Labs,

who wasn't, at heart, a cat. Detached, self-contained, self-absorbed, with just enough affection to prompt misplaced loyalty in the love-starved. *(Pause.)* And speaking of politicians: What's with the job search, Brian? I talk you up whenever I have a chance, but I don't hear of a lot of vacancies that would be any kind of fit.

BRIAN: There's nothing shaking. I've heard—only second-hand, but I believe it—that Jim Woodward's been blackballing me. If I don't tell people what I did for the two years I was at the agency and under Jim's thumb, they think I was in prison. If I tell them where I worked and that Jim was my boss, they call him, and he tells them I'm a sinister dullard. And if I tell them where I worked and they shouldn't call him and should call someone else, they still wind up calling him. And if he happens to hear that I've applied somewhere, he goes out of his way to get in touch with them. Or so I'm told.

DAVID: I had no idea he was such a shit. I never crossed swords with him, but then I never had to. I always thought a little of Jim went a long way.

BRIAN: Trust me—none of him would have gone even further.

DAVID: So what's Plan B?

BRIAN: I'm going to hang out a shingle and be a solo practitioner. Maybe get on a few appointed-counsel lists, get some piecework here and there.

JULIA: David—I hear your old job is still open.

DAVID: No, I think they were going to promote my deputy Diana into it. She's already doing it.

JULIA: Not according to Diana. I see her every week. I spin with her.

DAVID: "Spin" like yarn?

MARY *(To Brian and Julia)*: Even I can't always tell whether he's trying to be funny or he's as clueless as he seems *(To David)*: "Spin" like stationary bicycles, fool.

JULIA: Right. She says she's in your job temporarily, but they told her not to get too comfortable in it. They're looking for someone else. And she also says that you're advising them on recruitment, since you had that job so long that no one else has any idea how to do it. And she also says that they've started interviewing, and they have a list of people. And she also says that Brian's not on it. And she also says that they never seriously considered him. And she also says that his name came up and you steered them away from him.

DAVID: Julia, I swear. None of the above. Or almost none. I mentioned Brian to the Commissioner. Really, I did. I said he's a good guy and a capable attorney. And the Commissioner asked me whether I could recommend him for the job, and I said he knows nothing about the work we do, but he's a quick study and why not interview him, and the Commissioner said she'd take it under advisement, and that was fucking that. What else could or should I have done?

JULIA: “Good guy and capable attorney”? You think that’s going to get a fiftyish white guy an executive job?

DAVID: Tell me about a job that might be a better fit, and I’ll be more enthusiastic.

BRIAN (*butting in*): So now let’s play my game. It doesn’t compare to Candyland, I admit. But I think you’ll enjoy it. I call it “The Godfather Game.” We’ll be the first people ever to play it. You go around the room saying which Godfather character you’re most like, and then you go around the room again and everyone else says which Godfather character you’re most like. Anyone want to start? (*He gets silence and stares.*) Okay, I will. See, I’m the oldest of three kids, and I was the apple of my parents’ eye, and the Great White Hope, and the guy who was going to redeem what they saw as their failures, and it didn’t quite happen that way, so I’m Sonny. And my little brother Steven, who got rich and kind of famous, is Michael, who turned out to be the one who redeemed the family honor. And our middle brother Richard, who in our family was considered dumb, which outside of our family means he’s of average intelligence, and dropped out of three different colleges and one horrible marriage, and was pushing 40 and had no idea what to do with himself, was Fredo.

JULIA: Brian....

BRIAN: No, let me finish. It’s... it’s too beautiful. Too symmetrical. So then my little brother flamed out early. Like Sonny. And my middle brother, who found his way into a happy marriage to a good woman, and who took care of my father when he was dying, and takes care of my mother now so that Steven and I don’t have to, and turned out to be the family mensch, is Michael. And I’m spineless and annoying, and can fuck up anything I set my mind to, and can’t contribute to my family and can’t even stop my own father from dying—I’m Fredo. How about you, David? You’re a blue-eyed Sicilian, right? Like Carlo?

MARY: Jesus, Brian.

JULIA: Brian. *Shut the fuck up. Now. (Brian deflates completely, lowers his head to his hands, and sits with his head buried throughout Mary’s next lines.)*

(*Mary’s phone rings.*)

MARY: (*Looking at her phone.*) It’s the babysitter. (*She picks up the phone and talks into it.*) Hi, Ashley. Is everything okay? Is something wrong? (*Pause.*) How long? (*Pause.*) Both of them? (*Pause.*) Okay. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes. (*She puts down the phone and stands.*) David, we have to go. (*David rises, and he and Mary move toward the coat rack as she continues.*) (*To Brian and Julia*): The boys—both boys—have been melting down nonstop since we left. And you haven’t seen a meltdown until you’ve seen a twin meltdown. It gives combat-hardened veterans PTSD. I can’t imagine what it does to a novice babysitter. She says she tried everything we told her to try, and nothing worked.

BRIAN: *(Straightening up and moving toward them as they put on their coats and try not to look squarely at him. Julia walks just behind him.)* Okay. Look, David. Mary. *(They look at him.)* I'm sorry. I want to curl up into the fetal position and never uncurl again. It's just...it's all getting to me. All of it. My work, my idleness, my money, my kids, my 50th birthday...all of it. I'm not myself. Or maybe I'm more myself than ever. Maybe me, desperate and sort of drunk, reveals my true essence. But I'm sorry. I need friends. Not people who'll find me a job; friends. People I like, and who like me, at least when I'm at my best. And I don't want to lose any more of them.

DAVID: Us too.

MARY: Or us neither.

JULIA: Good luck with the boys.

MARY: No problem. We've learned to ignore them. We just have to rescue Ashley.

DAVID: We'll talk soon.

BRIAN: Hope so.

JULIA and BRIAN; G'night.

DAVID and MARY: G'night. *(They exit through the door.)*

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(A moment later. David appears Front Right, walking briskly toward Front Center. Mary walks more slowly behind him.)

MARY: David, slow down. *Stop.* *(He stops Center.)*

DAVID: Why? We have to rescue Ashley, like you said.

MARY: No we don't.

DAVID: Why not?

MARY: Because nothing's wrong. The boys are sleeping.

DAVID: What did you do? Did I miss a meeting? And what just happened?

MARY: I thought there might be trouble over Brian's job. Or his lack thereof. I wanted to give us an out if there was. So I asked Ashley to call, and then I'd play it by ear. My timing was a bit off, though.

DAVID: You couldn't have told me in advance?

MARY: As you said, you're not a very good actor.

DAVID: I shouldn't have asked about work in the first place. I can't believe Julia knows Diana.

MARY: David, we've been here for thirty years. Everyone else that we ever see has been here for twenty or thirty or forty years. By this time, we all know everyone and everyone knows us.

DAVID: So here we are, with the night before us. Are we really going to go home right away? Come on, I'll buy you a drink and we'll decompress.

MARY: I'm the designated driver, remember?

DAVID: Okay. I'll buy me a drink.

MARY: Oh, let's go home. We'll tell Ashley she can leave early and break out the single malt.

DAVID: Can we...

MARY: What?

DAVID: Can we play Candyland too?

MARY: If you play your cards right.

DAVID: Well, see, that's not even a concept in Candyland, because once you shuffle the cards and...

MARY: Just get in the car.

(They exit Left.)

Scene 5

(The lights come up on the same scene, except now we are in the living room of Mary and David's house. Mary is sitting in the downstage armchair. The end table that was adjacent to that armchair is now directly in front of her, and on it is a small, open laptop. She is dressed appropriately for work from the waist up, and very casually from the waist down. As the lights come up, she is wearing a pair of wireless headphones and watching and listening to something on the laptop. David enters; he is dressed in very casual clothing, of the sort one wears to run errands and do nothing else. He is carrying a newspaper and wearing a parka, in a pocket of which are visible half a dozen small paper bags of the sort in which pharmacies put prescriptions. Mary doesn't notice him come in. [if the director thinks the joke is worthwhile and will succeed, David can be dressed as closely as possible to the Bernie Sanders Inauguration Day ensemble of mittens, mask, etc.]

DAVID *(as he removes the paper bags and his phone from the pockets of the parka and puts them, along with the newspaper, on the end table adjacent to the other armchair.):* Hi. *(Mary still doesn't notice him. He moves to the coat rack, removes his parka, and as he is hanging it up, says, more loudly this time):* Hi.

MARY (*now hearing and noticing him, she looks up, pauses the laptop, and takes off the headphones*): Hi. I was watching the runup to the Inauguration.

DAVID (*moving towards the other armchair*): Yeah, I figured. Any surprises so far? I've been worrying.

MARY: Yeah, you're almost vibrating with anxiety. No surprises, thank God. How was the dropoff? You were out a long time.

DAVID (*as he sits down*): I had to go to the pharmacy. And you know how it is.

DAVID and MARY (*simultaneously*): "There's no such thing as a quick trip to CVS."

DAVID: Exactly. But I eventually got all our prescriptions. (*He picks up the bags and goes through them one by one.*) Let's see: Absurdizone...Ridiculin...Oxymorin...Catastrophe...Elantra...oh, wait. That's my car. And best of all, my Inauguration Day gift to both of us, Sildenafil. Or, as you earthlings call it, Viagra.

MARY: That's...interesting. What for? Well, I know what for. Why?

DAVID: Because Shakespeare was wrong. There aren't seven ages of man. There are only four that matter. In the first one, you *need* sex. In the second one, you want it, but you don't really *need* it. In the third, you can have it, but you don't really *want* it. And in the fourth, you can't even *have* it. I was on the cusp between want and can, and figured I'd be proactive. My doctor was fine with it. I'm curious to see what happens. (*Changing the subject.*) Where are the dogs?

MARY: Where they always are when they're not eating. Sleeping on our bed. So what about the dropoff?

DAVID: It was okay. So strange seeing those kindergarten kids walking into school in their masks. Do you realize they have no idea what their teachers look like? Or what their classmates look like? Or, really, anything else about them? What with masking and social distancing, those kids are as anonymous to each other as the clone troopers in *Star Wars*.

MARY: How did Austin do?

DAVID: He did fine. Austin's really very sweet, you know, when he's not batshit crazy. I walked them to the door of the school, and we passed a girl—she has cerebral palsy, I think—being taken to school, I assume by her father, in a huge, very elaborate wheelchair with what I imagine were lots of bells and whistles. And Austin stopped and looked at it and said to them "nice wheelchair." And the girl and the father turned their heads, and the father looked ready to say something angry when he saw that the compliment was sincere, like what someone else would say about a Lamborghini. Like, "Nice ride." And I think he smiled under his mask, and then the girl said "Thank you." But anyway, mission accomplished. The boys are at school. We're here. Which means that we're somewhere that they're not for the first time in what feels like 10 years.

MARY: I have to go see a patient.

DAVID: Yeah, I see you're dressed for work. The *tout ensemble* is stunning.

MARY: They only see me from the waist up. Will you please go meditate, or do yoga, or something?

DAVID: Okay, but I want to look at the paper first.

MARY: Didn't you read it last night?

DAVID: Not all of it. Last night I just looked at pixels. But you can't beat hard copy when it comes to obituaries. *(He opens the paper and starts looking for the obituary pages.)*

MARY: Okay. See you later. *(She shuts the laptop and picks it up, along with the headphones.)*

DAVID *(handing her the prescription bags)*: You might as well take these, too. Don't let the dogs have the Viagra. Though it might be fun to see what happens. *(She takes the bags.)*

(Mary exits left. David opens the paper to the obituaries and starts looking at them.)

DAVID *(doing an astonished double take)*: Holy shit. *Ho-lee-shit.* *(He puts the newspaper, still open to the obituaries, on the end table, picks up his phone, quickly dials a number, and stands up, listening to the phone for an answer. He starts to exit left, speaking the next line into the phone as he does so.)* Brian, it's David. How's it going?

Scene 6

(As David exits, Brian enters. He's wearing loungewear of some sort and is somewhat disheveled. He is listening to his phone. He is in his own living room, and we now hear only his side of the phone conversation):

BRIAN: *(He sits in the chair that David was in.)* Well, in some ways it's easier being a solo practitioner. I like being my own boss. I wouldn't say we're making ends meet, not quite yet, but we're hoping to introduce one end to the other soon. A real estate closing here, a DWI defense there, a divorce somewhere else, an appointed-counsel gig now and then--it pays a few bills. Of course, not much that people want lawyers for is going on anywhere now. We've all put our lives on hold. How about you? *(Pause for David's response.)* Yeah, I'm counting the minutes, of which there are exactly *(he looks at his phone)* one hundred and three until Biden is president. Although I won't rest easy until Trump's landed in Florida. I keep thinking that he's had Air Force One secretly retrofitted as a bomber and is on his way to nuke Manhattan. *(Pause for David's response.)* No, I haven't seen the paper. What's in it? *(Pause.)* Really? *(Pause.)* When? How? Was it...? *(Pause.)* Oh. I suppose there's no in-person funeral. Too bad, I'd like to dance on his grave. Or piss on his ashes. Or the other way around. Or both. *(Pause.)* That's right; I'm not bitter. *(Pause.)* Okay, enjoy your yoga. I'll look at the obituary right now. Thanks for letting me know. Talk to you soon. *(He puts down the phone, picks up the newspaper, and looks at the obituary page. After a moment spent looking it over, he stares at it in wonderment, then puts it down and sits back in the chair as if exhausted.)*

BRIAN (*dazed and reflective*) Son of a bitch.

(JULIA *enters Left. She has just finished exercising, and is wearing a long t-shirt, leggings, and socks without shoes. She has a towel draped around her neck.*) That feels good, now that it's over. I really should take more days off. (*She moves the end table to the side of the other armchair and then sits in the armchair.*)

BRIAN (*distractedly*): Where are the kids?

JULIA: In their respective rooms, discontentedly pursuing their respective remote, overpriced and economically futile educations.

BRIAN (*as much to himself as to Julia*): There's no such thing as a truly empty nest, is there? There's always the danger that they'll come back. We should have sold the house while they were away and disappeared into the night.

JULIA: Ha ha. You know perfectly well they have every right to feel cheated and disgruntled. This isn't how they envisioned the climax of their higher education, being stuck in their parents' house except when we make them go out and shovel the snow. At least they blame the Boomers for the whole mess rather than us blameless Gen X'ers.

BRIAN (*perfunctorily, not caring about the answer*): Did you spin? (*He immediately leans back in a semi-daze, in which he remains for Julia's next line.*)

JULIA: I spun. Or spinned, I guess. Absolutely brutal. Where on earth do they find those Peloton teachers? And where do the Peloton teachers find those bodies? They're like androids, or aliens. I guess it's supposed to be inspiring, but they make me want to give up and stuff my body down the garbage disposal. (*Noticing that Brian isn't listening, she clears her throat loudly to get his attention.*) You appear preoccupied.

BRIAN: (*Still off somewhere else*) You know, I'm thinking I may even try to get my old job back.

JULIA: Brian, you hated that job.

BRIAN: (*He gives her his attention.*) No, I kind of liked that job. I just hated my boss. And it wouldn't be Jim Woodward any more.

JULIA: Where did Jim go?

BRIAN: That's become a—what's the word?—an eschatological question. He died three days ago. David just called to tell me.

JULIA: Was it...

BRIAN: COVID? Evidently not. He died suddenly, it says here. I guess his heart attacked him.

JULIA: My God. How old was he?

BRIAN: 62, according to this obituary. (*He puts the newspaper on the end table.*)

JULIA: Young. Too young.

BRIAN: Yeah, I don't know whether to laugh or laugh. I've worked with people who are provincial hacks, and I've worked with people who are nasty pricks, but I think he's the only person I ever worked with who was both.

JULIA: Brian. *Please*. Let it go. You never have to see him again. You didn't ever have to see him again even *before* he died. He didn't care that you hated him while he was alive, and I imagine he doesn't care now. Besides, by your own lights, you got your revenge, didn't you? He's the one who's dead, not you. You're walking God's green earth and breathing God's polluted air. He's null and void. Game over. Savor your triumph. You won.

BRIAN: Not if he doesn't know it. If he's vanished into total oblivion he might as well still be around. (*Reflectively.*) Where do *you* think he is? Anywhere? Welcomed into eternal bliss through the tender mercies of God, and Jesus who died for our sins? Reincarnated? I could live with that notion. Jim reincarnated as a cockroach. Although, now that I think about it, cockroaches generally seem pretty happy. Okay, reincarnated as an unhappy cockroach. That would be satisfying.

JULIA: Listen, Brian: I don't know where Jim is. I don't even have an opinion. We don't know anything about what happens afterwards, and it's hubris to pretend we do. Maybe he's nowhere. Maybe he's sitting at the right hand of God. Maybe it turns out that being both a nasty prick and a provincial hack puts you on the narrow path of righteousness, while Mother Teresa is writhing in the Ninth Circle of Hell. But one thing I'm pretty sure he's not doing is lying around wondering about you.

BRIAN: That's *exactly* what I think he's doing. Or what I like to think he's doing. You know how they say the personal is the political? That's bullshit. You know why Trump's a genius? Because he knows, without having to think about it, that *the personal is the personal*. For the last year, the closest I've come to praying to a God I don't believe in is to say, several times a day, please God, make this pandemic end. But I will tell you something. If God had said "all right, wise guy. You don't believe in me? I'm in a generous mood. Here's your choice. I can stop the pandemic. Or else I can guarantee that Jim Woodward will spend all eternity in a state of excruciating insanity, acutely aware every instant that his inexcusable treatment of you is what put him there. Take a couple of minutes and make your pick." I'm not proud of this, Julia, but honestly, I'm not sure which one I'd choose. Or maybe I *am* sure, and it's the wrong choice.

JULIA: Jesus, Brian. Get a grip. Jim's gone. You've got good health. I've got good health. The people we love have good health. We're solvent, albeit just barely. Our kids are sane, and—for people who are living in the same rooms they were in when they were wearing diapers, and about as capable of earning a living now as they were then—mature and self-sufficient. The pandemic will recede. Spring is coming eventually. Life is sweet. Try to enjoy it.

BRIAN (*after a pause to think it over*): Right you are. You've raised me from the depths. You've inspired me. Life is good, a precious gift, et cetera, et cetera. (*Momentary pause. Then, resolved.*) Okay. I'll do it.

JULIA: Do what?

BRIAN: Get a dog.

JULIA: Where did that come from? Are you nuts?

BRIAN: You're the one who wants to do it.

JULIA: I'm the one who *wanted* to do it. That was—what?—close to two years ago, and it was just because David and Mary got their dogs. I'm over it.

BRIAN: Come on. Jim Woodward is dead, but I've been born again. Symbolic renewal. Actual renewal. Let's do something life-affirming, just like you said. You remember how much our kids loved our dogs when they were young? Let's adopt a dog! The kids can take care of him. Hey, let's adopt a kid!

JULIA: Brian. This will pass. Chill.

BRIAN: Maybe. But I'm going to go to the animal shelter anyway. I just have to get changed. (*Smiling.*) And don't call me Jill.

JULIA: Changed into what? You haven't changed clothes for the last nine months.

BRIAN: Into a suit and tie.

JULIA: You're going to an animal shelter, not opening night at the Met.

BRIAN: Neckties! Cufflinks! Links and ties! Connections! Back to the world! Back to work! Let's celebrate! Or maybe I'm just pretending that I'm going to Jim's funeral.

JULIA: (*Sighing*) All right. I'll get changed too and come with you.

BRIAN: Stay home and relax. You don't have to come.

JULIA: Yes I do. There is no way you're coming back from that shelter with an actual dog. (*Brian looks crestfallen and a bit embarrassed.*) Yeah, I figured that's what you had in mind. We can go to the animal shelter. If your fever hasn't broken by then, you can check out the dogs. If something catches your eye, *then* we can come home and discuss it.

BRIAN: Okay. Let me just check CNN for something. (*He presses his phone a couple of times and looks at the screen.*) Yesss! Air Force One has landed. In Florida. Let's dance!

JULIA: You don't know how.

BRIAN: Note to self—sign up for dance lessons. I'll try now anyway. Come on. (*He extends his arms.*) 1-2-3-1-2-3-1-2-3. (*Julia looks at him for a moment, then joins with him and starts trying to lead him in a waltz.*) No, let me lead. (*He continues counting as he attempts what a person who can't dance might imagine is a waltz, stumbling and half-dragging Julia as they exit left.*)

Scene 7

(A moment after Brian and Julia exit, David enters left. He takes the newspaper off the end table, sits in the chair, and begins reading. Shortly after he does, Mary enters, obviously annoyed about something. She sits down in the other chair, in a huff.)

DAVID *(putting down the newspaper)*: I thought you had a patient.

MARY: *(Stewing, mostly to herself)*: Freud was wrong. Well, he was wrong about everything. But he was especially wrong about the two basic human instincts. They're not love and death. They're the need to annoy other people and the need to feel morally justified in every shitty thing you do.

DAVID: Did something happen with your patient?

MARY: You know I can't tell you. But I fired her. Or she fired me; I'm not entirely sure. We came, shall we say, to a mutually-agreed-upon parting of the ways. I wasn't helping her, no doubt because she was pissing me off so much that I couldn't think straight. Sometimes that happens, and you just have to disengage as soon as you realize it. I think I should just go back to my nice, peaceful job in the psych hospital at the prison. Nobody, and I mean nobody, is crazier than affluent white neurotics. What about you?

DAVID: I watched the Capitol riot again and got all agitated. How were they not ready for that? Why wasn't the National Guard there to begin with? The rest of America knew what was going to happen. Why didn't they?

MARY: Because those Sergeant-At-Arms guys didn't want to bring the army in. They thought it was *(air quotes)* "bad optics." They didn't want to get in trouble with their bosses.

DAVID: Has it ever occurred to you that about three-quarters of human conduct, including some of the most important events in history, happens just because people don't want to get yelled at? I know that it determines everything *I* do.

MARY: You were supposed to try to relax. What happened to yoga?

DAVID: I tried. Really, I tried. But I'm completely inflexible, and don't you dare tell me that's a metaphor. And it's too sedate for me. I start doing a pose and suddenly I'm back inside my head. And I spend too much time there already.

MARY: Well, did you meditate?

DAVID: I tried that too. Really, I tried. But I just stop every time they talk about how emotions are passing clouds and you just have to watch them drift by. I just can't do it. It requires twisting your brain into a pretzel, just like one of those yoga poses. Hell, as far as I'm concerned, passing clouds aren't even passing clouds. I get that they go away in the long run. But like they say, in the long run, we're all dead. If the clouds happen to be raining pigs on your head at the moment, they're hard to ignore. Do you have another patient?

MARY: Not until late afternoon. My 11 o'clock canceled.

DAVID: I, uh, had an idea while I was supposed to be watching the passing clouds. And that idea was to conduct an investigation, strictly in the spirit of scientific inquiry, of course, into the properties of Viagra when administered to a sixtyish-year-old man with a slightly enlarged prostate and a spouse he worships. (*He starts to sing, very badly, Taj Mahal's song "Cakewalk Into Town"*):

"I had the blues so bad one time, it put my face in a permanent frown,

But now I'm feeling so much better I could cakewalk into town.

I woke up this morning feeling so good you know I lay back down again,

Throw your big leg over me, mama, I might not feel this good again."

MARY: Maybe we can figure something out. As long as you stop singing. How long does it take for Viagra to work?

DAVID: Uh, I already took it. Aspirationally. Anticipatorily. Like in *Field of Dreams*, you know? If you take it, you will come.

MARY: And...?

DAVID: And I've passed through "want" and am rapidly approaching "need."

MARY: All right. I guess it would be a shame to waste it. But we have to watch the Inauguration.

DAVID: So we'll multitask. Come on. (*Reaching out his hand for her. She takes it, and they exit Left, hand in hand, as Taj Mahal's recording of "Cakewalk Into Town" starts and, after the first verse, fades out.*)

Scene 8

(*The Fitzpatricks' Living Room. David, Mary, and Julia are seated as in Scene 1, and dressed as they are in that Scene. Julia and Mary have glasses of white wine on the end tables beside them, David has a normal-sized glass of red wine. Julia's phone is also on her end table. They are mid-conversation.*)

JULIA: I hear they're finally going to school without masks.

DAVID: If the school board had its way, they'd still be wearing masks, but they knew the parents would tar and feather them if they didn't change their policy.

MARY: All the kids can finally see what all the other kids look like, and it's created a bit of drama. There's this kid in their class named Morgan who wears her hair really short. When they got off the bus the first unmasked day, both boys were really upset. "Mom," Josh said.

"Morgan's a *girl*." They had just figured it out. "Didn't you wonder why you never saw her in

the boys' bathroom," I asked. Nope; they thought he just went at different times than they did. They're both pretty goofy.

JULIA: But otherwise okay?

DAVID: "Okay" is the operative term. As in "treading water." Mary always keeps it together, but for me it's always a struggle, with both Austin and Josh. Still, occasionally I'm able to factor out my own shit, and I get a lot closer to solving the equation. As a former 7-year-old boy myself, I understand that a lot of what they do is generic. But how much is generic, how much is due to the pandemic, and how much is just them I have no idea.

MARY: It did get a lot easier, just like everybody told us it would.

JULIA: And now it will get a lot harder again, just like everybody told you it would.

MARY: That's great news about Shannon. We'll look forward to getting the invitation.

DAVID: That wedding sounds pretty lavish. If I may ask an indelicate question: Are you bankrolling it?

JULIA: No, thank God; we're splitting the cost with his parents. Even so, it's *still* like buying a Mercedes and driving it off a cliff.

MARY: What about Jeff? How's divinity school?

JULIA: Not divine. He dropped out.

MARY: So what's he doing instead? He's running out of schools to go to.

JULIA: Competitive eating.

MARY: Is there graduate school for that?

DAVID: Age has ruined my hearing. I could have sworn you just said "competitive eating."

JULIA: I did.

DAVID: Like those guys on Coney Island with the hot dogs on the 4th of July?

JULIA: Exactly like those guys, except it's not just hot dogs. Sometimes it's pie, sometimes it's chicken wings, sometimes it's fucking asparagus. He was at loose ends, and broke, and working as a barista, and then a couple of months ago, he entered a hot dog eating contest, just for the hell of it, and he won in a walk and made some money. Then he entered another one, and he won that too, and made some more money. It turns out he loves it, and he has a real gift for it. "Mom," he said; "I have finally found my calling."

DAVID: And you can earn a living with this?

JULIA: A surprisingly good one, if you're at the top of the heap, which apparently he's talented enough to have a shot at. He's got a trainer who thinks he's so promising that he's working for free and paying for the food he practices with, and he even has a regular spotter.

MARY: What on earth for?

JULIA: So he doesn't choke to death while he's practicing. I know I did a lot wrong as a parent, but one thing I thought I was right about was telling him to eat more slowly.

MARY: Jesus Christ. And this is all okay with you?

JULIA: I've never seen him so happy, and if he's happy, we're happy. Or at least not miserable. And besides, what could be more American than a cross between gluttony and combat?

(The door opens and Brian enters. He is dressed neatly in business casual clothing, and is carrying a bottle of water. He moves hurriedly to the other arm chair, sits down, and puts the water bottle on the end table.)

BRIAN: Hi, guys. Sorry I'm late. I was at the office.

DAVID: At the office on Saturday evening? Weren't you the guy who didn't have an appetite for hard work?

BRIAN: That doesn't apply to us high-ranking executives.

MARY: So how does it feel being back at your old job?

BRIAN: I'm not.

DAVID: Oh, God. What happened?

BRIAN: You didn't tell them?

JULIA: I figured you'd want to.

BRIAN: Right. So you may have noticed that the State has a different governor than it had a few months ago.

DAVID: I think I read about it somewhere.

BRIAN: And now, a great big tidal wave has come and washed away all the cronies he appointed to run the state agencies. So my Commissioner got shitcanned last night. And the Deputy Commissioner got promoted to Commissioner. And the First Assistant Deputy Commissioner got promoted to Deputy Commissioner. And the Deputy First Assistant Commissioner got promoted to First Assistant Deputy Commissioner. And the Under Assistant Deputy First Commissioner...

DAVID: That's you.

MARY: I think I see what's coming.

BRIAN: ...got promoted to Deputy First Assistant Commissioner. Otherwise known as...

DAVID: Jim Woodward's old job! Fantastic! He must be spinning in his grave.

JULIA: What an idea! Do you suppose they have Pelotons in Hell?

DAVID: So that gives us two things to celebrate.

JULIA: Right. How was your birthday, David? You look great.

BRIAN: Yeah, you look like you lost a few pounds.

DAVID: I'm sure they'll turn up before long. Yeah, given that I'm 60, I guess I'm doing okay. I took a fitness test the other day, and it said that I was as fit as the average 45-year-old. I was elated, until I remembered what the average 45-year-old looks like.

JULIA (*reaching behind her chair and picking up a gift bag*): We got you a belated birthday present. We...(*she glances in the bag, then looks sharply at Brian*) Where's the card?

BRIAN: I gave it to you.

JULIA: No you didn't. You....Never mind. (*To David*): We lost the card. Happy 60th.

(*She hands him the gift bag.*)

DAVID: Wow. This is completely unexpected. Thanks, guys. Should I open it now?

BRIAN: We insist.

(*David reaches into the bag and takes out a folded piece of fabric. It's a T-shirt, which he unfolds completely and holds by the shoulders, so that he's looking at the front of the T-shirt, while the audience sees only the back, which is blank. Mary gets up to look at the front and starts laughing.*)

DAVID (*still admiring the shirt*): My goodness. This may be my best gift ever. (*He turns the shirt around to see if there's anything on the back, and the audience sees what is written on the front: "THE PANDEMIC IS OVER. KEEP YOUR DISTANCE ANYWAY"*)

BRIAN: We had it specially made.

DAVID: I'm speechless with gratitude.

JULIA: The shirt will do the talking for you quite eloquently.

BRIAN: Go ahead; put it on.

MARY: Absolutely.

DAVID: But I don't want to keep my distance from *you* guys.

JULIA and BRIAN (*simultaneously*): Awww.

MARY: Go ahead David. Indulge us. (*He puts the shirt on and shows it off.*) It's perfect.

(*A buzzer or bell rings from the kitchen.*)

JULIA: That means dinner's ready. Brian, come help me get it on the table. (*To David and Mary*): We're having a salad with avocado and cilantro dressing, calamari tartare in a mustard sauce, roasted beets, and cassata in a marzipan shell.

(Julia and Brian exit left, but a moment later reappear and poke their heads in, as if peering around a door, and listen to the conversation. They are amused. The audience sees them, but David and Mary do not. David and Mary rise from the couch and look at each other, bewildered.)

DAVID: Has she just done it *again*?

MARY: So it seems.

DAVID: You hate avocado.

MARY: You hate cilantro.

DAVID: You hate calamari.

MARY: You hate mustard.

DAVID: You hate beets.

MARY: You hate marzipan.

DAVID: And we'd both hate cassata if we knew what it was.

(Julia and Brian enter, smiling broadly.)

JULIA: False alarm, guys. Do you really think we'd serve raw squid to our guests without asking them about it first? *We* don't even like it, and we eat anything.

BRIAN: So: Surprise! We're taking you out to dinner. We've got a table for four at Pasquini's.

DAVID: Oh, you guys. You're so good to me. My favorite restaurant.

BRIAN: We know. One condition, though: you keep the t-shirt on.

DAVID: Wow. Tough decision. You're asking a lot.

JULIA: But that shirt is *you*.

MARY: And it's funny. Come on, David. Loosen up. Let yourself do something deliberately silly and ridiculous. You do silly and ridiculous stuff inadvertently often enough. And anyway, if you deprive me of another five-star meal, like you did that time in Manhattan, there will be a bitter reckoning.

DAVID: Oh, okay.

JULIA: Let's go.

BRIAN: Wait. *(Everyone pauses and looks at Brian.)* I almost forgot my mask.

DAVID: Why? You don't need it. We're all fully vaccinated. And boosted. And reboosted.

BRIAN: It's not a question of need. It's a question of want. *(He reaches into his pocket, takes out a colorful dollar-store harlequin mask, and puts it on. He looks very silly.)* And I've got

enough for everyone. *(He reaches into his pocket again, takes out three more harlequin masks, and offers them to the others. Julia shakes her head ruefully and smiles, Mary laughs, and David looks as if he has just been offered a shit sandwich.)*

JULIA: I had nothing to do with this.

BRIAN: Mary?

MARY: Why not? *(She takes a mask and puts it on.)*

BRIAN: Sweetheart?

JULIA: You are a complete buffoon. *(Beat.)* Okay. *(She takes a mask and puts it on.)*

BRIAN: David? Come on, you're the one who wanted to stretch a little. Think of it as Community Theater, except now you're the star.

DAVID: *(He is in torment. He looks at each of the three of them in turn. They offer silent encouragement.)* Oh, all right. *(He takes the last mask and puts it on.)*

BRIAN: Good man! Come on, let's go.

(Brian puts his arm around David's shoulder companionably and shepherds him to the door. Julia and Mary exit ahead of them.)

DAVID *(setting a limit)*: But I'm not eating dinner while I'm wearing it.

BRIAN: Of course not. We'll take them off as soon as we sit down. This is the first step on the road to being the life of the party, David. You'll get there; Rome wasn't built in a day. And neither was Utica.

DAVID: Don't be so sure. Have you been to Utica lately? *(They exit.)*

THE END