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## **Cast of Characters**

DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR GORDON GRANVILLE  
FOSSMIRE, age 37

LADY ALICE AUGUSTA GRANVILLE FOSSMIRE, his wid-  
owed mother

MADELINE COBBLES RIME, an Oxford professor and mother  
of triplets

HUGO BRIMLEY RIME, a Cambridge professor and father of  
triplets

EMMALINE RIME, a 20-year-old menace

URSELINE RIME, a 20-year-old menace

VALENTINE RIME, a 20-year-old menace

DOCTOR FLORA WHETSTONE, a psychiatrist, age 35

DETECTIVE SERGEANT RUPERT SLATER

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

WITCHES

*The play can be performed by a cast of eight with doubling:*

Hugo Brimley Rime / Detective Sergeant Rupert Slater

Madeline Cobbles Rime / High Priestess

## **Time**

The present

## **Place**

London, England. A gloomy shadow-strewn set evokes a modern gothic ambience and depicts three lecture halls, two offices, Gordon Fossmire's bedroom, New Scotland Yard, the Rime sisters' parlor, Regents Park, a ritual chamber, and Lady Augusta's sitting room.

## Production Notes

At the back of this script is a list of all the nursery songs sung throughout the play. To obtain the musical score used in the original production, contact Playscripts, Inc. ([www.playscripts.com](http://www.playscripts.com)).

## Acknowledgements

*Drink Me (or, The Strange Case of Alice Times Three)* was first produced by the InterAct Theatre Company (Seth Rozin, Producing Artistic Director) on May 24, 2000, in Philadelphia. It was directed by Whit MacLaughlin; the dramaturg was Larry Loebell; the set designer was David P. Gordon; the lighting designer was Peter Whinnery; the costume designer was Larisa Ratnikoff; the sound designer was Whit MacLaughlin; and the production stage manager was Brady Gonsalves. The cast was as follows:

LADY FOSSMIRE .....Hazel Bowers  
DETECTIVE FOSSMIRE ..... Joe Guzman  
MADELINE RIME /  
HIGH PRIESTESS.....Maureen Torsney-Weir  
HUGO RIME / DETECTIVE SLATER..... Tim Moyer  
DOCTOR FLORA WHETSTONE..... Catherine K. Slusar  
EMMALINE RIME..... Karen Krastel  
URSELINE RIME .....Mary McCool  
VALENTINE RIME..... Rebecca Hatcher Lisak

# DRINK ME

OR, THE STRANGE CASE OF ALICE TIMES THREE

by Mary Fengar Gail

## ACT I

### Prologue

*(A lecture hall where the formidable LADY AUGUSTA stands at a podium and speaks directly to the audience. Her speech is interspersed by the VOICES OF THREE GIRLS singing phrases of a nursery rhyme.)*

#### **VOICES OF THREE GIRLS.**

*Over in the meadow,  
in the sand in the sun,  
Lived an old mother crab  
and her little crabby one.*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** My dear friends and fellow members of the Kensington Garden Club: We English are famous for cherishing the soil and sun, but today I'm here to tell you we are tottering on the brink of a New Dark Age, a Millennium of Misery. The continuing devastation of our resources is being caused by an overabundance of the most profligate of mammals: human beings. We are pillaging the planet of its atmosphere, its oceans and rivers, its rich variety of plant and animal species, and what have we spawned in its stead? What will our children and our children's children receive as their heritage? A barren heath, a ravaged wasteland, a desert of desolation teeming with nothing but creatures like themselves.

#### **VOICES OF THREE GIRLS.**

*Over in the meadow,  
where the streams run so blue,  
Lived an old mother fish  
and her little fishies two.*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** There are over six billion of us on the planet, and one in four is the result of an unwanted pregnancy. The United Nations estimates that the population will double in forty years, and the great majority will be poor starving wretches from

countries in chaos. Already nations in Africa, Asia, and South America experience severe water shortages and spiraling cycles of disease, starvation, and anarchy—anarchy caused by people! People! Too many people!

**VOICES OF THREE GIRLS.**

*Over in the meadow,  
in a hole in a tree,  
Lived an old mother crow  
and her little birdies three.*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Hear me, my friends! If we are the guardians of Mother Earth, then it is our duty to defend her, to arm ourselves with new policies: first, a world wide program of zero population growth; second, tighter immigration controls; and third, we must stop sending provisions to irresponsible countries that refuse to practice birth control. Every bin of dried porridge fosters more babies and more suffering!

*(As LADY AUGUSTA continues, her voice swells with increasing hysteria.)*

Our dear Mother's capacity to carry us is sorely strained. Her back is bent from the weight of the old; her breasts sag from suckling the poor; and her mind boggles at the consequent burdens to people like us. Do we really want to keep paying their medical bills? Educating their offspring? Listening to them bitch about their bloody rights? Well, who gave them the bloody right to breed like rabbits?! If they're going to consume all our resources, then they should be willing to become resources themselves! We've all heard of Jonathan Swift and his solution for surplus populations: "Let's eat them," he said, and I say why not? A healthy infant is the most delicious of delicacies. They can be boiled, broiled and fried; their organs stored for transplants; their blood purged for puddings! Well, I know all about this. You see, I've just eaten my son, Foss, for supper. He was a nasty nipper, overly coddled, half-baked, and usually stewed, but ohhh, ladies! He made a lovely little brisket!

*(LADY AUGUSTA laughs heartily as the lights fade.)*

**VOICES OF THREE GIRLS.**

*Over in the meadow,*

*on the moor by the fen,  
Lived an old mother toad  
and her little toadies ten.  
“Eat” said the mother,  
“We ate,” said the ten;  
And they croaked till they choked  
on the moor by the fen.*

*(Hideous croaks are heard. Blackout.)*

### Scene 1

*(Morning in a luxuriously furnished bedroom. The croaks have faded to a mournful groan as GORDON FOSSMIRE awakens from his nightmare. A dashing, disheveled man of thirty-seven, he sits up gasping, relieved to be among the living, then lights a cigarette. On his bedside table is a glassful of whiskey. As he reaches for a drink, his mother, LADY AUGUSTA, enters.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Foss! I want you out of that bed this instant!

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, god.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Right now or I'm calling Doctor Hornsby!

**FOSSMIRE.** Lower your voice!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** If you don't move about you'll get bedsores...

**FOSSMIRE.** Damn.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** ...your muscles will atrophy, and stop smoking! Oh, Fossie, please, tell me what's wrong.

**FOSSMIRE.** I told you, I'm vexed! I'm on a case and I'm stumped, and you know I do my best thinking in bed.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Five days is *not* thinking; it's hiding! From what?!

**FOSSMIRE.** Nothing.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Please, let me help you.

**FOSSMIRE.** Nothing can help me. Leave me alone.

(LADY AUGUSTA *picks up the glass of whiskey and sniffs.*)

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Scotch?! It's ten o'clock in the morning! *(Pause.)* What is it, Foss? What's wrong with you?

**FOSSMIRE.** What's wrong with me is me. I can't seem to move; I have to crawl to the loo on my knees. My dreams torment me, my heart races, my head swells. It's bloody hell and I'm done for.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Have you seen a doctor?

**FOSSMIRE.** No. I'm not physically ill; I'm spiritually ill. I've been cursed.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** How? By what? Tell me!

**FOSSMIRE.** I can't. You're one of them.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** One of whom?

**FOSSMIRE.** A woman! You're a woman. It started with a woman.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Who?

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, Gussie, have you ever had an idea take hold in your mind? I mean, something that reeks of evil, something absolutely preposterous, unthinkable, something that goes against everything you've ever believed, and yet it...it settles. *Why* does it settle?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Maybe because it's not so preposterous; maybe because it's true.

**FOSSMIRE.** It can't be.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, for heaven's sake, what is it?!

**FOSSMIRE.** Well... *(Pause; he sighs.)* It began nearly three months ago. It seems that people have been disappearing, vanishing—poof!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Who? What people?

**FOSSMIRE.** Men, always men, mostly vagrants, homeless beggars and the like, but still, they become part of their communities and when they disappear, sometimes they're missed. Sometimes someone actually wonders where they've gone and reports it. Well, each week there's more and more reports and ergo fewer vagrants, and

people are starting to notice. Most are rejoicing, of course, but where did they go? Many had passports, police records, and some still had families. So here we are: tracing hundreds of missing men and drawing a blank every time. It's uncanny, absolutely uncanny.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** So you think it's some sort of serial murderer?

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, but there's no *corpus delicti*—not a single solitary one. It's as if they marched off the face of the earth.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Or into a mass grave.

**FOSSMIRE.** But where? And why?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Some hideous scheme, some neo-Nazi fanatic trying to thin out the undesirables.

**FOSSMIRE.** It's more than one, it has to be. Last week we planted one of our agents outside Liverpool Station. He befriended several of the other chaps, and last Friday the whole lot of them disappeared—like so many crumbs off the carpet. We've started placing notices in the *Times* and *Telegraph*, some with photographs, and last Thursday this woman came in...

*(Crossfade to an office at New Scotland Yard where MADELINE COBBLES RIME, a smartly dressed woman in her mid-forties, stands holding a briefcase.)*

Madeline Cobbles Rime. She struck me as well-educated, a woman of refined taste and sensibilities.

*(FOSSMIRE slips off his robe and leaps out of bed, fully dressed in a fashionable suit. He joins MADELINE RIME.)*

How do you do? I'm Detective Chief Inspector Fossmire. May I offer you some coffee? Tea?

**MADLINE RIME.** No thank you.

**FOSSMIRE.** Do you mind if I record our conversation?

**MADLINE RIME.** I'd rather you didn't.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, well then. I understand you're here to report the whereabouts of our missing indigents.

**MADLINE RIME.** No, not exactly. I should begin by telling you that I've been here before. I have a record as they say, not criminal, but well, I... I once reported an abduction.

**FOSSMIRE.** Abduction?

**MADLINE RIME.** You see, Chief Inspector, I'm an anthropologist. Twenty years ago I wrote a dissertation on witchcraft. My research required attendance at a coven meeting in Sudbury where I was drugged, driven to a cottage, and raped. Nine months later I gave birth to triplets: all girls.

**FOSSMIRE.** Good lord.

**MADLINE RIME.** I didn't realize what had happened until they were ten years old. That's when I made my report.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ten years *after* the incident...?

**MADLINE RIME.** My psychiatrist put me under hypnosis. That's when I dredged up my memories.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah.

**MADLINE RIME.** You see, my husband, Hugh, and I had been trying to conceive for several years, so when I became pregnant we thought the fertility drugs had finally taken effect. It's all documented. (*Withdrawing a folder from her briefcase*) This contains copies of their records and signed statements from the attending physicians.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, I see.

**MADLINE RIME.** What the records don't say is that they're not human.

**FOSSMIRE.** Not one of us, eh?

**MADLINE RIME.** They're half-demons, part devils, the result of ritual impregnation. Oh, they appear human, and their blood tests indicate they're human, but believe me, Chief Inspector, they are not.

**FOSSMIRE.** And just how did you determine this?

**MADLINE RIME.** Do you have any children?

**FOSSMIRE.** No.

**MADLINE RIME.** Well, if you did, you'd notice certain characteristics that remind you of yourself or your wife. I suspected early on that they weren't really ours, but it was more of a feeling than any sort of rational deduction, and I felt so callous for wanting to...to escape them, so I worked incessantly. As did Hugh.

**FOSSMIRE.** At what may I ask?

**MADLINE RIME.** We're both professors. I'm at Oxford and Hugh's at Cambridge, so we employed nannies. In fact, it wasn't until they were learning to speak that we were certain something was...well, peculiar. You see, Hugh teaches 17th century literature, and he started reading plays to the girls when they were toddlers. They were quite taken with them, enthralled really, so enthralled that they adopted the language as their own. At first we thought it was quaint and amusing, but then...well, they refused to learn modern English.

**FOSSMIRE.** You mean they actually speak this...this archaic English?

**MADLINE RIME.** "Jacobean" to be precise. We employed scores of private tutors and speech therapists but nothing seemed to work.

**FOSSMIRE.** They must be very...isolated.

**MADLINE RIME.** They had to be educated at home. They're extremely intelligent and didn't seem to need much mothering, which made me very despondent. That's when I became a patient of Doctor Whetstone's and found out about the abduction. Hugh's never believed me, and finally he...he left.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, this is all very provocative, Professor Rime, but how does it pertain to our missing indigents?

*(MADLINE rummages through her purse, producing a small pouch.)*

**MADLINE RIME.** Here. I have some buttons.

**FOSSMIRE.** Buttons?

**MADLINE RIME.** You see, the last time I paid a visit, there were four rather unsavory tramps perched on their kitchen stools eating shepherd's pie. The girls said they were giving them a good supper, clean clothes, and sending them back to the streets. I took them aside and told them it was charitable but dangerous, and the stench was appalling. Emmaline ignored me, and started snipping all the buttons off their coats. Then Urseline tossed them into an enormous chest full to the brim—with thousands of buttons. That was three weeks ago, and I'd forgotten the whole incident until I read the article in the *Times*.

**FOSSMIRE.** So you think these buttons came from our missing men?

**MADLINE RIME.** Well, I can only vouch for the ones I saw.

**FOSSMIRE.** Forgive me, Professor, but are you suggesting that three young women are abducting and dispatching people they don't even know?

**MADLINE RIME.** Look, Chief Inspector, I know what you're thinking, and I'm sure you and your sergeants will have a jolly good laugh when I leave, but I had hoped you'd at least want to trace them—the buttons, that is—which is why I picked the unusual ones.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me, why do you visit them at all—feeling as you do?

**MADLINE RIME.** Well, I... I'm not indifferent to them, and they...they've given me a key.

**FOSSMIRE.** Where do they live?

**MADLINE RIME.** In the West End, in Belgravia.

**FOSSMIRE.** What do they do to support themselves?

**MADLINE RIME.** Investments—in the stock exchange. They use their computers.

**FOSSMIRE.** What's their flat like?

**MADLINE RIME.** Oh, it's hardly a "flat". It's a magnificent Victorian on Belgrave Square, though it's gloomy inside.

**FOSSMIRE.** What about your husband? If I decide to confirm your statement, I'll need his address. I'll also need the girls' address and photographs—if you have them.

**MADELINE RIME.** It's all in the folder.

*(MADELINE pulls out three photographs. Dim lights reveal the RIME SISTERS as she names them. They are striking creatures, with luxuriant hair, jaundiced skin, purple lips, dressed entirely in black.)*

The first was Emmaline, followed by Urseline, then Valentine. Their births were traumatic and when they finally arrived, they had tails and were so jaundiced that Hugh called them “The Mustard Pots”.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tails...?

*(Instantly, the SISTERS burst into song.)*

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.**

*Whose little pigs are these, these, these?*

*Whose little pigs are these?*

*They're Roger the cook's,*

*I know by their looks,*

*I found them among my peas!*

*(Blackout.)*

## Scene 2

*(A Cambridge University office where PROFESSOR HUGH BRIMLEY RIME is seated at his desk speaking to FOSSMIRE.)*

**HUGH RIME.** They weren't tails—just tiny caudal appendages, and naturally we had them removed. But really, Chief Inspector, you're wasting your time, and I do have a tutorial in five minutes.

**FOSSMIRE.** Could you tell me when you and your wife separated?

**HUGH RIME.** About ten years ago—it was either that or follow her to bedlam.

**FOSSMIRE.** So you think she's...?

**HUGH RIME.** Absolutely! My daughters are brilliant girls, talented financiers, but completely asocial and hinged at the hips.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me more about their births.

**HUGH RIME.** When I first saw them—all yellow with their slanted eyes—I thought we'd given birth to a trio of mongoloid aliens. But believe me, Chief Inspector, they're no less human than you or I—that's just Maddy's way of avoiding responsibility.

**FOSSMIRE.** So the abduction is a deliberate fabrication?

**HUGH RIME.** Oh, no, she really believes it—she and that doctor of hers. My own doctor says it's an archetypal transformation, a subconscious defense that absolves her from this mad world and the daughters she set loose in it. But Maddy's felt guilty from day one when she didn't have enough milk to go round—though I rather enjoyed the bottle feedings. Do you have children?

**FOSSMIRE.** No. Now about this language of theirs...

**HUGH RIME.** It's the language of drama from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth. It's the language of Shakespeare, Johnson, Marston, Middleton, and so forth. It's rich and studded with obscure words and elaborate phrases that sound ludicrous today but I find quite captivating—so naturally I marveled that my daughters could speak it so fluently. Later, of course, they vulgarized it beyond recognition.

**FOSSMIRE.** When was the last time you saw them?

**HUGH RIME.** Two years ago at Christmas. Maddy organized a family reunion in their new home. It was pleasant enough—if you don't mind the frequent retreats to their nest of computers.

**FOSSMIRE.** I hear they're quite adept with computers.

**HUGH RIME.** "Adept" is hardly the word. Without showing their faces to the world, they've amassed a bloody fortune.

**FOSSMIRE.** What's their home like?

**HUGH RIME.** Quite opulent, except that everything's blue.

**FOSSMIRE.** What about boyfriends?

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**HUGH RIME.** They never seemed to want or need friends of either sex, but they wouldn't be interested in boys very much.

**FOSSMIRE.** And why is that?

**HUGH RIME.** They've been indoctrinated—with esoteric theologies. You see, Maddy's pet subject is goddess religions so to her the common enemy is patriarchal religions—all of them, and all the men who believe in them. She's very respected in her field, mind you. Last year *The Guardian* featured a four page profile on her.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me, is she a witch herself?

**HUGH RIME.** You can't study witchcraft without joining a few covens and mystery groups—that's what they call themselves. It's all nonsense if you ask me, but the girls loved it. When they were seven or eight, Maddy was writing a text on the ancient divinities. They were always coaxing her to tell the stories of the goddesses.

**FOSSMIRE.** And did their enthusiasm blossom into participation?

**HUGH RIME.** They made little altars, but never got beyond playing dress-up and burning a bit of incense.

**FOSSMIRE.** Were they ever hostile toward you?

**HUGH RIME.** No. They just didn't want much to do with me.

**FOSSMIRE.** And why was that?

**HUGH RIME.** Madeline insisted, so I forbade the reading of any more plays until they agreed to speak proper English. We were never as close after that.

**FOSSMIRE.** So tell me, Professor, can you think of any possible motive they might have for amassing so many buttons?

**HUGH RIME.** Buttons...?

**FOSSMIRE.** What if they're still worshiping their goddesses? Could they be collecting things to sacrifice at their altars? You know, goose feathers, crockery and...buttons?

**HUGH RIME.** I've no idea.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, was there anything else that struck their fancy? Any hobbies or sports?

**HUGH RIME.** They loved to sing—all the songs of the nursery, you know, “London Bridge” and so forth. It was quite delightful when they were toddlers.

**FOSSMIRE.** But girls do grow up, don’t they?

**HUGH RIME.** I suppose. *(Pause.)* That Christmas, when they were huddled together with their six arms and legs, Madeline said they looked like a freakish spider spinning its web. Not a pleasant thing to say about one’s own daughters.

**FOSSMIRE.** But did they—look like a spider?

**HUGH RIME.** Well...

*(Crossfade to the THREE SISTERS singing while creating a spider from their long black limbs.)*

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.**

*The itsy bitsy spider  
Went up the water spout;  
Down came the rain  
And washed the spider out;  
Out came the sun  
And dried up all the rain;  
Then the itsy bitsy spider  
Went up the spout again.*

*(Blackout.)*

### Scene 3

*(DOCTOR FLORA WHETSTONE, an attractive psychiatrist of thirty-five, is seated in her office, speaking to FOSSMIRE.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** I’m curious about the alleged abduction.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** First of all, it’s not “alleged”. It’s real.

**FOSSMIRE.** To her.

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**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** To both of us. And I have other patients who've experienced similar incidents.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah. Then is witchcraft a specialty of yours?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Let's just say I'm sympathetic.

**FOSSMIRE.** Are you also an advocate of astrology, crystals, and New Age curatives?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No, but I do believe my patients.

**FOSSMIRE.** So you didn't find her story incredible?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Of course it's incredible—even she didn't believe it. But her testimony under hypnosis was undeniably genuine.

**FOSSMIRE.** Have you examined the daughters?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I only met them once. They were children at the time, but already quite unique. Surely you agree.

**FOSSMIRE.** I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** They appeared normal except for their language, but inventing a language to express themselves could be a necessary step toward healing their own trauma. I was quite eager to analyze them—for a thesis for publication—but Hugh declined permission, and frankly, I was devastated.

**FOSSMIRE.** Really?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Multiple birth children have the closest of all human relationships—closer than husband and wife or mother and child, and hardly anyone's studied the bond between sisters.

**FOSSMIRE.** And why is that?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** In male-dominated societies sisters tend to be trivialized, and there's a genuine fear of women in groups, of their power. Sisters are uniquely close, and most end up completely dissimilar, but twins and triplets have to struggle for their individuality. And what about you, Chief Inspector? Do you have any siblings?

**FOSSMIRE.** My parents thought one new Fossmire was ample.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Any children of your own?

**FOSSMIRE.** No. Now about the girls—could you be more specific? What were they like?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Fearless, yet completely interdependent. Most children go through phases of identifying indiscriminately with either parent, but they identified with each other. They formed an exclusive little club and their own mother wasn't given the password—which of course broke her spirit.

**FOSSMIRE.** And explains why she might think they're demons.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Madeline wanted nothing more than to love her daughters. That she couldn't caused her terrible suffering—until she found out about the abduction.

**FOSSMIRE.** Sorry, Doctor, I'm a skeptic, much too earthbound for satanic impregnations, but perhaps you can tell me why three young women would want anything to do with downtrodden indigents, most of whom are certifiably insane?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I can't even speculate on that.

**FOSSMIRE.** Did Madeline mention the buttons?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, but people collect all sorts of things for countless reasons. The buttons might have been bought at jumble sales or the Salvation Army or pinched from the rubbish.

**FOSSMIRE.** Not this button. (*Retrieving a brassy disk from his pocket*) It's rather distinctive, don't you think? I was going to let the whole business slide, but couldn't resist shuffling through the lot, and when I found this hog's head, I had my detectives trace it—to a seamstress at the National Theatre. It seems it belonged on a cape she'd given to a homeless musician, a chap named Horace Craggins. He's disappeared, but used to play his violin outside the entrance. It's not much, but it's the only lead we've got. Nothing else has surfaced, not a single credible clue to the whereabouts of five hundred and sixty-two missing persons.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** My god.

**FOSSMIRE.** All of them indigents, and all of them men. I'd appreciate your discretion, doctor.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Of course, but surely you don't think...?

**FOSSMIRE.** I don't know what to think. Is Professor Rime still your patient?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No. She was one of my first and I liked her very much, but it's the sisters I pity—their isolation and loneliness. They seem to have the disease for which there is no cure.

**FOSSMIRE.** And which disease is that?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Detachment: the plague of the future.

**FOSSMIRE.** But if you come into the world in triplicate, perhaps you don't need anyone else.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** We all need each other, Chief Inspector, and if you ever need me—to help with the case—I'd be happy to oblige.

*(Lights fade as the RIME SISTERS are heard singing.)*

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.**

*Boys and girls come out to play,  
The moon doth shine as bright as day;  
Leave your supper and leave your sleep,  
And join your playfellows in the street.*

*(Blackout.)*

**Scene 4**

*(The Rime sisters' parlor furnished in varying shades of blue. EMMALINE, wearing a long black dress, sits demurely on the sofa reading a lengthy scroll of computerized graphs. The doorbell rings and EMMALINE responds, greeting FOSSMIRE with a curtsy as he displays his official identification.)*

**EMMALINE.** The best of welcome, sir. How may I attend thee?

**FOSSMIRE.** How do you do? I'm Detective Chief Inspector Foss-  
mire. I wonder if I might have a moment of your time? *(Pause)* Per-  
haps I could step inside?

**EMMALINE.** Faith, sir, forgive me, and I pray you not think me  
poorly bred.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, heavens, no. I'll sit here, if you don't mind,  
Miss...?

**EMMALINE.** Rime. Emmaline Rime.

**FOSSMIRE.** Surely you don't live in this big house by yourself.

**EMMALINE.** Nay, sir, my sisters have gone to market.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, your home is certainly very...blue.

**EMMALINE.** Aye, your lordship, 'tis a great bliss and burden, but  
we forebear best in blue.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ha! That's the first time anyone's ever called me "your  
lordship" though my mother is a genuine lady, the daughter of an  
earl. I must say, you certainly have an antiquated way of expressing  
yourself.

**EMMALINE.** Aye, we sisters have forsworn the speech of our  
kinsmen, and this be the tongue we willfully wag.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, I find it very...quaint. Your youthful appearance  
suggests a thoroughly modern woman.

**EMMALINE.** Troth, by heaven, I am as old as I am young!

**FOSSMIRE.** Really? How do you mean?

**EMMALINE.** I'm wise, but oftentimes witless too.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, aren't we all?

**EMMALINE.** Please, sir, wilt thou state thy business so I might pursue my own.

**FOSSMIRE.** Of course. I have a photograph here of a man who's gone missing. We're asking the local residents if they've seen him.

**EMMALINE.** Faith, he is not of my acquaintance.

*(Giggling sounds are heard as VALENTINE and URSELINE enter, wearing black clothing and carrying bundles of groceries.)*

**EMMALINE.** O sisters, sisters, the most piteous misfortune! A man hath vanished from our streets.

**VALENTINE / URSELINE.** Oh, horrors!

**EMMALINE.** May I present my sisters: Valentine and Urseline, maids of much modesty and charm.

**FOSSMIRE.** My pleasure, ladies. I'm Detective Chief Inspector Fossmire. My goodness, you're all such...such pretty girls.

**VALENTINE.** We use possets for plumping the breasts...

**URSELINE.** ...sleeking the cheeks...

**VALENTINE / URSELINE.** ...and blanching the teeth.

**URSELINE.** Lest we grow pruned and puckered as old trot's tit!

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah, well. *(Presenting the photograph)* Now, here's our missing man. His name is Horace Craggins. He's a beggar and quite innocuous, but we're afraid he might have come to some harm.

**URSELINE.** 'Tis a base face, like a curst dog let loose at midnight.

**VALENTINE.** Such men dwell as doth the beetle on a dung heap.

**FOSSMIRE.** You're certainly being very hard on the poor fellow, but I do have something that belonged to him.

*(FOSSMIRE reaches into his pocket and brings forth the hog's head button.)*

**VALENTINE.** 'Pon my soul!

**URSELINE.** I fancy that button!

**EMMALINE.** Your Mister Craggins was no ordinary beast.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, indeed. He was a violinist, and before that a butcher in Brighton. It seems he had a cycling accident and suffered head injuries from which he never quite recovered.

**EMMALINE.** Who brought thee to us? Shall we venture shrewd conjectures?

**URSELINE.** A kinswoman of middling age with tresses o' tainted henna!

**FOSSMIRE.** As a matter of fact, yes. Three days ago, a woman brought this button to New Scotland Yard. She said it came from this very house.

**VALENTINE.** Fie! 'Tis our melancholy mum!

**URSELINE.** 'Twas wicked of her to pilfer from our pyre!

**EMMALINE.** Didst mumsy dare defame us?

**URSELINE.** Faith, she thinks us monsters of nature, foul fiends from hell.

**EMMALINE.** Troth, I am brain mad.

**VALENTINE.** I am heart mad.

**URSELINE.** And I am horn-mad!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** *(Laugh!)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, mothers do tend to worry. They don't approve of their daughters inviting vagrants home to supper. They think it's imprudent and I dare say they're right.

**EMMALINE.** 'Tis a wee lapse in a lawful life—for we are chary chicks who dwelleth in seclusion.

**URSELINE.** Aye, in nobody's books or bonds.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah, so you're independent, self-reliant. Well, that's certainly commendable, yes indeed. Now about this button—your mother claims she found it in a large chest, and wondered if it

might belong to one of our lost indigents. Perhaps you're unaware that London is currently experiencing an epidemic of missing men—very like the fellows you've been having to supper.

**URSELINE.** Baseborn rogues sniffing the pavement for crumbs. Troth, 'tis shameless but we fatten a few, 'tis true.

**VALENTINE.** Scraps for the chaps, but 'tis only pottage and only on the Sabbath.

**FOSSMIRE.** Do these “chaps” have names?

**URSELINE.** Aye, but none we've heard spoken.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, where do you find them?

**URSELINE.** Hither and yon.

**FOSSMIRE.** Do you know where they go when they leave here?

**EMMALINE.** From wither they came.

**FOSSMIRE.** Can you be more specific?

**EMMALINE.** In the underground, 'twixt Whitechapel and Notting Hill Gate.

**FOSSMIRE.** When you remove their buttons, do you provide them with new ones?

**VALENTINE.** Aye, hooks and clasps on greatcoats to match their breeches.

**FOSSMIRE.** What do you do with the buttons?

**URSELINE.** We forge a pyre to Circe.

**VALENTINE.** Mistress of the Wild Things.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah, yes, she's Greek, isn't she?

**EMMALINE.** Our tribal mother, nymph and sylph...

**URSELINE / VALENTINE.** ...river and echo.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, then, you're modern pagans. Are you part of a cult? A coven?

**EMMALINE.** None but our own. Art thou a good Christian?

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, no, I... I'm not religious.

**URSELINE.** How now? A heretic! Dost thou believe in nothing?

**FOSSMIRE.** I believe in doubt, in questioning, and in staying clear of people who believe too strongly in anything.

**URSELINE.** Posh! 'Tis a middling piddling way.

**FOSSMIRE.** Perhaps, but I'm not here to discuss my spiritual life. I need to know everything you remember about the men you've brought here, and precisely where, when, and how you acquired this particular button as it might lead to the whereabouts of Mister Craggins. And if you don't mind, I'd like to see the rest of the buttons—in the chest.

**URSELINE.** Nay, nay! T'would offend our Mistress!

**VALENTINE.** A pyre is as private as a privy.

**FOSSMIRE.** I don't mean to offend, but I do have a search warrant.

**URSELINE.** O, villain! Thou hast wronged us with suspicions!

**FOSSMIRE.** I never said I suspected you of...

**URSELINE.** Humbugger! Faith, sisters, he lieth like a snake 'neath a stone. He hath already deceived us—feigning ignorance whilst knowing mumsy.

**FOSSMIRE.** Please, ladies, this is a very serious business. Can't you just show me where you keep the buttons?

**VALENTINE.** In yonder chamber, behind that bolted door.

**EMMALINE.** By my troth, the key is lost!

**VALENTINE.** Zounds!                   **URSELINE.** Horrors!

**FOSSMIRE.** Please, open it.

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.** Nay!

*(FOSSMIRE approaches the door and attempts to open it.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** You do realize I can have you arrested for obstructing an investigation!

**URSELINE.** Impudent wretch! Banish him from the house!

*(FOSSMIRE attempts to open the door again.)*

**EMMALINE.** Cold frost, he is obstinate!

**FOSSMIRE.** I'm going, ladies, but I'll be back—with a locksmith and warrants for your arrest!

**VALENTINE.** O leave us, leave us!

**URSELINE.** A pox on your pecker, sir!

**EMMALINE.** Shush, Urseline! Come, good sisters, show some civilities.

*(EMMALINE signals for the SISTERS to curtsy, then offers her hand for FOSSMIRE to clasp.)*

**EMMALINE.** Good day, your lordship.

*(FOSSMIRE unthinkingly grasps EMMALINE's hand.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Ahhhhhhhh!!!

*(Stricken with pain, FOSSMIRE screams, retracts his hand, and backs out the door as EMMALINE sings.)*

**EMMALINE.** *Oh, where, oh, where has my little dog gone?*

**URSELINE / VALENTINE / EMMALINE.**

*Oh, where, oh, where can he be?*

*With his ears cut short*

*And his tail cut long,*

*Oh, where, oh, where can he be?*

*(Blackout.)*

## Scene 5

*(FOSSMIRE has donned his robe and returned to bed. He continues conversing with LADY AUGUSTA.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** They're the triplets from hell.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Yes, dear, now relax, try taking deep breaths.

**FOSSMIRE.** I think I've seen evil.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You should never have gone there alone.

**FOSSMIRE.** I despise and abhor their very names—such innocent ladylike names, but they're *not* innocent, there's nothing innocent about them—especially their laugh. It's so false and flutey, at a pitch that could splinter your spine. What do you suppose they're doing at this very moment? Who are they killing and how? Poison probably, hemlock in the pottage. Pottage! They'll take out the whole of London with their damn pottage!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Really, Foss, calm yourself.

**FOSSMIRE.** You've no idea what's happening, Gussie. At the Yard there's a chart of the missing men, and every day we watch with ghoulish fascination as the numbers climb up, up, up! It's pathetic, because people have the decency to report the fellows missing, but no one's pressing us to actually find them.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, if these men are the sort you say they are, then they've already disappeared—from decent society. They've been living on the margins and have simply left the page.

**FOSSMIRE.** Even their families don't want them, poor buggers. It makes me think of Hitler and his war of eugenics, but this war's being waged on the homeless, the hapless.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Aren't all wars a form of eugenics? They clear the population of the least productive, least promising young men before they wreak havoc at home.

**FOSSMIRE.** I wish you wouldn't talk like that. It frightens me, Gussie, it really does.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Why? We all know the males of our species have hormonal levels far exceeding their evolutionary usefulness. Women are far less toxic to society—if only they weren't so keen to reproduce.

**FOSSMIRE.** You're such a brute, Gussie, you and your Zero Pop Party. You're just like old Scrooge who wants everyone who isn't useful to check out of the game. Well, everyone living has a right to their lives—every wog, rogue, and rotter. They didn't ask to be

born. I didn't ask to be born. Suppose someone wanted to declare me unfit and unworthy? Should I sacrifice myself for the space I'd leave in my absence? All the scotch I wouldn't drink, the kippers I wouldn't eat...

**LADY AUGUSTA.** ...the grief you wouldn't give your mother! Oh, shush, Foss! You're really most annoying! I'm sure you're giving me heartburn, and frankly, if you do become unfit, I hope you'll have the decency to go quickly and quietly—just like Uncle Edwin.

**FOSSMIRE.** Your own son! What a hideous thing to say at a time like this! You're shameless, Gussie. Your heart's hard as a hammer, it really is...

(FOSSMIRE *grasps his chest.*)

**LADY AUGUSTA.** What's wrong, Foss? What is it?!

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, Christ, they've done something to me, I know it!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Who? Who's done what?

**FOSSMIRE.** Those harpies! When I left, the one called Emmaline clasped my hand. It was repulsive—like touching slime. Then I felt a tingling and sparks crackling through my veins. I'm sure she tried to electrocute me, but *how* for godssake?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Electrocute you...?

**FOSSMIRE.** I'm probably rabid, frothing at the mouth, and every time my foot touches ground, my heart beats the band! Oh, Gussie, what if I'm having some sort of breakdown? I can't spend the rest of my life supine.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Why not? Your father did. Sorry, dear, but what if it's—you know—some sort of genetic predisposition catching up with you?

**FOSSMIRE.** You say such comforting things, Gussie, and if I am doomed by destiny, I'm much more worried about *your* side of the family. In any case, I'll not let three loonies be the ruin of me. I'll continue the investigation from here if I have to.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, I would like to meet them—the girls.

**FOSSMIRE.** Please tell me you didn't just say that. They could be murderers, for godssake! At the very least they're odious misfits, and nothing like real girls—women really—and certainly nothing like the women you know.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You mean they're not refined and restrained.

**FOSSMIRE.** They're pit bulls with breasts! Their own mother doesn't claim them.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, at least they're independent; they have their own home, their own language...

**FOSSMIRE.** Their own bats in the belfry! Good Lord, you sound like you admire them!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, only that they live on their own terms, with elements of the past and the future...

**FOSSMIRE.** The future?! They live in a crypt! The place reeks of death. It's obscene and tawdry, and I'm sure I saw mold on the carpet.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But imagine having two other people exactly like yourself. It could make you seem larger than you really are, capable of bigger and better things.

**FOSSMIRE.** Bigger and better mischief!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Yes, I suppose, but, well, Foss, I... I have a little secret. I've never even told your father, but when I was a child, I used to pretend there were three more of me.

**FOSSMIRE.** You? Tripled?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Alice times three plus me, so that's four actually. We played in the woods, beyond the boundaries of my father's estate—that's how we escaped nanny and my brothers. We were very fetching, and all the birds and squirrels invited us to tea. Oh, I know it's typical for children to have imaginary playmates, but mine were very vivid, very special.

**FOSSMIRE.** So was it traumatic when you knocked them off?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I didn't actually. I just left them in the woods one day.

**FOSSMIRE.** That wasn't very sporting.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** It's good to see you smiling again.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, that's just my teeth chattering. Look, Gussie, are they coming loose? There's a taste—like copper and sardines—and I think I'm feverish. Feel my forehead.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You do seem warm.

**FOSSMIRE.** I wonder if I should ring that Doctor Whetstone? Maybe she'll drop in and prescribe something.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Listen to me, Foss: I'm going to help you cross the room. Then we'll draw a nice hot bath. Now sit up and take deep breaths: one...two...three...

*(FOSSMIRE lifts the covers and steps out of bed, wobbling, grasping LADY AUGUSTA's arm.)*

There's a good boy! One step, two... Heavens, you've lost weight.

**FOSSMIRE.** And you're getting plump as a partridge. Ahhhhh!! There it goes again—full gallop! Get me the Scotch!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I really don't...

**FOSSMIRE.** Quick, damnit, or I'll scream!

*(LADY AUGUSTA fetches the Scotch. FOSSMIRE swills it down then attempts to walk.)*

Damn, damn! It's hopeless; I'm reeling. Get me back to bed!

*(They stagger to the bed where FOSSMIRE collapses.)*

Ahhhh. Yes, yes, much better, much better... Now, please, Gussie, call Doctor Whetstone. Her number's in my appointment book on my desk.

Then go away and leave me in peace. I'm dead tired.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You're dead drunk!

*(LADY AUGUSTA departs as FOSSMIRE falls into a deep slumber, and lights fade to black.)*

### Scene 6

*(A clock chimes 3:00 A.M. Shimmering lights reveal EMMALINE, VALENTINE, and URSELINE entering Fossmire's bedroom. They creep onto his bed, snuggling next to him.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Hush-a-bye, baby,  
on the tree top;  
When the wind blows,  
the cradle will rock;  
When the bough breaks,  
the cradle will fall;  
And down will come baby,  
cradle and all.*

*(FOSSMIRE awakens, and sits bolt upright!)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Ahhhhhhh!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Greetings, your worship.

**FOSSMIRE.** Get out! Out of my bed!!!

**VALENTINE.** He reeks of the drivels.

**FOSSMIRE.** How...?! How did you get here?

**URSELINE.** Through the hairline crack of a dream.

**FOSSMIRE.** Owwwwwww, my...my heart...

**EMMALINE.** Sisters! Hold fast his arms!

*(URSELINE and VALENTINE pin Fossmire's arms as EMMALINE places one hand on his forehead, the other on his breast.)*

His brain's aflame, and his heart held fast in the jaws of an asp.

**FOSSMIRE.** What...? What asp?! What are you talking about?! Why are you tormenting me?!

**URSELINE.** O fie! We've come to fettle thy fidgets!

**EMMALINE.** Drink this potion! 'Twill banish the scourge!

*(EMMALINE forces a potion down FOSSMIRE's throat as he sputters furiously.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** You! You're the scourge! The scourge of over six hundred men! Where are they? What have you done to them?

**URSELINE.** Slit their gullets and pitched them in the Thames.

**VALENTINE.** Hung them in the gallows—hoisted and cracked.

**URSELINE.** Poisoned them with oleander, fatal flower o' mercy.

**FOSSMIRE.** Where are they buried? Where are the bodies?!

**VALENTINE.** Down...

**EMMALINE.** ...down...

**URSELINE.** ...down the rabbit hole!

**VALENTINE.** Faith, if it's bodies ye crave, the cobbles o' London are aswarm with multitudes.

**URSELINE.** Thick as maggots on a tor o' turds! 'Tis time for weeding the wretches.

**FOSSMIRE.** Is that it then? You're thinning out the masses? Oh, Gussie will love this.

**EMMALINE.** "Gussie?" Dost thou mean the Lady Augusta who dwelleth 'neath this very roof?

**FOSSMIRE.** What?! You...you know her?

**URSELINE.** Troth! She's writ of oft enough!

**EMMALINE.** She governs a cause we follow with fervor.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, lord, tell me I'm not awake, tell me they're not real.

**EMMALINE.** Faith, sir, we are as real as thyself.

**FOSSMIRE.** Are you? Then tomorrow you're going to have your real door broken down, and I'll upturn every inch of the premises till I find the real bodies of real men!

**EMMALINE.** O posh and tosh!

**URSELINE.** By my bum, he is all ablush.

**VALENTINE.** Doth he find us as bewitching as we find him?

**FOSSMIRE.** No he "doth" not! He finds you odious and repellent! Now bugger off!

**URSELINE.** Then why is thy manhood stiff as a poker?

*(The SISTERS laugh, pouncing on FOSSMIRE.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Stop that! Get off me! No, noooo, ohhhhhh...

*(The SISTERS ravish FOSSMIRE till he faints.)*

**EMMALINE.** Sleep well, fearless Foss. Anon thou willst sail the River of Dreams to the moorings of the morrow.

*(The SISTERS sit atop FOSSMIRE as if he were a boat, then row with invisible oars, singing a round in perfect measure.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Row, row, row your boat,  
Gently down the stream,  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is but a dream.*

*(Blackout.)*

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**Scene 7**

*(The next morning. FOSSMIRE is asleep, attended by LADY AUGUSTA and DOCTOR WHETSTONE who administers an injection.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Is Foss in a coma?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** More of a mild stupor. I'm giving him a B complex injection. *(Pause, putting away the syringe)* Be sure he drinks plenty of fluids, and here are some tranquilizers in case he should need them.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Do you happen to have anything for dyspepsia? I'm afraid all this excitement has wreaked havoc with my digestion.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No, I'm afraid not, and you really should ring his regular physician.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I would have, but Foss insisted I call you. Now that you're here, I can see why. Would you care for some tea?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No thank you. I really must go.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** What are you doing next Friday? Sir Sidney Rubble's giving a lecture on Africa for the ZPP.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** The ZPP...?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** The Zero Population Party. Oh, please stay—just a bit longer. Let me give you one of our pamphlets.

*(DR. WHETSTONE sits reluctantly as LADY AUGUSTA brings forth a pamphlet and points to a photograph.)*

There's Sir Sidney with some tribesmen from Ghana. Look at the poor dears: still living in the Stone Age, still tilling their tiny plots, frantically feeding offspring who will never hold a fork much less read the menu. We can't control the population with wars and viruses, so the ZPP is building clinics all over the world. *(Indicating another photo)* Here, you see, we've just financed a laboratory in Sidney where they're working on vaccines to sterilize everyone incapable of rearing a child. Do you have any?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Children...? No. My husband died two years ago, and we...well, we were hoping to have a family.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, I am sorry. Well, motherhood can be a great adventure—or a life sentence.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** My sister, Fiona, has a son and absolutely adores him. He's the joy of her life—and her husband's too.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** How lovely, and I do hope their feelings won't change if he grows up to disappoint them.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Did yours disappoint you?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** (*Selecting a photograph from a side table:*) That's young Foss—first in his class at Eton. Now he's a detective and it's a sordid business, dealing with the very worst sort of people—though I must say his cases make for scintillating conversations. These girls for instance—imagine being tripled. No need for mirrors! I was just telling Foss about my own triplets, my imaginary Alices.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** They were all named “Alice”?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** After me. You see, I'm Lady “Alice” Augusta. The Alice was for Alice Liddell, the original Alice in Wonderland and a friend of my Great Aunt Augusta's. Of course, *my* Alices were silly girls, pranksters. They had a secret lair in the forest, a bottomless pit where they'd toss stray cats, rats, and any creatures who crossed them.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** So even as a child you were solving the population problem.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, yes, we were ghastly girls. We hated everyone.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Your childhood wasn't a happy one?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I had twin brothers who died when they were seventeen. They went on safari with my Uncle Godfrey, and one of the guides—a Dutchman from Durban—got rip roaring drunk and shot the whole lot of them.

**FOSSMIRE.** (*Groaning:*) Uhhhhhhhhh...

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, he's rallying! He's rallying! Hello, Fossie, wake up! Welcome home!

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh...oh, god. My...my head is throbbing.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Your Doctor Whetstone's here, dear. We've had a very nice chat.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Can you sit up? *(Pause.)* Good. Do you think you can walk? Here, let me help.

*(FOSSMIRE slips cautiously out of bed.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** The palpitations seem to be... Yes, they're...they're gone! Look, look, I can walk! Oh, thank god, thank heaven! I'm better, I'm really better. They came last night and cured me. They said I was cured and I am!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Who came?

**FOSSMIRE.** The sisters, they... Oh, lord, listen to me! It must have been a...a dream, obviously, just a dream.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, apparently it was a curative one.

**FOSSMIRE.** Christ, it's good to be grounded again, and I actually have an appetite. Gussie, would you be an angel and bring us some tea?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Of course, dear.

*(LADY AUGUSTA departs.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I really think you should sit awhile. You might have some vertigo.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, but it feels so wonderful to stand! And I must thank you for coming to my rescue.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No trouble, though I've done nothing, really.

**FOSSMIRE.** Not so. Your very presence is a bridge to the world. And please forgive my appearance. I must look a sight. *(Pause.)* So did Gussie convince you we're balmy?

*(DOCTOR WHETSTONE smiles.)*

Well, we are, especially me—still living with mother at my age. Please try not to take her too seriously. She's had more breakdowns than my Jag, and means to control the world someday, so she's been practicing on me. I'm sure she told you I've met the sisters and think they're involved somehow—in the disappearances. Are you still willing to help?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, of course.

**FOSSMIRE.** Then I'd like you to pay them a visit. See if they remember you, try to win their confidence, tell them you're researching female triplets and you'd like to ask some questions. You'll be wired of course.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I could give them some tests—neurological and personality profiles. I'll bring my equipment, and since I'm interested anyway, I should certainly be convincing.

**FOSSMIRE.** Good! I'll be about fifty meters from the house, skulking behind the yews.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I've been wondering—if it's really conceivable that they're involved with all these missing men, then how...? And where are they hiding the bodies?

**FOSSMIRE.** Down the rabbit hole. Well, that's what they said in my dream.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Really? Alice in Wonderland fell down a rabbit hole, and your mother's triplets were all named Alice. They had a hole too, a pit in the forest.

**FOSSMIRE.** She told you about her Alices?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes. Perhaps your mother's triplets and the Rime triplets became confused in your dream, along with your memories of the Alice books.

**FOSSMIRE.** The subconscious loves to rearrange things, doesn't it? Now when can you call? Is tomorrow all right?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I'll need to reschedule my appointments.

**FOSSMIRE.** Shall we meet around two o'clock? I'll pick you up at your office.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Fine. By the way, Chief Inspector, I've left some tranquilizers with your mother—in case you need them.

**FOSSMIRE.** Please call me Foss—everyone does.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** All right, and I'm Flora.

*(LADY AUGUSTA enters with a tea tray.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Can you stay for tea?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I'm afraid not. It was a pleasure meeting you, Lady Augusta.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Do come again, my dear.

*(DOCTOR WHETSTONE exits.)*

Here, Foss, I've made some toast. Now what did you tell Doctor Whetstone?

**FOSSMIRE.** Everything. Her name's Flora, and she's calling on the girls tomorrow.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, I wish I could tag along.

**FOSSMIRE.** So do they. In my dream, they knew all about you.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Really?

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, yes, we had quite a chat. I even asked where they were stashing the bodies, and they said “down the rabbit hole.”

*(LADY AUGUSTA blanches, biting her lip.)*

Flora thinks... Gussie...? Are you alright? You've gone white as a sheet.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Have I? Oh, it's nothing really, just my digestion. All this talk about triplets brings back memories. Mine were twelve when we parted.

**FOSSMIRE.** Twelve! You kept your imaginary friends till you were twelve!? That's frightening, Gussie, it really is.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** They were good company.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, these girls are *not* good company. They're very real, very dangerous, and very likely to be involved with our missing men.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Maybe they don't like men much. My Alices didn't.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why ever not?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, my brothers were not very kind, always pinching and poking their peckers, and snatching the heads off my dolls.

**FOSSMIRE.** Poking their what...? What did you say?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** My dolls. They snatched off their heads.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, you said they were "poking their..." their what?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Did I?

**FOSSMIRE.** You know you did.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, really, Foss, it's nothing.

**FOSSMIRE.** Then why are you blushing?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I'm not.

**FOSSMIRE.** Look, you just said your brothers were always pinching and poking their...their what?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, if you must know, they were poking their...their...well, "pushing" really.

**FOSSMIRE.** Pushing what?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, for heaven's sake, Foss...

**FOSSMIRE.** Pushing what? Say what you mean!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, their...their male organs.

**FOSSMIRE.** What about their male organs?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, Foss, really.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me about their male organs.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, they...they pressed them into my...well, you know.

**FOSSMIRE.** *(Pause.)* My god, Gussie, are you telling me that your own brothers...? They molested you?

*(Pause as LADY AUGUSTA nods but remains nonchalant, almost cheerful.)*

Both of them?! My god, that's...that's terrible! It's...it's savage, inhuman! Their own sister!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Half-sister.

**FOSSMIRE.** So did you...did you tell your parents? Were they punished?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** They said they'd kill me if I told, and when you're only five...

**FOSSMIRE.** Five! Where was your mother? Your nanny?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, they noticed the bruises, but I said they'd come from riding my ponies. Mummy and Nanny were both tipplers, you know, but they loved the boys, especially Nathan.

**FOSSMIRE.** Where the hell was your father?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** On his business trips.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, Gussie, I'm so sorry. How...how long did it go on?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Until I was ten.

**FOSSMIRE.** Wasn't there anyone to confide in? No teachers, no cousins or neighbors?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Only my Alices. They were very good listeners.

**FOSSMIRE.** But after the twins died—did you tell anyone then?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Who? Everyone was in mourning. Besides, Mummy told the boys I was a horrid little accident, coming too little too late.

**FOSSMIRE.** She said that?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, she was forty-three. They said she tried to flush me down the loo—through the sewers of Dorset.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, dear, dear Gussie. Did father know?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, no, it never came up. I always thought the subject...inappropriate. Of course, today's it's all the rage: fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, even mothers and sons. You can't open a book or see a play where there isn't some vulgar scene or revelation.

**FOSSMIRE.** (*Pause as he holds his mother's hand:*) Strange, isn't it? Just when we think we might fathom a person, we find we know nothing, nothing at all.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, dear, you're my miracle. The doctors said I was too damaged to bear children, and here you are!

**FOSSMIRE.** Is there anything I can do, Gussie? Anything to make you happy?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, yes, dear, there is.

**FOSSMIRE.** What...? What is it?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Introduce me to the sisters.

**FOSSMIRE.** God, no!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But you said they knew all about me!

**FOSSMIRE.** That was in my dream!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I could help with the case.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, certainly not! I absolutely forbid it! You're the only mother I've got and I won't have you risking your life—especially since I'm just getting to know you.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But I just wanted to *see* them.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, please, Gussie, leave it alone. Let's have our tea and pretend they're gone, flown off on their broomsticks.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** The color's coming back to your cheeks.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, I'm really feeling better, better than I've felt in weeks.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Maybe you're smitten.

**FOSSMIRE.** Smitten?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** With Doctor Whetstone. "Flora" is it? She's quite lovely.

**FOSSMIRE.** She's probably married.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** No, she's a widow.

**FOSSMIRE.** Really?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, do take care, Foss.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why should I? Look at me. I've come very near to dying and it's about time I lived.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Then here, dear, finish your toast. There's plenty of marmalade.

*(FOSSMIRE takes a bite of toast.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** I want to learn more about my mother, my country, and the whole blessed world. Oh, Gussie, I've squandered too many chances. *(Standing)* I want more happiness, more life, more... Ahhhhhhhh!

*(FOSSMIRE falls to the floor. LADY AUGUSTA rushes to his side.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, nooooooo!

*(Blackout.)*

### Scene 8

*(LADY AUGUSTA's "Nooooooo!" is overlapped by the RIME SISTERS' "Ohhhhhh" as lights reveal their parlor. They sit wired to a polygraph machine monitored by DOCTOR WHETSTONE who shows them enlarged photographs.)*

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.** Ohhhhhh...

**VALENTINE.** 'Tis a curious contrivance.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** It's very similar to a lie detecting polygraph. Now I'm going to show you some photographs accompanied by music. Your responses will be measured accordingly. Are you ready?

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Aye!

*(Mozart is heard as a picture of Kew Gardens in bloom is shown.)*

Ohhhhhh...

*(Brahms is played as a picture of sleeping infants is shown.)*

Ahhhhh...

*(A funereal dirge accompanies a picture of mourners by a grave.)*

Ahhhhh...

*(Sensual jazz accompanies a scene of naked lovers.)*

Ohhhhhh...

*(Hard rock percussion accompanies a scene of gruesome slaughter.)*

Ahhhhh...

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Thank you, ladies.

*(DOCTOR WHETSTONE studies the polygraph charts as the SISTERS detach themselves from the equipment.)*

**VALENTINE.** Behold: 'tis the handscrip of a poet with palsy.

**EMMALINE.** Feigned shadows of our natures.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Your responses are incredibly similar and...unusual. Look, you've registered the exact same response to Kew Gardens as you did to brutal slaughter.

**URSELINE.** Dost thou think us craven and churlish?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I'm not judging you; I'm merely saying it's highly irregular. I mean, you...well, you don't seem to feel much. It's possible you lack a substance called oxytocin. It's a hormone that stimulates feelings and emotions.

**EMMALINE.** Why wouldst we lack such a substance?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** It's usually caused by a trauma or injury to the head, or lack of stimuli in childhood. Some people don't develop the cerebral cortex sufficiently in infancy. They don't receive enough attention or...or love.

**URSELINE.** Aye, 'tis true. Once we sprouted teeth, mumsy loved us naught.

**EMMALINE.** And father forsook us, made us foundlings.

**URSELINE.** We mothered ourselves, by troth!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I've come to know your mother quite well. She says she loved you very much, but that you preferred your own company.

**URSELINE.** 'Tis true. We cleave to one another like warts on a troll's bum.

**VALENTINE.** We slumber in the same chamber, in the same bed...

**URSELINE.** ...'neath the same bedding...

**EMMALINE.** ...where we dream the same dreams.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** So you're never apart?

**EMMALINE.** No longer than the thrice it takes for the dispatch of business: bathing, banking, and... *To market, to market...*

**VALENTINE / URSELINE / EMMALINE.**

*...To buy a fat pig,  
Home again, home again,  
Jiggety, jig!*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, I... I do have a few more questions. Can you tell me your favorite color?

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Blue.

**URSELINE.** Ain't it obvious?!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, yes, of course. And do you have a favorite sport?

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Hunting.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Really? And what do you hunt?

**VALENTINE.** Men mostly, and snakes.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** How do you hunt them?

**URSELINE.** Armed with cunning, prowess, and essence o' lavender.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** And what do you do once you've captured your game?

**URSELINE.** They go down...

**EMMALINE.** ...down...

**VALENTINE.** ...down the rabbit hole!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** The rabbit hole? You're not speaking literally, of course. I mean, you don't actually hunt men and push them down a hole.

**VALENTINE.** Why ever not? 'Tis great sport.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I think you're having sport with me.

**URSELINE.** Cold frost, speak no more!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Oh, please, I'm curious. If there really is a rabbit hole, where is it located?

**EMMALINE.** Thou must track the rabbit, but pray, cease thy sniffing.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Just a few more questions if I may? Do you have any personal ambitions? I mean, do you ever yearn for romance, a family, some special place in your community?

**VALENTINE.** Aye! Romance.

**EMMALINE.** The romance of destiny: a vintage claret, a bawdy game o' billiards...

**VALENTINE.** ...hot buttered scones...

**EMMALINE.** ...songfests on Sundays...

**URSELINE.** ...frippery and frocks!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, I know what you mean. Those are all lovely, but I was thinking of more intellectual and more...intimate goals.

**VALENTINE.** Oh, we have those, Milady, fair fancies and pleasures.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, but which pleasures?

**VALENTINE.** Good victuals!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Food? Alright, what's your favorite food?

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.** Meat.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** What kind of meat?

**EMMALINE.** Dark and light.

**URSELINE.** Fat and lean.

**VALENTINE.** Skewered on a pike or boiled in a cauldron.

**URSELINE.** She thinks us filthy flesh mongers, but fear not, your sort don't whet our appetites.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Good. *(Pause.)* Do you belong to any sort of religion?

**EMMALINE.** We worship the female deities.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** So you're witches?

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Aye.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Are you good witches?

**EMMALINE.** To light a candle is to cast a shadow. Every act hath its opposite effect.

**URSELINE.** We're forsworn to silence, so cease thy meddling!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I... I didn't mean to...intrude. Now, I wonder if you can tell me your first memory?

**VALENTINE.** 'Twas the great gush of mumsy's waters.

**EMMALINE.** Her womb pitched and pursed and near crushed our skulls.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You mean you actually remember your birth?

**EMMALINE.** And infancy. We were slaves unto appetites and slumbering, and dreaming of who we were afore this turn o' tides.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** What do you mean, "afore this turn o' tides?"

**EMMALINE.** Afore this life.

**URSELINE.** Come, sisters! Enough of this prying medicine monger! 'Tis time she left us to our labors.

**EMMALINE.** Patience, dearest Urseline, permit the positing of three more queries, but only three.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Thank you. Well, I... I'm curious—why have you chosen to speak the way you do?

**EMMALINE.** Living in a dark age, 'tis best to speak a dark tongue...

**URSELINE.** ...in a dark dwelling. Dost thou agree?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, yes, we do seem to be living in a dark age. There's a tragic sense of...decline.

**EMMALINE.** Of civilization!

**VALENTINE.** Of civility!

**URSELINE.** Madness reigns!

**EMMALINE.** We ought to know.

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** (*Laugh!*)

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** That's why I encourage my patients to make art, to paint and write and play music. I tell them we need art to give form to our madness—before it forms us.

**EMMALINE.** Aye, mold the muck o' madness, ere it bubbles o'er the pot and befouls the world with rancor, plagues...

**URSELINE.** ...and buboes!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** And how do you mold your madness?

**EMMALINE.** We create...

**URSELINE.** ...and are ourselves creations.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** But what do you create?

**URSELINE.** Marmalade.

**VALENTINE.** By the buckets. 'Tis Urseline's own recipe.

**EMMALINE.** And Valentine carves figures, waxen effigies of freak-folk and whimsies.

**VALENTINE.** And Emmaline leads us in singsongs, ditties from the heyday o' youth.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, I'd love to hear another.

**URSELINE.** 'Twill be the last thing you hear. Thy queries are thrice answered so 'tis time to get thee gone.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, of course, and I... I'm very grateful for your...patience.

**EMMALINE.** Let us sing our sister song!

*I love you well, my little sisters...*

*(VALENTINE and URSELINE join in perfect harmony. As they sing, the SISTERS surround DR. WHETSTONE, stroking her arms.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*And you are fond of me;  
Let us be kind to one another  
As sisters ought to be.  
You shall learn to play with me,  
And learn to comb my curls;  
And then I think that we shall be  
Three happy little girls.*

*(EMMALINE and VALENTINE kiss Doctor Whetstone's cheeks.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Oh!

*(Blackout.)*

### Scene 9

*(Lady Augusta's parlor where FOSSMIRE. sits on the sofa, wearing his robe. The sisters' song has mingled simultaneously with a tape that DOCTOR WHETSTONE is playing on a cassette player. LADY AUGUSTA sits nearby.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** So there you have it: every word of our encounter.

**FOSSMIRE.** How curious that they mentioned a rabbit hole. In any case, I don't approve of your going without me. You'd make a dreadful subordinate.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I'm afraid that's my fault. When Flora rang, I told her you'd had a relapse and suggested she go alone.

**FOSSMIRE.** From now on, Flora, you're to take your orders from me.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Your blood pressure's low. How are you feeling?

**FOSSMIRE.** Like a raw rotting wound. I'm afraid you haven't seen me at my best.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You're going to need some tests. I'm taking you to Saint Anne's hospital.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** That won't be necessary. I know exactly what's wrong with Foss. It's those tranquilizers you left me: I hammered them to powder and sprinkled them into the marmalade.

**FOSSMIRE.** You what...?!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** How many?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Eight. That was Friday and he's already rallying. By tomorrow he'll be right as rain.

**FOSSMIRE.** What in god's name...? Why?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You forbade me to see the sisters so I thought if you were laid up a bit longer, I could pay a visit, you know, track them down and do some sleuthing of my own.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ohhhhhh, my own mother—you could have killed me!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Nonsense, but you gave me such a fright when you fell, I decided to stay by your bedside instead.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Really, Lady Augusta, you could have done great harm.

**FOSSMIRE.** Whatever possessed you?! I'm furious, Gussie, really I am, and you've no right to interfere in *my* case!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But it's not just your case. It's mine too. You see, dear, they're *my* triplets; they're my Alices. They've found themselves a family and entered the world.

**FOSSMIRE.** (*Pause.*) Now, Gussie, listen to me: your triplets were a child's fantasy. You conjured them to comfort yourself until you didn't need them anymore. Now they're gone, finished, dead!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, no, they're not dead. I just sent them packing. I told them to find a real home with real parents who'd give them names and faces and voices of their own.

**FOSSMIRE.** I need a drink.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** It would be just like them to speak an antiquated language.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** But Lady Augusta, wouldn't your Alices be as old as you? These girls are only twenty.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Imaginary children can't age until they're born like the rest of us.

**FOSSMIRE.** The operative word here is "imaginary." Your triplets are fictitious; the Rime sisters are flesh and blood women. Yours were a solace; the Rime's are a menace.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, mine were a menace too—that pit in the forest, you know.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Your pit in the forest—do you think it's anything like the Rime sister's rabbit hole?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** No, it's not the same, not at all.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, what is it then?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I can't say.

**FOSSMIRE.** You mean you can't or you won't.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I won't. And I can't.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, does it really exist? I mean, are we talking literally or are we talking nonsense? Get a grip, Gussie!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I haven't slipped my tethers in years, and I'm quite certain those triplets are mine. I had my suspicions when you mentioned the buttons.

**FOSSMIRE.** What about the buttons?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** We collected them. It's all on your tape—their favorite color, their love of singing, and all that talk about the Dark Ages. Well, my Alices wanted a New Age of Light. That's why they've waited till now—for a whole new millennium.

**FOSSMIRE.** For a whole new Wonderland! You're mad, Gussie, mad as the March Hare, the Cheshire Cat, and the whole lot of them put together. And I'm mad for sitting here listening to this rubbish!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I'm sorry you think it's rubbish, but to me it makes perfect sense. You see, Doctor, I was molested by my twin brothers. That's why I created the girls in the first place. The psyche can be very creative in defending itself, and my triplets outnumbered the twins.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, Flora, you're the doctor. What do you think? Is she dotty? Loony?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, I don't think you can declare a person "loony" unless you're absolutely certain of your own sanity, and quite frankly, I find that morally unacceptable—for myself at least.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You have a compassionate nature, Doctor, but I'm not fool enough to think I'd convince you on my own—so I've invited the girls to tea.

**FOSSMIRE.** You what...?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Tea on Thursday at four.

**FOSSMIRE.** Here? In this house?! Tea?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** They're listed in the directory, you know. We'll have Dora polish the silver and make those lovely little lemon cakes.

**FOSSMIRE.** You've invited three mass murder suspects to tea?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** You're both invited as well.

**FOSSMIRE.** Beastly girls who could be homicidal maniacs, psychopathic witches or worse!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** They said they'd be delighted.

**FOSSMIRE.** Thursday! My god, that's...damn! You've got me so rattled I don't even know what day it is.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Monday—at half past nine.

**FOSSMIRE.** That gives me three days. Gussie, bring me some coffee, the strongest ever brewed!

(LADY AUGUSTA *exits.*)

And try not to poison it!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** *(Pause.)* Will you be alright?

**FOSSMIRE.** No, no, I will never be alright. My mother's off her trolley and I'm weak and wasted to the bone. And now I have to interview the parents again, call on the sisters, and assuming I survive, I'll be attending Gussie's tea party. What about you? Are you coming?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I wouldn't miss it for the world.

*(Lights reveal the SISTERS singing.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Polly, put the kettle on,*

*Put the kettle on,*

*Put the kettle on;*

*Polly, put the kettle on*

*And we'll have some tea!*

*(Blackout.)*

*End of Act I*

## ACT II

### Scene 10

*(Fossmire's dream: A dimly lit lecture hall where the VOICES OF THE RIME SISTERS are heard singing while LADY AUGUSTA speaks from a podium, overlapping their song.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Ladies and gentlemen...

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe...*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** ...we are a species out of control.

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*She had so many children she didn't know what to do.*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** We are reproducing at alarming rates,...

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*She gave them some broth without any bread...*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** ...and our Earth Mother's milk of human kindness is turning sour.

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Then whipped them all round and sent them to bed!*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** In fact, she's poisoning us, especially in Cairo, Calcutta, and Mexico City where the population's grown so rampantly they can't control the sewage. There's such high levels of fecal dust in the air that intestinal parasites are infecting the tourists—not to mention the natives. So how can we endure this calamity? How can we preserve ourselves and our humanity when we can't even breathe the air? The Zero Population Party proposes universal vasectomies for all adolescent males—after they preserve semen samples for their future families. This simple operation will guarantee that no child is ever again born unwittingly or unwanted. And it's high time for men to take the initiative! For decades women have subjected their bodies to chemicals that induce life-threatening strokes, cancers, and bloatings so severe they inflate like balloons and fly east—to China where they've legislated one child per family: one mother, one father, one child, only one. If we follow this dictum the standard of living in the whole world will rise. If we don't, Mother Earth will plague us with floods, famines,

and national psychoses—whole countries so swarming with people they sell their excess into slavery or commit mass genocide. But what is genocide? A systematic solution? A war against humanity? An ugly little word? Or maybe it's a tea party. Oh, invitations have already been sent to the Jews, the Armenians, Albanians, Cambodians, Bosnians, and Tutsies. And where did they go? Down, down, down the rabbit hole to a tea party. Tea Party. Tea Party. Genocide. Genocide. It's all just words, you see, words, words, words!

*(LADY AUGUSTA laughs as the RIME SISTERS appear, dancing around her.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Here we go up, up, up,  
Here we go down, down, down,  
Here we go backwards and forwards,  
And here we go round, round, round.*

*(Fade out.)*

### Scene 11

*(An office in New Scotland Yard. FOSSMIRE is asleep at his desk. DETECTIVE SERGEANT RUPERT SLATER enters, carrying a file folder. He coughs and rouses FOSSMIRE who sits bolt upright, awakened from his dream.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, god... Sorry, Sergeant, I... I must have dozed. I keep dreaming about my mother.

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** You wanted a list of the latest disappearances, sir. *(Handing a file folder to Fossmire)* They're mostly off the streets and the underground, and a growing number in hospitals as well. In the past hour there's seven gone missing at the Bedford Juvenile Detention Center; twelve at a recovery clinic in Newcastle; and twenty-four prisoners working at a low surveillance laundry in Wellingborough, causing a near riot and making a grand total of two thousand, six hundred and fifty-seven missing persons as of nine hundred hours this morning.

**FOSSMIRE.** All male?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Yes, sir. There's even a few gents, reputable sorts with trades, and last night a magistrate from Bloomsbury.

**FOSSMIRE.** And not a single solitary soul has actually witnessed these vanishings? No bolts of lightning, no slow dissolves or falling into sinkholes?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** No, sir. They're alone when it happens, and it's usually at night. It seems they'll leave a room or turn a corner and then they're gone without a clue except for the occasional odd buttons, but forensics still hasn't traced them to the owners whereabouts.

**FOSSMIRE.** So what's the scuttlebutt, Sergeant? What are the rumor-mongers of the press peddling today?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Well, sir, *The Tattler* says it's the new millennium. It's the end of the world so aliens are sucking chaps onto space ships to steal their sperm for future generations.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah, yes, that would explain their wanting only the men. Later they'll come down for the women—for their eggs.

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian* continue to blame extremist cults trying to rid the world of undesirables, and yesterday on the telly, Lord Rockston said it's a conspiracy of feminists knocking off potentially violent men. The foreign press is starting to notice and they're hounding us with questions.

**FOSSMIRE.** So old Rockston's blaming the feminists?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Yes, sir, but it's not likely.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why not?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Well, you know, sir: women are usually acquainted with their victims, and they commit only a small percentage of murders.

**FOSSMIRE.** Maybe they're trying to catch up!

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Well, sir, whoever it is must be having a jolly good laugh—watching us chase our tails and getting bloody nowhere.

**FOSSMIRE.** This morning I ordered round-the-clock surveillance on an address in Belgravia. I've told DCI Flint I want reports on everyone coming and going and I want them every hour. So keep track of me, Sergeant, seek me out and relay my messages.

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Yes, sir.

**FOSSMIRE.** Just one more question: what's your personal opinion?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** I'm sorry to hear about the gents and juveniles, but the rest won't be missed much.

**FOSSMIRE.** I meant what do you think is the *modus operandi*—the how and the who, Sergeant.

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** I think it's extremists, and they're well off. I don't know how they manage the abductions, but they've got the technology to dispose of the corpses—chemicals and furnaces for cremating.

**FOSSMIRE.** Or maybe they're running a chop shop? You know, spare body parts: odd sets of eyeballs and knee caps—just joking, Sergeant. So are we sending out the bloodhounds, tracking the scent of scorched flesh?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Yes, sir, but nothing's come of it yet.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ha! We ought to be chasing old Robin the Bobbin.

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Who, sir?

**FOSSMIRE.** You know, the nursery song:

*Robbin the bobbin, the bouncing Ben.*

*He ate more meat than four score men.*

*(Suddenly FOSSMIRE is joined by the VOICES OF THE RIME SISTERS which startles him.)*

**FOSSMIRE / THE VOICES OF THE RIME SISTERS.** *He ate a cow, he ate a calf...*

(FOSSMIRE's voice trails off, but the SISTERS continue.)

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*He ate a butcher and a half,  
He ate a church, he ate a steeple,  
He ate a priest, and all the people.*

(The SISTERS' VOICES cease as DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER speaks.)

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** No, sir.

**FOSSMIRE.** What...?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** I don't know the song, sir.

**FOSSMIRE.** Did you...did you hear anything just now? Some girls singing?

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Just you, sir.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, bring in the professors, Sergeant, and thank you for your candor.

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** There's only the lady, sir.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, send her in.

(DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER exits, leaving FOSSMIRE alone.)

Are you here? Are you bloody bitches hovering around me? I'm not afraid, you know. No, I'm beyond fear, way way beyond.

## Scene 12

(MADELINE RIME enters as FOSSMIRE composes himself.)

**FOSSMIRE.** Good morning, Professor Rime, do sit down. I've met your daughters, and I must say they're quite extraordinary. (*Indicating a dense text*) I'm reading one of your books. It's fascinating, though I've always thought of English culture as priding itself on rationality.

**MADELINE RIME.** It does. I was attempting to make the arcane of magic more intelligible.

**FOSSMIRE.** I wonder who actually buys your books? Other witches?

**MADLINE RIME.** All sorts of people from all sorts of professions. Most of them simply want more ritual in their lives, something more esoteric than the usual Sunday service.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, but *how* esoteric. What do they actually believe?

**MADLINE RIME.** Well, to put it simply, they believe that through certain rituals, the mind can affect matter.

**FOSSMIRE.** But *how*?

**MADLINE RIME.** The physical world is energy patterns in flux. Witches change those patterns through chanting, meditation, and concentrated will power.

**FOSSMIRE.** So are your daughters capable of changing these patterns?

**MADLINE RIME.** I really can't say.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, I can. I mean, it...it seems quite likely.

(HUGH RIME *enters.*)

**HUGH RIME.** Sorry I'm late. Hello, Madeline.

**MADLINE RIME.** Hugh.

**HUGH RIME.** So what's this all about, Chief Inspector? Where are my daughters? Have you arrested them?

**FOSSMIRE.** No. I'm still trying to fathom why they'd want to eradicate a very large and ever-growing number of men.

**HUGH RIME.** They wouldn't; it's utterly preposterous. Now, please, Chief Inspector, I'm extremely busy. What is it you want?

**FOSSMIRE.** Details. Specifics. You see, I believe the clues to our destinies lie in our childhoods, and I'm looking for clues—any crumb you've got. But first let me explain the position of the Metropolitan Police: we're lost. Of course, we all have our theories: alien abductions, fanatic feminists, and my sergeant thinks it's wealthy extremists with crematoriums. Believe it or not, your

daughters are our only suspects—well, *my* only suspects. It's been difficult persuading my superintendent that three quaint young women are dangerous sociopaths, and to complicate matters further, my own eccentric mother thinks your daughters are her Alices, her imaginary childhood playmates sprung to life. So there you have it. Now it's your turn. What do you think?

**HUGH RIME.** I tend to agree with your sergeant.

**MADLINE RIME.** Maybe you should listen to your mother. When they were six, Emmaline decided to discard her name. She preferred to be called Alice. (*To Hugh:*) Don't you remember? Then Urseline and Valentine said they wanted to be called Alice too, but it was only a childish whim that lasted a few days, and soon they were back to being...well, themselves.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why Alice?

**MADLINE RIME.** From *Alice in Wonderland*, I suppose. They especially liked the Dormouse because he knew three sisters who lived on treacle at the bottom of a well.

**FOSSMIRE.** And did your daughters have a well?

**MADLINE RIME.** No, but they loved treacle.

**HUGH RIME.** Yes, yes, and they still love treacle and so do we all. But what of it?! How is it all connected, and what bloody difference does it make?!

**FOSSMIRE.** Now that, you see, is the conundrum: there's no logic here, no rational deductions, no evidence, no answers—only questions.

**HUGH RIME.** That's life, Chief Inspector, that's life!

**FOSSMIRE.** But we seek to apprehend the truth, so I need you to shed more light, even a single moonbeam, just one little moonbeam. Please.

**HUGH RIME.** Sorry, I've given you all my moonbeams.

**MADLINE RIME.** When they were ten, I said something to Urseline about how different they were, as if they really belonged to another set of parents and were dropped randomly into my womb.

Then she replied that there was nothing random about it. They chose me, she said, and they chose Hugh as well.

**FOSSMIRE.** Did she say why?

**MADLINE RIME.** She said we were kindly and intelligent and could carry a tune.

**HUGH RIME.** You never told me this!

**MADLINE RIME.** Well, it seemed absurd. I mean, if they'd chosen me, why didn't they like me more? Most mothers and daughters bond on many subjects like literature and fashion, but all we ever bonded on was witchcraft. I taught them everything I knew, and they loved candle-making and singing chants.

**HUGH RIME.** They weren't chants; they were nursery rhymes—sung shrilly and incessantly!

**MADLINE RIME.** It was their own form of chanting. You see, chanting changes the state of your consciousness—so you have access to your inner powers.

**HUGH RIME.** To the goddess within!

**MADLINE RIME.** Many young girls are attracted to goddess worship, and why not? They haven't any transcendent role models of their own.

**HUGH RIME.** Watch out, Chief Inspector, she's stepping onto her pulpit!

**MADLINE RIME.** Our culture has completely obliterated the female divinities. The only one left is the Virgin Mary whose been so humbled she kneels before her own son.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah, then do witches resent men?

**HUGH RIME.** Yes!

**MADLINE RIME.** Many witches *are* men.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me, are you yourself capable of performing their rites and rituals? For example, how would a witch—an English witch—get rid of someone?

**MADLINE RIME.** Modern witches are benign, Chief Inspector, They don't burn effigies at altars anymore. Of course, there are certain banishing rituals...

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes! Banishing rituals!

**MADLINE RIME.** But they're for illnesses and misfortunes—not for banishing people.

**FOSSMIRE.** Are you sure?

**MADLINE RIME.** Yes.

**FOSSMIRE.** You know, when the girls were asked where the men had gone, they said, “down the rabbit hole.” Have they ever mentioned a hole of any kind?

**HUGH RIME.** No.           **MADLINE RIME.** Not that I recall.

**HUGH RIME.** They often make inane remarks that mean absolutely nothing.

**FOSSMIRE.** Do witches dig holes?

**MADLINE RIME.** No, but they have circles, ceremonial chalk circles. The high priestess draws it at the beginning of her rituals to indicate the boundary between the world of gods and the world of men.

**FOSSMIRE.** So where is this world of gods?

**MADLINE RIME.** All around us—it's the world of magic.

**FOSSMIRE.** But is there really any magic?

*(Time stops as music tinkles and colored lights twinkle. The RIME SISTERS appear as dimly lit apparitions materializing in the walls and singing softly. FOSSMIRE stares, afraid that only he can see them.)*

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.**

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
How I wonder what you are.  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky...*

*(The SISTERS vanish, leaving a soft hum in the background as the conversation continues.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me, could witches be right here in this very room?—wafting about on some nether plane.

**MADLINE RIME.** Yes, I suppose.

**FOSSMIRE.** So can we at least presume that your daughters are practicing some sort of black magic?

**HUGH RIME.** No, we cannot presume anything of the sort.

**MADLINE RIME.** Virtually all the witches I've met practice white magic.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yet you claim to have been abducted and impregnated at some sort of ritual. So if your memories are correct, some witches are *not* benign. In fact, some of them are malevolent and evil.

**MADLINE RIME.** Then they're not witches; they're sorcerers and warlocks.

**HUGH RIME.** And our girls are neither! They're mischievous, yes, but not...not evil.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, they're mischievous alright. They even broke into my dreams, crept into my bed and seduced me. In fact, I just saw them right over there—stark naked.

**HUGH RIME.** Don't be daft!

**FOSSMIRE.** *(To Madeline:)* Did you see them?

**MADLINE RIME.** No, but I... I smelled them. They're like turnips, just boiled.

**FOSSMIRE.** With a hint of lavender! Do you smell them now?

**MADLINE RIME.** No, they're gone.

**HUGH RIME.** I must say, you surprise me. You're sounding like a convert.

**FOSSMIRE.** I'm still a heretic, but a curious one. You see, in my brief encounter with the girls, I felt both repulsed and...well, quite

frankly, attracted, even aroused. But what about you? Were they seductive towards you?

**HUGH RIME.** Really, Chief Inspector, they were our children.

**FOSSMIRE.** Of course, and I'm not accusing you.

**HUGH RIME.** Look, we've told you everything we have to say.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, yes, but I want to know what you can't say. I want to know the unspeakable. What I mean is that for most of us, when such feelings occur, we repress them, but the girls—were they capable of respecting any boundaries? Did they honor any social taboos?

*(Pause as MADELINE glances at HUGH.)*

**MADELINE RIME.** No. None whatsoever.

**HUGH RIME.** Christ, Madeline...

**MADELINE RIME.** That's the reason Hugh left...the real reason.

**FOSSMIRE.** Ah.

**MADELINE RIME.** Believe me, Chief Inspector, you've no idea the power of three young girls, always together, day after day. It was worse for Hugh than for me, but I understood because sometimes I... I felt... *(Pause; she holds back tears)* Even as toddlers there was an anarchy in them, a wildness you knew you could never tame.

**HUGH RIME.** They'd play this bloody cat game where they'd pounce and start pawing and licking. In the end, we decided I should leave, but I never touched them—because the truth is I resented them even more than I desired them, and what I resented most was their defiling our...our family, taking all that was good and wholesome. I don't know if it was their own innate natures or Madeline's witchcraft mania...

**MADELINE RIME.** He's always blamed me, but it was reading all those lewd, licentious plays!

**HUGH RIME.** Oh, Christ...

**MADELINE RIME.** That's what made them wild and over-sexed!

**HUGH RIME.** But it didn't make them murderers! For godssake, Maddy, they're our children! Our children...

*(Pause as MADELINE succumbs to tears.)*

Well, there you have it. I suppose our lives must seem terribly botched.

**FOSSMIRE.** Aren't most lives botched somehow or other? Still, we plod on.

**HUGH RIME.** Really, Chief Inspector, haven't you heard enough? Surely you can see how upsetting this is. Come, Madeline, let's go.

**FOSSMIRE.** Please stay. I want you to realize I'm your ally here, but you should know there's a surveillance team watching the girls—not that it matters since they can slip out through whatever laws of physics they live by. In any case, I'll be seeing them on Thursday. My mother, you see, has invited them to tea.

**HUGH RIME.** To tea?

**FOSSMIRE.** Since she believes they're her Alices, she's convinced she can help me solve the case. So you see, I have a rather personal stake in this business and I want to be prepared. So far you've been of great assistance, but I hope you'll help me even more—especially you, Madeline. May I call you Madeline?

**MADELINE RIME.** Well, I... I suppose.

**FOSSMIRE.** The truth is I need you, the whole country needs you. Did you see the throngs in our lobby? People from all over England are abandoned and bereft. Where did their fathers and sons disappear to? Where are their husbands and brothers and friends? Well, I've been thinking, you see: if witchcraft took them away then maybe witchcraft can bring them back.

**HUGH RIME.** Oh, lord...

**FOSSMIRE.** On Thursday the girls will be at the tea party. Their house will be empty and you have the key. What I want you to do is get them together—all the witches you know and all their witch friends. I want you to break into their house, into their ritual

chamber, and cast a banishing spell or whatever it is you do. I want you to chant all day and all night until somehow...

**HUGH RIME.** You can't be serious?!

**FOSSMIRE.** Make the girls impotent, banish their powers or...or banish them.

**HUGH RIME.** You can't ask her to do that! Good god, man, you should hear yourself!

**MADLINE RIME.** Well, there are people I can speak to.

**HUGH RIME.** You're both mad!

**MADLINE RIME.** There are several local covens and western mystery groups, some with highly intelligent and powerful adepts.

**FOSSMIRE.** Your book claims that rituals can have special intentions, so the intention of this ritual is to stop the vanishings! Stop them now and forever!

**MADLINE RIME.** You know, Chief Inspector, you weren't the first to think of this. I almost tried myself, but...well...

**FOSSMIRE.** What...?

**MADLINE RIME.** A mother can't banish her children.

**FOSSMIRE.** But you said it yourself: they're not yours. They're on their own now, and heaven help them!

### Scene 13

*(Crossfade to the RIME SISTERS singing sweetly in their home.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*I love little pussy, her coat is so warm,  
And if I don't hurt her she'll do me no harm;  
So I'll not pull her tail, nor drive her away,  
But pussy and I very gently will play.*

*(There is a rapping on the door.)*

**URSELINE.** Fie! 'Tis the Foss!

(FOSSMIRE *enters.*)

**FOSSMIRE.** Good afternoon. I've come to make a few more inquiries, and I understand you've been invited to Lady Augusta's house for tea.

**VALENTINE.** Shall we fetch the punch and pastries?

**FOSSMIRE.** No, she'll have everything she needs.

**URSELINE.** I pray Milady's doctor hath not forbade a quaff of tipple with her tea.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, Lady Augusta often serves sherry at her teas. I don't suppose you go out for tea very often.

**URSELINE.** Since we dwelleth in solitude, we ne'er acquired the manners o' society, but we shall don our finest frocks.

**VALENTINE.** Silk stockings, and popinjay feathers! What willst thou wear, my lord?

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, I suppose I'll wear one of my charcoal suits.

**VALENTINE.** By thy apparel some wouldst judge thee a courtly man o' vision...

**EMMALINE.** ...and vapors. We hear thou art enamored of the Lady Flora.

**FOSSMIRE.** Who told you that?

**VALENTINE.** The cuckoo bird!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*The cuckoo is a merry bird,  
She sings as she flies;  
She brings us good tidings,  
And tells us no lies!*

**VALENTINE.** O, the tender strains o' courtship in spring. What joy!

**EMMALINE.** Hast thou wrought an ode to Flora's amber eyes?

**VALENTINE.** Dost thou call her breasts the hills o' Hebe?

**URSELINE.** Her rump the hump o' Venus?

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** *(Laugh!)*

**FOSSMIRE.** I'm not here to discuss my love life—or my wardrobe. In fact, I came to inform you that you're my only suspects for the disappearance of nearly four thousand men.

**EMMALINE.** Alas, by the morrow, scores more will swoon to their doom.

**URSELINE.** And after the shiftless, we shall vanquish the rest, class by class, the nobs with the Bobs.

**FOSSMIRE.** But why?! And how?

**URSELINE.** Said the big brown cow.

**FOSSMIRE.** You're under surveillance as I'm sure you know, but I've been forbidden to arrest you outright. It seems the buttons aren't sufficient evidence.

*(The SISTERS dance around FOSSMIRE.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Buttons, buttons, a farthing a pair,  
Come, who will buy them of me?  
They're round and sound and pretty,  
And fit for the girls of the city!*

**FOSSMIRE.** *(Overlapping the SISTERS:)* Stop it! For chrissake, be serious! Don't you see the world's falling apart?! Men are dying and disappearing and leaving their families bereft. The whole of London's in a state of hysteria!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*London Bridge is falling down,  
Falling down, falling down;  
London Bridge is falling down,  
My fair lady!*

**FOSSMIRE.** *(Overlapping the SISTERS:)* Stop! Stop it this instant! Lord! How I wish you were a bad dream!

**URSELINE.** Wakefulness and dreams—'tis all the same for us.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, it isn't for me or anyone who claims to have a grasp on reality, and why in god's name did you accept Lady Augusta's invitation?!

**URSELINE.** 'Cause she hath meant to us what she means to thee.

**FOSSMIRE.** That's not very likely since she's my mother.

**URSELINE.** Troth, sir, some wenches give birth from their noggins as well as their boggins.

**VALENTINE.** They spawn souls to wander till wishful wombs beckon them hither.

**EMMALINE.** Shush, sisters, 'tis a mystery our Foss is not fit to fathom.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, please, please go on.

*(Pause as URSELINE and VALENTINE look to EMMALINE.)*

**EMMALINE.** Afore this life we were spectral companions to a tormented child. 'Twas the Lady Alice Augusta.

**URSELINE.** Our sisterhood hath lasted many years, but only a score in this mortal mold.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, very clever, ladies, very clever indeed. You're saying this because Lady Augusta told you that you're her imaginary little friends.

**EMMALINE.** Aye, her Alices, her soul's redeemers, spirits thrice-born to throttle her foes.

**URSELINE.** 'Twas men who wronged Milady so 'tis men we extract—like teeth from the gob of a goat.

**FOSSMIRE.** So you do it for vengeance?

**EMMALINE.** For Milady. 'Twas her bidding.

**FOSSMIRE.** That's ridiculous! Gussie's not like that! She's not vengeful; she doesn't hate men. She's my mother for godssake!

**VALENTINE.** And our mother too!

**URSELINE.** We are her bratlings...

**EMMALINE.** ...her saplings...

**URSELINE.** ...her chicks.

**EMMALINE.** Art thou too proud to claim us as sisters?

**FOSSMIRE.** Sisters...?

**VALENTINE.** Brother!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Brother!!

*(The SISTERS pounce on a horrified FOSSMIRE, hugging and kissing him.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Go away! Don't touch me! Ahhhhhhh!

*(FOSSMIRE breaks free and flees. The SISTERS chase him, laughing wildly! Blackout.)*

#### Scene 14

*(A mist rises on a foggy London street where DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER is speaking into his cell phone.)*

**DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER.** Hello? Chief Inspector? Detective Sergeant Slater here. I've been trying to track you down, sir. There's a bit of a panic at the Yard. There's so many new cases, the lads are afraid to go to the loo never mind cross the street. Nobody's safe 'cept the women. There's even chaps taken to dressing in skirts. Most everyone's staying home and the city's like a morgue. I'm in Regents Park having a smoke, and there's no one about 'cept some ladies.

*(The SISTERS approach, singing.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Oh, dear, what can the matter be?*

*Oh, dear, what can the matter be?*

*Oh, dear, what can the matter be?*

*Johnny's so long at the fair?*

**DETECTIVE SGT. SLATER.**

I'll report again in an hour.

*(As DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER pockets his phone, the SISTERS surround him.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

**DETECTIVE SGT. SLATER.**

*Ring around the rosie,  
A pocket full of posies...*

What the bloody...?

*(DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER freezes as the SISTERS snip off his buttons.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Ashes, ashes,  
We all fall down!*

*(Hissing sounds are heard as DETECTIVE SERGEANT SLATER falls to the ground in a heap. A blue vapor rises and he vanishes. Blackout.)*

### Scene 15

*(DOCTOR WHETSTONE is seated in her office. A frantic FOSSMIRE enters.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** Forgive my barging in, but I've just come from seeing the pox sisters. It's not possible, is it? Nobody can will another human soul into being—I mean, create the essence of a person from the sheer force and agony of their will.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Let me take your coat.

**FOSSMIRE.** Not the person, not the body, but their soul, a kind of spiritual incarnation of their...their rage, their despair, and then a woman, a real live woman, is chosen to give that rage a body, a healthy human baby who contains the rage and allows it to live and grow and wreak unholy havoc!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No, I don't think it's possible for people to create souls, but they can create something tangible like a poem or a song that reflects their soul.

**FOSSMIRE.** Listen, Flora, they said Gussie was their birth mother and Madeline their earth mother, and the worst of it is they accused Gussie of being the real instigator, Gussie and her hatred of men.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I didn't know she hated men.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, of course she doesn't.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** She certainly doesn't hate you.

**FOSSMIRE.** But she hated the twins, so you can't blame her for conjuring a trio of devils—wouldn't you? If you could, I mean. Madeline says witches can control the material world, so can the world be destroyed by someone's vengeance, by someone's wrath?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, if you mean the wrath of rogue dictators with bombs, yes, I suppose, but if you mean can someone just will the world away, no, I think not.

**FOSSMIRE.** But why do I feel it's not...impossible?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Because you're tired and susceptible to thinking beyond...well, beyond your usual laws of logic.

**FOSSMIRE.** Logic! Ha! I don't even know what it means anymore, but you're right. I'm indulging in exactly the sort of shabby thinking I'm always accusing my sergeants of, but what choice do I have? I've even persuaded Madeline to gather her witches, bring them all together.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You what?

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, yes, the good witches are going to banish the bad with a spell or a curse or whatever it is they do. Oh, don't gawk at me like that. The best minds at the Yard have exhausted the possible, so now it's time to try the daft and deranged.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** The reason I'm "gawking" is that I'm a doctor and you look on the verge of collapse.

**FOSSMIRE.** One of my sergeants just rang and said there's hundreds more disappearing, just passing out of the picture—poof! After they finish off the English, will they move on to the Irish? The French? The Chinese? Will no one be spared?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You will.

**FOSSMIRE.** What?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, if the sisters are right and your mother's responsible then surely she'd spare her own son. Imagine: you'd be the only man left in the world, the only man and millions—billions—of women!

*(Pause as FOSSMIRE ponders this.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** So you see, Foss, maybe *you're* the one responsible.

**FOSSMIRE.** My god...

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** For heaven's sake, I'm only joking.

**FOSSMIRE.** Well, it's not funny, not in the least!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You're trembling. You need to rest.

**FOSSMIRE.** What I need is a drink.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Go home, Foss. Take a nice hot bath and get some sleep.

**FOSSMIRE.** Sleep?! Who can sleep while my fellow males are facing oblivion? What day is it?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Wednesday.

**FOSSMIRE.** Tomorrow's the tea party. By tomorrow thousands more will go down.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I want you to take a nap. I insist.

**FOSSMIRE.** Will you take one with me? Sorry, I... I've never met a psychiatrist like you. The chaps at the Yard are supercilious and predictable, but you... *(Pause.)* Do you suppose when this nightmare is over we could do something very ordinary like go out to dinner?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I'd like that very much.

**FOSSMIRE.** Whatever happens I'm grateful to them for one thing: They led me to you, and you really are so...so lovely. You're sure you're not a witch yourself?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** As a matter of fact, I... I am.

*(Pause as a stunned FOSSMIRE retreats.)*

Several of my patients are witches and I've seen how it's affected them. Really, Foss, it's amazing what happens when a woman believes she's the incarnation of Isis or Athena. It makes her feel

empowered, enchanted, so you see, I... I wanted to experience it for myself.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why haven't you told me this before?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I was waiting for the appropriate time. I'm afraid this isn't it. Let's talk later.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, no, let's talk now, right now. Are you still...?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Once a month I attend meetings at a Gardnarian Coven in Kilburn. I'm only a novice, but I have my own ritual chamber. In fact, I've only used witchcraft once—to cure my husband. One of the coven members made a doll-sized model of Donald, and I had a photograph and some of his clothes, and we placed them on the altar, at the feet of a Minoan goddess. Then we all held hands and ran about in circles and chanted prayers for Donald's body to be healed.

**FOSSMIRE.** You perform these rituals naked, don't you?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** We call it sky clad.

**FOSSMIRE.** Your spell didn't cure him, yet you still attend the meetings?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You don't approve, do you?

**FOSSMIRE.** *(Pause.)* Who am I to judge? Look at me. Any detective can tell you that men living with their mothers at my age are complete misfits, a pathetic lot of layabouts who don't have the gump-tion to make lives of their own.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You can always move out.

**FOSSMIRE.** I tried once but I... I missed her, and then she tumbled down the stairs and fractured her femur—which was just the excuse I needed to come back.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You're not unlike her, you know. You have courage and vitality, and you've both found causes to feel passionate about.

**FOSSMIRE.** Oh, she's passionate all right. If she spots a pregnant woman with three toddlers in tow, she'll march right up and tell

her she's irresponsible. She's always seen the world in extremis, and her response is to keep it from growing.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** So long as she doesn't keep you from growing.

**FOSSMIRE.** No, that's my own fault. Ha! I used to think human experience could be mapped and quantified—even predicted. Lately, I'm doubtful about everything, about the fundamental reality of my whole wretched life. So tell me, Flora, what's real? Are men really vanishing? Can something so terrible really and truly be happening?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I'm afraid so. It's all everyone's talking about.

**FOSSMIRE.** And what about you, Flora? Are you really happening or am I under some sort of spell?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I'm really happening.

**FOSSMIRE.** Can you prove it? Will you...will you hold my hand?

*(They clasp hands, then embrace as the VOICES OF THE SISTERS are heard.)*

**VOICES OF EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly,*

*Lavender's green;*

*When I am king, dilly, dilly,*

*You shall be queen.*

*Come to make hay, dilly, dilly,*

*Come to cut corn;*

*While you and I, dilly, dilly,*

*Keep ourselves warm.*

*(Fade out.)*

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**Scene 16**

*(Pitch blackness as the song becomes an eerie drone. Candles are lit, illuminating a circle of WITCHES beneath cowled cloaks. The HIGH PRIESTESS is heard, chanting over the drones.)*

**HIGH PRIESTESS.** *(Chanting:)* I am She that is Mother, Mistress, Empress of the Elements, Priestess of the Powers Divine. I am Artemis, Aphrodite, Eris, Iris, Calypso, Dido and Demeter. At my will, the winds of the seas and the fires of Hades are disposed to banish the foul forces of the Gorgon Furies who have unleashed their dark magic. Let us imagine them as cats! Let all hatred, hindrance, and fatal fluxings be cast forth from their feline hearts!

*(The WITCHES join the chant while menacing hisses and growls are heard in the background.)*

**HIGH PRIESTESS / WITCHES.**

*There once were three cats of Kilkenny,  
Each thought there were two cats too many,  
So they fought and they fit,  
And they scratched and they bit,  
Till, excepting their nails  
And the tips of their tails,  
Instead of three cats, there weren't any!*

*(The candles are snuffed to the howling of cats. Blackout.)*

**Scene 17**

*(Lady Augusta's parlor where an opulent tea table is set with trays heaped with cakes and sandwiches. FOSSMIRE, DOCTOR WHETSTONE, and LADY AUGUSTA are seated, all dressed in black.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I distinctly said four o'clock and it's nearly half past. Do you think I should ring them up—in case they've forgotten. Or maybe they've had an accident.

**FOSSMIRE.** Or maybe they fell down the rabbit hole.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** That's not possible.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why? Why isn't it possible?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** It just isn't, that's why.

**FOSSMIRE.** You're never going to tell me, are you?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** No.

**FOSSMIRE.** Then Mother, I think there's something I should tell you: your "guests" may not be arriving at all, and if they do, I intend to arrest them.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** What do you mean "not arriving"?

**FOSSMIRE.** You see, Gussie, all the good witches of England have been assembled to perform a banishing ritual, and with any luck they've already succeeded in making the Rime Sisters a very bad memory.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Foss! You can't be serious?

**FOSSMIRE.** Why not? They're witches, aren't they? So I'm playing on their own heath.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But surely you realize that you might be banishing me as well.

**FOSSMIRE.** Rubbish! The white witches are cursing the black and you're neither.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Don't be so sure.

**FOSSMIRE.** *(Pause.)* No...

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Cousin Gertrude was the Green Hestia and I was the Red. Now there's witches everywhere, but in our day there were only two respectable groups, and we called ourselves magicians.

**FOSSMIRE.** You told me you're an atheist!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But a pagan at heart, and I occasionally attend a woman's mystery group, on Tuesdays.

**FOSSMIRE.** But that's your book club! You said so!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Nonsense! You just assumed it.

**FOSSMIRE.** Did I? Am I so blind and obtuse? A detective duped by his own mother!

*(To Flora:)* Did you know?!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** No, I never even suspected.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** We're all entitled to our secrets, Foss, but this banishing business is very dangerous. In the event of my death, you'll inherit the house and half my fortune, but the other half goes to the ZPP. That's my legacy, my gift to the future.

**FOSSMIRE.** You're not going to die!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Flora, would you like some tea?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Yes, thank you.

**FOSSMIRE.** Just tell me this: is there a woman left in England who isn't a witch?!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Milk or lemon?

*(The doorbell rings.)*

Please, Foss, answer the door.

*(FOSSMIRE opens the door, and the RIME SISTERS, dressed extravagantly, scurry to Lady Augusta and curtsy.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Greetings, Lady Augusta.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, my goodness, I... I'd never have recognized you.

*(There is an awkward pause as LADY AUGUSTA studies them.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Why don't you tell Lady Augusta your names.

**EMMALINE.** Emmaline...

**URSELINE.** ...Urseline...

**VALENTINE.** ...and Valentine...

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** ...Rime!

**EMMALINE.** *Merry have we met, and merry have we been...*

**VALENTINE / URSELINE / EMMALINE.**

*Merry let us dance, and merry let us sing.*

*Waddle goes your gait, and hollow are your hose;*

*Noodle goes your pate, and purple is your nose.*

*(LADY AUGUSTA joins their song.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE / LADY AUGUSTA.**

*With our merry sing-song, happy, gay and free,*

*And a merry ding-dong, happy let us be!*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Yes, yes, it is you! My Alices! My girls!

**EMMALINE.** Mother!

**VALENTINE and URSELINE.** Mother!!

*(They embrace.)*

**URSELINE.** How you've changed, Milady.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, too many years, too many pastries, and it seems I'm always peckish.

**EMMALINE.** We oft behold thy visage and ponder thy orations,...

**URSELINE.** ...and daily strive to serve thy grand crusade.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Yes, well, we really must discuss that.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, we must.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But first, do sit down. Of course, you know Doctor Whetstone, and my son, Foss.

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Our brother!

*(FOSSMIRE cringes.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** May I offer you some tea? I also have a very special sherry.

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Sherry, please, Milady.

*(LADY AUGUSTA pours the sherry.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Well, I must say, this is quite a unique...reunion.

**VALENTINE.** (*Munching a cake:*) Yum! Such sweetmeats and tarts!

**EMMALINE.** From the Queen of Hearts!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*The Queen of Hearts,  
She made some tarts  
All on a summer's day;  
The Knave of Hearts,  
He stole those tarts,  
And took them clean away!*

**FOSSMIRE.** Tell me, ladies, are all these nursery songs meant to keep us from any meaningful discourse?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Foss, please...

**FOSSMIRE.** Of course, if you're put in a cage, you'll have plenty of time to sing.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Don't mind Foss, girls. He can be quite tedious. I'm curious though—you just mentioned that you strive to serve my crusade.

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Aye!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, since my crusade is controlling the world's population, what exactly did you mean?

**VALENTINE.** We dance the dwindles.

**FOSSMIRE.** You what...?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Foss thinks you're responsible for all these...disappearances. Frankly, I find it difficult to believe, but if you are—well, it's wrong. Most people believe that everyone living has a right to their lives.

**EMMALINE.** Aye, but not everyone living's alive.

**URSELINE.** We nip the dead heads or them that's waning.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** But girls, that's very wicked and...cruel, and now all of England's in mourning, all of us wearing black.

**VALENTINE.** It suits you fine, Milady.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Tell me, how do you decide who's dead or alive?

**URSELINE.** Emanations neath the Ethers o' The Erinyes.

**VALENTINE.** Whither we spy a black hole, there's sure to be a gray soul.

**FOSSMIRE.** But how?! How do you actually make them vanish?

**VALENTINE.** 'Tis the power of the dwindles, the curse o' the Dirae.

**EMMALINE.** The goddesses are vexed from being slighted these many moons. 'Tis a simple twist o' the wrist to harness their power.

**URSELINE.** Aye, and a pinch o' fungus, codswallop, chalk, cheese, chicory, and flux o' the Furies.

**EMMALINE.** 'Twas child's play with most, a release for them that's plagued with piles, stones, and scabbies.

**URSELINE.** Some's got their hearts racing, heads pounding, joints full o' the gout.

**VALENTINE.** 'Tis great sport to glimpse 'em fizzle and fade.

**FOSSMIRE.** But why? Why do this at all?

**URSELINE.** 'Tis for thee, Milady.

**VALENTINE.** For thy loss.

**EMMALINE.** The loss o' thy innocence. Ere we parted, you bade us to ne'er trust any man, to hunt and slay the devils afore they snatch our hymens and our hearts.

**URSELINE.** You said, "The world ain't safe till the last one's dead as mutton!"

**VALENTINE.** "And afore they pass, be sure to pluck a button!"

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Did I...did I really say that?

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Aye.

**EMMALINE.** Come, sisters, lets summon from the vasty deep, our bounty for Milady!

**VALENTINE.** 'Twill make thee weep!

*(The SISTERS clasp hands and sing.)*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.**

*Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum,*

*I smell the blood of an Englishman!*

*Be he alive or be he dead,*

*I'll grind his bones to make my...*

*(Lightning flashes thunder claps, and thousands of buttons descend from the ceiling, crashing to the floor!)*

**FOSSMIRE.**

Good lord!

**LADY AUGUSTA.**

Ohhhhhhhh!

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.**

Good god...

**VALENTINE.** 'Tis our buttons, heaps and hoards o' buttons!

*(Pause; LADY AUGUSTA trembles, trying to contain her emotions.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I used to bite them off their shirts—when the twins were on top of me. I'd bite through the threads and swallow them, and mother would scold the boys for losing so many. That was my child's revenge. In fact, buttons became a kind of fetish, and when you first mentioned them—well, that's when I suspected the girls were mine.

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** Mother...

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I suppose I said all those horrid things, and I might have meant it then but I don't now. I'm perfectly fine, you see. I've recovered, and don't need or even want my innocence, and I certainly don't hate enough to...to hurt anyone. Oh, girls, my dear girls, this really must stop, it must! We don't want any more men disappearing. It's not the right solution. Remember our little song:

*For every evil under the sun...*

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE / LADY AUGUSTA.**

*There is a remedy or there is none.*

*If there be one, seek till you find it,*

*If there be none, never mind it.*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, this is not the remedy. In fact, if you don't cease this instant my son and the Metropolitan Police will do everything in their power to stop you. They'll even fight your magic with their magic.

**FOSSMIRE.** That's right ladies! Even as we speak, the good witches of England are banishing you. At any given moment you could all drop dead.

**URSELINE.** Hah! They couldn't conjure a boil on me bum!

**VALENTINE.** Or a wart on your wanker!

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** *(Laugh!)*

**FOSSMIRE.** But what if they're chanting from your very own chambers? Using your very own goddesses against you!

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE.**  
Zounds!

**URSELINE.**  
The gall o' it all!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Stop them, Foss! This very instant! Ring them up or drive to Belgravia or whatever you have to do, but stop them!

**FOSSMIRE.** I'll stop my witches if you'll stop yours—stop the vanishings!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** He's right, girls. You must promise to leave our men in peace!

**EMMALINE.** 'Taint in our nature, Milady.

**URSELINE.** We're made for mischief.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, there must be something else you can do, something less dangerous.

**FOSSMIRE.** Why don't you start by returning the men who've already gone. My sergeant, for instance—where is he?

**URSELINE.** Somewhere dark and damp and down,...

**VALENTINE and URSELINE.** ...down...

**EMMALINE / VALENTINE / URSELINE.** ...down the rabbit hole!

**FOSSMIRE.** But *where* is it?!

**VALENTINE.** At a tea party!

**FOSSMIRE.** So there's a tea party at the bottom of the hole?

**VALENTINE.** Nay, but near.

**URSELINE.** Ask Milady.

**FOSSMIRE.** I have but she won't answer.

**EMMALINE.** 'Tis unseemly for a mum to tell a son.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Yes, dear, it's so...so...

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** You have nothing to fear, Lady Augusta. Please, tell us.

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes, Gussie, for godssake!

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Well, the twins, you see...

**FOSSMIRE.** Yes...? What about the twins?

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Whenever they...well, whenever they wanted to...to hurt me, they said they were going down Alice's rabbit hole. So you see, the rabbit hole is my...my...

**URSELINE.** 'Tis the tunnel to Milady's womb!

**EMMALINE.** Her womb's a tomb.

**VALENTINE.** Must be cumbersome, holding them souls inside.

**URSELINE.** Tain't comfortable for them neither.

**EMMALINE / URSELINE / VALENTINE.** (*Laugh!*)

**URSELINE.** 'Tis why Milady's bloated and paunched as a pot.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** I... I don't understand. Are you saying...?

**EMMALINE.** Aye, Milady, 'tis where we stash the vanished!

**URSELINE.** The banished!

**VALENTINE.** The lost!

**URSELINE.** The twin's oft said, "Drink me," afore their descent.

**VALENTINE.** “Drink me, eat me,” then down, down, down they went!

*(LADY AUGUSTA sits, shaken. In the background, the VOICES OF THE GOOD WITCHES are heard droning softly.)*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Lady Augusta, are you alright?

**URSELINE.** Milady’s looking fevered and a-flush.

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** I’m afraid you’ve upset her.

**FOSSMIRE.** *(To Urseline:)* Tell me, if...if they go down the rabbit hole, can they ever come back up?

*(The droning sounds grow louder as the SISTERS gaze upward, entranced, slowly walking in circles, then swooning, collapsing simultaneously.)*

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Oh, nooooooooo...

*(DOCTOR WHETSTONE rushes to EMMALINE, taking her pulse as the GOOD WITCHES’ VOICES are heard.)*

**VOICES OF THE GOOD WITCHES.**

*They fought and they fit,  
And they scratched and they bit,  
Till excepting their nails  
And the tips of their tails,  
Instead of three cats there weren’t any!*

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** What’s happening?

**FOSSMIRE.** The banishings! By god, it worked!

*(Blackout to the sound of a timorous mew.)*

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**Scene 18**

*(The mew becomes the BBC broadcasting tones as dim lights reveal a radio.)*

**MALE VOICE ON THE RADIO.** From the BBC Radio Three in London: an update on the plague of vanishing men. According to Police Commissioner Reginald Boulder, there have been no reported disappearances since last Thursday. That's five full days of relief from the terror that has led to mass hysteria and a frantic nation-wide search for the bodies of nearly twenty thousand missing males. The men of England are free to walk the streets once again; however, the police strongly advise that they proceed with utmost caution.

*(Blackout.)*

**Scene 19**

*(Fossmire's bedroom where lights reveal the SISTERS asleep in his bed. Standing to the side are LADY AUGUSTA, MADELINE RIME, and DOCTOR WHETSTONE singing.)*

**MADELINE / LADY AUGUSTA / DR. WHETSTONE.**

*Sleep, baby, sleep,  
Down where the woodbines creep;  
Be always like the lamb so mild,  
A kind and sweet and gentle child.  
Sleep, baby, sleep.*

*(FOSSMIRE enters.)*

**FOSSMIRE.** How are they?

**DOCTOR WHETSTONE.** Their fever's down but their blood pressure's low.

**LADY AUGUSTA.** Foss wants them dead.

**FOSSMIRE.** I'd be satisfied if they each shrank to the size of a wood tick. Can you do that?

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