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Playscripts, Inc.
325 W. 38th Street, Suite 305
New York, NY 10018

Phone: 1-866-NEW-PLAY (639-7529)
Email: info@playscripts.com
Web: www.playscripts.com

Cast of Characters

JOHN JR. JOHNSON

MR. JOHNSON

MRS. JOHNSON

THOMAS THOMPSON

LOUISE THOMPSON

TESSA THOMPSON

Note to Director

The Johnsons & The Thompsons is a comedy that shifts between two distinct worlds, ideally, in a seamless fashion. Stage architecture and design are left to the director's interpretation. A cast iron circular staircase, however, is a fixture of both living spaces.

THE JOHNSONS & THE THOMPSONS

by Howard Altmann

(The Johnsons. Night, very late. A modest living room with a circular staircase leading to a second level that cannot be seen. Faint glimmers of street life cast their quiet suburban glow through a window. MR. JOHNSON and MRS. JOHNSON, the older part of old but not elderly, visibly shaken from their sleep, move about in slippers and robes, turning on the odd light as they scrutinize JOHN JR., the older part of young but not middle-aged, standing still in a coat, unshaven. He clutches an overstuffed briefcase. MR. JOHNSON and MRS. JOHNSON examine JOHN JR. from head to toe, circling him as if he were mounted on a pedestal in a museum. MR. JOHNSON eventually retreats to a sitting chair and picks up a dictionary-sized bible, resigned. Long pause.)

JOHN JR. I've come home.

MR. JOHNSON. Your name?

MRS. JOHNSON. You know his name.

MR. JOHNSON. I know his name doesn't mean *he* knows his name.

MRS. JOHNSON. Is it necessary to test him like this? He's just come in the door.

MR. JOHNSON. Nothing 'comes in the door' at five in the morning except the cold mountain air.

MRS. JOHNSON. The only mountains near Cherry Road are two hundred miles away.

MR. JOHNSON. The only *moon* near Cherry Road is a *million* miles away.

MRS. JOHNSON. I never said there was a moon in the house.

MR. JOHNSON. *(Looking at JOHN JR.)* I'm not sure what planet to call it.

JOHN JR. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson...I've come home to tell you something.

MRS. JOHNSON. (*With relief:*) He's come home. May I help you with your coat, dear?

MR. JOHNSON. He put it on, he can take it off.

MRS. JOHNSON. With all that education who would doubt it.

JOHN JR. My name is John Jr.

MRS. JOHNSON. Oh, I knew he would remember. Welcome home Johnny.

MR. JOHNSON. Your date of birth?

MRS. JOHNSON. He told you his name.

JOHN JR. I was born on a Wednesday.

MRS. JOHNSON. Was it Wednesday or Tuesday? I thought it was Tuesday. Maybe it was Wednesday.

MR. JOHNSON. It was Monday.

MRS. JOHNSON. We have bible class on Monday.

MR. JOHNSON. Except the first Monday of every month.

MRS. JOHNSON. When it's switched to Thursday.

(Pause.)

JOHN JR. I've come home.

MR. JOHNSON. (*To MRS. JOHNSON:*) Not Thursday, Friday. (*To JOHN JR.:*) There's a beer in the fridge. You can have it.

MRS. JOHNSON. Have an apple, dear. This is the season for apples, red apples that is. Green apples are not in season. If you'd like a green apple I'm afraid this is not the house. This is the house for red apples.

JOHN JR. This is the house I was born in.

MRS. JOHNSON. With water in the kettle at all times. Shall I Mr. Johnson?

(JOHN JR. *slowly removes his coat and rests his briefcase on the floor.*)

MR. JOHNSON. Boiling water doesn't sound like a bad idea.

MRS. JOHNSON. Oh...I just remembered...we're all out of biscuits.

MR. JOHNSON. This is no time for biscuits. All that sugar at this time of the night.

MRS. JOHNSON. But my biscuits have no sugar. Only butter.

JOHN JR. I don't want any biscuits.

MR. JOHNSON. There are no biscuits!

MRS. JOHNSON. (*To JOHN JR.:*) Had we known there would have been many kinds of biscuits. Just tea then. (*She doesn't move.*)

MR. JOHNSON. (*To JOHN JR.:*) Now...there were dreams going on up those stairs.

MRS. JOHNSON. We have them every night, Johnny.

MR. JOHNSON. Speak or that beer will stay right where it is—next to the milk below the butter.

MRS. JOHNSON. What shall we do about the apples, Mr. Johnson?

MR. JOHNSON. Let's not be rash. A bottle of beer and we'll go from there.

MRS. JOHNSON. Please speak to us, Johnny. I always learn something when you speak. Not only are you our only child, you are our only educated child.

JOHN JR. I am glad you mention this Mrs. Johnson because I—

MRS. JOHNSON. Please call me Mother. I am your Mother.

JOHN JR. I am glad you mention this—Maa (*Stuttering:*) —Maaa—I am glad you mention this because the topic of my education is what I would like to discuss with both of you at—

MR. JOHNSON. What *about* your education?

MRS. JOHNSON. I don't think it's wise to rush him.

MR. JOHNSON. A wisdom the kettle seems to have acquired.

MRS. JOHNSON. My apologies, Mr. Johnson, but the kitchen is closed.

MR. JOHNSON. Closed? When did it close?

MRS. JOHNSON. When I realized there were no more biscuits.

MR. JOHNSON. Is there enough bread to keep the lights on?

JOHN JR. As I was...what was I...oh yes: yesterday was my birthday.

MR. JOHNSON. Yesterday was the last day of autumn.

MRS. JOHNSON. Did you catch the leaves, Johnny?

MR. JOHNSON. He's waiting for the snow, Mrs. Johnson.

MRS. JOHNSON. They both have their challenges.

JOHN JR. I was saying—

MRS. JOHNSON. Yes Johnny, happy birthday. If only you had come yesterday.

JOHN JR. My education. It started here. In this house. Where I learned how to speak. How to think. How to see the world.

MRS. JOHNSON. When the leaves fell we put them in piles right away.

MR. JOHNSON. I was opposed to it.

MRS. JOHNSON. But I wasn't.

JOHN JR. You gave me the perspectives of a lifetime.

MRS. JOHNSON. We wanted you to see the grass.

MR. JOHNSON. Though you showed no interest in the grass.

MRS. JOHNSON. Except the people that stepped on it.

JOHN JR. Remember how...how you used to read to me?

MRS. JOHNSON. At your bedside after you brushed your teeth. Are you still brushing, Johnny?

JOHN JR. I never followed the stories.

MR. JOHNSON. You fell asleep before they were over.

JOHN JR. My concentration was very poor.

MRS. JOHNSON. Perhaps you didn't brush long enough, Johnny.

JOHN JR. I pretended to concentrate...to understand. This pattern has followed me all my life. I...I never told anyone. Now...now I can no longer store any new information. I'm at full capacity. I can read yet I feel illiterate. I can hear yet I feel deaf. I can speak yet I feel mute. I can touch but I feel nothing. I can walk but I cannot move. I have a brain yet I...

MR. JOHNSON. ENOUGH! I'VE HEARD ENOUGH!

(Silence. Nobody moves.)

JOHN JR. *(Nervous:)* I've come home to...to tell you something.

MR. JOHNSON. *(To himself, disdain:)* He's come home to tell us something.

MRS. JOHNSON. *(To herself, thankful:)* He's come home. To the very house he was born in.

MR. JOHNSON. To the very house he left.

MRS. JOHNSON. I remember when you were born. How can I forget? Even if I had ten more of you...I would remember each one. Can a Mother forget the birth of her child? No way. A Mother can't forget. I'm your Mother.

(The Thompsons. Spotlight on the face of LOUISE THOMPSON, fifty-six, luxuriating in a bath that is a fixture of the living space, in a minimalist and carefully appointed, loft apartment.)

LOUISE. I must go to the left bank...as Paris stops for baguettes on its way to work...watching from some old hotel...sipping my tea...the winter air...brushing my breasts...as a light snow...a light Parisian snow starts falling...filling all the holes and cracks...as I finish my tea, my biscuits...close the shutters...and return to

bed...till late in the afternoon...then wrap a long red scarf around my neck...find a café...sit by a window in my soft gray sweater...and watch as everyone returns...stopping on their way home for a café au lait...to warm their palms...as the snowflakes fall...and disappear.

(The Johnsons.)

JOHN JR. Thank you for remembering about my birth.

MRS. JOHNSON. Nothing at all, Johnny.

JOHN JR. I remember the leaves. I remember counting the piles in my head. Like the way I read words. Over and over again. Three, four times. Sometimes more. Which brings me back to what I was saying earlier.

MR. JOHNSON. I remember what you were saying but none of it makes much sense to me.

MRS. JOHNSON. You keep interrupting him.

MR. JOHNSON. There were pauses.

MRS. JOHNSON. I don't remember any pauses.

MR. JOHNSON. I don't remember any apples.

MRS. JOHNSON. I don't remember any cold mountain air.

JOHN JR. We cannot remember everything. We get filled up. We get filled up and then we reach capacity. Then we must empty what we are filled with. To make room. We are capable of X. Not two X. Or ten X. X and only X!

MR. JOHNSON. Is it the absence of any real obligations in your life that brings you to this point of discovery?

JOHN JR. My obligations are numerous.

MRS. JOHNSON. Why haven't you shaved Johnny?

MR. JOHNSON. Do you file taxes? How many deductions do you claim? In what State? Do you have friends? Do they file taxes? How many deductions do they—

MRS. JOHNSON. Not so fast, Mr. Johnson.

JOHN JR. I don't want to talk about the past. I'm here to discuss the present.

MR. JOHNSON. You've come back to the house you were born in to start over! To wipe the slate! To paint the canvas! Is that what you wish me to understand?

MRS. JOHNSON. Are you coming back Johnny?

JOHN JR. I've come back to tell you something important.

MRS. JOHNSON. Johnny's coming back.

MR. JOHNSON. I have no interest in discussing the present. What is the use of discussing the present when it exists right before us? To wake Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson in the middle of the night you can only speak of one thing: your failure to keep us informed of what has happened all this time. The Johnsons deserve an understanding of the past to predict what the future has in store!

(JOHN JR. becomes increasingly ill at ease.)

MRS. JOHNSON. We're here to listen. That's why we're here...to listen. We are Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. And you are John Jr. Perhaps it's time to have an apple. A red apple.

MR. JOHNSON. If he'd want an apple he'd ask for one.

(MRS. JOHNSON turns on a lamp.)

MRS. JOHNSON. Sometimes we can't always say what we want, Mr. Johnson.

(The Thompsons. LOUISE THOMPSON is dressed with a wet towel wrapped around her head. She has partially unpacked: a woman's mesh sun hat, a sleeping bag, a souvenir-type bongo drum, a handbag and other items are spread about. Her lingerie, and there is much of it, is hanging along the edges of the tub and the staircase. THOMAS THOMPSON, sixty, sits in a 1950s leather chair with self-help books stacked knee-high around him. He nurses a glass of Scotch as he stares incredulously at the lingerie. The apartment is minimally furnished and sterile, with clean lines modernizing this old loft space. A banana leaf tree hovers. The unpacked items from the trip, including a number of tribal wall hangings, lend color and life. THOMAS drinks throughout every scene.)

LOUISE. (*Sated, with a dramatic air:*) Africa filled me.

THOMAS. It took a continent.

LOUISE. You need Africa, Tom.

THOMAS. I need a good lay.

LOUISE. Don't look at me.

THOMAS. Not to worry, darling.

LOUISE. They're lining up around the block, are they?

THOMAS. Wait till my next book.

LOUISE. The only ones lining up will be the creditors.

THOMAS. While you're lining up for the next Zen master with a publicist.

LOUISE. A publicist is what you need.

THOMAS. Africa and a publicist.

LOUISE. Why are you *so* anti everything?

THOMAS. Why do *some* people travel alone? And take three baths a day? Why do I count how many baths some people take? Why do the leaves show off their colors when they die? Why, why, why. Questions, questions, questions. I've got so many questions they just keep hitting me—boom boom boom boom boom.

LOUISE. Why do we keep pretending we can last another minute?

THOMAS. Why do I masturbate? Cause I know what I'm doing.

LOUISE. I'm so happy for you, Tom.

THOMAS. The only reason I bother.

LOUISE. Africa would've cleansed you. It would've. Every night the body simply yielded, gave up, *gave in* to the *concept* of sleep, and then to the *inevitability* of sleep.

THOMAS. So, you had a nap in Africa.

LOUISE. It was calm.

THOMAS. You fed Ritalin to the lions, did you?

LOUISE. Elephants have this inner peace—I can't describe it.

THOMAS. They've worked on themselves, haven't they?

LOUISE. There's no cynicism in Africa.

THOMAS. A reason they call it the Third World.

LOUISE. What makes us first and them third?

THOMAS. It's an emotional choice—you're first, you play asshole—you're last, you play victim.

LOUISE. Something happened to me in Africa.

THOMAS. You fell asleep.

LOUISE. I began to write letters. Letters to childhood friends I haven't spoken to since high school. As if everyone was waiting to hear from me. Things inside me I didn't know existed were suddenly just pouring out of me, flowing. Peeling all my layers. I remembered who I wanted to be, Tom.

THOMAS. And who is that, honey buns?

LOUISE. Not the American man sleeping on our daughter's sofa.

THOMAS. Oh to be François. To be Pierre. To be Jacques. To be pissed on by the French when you can buy crêpes and an Eiffel Tower at Joe's Deli!

LOUISE. Paris is for lovers.

THOMAS. Paris is salad dressing on the Fourth of July!

LOUISE. Paris is a threat to your identity.

THOMAS. Oh, Paris—the great threat! I mean the Nazis invaded, took one look at Jean Claude and Marie eating their croissants and ran back to their bunkers in Berlin! All that butter.

LOUISE. My point, *my point*, Tom, is that the city's architectural beauty, so vast and overwhelming, flies in the face of your narcissistic instincts.

THOMAS. (*Pouring himself another drink...*) Darling, allow me to come to these revelations more organically.

LOUISE. I'm fifty-six: I've learned to let go of organic.

THOMAS. Not travelling ten thousand miles to wait until a giraffe gets mauled by a lion struck a chord of reason, under the circumstances.

LOUISE. The *circumstances*.

THOMAS. Observing what Tess is like at the end of the day is helpful to my work.

LOUISE. Our daughter's life as commercial testing ground for new self-help titles. Wonderful.

THOMAS. It's not some hippo I can't relate to.

LOUISE. If one of my patients spoke of their child and a hippo in the same breath I'd say they—

THOMAS. I'm not one of your patients.

LOUISE. Just because I don't send you a bill Tom does not—

THOMAS. I've taken a walk. You've taken a trip. Let's be clear on that.

LOUISE. I don't think we're clear on anything.

THOMAS. "Something happened to me over there." Wow.

LOUISE. How is one to understand a man so frightened by change can make *any* money publishing books on personal growth?

THOMAS. How is one to explain a sex therapist who hasn't had sex with her husband since the first millennium?

LOUISE. Self-pity at your age is so unattractive.

THOMAS. *My* age! What age would it get the girls?

LOUISE. I don't know—you probably have a book about it! Actually—you probably *don't* have a book about it!

THOMAS. Forgive me for not spending three weeks hunkered down in a jeep waiting for a Kill. The only thing that got *filled* in Africa were the cheetahs!

LOUISE. You don't like to see much—we've established that.

THOMAS. I saw 'Nam.

LOUISE. We are *not* doing Vietnam.

THOMAS. How about Spin The Bottle?

LOUISE. The bottle's your default for everything. I'm staying here, Tom.

(LOUISE *unrolls her sleeping bag.*)

THOMAS. Have you ever heard of *first mover advantage*?

LOUISE. Tess will figure things out. She can deal with us.

THOMAS. *We can't deal with us!*

LOUISE. I'm fifty-six years old and our house is *padlocked!*

(*The Johnsons.*)

MRS. JOHNSON. Do you remember when the Thompsons lived on Cherry Road?

MR. JOHNSON. He can hardly remember his name.

MRS. JOHNSON. Mr. Thompson was an early riser. Walked the dog before the sun came up. Years ago he asked me about you. I told him you were off doing your own thing. I hope I did not speak out of turn. When he asked me what that was...in other words...what your own thing was...I thought he crossed the border of discretion. I did not tell him that I thought he crossed the border I just *deftly*...yes, *deftly*...spoke of the sunshine. I remember the day very well. I wish the Thompsons were here right now so they could see you. Mr. Thompson always liked you. And you always liked him, didn't you? And that daughter of theirs—I remember how you followed her every move. But the neighbors liked you just the same. They saw you as a role model for their own children. I bet you didn't know you left such a presence on Cherry Road—

MR. JOHNSON. The *dog* left its presence on Cherry road.

MRS. JOHNSON. It was good for the soil.

JOHN JR. I've come home...to...to tell you I...I...

MRS. JOHNSON. The grass was greener because of it.

JOHN JR. I want my room back.

MR. JOHNSON. I will grant you, Mrs. Johnson, that the grass was greener, yet I wish to point out to you, my wife of how many years, that what's green one day is not green the next. With all due respect to you who suffered through four hours of induced labor on that Monday, is that what stands before us has blown in like a leaf that doesn't know it's winter!

MRS. JOHNSON. If my memory serves me, it was twelve hours of induced labor on a Wednesday.

JOHN JR. You counted the hours?

MRS. JOHNSON. Oh no, Johnny, Mr. Johnson did the counting. I did the breathing.

JOHN JR. How did you count?

MR. JOHNSON. How? The eyes in my head. It was tiring but I did it.

MRS. JOHNSON. You didn't have to be there.

MR. JOHNSON. Establish a connection, you said.

MRS. JOHNSON. I suggested. I merely suggested.

JOHN JR. An eight hour discrepancy in the two accounts of my birth.

MRS. JOHNSON. Perhaps you are right about this capacity thing.

JOHN JR. Eight hours...nine to five.

MRS. JOHNSON. Mr. Johnson did not punch a clock.

MR. JOHNSON. Never did, never will. My own watch kept up with the time.

MRS. JOHNSON. A Johnson heirloom. The day you were born he recorded the time with the very watch he's wearing now.

JOHN JR. (JOHN JR. *paces.*) I want my room.

MRS. JOHNSON. Son, may I ask...are you happy?

MR. JOHNSON. Why shouldn't he be happy?

MRS. JOHNSON. He hasn't shaved.

MR. JOHNSON. He seems happy to me. From where I'm sitting. Lost but happy.

MRS. JOHNSON. Johnny, you are happy, aren't you?

MR. JOHNSON. He seems sufficiently happy and lost.

JOHN JR. I want my room back.

MRS. JOHNSON. He looks healthy. Tired but healthy. His hair is vibrant. That's a sign isn't it? It's not limp or dry. Don't you think so, Mr. Johnson?

MR. JOHNSON. Why should his hair be limp? He's a professor of sociology. Dirt doesn't cling to those who study it.

MRS. JOHNSON. (*To JOHN JR.:*) I hope you don't scrub too much. Over scrubbing is just as bad as under scrubbing.

JOHN JR. I would like to see my room.

MRS. JOHNSON. I'm afraid your room is closed, Johnny.

JOHN JR. When did my room close?

MRS. JOHNSON. When you said good-bye to Cherry Road. Of course.

MR. JOHNSON. For God's sake it's five in the morning!

MRS. JOHNSON. Besides, your room is full of plants and orange trees—

JOHN JR. You've *changed* my room?

MRS. JOHNSON. Ivies and geraniums and—

JOHN JR. A green house?

MRS. JOHNSON. It always had the best light.

JOHN JR. Where's my bed?

MRS. JOHNSON. Exchanged it for a cactus.

JOHN JR. A cactus?

MR. JOHNSON. A six foot cactus.

JOHN JR. You measured it?

MRS. JOHNSON. A tall plant is a tall plant, a short plant is a short plant. Nothing more to it than that.

MR. JOHNSON. One plant would have been enough.

MRS. JOHNSON. *(To JOHN JR.:)* You know how he can be—one plant, one language, one testament, one beer...

JOHN JR. I'm going upstairs.

MRS. JOHNSON. No! Stay here, Johnny.

MR. JOHNSON. You can't reclaim your property after abandoning it for a thousand years.

(JOHN JR. heads toward the stairs.)

JOHN JR. I have to see my room.

(MR. JOHNSON moves quickly to block the staircase. They stare at each other.)

MR. JOHNSON. Your room is closed.

MRS. JOHNSON. There are so many plants there's no room to stand.

JOHN JR. I have a right to see my room.

MR. JOHNSON. A right? Where did you get this right? *(To MRS. JOHNSON:)* Have you ever seen such a sense of entitlement?

MRS. JOHNSON. Be gentle Mr. Johnson...he's our son.

(JOHN JR. backs away.)

MR. JOHNSON. He's a professor of sociology.

MRS. JOHNSON. Full professor. *(To JOHN JR.:)* Isn't that right? Full tenure!

(JOHN JR., having been turned away at the staircase, becomes more noticeably withdrawn.)

Isn't that right, Johnny? Full tenure? *(He doesn't respond.)* Johnny, I'm talking to you.

MR. JOHNSON. Call him professor.

MRS. JOHNSON. *(To JOHN JR.:)* Did I say something wrong? Something inappropriate? You are still a professor, aren't you? You're still an expert on...on...what are you an expert on? *(He doesn't respond.)* Maybe we should at least let him walk around up there. Let him feel his way. *(MRS. JOHNSON crosses to the staircase.)* I'm going to make an opening for him. I'm going to make an opening for you, John Jr. Johnson.

(She exits up staircase.)

(The Thompsons. TESSA THOMPSON is clutching her briefcase in one hand and one of her mother's bras in the other. Her clothes and umbrella have borne the brunt of a vicious rain.)

THOMAS. When watching a lion eat its breakfast, Tess, they recommend you keep your breasts firm, upright and see-through.

LOUISE. Don't you want to take off your clothes?

THOMAS. She has her own DNA.

LOUISE. *(To TESSA:)* He's been drinking since I got here.

TESSA. *(Examining her banana tree:)* He didn't water it.

LOUISE. He could explode any minute.

THOMAS. He is the handsomest man in the world!

TESSA. *(Handing LOUISE one of her bras:)* Thank you.

THOMAS. I thought we'd do a Zen watering thing with a corporate sponsor.

TESSA. Welcome back, Mother.

THOMAS. Welcome back, indeed. *(With a hushed voice as if he were a narrator on a National Geographic special.)* Haven't seen a Kill for some time but it could happen at any minute. Here in the marshes of Tanzania...a group of American tourists have just arrived and the lions understand that Americans are the best tippers.

LOUISE. What'd you do to your hair?

TESSA. My hair?

LOUISE. I changed mine—do you like it?

THOMAS. She's a changed Mother, Tess. (*To TESSA:)* Can I pour you a drink? (*She ignores him, he pours one for himself.*)

TESSA. Let's review what the mortgage company said.

LOUISE. Let me get a hug. You just walked in.

TESSA. With penalties the back payments total a hundred and eighty thousand.

LOUISE. Before I get a hug it's hard for me to hear anything.

TESSA. And before you don't come up with sixty-five, they won't work with you and reverse the foreclosure—

LOUISE. Sixty-five? In Kenya, Tess, I started writing letters. I felt young again.

TESSA. I received the one you sent me—listen—the bank that originated the loan has been acquired and the new bank is receptive to—

LOUISE. Give me a hug and take off your shoes!

THOMAS. Tess—do you know your mother took a nap in Africa?

LOUISE. What you *should* know is that we're in far better shape.

THOMAS. I've got a best-seller in the works.

TESSA. And I've got a plan in the works. Shall we go over it?

LOUISE. Oh, I love plans, Tess.

THOMAS. They're not travel plans, darling.

LOUISE. Will you pipe down!

THOMAS. *Pipe* down? Is someone going English? Is someone trying to pipe some damn English piping through my auditory canal when Pluto's blocking my chakras!?

LOUISE. You didn't open my letter, did you?

THOMAS. Body and mind must be aligned before opening letters from sex therapists on spiritual voyages!

TESSA. Can we go over my notes, please?

THOMAS. You need a dog, Tess.

LOUISE. I've always thought she'd enjoy a cat.

THOMAS. A cat?

LOUISE. They don't need anyone.

THOMAS. Dogs are happier.

LOUISE. You don't know that.

TESSA. It'd be nice to have a dog but who would walk it?

LOUISE. If I stay here, Tess, I can walk it for you.

THOMAS. She likes *cats*. If anyone can walk a dog you're looking at him.

LOUISE. If a man can't care for himself how can he care for a dog?

THOMAS. If a woman likes cats what does that say for the future of man?

LOUISE. If a man can't water a plant what does that say for the future of women?

TESSA. I'd like some carrot juice. Excuse me.

LOUISE. I'll make it for you, sweetie.

TESSA. Don't call me sweetie.

LOUISE. Sweet—

TESSA. And I would like to take a bath. And rub cream around my eyes. So pardon me.

(TESSA tries to disengage and leave.)

THOMAS. If you grew up in the sixties, Tess, you would've been a poet. Not some corporate attorney with a bathtub.

LOUISE. The sixties—here we go.

THOMAS. Nothing wrong with free love and JFK.

TESSA. *(Disdain:)* JFK.

THOMAS. *(To TESSA:)* You entered this world not long after he left it.

TESSA. Is it possible to put the Kennedys in a drawer and all their biographers who recycle the same thin facts—

THOMAS. The day he was shot—it's like yesterday.

TESSA. All those people who keep track which Kennedy had which appetizer at which restaurant and how it all changed the course of history. Shame on this country for creating the Kennedys!

THOMAS. JFK would've ended Vietnam.

TESSA. JFK's an airport!

(The Johnsons. MRS. JOHNSON is seen going back up the stairs—there are now about ten tall plants in the living room. JOHN JR. has his face buried in a children's book, one of many that he has removed from his briefcase. MR. JOHNSON, uncomfortable with the silence, tries to engage, and as he starts, doesn't quite know how to stop, talking just as much to the air as he does to JOHN JR.)

MR. JOHNSON. As a sociologist have you noticed any changes? In the world. *(He waits for a response but doesn't get one.)* I would imagine the outside world could still use an independent appraiser—an independent opinion on things human and such. In my line of work I can't say I ever considered the services of—you know— *(He glances at JOHN JR. examining a book, unaware it's a children's book.)* somebody with your skills—but these large corporations—have you tried contacting them? When I opened for business I made many calls. At first people didn't understand how I was much different from the fellow down the block. Eventually people saw the larger picture, they understood the importance of—I persevered is what I'm trying to say.

(MRS. JOHNSON returns with two more tall plants. She places them and quickly proceeds back up the stairs.)

Now as to whether corporations will be interested in somebody with your skills—well—I can't say I understand that world other than what I read in the papers—and what the good book tells me the world should be—or was—or will be—but the point is the papers are a window on the world and everyone needs a window on

the world—for example—the banks have a fine window—they get to see all the comings and all the goings—they've got quite a window. You've always been good with numbers—I do remember that. Have you thought of taking a look at the banks? Talking to the banks? Knocking on their window—using your skills as a sociologist to understand—all the goings and comings—the behavior of money—in other words you would never lose your skills as a sociologist but in the interest of money and how it flows—how it rises and falls—

(MRS. JOHNSON returns with two more tall plants. She places them, wipes her hands clean and then examines the plants in the living room.)

MRS. JOHNSON. The light down here could be a shock to their system.

(JOHN JR. looks at the plants and walks over to examine them, curious.)

MR. JOHNSON. The change of locale is the hardest part.

MRS. JOHNSON. You can go up now, Johnny.

JOHN JR. *(As he touches the leaves:)* I can walk around?

MRS. JOHNSON. The middle...the entrance area...

JOHN JR. I want to stand by the window.

MRS. JOHNSON. I'm afraid that won't be possible.

JOHN JR. I want to stand by the window in my room.

MR. JOHNSON. It won't be possible!

MRS. JOHNSON. It's all blocked up. My most delicate plants need the window and besides, the change of locale, as Mr. Johnson pointed out, could be devastating.

MR. JOHNSON. Given a prolonged absence, we've shown considerable accommodation.

MRS. JOHNSON. I think we've done the best we can.

MR. JOHNSON. At this hour of the night!

JOHN JR. I want my room back!

MR. JOHNSON. You can't have it!

MRS. JOHNSON. It's just not ready, Johnny. It's not ready for you. Things have changed since you've been gone. Please understand.

JOHN JR. Who said you could sell my bed?

MR. JOHNSON. Who said you had any say in the matter?

MRS. JOHNSON. Who'd imagine you'd come back demanding it!

JOHN JR. You've sold my bed for a cactus and you won't let me stand by the window! I am John Jr. Johnson and I have certain rights and privileges. They may not be written down like the by-laws at the university...but in the oral tradition I have rights and privileges!

MR. JOHNSON. What oral tradition?

MRS. JOHNSON. You were lucky enough to have a bed all to yourself. When I grew up I shared my bed with my mother and father!

MR. JOHNSON. After the age of five, I didn't even have a mother or father!

JOHN JR. I WANT TO STAND BY THE WINDOW!

(MRS. JOHNSON crosses to the stairs.)

MRS. JOHNSON. I'll make room, I'll make room.

MR. JOHNSON. No! We cannot indulge him like this! Just because he's a professor does not give him the right to come barging in here after all this time demanding a view of the front yard! This is not some homework assignment for Mr. and Mrs. Johnson!

MRS. JOHNSON. *(MRS. JOHNSON stops, thinks, stands up straight.)*
We are Mr. and Mrs. Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON. That's who we are!

(JOHN JR. heads toward the stairs. MRS. JOHNSON rushes to block him.)

MRS. JOHNSON. Let me go up there. Don't you worry. I'll make room for you. (*As she ascends the stairs...*) I'll make room for you John Jr. Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON. Look what you've done.

JOHN JR. I've done nothing but come back to the house I was born in.

MR. JOHNSON. Your absence created an atmosphere that allowed a forest to rise! Right down the hall from my bed! Now you come back pleading the oral tradition! What oral tradition?

JOHN JR. Read me the by-laws.

MR. JOHNSON. There are no by-laws.

JOHN JR. You see! I told you!

MR. JOHNSON. Told me what? What exactly have you told me?

JOHN JR. The university has by-laws and this house doesn't.

MR. JOHNSON. Have you broken the by-laws at the university?

JOHN JR. If I never read them how could I have broken them?

MR. JOHNSON. Maybe you tried and it just took you too long.

JOHN JR. I want my bed.

MR. JOHNSON. Your bed is a cactus.

JOHN JR. I want my bed and my pillow and my window!

MR. JOHNSON. Is this what you teach at the university?

(The Thompsons.)

LOUISE. No one talks about the Kennedys in Africa.

THOMAS. That's why it came in third.

TESSA. What came in third?

THOMAS. The Nazis running from Jean Claude and Marie.

LOUISE. You must go to Africa, Tess. That feeling when you just know you've changed. It sounds trite but things inside of—I just felt

all this change taking shape—I started writing poems—can you imagine—*me?* Who would've thought?

THOMAS. “How To Become A Poet In Thirty Days.” My title.

LOUISE. I have to say I'm rather proud of them. I carry a few of them with me, actually, in my purse, well it's not really a purse, but you know what I mean, my bag, my bag of poems. Ah, a bag of poems. Don't you like the way that sounds?

(LOUISE opens her bag and takes out a crumpled piece of paper that in her nervousness she drops to the floor.)

THOMAS. *(With an FM voice of a classical music station:)* Poetry at the Thompsons. Tonight's reading begins with a pondering examination of “Africa: How to Find the Inner Child When You've Lost Your Fucking Mind.”

(LOUISE begins to read her poem.)

LOUISE.

*A rose has many names
And a name has many petals
And a petal has many reasons
To fall down and wait...*

(The Johnsons.)

(MRS. JOHNSON returns and plops another couple of plants on the floor.)

MRS. JOHNSON. I'm afraid it's not going to happen tonight, Johnny. I don't have the strength and there's much more to go.

MR. JOHNSON. Look what you've done! You've woken this household and you have physically harmed its inhabitants!

JOHN JR. I don't feel harmed.

MR. JOHNSON. He considers himself an inhabitant! After waking us up in the wee hours of the morning, abandoning this house for a thousand years, he considers himself an *unharméd inhabitant!*

JOHN JR. I am an inhabitant.

MR. JOHNSON. You're a professor of sociology!

MRS. JOHNSON. Full tenured professor. The Thompsons' told us all about your steady rise, Johnny. They told us all about it.

MR. JOHNSON. The Thompson girl descended from her place with the Frigidaire and the faucets.

MRS. JOHNSON. We bumped into her on the street is how it all happened. She remembered how you used to watch her walk to school. Staring out the window every morning as she passed. She sent her regards but we had no idea where to send them.

MR. JOHNSON. No idea what state or village had inherited your expertise.

MRS. JOHNSON. The name of the college, Mr. Johnson means.

JOHN JR. I'm clearing my room!

(He heads toward the stairs but MR. JOHNSON races in front and quickly shuts a safety gate in front of the staircase. The sound of the gate closing echoes. JOHN JR. retreats and a sense of increasing withdrawal should be discerned. He crosses back to his briefcase, selects another children's book and then crosses back to the plants and lingers there. Meanwhile, MR. and MRS. JOHNSON begin to laugh together at what appears to be their own inside jokes. JOHN JR. reads his book.)

MR. JOHNSON. The gates are closed.

MRS. JOHNSON. Tonight they're closed.

MR. JOHNSON. From sea to shining sea.

MRS. JOHNSON. Tomorrow they may open.

MR. JOHNSON. All with good time.

MRS. JOHNSON. Never good to rush to judgment.

MR. JOHNSON. Judge not lest ye be mistaken for a judge.

MRS. JOHNSON. The foolish man waits for the fools to get wiser.

MR. JOHNSON. Lord is my shepherd and I am his chauffeur.

MRS. JOHNSON. Mr. Johnson...the beer in the fridge... *(Referring to JOHN JR.:)* I don't think it can do much harm.

MR. JOHNSON. Why not. Why not, Mrs. Johnson.

MRS. JOHNSON. The kitchen is open.

(She exits, excited...)

(The Thompsons. Louise's poem is now in Thomas' hands.)

THOMAS. How *not* to write a poem in thirty days.

TESSA. That's mean.

THOMAS. I want her to grow as a poet.

LOUISE. Did you like it, Tess?

TESSA. It's a nice poem.

LOUISE. Nice?

THOMAS. Who can argue with nice?

LOUISE. You work at the top law firm in the country for heaven sake!

THOMAS. Can you say *very nice*?

LOUISE. An alcoholic who publishes self-help—make sense of that!

TESSA. I'm asking you both politely to *stop*.

LOUISE. If your father hadn't left his law practice none of this—

THOMAS. Have any of your patients ever gotten better?

LOUISE. “How to Love in 30 Days”—that was the first home equity line. “Reclaim Your Identity in 30 days”—the second mortgage. And now the Thompson bible: “How to Get Out of Bed in 30 days.” He thinks the world processes everything in one-month increments—something to do with the menstrual cycle!

TESSA. What do you know about the menstrual cycle that we don't?

LOUISE. What does he know about “how to love!” He spent twenty years in tax law!

THOMAS. Personal growth is a multi-billion dollar industry.

TESSA. How could you risk the mortgage a second time?

THOMAS. Three of my closest friends die and then my sister—IS THAT ENOUGH FOR THE TWO OF YOU??? We live once for fucks sake!

LOUISE. He's right, Tess.

TESSA. Stop TESSING ME! How could you go to Africa if there's no money?

LOUISE. I put it on my credit card.

TESSA. Pardon?

LOUISE. I had to get out of the country.

TESSA. You're always getting out of the country!

LOUISE. I'm fifty-six, Tess. Do you understand what that means?

TESSA. Do you?

LOUISE. I look in the mirror and see the face I don't imagine I have. It's the truth. I have to be honest. I see the lines and I...I walk around but I don't feel them—the world sees them though, doesn't it?

THOMAS. The world is CNN and a bottle of ketchup!

LOUISE. The world sees them, Tess. Am I vain? I'm not vain. I can't be vain. I'm too old to be vain. But wherever I go I check the lighting—in Africa I always wore a hat. In Ireland you don't need a hat—I'm going to Ireland—the coast. No! Of course not! I'm not going anywhere! How can I? I'm all maxed out. Do you think it's going to get worse? Of course it is—what am I thinking? The lines are going to get deeper—and—more on the way. Even my patients—the few I have left—“Dr. Thompson, I don't remember you having so many lines...and your nose...I hate your nose Dr. Thompson. It's aggressive. It's pompous!” That's just the beginning. You can start to lose your mind. My *mind*. I've got it all together. I do. This is all really helpful. What's going on right now. Us, talking like this. You know what I mean? But listen, you've been on my mind so much, Tess...you really have...I love you. I love you. It's all in my letter. When I was away I thought about you so much...you're beautiful.

(TESSA eyes the tribal wall hangings.)

TESSA. The furthest place I've ever been is Winnipeg.

LOUISE. What's wrong with Canada?

TESSA. Nothing's wrong with Canada!

THOMAS. (*Singing, overlapping:*) Oh Canada, our home and native land...

LOUISE. Buenos Aires is over-rated. So's French Polynesia. Listen Tess, I'm fifty-six. Fifty-seven in a couple of—

TESSA. I know how old you are—

LOUISE. But do you *understand* how old I am? Fifty-six is not thirty-four.

TESSA. Why is that my—

LOUISE. I know—it's *my* problem! I've taken *ownership* of it! But you try selling fifty-six to the world!

THOMAS. And fifty-six is not thirty-four and thirty-four is not seventy-five and ninety-nine is not thirty-three and if you take fifty-six and divide by a thousand do you know what you get? DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU GET?

(THOMAS hurls his glass of Scotch at the wall and then stares directly at LOUISE.)

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU GET??? LOOK AT ME! LOOK AT ME!!! DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU GET???

LOUISE. I told you. I told you, Tess. I told you he was going to explode. He always does.

THOMAS. DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU GET???

LOUISE. Tess...Tess...hold me. Hold me. Please...come here and hold me.

(TESSA doesn't move.)

THOMAS. You get nothing.

(The Johnsons. JOHN JR. stands reading his book. MRS. JOHNSON comes running out with a glass of beer in hand.)

MRS. JOHNSON. Here you go, Johnny.

JOHN JR. “Look Jane. Look Dick. See funny, Sally.”

MRS. JOHNSON. It was the darkest one in there.

JOHN JR. I’ve gone back to the beginning, Mrs. Johnson.

MRS. JOHNSON. Oh, I do love beginnings. Endings come too soon.

MR. JOHNSON. Or not soon enough.

JOHN JR. Why was Sally funny? Because she dropped the umbrella on her head. That’s what the book tells us. Right from the very beginning there is no room to make mistakes!

MRS. JOHNSON. Things are written down the way they’re written down. It’s like the Bible, Johnny.

MR. JOHNSON. Are you going to drink your beer?

JOHN JR. I never asked for a beer.

MR. JOHNSON. We opened the kitchen for you!

JOHN JR. I am thinking about Sally. Sally, Dick and Jane.

MRS. JOHNSON. Have you thought about Jesus, Luke or Paul?

MR. JOHNSON. Sociologists only have room for the seminal figures, Mrs. Johnson.

MRS. JOHNSON. I hope you didn’t forget about the beheadings and the begettings, Johnny. I hope you gave the college *those* beginnings.

JOHN JR. It’s not a college it’s a university.

MR. JOHNSON. Full capacity, he said. *Full* capacity.

JOHN JR. I need to find my books. Stand by the window. Lie in my bed.

MR. JOHNSON. Your bed is sold!

MRS. JOHNSON. Six months of bible study we got for it.

JOHN JR. I thought you exchanged it for a cactus.

MRS. JOHNSON. Your mattress we exchanged for a cactus. Your sheets and pillow we simply gave away.

JOHN JR. What about my books?

MRS. JOHNSON. What about them?

JOHN JR. I want them.

MR. JOHNSON. We gave him a beer and look what happened.

JOHN JR. I never asked for a beer. I asked for my books.

MRS. JOHNSON. They're all locked up. Tied up in bundles. Piles of bundles. Bundles of piles.

(MR. JOHNSON stands at the foot of the stairs, holding his dictionary-sized Bible.)

MR. JOHNSON. He's come back for his remains, Mrs. Johnson.

JOHN JR. I need to find my book!

MR. JOHNSON. It's buried in the piles!

JOHN JR. How do you know? You don't even know the name of the book!

MR. JOHNSON. They all say the same thing! Like the leaves!

JOHN JR. No two leaves say the same thing and no two books say the same thing!

MRS. JOHNSON. Let's be honest, Johnny—sometimes it's very hard to tell one leaf from another.

JOHN JR. When we reach capacity.

MR. JOHNSON. This night is at capacity! This nonsense is at capacity! I'M AT CAPACITY!

(MR. JOHNSON ascends a few steps of the staircase in a huff, then suddenly stops and turns around, scanning JOHN JR. A moment, as he reflects...)

Remember, Mrs. Johnson, when we went looking for him.

MRS. JOHNSON. A mother would never forget that. I am Mrs. Johnson and his mother. I am both. Sometimes it was hard to be both.

MR. JOHNSON. The renaissance period ended for a reason.

MRS. JOHNSON. I bet Johnny can speak about that period.

MR. JOHNSON. All he can speak about is Sally and Dick—a preposterous attempt to find the inner core of an irrelevant book.

MRS. JOHNSON. Oh, the inner core, like an apple: red, green or yellow. Have you ever wondered why God never created blue apples or orange apples? It would seem to me Mr. Johnson, that God only wanted a rainbow in the sky, not in an apple tree. God wanted us to look up to beautiful things, and I guess an apple tree wasn't high enough. It's like a child looking up to its parents and as the child grows up, the parents become less and less beautiful.

MR. JOHNSON. For what purpose do we allow them to outgrow us?

MRS. JOHNSON. God knows, Mr. Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON. Perhaps it's time to ask him some serious questions.

MRS. JOHNSON. We can start with some easy ones and move along from there.

MR. JOHNSON. I say we go right to the heart of the matter.

(The Thompsons. TESSA has taken her Mother in her arms, ambivalently. THOMAS, having expended a burst of anger, has regained his composure, though still very much in a drunken state. He sits on one of the tribal hangings spread out on the floor.)

LOUISE. This is what I came back for.

TESSA. You need a plan, Mother.

LOUISE. To feel.

(TESSA unhinges from her Mother.)

TESSA. Put your feelings in a plan, Mother. Nothing happens without a plan.

THOMAS. (*Holding a fake microphone.*) Good eeeeeeeevening Mozambique.

LOUISE. One can't put feelings in a—

THOMAS. Tanzaneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaah.

(*TESSA confronts THOMAS and takes the bottle of Scotch.*)

TESSA. I want my apartment back.

THOMAS. I want my sister back!

LOUISE. You're putting us out into the streets? Is that the plan?

TESSA. I've lent you both over a hundred thousand dollars—all of which was squandered. Don't try to make me feel guilty.

LOUISE. Guilt is a false emotion, sweetie.

THOMAS. Will you cut the fucking crap!

LOUISE. Do hear that tone, Tess?

THOMAS. *You're* a false emotion!

TESSA. How come the entire country is able to get divorced?

LOUISE. Shouldn't you be grateful we've stuck it out?

THOMAS. *Someone's* gotta be grateful!

LOUISE. (*To TESSA.*) This whole self-help thing is his way to erase my very essence, my very being, you know that?—"people can help themselves!"

TESSA. This is not about you—it's about me!

THOMAS. Can I use that?

TESSA. Do you think it's right to muck up my life?

THOMAS. *Muck?*

LOUISE. You sound very controlled, sweetie.

THOMAS. Men like vulnerability.

TESSA. Are there any friends you can stay with?

THOMAS. Friends!!!???

LOUISE. He gets drunk and ruins every evening we ever had.

THOMAS. She *doesn't* get drunk and ruins every evening we've ever had!

TESSA. I just can't allow the two of you to muck up my life.

THOMAS. Will you *please* say fuck!

LOUISE. Sweetie, have you ever tried a little weed?

TESSA. Pardon me?

LOUISE. I mean reality's daunting. It is. Daunting and banal. Drugs can help us see that. That's all. The right drug at the right time can really, you know, set us free.

TESSA. Are you talking to me about drugs? Is...is...th...that what I'm hearing?

LOUISE. You know my feeling: hallucinogens when used in moderation can do wonders. Studies have proven it. You know that.

TESSA. Are you talking to me about drugs, Mother?

LOUISE. I'm trying to.

(Pause.)

TESSA. Don't you fucking remember why I'll never have children?

(The Johnsons. MR. JOHNSON and MRS. JOHNSON are engaged at the staircase. JOHN JR. is trying to be inconspicuous as he dials a number from a rotary phone, scrutinizing a tiny scrap of paper.)

MRS. JOHNSON. We could ask God: why a boy and not a girl? Why does a child leave the house he was born in? What is proper conduct in the bedroom when the lights are out?

MR. JOHNSON. There's only one question: who invented sociology and should its study be prohibited?

MRS. JOHNSON. There are no professors in the Bible, this we no for sure.

MR. JOHNSON. No professors and no universities!

MRS. JOHNSON. Yet it couldn't be more wise.

MR. JOHNSON. One needn't go far to find the truth.

MRS. JOHNSON. And one has the New *and* the Old to choose from.

MR. JOHNSON. Yet the professor wants his book.

(They scan JOHN JR. and become alarmed when they realize his ear is to the phone.)

MRS. JOHNSON. Johnny who are you—

(JOHN JR. hangs up.)

Who are you calling?

JOHN JR. No one.

MRS. JOHNSON. Did the phone ring?

JOHN JR. No.

MR. JOHNSON. What are you doing with our phone?

MRS. JOHNSON. How is our signal, Johnny?

(JOHN JR. looks at them quizzically. They turn away from him.)

(The Thompsons.)

LOUISE. *(To TESSA:)* You're not done blaming me.

TESSA. You're not done playing the victim.

LOUISE. You must let go of your anger, Tess.

THOMAS. I want the foreign rights to *that!* The movie and the musical! *(Starts singing to the tune of "Ring Around Rosie":)* You must let go of your anger, you must let go of your anger, you must let go of your anger or da da da da daaaaaahhhh!!!

LOUISE. Shut up!

(TESSA crosses to the bathtub. LOUISE follows her closely.)

You must, Tess. You really must.

(TESSA, in two big sweeps, shoves Louise's lingerie into the tub and turns the taps on.)

(THOMAS cannot resist his glee. Lights slowly dim as they watch the bathtub fill.)

(The Johnsons.)

MRS. JOHNSON. He's had no sleep, Mr. Johnson. Perhaps we should lay him down somewhere.

MR. JOHNSON. Perhaps he should take his lunch pail and head on home.

MRS. JOHNSON. Johnny's lunch pail always had an apple. Red ones, of course. One time I put a yellow one in and he brought it home, uneaten. Do you remember when he brought home that yellow apple, Mr. Johnson?

(JOHN JR. picks up the phone again and begins to dial.)

MR. JOHNSON. As you remind me of that yellow apple, it occurs to me that he rejected much of the food we gave him. Yet he still grew to be taller than each of us.

MRS. JOHNSON. He had his own rhythms is the only way I can explain it.

MR. JOHNSON. Staring out his window. Watching that Thompson girl. Leering at her like a fool.

MRS. JOHNSON. The other children were respectful of Johnny, Mr. Johnson. They may not have invited him out to play but they showed him a certain respect. They did do that. Didn't they, Johnny?

(They look over at JOHN JR. and again notice him on the phone. As he realizes their eyes are on him, he immediately hangs up and in his nervousness grabs the glass of beer.)

MR. JOHNSON. He's come back for our assets!

MRS. JOHNSON. Who could he be calling at this hour?

MR. JOHNSON. The only people he knows are Dick, Sally and Jane!

(MR. JOHNSON *crosses and slaps JOHN JR. hard on the face. JOHN JR. stops laughing. The slap sends a severe shock rippling through JOHN JR.'s body so that he is momentarily paralyzed. MR. JOHNSON returns to his sitting chair and MRS. JOHNSON, somewhat tentatively, follows closely behind. As they sit down JOHN JR. crosses to his briefcase and pulls out a small pillow and rests on the floor, head on the pillow, catatonic, underneath the plants.*)

(Long pause.)

MR. JOHNSON. He has no jokes.

(The Thompsons. THOMAS THOMPSON is staring into the tub, as if it were a pond, watching the lingerie float.)

THOMAS. Hello, little duckee.

LOUISE. *(To TESSA:)* I hope you feel better now.

THOMAS. One little duckee, two little duckee, three little duckee, four...who needs a dog when the cats are on the floor...

LOUISE. *(To TESSA:)* What else would you like to throw in?

(THOMAS jumps away from the tub, worried he would be next. He notices the bongos and picks them up.)

TESSA. Maybe he should have some water.

LOUISE. If that's what you would like.

(LOUISE exits. TESSA locks eyes with THOMAS. A moment.)

TESSA. You are a selfish man.

THOMAS. *(Imitating LOUISE:)* You know, you must know, I've begun writing letters to my high school love. And I expressed, I was very honest, I said, you know, you never kissed me, and I'm still nursing the wound, you know, you must know—

TESSA. Did you ever really want a family?

(THOMAS straps the bongo drums and starts humming the tunes and lines from Tom Waits' "Hold On"...as he does so TESSA retreats to the staircase and sits down, helpless.)

THOMAS. "...baby you gotta hold on...baby gotta hold on and take my hand...when you fall behind in this big bad world...you gotta hold on baby gotta hold and take my hand..."

(LOUISE returns holding a glass of water. She freezes.)

(The Johnsons.)

MRS. JOHNSON. He never cared much for laughter. He did like those books about the man with the yellow hat. The man with the hat and the monkey.

MR. JOHNSON. Curious, isn't it?

MRS. JOHNSON. He would go on for days about meeting a man with a yellow hat.

MR. JOHNSON. George? Was his name George? Yes, the man's name was George. I do remember that.

MRS. JOHNSON. A man with a yellow hat, a man with a yellow hat—he'd go on and on about that man.

JOHN JR. *(Softly, lying on the floor:)* One night...Mrs. Johnson saw something in my eyes and I remember she said...

MRS. JOHNSON. Did you say something, Johnny?

MR. JOHNSON. Leave the boy.

JOHN JR. She said...be honest and be kind and everything will be all right...

MRS. JOHNSON. Who are you talking to, Johnny?

JOHN JR. ...Now say goodnight, she said. Say goodnight.

MR. JOHNSON. He's talking to the plants.

JOHN JR. But then I'd fall asleep and forget to say goodnight.

MR. JOHNSON. Maybe *they* can understand him.

JOHN JR. *(Softly:)* I never said goodnight.

(JOHN JR. closes his eyes. MRS. JOHNSON glances over her shoulder and looks at JOHN JR. lying down.)

MRS. JOHNSON. Are you sleeping, Johnny? I think he's trying to sleep.

MR. JOHNSON. Do you see any dreams coming out of him?

(MRS. JOHNSON rises from her chair and examines JOHN JR. as he lies still on the floor.)

MRS. JOHNSON. We shouldn't rush him.

MR. JOHNSON. It'll happen on its own.

MRS. JOHNSON. We mustn't deny ourselves a good night's sleep. Only way to control our dreams, isn't it?

MR. JOHNSON. In my experience, only way for it to happen.

MRS. JOHNSON. Your experience...on the inside or the outside?

(MR. JOHNSON rises and begins to examine JOHN JR. as well. They circle around him.)

MR. JOHNSON. When it comes to dreams Mrs. Johnson, the outside and the inside are like those apples you were talking about—once you begin—no choice but to finish what you've started.

MRS. JOHNSON. Or else it'll all go to waste.

MR. JOHNSON. Who can finish a dream but in one's bed...when one's eyes are closed.

MRS. JOHNSON. Do you think that's what Johnny's trying to do? Finish his dream?

MR. JOHNSON. God knows.

MRS. JOHNSON. And do you think God knows why he came back now? After all this time?

MR. JOHNSON. Perhaps it was all that education.

MRS. JOHNSON. He does look very tired. A little ill. Is he ill? Do you think we should call a doctor?

MR. JOHNSON. Who knows when he had his last check up.

MRS. JOHNSON. Remember when he was given a shot for the measles. He had a bad reaction.

MR. JOHNSON. Yes, yes. I remember that.

(MR. JOHNSON looks at MRS. JOHNSON as if he has just had a revelation.)

(Pause.)

Your hair was longer then.

MRS. JOHNSON. Longer? Maybe...maybe it was a little bit longer.

MR. JOHNSON. More than a little bit.

(The Thompsons. THOMAS is pouring the glass of water that LOUISE has handed to him very slowly into the bathtub, on top of the lingerie. He still has the bongos strapped around him. LOUISE is combing her hair in a mirror. TESSA is gathering all of Thomas' self-help titles and tossing them into Louise's suitcase.)

LOUISE. You never talk about men, Tess?

(THOMAS refills the glass with water from the tub, and, catatonically, empties it back in. He does this throughout the scene.)

I know you like to keep your private life private. I just want you to know that I am interested.

How did I know the things we were doing in the sixties would have—well—we wouldn't be in this situation now. We can't cry over spilt milk, can we? Or can we? Either way, we just didn't know until many years later. I wanted to sue, you should know that.

(TESSA crosses to the bathtub and removes the plug.)

I hope you know that.

TESSA. They were illegal drugs!

(We listen to the water empty from the tub. As it empties, THOMAS taps the bongos, with slow, increasing intensity, overlapping with LOUISE. TESSA continues to "clean house," rolling up the sleeping bag and the decorative tribal wall hangings.)

LOUISE. I know I've let you down. It's all in my letter. How weak I was. I was and I am. How weak I must be. I can't get it out of me. Things happen. Are happening. I mean nothing's happening and everything's happening—you know? You must know. Nothing's

missing and everything's missing. I don't know what's going on. But I'm breaking inside. I must be breaking inside. Am I breaking inside? TALK TO ME, TESS!

(THOMAS returns to Tom Waits—stronger and louder. The two women watch him for a bit, and don't know what to say or do. Then LOUISE uncontrollably...)

TALK TO ME!!!

(The bongos stop.)

(The Johnsons. MRS. JOHNSON is touching her hair, embarrassed.)

MRS. JOHNSON. You don't think he's ill, Mr. Johnson?

MR. JOHNSON. He's just fine, Mrs. Johnson.

MRS. JOHNSON. How can you tell? How can you be so sure?

MR. JOHNSON. Where do you think he is, Mrs. Johnson?

MRS. JOHNSON. He's right here, isn't he?

MR. JOHNSON. He has the floor.

MRS. JOHNSON. Home.

MR. JOHNSON. At six in the morning.

MRS. JOHNSON. We should leave him alone.

MR. JOHNSON. It's probably wise.

(Pause.)

MRS. JOHNSON. *(A glimmer in her eye:)* Shall I change the linen?

MR. JOHNSON. *(A surge of restrained energy:)* I'll open the windows.

(The Thompsons. TESSA has taken the wet lingerie and tossed it on top of the books in Louise's suitcase. THOMAS follows TESSA around the apartment like a hobo. Intermittently she recites The Serenity Prayer to keep herself from losing control. Even when there is absolutely no evidence left of LOUISE and THOMAS—she retraces her steps, dusting and fluffing sofa cushions. THOMAS is wearing

Louise's mesh sun hat. LOUISE has taken hold of Thomas' scotch and is anesthetizing herself as fast as she can.)

THOMAS. Maybe them Johnsons got an extra room. (*Slurred:*) Or maybe we pitch a tent? On Cheery Road!? A tent's all we need. Pitch a tent in one night. Who needs thirty days! What was me Tom Waits thinking? Maybe there are cheetahs on Cheery Road. Giraffes. Zebras and hyenas. What do you say, Tess? She and I could cozy up in a tent, don't ya think?

(THOMAS steps inside the tub, resting the mesh hat on the edge.)

A tent's all we need, Tess. Come on, honey buns—we going camping to Cheery Road. We gonna dance with the moon. We gonna watch the moon and dance with the moon. Come in and check it out. 'Nough room for the two of us. We going dancing with the moon. We'll start a little camp fire on Cheery Road. Throw in my books. Title by title. Just to keep the fire burning. The ashes flying. Rising to the stars. The wind blowing the fire higher and higher. Like it's never blown before. Blowing all the hats off all the old men. In all the alleys. In all the corners of the world. Hands reaching. Grasping. Hats! Hats! Scattered hats over the Sahara. Black hats. Black pearls. Under the stars and the moon. Casting shadows on the desert. In the middle of the night. Until I...until I...I...I put a hat on my head...

(He puts the mesh hat on his head.)

...and all the hat shadows lift, one shadow at a time. And I...I cast a shadow on the desert. Alone with the hats. With the stars and the elephants. The cheetahs...the zebras.

(THOMAS looks up at the ceiling.)

I'm coming up to see you. Don't worry: I'll take my hat off for you, God. I'll climb all the way up. As far as I can go. And with all my strength, whatever's left, throw the hat...

(THOMAS removes the hat and gently tosses it in Louise's direction, whose eyes have closed.)

...to all the other hats. And together they'll rise. Hover and circle... the earth. All in good time, isn't that right, God? Find their proper

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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