

# MARGARET AND ERNIE VS. THE WORLD

A Three-Act Play

ACT I

Partial Vision

## CHARACTERS:

MARGARET, a blind retired school teacher, dignified, with a wry sense of humor

ERNIE, a crude but good-hearted retired construction worker, one arm partly paralyzed

SOCIAL WORKER (JEREMY), a fussy male do-gooder of any age

USHER, female, any age, any race, at the theater

GUARD (Jim), any age, any race, at the retirement residence

JUNKIE, a young, threatening male, preferably not of "color"

## SCENE 1

SETTING: At rise we see the lobby of a run-down hotel in a downtown area, with minimal appointments a potted plant, a round seat, elevator door. The sets for each scene should not be so elaborate as to require any extended gaps between scenes. The action should be continuous, with only brief blackouts between the scenes, until the Intermission after Act II.)

(The fussy SOCIAL WORKER enters, sees the potted plant, goes over and removes a wadded-up piece of paper someone has thrown into the pot. He ostentatiously deposits it in a waste basket, then straightens up the round seat, moving it as he tidies up. Then he runs his finger over the seat, finding dirt. He clucks his tongue.)

(MARGARET enters, using a white cane. She is neither dowdy nor a fashion plate, dressed as tastefully as her small budget will allow. She is healthy and active despite her age and her blindness. She moves toward the round seat, but has a little difficulty finding it because it has been moved.)

JEREMY Good evening, Margaret!

MARGARET (still searching for the round seat) Hello! How are you?

JEREMY Having some trouble?

MARGARET I guess I am. Have they moved the lounge?

JEREMY Here it is. (Helps MARGARET sit.)

MARGARET Thank you.

JEREMY My pleasure. Well, I must be going now. Nice talking to you!

MARGARET (ironically) *Was* it?

JEREMY Bye! (Starts to leave, gets all the way to the other side of the stage, then notices ERNIE enter. Stops and watches the two of them.)

(ERNIE is short, a roughneck kind of guy who likes football, the type who'd drink milk out of the carton. He is quick in his movements, though his bad arm gives him some trouble.)

(ERNIE spots MARGARET but doesn't see the SOCIAL WORKER. He tiptoes closer to MARGARET, then stops behind her. She turns her head slightly, not sure if someone is there. He hesitates but then sits on the seat with his back to MARGARET. He looks over his shoulder. She moves a little to make room for him. Finally ERNIE coughs, hoping to get her attention. But MARGARET doesn't realize he's trying to attract her attention. He gets up, waves his hand in front of her face. She reaches up just after he removes his hand, to check if something is there. ERNIE coughs again.)

MARGARET Yes?

ERNIE Do you mind if I sit here?

MARGARET Am I taking up too much room?

ERNIE Oh, you're fine!

MARGARET I'm just waiting for a taxi.

ERNIE Are you? That's interesting!

MARGARET Well, yes. Very.

ERNIE I live here too.

MARGARET Do you? That's nice.

(There is a clumsy pause, with ERNIE unable to find anything else to say. The SOCIAL WORKER notices and comes hurrying over.)

JEREMY Haven't you two been introduced? Margaret, this is Ernie. Ernie, this is Margaret!

MARGARET (uncomfortable) How do you do? (Extends her hand.)

ERNIE Nice to make your acquaintance. (Shakes her hand awkwardly.)

JEREMY You know what! You two might have a great deal in common. Margaret here likes the theater. I bet you like the theater too, don't you, Ernie? Isn't that incredible! Here you theater buffs have been living in the same hotel and didn't even know each other!

MARGARET (standing) Has my cab come yet?

JEREMY (going to look) Not yet. Isn't this gal something, Ernie! With my own eyes I've seen her eat a Jell-O salad in her room just so she could save up enough money to take a taxi to the theater!

MARGARET Wish it would hurry. Don't want to be late. (Moves toward the taxi offstage, not wanting this introduction.)

JEREMY But what about Ernie?

(MARGARET stops, not encouragingly.)

ERNIE Actually I ain't been to the theater (he pronounces it the-ay-ter) that much. But could be Margaret might teach me a few things about it.

JEREMY I bet she can, if anybody can! Margaret here goes just about every night of the week. And she always goes by herself. Let me tell you we're mighty proud of our Margaret! (Gives her a condescending hug.)

MARGARET (embarrassed) It's fairly easy to get around. Really it is.

JEREMY Now, I don't want to tell you what to do, Margaret, but we can't be selfish, can we! What about nice Ernie here? There's no one to take him. Don't you feel bad about neglecting him?

MARGARET Well, I . . .

JEREMY Of course you feel bad! Just because you're blind now, you can't neglect other people! Ernie, come over here. Don't be bashful. (ERNIE comes closer.) That's much better! I bet they'll have an extra ticket for Ernie here — and at a discount too! Don't you think they might?

MARGARET Doesn't Ernie-here want to know the name of the play?

JEREMY (to ERNIE) You don't care what's playing, do you, Ernie? Margaret here is such a nice person it doesn't matter what the silly old play is, now does it?

ERNIE A play is a play is a play!

MARGARET It's a serious non-linear drama by a new playwright. Won't be many laughs.

JEREMY Oh, Ernie likes non-linear drama. I can just tell. Don't you like it, Ernie?

ERNIE I can't get enough!

MARGARET My cab is waiting, isn't it?

JEREMY Hey, now that you two have been introduced and all, why don't you — I mean, this is the big city and everything. There's no use people being alone. I mean, some of us have to watch out for our fellowman, don't you think?

ERNIE Of course I wouldn't want to force myself on —

JEREMY Who's forcing! People need a little push sometimes. There's no reason for Ernie here to be sitting around the hotel lobby watching TV. That's just plain silly. Isn't that just plain silly? (making them respond) Huh?

MARGARET (with some double meaning) Yes, I guess it's just plain silly.

JEREMY (to ERNIE) And what do you say?

ERNIE Took the words right out of my mouth.

JEREMY That's more like it! Why don't you tell Margaret there. Come on, tell her!

ERNIE I couldn't agree more, Margaret-there.

JEREMY That's it! And, Margaret, why don't you tell Ernie here what's on your mind? Come on, come on!

MARGARET As a great poet once said Ditto.

JEREMY That's it! Now, just look what we have here, with just a little bit of effort. Two folks who never spoke a word to each other — and now they've got a date. I think that's terrific. Don't you think that's terrific?

MARGARET/

ERNIE (intimidated) Yes!

JEREMY Good! And now I'm going to leave you two alone. I want you to behave yourselves! (Leers.) If you know what I mean.

MARGARET (restrained) I think we now what you mean. We're psychic.

JEREMY Take her hand, Ernie. Margaret, take his hand. Come on, don't be standoffish. (Takes their hands and makes them hold hands.) Now, isn't that better?

(They are awkwardly holding hands.)

JEREMY (his work done) Well, I've got loads of other chores to do, so I'm going to say toodles. You two be home at a decent hour, you hear me!

MARGARET (restrained) We hear you.

JEREMY Have fun, kids. And don't forget who introduced you! (Exits.)

(MARGARET and ERNIE are left holding hands. They don't know how to break the bond and smile nervously at each other.)

ERNIE You know what this makes me think of?

MARGARET No.

ERNIE My dead wife.

MARGARET I beg your pardon?

ERNIE Oh, nothin' personal. I just meant that she and me used to hold hands a lot. She's been dead for some time, though.

MARGARET (tongue in cheek, removing her hand) Do you still hold hands with her?

ERNIE (not sure) Is that a joke?

MARGARET Maybe not.

ERNIE You're pretty smart, huh? Guess it's going to all those plays. I'm not so dumb myself, to tell the truth. I can tell a nice-looking woman when I see one.

MARGARET (matter of factly) Thank you, but I'm not nice looking.

ERNIE Sure you are.

MARGARET You don't have to flatter me.

ERNIE I'm not flatterin'. Honest! I'm not much to look at myself, I know that. But I've got a good heart. My dead wife always said I had a good heart. (He sneezes.)

MARGARET Got a cold?

ERNIE Oh, it comes and goes. Must be an allergy. But I ain't never been allergic to women!

MARGARET Is the taxi here yet?

ERNIE (checking) Yeah, it's here. Well, shall we go?

MARGARET Do you really want to go to the theater?

ERNIE (not convincing) Sure I do! I like all them people prancin' around and showin' off.

MARGARET That's the theater, on the button.

ERNIE Maybe I should tell you something.

MARGARET Yes?

ERNIE I'm glad what's-his-face introduced it. I've seen you in the lobby lots of times; only I didn't know how to get your attention. I smiled. I waved. I coughed.

MARGARET At least you didn't trip me.

ERNIE You really do remind me of my dead wife! It's amazing. She was sort of wry, like you. Had to have a sense of humor if she married me, huh? (Laughs at his own joke.) You're even the same size. Only she wasn't blind, of course.

MARGARET (letting the remark go) I was married once myself. My husband died some time ago.

ERNIE           Gee, that's too bad. Gets pretty lonely around the hotel, don't you think?

MARGARET    Sometimes.

ERNIE           I suppose those plays help, though.

MARGARET    . . . Sometimes.

ERNIE           Not always what you need?

MARGARET    We all need culture — have to have it, in fact. But culture isn't everything.

ERNIE           You want to stay home instead? We could watch TV. Or we could go up to my room and . . . get to know each other better. (suddenly embarrassed) Or we could do — do our laundry together.

MARGARET    That's the best offer I've had . . . all year. But maybe we'd better go to the theater.

ERNIE           Maybe later something might . . . ? (Takes her hand and kisses it several times, as if gallant, but not properly.)

MARGARET    Where did you learn that?

ERNIE           I saw it in an old movie. Besides, I got real good hands, everybody tells me. I should have been a chiropractor instead of a construction worker. I know how to move those bones around just so . . . Or at least I used to have real good hands. Still got one! Want me to show you?

MARGARET    I bet you're not a Buddhist, are you, Ernie?

ERNIE           Huh?

MARGARET    The passions must be controlled.

ERNIE           It's hard to control myself when I'm with you!

MARGARET    The taxi's waiting and this is a public lobby and I —

ERNIE           Just a little bit! (Reaches out; she moves away) You don't want me to touch you?

MARGARET    (moving farther away) I'm sure it would be very nice, but —

ERNIE           Come on, let me rub those shoulders. (Tries to, but can't.) They're very nice shoulders, by the way.

MARGARET    Aren't people watching us!

ERNIE           No, nobody's around. You sure you don't want to stay home?

MARGARET    But the theater calls!

ERNIE Oh, who needs the theater! I think you're a real swell woman.

MARGARET (holding up her cane to keep him away, playfully) Let's go to the theater, Ernie.

ERNIE And later?

MARGARET Let's get to know each other, what do you say? Is that a deal?

ERNIE I think I know you pretty well already. I think you're special. A real special person! I've never known anybody blind before.

MARGARET Let's get the — (Goes to the door, then turns back suddenly, trying to control her anger.) That's not why you like me, is it? It's not because you think I'm pathetic, is it?

## BLACKOUT

## SCENE 2

(At the theater. A suggestion of seats. The USHER stands to the side of the chairs as MARGARET and ERNIE enter and give the USHER their tickets.)

USHER (coldly, tearing the tickets) Row S. Left side. Seats 9 And 10. (Hands them the stubs, no programs as she hurries away.)

(MARGARET and ERNIE sit facing the audience in two chairs. Two seats in front of them have RESERVED signs on them.)

ERNIE I can barely see the stage from here! But this is all they've got left. Can you see all right, Margaret?

MARGARET (ignoring his insensitivity about her blindness) Well enough.

ERNIE You'd think they'd have special seats up close, so you could at least hear good! (to USHER) Hey, you!

USHER (coming closer) Yes, sir?

ERNIE You got any other seats? How about those two? (Points to empty ones.)

USHER I'm afraid those are reserved, sir. (Exits.)

ERNIE Snippy, ain't she?

MARGARET These seats are fine, Ernie.

ERNIE You can't let 'em push you around.

MARGARET Did she give us a program? (Starts to remove her coat, has some difficulty. (ERNIE helps, but not too well because of his bad arm.)

ERNIE She didn't even do that. (waving) Hey, how about a program over here. Hey!

MARGARET Ernie, it's all right.

ERNIE Hey, this woman needs a program over here!

USHER (returning) Here's your program, sir. Any particular place you'd like it?

ERNIE All I'm trying to do is get this nice blind lady a program. Is that too much to ask?

USHER (handing him the program) I'm sorry if we're not as efficient as we might be, sir!

MARGARET (squirming) We're fine, thank you.

ERNIE (to MARGARET) You like where we're at?

USHER We have a full house tonight, I'm afraid.

ERNIE Couldn't you ask some people to move, so this blind woman can have a nice evening?

USHER I'll see what I can do! (Goes off in a huff.)

ERNIE I knew we should've stayed back at the hotel.

MARGARET Why don't you tell me what's in the program.

ERNIE (reluctantly) Okay. (Looks.) It says it's a play in three acts. That means it's gonna take a long time?

MARGARET It will fill up the evening, no doubt.

ERNIE I hope it's good.

MARGARET What else does the program say?

ERNIE Act I, Scene 1 — a tower in ancient Carthage. Where's that?

MARGARET Carthage was a rival power to Rome, I believe. Hannibal. And the elephants.

ERNIE Like in the circus?

MARGARET They used them for war.

ERNIE Did you used to be a teacher?

MARGARET Yes, high school.

ERNIE I thought so. Hannibal! Like that place in Missouri.



MARGARET Where Mark Twain grew up.

ERNIE Did they have elephants in Missouri?

MARGARET I don't suppose so. (after a pause) Are you being yourself, Ernie?

ERNIE What do you mean?

MARGARET You're not putting me on, are you?

ERNIE Why would I do that?

MARGARET Men seem to think women like it. Maybe some of them do.

ERNIE I ain't doing nothin' like that. I swear! I just want you to have the best seat in the house, 'cause you deserve it.

MARGARET I'm not looking for special treatment. I've trained myself not to have to depend on others. It's taken a long time.

ERNIE If you don't mind my asking, how long have you been . . . like you are?

MARGARET Twelve years.

ERNIE So you used to be able to see.

MARGARET I got diabetes and gradually lost my sight.

ERNIE How terrible!

MARGARET You're very direct, Ernie. I have to give you that.

ERNIE (pleased) Am I?

MARGARET Very often people treat me like a child. You don't do that!

ERNIE Gee, thanks! (Grabs her hand.) Can I confess something to you?

MARGARET Certainly.

ERNIE I don't exactly know how to talk to a blind person. I mean, do you want me to not mention it or what?

MARGARET Well, we can't ignore it. But we don't have to dwell on it either.

ERNIE You have to tell me if I'm doing wrong. I know I can be sort of an old jackass if I don't watch myself.

MARGARET Can I ask you something, while we're at it?

ERNIE Anything.

MARGARET How come you live in that hotel?

ERNIE I used to have a real good job, back when. I was makin' lots of money in those days. I had plenty of clothes and a car. Back when.

MARGARET And something happened?

ERNIE I got sick. One thing after another, and I got all infected, and then some other things happened, which I don't really want to go into, and the next thing I knew I couldn't work anymore. Then I had a stroke. (Shows his bad arm.) Never was quite the same after that . . . So now I'm on Assistance. The doctor says I could have another stroke.

USHER (coming over) I can't find you other seats, sir. You'll have to keep these if you want to see the play.

ERNIE (looking at empty ones) What about those?

USHER They're reserved for some very important people.

ERNIE Who are we — a couple of nobodies?

USHER I can't continue this conversation, sir. The house lights are dimming. (They begin to dim.)

(USHER leaves, looking back angrily.)

MARGARET (upset) It's okay, Ernie. It's okay.

ERNIE Nothin's too good for you, kid. I'm gonna get you those seats if I have to break an arm to do it!

MARGARET Ernie, please!

ERNIE They take advantage of you if you don't say anything! I've learned that much from living! Let's go take those ones. (He points.)

MARGARET The people may come late.

ERNIE Come on! (He grabs her hand and makes her sneak with him to the other seats. They remove the Reserved signs and adjust themselves in the new seats. He laughs.) See, they didn't even notice!

(The USHER comes over at once, bristling.)

USHER Are these your seats, sir?

ERNIE Sure they are. (He tries to hide the RESERVED sign.)

USHER I believe you were sitting over there!

ERNIE (pretending ignorance) Who was?

USHER            We're expecting the person who subsidizes this theater, and we have saved these seats for him and his party.

ERNIE            Looked empty to me.

USHER            Return where you were, please!

MARGARET      Let's go back, Ernie.

ERNIE            This is unfair! Throwin' blind and crippled people out of empty seats. Next thing you know you'll toss us out in the snow!

MARGARET      It's summer. Come on, Ernie. (She gets up, tugs at him.)

ERNIE            (sneaking back) I think this is humiliating. That's what I think.

MARGARET      We're fine. We're fine now. Let's just enjoy the play!

(They readjust themselves in their original seats.)

ERNIE            (for the USHER's benefit) It's a real shame when blind people have to wander around in the dark, I'll tell you that!

MARGARET      Never mind, Ernie. (Pats his hand.) It won't matter a dozen centuries from now.

ERNIE            Hey, it's startin'! It's startin'!

(They watch the play. After a few seconds, Ernie sneezes.)

ERNIE            Bless me.

MARGARET      Bless you.

(They watch for a few more moments; then ERNIE sneezes again, then coughs.)

MARGARET      (whispering) Are you okay?

ERNIE            (whispering) Yeah. (He sneezes again, coughs a hacking cough.)

MARGARET      Do you need a handkerchief?

ERNIE            (Feels his pocket.) I forgot mine.

MARGARET      I think I have one. (She searches, finds one in her coat.) Here.

ERNIE            Hey, you're very efficient. (He blows his nose in her handkerchief, making too much noise.)

(MARGARET looks around, embarrassed. When Ernie finishes, he offers her the handkerchief back, but innocently.)

ERNIE            Here's your hanky.

MARGARET    (starting to take it, then deciding she doesn't want a soiled handkerchief) You may keep it.

ERNIE            But it's yours.

MARGARET    Consider it a gift.

ERNIE            But it's a nice one. (trying to make her take it back)

MARGARET    I don't mind!

ERNIE            (realizing) Oh . . . sorry. You're sure now? I can wash it out when I get back to the hotel.

MARGARET    (squirming) I have other ones!

ERNIE            (settling back into his seat) What's this play about?

MARGARET    Why don't we watch and find out?

ERNIE            I don't know what they're talking about? This ain't poetry, is it?

MARGARET    Perhaps it will become clearer.

(The USHER makes a sweep by, to keep him quiet by her presence. They watch some more of the play. USHER leaves.)

ERNIE            Are you hungry?

MARGARET    No.

ERNIE            Sure?

MARGARET    At intermission.

ERNIE            Don't you want something now?

MARGARET    No.

ERNIE            I'll get it for you.

MARGARET    Ernie, people can hear us whispering.

ERNIE            I'm sorry. (to those behind them) Sorry. (beat) I'm gonna get you somethin'!  
(Gets up and crouches offstage.)

(ERNIE returns with a large cookie.)

ERNIE            Here's a present for you! (Tries to put the cookie, possibly with cellophane, in her hand.)

MARGARET What is it?

ERNIE A cookie!

MARGARET Thank you, but why don't you eat it?

ERNIE You're sure?

MARGARET I'm sure.

(He starts to eat it, making noise with the cellophane, the crunch, the crumbs in turn.)

ERNIE (to those around them) Excuse me! (to MARGARET) You want a bite?

MARGARET No. (She reaches out uncertainly, locates the noisy cellophane, and snatches it away from him.)

ERNIE No? It's good. Is the play gettin' interesting?

MARGARET (barbed) I don't know yet. I think the actors are watching us!

ERNIE You want me to describe what's going on?

MARGARET I can figure it out.

ERNIE The big guy's holding a glass of wine.

MARGARET I know.

ERNIE This cookie's makin' me thirsty. (Looks around as if to go back for a beverage.) It's as big as a Frisbee!

(The USHER comes over, stands with arms folded, irritated at ERNIE's disturbances.)

USHER Are you quite comfortable yet?

ERNIE Not too bad, thanks. Do you sell beverages?

USHER This is not a baseball game. And I am not a vendor!

ERNIE Thanks anyway.

USHER (furious) You're more than welcome! (Exits.)

(They finally get settled down. ERNIE is watching the play, but gradually his head starts to nod. He catches himself several times but then falls sleep. He snores.)

MARGARET (realizing he is not awake) Ernie? (No answer.) (She pokes him.)

ERNIE (waking up) Huh? Is it over yet?

MARGARET (Shakes her head, says nothing.)

ERNIE It's sort of slow, don't you think?

MARGARET I've seen better.

ERNIE Want to leave?

MARGARET You can leave if you want.

ERNIE But we came together.

MARGARET I won't mind.

ERNIE See, those seats are still empty! What did I tell you.

MARGARET Ernie, I can't hear the play!

ERNIE (looking at her profile) I'd like to kiss you. Can I?

MARGARET (Shakes her head no.)

ERNIE It won't hurt. (She sits very rigid.) You don't want me to?

MARGARET Maybe on the cheek. (She allows it, to quiet him.)

ERNIE That's a start. (He kisses her cheek, then kisses her a second time.) Let's go, what do you say? This old play's no good.

MARGARET (Sighs, can't hear the play, is embarrassed.) Yes, we might as well leave.

ERNIE Really? (Jumps up, escorts her off to the side, snaps his fingers at the USHER.) Hey, we're leaving. You can have these seats too!

USHER So sorry to lose you, sir!

ERNIE We'll be needin' a taxi now, if you don't mind. Madame!

USHER Can't you at least wait until the interval? I'm still seating latecomers.

ERNIE Well, where's your phone then? You can't keep this blind woman standing around.

USHER Find one yourself! A seeing-eye dog is less trouble than you are — sir!

ERNIE Trouble? Don't you know this woman's blind? Is that how you treat people who can't help themselves?

USHER It's not my obligation.

ERNIE Haven't you got an ounce of human decency?

USHER Sir, you are making me very angry!

ERNIE Well, you're making me angry! Look how you treat this poor woman. Just look how you treat her!

MARGARET (shamed, touching her face) Please! Oh, please, Ernie, don't make me into a nuisance!

## BLACKOUT

## SCENE 3

(They are in MARGARET's room at the hotel, with a single bed, little else.)

ERNIE Hey, your room's real nice.

MARGARET Is it? I had the feeling it was pretty simple.

ERNIE It looks like mine, actually.

MARGARET I suppose most of them look alike.

ERNIE I'm glad we left that stupid old play.

MARGARET I'm not sure we gave it a chance.

ERNIE (sitting on the bed, making a play for her) Why don't you come over and sit next to me?

MARGARET I believe the management doesn't like the residents visiting in the rooms after ten.

ERNIE It's not ten yet.

MARGARET Isn't it? It seems late.

ERNIE It is getting rather late, for the both of us. If you catch my drift.

MARGARET Oh, I catch it.

ERNIE Don't you want to sit over here? I'm not really a bad guy, you know. My dead daughter said I had my faults, but I was basically an all-right guy.

MARGARET You have a dead daughter too?

ERNIE That's what I'm trying to tell ya. No use in the two of us being lonely, is there? How much time do you spend in this room, Margaret?

MARGARET Too much.

ERNIE Is that why you go to the theater so often?

MARGARET I suppose.

ERNIE I never really liked them plays all that much. Always seemed sort of phony.

MARGARET Oh, art can be better than life sometimes. Most of the time.

ERNIE (with a sexual hint) I'd rather do something *real*. You know what I mean? When was the last time you did something real, Margaret?

MARGARET Real? . . . I can't remember.

ERNIE Have you since you went blind?

MARGARET (softly) No.

ERNIE You haven't done anything real for twelve years?

MARGARET When was the last time you did something artistic, Ernie?

ERNIE Artistic? We went to the play tonight!

MARGARET So I noticed. When was the last time you made love to somebody, Ernie?

ERNIE Hey, hey, hey, what kind of talk is that! You're gonna get me all excited!

MARGARET How long has it been, Ernie? I'd like to know.

ERNIE (suddenly vulnerable) I was having an affair with Mrs. Welch on the seventh floor. But she fell down a few months ago and broke her hip. She hasn't been right since.

MARGARET (Laughs a bit.)

ERNIE Did you laugh?

MARGARET I know it isn't funny, but I'm going to laugh anyway. Life is a comedy, Ernie. Isn't that what they say?

ERNIE She's a splendid woman, but she just didn't feel like makin' love anymore. (Looks up at the ceiling.) I suppose she's still up there. Do you know Mrs. Welch?

MARGARET (looking up) Is that what we have to look forward to, Ernie?

ERNIE Huh?

MARGARET Lying in our beds alone.

(There is a tap at the door.)

ERNIE (jumping up) Who's that?

MARGARET I don't know. The sex police.



GUARD Is everything okay in there?

MARGARET (going to the door) Everything's fine.

GUARD Nobody's bothering you, are they?

MARGARET I'm fine. Thank you.

GUARD You mind opening up so I can see?

(MARGARET opens the door offstage. GUARD enters.)

GUARD Oh, it's you, Ernie .

ERNIE Yeah, just me.

GUARD I saw somebody come into this room and I thought I'd better check. Been some muggings and robberies lately.

ERNIE We're just chattin'.

GUARD (insinuatingly) So I see. Don't stay too long now.

ERNIE I won't.

MARGARET Thanks for worrying about us.

GUARD Just doing my job.

ERNIE (wanting him to leave) Good night.

GUARD Hope you saw the new notice we put up on each floor. No overnight guests. Too hard to check on people coming and going. That's how these muggers get in.

MARGARET I guess we can thank the muggers for keeping us pure, can't we?

GUARD Some real mean guys out there. (Points.) You better watch yourselves.

ERNIE We will. Good night.

GUARD Good night. (coming back) Oh, did you hear? Mrs. Welch on seven died. Ambulance came about an hour ago.

ERNIE (sadly) No, I didn't hear.

(Both ERNIE and MARGARET look up at the ceiling.)

GUARD She was a pretty nice lady.

ERNIE Yes, she was.

GUARD Well, I guess we all get our turn . . . Good night!

(GUARD leaves.)

ERNIE Poor Mrs. Welch — Amy. That makes me feel . . . old. We used to make love, and now she's dead.

MARGARET (coming over to sit beside him, putting one arm around him) We get old . . . What else is there to say?

ERNIE (Starts to cry quietly.) I'm lonely, Margaret . . . I'm lonely.

MARGARET I know . . . I know.

ERNIE Are you lonely too?

MARGARET Yes.

ERNIE I still love women. I . . .

MARGARET To tell the truth, I don't get a whole lot of offers myself. And there's something else, something I've never told anybody else here. My husband didn't die. When I went blind, he couldn't take it. He left me.

ERNIE (hugging her with one arm) Poor Margaret. What's going to become of us? Don't have any kids to look after me. I'm just not used to being on my own. At my age you'd think I'd learn, but I've never been alone until now. Always had somebody. Used to sleep with my brother in this great big featherbed when we were kids. Then I got married and we had a great big Posturepedic. Now I've got a tiny little bed, hardly big enough for me and a cockroach. I need somebody. I need to be needed.

MARGARET Can I read your face, Ernie?

ERNIE I beg your pardon? Is that dirty?

MARGARET I'd like to see what you look like, with my hands. May I?

ERNIE Sure . . . Let me turn so you can feel my best side. (He turns around.) Feel the back — that's the best side!

MARGARET You have to sit still. Promise?

ERNIE (turning back) Promise.

(MARGARET begins to touch his face all over.)

MARGARET You're not bad looking, are you?

ERNIE What did you expect, Frankenstein?

MARGARET It's funny, I can't really tell what you look like.

ERNIE No major disaster areas.

MARGARET (feeling) You may be right.

ERNIE This is fun!

MARGARET Behave yourself now.

ERNIE Did they teach you this in Braille school?

MARGARET No, I picked it up on my own. (ironically) I go up to strangers on the street and do it to them.

ERNIE I could get used to this!

MARGARET I probably could get used to it myself. (She stops touching his face.) Sometimes I'm afraid, Ernie, afraid that I'm never going to be touched again. It's difficult to tell anyone that all you really want is someone to stroke your spine. So difficult to say such a simple little thing.

ERNIE Can I touch your back now? (She doesn't answer.) I won't go too far. I promise. (He starts to massage. Gradually she relaxes a little) How's that?

MARGARET Oh, it feels wonderful . . . wonderful! You do have good hands, Ernie.

ERNIE We're not finished yet! Maybe I'll open that chiropractor place after all. And maybe you'll stop being in the audience all the time and get yourself a part in one of those plays you're always going to! Or a movie! I saw Bette Davis play a blind woman once in . . . what was the name of that?

MARGARET Me as an actress? No, I don't think so.

ERNIE You should try it. You'd be world famous, I can tell!

MARGARET (referring to her eyes) I have a feeling the parts I could play might be limited.

ERNIE Maybe I'll act with you! Wouldn't we make a pair. Wouldn't we? (He leans closer to her.) Can I stay, Margaret? Can I?

(She is about to say yes, then changes her mind.)

MARGARET (slowly getting up and going to the door) I don't know how to say this exactly, Ernie, but I think we'd better say good night.

ERNIE Good night?

MARGARET We're both lonely. But necessity isn't the answer.

ERNIE But I like you. And the theater — I thought we were gonna go to the theater all the time together — you know.

MARGARET Let's not do it out of desperation, okay?

ERNIE But we need each other!

MARGARET Let's give ourselves that much dignity at least.

ERNIE But we shouldn't give up! We shouldn't give up just because we're getting on in years.

MARGARET And we shouldn't settle for each other just because we can't get anything else.

ERNIE Don't you like me? I like you.

MARGARET I like you, but . . . Ernie, I can see some things, and what I see is that you and I really have nothing in common except loneliness, and that's not enough. That's not enough.

ERNIE (getting up) You really want me to leave?

MARGARET I'm afraid so, Ernie. Thanks for the . . . evening. I appreciate it.

ERNIE You're just joking, aren't you? Aren't you?

MARGARET No . . .

ERNIE You're sure?

MARGARET (after a pause) I'm sure.

ERNIE Well, I guess I'd better say good night then. Don't want to wear out my welcome. . . . Maybe some other time then.

MARGARET Maybe some other time. Goodbye, Ernie.

ERNIE Goodbye. Sleep tight.

MARGARET You do the same. Let's say a prayer for Mrs. Welch.

ERNIE I will. You gonna be all right by yourself?

MARGARET (nodding) Yeah, I'm going to be just fine.

ERNIE Should I check on you tomorrow? Maybe I could call you when —

MARGARET I'll be at the theater tomorrow. There's a play where the acting is supposed to be really . . . really . . . out of this world. There's a matinee.

ERNIE A matinee on the moon, huh? Well, good night, Margaret. Parting is such sweet sorrow and all that.

MARGARET Yes, good night, Ernie.

(ERNIE leaves, looking back.)

(MARGARET listens, then goes over to her bed and sits on it, staring out at the audience.  
After a moment, she folds her hands in front of her mouth, in prayer.)

MARGARET For Mrs. Welch. (Puts her hands down.) And for me! (She quietly begins applauding.)  
Bravo, Margaret! Bravo!

(She applauds for herself as an 'actress' as the lights slowly fade.)

END OF ACT I

## ACT II

### The Baron Dances

SETTING: Another room in the hotel, with a gymnasium feel to it. The SOCIAL WORKER is standing on a chair putting up streamers and balloons for a party. He gets down and finishes a few details, such as the punch bowl, then checks the record player.)

(The GUARD enters, wearing his gun.)

JEREMY Oh, good, you've come for the party! You can help me put up balloons!

GUARD Afraid not. Just doing my rounds.

JEREMY Oh, come on! Stay for just a little bit.

GUARD Sorry. Gotta keep moving. (Pats his gun)

(GUARD starts to exit, but stops to listen.)

JEREMY Where is everybody? (Looks around.) I told them eight sharp. Nobody appreciates what you do for them anymore! I mean, I've put a lot of work into this. (Points to the decorations.) I even made a special health punch, with guava juice and brewer's yeast . . . I wonder if I should tell anybody what's in it? (GUARD leaves.) Where is everybody!

(He spots somebody offstage and runs after the person, returns dragging ERNIE.)

JEREMY Yes, you will! Come on now, Ernie!

ERNIE I'd really rather not!

JEREMY You're just playing hard to get! (Lets go of him.) There! Now this isn't so bad, is it?

ERNIE Am I the only one here?

JEREMY People will be coming any minute now. I mean, how many times a year does this hotel hold a dance? Why wouldn't everybody want to come — and get those limbs moving! (He does a few dance moves.)

ERNIE I don't like to dance.

JEREMY You're just saying that!

ERNIE I'm serious.

JEREMY You know what — I don't believe you!

ERNIE Believe me you should believe me! (Starts to leave.)

JEREMY Where's Margaret? I thought you'd be coming with her.

ERNIE (meaningfully) Your mistake.

JEREMY But I introduced you two! You'd make a real nice couple.

ERNIE You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it swim the English Channel.

JEREMY Hey, that's clever . . . Isn't that clever?

ERNIE Far be it from me to blow my own horn.

JEREMY What happened between Margaret and you?

ERNIE Never mind.

JEREMY (realizing he doesn't want to talk about it) Okay. Want me to put some music on?

ERNIE No.

JEREMY Come on, let's have some music! (Turns on the record player.) Why don't you dance, Ernie? I can't dance with you of course, but you go right ahead.

ERNIE Nobody dances alone.

JEREMY Sure they do! Hey, I've got it — you dance over there. And I'll dance over here! That way we won't be dancing alone — and yet we won't be dancing together! Isn't that a great idea!

ERNIE I don't feel much like dancing —

JEREMY Don't be an old stick-in-the-mud! Look at me — Jeremy's dancing! (He begins to dance, doing several twirls.) This is fun! You can do it. Dance! Come on — dance!

(Reluctantly ERNIE begins to dance a little, by himself.)

JEREMY (also dancing, but separately) See what can happen if you think positive! (ERNIE stops dancing, disgusted.) What's wrong?

ERNIE I think I'll go to bed.

JEREMY But it's early!

ERNIE Well, obviously nobody's coming to your dance.

JEREMY They're late, that's all. Any minute now a whole bunch will be coming in, you watch.

ERNIE You're incredible, you know that. Doesn't it ever cross your mind that people might just want to be left alone!

JEREMY (feelings hurt) I'm just trying to help them, Ernie. I'm sorry if I'm a bother. I won't keep you. (Removes needle from the record player or removes tape.)

ERNIE I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.

JEREMY (still hurt) You didn't.

ERNIE You just — You just —

JEREMY I'm sure you have other things to do, Ernie, so don't let me keep you here against your will. If nobody shows up, that's all right. I can take it.

ERNIE (feeling guilty) All right, I'll stay.

JEREMY You will! Fabulous! How about some punch? It's got (pause) all sorts of good things in it!

ERNIE Why the hell not!

(The SOCIAL WORKER ladles out some punch in two cups.)

JEREMY One for thee! And one for me!

ERNIE May I propose a toast?

JEREMY Why certainly.

ERNIE To masturbation! It keeps people off the streets!

JEREMY Why did you say that?

ERNIE Because that's probably what I'm gonna do, just as soon as I leave this "dance." It's permitted in our rooms, I believe. Or am I wrong? There aren't any signs up forbidding it — yet. Are there?

JEREMY Now, Ernie, that sounds like you're feeling an itsy-bitsy bit sorry for yourself.

ERNIE (perfunctorily) Pardon me. It won't happen again.

JEREMY That's why I'm working like a dog to arrange these get-togethers for the residents here. I don't want anybody to be lonely and locked up in their rooms. Don't you think I know people laugh at me behind my back, because I'm so "gregarious." But I don't care. I think I'm doing the right thing. And if nobody comes to this dance, then that's fine too. At least I tried.

ERNIE We appreciate what you do. Sometimes we don't seem to, but really we do.

JEREMY (hurt) And I put up those notices on the bulletin board and everything.

ERNIE It's okay, it's okay. You have lots of energy.

JEREMY All these streamers and balloons I put up. And all this special punch left over. How is it, by the way?

ERNIE (sipping, reacting) It's a . . . imported from Mars. Didn't you taste it?

JEREMY Oh, no, I wanted to make sure there was enough for everybody.



ERNIE If there's any left over, maybe you can donate it to the homeless. (Aside) The poor will drink anything.

JEREMY Well, at least one person came.

ERNIE Right. And thanks for the special invitation. But, ah, I guess I'll be . . . (Starts to leave slowly.)

JEREMY And after Margaret told me she was going to come!

ERNIE (interested) She did?

JEREMY Maybe she'll show up late. Don't you want to wait?

ERNIE Margaret and I didn't exactly hit it off. She doesn't want to see me again.

JEREMY Oh, you're just being sensitive!

ERNIE It's a little hard to say, but, no, she didn't care for me.

JEREMY I bet she did!

ERNIE No, she didn't!

JEREMY Oh, I bet she did!

ERNIE I was there, remember?

JEREMY How could she not like you?

ERNIE That's what I kept asking myself! "Ernie," I said, "what am I gonna do with you? No woman will have you." But then I thought, "Ernie, why not look on the bright side. How many men can say they've been turned down by a blind woman? That makes you pretty damn special, if you ask me!" (hurt) Pretty damn special . . .

(MARGARET enters, using her white cane.)

JEREMY (whispering to ERNIE, who has his head turned) Psst! Guess who just came in.

ERNIE (looking around at MARGARET) Helen Keller.

JEREMY Ernie!

ERNIE I always seem to say the wrong thing, don't I?

JEREMY Margaret, you look lovely tonight! What a handsome brooch! We're so glad you came.

MARGARET Thank you. Is this the right place? I don't hear any music.

JEREMY Oh, we turned it off. But if music be the food of love . . . want some punch?

MARGARET I'd love some. (as the SOCIAL WORKER gets it) Is anybody else here?

(The SOCIAL WORKER turns to ERNIE, but ERNIE refuses to speak.)

MARGARET (when she gets no answer) Hello?

JEREMY Oh, I'm sorry, Margaret. I thought somebody was here. (Sends small daggers at ERNIE.)  
I thought I saw him come in!

(ERNIE puts his finger to his lips, to tell the SOCIAL WORKER not to mention him.)

JEREMY (pretending) Isn't that someone coming in right this minute?

(ERNIE shakes his head, refusing to participate.)

MARGARET Who is it?

ERNIE (under his breath) I thought she'd be able to tell it was me by the smell!

MARGARET (not hearing him) Is something odd going on here?

JEREMY I suppose I could say something, but far be it from little old me to interfere!

MARGARET A hint at least?

JEREMY I'm not saying word one. Here's your punch. It's . . . pink.

ERNIE The other guest's name begins with E — not that you'd care.

MARGARET (not sure) Ernie?

ERNIE Very good! Well, as they say, I must be moseying along. I'm a very good moseyer.

MARGARET Don't leave on my account.

ERNIE Why not? I'm sure you don't want me to stay on your account.

JEREMY Why don't I go and check if those notices are still up on the bulletin board. I'll be back in two shakes of a — and I'm going to bring more guests if I have to go out on the sidewalks and drag them in. You two have to stay here and guard the fort. (insistently) And put up some more balloons!

ERNIE I can't stay long. I —

(The SOCIAL WORKER leaves, looking back at the two.)

ERNIE Destiny seems to keep throwing us together, doesn't it? But you needn't worry. I won't remain long in your presence, milady. So long.

MARGARET Ernie!

ERNIE            Yeah?

MARGARET    I didn't mean to hurt you.

ERNIE            Who says you did! (false bluster) Can't hurt me!

MARGARET    Maybe we could be friends.

ERNIE            Oh, probably not! You'd always be wincing or something.

MARGARET    Wincing?

ERNIE            I'm sure you're convinced I'd be pawing at you all the time.

MARGARET    I'm sorry I wasn't more . . .

ERNIE            I suppose it gave you some sort of charge to kick me out of your room, didn't it?

MARGARET    Not in the way you mean.

ERNIE            It gave you a charge in some way that's even kinkier, huh? But that's all right. Don't trouble yourself to explain. With my limited I. Q, I couldn't begin to appreciate all these far-out thrills.

MARGARET    You're very angry with me, aren't you?

ERNIE            Who me? Old Ern never gets angry. He laughs. He laughs everything off. Hear him laughing? Ho, ho, ho!

MARGARET    I realize you took a risk, that you put yourself out with me. That was brave of you.

ERNIE            Maybe I was just horny! What do you think about that, madame? Maybe I just wanted a fuck. Didn't matter who it was.

MARGARET    (pause, then) You needn't be cruel just to get back at me.

ERNIE            Men have physical needs, that's all. I'm tired of having to apologize for them. They just are, that's all.

MARGARET    I didn't think you'd be the kind who'd lash out just because you're hurt.

ERNIE            Who's lashing out? Old Ernie? He's supposed to take everything that comes his way. Such a great guy, that Ernie! No matter what happens, he just never gets upset. What an all-right guy he is!

MARGARET    You can't expect to get something just because you want it.

ERNIE            Thanks for the wisdom. Where did you read that — in a fortune cookie?

MARGARET    I didn't read it anywhere. Like most people, I learned it the hard way — from living.

ERNIE            You know what your trouble is? You've got no passions. That's it. It's easy for you to come down on me, because you don't even now what it feels like to want, to crave. You're just like some dried-up old nun who feels superior — Mother Superior — because she's never known what it feels like to have an itch between her legs!

MARGARET    (pause) Do you want me to jerk you off, Ernie?

ERNIE            (surprised) Huh?

MARGARET    Get it out. If you're that horny, let me ease your burden.

ERNIE            You will?

MARGARET    Sure. Where's your zipper? (moving closer) You may have to help me find it.

ERNIE            Are you serious?

MARGARET    Get it out! Put it in my hand. (Holds out her hand) What do I do? Refresh my memory. Back and forth? Like this? (Moves her hand) I think I can get the hang of it. Besides, it won't take long, I gather.

ERNIE            We can't do it here! (Looks around.)

MARGARET    Why not? The dried-up old nun who also likes kinky sex will get off on it, don't you think?

ERNIE            If you're trying to make me feel bad, you're succeeding.

MARGARET    Oh, heavens no! As the nun would say, where's your fly? (moving toward him, feeling him up) Let's get it over with, Ernie. And then what do you want to bet — we might even have a conversation!

ERNIE            You're making fun of me, but it's not silly. I don't care what you say. A man gets sick if he doesn't have sex.

MARGARET    I accept that. Come on! Let's get that load off your mind! (Grabs at him.)

                  (The SOCIAL WORKER returns.)

JEREMY        (with great enthusiasm, not knowing what's going on) And how are you two doing!

ERNIE            (embarrassed) Just fine.

MARGARET    Ernie and I were discussing nature.

JEREMY        Nature, huh? You two want to be left alone some more?

ERNIE            Not really.

MARGARET    Did I hear correctly?

ERNIE            You heard correctly.

MARGARET    And I was just getting into it too!

JEREMY        What are you two talking about?

MARGARET    Our little secret.

JEREMY        A secret? Oh, how cute. Why don't you tell me?

MARGARET    I don't think you'd like it, not really.

JEREMY        (real cozy) Sure I would. What is it?

ERNIE          It's pink!

JEREMY        Pink? Should I try to guess?

ERNIE          We're not going to tell.

JEREMY        Oh, come on now!

MARGARET    Maybe Ernie and I are in tune at last. Shall I play on, Ernie? The food of love?

JEREMY        What is it? I'm going to get mad now!

ERNIE          How about some more punch?

MARGARET    I haven't tasted this yet.

ERNIE          Take a sip. It's like nothing you've ever had before.

JEREMY        (going to the punch bowl) How about you, Ernie? Some more?

ERNIE          (shrugging) Sure. All it can do is kill me. How's yours, Margaret? Go ahead, try it!

(MARGARET hesitates, then takes a sip, makes an awful face.)

ERNIE          Like it?

JEREMY        Did I make it too strong?

MARGARET    I wouldn't say that, but I do think my sight is returning.

JEREMY        (getting more punch for ERNIE) Is that true?

MARGARET    Maybe it was just the first shock.

JEREMY        You two are such fun! Although you didn't put up any balloons! (handing drink to ERNIE)  
You know what — several of those posters outside were removed! That's why nobody showed up.

MARGARET Maybe a little music would help.

JEREMY You're absolutely right! Excuse me, I'm just not with it tonight. I had a terrible day. The cleaning people put this real sticky wax on the floor when they did the elevator, and three different wheelchairs got stuck to the floor and delayed the elevator service for practically hours! (Puts a record on the record player.) Now, isn't that better? Why don't you two dance?

ERNIE I don't think we're in the mood.

SOCIAL Well, I'm not interfering! No matter what! Maybe I'll just pop over there and see who's around that might want to come over. Now you two dance — but only if you want to! Not because anybody told you to!

(JEREMY exits, not on lobby side of stage.)

MARGARET (tongue-in-cheek, to ERNIE) Well, Ernie, where were we? (holds out her hand toward his crotch)

ERNIE I forget.

MARGARET (smiles) The music is rather nice, actually.

ERNIE I suppose you want to dance.

MARGARET I suppose you don't.

ERNIE I can go either way.

MARGARET Will you settle for mere dancing?

ERNIE I'm not very good at it. In fact, I'm pretty bad.

MARGARET You have all sorts of hidden talents, it seems.

ERNIE Well, I'm not gonna ask you. You have to ask me. Wouldn't want to 'harass' you!

MARGARET All right. Excuse me, baron! Would you care to dance?

(ERNIE hesitates.)

You're not sure?

ERNIE You know what I feel like?

MARGARET No.

ERNIE A teenager.

MARGARET Bragging?

ERNIE Remember when you had to ask a girl to dance, and you didn't feel like it, 'cause you were so awkward. Well, maybe you didn't have to ask. But boys had to. And it wasn't easy. I was always afraid I had bad breath.

MARGARET And did you?

ERNIE I always snuck into the john and cupped my hands over my mouth to check. You know, like this. (Demonstrates, sniffing his own breath several times.) I did that so often I don't think I ever got around to actually dancing very much!

MARGARET And that's why you're not good at it today?

ERNIE Something like that . . . And not knowing whether your possible partner wants you to ask her or not. Oh sure, she's sitting across the room with a bunch of other girls, catching your eye now and again, but you're not positive she's interested.

(There is a moment in which the parallel between his past and the present situation of awkwardness and uncertainty becomes clear to both.)

MARGARET (being nice) If you'd like to dance, I'd like it too, Ernie.

ERNIE I can't promise to keep my hands off you. After all, we do have to touch a little. Unless it's one of those modern dances where it doesn't matter who's —

MARGARET May I have your hand?

(ERNIE hesitates a moment, but then helps her to center stage. Awkwardly they get into a formal dance embrace, with ERNIE having some trouble with raising his bad arm. MARGARET helps him.)

MARGARET How's this?

ERNIE We're not gonna look stupid, are we?

MARGARET Tact, Ernie, tact. I promise to leave my cane behind.

ERNIE I meant because I'm such a klutz rather than because you're blind.

MARGARET Come, my prince. With your stroke and my eyes — and a little bit of choreography — in no time we'll be the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers of the handicapped set!

(They begin to dance.)

MARGARET (after a few steps) How are we doing, Fred?

ERNIE Maybe it should be Ginger Astaire and Fred Rogers. (MARGARET laughs.) You're not bad!

MARGARET You might say: That gal sure knows how to follow. You're not so bad yourself!

(The JUNKIE enters with a gun. He looks nervous, frightened, and desperate. He aims the gun at the dancing couple. This scene should be played as a mix of danger and comedy.)

JUNKIE        Okay, give me all your money and your valuables!

MARGARET    (to ERNIE) Who is that?

ERNIE        I think it's a joke.

JUNKIE        This is no joke! Don't fool with me!

ERNIE        Who's foolin'?

JUNKIE        I want you two to separate. (They hesitate.) Do it! Do it!

(MARGARET and ERNIE separate.)

                  Is there something wrong with her?

ERNIE        She's blind.

JUNKIE        I'm sorry. I don't like to take advantage. But I'm real desperate at the moment. Give me some money. Come on, hurry!

ERNIE        Can I reach for my wallet?

JUNKIE        Don't do anything funny. I'll shoot you. I mean it!

ERNIE        (very carefully) I'm sure you do.

MARGARET    Do you want my purse? It's over on the chair, I think.

JUNKIE        (getting the purse, riffling through it) Is there anybody else here? Anybody else around?

(MARGARET and ERNIE look toward each other, reminding us that the SOCIAL WORKER is nearby and could return at any moment.)

ERNIE        No, there's nobody else!

JUNKIE        Better not be. 'Cause I'll shoot 'em if they come in here and try to stop me!

ERNIE        You gonna steal money from people like us?

JUNKIE        You got somebody better in mind?

ERNIE        We're poor too. Why don't you go rob somebody rich!

JUNKIE        Sorry, I left my Robin Hood suit at home!

ERNIE        Why don't you get a cure or something?



JUNKIE Listen, just give me your goddamn stuff and I'll get out of here. Don't give me any advice, okay?

MARGARET Did you find my purse?

JUNKIE (searching through the purse) Yeah, but I can't find any money!

MARGARET Look in the little change purse. There isn't very much —

JUNKIE Are you really blind?

MARGARET That's what they tell me.

ERNIE And I've had a stroke! (Shows his bad arm.) You sure you want to rob us?

JUNKIE I don't want to rob nobody, man, but you gotta do what you gotta do.

ERNIE Can I take my money out of my wallet, so I can keep my ID and —

JUNKIE Don't get any ideas about being a hero, pal! I haven't shot anybody yet, but I will. I will!

ERNIE I don't have any ideas! (with a little laugh) At least that's what Margaret tells me.

JUNKIE Give me the whole wallet.

(ERNIE inches toward him, hands him the wallet, turning his body sideways ostentatiously.)

What are you doing?

ERNIE Nothing. Just giving you what you asked for.

JUNKIE Why are you standing so funny?

ERNIE I read somewhere that you're supposed to stand sideways if you're robbed. You make a smaller target.

JUNKIE You're also supposed to yell. (threateningly with the gun) Feel like yelling?

ERNIE I'm a very quiet person.

JUNKIE (to MARGARET) How about you? Are you quiet too?

MARGARET A still life.

JUNKIE Is this all you two got?

MARGARET I don't carry much cash. They advise against it — in cases like the present.

JUNKIE (to ERNIE) What about you?

ERNIE I have some in my room. I could go get it, if you like . . . (Makes a move as if to go)

JUNKIE A clown, huh? (Motions him back with gun.)

ERNIE No . . .

JUNKIE Don't mess with my head, man! I wouldn't want to hurt an old couple like you. Really I wouldn't.

ERNIE I'm sure basically you're a splendid person.

JUNKIE I am! You think I want to do this?

ERNIE You're doing it.

MARGARET Ernie, don't argue with him.

ERNIE I read somewhere you're not supposed to give in. If you resist, it's better.

MARGARET I read that you're supposed to agree with what they want.

ERNIE I don't think so.

JUNKIE Do you mind letting me in on this conversation? You got any jewelry? Any rings?

(Both hold up their hands, showing they don't.)

JUNKIE (to Ernie) Get that other arm up all the way!

ERNIE I'm trying. I'm trying. It's not what it used to be. The last time I was mugged, I got it up.

MARGARET (about the double entendre) No comment!

JUNKIE You sure you don't have any money hidden on yourselves? (He pats ERNIE down, finds nothing.) (to MARGARET) What about you? (Goes up to her.)

ERNIE Don't you touch her!

JUNKIE What?

ERNIE I'm not trying to be a hero or anything, but you wouldn't feel up a blind woman, would you?

MARGARET Right! Only Ernie would do that.

JUNKIE I'll feel up whoever I damn well please! Don't you see this? (Brandishes the gun.)

ERNIE Is it really loaded?

JUNKIE Want to find out?

MARGARET (to JUNKIE) Please, you'd better get away before some of the staff come back.

JUNKIE (frightened) Who's around? (Goes to check the entrance, away from the lobby side.) I don't see anybody.

JEREMY (entering from the other side, the lobby side) Hey, you two! I don't hear any music! (He enters, then sees the JUNKIE.) Hey, what's —

JUNKIE Stand over there! In fact, all three of you stand in a row together!

(They do, but with MARGARET out of synch, unsure of where to go.)

I said in a row, goddamn it! (He moves her roughly.)

ERNIE Don't you treat her like that!

JUNKIE Okay, I'm sorry! I'm just trying to get out of here as fast as I can. Don't give me any trouble and we'll all be fine. I'll leave and you can go back to your dancing. (to SOCIAL WORKER, loudly) But I need some money first!

JEREMY But I locked it in our safe!

JUNKIE You're lying to me!

JEREMY Honest I'm not. We've been robbed before, and I learned from that.

JUNKIE Goddamn it, can't you get it through your thick heads! I need something valuable, something I can —

ERNIE (looking around) How about Margaret's cane. (Picks it up.)

JUNKIE Are you being a smartass?

ERNIE (intimidated) Sorry.

JEREMY Maybe I have something. Let me see. (Starts to check his pockets.)

JUNKIE Wait! Let me do it! (Comes over, pats the SOCIAL WORKER down, finds nothing.) How about a watch?

JEREMY I don't wear one.

ERNIE Me neither.

MARGARET (after a beat, realizing the JUNKIE is waiting for her answer) Are you looking at me? I don't have a watch either.

JUNKIE (to ERNIE and MARGARET) Afraid of time passing, is that what it is? Look, I'm real hard up and I'm not getting anywhere with you guys. I've never done this before, honest! I —

JEREMY        Why don't you come back tomorrow when we're open. I mean, we could help you more then. We've got a very effective drug abuse program here.

JUNKIE        (angry) Listen, asshole, I've had enough out of you! I need some junk and that's all there is to it!

ERNIE         May I make a suggestion?

JUNKIE        What?

ERNIE        (placatingly) I'm not trying to be funny now, I swear it.

JUNKIE        What is it?

ERNIE        Have you thought about robbing the person you get the drugs from? Then you wouldn't have to go through the middleman — like us, I mean.

JUNKIE        No, I haven't! . . . He carries a gun.

MARGARET    Wise man.

JUNKIE        You sorry you don't carry one? (Looks through her purse for a possible gun.)

MARGARET    Not really. I'm not terribly good at aiming.

JUNKIE        Don't think you're going to get sympathy out of me.

MARGARET    Wouldn't dream of it.

JEREMY       I think you'd better leave, don't you?

JUNKIE        You're expecting more people here, aren't you?

JEREMY       Some may still arrive, yes. They'll —

JUNKIE        I should wait then. I can rob each one as they trickle in.

JEREMY       I don't think that's a very good —

JUNKIE        Well, I do! . . . I want you three to act normal.

JEREMY       By doing what? . . . Well, I guess I could put up some more balloons.

JUNKIE        I got it! Dance! Like you were before. I'll stand over here where they can't see me. Put the music back on. (The three hesitate.) Put it on!

(The SOCIAL WORKER starts to put a record on.)

JEREMY       What do you want to hear? Classical? Easy-listening?

JUNKIE        Never mind! Jesus! Just put something on!

JEREMY Just trying to be pleasant in a difficult situation!

JUNKIE (to MARGARET and ERNIE) Get going!

(MARGARET and ERNIE come together, as though to dance.)

ERNIE (to MARGARET, trying to be cool) May I have the pleasure, milady?

MARGARET Of course . . . baron. Just as long as you don't use me as a shield between you and him!  
(meaning the JUNKIE)

(MARGARET and ERNIE begin to dance, nervously, trying to be calm.)

ERNIE Ah, dear Margaret, you're so good in a crisis.

MARGARET You've kept your cool too. Indeed, you've never danced better!

JEREMY (to JUNKIE) What do you want me to do?

JUNKIE Let me see. A samba? How about dropping dead?

JEREMY (doing a few dance steps out of nervousness) Is this okay? Why do you have to do things like this? We run these social agencies for people like you and then you refuse to take advantage of them!

JUNKIE Will you shut up!

JEREMY It's people like yourself who ruin it for everybody else!

JUNKIE (as a joke) Sorry, but they just wouldn't renew my prescription!

JEREMY (still dancing a little) How long do you intend to keep us like this?

JUNKIE Till I get what I need.

ERNIE (dancing) I remember marathon dances like this back in the Depression.

JEREMY (to JUNKIE) We have a guard in this building, I hope you realize. He makes rounds all the time.

JUNKIE Well, he doesn't seem to be making one now, does he?

JEREMY I just passed him a minute ago.

ERNIE (to JUNKIE) May we sit the next one out?

JUNKIE Keep dancing!

JEREMY Okay, I've had enough of this! Give me that gun!

JUNKIE Shut up!

JEREMY (Moves toward the JUNKIE, hand out.) You don't want to do this. Just hand that gun over to me and it will be the beginning of a whole new phase of your life!

JUNKIE Who is this crazy person?

JEREMY If I have to, I'm going to take that gun away from you.

JUNKIE Like hell you are!

JEREMY (still advancing) Think about others. Think about society!

JUNKIE (backing away) Get away from me. I mean it!

JEREMY (still moving) I'm sure we can solve your problems for you.

JUNKIE No, you can't. They're my problems!

ERNIE (to JUNKIE) You'd better give up. There's no getting away from him.

JEREMY If people would only sign a petition against handguns, this kind of thing wouldn't happen!

JUNKIE (going to MARGARET and holding the gun to her head) Stop right there or I'll blow her head off.

(The SOCIAL WORKER stops.)

JEREMY Now you wouldn't harm that woman and you know it. She's blind.

JUNKIE I don't discriminate against the handicapped!

JEREMY I can't believe you'd sink that low.

MARGARET (with the gun at her head, tongue-in-cheek) Why don't we take his word for it.

JEREMY You can't negotiate with these people, Margaret. If you give in to them, they just keep doing it again and again.

MARGARET (still tongue-in-cheek) Perhaps just this one time.

JUNKIE I've got to get out of here.

JEREMY (blocking the door) You're not leaving here until you come to your senses.

JUNKIE Get out of the way!

JEREMY You stay here and work this out! You can't keep running away from your problems!

ERNIE (to SOCIAL WORKER) Hey, let him go if he wants to!

JUNKIE Thank you.

JEREMY Don't interfere, Ernie. I'm been trained to handle this.

JUNKIE Okay, I'm going to leave. . . . But I'm taking her as a hostage until I get outside.

ERNIE/  
JEREMY Hey! No!

JUNKIE (to MARGARET) Come on, move! (He leads MARGARET, gun still to her head, toward the exit.)

ERNIE Let her go!

MARGARET (genuinely afraid) Help me, somebody!

JUNKIE No one's going to help you. If you scream, I'll . . . (Pushes the gun close to her head.)

MARGARET I won't scream.

ERNIE Margaret!

MARGARET What?

ERNIE Don't panic. We'll rescue you.

MARGARET Cross your heart and hope to die?

ERNIE Solemn vow.

JEREMY A lot of good that's going to do. Once she's outside, who knows what'll happen to her! Think of something, Ernie!

ERNIE Well, I'd — If —

JUNKIE Save your breath. He's no help.

MARGARET Ernie?

ERNIE What am I supposed to do?

MARGARET Ad lib.

ERNIE I'm just an ordinary guy. I . . . (He fails to be courageous. It should be a moment.)

(MARGARET and the SOCIAL WORKER slump, disappointed.)

ERNIE Well, what did you expect from me?

JUNKIE (contemptuously) Just what we got, I suppose. Okay, let's go! (Starts off with MARGARET.)

ERNIE Wait! I do have one idea.

JUNKIE        What?

ERNIE        I'm willing to take Margaret's place as your hostage.

JUNKIE        You are?

MARGARET    Ernie, are you serious?

ERNIE        It's the least I can do after your offer to jerk me off.

JEREMY       (flabbergasted) *What?!*

ERNIE        Never you mind.

JUNKIE        I didn't think you had it in you, man.

ERNIE        Old Ernie is full of hidden talents.

JUNKIE        Just one hitch. I don't want to exchange! It's too much trouble. And you're probably planning to pull something smart.

ERNIE        I won't pull anything. It'll be a lot easier if your hostage doesn't slow you down.

JUNKIE        (thinking fast) All right. But try one little thing and you'll all be dead!

ERNIE        It's a deal.

JUNKIE        Come toward me . . . slowly. (ERNIE does.) Now put your head down. (ERNIE bends a little) Farther. Now when I move the gun from her head to yours, nobody move. Nobody! Agreed?

ERNIE /  
MARGARET/  
JEREMY       All right. Yes. Okay.

JUNKIE        Okay, I'm going to move the gun now. (He quickly moves it from MARGARET's temple to the top center of ERNIE's skull.) Stay with me. (He turns, letting go of MARGARET'S arm, pushing her away. She stumbles and falls.) Stay there! Don't get up!

JEREMY        Are you all right, Margaret?

MARGARET    (still on floor) I'll be all right.

JUNKIE        (still with the gun pointed into the top center of ERNIE'S skull, the head bent forward) Okay, so you're a big hero, pal! Feel better?

ERNIE        (head bent) It's not exactly what I had in mind!

JUNKIE        Now you just stay like this and we'll move out together. When we reach the front door I'll set you free.



ERNIE (ironically) Many thanks.

JUNKIE Let's move. (He backs out, holding the gun to ERNIE'S skull.)

MARGARET Ernie!

(The JUNKIE and ERNIE disappear offstage.)

JEREMY (rushing to MARGARET) He's gone. Let me help you.

MARGARET Is Ernie all right?

JEREMY I don't know. (Goes to the exit to check.) I can't see them. Do you think I should follow them?

(There are gunshots offstage.)

MARGARET (devastated) Oh, no! NO!

(Lights fade, to show time passing. Then lights slowly back up, with MARGARET at another part of the stage. The SOCIAL WORKER is gone. We hear a commotion offstage. MARGARET looks up expectantly.)

JEREMY (re-entering, shaking his head) What a shame! What a terrible shame!

MARGARET What happened? Is Ernie dead?

JEREMY What a needless waste of human life . . .

MARGARET (fiercely) Tell me what happened!

JEREMY The guard shot the junkie out in the lobby. He's not moving.

MARGARET (reacts to the death, then) Is Ernie all right?

JEREMY (looking offstage where the shooting took place) I could have saved that man if I'd had just a few more minutes. I know I could have!

(ERNIE backs in, in the same head-bowed position he left in — as a joke.)

ERNIE Guess who's back! (He stands upright.)

MARGARET (shocked, relieved) Oh, my god! Ernie!

ERNIE Hey, you missed my big entrance.

MARGARET Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry . . . But I'm blind!

ERNIE (snapping his fingers) Oh, I keep forgetting.

MARGARET You were so brave, Ernie. You were fantastic!

ERNIE            Was I? I thought I looked a pretty silly creeping off there like that.

MARGARET    You were magnificent.

ERNIE            I was? Oh well, maybe just a little magnificent. I feel sorry for that guy . . . but he did almost kill us.

MARGARET    (nods agreement) . . . May I hug you?

ERNIE            (shyly) Don't want to force anything.

MARGARET    I want to!

(She holds out her arms. ERNIE diffidently places himself inside her outstretched arms, inching his way closer but so that she has to hug him sideways.)

ERNIE            It's nice to be appreciated.

MARGARET    You're appreciated. Believe me, you are appreciated. (Hugs him.) Why are you standing like this?

ERNIE            They say it makes you a smaller target.

MARGARET    (touched) Oh, Ernie!

ERNIE            Does it mean you have to marry me now, because I saved your life, like some old play?

MARGARET    Ernie, I think that would be a bit —

JEREMY        Why don't you two get married! We could hold the ceremony right here. We've already got the balloons and everything! We could invite a minister or a priest or a rabbi or a mullah or —

MARGARET    Excuse me.

JEREMY        Yes?

MARGARET    Do you have any of your balloons with you now?

JEREMY        Why, yes! (He goes and gets one.) Here's one.

MARGARET    Would you mind bringing it over to me?

JEREMY        Of course not, Margaret! (He brings it over to her with a flourish.) (singing) "Here comes the bride . . ."

MARGARET    Is it here?

JEREMY        It's pretty yellow one. We'll get some big white ones for the reception and —

MARGARET    (feeling for it) Is it right here?

JEREMY      Yes, it's —

(MARGARET takes off her brooch and deliberately breaks the balloon.)

JEREMY      Margaret!

MARGARET    Sorry. It was an accident . . . What a shame. We won't be able to hold the wedding ceremony after all, will we? Will we?

BLACKOUT

INTERMISSION

ACT III

Who's Afraid of Beauty?

SETTING: The lounge of the hotel, a kind of reading/game room

(The GUARD, who shot the JUNKIE, is sitting off to the side of the stage, his head in his hand, depressed, looking at his gun.)

(MARGARET enters, using her cane. She carries a Braille book. As she sits in a lounge chair, the GUARD notices her and turns away, still holding his head. MARGARET settles herself, opens her Braille book, and begins to read.)

GUARD (twisting about, unsettled)

(MARGARET looks up, hearing him, but she says nothing. Then she goes back to her reading.)

(The GUARD looks at his gun with distaste.)

GUARD (softly) Christ!

MARGARET Ernie?

GUARD No, I'm afraid it's not Ernie.

MARGARET Who is it?

GUARD It's Bill. The guard.

MARGARET Is something wrong?

GUARD A little.

MARGARET I didn't get a chance to thank you for what you did yesterday. If it hadn't been for you, I might not be sitting here right now.

GUARD (looking at his gun) That's what everybody tells me. I wish I was convinced. Just a case of the jitters or something. I was perfectly fine yesterday, but it's catching up to me today.

MARGARET Is there some way I can . . .

GUARD (Starts to leave.) No, I'll have to work it out myself.

MARGARET Whatever you say. (before he leaves) Maybe you can help me a little.

GUARD Sure, what is it?

MARGARET If you run into Ernie, would you tell him I'm in here? I was supposed to meet him in the cafeteria, but he was late.

GUARD I'll tell him.

MARGARET Thank you. (as he is about to go) You know, it's funny — people will help you, but sometimes they don't want to be helped themselves. I used to be like that. But since I went blind, I've learned to be independent when I have to be. And to accept help when I need it . . .

GUARD Well, I would sort of like to talk to somebody.

MARGARET (closing her Braille book) I was just going to read some poetry. It can wait. Why don't you sit down?

GUARD But if you're supposed to meet Ernie and everything, I wouldn't want —

MARGARET Ernie and I are just friends.

GUARD That's not what I hear. I heard you two were becoming an item around here.

MARGARET Excuse me, but I hate that! Why do people have to see everything, every relationship in such predictable terms!

GUARD Sorry!

MARGARET Why must everybody be in a couple?

GUARD Didn't mean to offend. Actually I know what you mean. When I got divorced, it was amazing how everybody thought I'd want to get married again right away. But I enjoyed being alone.

MARGARET Right! All that room in the bed! (now that they have become more intimate) So what's been bothering you?

GUARD Because of what happened, they're talking about locking the front door now, so you'd have to have two or three keys to get in! I think that's terrible!

MARGARET The world for most people is getting smaller, not bigger. That's one reason I came to sit in the lounge. I'm afraid if I don't, I just may wind up spending the rest of my life in my room.

GUARD I killed a man. Think of that. I took this gun and blew a hole in him. He was some sad creep who couldn't control his habit and now all that's left of him is the stain in the lobby.

MARGARET Is there a stain?

GUARD That's probably even gone by now! It's disgusting and miserable.

MARGARET Yes, we should all at least have a stain for people to remember us by.

GUARD I don't remember the world being like this, do you? And now I'm part of it, all the violence and shittiness!

MARGARET Why did you become a guard?

GUARD Because that's all I could find. I was laid off of my regular job.

MARGARET What was that?

GUARD I forget.

MARGARET You are depressed.

GUARD Sorry, I don't mean to get you down. You've been through enough lately. I'd better be going. Who knows — might be more thieves in need of shooting!

MARGARET Maybe you should take a few days off.

GUARD Can't afford to. I pay child support. And there's a mortgage. And I smoke dope too! Isn't that a kicker? I shoot some poor bastard because he needs dope and I smoke more than my share! Isn't that beautiful!

(ERNIE enters, with a book.)

ERNIE (to MARGARET) So there you be! Sorry I was late. (noticing the GUARD) Hey, here's the man I owe my life to! Hey, buddy! (Grabs the GUARD'S hand.)

GUARD Hey, Ernie! Good to see you!

(They shake hands energetically, as though nothing is the matter.)

ERNIE How's every little thing, sheriff!

GUARD Can't complain! How about yourself?

ERNIE Great! Just great!

GUARD Good to hear it. Nice to see you!

MARGARET (reacting to their unwillingness to be honest) Sit down, both of you!

ERNIE What?

MARGARET What's with all this . . . how shall I put it? Bullshit.

ERNIE What bullshit?

MARGARET Let's sit and talk. I haven't had a grown-up conversation since I don't know when. The world is coming to an end and nobody wants to talk about it.

ERNIE What are you talking about?

MARGARET Inflation, unemployment, violent crime, nuclear war, and spit on the sidewalks — how about those for starters?

ERNIE Oh, those are depressing! If we're gonna talk, let's discuss upbeat things.

MARGARET I don't know how to break it to you, Ernie, but the world is not a Debby Boone Festival.

ERNIE What d'you say we talk about romance! (He sings:) "You light up my life. You give me hope to carry on!"

GUARD Make that "you give me dope."

ERNIE Hey, I like that! (He sings:) "You give me dope to carry on!"

MARGARET Are we going to talk?

ERNIE We're not gonna solve anything.

MARGARET We're just going to run away from everything, bury our heads in the sand. (Gestures at the lounge.)

ERNIE You won't like what I'm gonna say, Margaret, but frankly I don't think we three little people are gonna make the slightest difference whether we discuss inflation, unemployment, violent crime or Einstein's Theory of Relativity! The world doesn't pay one flicker of attention to us, and if we think it does, then we're even dumber than they think we are!

MARGARET You're wrong. We're just supposed to sit here and wait for whatever happens to us?

ERNIE Go march if you want to. Would it be cruel, though, if I pointed out that demonstrations to halt the end of the world so far haven't been arranged for the handicapped — either the deaf, the mute, or the blind.

MARGARET (after a pause) I'll bet the end of the world is wheelchair-accessible, though, isn't it?

ERNIE Hey, I thought we were gonna read some poems and have a quiet 'artistic' night.

GUARD It's my fault because I've been in a blue funk. It's time I went home. My shift's over.

ERNIE Stay! Margaret will read aloud to us. We'll have a Poetry Festival!

GUARD I'm not sure I can stay . . .

ERNIE Sure you can! Shouldn't he stay, Margaret?

MARGARET Maybe we could all read a poem. (Gets her Braille book.)

ERNIE Could be I'll even write one! "The Poem to Save the World." How's that?

MARGARET Won't you need a crayola to write it?

ERNIE It's not nice to make fun of the 'mentally challenged,' Margaret!

GUARD I'm afraid I don't know much about poetry, so I'd better —

MARGARET This could be exciting! Nobody reads anymore! We could start a trend.

ERNIE (to GUARD) Come on, nobody knows less about poetry than I do! But if Margaret wants it, that's what Margaret gets.

MARGARET Why do I always feel like I'm pulling teeth?

ERNIE I've got an evening to kill!

(MARGARET winces.)

GUARD You sure you two want me to stay?

ERNIE If you stay, it takes the poetry burden off me. Of course if there was a game on . . .

MARGARET Is a game going to save the world, Ernie?

ERNIE Nothin's gonna save the world, probably, but at least when there's a game on, I'm not bored, like I am with poetry!

MARGARET I must say I don't relish the role of schoolmarm, trying to make you boys swallow your poetic Castor oil.

ERNIE Don't back out. I'm into it now. You into it, Bill?

GUARD Maybe it'll take my mind off my problems. Only I wouldn't want to butt in if you two want to —

MARGARET What were we saying earlier, Bill — about forcing everybody into couples?

ERNIE You can be our chaperone. Our guard! Keeping us apart. But maybe Margaret and me will fall in love anyway! Is tonight the night? God knows, I keep trying hard enough!

MARGARET Who knows! The night is young.

ERNIE I'll woo you with sonnets, rhymed cupcakes!

MARGARET Couplets.

ERNIE That's what I said. Okay, everybody, get your porn books — I mean your poetry books out!

GUARD (looking in his pockets) I don't happen to have one on me!

ERNIE Take mine! Take mine! (Gives his book to the GUARD) (as an afterthought to placate MARGARET and also to half-joke about courting her) I can look on with the mentally magnificent Margaret! (Sits next to her.)

MARGARET (flipping open the book) Mine's in Braille, Wordsworth! (Shows him.)

ERNIE Oops!



GUARD Here, we can look on this one together.

ERNIE (Grabs it, flips through it.) Lots of big, fancy words in here, and I had to buy it too!

GUARD What do we have to do?

ERNIE It's up to teacher here! (ERNIE arranges the chairs for him and the GUARD as though in a classroom.) Is this okay, teach? Is this okay? (He and the GUARD sit down like unruly schoolboys.)

MARGARET Okay, children. I mean, poets! Settle down now.

ERNIE We'll be good. We'll be good! We promise!

MARGARET I don't think I'm going to enjoy this.

(ERNIE throws a spit ball or something at MARGARET.)

MARGARET Did you throw something? (with a real edge to her voice) I'm not going to do this if you're going to act like typical nincompoop brats. Do I make myself clear? Believe it or not, children, poetry doesn't need you.

GUARD I think we're getting off to a bad start.

ERNIE Aw, we're not doing nothin'!

MARGARET (angry) All I'm saying, Ernie, is that I despise that attitude— that somebody who knows something about poetry has to be put in the humiliating position of defending Shakespeare or Walt Whitman or Sylvia Plath to some sub-literate, arrogant asshole teenager who's never read anything except the dust jacket of a punk rock album — if that!

ERNIE Wow!

MARGARET Any questions?

GUARD None.

ERNIE She's mean!

MARGARET Get rid of your spitballs and your rubber bands and your paperclips, to say nothing of you switchblades and your zip guns. Can you manage that?

ERNIE Can we chew gum?

MARGARET (angry) Ernie, that's precisely what I'm talking about! Where did this idea come from that teachers are adversaries? I feel as though I have to get a machine gun — and for what? So I can drag you, kicking and screaming every inch of the way, to sneer at literature? Who says I have to do this? Why would anybody, anybody put up with it?

ERNIE (impressed by her sincerity) Hey, okay!

MARGARET I'm not going to be hassled. When I was a teacher, I went through this, and I won't go through it again!

ERNIE Well, somebody's got to educate us.

MARGARET Sometimes I wonder if the human race is worth the effort!

ERNIE Maybe at least a few individuals are . . .

GUARD Hey, you two are getting too heavy for me!

MARGARET All right, class, let's begin then. Who'd like to read first? (Nobody answers.) How about you, Ernest? Did you bring a poem, the way I asked you to?

ERNIE I brought one, but I don't know what it means. Why don't they say it straight out?

MARGARET Why don't they play tennis without a net?

ERNIE Hey, that's good!

MARGARET I'm afraid it's not original. Robert Frost said it. Surprisingly enough, poets are not always out of touch with reality.

ERNIE Name fourteen!

MARGARET Better yet, Ernie, why don't you read us something?

ERNIE Do I have to?

MARGARET Yes!

ERNIE I think my friend here would like to go first. It's polite to let other people go first!

MARGARET What do you say, Bill?

GUARD I haven't practiced anything, but I'm willing to try. (He stands up, somewhat self-consciously.)

ERNIE Don't read anything too flowery!

MARGARET Ernest!

ERNIE Okay, I'll behave.

MARGARET Oh, Jesus!

ERNIE I'm trying! I'm trying!

GUARD (holding the book of poems) I'll just pick one at random. (Finds a page, starts to read:)

"The greedy the people

(as if as can yes)  
they sell and they buy  
and they die for because  
though the bell in the steeple  
says Why.”

ERNIE Are you on something?

GUARD It's E. E. Cummings.

ERNIE Is he on something?

GUARD Okay, I've read enough. Now it's time for my dear little schoolmate to take his turn.

MARGARET Yes, Ernest, give us a poem — even some prose — that you think is beautiful. You're not afraid of beauty, are you?

ERNIE Afraid of beauty?

MARGARET You'll stand up to a robber, but you're terrified of a poem.

ERNIE (standing) Who's afraid? I'm gonna recite, and it's gonna be one I made up too!

MARGARET I'll believe it when I hear it.

ERNIE Okay, here I go! (He gets all psyched up, but no words come out.)

GUARD We're waiting, Ernest.

ERNIE It's coming! It's coming! (makes a bathroom grunting noise) I can feel it!

MARGARET Ernie!

ERNIE Here goes! (reciting:) “He is not afraid of beauty!  
He knows it is his duty.  
He doesn't try to be snooty.  
I think this poem is . . .

MARGARET (helping him because he's stuck) Yes?

GUARD Yes?

ERNIE Better than a cootie!

GUARD (laughing, applauding) Hey, Ernie, that was good!

ERNIE Wasn't too bad, for a first try. What did you think, teach?

MARGARET We'll work on it.

ERNIE After school?

MARGARET In the woodshed!

ERNIE Hey, maybe there's a touch of the poet in me after all! See, Margaret, I'm not hopeless. If I keep this up, I'll be so fabulous I'll win your heart yet!

MARGARET "Ah, love, let us be true to one another!"

ERNIE Are you serious?

GUARD I think she's quoting a poem, Ernie.

ERNIE Yeah? What is it?

GUARD Maybe Margaret could read the whole thing to us.

ERNIE Yeah! Why not!

MARGARET Can you sit still that long?

ERNIE Sure I can!

MARGARET All right then, I'll read it.

(She opens her Braille book, begins to trace the lines, reciting very movingly.)

"The sea is calm tonight,  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; — on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone;"

ERNIE Is this gonna be funny pretty soon?

MARGARET (teasingly) All right, Ernest, I'll skip ahead to "the eternal note of sadness."  
"Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea."

ERNIE (whispering to GUARD) What's a turbid ebb?

MARGARET (pointedly ignoring him, continuing)  
"The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled — "

ERNIE Bright girdle?

MARGARET (to ERNIE) It means like a belt. The diction has changed. (She goes on.)  
"But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,"

— referring to the Sea of Faith —  
“Retreating to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.  
Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another!”

ERNIE Hey, I recognize that!

MARGARET (continuing)  
“For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

(There is a hush at the end.)

ERNIE Gee, that’s pretty. A little depressing, though.

MARGARET Saying it beautifully helps . . . (uncertain) I think.

ERNIE Who wrote that?

MARGARET Matthew Arnold.

ERNIE And this ignorant army even understood it!

MARGARET It’s a lovely poem.

ERNIE And you read it so well. Hardly a stumble. You’ve got good hands, Margaret!

MARGARET Actually I know it by heart. I just pretended to read it.

GUARD Thank you, Margaret. It was beautiful.

MARGARET Well, we don’t have to be pious about it. Poetry of course isn’t just ‘pretty.’

ERNIE It’s also true, right? “Ah, love, let us be true to one another!”

MARGARET I wonder if we ever will fall in love?

ERNIE I’m doing my share.

MARGARET But is that love, Ernie? Love?

ERNIE I don’t know how to define it. But I know it when I feel it.

MARGARET We probably have different definitions. What's yours?

ERNIE Let me think. Love is . . . having sex with somebody you like. How's that?

MARGARET (looking at him for the first time as a possible marriage partner) What if you didn't have sex, Ernie? Would it still be love?

ERNIE Probably not.

MARGARET That's clear enough.

ERNIE Well, how would you define love?

MARGARET One-third lust. Two-thirds regrets.

ERNIE That's awful!

GUARD I think she's teasing you, Ernie.

MARGARET Not really. I have found 'love' to be infinitely better in a poem than in the flesh, shall we say.

ERNIE Love is something you have to work at.

MARGARET Like a prison sentence?

ERNIE Maybe you expect too much of it, Margaret.

MARGARET Maybe I do.

ERNIE I've seen lots of worse couples than us.

MARGARET That's just what I'm talking about. Do you just want to be a couple because the world says you have to be?

ERNIE Well, it's nice! Somebody you can count on. Is that so terrible?

MARGARET Will you play a little game with me?

ERNIE What?

MARGARET Just go along with me. You'll get the hang of it. Bill, you act as marriage counselor, and tell us what to do, okay?

GUARD Okay.

MARGARET Scene: a couple on a bus. (She sits next to ERNIE, as though the two are riding a bus.) "It was Tuesday."

ERNIE Huh?

MARGARET “You said it was Wednesday. But it was Tuesday. I remember.”

ERNIE (going along with the pantomime) “It was Wednesday.”

MARGARET “No, Tuesday.”

ERNIE “I remember it was Wednesday, ‘cause that’s the day when your brother came over and ate up all the dog food.”

MARGARET “It was Tuesday, the same day your fat sister came over and broke my wicker chair sittin’ in it.”

ERNIE “Sis wouldn’t break no chair!”

MARGARET “She broke one the day we was married. Been breakin’ one every year since!”

ERNIE “At least she don’t eat up all the dog food!”

MARGARET “If you didn’t leave it around, my brother wouldn’t see it. You know how he is!”

ERNIE “Well, if you’d pick up things now and then, maybe I’d do it when it was my turn! But no, you’ve gotta yak on the telephone all day long. No time to watch out for the dog food!”

MARGARET “Hmm!” (Folds her arms.) “It was Tuesday!”

ERNIE (Folds his arms.) “Wednesday!”

MARGARET (to GUARD) Well, Bill, what do you advise this couple?

GUARD Divorce.

ERNIE Oh, they like picking at each other. It’s a form of love!

MARGARET Not the kind anybody needs!

ERNIE You can’t expect perfection! Or nobody’d ever settle down with anybody!

MARGARET The world might be a happier place! How about one more scene, Ernie? You game?

ERNIE I may not go along this time.

MARGARET Just be honest, that’s all I ask. (She moves her chair so that they face each other.) Are you looking right at me?

ERNIE Yes.

MARGARET (playing the scene) (She gives a huge yawn in his face.)

ERNIE (catching on) “Honey?”

MARGARET (Another big yawn.) "Is that you, dear?"

ERNIE (Big matching yawn, followed by a stretch.)

MARGARET "I thought it was you, honey!" (Big yawn.)

ERNIE "Yeah, just me." (Yawn.)

MARGARET "How long you been sitting there, dear?"

ERNIE "Three months."

MARGARET "I thought there was something there! (Yawn.) "Nice having you around, dear." (Yawn.) (snapping back to herself, to GUARD) The decision?

GUARD . . . Annulment?

MARGARET I rest my case.

ERNIE But that's not fair! Sometimes couples actually get along and don't bore each other!

MARGARET Name fourteen!

ERNIE You're cynical, Margaret! Did you know that?

MARGARET A cynic is someone who tells the truth other people don't want to hear.

ERNIE No, a cynic is someone who's afraid to come out from behind those perfect poems and experience the naked truth!

MARGARET I know whereof I speak!

ERNIE (seriously) Do you, Margaret? You haven't lived with anybody for twelve years. Have you thought that maybe you're protecting yourself, by making living together seem worse than it really is?

MARGARET (quiet, then turning to the GUARD) Decision?

GUARD I have to keep out of this one, I'm afraid. (Gets up.) In fact, it's time I was heading on home.

MARGARET So soon?

GUARD I'm sort of tired. Didn't sleep very well last night.

ERNIE That's because you slept alone.

GUARD I want to thank you both for including me in your evening.

ERNIE We enjoyed having you. You can come to our 'parlor' anytime!



MARGARET I hope you're feeling better now.

GUARD I am. . . . I know you don't want me to say this, but I do hope you two make it. I need something to believe in. Don't say anything! (Holds up his hand) I'd just like to see some love, instead of so much hate. Good night. (Exits)

MARGARET (after he's gone) Good night . . .

ERNIE (joking) I thought he'd never leave!

MARGARET (also joking) Yes, wasn't he an awful person!

ERNIE You know what — I had fun tonight! We have to go on meeting like this! We should entertain more often. I could arrange the next evening. Then you could arrange . . .

MARGARET . . . Maybe we . . . should.

ERNIE Really?

MARGARET It was fun. The whole evening was lively and you're . . .

ERNIE Wow, I never thought I'd hear those words coming out of your mouth.

MARGARET You're not a ventriloquist, are you? (pretending to be a ventriloquist's dummy)  
"I was fun. It was fun."

ERNIE No, I'm not a ventriloquist. And no jokes about dummies either!

MARGARET You're not a dummy, Ernie. I realize that now. Far from it.

(They look at each other meaningfully, the moment when they might agree to get together.)

ERNIE Well, here we are! Alone at last!

MARGARET What do you think will happen to us, Ernie? As an 'item'?

ERNIE I don't know. What do you think?

MARGARET . . . I suppose one possibility is that we could 'live in sin.'

ERNIE Or marry.

MARGARET Or separate.

ERNIE Or separate.

MARGARET Or one of us could die.

ERNIE Or both of us.

MARGARET Now who's depressing?

ERNIE Know something? We don't even know each other's last names.

MARGARET You're right.

ERNIE How can we fall in love if we don't even know each other's last names?

MARGARET I agree. I've always hated those movies where people 'fall in love' when they don't know the slightest thing about each other, except that they like quiche or something inane like that.

ERNIE Coggins.

MARGARET What?

ERNIE My last name is Coggins. Ernest Alexander Coggins.

MARGARET Margaret Emily Parsons Guildhoff.

ERNIE Nice to meet all of you.

MARGARET Nice to meet you too.

(ERNIE feels awkward, rubs his head.)

ERNIE Well, I suppose I should be moseying . . .

MARGARET (encouraging him) It's not late, is it?

ERNIE I've lost track of the time.

MARGARET We could read a few more poems together.

ERNIE Don't want to overdo now!

MARGARET I did enjoy being with you, Ernie.

ERNIE Well, me too.

MARGARET (awkward) What do you think we should do?

ERNIE We could have a snack, I suppose.

MARGARET I suppose.

ERNIE Do you like quiche?

MARGARET (smiling) Do you?

ERNIE (tongue-in-cheek) Mad about it.

MARGARET It's sort of expensive these days.

ERNIE           They say two can live on disability as cheaply as one.

MARGARET    I've heard that too.

ERNIE           It takes guts to live alone, you know that?

MARGARET    More than living with somebody?

ERNIE           I don't think most people realize that. I didn't realize it until I did it. Why does it take us so long to learn anything? Hell, it's hard living alone or living with somebody. That's all you can say.

MARGARET    You're deeper than you try to seem, Ernie. I think you're a very nice person.

ERNIE           And so do I — think you're a very nice person.

MARGARET    We could probably have a very good life together.

ERNIE           (strolling with her arm and arm) We could get a camper and go up to the mountains.

MARGARET    Or to the desert. I hear Death Valley is incredible in the early spring.

ERNIE           And we could maybe get a little apartment somewhere.

MARGARET    Leave the hotel. Someplace warm.

ERNIE           Yes, I like it where it's warm. We could go to the theater together!

MARGARET    And listen to the baseball games on TV.

ERNIE           And read poems to each others.

MARGARET    Why not?

ERNIE           If.

MARGARET    If?

ERNIE           If we really loved each other. (turning away from her) But we don't.

MARGARET    No, we don't . . . But then again maybe that kind of love isn't necessary.

ERNIE           Is that an offer at last?

MARGARET    Should I get down on one knee?

ERNIE           There's something I could say to that, but I wouldn't want you to think I'm a dirty old man. Besides, you're right — sometimes you gotta be serious.

MARGARET    Why don't we hold hands?

ERNIE That sounds serious.

MARGARET Maybe there's an electric current there we've overlooked.

ERNIE You mean it?

MARGARET (Nods.)

(ERNIE comes over and they hold hands, slightly out in front of them, expectantly.)

ERNIE How's your current — positive or negative?

MARGARET Not bad.

ERNIE Tell me more.

MARGARET If we held hands like this, we could zap just about any mugger in the world, don't you think? You wouldn't have to be afraid, Ernie, ever again. (smiling) I'd be there to protect you, to hold you when you feel alone in the night. . . . I get so tired, so very, very tired of being strong. Don't you? (He nods.) I try to be noble, but I guess I'm just human . . .

ERNIE Yes.

MARGARET I was wrong, Ernie. We need two of us. . . . Your hand feels so warm.

ERNIE And that's my bad one!

MARGARET (Laughs.) The more I get to know you, the more I see we have in common. (referring to their joined hands) I'll bet there really is a current here. We could be another Antony and Cleopatra. Only in pastels.

ERNIE How about paint-by-number?

MARGARET (sincerely) We could do it, Ernie! Maybe nobody can make it alone and we should admit that. It wouldn't be so hard otherwise. Eventually we could even fall in love.

ERNIE (with a sad smile, a shake of his head) Anything's possible in this world.

MARGARET (convincing herself) After all, how many times can two people make love in any given day or week or year? Why not a gentle companionship? That isn't wrong! Why not? . . . Why not?

ERNIE I think you're trying to tell me something.

MARGARET I am, Ernie. We could be the answer for both of us.

ERNIE (Takes a breath.) Would you play a little scene with me, Margaret, like we did before? Go along with me, the way I did with you? You don't have to say much. (She nods.) Picture Margaret and Ernie married. Why, it's their honeymoon and they're getting ready for bed. "Hello, darling wife," Ernie says, as he takes off his robe and sits on

the side of the bed. Margaret slowly lowers the book she's been reading and says, "Oh, I guess it's that time, isn't it?" Ernie smiles and puts out his hand to touch his bride. She flinches and grits her teeth, or is she smiling? After a pause, she scoots down under the covers as Ernie slips into bed next to her. "I love you," Ernie whispers. Then, guess what? He moves toward his bride, who lays there, oh so brave and dutiful . . . and hoping that it won't take too long.

(MARGARET begins to cry softly.)

The bridegroom presses down into the posture we like to think is romantic. Lusty though he is, he manages to look down at Margaret's face; he notices his bride's eyes are closed, with little quivering wrinkles at the edges. (Touches her face.) And he knows her eyes are gonna be closed every time they 'make love,' every single time. But old Ernie will be so grateful for what he gets, won't he? So grateful that maybe even tears will come into his eyes. (Touches his own face.) . . . See, Margaret, even I can read faces. They're just like poems.

MARGARET (crying) Oh, Ernie, I don't dislike you that much! Why don't we at least try?

ERNIE That's insulting to both of us. I wouldn't want that for all the sex in the world, Margaret. We can want it so bad we can taste it, but if it's not there, it's simply not there. Aren't we old enough to have learned something in all this time?

(MARGARET absorbs his point, which she has known of course all along in her heart.)

MARGARET You're right . . . Shall we be wise? (separating)

ERNIE So long, Margaret.

MARGARET So long? How about just good night?

ERNIE I think it would be better if we just cut it off, instead of being in-between like we are. It's too hard on both of us.

MARGARET (hurt but brave) Right . . . too hard. Goodbye, Ernie.

ERNIE Shake?

MARGARET Of course.

(They shake hands.)

ERNIE (lifting their hands) No current? Maybe we forgot to pay the electric bill.

MARGARET Maybe . . . One thing before we go our separate ways?

ERNIE What's that — a memento? I could leave a finger behind. (He makes a gesture as if to break one off.) Got one for me?

MARGARET No. Just this. (She kisses his hand, the way he did hers when they first met.)

ERNIE            Hey, your lips are warm.

MARGARET    You sound surprised.

ERNIE            I always thought the kiss of death would be cold . . .

MARGARET    We're not going to die, Ernie.

ERNIE            Of course we're not. Of course we're not . . .

(They separate, on opposite sides of the stage. ERNIE then moves slightly upstage to watch her.)

MARGARET    (about to leave, getting her cane, sensing something) Ernie, are you still there?

(ERNIE deliberately doesn't answer. After a beat, MARGARET takes her cane, stiffens her shoulders, and crosses the stage, passing right in front of ERNIE. She exits from his life.)

ERNIE            (coming forward, watching her disappear) Almost, Ernie, *almost* . . .

Soft music, slow fade.

THE END

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