

# SALT WATER WOMEN

by  
Emma Kershaw

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## **CHARACTERS:**

ALYCE HAMLE: A modern businesswoman in her thirties

SHIRLEY JEAN HEWES: An acquiescent teacher in her mid fifties.

ARVILLA SCOTT: An independent traveler nearing eighty

## **SETTING:**

A beach with a cliff behind and sky above. A sloped pathway leads up from the beach to a draped cave opening and continues up to a cliff and promontory. These may be played as simple lower and upper areas connected by a ramp. The relative height of the promontory need only be suggested. The attic may be a downstage area dressed with a few essential props.

## **ACTS AND SCENES:**

### ACT ONE

Scene One	The beach	Summer
Scene Two	The beach	The next morning
Scene Three	The beach	Autumn
Scene Four	Across the river from town	Moments later
Scene Five	Shirley's attic	That evening

INTERMISSION Winter

### ACT TWO

Scene One	The beach	Spring
Scene Two	Shirley's attic	That evening

INTERMISSION Solstice

### ACT THREE

Scene One	The beach	Summer
Scene Two	Hospital garden	An hour later
Scene Three	The beach	Sunset
Scene Four	The beach	A few days later

"SALT WATER WOMEN" is an original play for the theatre and is the property of its author Emma Kershaw. It has not been previously performed or produced and is not under obligation to any producing entity.

"There Is A Tavern In The Town" is a 19th century song and is in the public domain.

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## ACT ONE

### SCENE ONE      THE BEACH      SUMMER

Surf surges through tide pools. Wind howls. A storm streaks moving bands of light across a promontory behind the beach and the sky above.

Shirley stands on the promontory staring out to sea. She is in her fifties and is heavily shrouded in a hooded yellow rain slicker.

Alyce, in a light cloth coat, drenched and bent into the wind, enters on the beach below. She is in her thirties and clutches a small suitcase.

Lightening flashes. Shirley does not flinch. Alyce's suitcase springs open and spills her clothes. She screams and hurls the empty suitcase.

#### ALYCE

Ahhh! Mugged by gravity. (throws her coat) Go ahead. Take it all. I'll travel light. (kicks scattered clothing) Take everything! Leave me nothing, but I will find him! And when I find him I will... I will... god damn I will something.

(Shirley removes the slicker and throws it over the cliff narrowly missing Alyce.)

My good luck continues. It's raining raincoats.

(Shirley removes a shoe and throws it.)

And sensible shoes?

(Alyce sees Shirley and dodges the other shoe.)

Hey, lady, I get to choose who dumps on me!

(Shirley removes her blouse and throws it.)

Keep your clothes on, lady. You'll catch your death.

(Shirley throws her skirt. She teeters on the cliff edge.)

Oh my god. I'm going to catch your death.

(Alyce picks up the raincoat and rushes up toward Shirley.)

Lady, please.

Shirley drops her slip, revealing a full torso corset-bra, trussed and gartered in every possible manner. She is protected. Shirley raises her arms, preparing to jump.

ARVILLA (O.S.)  
 (offstage) God! What ugly underwear.

Shirley freezes. Arvilla enters at the top of the cliff. She is saddle tanned and nearing eighty. She pushes a bicycle loaded with old camping gear.

ARVILLA  
 You'll make one hell of an impression going to eternity tied up like a busted suitcase. Better to go naked.

Arvilla unhooks Shirley's corset. As the corset drops away, Shirley clutches her modesty then drops to her knees and sobs softly. Alyce wraps the raincoat around Shirley.

ARVILLA  
 You need to keep a tighter leash on your mother.

ALYCE  
 (fastening rain coat)  
 She's not my mother.

ARVILLA  
 Possession is nine tenths of the law.

ALYCE  
 I don't possess her.

ARVILLA  
 Something does. Satisfied women don't stand on cliffs in ugly underwear unless something has a vise grip on their vanity. Usually it's men... or their daughters.

ALYCE  
 I'm not her daughter. She's nobody to me.

ARVILLA  
 Nobody's daughter with nobody's mother.

ALYCE  
 I don't even know her name.

Arvilla kneels on the opposite side of Shirley.

ARVILLA  
 What's your name? Your name.  
 (taking Shirley's hand)  
 This person. This face. These hands. The woman that locks herself in a rubber coffin. You! (tries a new tack) Me Tarzan. You...? (places Shirley's hand on Alyce) She is...

ALYCE  
 Alyce Hamle.

ARVILLA

She's Alyce. I'm Arvilla. You are...?

SHIRLEY

Shirley.

ARVILLA

Shirley, what makes you want to tear down your temple? Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without. That's how I was raised. You were too, weren't you.

ALYCE

She feels cold.

ARVILLA

Is there someplace Shirley lives?

SHIRLEY

The blue house.

ALYCE

(looks offstage) The two story house with the green shutters?

SHIRLEY

It's where I was born.

ALYCE

Full ocean view property. Good location.

SHIRLEY

My father liked it.

ARVILLA

She'll help you home.

SHIRLEY

Can't you help her?

ARVILLA

You're here, alone, on the beach, soaking. What do you have that keeps you from showing her a little kindness?

ALYCE

I've got to pick up my clothes.

Alyce pulls away and takes a step toward the beach. Arvilla looks down on Alyce's clothes.

ARVILLA

Hmmm. They're not worth much. Not any more. What happened?

ALYCE

I... I was mugged.

ARVILLA

Strangers can be so bold.

SHIRLEY

A man attacked you? Was he tall? Green eyes?

ALYCE

He was... short. Very short.

SHIRLEY

Oh, that's a relief.

ARVILLA

It's always better to be attacked by short men.

SHIRLEY

You should go to my house and put on something dry. I'll loan you something if you need it.

ALYCE

I couldn't take your clothes.

ARVILLA

Go ahead, my dear. I'm sure she owns something that isn't reinforced with rubber.

SHIRLEY

The door's not locked.

ARVILLA

There, she was expecting you.

SHIRLEY

Please. Help yourself. Take whatever you need.

ALYCE

You'll come with me, won't you.

SHIRLEY

Go back there? I hadn't really...

ALYCE

I wouldn't feel right, not without you.

SHIRLEY

Well, I hadn't expected to... But I supposed I should. There's still Lillie to think about.

ALYCE

Lillie? I don't want to intrude on you and... Lillie?

ARVILLA

A word to a fellow traveler, never turn down an invitation to be warm and dry... or good whiskey.

SHIRLEY

I have brandy in my cupboard. But I'm afraid it's very old.

ARVILLA

Old brandy. Tsk, tsk, a shame.

SHIRLEY

I have ice.

ALYCE

I could use a brandy. Maybe a place to lie down a bit?

SHIRLEY

You're welcome to come to my house.

ALYCE

I'll just pick up my scattered clothes before they get even more soaked. (goes to beach)

SHIRLEY

I have a clothes line upstairs. I'm sure they'll be dry by the morning. (to Arvilla) You're invited too, unless...

ARVILLA

Unless my bicycle is really a shopping cart in disguise?

SHIRLEY

It's just that we've never been introduced.

ARVILLA

I have Diner's Club, American Express and ten thousand shares of blue chip stocks. Is that enough introduction or did I put my teeth in upside down again?

SHIRLEY

I have denture cream in the bathroom. It's fresh mint.

ARVILLA

I need to pitch a camp.

Arvilla hands Shirley her corset and takes things from her bicycle before walking down to the beach.

SHIRLEY

It's my best girdle. I was saving it for good.

ARVILLA

Being alive is good.

SHIRLEY

I meant for really good.

Arvilla looks for a camping place on the beach.

SHIRLEY

(to Alyce) Those look like nice clothes. Are you someone?

ALYCE

No, I came here to find someone.

SHIRLEY

Who do you want to find?

ALYCE

Ah... my fiancé.

SHIRLEY

Your fiancé? Are his people from Coos Bay?

ALYCE

Not sure.

SHIRLEY

Maybe I know his mother. What's her name?

ALYCE

He never told me.

SHIRLEY

Are you staying at a B&B?

ALYCE

I was going to stay with... I just got off the bus from Los Angeles and don't know this area and... the mugger took...

ARVILLA

All her money.

ALYCE

How did you know that?

ARVILLA

It's a familiar story.

Arvilla discovers the cave and goes inside.

SHIRLEY

You could have Lillie's room.

ALYCE

Lillie?

SHIRLEY

She passed away last night.

ALYCE

Last night? I'm so sorry.



SHIRLEY

Died in her bed.

ALYCE

In bed?

SHIRLEY

They're not taking her away until tomorrow, but you're still welcome to sleep in her room.

ALYCE

I'll find a motel.

(Suitcase filled, she heads back up the path.)

Unless maybe... I could sleep somewhere else. Your couch?

SHIRLEY

Lillie liked sleeping on the couch. At least I think she did. She always purred when she was on it.

ALYCE

Purred? Lillie was your cat?

SHIRLEY

If you're allergic, maybe you could sleep in Vinnie's room.

ALYCE

Vinnie is your husband?

SHIRLEY

I'm a widow. Vinnie is my baby. Thirty-four last September.

ALYCE

He's at your house now?

SHIRLEY

No, he... he travels a lot. He's an artist, you know (looks to the cave) You think she'd like coffee or and a home made dessert?

ALYCE

Who could say no to a mother's home made dessert.

SHIRLEY

Depends if her teeth are real.

ALYCE

If her teeth?

SHIRLEY

I'll serve wild blackberry pie, then we'll know.

ALYCE

I don't understand.

SHIRLEY

When I make blackberry pie, I leave the seeds in. The seeds are very tiny and they get under dentures something awful.

ALYCE

Isn't that a nasty trick to play on an old woman?

SHIRLEY

Not one who criticizes your underwear before she says hello.

Alyce and Shirley cross along the cliff.

ALYCE

It must be nice owning a house with an ocean view.

Arvilla exits the cave and Shirley calls to her.

SHIRLEY

You're invited too, Arvilla. I'm serving pie.

Arvilla nods as the women exit giggling. She returns to her bicycle to retrieve a paper and string wrapped package. She thoughtfully turns it over in her hands as she walks back to the cave where she dislodges a rock and hides the package. Arvilla discards her traveling duster and from the pocket of her simple white frock, extracts an often creased letter and unfolds it and reads.

ARVILLA

"Dear Arvilla. I have never written to a woman, except my mother who never wrote back. But one August night with you beside a high mountain campfire and I am someone else."

(Hanging the letter outside the cave, she backs slowly away until she is reciting from memory.)

"Far down the hill I saw your bicycle over my tire jack. I loosened the wheel nuts and I saw you were a woman."

(She discards her shoes and socks.)

"I thumped the shredded rubber to the pavement and listened to your steady, rhythmic breathing, pumping up the mountain."

(She goes to the edge of the water and shudders in exhilaration as her feet touch the sea.)

"I sensed your salt as you breathed by me. I parked that night near your tea fire, pushed back the briars to borrow an ember and stayed the night on your blanket."

(She steps into deeper water)

"What an epiphany you have been."

(Arvilla moves downstage into neck deep darkness. Rising on her toes, her arms appear to float on the surface. All except her head appears submerged as she moves in gentle liquid grace.)

"You are a murderess. You are Shiva, Krakatoa, a devastation that swept me away and I thank you. I adore you, I regret you. I love you."

A deep breath and she sinks into the sea.

BLACKOUT

SCENE TWO            THE BEACH            THE NEXT MORNING

Almost without pause, in the darkness Alyce continues reading the letter.

ALYCE:

"I love you from my toes to the last split end of my wavy infinity. Arvilla, you are a slippery stream, you are spawning salmon. You are sensuous, sensible, and.. silly."

(The morning light reveals Alyce at Arvilla's cave reading the letter aloud.)

"Arvilla, wait for me. Put aside your quest and wait for me in Caliban's cave by the sea. Swim cold. Stroke the surf and wait for me. As you have changed me. By the sea. I am for you, Victor." (retreats from the letter) "Pumping the mountain." "Spawning salmon." "Caliban's cave." Victor. Whoa, Victor, you are for me!

ARVILLA (O.S.)

Victor is not for you.

ALYCE

(looks for Arvilla) Sorry, I couldn't stop reading it.

ARVILLA (O.S.)

And I couldn't stop listening. Read it again.

ALYCE

It's too personal.

ARVILLA (O.S.)

It's too short. Add some words of your own. Shout it to the sea. I want to hear more.

ALYCE

What woman wouldn't?

Arvilla climbs out of the downstage darkness. A rope twists around her waist and legs shaping her loose skirt into wading pants. She carries a bucket filled with live crabs.

ARVILLA

He's spectacular!

ALYCE

Victor? Here?

ARVILLA

(points down the beach) He's in the deep tide pool romancing an orchid anemone with a spectacular appendage.

ALYCE

A spectacular... Victor?

ARVILLA

Victor's spectacular too, but this fellow is a twenty legged starfish.

ALYCE

Oh.

ARVILLA

Since your panties are already damp, wade in.

ALYCE

I'm not damp and I don't wade with fish.

ARVILLA

Modern women are so repressed.

ALYCE

I'm not repressed. Show me Victor and I may never let him crowd your blanket again. Unless he's a hundred.

ARVILLA

He's a hundred and ninety pounds, six foot one, thirty-four years old.

ALYCE

He'll do.

ARVILLA

And he does. Except he stutters.

ALYCE

My fiancé stutters, but all he can write are foreclosure notices. Is there room in your cave for another blanket?

ARVILLA

You're missing a saltwater romance.

ALYCE

I'll pass. My eye to stomach connection is a little queasy.

ARVILLA

How long have you been pregnant?

ALYCE

Pregnant?

ARVILLA

Morning sickness?

ALYCE

I have to make a phone call.

ARVILLA

Ring up your uterus to see if anyone answers?

ALYCE

I'm unnerved. I'm five weeks late. And I...

ARVILLA

Want to find the father before your water breaks?

ALYCE

What makes you think I want to find him?

ARVILLA

Modern women always find someone to sue.

ALYCE

You can believe I'd sue the snot out of him, but I don't know where to look for him.

ARVILLA

Maybe this letter could help. (takes a letter from her blouse pocket and reads) "I know it's a shock to receive a letter from me after so long. But I didn't know you existed.

ALYCE

Vance's letter? I thought I'd lost it. How'd you get it?

ARVILLA

Found it on the beach. (examines it) No name, just the town.

ALYCE

Its an unfinished letter to his mother.

(She takes the letter from Arvilla.)

I found it in our trash.

ARVILLA

Our trash?

ALYCE

We lived together. He did the laundry.

ARVILLA

Our trash. Our laundry. Your pregnancy. But you don't know his mother's name?

ALYCE

I didn't ask for references.

ARVILLA

When you shack up with a man you don't know well enough to fix the plumbing under your sink, don't cry when he clogs the pipes under your skirt.

Arvilla picks a crab out of her bucket.

ALYCE

You're going to boil him now?

ARVILLA

Tonight. How's Shirley?

ALYCE

Embarrassed.

ARVILLA

A woman strangles herself in ugly underwear and tries to throw herself off a cliff and all you can say is that she feels embarrassed? Pig spittle.

ALYCE

How'd you feel if strangers watched you have a nervous breakdown?

ARVILLA

I'd hire a hall and perform three shows a day.

ALYCE

You'd flaunt your misery?

ARVILLA

Flaunt it? I'd scream it to the heavens until someone opened the golden doors and invited me in just so I'd be quiet.

ALYCE

I doubt heaven admits people who scream and make horrid noises.

ARVILLA

Then someone should tell all those church choir folks they're wasting their breaths. (She examines another crab.) So how is the woman who is not your mother?

ALYCE

Shirley is fine.

ARVILLA

And her house with the grand ocean view, is it warm and dry?

ALYCE

Probably warmer and dryer than that cave.

ARVILLA

Probably. But I never have to say, please, thank you, or lie about adoring someone's collection of porcelain figurines.

ALYCE

It's needlepoint cats. Shirley needle points pictures of cats. She's quite good. But you can judge them yourself.

Last night's invitation for dessert and brandy is still open. She even saved you a slice of her homemade blackberry pie.

ARVILLA

My dance card is filled. (carries crab bucket to cave) A dinner of seasoned crab, a full moon slanting into Caliban's cave, and a satisfying rest while the sound of the surf lulls me to dreams of my youth.

ALYCE

Her invitation includes dinner and a warm bubble bath.

ARVILLA

A bath? Steam in my tub while the crabs boil in theirs?

ALYCE

She warms the towels for her guests.

ARVILLA

Warm towels sooth me while the crabs chill on cracked ice?

ALYCE

It's your choice.

ARVILLA

A disagreeable choice, I accept. But only if you also invite my crabs and supply the ice.

Shirley enters on the cliff. She takes off her sweater.

ALYCE

Chilled crabs at our place? We accept. I'll buy chardonnay and we'll have a seafood girl-fest till sunrise.

ARVILLA

You called Shirley's house, "our place".

ALYCE

Ah, she's asked me to ah... she needs... some help... I'm going to run a few errands for her.

ARVILLA

Pick up her mail, buy her chardonnay, do her banking?

ALYCE

Her banking? I'm a life estate planner and yes, I'm giving her a little... advice, free of charge.

Shirley throws her sweater. It lands on Alyce.

ALYCE

What the? Shirley's sweater. Oh god!

Alyce sees Shirley teetering on the edge.

ALYCE

Shirley!

SHIRLEY

Will she come to dinner?

ALYCE

Yes. And don't scare me like that.

SHIRLEY

Will she... you know... Is she going to...?

ARVILLA

(shouting) Scrub the dirt and launder her hair?

ALYCE

She has crabs.

SHIRLEY

Should I call the pharmacy?

Arvilla lifts a crab and displays it for Shirley.

SHIRLEY

Oh. You had a phone call. It was 'something' Laboratories.

Arvilla picks up Shirley's clothing.

ALYCE

What did they say?

SHIRLEY

Maybe you should call.

ALYCE

Tell me.

SHIRLEY

They said your tests showed...

ALYCE

Yes. Showed what?

SHIRLEY

(struggling) They said, that...that... The tests... you're...

ALYCE

Shirley! What? Am I pregnant or not?

SHIRLEY

It's a baby. It's a baby. It's a baby. (Shirley teeters on the edge, falls to her knees and sobs.)

ALYCE

Damn him and his spontaneity! Now, I'm having his baby.



ARVILLA  
 (striding up the path) Are you?

                                  ALYCE  
 You heard her. I'm going to have a baby.

                                  ARVILLA  
 Are you?

                                  ALYCE  
 (catching on) Oh. I don't know.

                                  Arvilla reaches Shirley, puts the sweater over her  
 shoulders.

                                  ARVILLA  
 It's a baby, Shirley. They're good little things.

                                  SHIRLEY  
 (looks at Arvilla) I only held him for ten minutes. I never  
 even kissed him. Ten minutes. That's all.

                                  ALYCE  
 I don't know. I just found out!

                                  ARVILLA  
 What did you think your live-in plumber was installing down  
 there, a new water heater?

                                  ALYCE  
 I'm a woman, not a mother. They're not the same! (exits)

                                  ARVILLA  
 Come. I'll show you an anemone that sings of sensuality.

                                  Arvilla guides Shirley down the path to the beach.

                                  SHIRLEY  
 Is she in the secret pool below the high tide line?

                                  ARVILLA  
 It's low tide, a good time to wade in secrets.

                                  SHIRLEY  
 (sees Arvilla's bicycle) You came here on a bicycle?

                                  ARVILLA  
 From the Hudson Bay to Coos Bay.

                                  SHIRLEY  
 That's a long way to pedal.

                                  ARVILLA  
 Gershwin has tasted the salt water of two oceans.

SHIRLEY

You name your bicycles for composers?

ARVILLA

Not all composers. Before Gershwin there was Thoreau, Joe Lewis, Cary Grant and one name too personal to utter.

SHIRLEY

All men?

ARVILLA

A good ride, every one.

SHIRLEY

(looks to the cave) Did you sleep in there

ARVILLA

My lair du mer.

SHIRLEY

I've slept in there once, on a warm midsummer's night.

ARVILLA

Tonight is midsummer. You could join me. There's level sand in the back where you can lie down and sleep through the night like a hibernating bear.

SHIRLEY

A bear? There weren't any bears, just me... and Edward. Edward, Ed, I called him, was a nice boy. I thought he was so considerate when he showed me the blanket he'd hidden for us in the back of the cave. He even folded one corner over to make me a pillow. We laid there, together, at the back, where we wouldn't be seen. I was only fifteen. Ed liked me and I liked him, I really did. In the morning I woke up cold and Ed wasn't there. He'd left the blanket. Ed was thoughtful that way. But I had stayed out all night and I was terrified that father would be in one of his ruddy cheeked moods when he saw me come home, terrified that he'd see the blood stain on the blanket. The morning fog hid me as I crept behind the house while father was cutting firewood. Later, when father had gone to dig clams, I found some kerosene in the tool shed, soaked the blanket and burned it. I was so afraid that father would find the ashes from Ed's blanket that I raked them into the dirt under the pumpkins. I think the ashes must have helped the pumpkins grow extra big that year. (touches her stomach) Big and round. That was the year I was too old for Halloween, too big to carve pumpkins. Never did carve another pumpkin. Couldn't push the knife in.

ARVILLA

No one likes to kill an unborn jack-o'-lantern.

SHIRLEY

Ed said the baby was my fault but his father made him join the army anyway. Three months later Ed's drill Sergeant shot him in the head. Said it was an accident. Said it was Ed's fault. Then the Sergeant deserted. He just ran away.

ARVILLA

Death and babies have that affect on men.

SHIRLEY

(looks at the ocean.) You like fresh crab?

ARVILLA

Fresh crab and fresh men, except when they pinch.

SHIRLEY

I know a hidden cove where there's so many crabs clattering across the rocks it sounds like they're tap dancing.

ARVILLA

Do they buck and wing and shuffle off to Buffalo?

SHIRLEY

But you have to wade through deep water and our dresses will get soaked to our necks.

ARVILLA

Saltwater is my favorite skin lotion. (unbuttoning blouse)

SHIRLEY

What are you doing?

ARVILLA

This is my only dry blouse.

SHIRLEY

This is a public beach.

ARVILLA

And this is a public act.

SHIRLEY

What would someone say if they saw us?

ARVILLA

What would someone say if they'd found you dead in ugly underwear?

SHIRLEY

I'd have been dead and blessed with not hearing them.

ARVILLA

If the high tide catches us, we might both be blessed.

Arvilla continues to undress. Shirley looks up and down the beach, giggles and removes her blouse.

SHIRLEY

You know the ocean is cold?

Arvilla casually covers her breasts with cradled arms as her blouse falls away.

ARVILLA

Cold salt water makes my body feel young and firm.

Shirley removes her bra, self-consciously cupping her hands over her breasts. They disappear into the deep waters.

SHIRLEY

It just makes my nipples pucker.

BLACKOUT

SCENE THREE      THE BEACH      AN AUTUMN      AFTERNOON

Arvilla's bike is now on the beach, a little older and rustier. An Indian blanket covers the cave opening. Victor's ragged letter hangs nearby.

ALYCE (O.S.)

(calls) Arvilla. Arvilla?

(Alyce drags a barnacle encrusted anchor by its rusty chain. Her jacket, baggy pants and boots cannot hide that she is three months pregnant.)

Arvilla? Damn where are you. If I leave this antique treasure here someone else will claim it. Arvilla!

(Alyce pushes back the Indian blanket, discovers several magazines which she picks up.)

House Beautiful, Home and Garden? Couldn't find copies of "Cave Dweller's Beautiful", could you? And an A.M.A. Journal? Doing a little self diagnosis? Or... or... is it Doctor Arvilla? She can't really be a medical doctor, or is that how she owns so much Wall Street stock? Doctor Old-biddy-on-the-beach-with-a-bike living in a cave. I wonder where she keeps her golf clubs.

ARVILLA (O.S.)

(singing) There is a tavern in the town, in the town.

SHIRLEY (O.S.)

There's a lot more than one.

Alyce hears voices and ducks back into the cave. Arvilla is wearing a white cotton sheet wrapped around her body and tied up between her legs for wading.

A starfish clings to her bare shoulder and seaweed dangles from her hand. Shirley is in gloves, raincoat, waders and carries a clam shovel. They tote a heavy bucket between them that makes them stagger as they enter along the beach.

SHIRLEY

I've seen the sun set as far North as that bend in the bay and in December as far South as Indian Rock. When I was little, there were only three houses on the whole bay.

(They put down the bucket and Arvilla sorts the clams while Shirley tells her story)

My home on the cliff, the Portuguese fisherman's place across the bay, which they turned into the Chowder House before it was the town and, on the sandy point where they built the sewage plant, a snug fishing shack where an old Chinook Indian woman lived. I spent adolescent rainy hours with that lady. Used to call her Ga-ga. Don't think I knew her real name. But for me, Ga-ga was the name of kindness. She knew everything or at least something about everything. Never saw her fish, just sat in the lee of her house telling stories to Indian kids, white kids, anybody who'd listen. She told us stories of when the whole coastline belonged to her father and her father's father and before, since their time began. She'd chant magic tales about storms that started in the spray of a whale's breath and of swirling sand spirits that stole little children. Then she'd make us laugh with her funny tales about how clams were spirits on a holiday from the great beyond. When I was little, I think I actually believed those stories, and to this day, I've wondered if maybe the old Indian woman did too. Clam spirits on a holiday, ha, ha, ha.

ARVILLA

We may have to bury these 'clam spirits' back in the wet sand if we want to keep them alive and fresh for tonight.

SHIRLEY

When the tide washes in, they won't stay buried.

ARVILLA

Not stayed buried? Are you saying that clam spirits have a religion that works?

SHIRLEY

Heavens, no. They're not even Lutherans.

ARVILLA

Not staying buried is what religion is all about.

SHIRLEY

Yes, but...

ARVILLA

Holy bivalve, we must worship these prophets on the half-shell. Great clam god, open and receive this sinner.

Arvilla kneels and places a clam in Shirley's hand. Kneeling with her arms outstretched, Arvilla ceremoniously kisses the clam.

SHIRLEY

I'm not sure about this. People kneeling to pray to a bucket of clams? Some might even think that...

ARVILLA

...that salt water stains on their Sunday go to meetin' clothes is too high a price too pay for immortality?

SHIRLEY

Dry cleaning isn't cheap.

ARVILLA

Clams might go well with wine and wafers. (getting up)

SHIRLEY

Could people still sing hymns?

ARVILLA

And mock a spirit clam's silence with singing? Blasphemy.

SHIRLEY

But, without hymns how can a congregation worship? Prayer is so... so quiet.

ARVILLA

They can dance. (opens and closes her arms and knees like a clam) Come, sister Shirley, join me in prayer.

Shirley tentatively joins Arvilla circling the clam bucket with the same arm and knee motions.

SHIRLEY

Maybe clam worship should be done in private, away from children.

ARVILLA

The children could make decorations. Papier-mache clams are so easy. They're supposed to look gray and lumpy.

Both women stop and laugh together.

SHIRLEY

Last week we decorated the church with pumpkins for the Fall Festival. Alyce came to invite you, but you'd gone.

ARVILLA

Gershwin is getting rusty and needed a long run. I rode him on a quest.

SHIRLEY

A quest for what?

ARVILLA

For a missing ghost.

SHIRLEY

I was afraid you weren't coming back.

ARVILLA

And leave my lair du mer? My Caliban's cave?

SHIRLEY

Leave before Victor finds you?

(Arvilla ignores her and starts the clam dance)

If Victor comes for you, he can stay in Lillie's room.

Shirley joins Arvilla's dance, but both women stop when Alyce comes out of the cave.

ALYCE

And will Victor replace me at your breakfast table?

ARVILLA

Haven't found your semen donor yet?

ALYCE

I'm hurt that after three months of caring for you, you'd toss me out. I've should have realized how easy a mark you are for someone like... her. (points to Arvilla)

SHIRLEY

(turns to go) This reminds me, I've made a blackberry, a seedless blackberry, cheese cake for lunch.

ARVILLA

Lunch here. I've minced clams for all.

SHIRLEY

(heading up the cliff) Cheesecake in ten minutes.  
(reconsiders) Twenty. I'm walking to the market. You're welcome to bathe at my house. Do you have a good dress?

ARVILLA

I might have one buried that I could dig up.

SHIRLEY

You have time, I'm picking up a special order of fresh roasted Hawaiian... Chocolate...(walking away) Macadamia... Nut... (exits and calls from offstage) Coffee!

ARVILLA

After all that flavored nonsense she still had the nerve to call it "coffee"?

ALYCE

Shirley is dying.

ARVILLA

(examines the anchor) Did you drag that anchor here?

ALYCE

All I could drag out of her was that a "long Latin word" is killing her and how it was ironic because she didn't take Latin in high school and now Latin was taking her.

ARVILLA

The barnacles are dying.

ALYCE

Then she told me about teaching Roman history for thirty years and missing the faculty trip to Italy because her husband wanted to fish for salmon.

ARVILLA

(looking at the anchor) Not a good decision.

ALYCE

Shirley is sick!

ARVILLA

It needs to be back in salt water.

ALYCE

What?

ARVILLA

They can still be saved. I'll help you.

Arvilla picks up the chain and offers an end to Alyce, who takes it.

ALYCE

Shirley is dying and she won't face it.

ARVILLA

We should pull together.

ALYCE

I don't care about your dying barnacles! I care about Shirley.

Alyce throws down the end of the chain and storms up the walk. She stops, her back to Arvilla.



ARVILLA

Shirley only cared about Vinnie. And now she has you.

ALYCE

Me?

ARVILLA

Caring about Vinnie.

ALYCE

(on the walkway) I have to. I'm helping update her will.

ARVILLA

That's very modern of you.

ALYCE

Of course Vinnie would be her beneficiary, one of them, except she doesn't know if that's his real name. Seems no one asked her to name the baby before giving it up for adoption. She only calls him Vinnie because she hoped he grow up to be an artist like, Vincent Van Gogh. Last night I told her we needed an inventory of everything she owned, so we went from room to room making lists. One bedroom was locked. She wouldn't show it to me until... well, finally she opened it. The room was filled with thirty years of trophies, plaques and awards with Vinnie's name on them. It's as if he'd won them. As if he had lived in that room.

ARVILLA

When a mother can't keep her son, she keeps his trophies.

ALYCE

The closet is stuffed with shoe boxes of letters from girls, all to Vinnie. Except those letters aren't from Vinnie's girl friends. Shirley wrote them. Shirley wrote lurid letters that make your Victor's letter read like a gardening note from a celibate nun. The framed awards hanging in his room, she cut them out of magazines. She even had business cards engraved that list him as an fine art appraiser, an expert on Gauguin's Tahiti period. She told me Vinnie sends her postcards and souvenirs from everywhere he travels. You know what her special prize is? It's a carved coconut shell lamp he would have given her had he really taken her on a vacation to Bora Bora. She talks like she's really been there. Bora Bora? It's become her personal vision of heaven.

ARVILLA

I've read the clams on Bora Bora grow as big as pumpkins.

ALYCE

How can motherhood get inside a person and take them over so completely? How it can mean so much? Hurt so much.

ARVILLA

It's a matter of choice.

ALYCE

(walking down to Arvilla) You think women choose that kind of... insanity?

ARVILLA

I don't think we get it from mosquitoes.

ALYCE

If that's what motherhood does, then I'm scared.

ARVILLA

Don't be afraid of motherhood. Be afraid of despair.

ALYCE

Right now, I don't see much of a difference.

ARVILLA

Unlike our babies, despair doesn't grow up and go to school. It stays home and becomes unrelenting remorse, like a bad skin disease, itchy and incurable.

ALYCE

That makes me feel itchy all over.

ARVILLA

Probably left over fleas from Shirley's dead cat.

ALYCE

You think her insanity is contagious?

ARVILLA

Shirley is a giving woman, and giving women like to share their misery with friends.

ALYCE

What a sour woman you are to say that about Shirley.

ARVILLA

When are you due?

ALYCE

You never listen, do you? You just talk about what you want.

ARVILLA

Your due date, if you keep it, and my sourness, which keeps me, are your subjects. I just juggled the order and due date came up first.

ALYCE

To hell with you, I am not running your witty mazes. (stomps off, but stops) I'm due in five months and I wish it were yesterday because tomorrow I go for an amnio test.

ARVILLA

Amniocentesis? You're older than you look.

ALYCE

Thirty-four is not old and it's not the test, it's the long needle that scares me.

ARVILLA

Relax. The needle is a minor discomfort. The truth may hurt more.

ALYCE

The truth? Like you're really a Doctor?

ARVILLA

A medical doctor?

ALYCE

(waving the magazines) Doctor old biddy on the beach?

ARVILLA

I've been called worse things.

ALYCE

I've called you worse.

ARVILLA

I'm flattered you think of me at all.

ALYCE

I've heard people in the grocery line talk. They call you that crazy old woman in the cave. One pregnant girl even called you "that witch on the water".

ARVILLA

A witch? Ah, that must have been the young wife who brought me an offering of live chickens. (chuckles)

ALYCE

She brought you chickens?

ARVILLA

She crept into my cave one moonless night and begged for a potion that would help her conceive a baby boy.

ALYCE

What did you do?

ARVILLA

It was after midnight and I was too sleepy to argue, so I hunched in my bed, squinted my eyes like a medieval midwife and, in a raspy whisper, incanted a magic portion. She was to concoct a potion of amaretto and cognac and that she and her husband must sip it slowly beside the light of a musk scented candle. Then to sweeten her lips with chocolate, lie naked on top of red satin sheets, cover her woman parts with pink rose petals and let her man have his way.

ALYCE

That sounds more like a cheap romance novel than magic.

ARVILLA

Magic enough for her husband. Every week he sent her back for more treatments. Ten minutes are up. (starts up path)

ALYCE

You're going to Shirley's house like that?

ARVILLA

Rather I was naked?

ALYCE

Not from this angle. Go ahead, please. What about my anchor?

ARVILLA

Pregnancy is all the anchor you need.

(offers a hand up the path)

And we're all dying. It's only terrifying when doctors tell us when.

ALYCE

They told her she has less than six months.

ARVILLA

Then in six months she will follow doctors orders, obediently lie down, close her eyes and hold her breath forever. Unless...

ALYCE

Unless? Unless? Unless what?

They exit.

#### SCENE FOUR                      MOMENTS LATER

As the sky becomes infused with sunset, Shirley enters above with a bag of groceries.

SHIRLEY

(reading coffee label) "Fresh roasted, decaffeinated with methyl ethylene." 'Ethel Eene'? Not as romantic as Jamaican Vanilla Mocha or Kenyan Amaretto Spice. 'Ethel Eene'? Must be a southern name. Whatever it is, I won't tell. It'll be my secret. Oh, I like that. My secret.

Alyce, agitated and pointing downstage, rushes back on stage with Arvilla following.

ALYCE

Look! Across the bay, in the town, beside the Chowder House...there he is! It's Vance. (waving) Vance! Vance! Doesn't he hear me? (shouting) It's Alyce. Alyce from L.A.

He's looking. He sees me. He sees me! (waving again) He's pretending not to see me. He's going away. I can't believe it. No, I do believe it. (to Arvilla) You're not looking.

ARVILLA

With my old eyes, I can't tell if it's a man or a Buick.

ALYCE

(to Shirley) You see him, don't you? The tall man in the blue windbreaker? The father of this! (clutches her belly) Oh, my god! He's getting away.

SHIRLEY

I wish I had my whale binoculars. But that blue speck by the fish market does look tall. Vinnie's tall.

ALYCE

Vinnie?

ARVILLA

Victor wears a blue windbreaker.

ALYCE

Victor?

SHIRLEY

Maybe it is. Is he buying something?

ARVILLA

I hope it's not more clams.

SHIRLEY

Vinnie loves clams. Maybe it is Vinnie.

ALYCE

Maybe it's Vinnie? Maybe it's Victor? Maybe it's all three of them, all wearing blue windbreakers and all driving away in the same Buick. Stop him! Stop all three of them!

Alyce starts running across the stage.

SHIRLEY

The footbridge is the other way.

Alyce stops and runs the opposite direction.

ARVILLA

Take the short cut across the inlet through the salt marsh.

Alyce changes direction and starts down the cliff.

SHIRLEY

He's turned around. He's heading toward the footbridge.

Alyce runs back up the cliff and stops

ALYCE

(cramping) Ahhh! Ahhh. The baby. I'm in labor! Oh god.

ARVILLA

You're not in labor. You're only three months. Sit down.  
(Arvilla helps Alyce to the ground.)

ALYCE

Is he getting away?

SHIRLEY

(puts down bag) I'll meet him at the bridge. Vinnie? (exits)

ALYCE

It's Vance! If I'm not in labor...ah...then I don't need you to ca...ca...catch the baby, so pl...pl...please, ca... ca... catch the father!

ARVILLA

Relax and breathe...in and out...in and out. Haa, haa, haa.

ALYCE

I'll damn well start breathing sideways if you don't catch him. Ahhh. Ahhh.

ARVILLA

Hee, hee, hee. All right. I'll cross by the rocks. (calling back as she exits) Haa, haa, haa. In and out. In and out.

ALYCE

(screaming) They're coming to get you. Haa, haa, haa. You mi... serable, de... spicable, im... im... impotent, Hee, hee, hee Oh... Oh... O.K. You're not impotent. Ah. Ah. Hurry Shirley. Haa, haa, haa. There he goes. He's gone behind the Chowder House, ah... ah.... Shirley. No. Shirley. No.  
(screaming) Behind the Chowder House. Hee, hee, hee. There he is! Coming out the alley. Arvilla! Get him. He's going for the pier. Run baby run. (to her stomach) Haa, haa, haa. Where'd he go? He's in that car. Arvilla! The blue, whatever, Buick, the squat thing with four wheels. Shirley, he's running across the bridge. No, not this way. Go back. Go back! Shirley! Shirley?

Shirley runs to center and holds her head.

ALYCE

You're letting him escape. Shirley? What happened?

SHIRLEY

I saw him. I saw Vinnie.

ALYCE

Vinnie? No. You saw Vance. You saw my Vance.

SHIRLEY

He was in the Chowder House. My Vinnie. Eating clams.

ALYCE

You can't know it was Vinnie. You've never seen him.

SHIRLEY

He saw me. He looked at me. "Mom? Mom, it's me. It's Vinnie. I'm here." I didn't know what to say. I ran away. I was afraid of my own son and I ran away.

Alyce hugs Shirley.

ALYCE

It'll be all right. Shh. It's Okay. Shh.

SHIRLEY

(soft whimpers) Vinnie. Oh Vinnie, I'm sorry.

ALYCE

We'll go back. You can look again. You can make sure.

SHIRLEY

I have to go home. I have to make Methyl ethylene. I have to make a bed for Vinnie. Will it be a boy? Can you stay for ten minutes? Tell me about our trip to Bora Bora. Are you in love? Is she just like me? Vinnie? It's me. I'm your mother.

Shirley picks up the bag. She puts the bag down.  
She is lost.

ALYCE

Shirley. Go home. I'll take care of the groceries.

Shirley steps away, pauses to look across the bay,  
and exits. Arvilla enters.

ALYCE

What a life. Shirley thinks she saw Vinnie. But at least Vance is really here. So close I could smell his cologne.

ARVILLA

He was standing at the take-out counter.

ALYCE

Shirley said he was eating clams.

ARVILLA

He was eating crab.

ALYCE

What's it matter what he was eating?

ARVILLA

It was Victor.

ALYCE

Victor? Victor? You don't see well enough to tell a man apart from a god damned Buick!

ARVILLA

He walked right by me. He didn't even nod.

ALYCE

Oh Arvilla.

ARVILLA

(exhausted) I've shivered in Caliban's cave, bathed in cold seawater and he didn't... (absently, she picks up the grocery bag and looks inside) Shirley's not making coffee?

ALYCE

(realizing Arvilla is far away) Give me the bag, Arvilla.  
(Alyce takes the grocery bag from Arvilla)  
I'll make the coffee.

ARVILLA

Just coffee? Plain, black coffee?

ALYCE

Go to Shirley's house, Arvilla. We'll all drink coffee together. Plain hot coffee. Not even sugar.

Arvilla exits, but Alyce looks across the bay.

ALYCE

You got away you lucky bastard. Lucky bastards all three of you. But we're watching you. We're watching all of you.

Alyce exits as the sunset fades to black.

SCENE FIVE                      SHIRLEY'S ATTIC                      LATER THAT NIGHT

An old steamer trunk, bridge lamp, three legged iron kettle, string of Christmas lights and a Persian carpet lie on the floor. A trap door or the cave flap opens and Shirley enters.

SHIRLEY

An empty attic is like an empty diary. (She brings more oddities to spread about the stage, while continuing to address an offstage Alyce) My attic is cluttered enough for two diaries and a shelf of Jane Austen.

Alyce steps up into the attic. She carries a pen and note pad to inventory what she sees.

ALYCE

It's going to take days to inventory all this for your estate plan.



(sniffing) This place smells the way I always thought my family's attic would smell, if my family had an attic, or if we even had a house.

SHIRLEY

What's the good of an estate plan? Vinnie's my only heir and I ran from him. He's not going to want anything I have.

ALYCE

We'll find him. And Vance too. Hell, if he really exists, we might even find Victor.

SHIRLEY

Vinnie exists. I just don't know where he lives. I don't even know his new name. (sits on trunk) What's the good it?

ALYCE

Maybe there's a good in that trunk your sitting on. Look at the antique steamship decals. Here's the Royal Hawaiian, The Hong Kong Peninsula, something called the P. & O. in someplace called Penang. Where's that?

SHIRLEY

Malaya. Malaysia now.

ALYCE

And this one, it's all scratched up. French Polynesia. Bora... Bora Bora? Have you been there?

SHIRLEY

No.

ALYCE

Singapore? Penang? Honolulu? None of them?

Shirley leaves the trunk shaking her head "no" to each place Alyce names. Alyce opens the trunk and rummages through Polynesian artifacts, sarongs, a bundle of brown grass skirts.

SHIRLEY

I've never been more than a hundred miles from this attic.

ALYCE

Weren't you a geography teacher or something?

SHIRLEY

For an hour every school day. Mostly I just read what was in the textbook and every month I'd show a film. Sometime student's mothers would bring special foods foreigners eat.

ALYCE

Like Indonesian satay or Russian borsch?

SHIRLEY

Half the time they brought in canned pineapple rings.

ALYCE

Once you've tasted fresh pineapple, canned seems foreign.

SHIRLEY

Do you think Arvilla is enjoying the bubble bath I gave her?

ALYCE

The one she said made her feel like she was a pair of silk underwear soaking in the sink?

SHIRLEY

You think she really has money?

ALYCE

She claims she owns lots of stocks.

SHIRLEY

Should I have given her my special shampoo? I keep it hidden under the good towels.

ALYCE

Only if it was made from extra strength oven cleaner.

SHIRLEY

It came in the prettiest little porcelain bottle. My husband bought it from a real French Countess who said her mother, another Countess, had found it in Marie Antoinette's palace.

ALYCE

Really.

SHIRLEY

Jim smuggled it through customs wrapped up in his dirty socks. He told me to save it for "good", for special nights. But we never had any special nights.

ALYCE

(pats stomach) Vance and I had too many special nights.

SHIRLEY

Half the things in this attic were saved for "good".

ALYCE

I worked out an estate plan for another woman who said she saved things for good too. After she died, it was my job to auction off her estate.

SHIRLEY

Oh, that must have been hard, seeing all her nice things going to strangers.

ALYCE

Those nice things she was keeping for good had gotten so moth eaten, the Salvation Army wouldn't even take them. Vance had to help me carry closets full of stuff to the trash.

SHIRLEY

I should give that shampoo to Arvilla. I'll never use it.

ALYCE

(opens a small chest) Look, baby clothes. A baby's sun suit?

SHIRLEY

It was Vinnie's. (fights crying) Oh. Oh.

ALYCE

We don't have to do this.

SHIRLEY

You need baby clothes.

ALYCE

I'm only twelve weeks. I may not even... I don't know. It's too dim to really see the colors. Is there some place to plug in that lamp?

SHIRLEY

If it still works.

(Shirley plugs in the lamp. It doesn't go on.)

Jim would never fix it.

(Wiggles bulb. It goes on burning her left hand.)

Ow!

ALYCE

Let me look at that.

(Alyce looks at the side of Shirley's hand and sees a small strawberry mark)

Oh, it's red. I'll get some ice

SHIRLEY

That's just my strawberry mark.

ALYCE

A birthmark?

SHIRLEY

I think my mother told me it was, "A good luck kiss from the faeries." No, it couldn't have been my mother. I wasn't old enough to remember her.

ALYCE

Your father?

SHIRLEY

He hardly said anything to me except, "stay away from boys." Was it for good luck or for bad luck?

Alyce finds candy wrapped in the baby clothes.

ALYCE

Shirley, you are an evil woman.

SHIRLEY

No, I really will give Arvilla the shampoo.

ALYCE

You're hiding chocolate.

SHIRLEY

Oh, that's for Vinnie. I mean, that was for Vinnie.

ALYCE

You always believed he'd come back?

SHIRLEY

I was taught to believe in the virgin birth, the resurrection and second coming of the son. Isn't that alright?

ALYCE

Lots of people take those things literally.

SHIRLEY

It was crazy. How could I know Vinnie's favorite candy?

ALYCE

I don't know about Vinnie, but this is my favorite. May I?

SHIRLEY

Please. I gave most of it away a long time ago. Sometimes I gave it to the boys in my classroom or put it in Jim's lunch. He didn't know I'd bought it for Vinnie and I never told him.

ALYCE

He never asked about buying boys clothes?

SHIRLEY

I'd have students stay overnight and help them with their homework. Gave them clothes as Vinnie outgrew them.

ALYCE

Jim probably thought you were a dedicated teacher.

SHIRLEY

I was to the boys. But I owe the girls a lot of apologies.

ALYCE

Did you ever think of you and Jim having your own baby?

SHIRLEY

Jim wanted a son. But... (she fades to a long silence)

ALYCE

But you couldn't?

SHIRLEY

They took Vinnie by Caesarean and my father told the doctor that as long as they already had me cut open he wanted them to "clean house" so I'd couldn't disgrace him again.

ALYCE

That's barbaric.

SHIRLEY

When it's time for your baby to be born, don't let them put you to sleep. Stay awake. Keep your eyes open so you can watch them, all of them, as they yank your baby from his warm little house and spank life into his lungs. While you listen to his first cries and they lay him on your stomach, still bound to you by his bloody cord, look at him, memorize his face, the shape of his ears, the wrinkles on his hands as if it were the last time you'd ever see them. Hold him close to your breast, so close that when the nurses whisper and try to snatch him away, you can hold tight to his little life. Hold very tight and never let go. Never, never, never let go.

Exhausted, Shirley sits on the trunk. Alyce is breathing hard and fast. She becomes angry.

ALYCE

How could you tell me that? I'm paranoid enough. (breathing)  
Ah. Ah. Ahhh. Ah. Ah. Ahhh.

Arvilla enters. Her hair is wrapped in one towel and her body in another.

ARVILLA

If you're practicing your birthing breaths, you should let them come more naturally.

SHIRLEY

Did you like your bath?

ARVILLA

I spilled the bottle of bubble bath you gave me, so I used a porcelain bottle of cheap Paris hotel shampoo I found under the towels. I hope you don't mind. (surveys the room)  
Entertain here often?

SHIRLEY

We were looking for baby clothes.

ARVILLA

So you've decided?

ALYCE

I don't know.

SHIRLEY

What are you deciding?

ARVILLA

Be a good girl, tell Shirley and Arvilla all your plans.

SHIRLEY

What plans?

ALYCE

How I've decided I don't need to find a husband since I already have two mother-in-laws.

SHIRLEY

Which on is your favorite? (pause) Well, everyone always has a favorite. Don't they?

Arvilla breaks the awkward silence when she sees the three legged cast iron kettle.

ARVILLA

What a magnificent iron caldron. (slaps the kettle and it rings) The crabs will be honored by such music. (smells the rim) Ahhh, it's no stranger to wild feasts.

SHIRLEY

Mostly church dinners. But they get wild. Once we filled it with leeks garlic and onions and stewed them all day.

ARVILLA

Borders on the indecent.

SHIRLEY

It was a Saturday night celebration and we ate every bite. Come Sunday morning, the church was so filled with the men's air of repentance that we had to open the windows.

ARVILLA

Let's heave this cauldron to the sand and build a driftwood fire between her legs. Shirley can season her iron with butter. Alyce will rim her full with fresh brine. And when she's bubbling ripe, I'll fill her with clattering clams, crimson crab and stone crushed spices from cannibal islands. And while we inhale her steaming perfume, we will watch the full moon rise, swill young wine and tell each other terrible lies about our lovers. (rings kettle)

SHIRLEY

I think I read this recipe in Sunset magazine.

ALYCE

Is this a clambake or a coven?

Arvilla pulls a grass skirt from the trunk, reading an attached label.

ARVILLA

You've been to Bora Bora?

SHIRLEY

Vinnie and I... I've never been off the Oregon coast.

ARVILLA

Oregon gave me my first wild bear.

SHIRLEY

A bear?

ARVILLA

A sweating, villainous, breathing hunk of untamed virility. His steaming breath clouded the air, curled my hair.

ALYCE

You were that close?

ARVILLA

To touch.

SHIRLEY

Were you in a zoo?

ARVILLA

I was bedded on a blanket in an open grove a pebble's throw from the trout filled waters of the Rogue River. The air was warm, the mosquitoes had settled for the night and the serenity of the half moon light must have lapped away my common sense because I forgot to hang my food in a tree. I might as well have brought along a she-bear in estrus. The warm air carried the scent of bacon and coffee to wild nostrils like a love note written on smoke. I had nearly drifted into dreams when my bear, who with a clear conscience of a hungry animal, elected me to be his evening's merriment.

(She throws the grass skirt around her shoulders, loosens her hair, and assumes the role of bear)

Untroubled by moral conflicts, he took charge like a Spanish dancer, and ravished my camp, my food and damn well would have done me too if I hadn't bopped him on the snout with an iron pan. He was aroused. I was aroused. We circled each other with a common determination to survive.

(She circles the women, herding them)

He had a monopoly on sharp claws but I had a burning stick from my fire, and though the flame baffled him, he did not back down. All night the stars wheeled through the cedar tops and all night my heart palpitated, my skin flushed and sweated. I hadn't been so excited since the night I misplaced my virginity. The bear was huge and his teeth were wet, I was small and my mouth was dry, but our tenacity was equal and we teased each other in a dance of death through a thousand acre wood until sunlight broke across the mountains. I've never known such an enduring partner. His stamina and his fortitude in pursuing me were magnificent.

If he wouldn't have torn open my guts and nuzzled out my liver I would have lived forever with him in his woods. But, if he had been tame enough to cohabit, he would have been too tame to love.

SHIRLEY

Your wild bear, it's really Victor, isn't it?

ARVILLA

Victor is a man, but still too wild to cohabit.

SHIRLEY

What about Vance, is he a bear?

ALYCE

More weasel than bear. Maybe Vinnie is your bear, your little Vinnie bear.

SHIRLEY

Vinnie, a bear?

ALYCE

A furry, cuddly little Vinnie bear? (chuckles)

ARVILLA

Tall, dark, sharp claws?

SHIRLEY

I don't know. If he were a bear, would he forgive me for sleeping on Edward's blanket... or would his claws...

ALYCE

Shirley, don't.

SHIRLEY

...tear out my shame.

ALYCE

Shirley, you don't need to do this.

SHIRLEY

Vinnie. (calling out) Vinnie, please, forgive me!

ALYCE

Shirley, please. Stop.

SHIRLEY

I'm sorry I gave you away. Please forgive me! Forgive me!

Arvilla, hunched and stalking, suddenly throws Shirley to the floor.

ALYCE

What are you doing?



Arvilla pummels and tears at Shirley as would a raging bear. Shirley barely struggles as Arvilla bites her teeth deep into Shirley's belly. Shirley falls still and Arvilla rears over her, screaming.

ARVILLA

Forgive yourself! Forgive yourself!

All is quiet. Alyce is so shocked that she can only watch as Arvilla draws Shirley into her arms.

ARVILLA

(softly) Next time... you must fight.

Arvilla holds Shirley and rocks her gently.

BLACKOUT

INTERMISSION

WINTER

## ACT TWO

SCENE ONE            THE BEACH            SPRING, BEFORE DAWN

A flashlight beam sweeps the beach. Alyce, seven months pregnant, trudges across the sand in Shirley's yellow slicker and floppy boots. She drops her bucket and prods the sand with her clamming shovel. Nothing. Her light sweeps up to the rusty hulk of Arvilla's bicycle buried axle deep in sand. The blanket over the cave is tattered but Victor's weathered letter is still there. A new letter is next to it. A light flickers inside the cave. Arvilla, in an old nightgown over tattered long-johns, emerges carrying a kerosene lantern before her.

ARVILLA

Victor? Victor?

ALYCE

(cool) You've come back?

ARVILLA

I've come home.

ALYCE

Home? You mauled Shirley!

ARVILLA

I've been with the bear.

ALYCE

You were the bear! You beat her to the floor and fled into nowhere. Now, months later, you come back?

ARVILLA

I've been with the bear.

ALYCE

For the whole damn winter?

ARVILLA

I followed his scent and found him in his sleep.

ALYCE

You found Victor?

ARVILLA

I found my bear and dreamed away a snow bound winter in his embrace.

ALYCE

You slept with a hibernating bear?

ARVILLA

Mostly napped. Did you know bears snore?

Morning color shows in the sky. Alyce's flashlight spots the letter.

ALYCE

Did Victor's new letter gnaw at you?

ARVILLA

What letter?

ALYCE

You didn't see it?

ARVILLA

It was dark.

ALYCE

The moon is full.

ARVILLA

The clouds were thick. (takes down the new letter)

ALYCE

It was clear.

Arvilla holds up the light and squints to read it. She pushes the letter to Alyce.

ARVILLA

Read it to me.

ALYCE  
Read it to yourself.

ARVILLA  
Read it to me.

ALYCE  
It's too personal.

ARVILLA  
His handwriting is scrawled.

ALYCE  
It's typed.

ARVILLA  
The letters are broken.

ALYCE  
Ahh, then you can see it.

ARVILLA  
It's my eyes. They...I...had a hard winter.

ALYCE  
You and your cozy hibernating bear?

ARVILLA  
He was a hard bear. Read the letter.

ALYCE  
Saying 'please' is hard too.

ARVILLA  
I need to hear Victor speak to me.

ALYCE  
You didn't listen when I told you Shirley was dying.

ARVILLA  
I'm listening now.

ALYCE  
And?

ARVILLA  
Shirley is dying. Read the letter.

ALYCE  
If you want Victor's words you'll have to earn them.

ARVILLA  
Then it's true.

ALYCE

What's true?

ARVILLA

Pregnancy toughens a woman.

ALYCE

We have a bargain? Any question and you'll answer?

ARVILLA

I need to hear Victor. Please.

ALYCE

I'd almost feel sorry for you if... Damn. (reads) "The."

ARVILLA

"The"? One word, that's all?

ALYCE

There are more, but first you have to pay.

ARVILLA

This is extortion.

ALYCE

I'm comfortable with extortion. Who are you?

ARVILLA

Arvilla Kershaw. M.D., mother, widow, dismissed woman.

ALYCE

"Heart."

ARVILLA

"The heart."

ALYCE

Where are you from?

ARVILLA

My mother was the daughter of a Yakima apple farmer. My father came from Kansas. Two days after mother married him, father put the title to the farm in his name. He was efficient that way.

ALYCE

"Is."

ARVILLA

I think they call that a 'gimmie'.

ALYCE

"Is fickle."

ARVILLA

"The heart is fickle." Oh, Victor, mine is constant.

ALYCE

Where were you born?

ARVILLA

Between the pippins and the macintosh.

ALYCE

Where?

ARVILLA

Mother was leading the horse drawn wagon through the apples while father rode above her spraying the unripe fruit with his toxic concoction. She went into labor between the pippins and the macintosh. Father stopped his work just long enough to midwife the delivery. He was efficient that way too.

ALYCE

What brought you here?

ARVILLA

You have no gimmies.

ALYCE

"Promises...in...ink." What did Victor promise you?

ARVILLA

He promised to come to this beach, to this body.

ALYCE

That's all?

ARVILLA

I thought a young woman would know that's enough.

ALYCE

But a woman your age... I mean...

ARVILLA

That a woman nearing eight decades can't feel desire?

ALYCE

I meant...

ARVILLA

That your baby filled body is so addicted to estrogen that you can't believe a woman who menopausal cold turkey can't have a simple need? When anxiety wakes me in the middle of the night, a need to be held, to be loved?

ALYCE

I know you have...

ARVILLA

Read the letter.

ALYCE

"Are shackles."

ARVILLA

Shackles? He wrote "shackles" ?

ALYCE

"Promises in ink are shackles...that dissolve with tears."

ARVILLA

I've lost him.

ALYCE

You said you're a mother?

ARVILLA

Victor, you promised me. You promised. (turns to go)

ALYCE

You still owe me. You were a mother once?

ARVILLA

Twice.

ALYCE

Where are your babies?

ARVILLA

My first born, my son, my Daniel, died before he could take a breath, before he could see light, clutch my hand or let me hear his cry. Though I knew his life was kind and (touches her stomach) he was happy in his own little house, the pain of never looking into his living eyes scarred me to my spine. I went home, and instead of sewing him a little yellow sunsuit, I bought a black dress, wore it once then wrapped it in brown paper and buried it with his memory.

ALYCE

And the second child?

ARVILLA

Stolen by a stranger who strolled beside us and smiled sweetly at my little Sarah. My beautiful little girl pursed her dimpled cheeks and blew the ruddy-cheeked man kisses as he knocked me to the sidewalk and took her away. My beautiful little girl wasn't even three. I knew for only three years. Longer than Shirley's ten minutes, but not long enough. The police searched for weeks and found the bodies of seven other little girls. But not hers. The official report was couched to spare my feelings and save my hopes. "Maybe she was alive", it read, "because he liked her too much to kill."

ALYCE

You looked for her?

ARVILLA

Every day...for more than fifty years.

ALYCE

Is that why you came here on your bicycle?

ARVILLA

I have known many bicycles but the one constant has been my quest for a girl with a faerie's kiss on her hand.

ALYCE

A faerie's kiss?

ARVILLA

A scarlet mark, forever seared in skin.

(Arvilla grasps Alyce's hand. )

Right there.

(examines Alyce's hand and gives it a hard kiss.)

Now, read the rest.

ALYCE

(jerks free) Ow! You've made a mark!

ARVILLA

Yours will fade. Read the letter.

ALYCE

You're sure it was this hand?

ARVILLA

I'm sure. Read!

ALYCE

"Ariel is unloosed."

ARVILLA

Victor was never captive

ALYCE

Did you really sleep with a bear?

ARVILLA

A has-been bear, a white-muzzled lumberjack in suspenders and plaid shirt. He was the winter caretaker for a snow bound logging camp. The season was turning cold and I needed a place to hibernate. I stockpiled a winter's worth of books and canned fruit. He stockpiled whiskey and chewing tobacco. After the snow closed the single road out of the camp and locked us in twin isolation, he made it clear that he preferred whiskey to books. I made it clear that I preferred poets to drunken lumberjacks, but...we were both alone and less disagreeable choices were not available.

ALYCE

"Caliban is unbound." Why did you give up medicine?

ARVILLA

It's an exaggeration.

ALYCE

Caliban unbound?

ARVILLA

Medicine.

ALYCE

That's not an answer.

ARVILLA

I'll open another vein. (rattling off her list) I was a virgin until I married. My father was too frugal to give me a middle name. I murdered my husband! Cataracts so obscure my vision I can't read this letter.

ALYCE

You murdered your husband?

ARVILLA

I shot him full of morphine.

ALYCE

That's it? No. It's not enough.

Arvilla steps down to the water and looks out.

ARVILLA

Like many couples that suffer loss, suffer a shared grief of losing one child and then another, we sought relief in something outside ourselves. Then came the war. It charged my husband and I with a sense of purpose, a mission, a calling, so together we enlisted. He became an artillery Captain and served at the front. I labored in a blood stained medical tent just beyond the sound of his exploding death.

ALYCE

But why did you kill him?

ARVILLA

One night the sounds of the death he threw at the enemy fell silent. They told me he had been wounded, injured by his own artillery. I was shocked, but still I rejoiced. He had fought his last battle, had made his last disagreeable choice between killing or dying and like Caliban, was coming to my tent. Anxiously I waited for him between the drab canvas walls as a medic wheeled him toward me. "Here's your husband", he said. "Take care of him". I could barely recognize him through the burns and bandages that cover most of his body.



But he was my husband, my love, and they let me take him home. Through a year of our private agony, I doctored him. All that time, no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I cared or how many hours I soothed his charred flesh with love and lotions, he never got better. Months passed and he became bound, shackled in his scarred flesh. He couldn't move, his arms and legs so pinned down by his burned skin that his body was no longer his own, was no longer able to feel my touch or obey even his simplest commands. He was a prisoner of the war, sentenced to the hell of his own life. But in all that time he never asked me to end his pain, end his suffering. He didn't need to.

ALYCE

What did you do?

ARVILLA

I injected him with enough morphine for his pain, enough for mine and enough for the entire army that sent him to hell.

ALYCE

He chose to die?

ARVILLA

I was his doctor. I gave him the best medicine I had.

ALYCE

But he chose to die?

ARVILLA

We kissed goodbye, and while our lips still touched, in his last breath that bought him eternity, the little that was left of him, whispered, "Travel well". After I laid him to rest my mind collapsed. They called me back to duty, but I couldn't face another dying boy. They gave me orders that left me only disagreeable choices, insanity or retreat.

ALYCE

You left the army?

ARVILLA

And I've been A.W.O.L. for forty-seven years.

ALYCE

Didn't they come after you?

ARVILLA

I hid from the soldiers and their war by climbing high into the cold granite of the western mountains. I hunkered nights in moon born craters, drank from hanging glaciers and scraped a life from what the mountains provided. Below, men battled a single enemy, up there, I battled triple conquerors, my self, my guilt and my regret. Alone, without weapons, I was defenseless, and worst of all, without anyone to forgive me.

ALYCE

I know how that feels.

ARVILLA

It was then that I met my first little yellow flower. I spotted it among the tumbled rocks beside a turquoise lake. I knelt low to smile at its petals and found, in one simple flower with veins of color that flowed like rivers and sparkled like stars, I found what five hundred years of human medicine could never offer. I found forgiveness. I found redemption and renewed purpose.

ALYCE

I should be that lucky.

ARVILLA

That's when I set upon my quest to find my little girl.

ALYCE

And you came here to find her?

ARVILLA

I came here for Victor's letter. Now read it to me.

ALYCE

(looks at letter) You won't believe.

ARVILLA

Oh, Victor, I never believed you anyway. But you were fun.

ALYCE

That's not what he wrote. His last words are, "Travel well."

ARVILLA

Travel well. (goes to the water's edge)

Dawn comes. Alyce clicks off her flashlight.

ALYCE

I'm sorry.

ARVILLA

Six months pregnant, and probably wearing ugly underwear, you are indeed a sorry sight. How was your amnio

ALYCE

I relaxed. The doctor didn't. After four tries with his dipstick, he said my fluid was low and I had to come back in two weeks. I put it off two months.

ARVILLA

When it would be too late to change the verdict?

ALYCE

I'm past the legal point of no return and I haven't had the moxie to call for results. If they're good, they're good. If they aren't, even the dead have to be born.

ARVILLA

Brava, for the courage of prenatal ignorance.

ALYCE

No, damn it! You still owe me. Are you going to miss him?

ARVILLA

No, I have Ali Baba and his forty fornicating thieves in that cave. Yes, I won't miss him. I'll find him.

ALYCE

When this is over, (pats her belly) I hope I'm as ornery an old biddy on the beach as you.

ARVILLA

Your life should be so rewarding.

ALYCE

I've missed you these middle months.

ARVILLA

My little yellow flower, you smell sweeter than logging camp whiskey and you're smoother than a bear's December stubble. Hug me or slug me.

(They hug)

I want my Mommy too. Oh, you are huge for six months.

ALYCE

God, I know it.

Shirley enters above. She is leaning on two canes and wearing an obvious wig.

SHIRLEY

Alyce?

ALYCE

Down here, at the old biddy's... Arvilla's cave.

ARVILLA

I always wanted a middle name.

SHIRLEY

She's back? (starts to go) I'll give you the message at home.

ALYCE

Don't go. We were just talking.

SHIRLEY

About me?

ARVILLA

Not yet.

ALYCE

Don't start. (to Shirley) Do you want to say hello?

SHIRLEY

Not to her.

ALYCE

Would you like to invite her for tea and maybe pie?

SHIRLEY

I wouldn't.

ARVILLA

I'm not dressed for tea, but I'll change. Sorry, but it can only be my clothes. (goes into her cave)

ALYCE

What message?

SHIRLEY

Doctor something, called.

ALYCE

Dr. Creamer? Is it bad?

SHIRLEY

(slowly warming) Why did you tell me your amnio was fine, when you didn't know?

ALYCE

It's complicated.

SHIRLEY

Is it as complicated as your letter to that Judge in California?

ALYCE

You couldn't have read that. I mailed it.

SHIRLEY

You mailed the second version. Did he accept your offer to turn state's evidence against Vance?

ALYCE

I didn't offer. I inquired. What other tidbits has your sleuthing uncovered?

SHIRLEY

Your babies' sex.

ALYCE

The sex?

SHIRLEY

Want me to tell you?

ALYCE

Yes. No! Do I want to know? (pause) Do you know?

SHIRLEY

Yes. I know and you don't. I like that. I've never known someone's secret before they did.

ALYCE

Okay, you can tell me.

SHIRLEY

Not yet. (Pleased, she begins to slowly descend to the beach)

ALYCE

Tell me.

SHIRLEY

My, this is fun.

ALYCE

Tell me!

SHIRLEY

Tell you what?

ALYCE

About the sex!

SHIRLEY

When I was a girl, sex was a great big secret.

ALYCE

Shirley!

SHIRLEY

Do you think it still is?

ALYCE

Shirley.

Shirley nears Arvilla's cave parting the curtain with her cain to peer in.

SHIRLEY

I think sex is better when there are secrets.

ALYCE

(approaching) Damn it. Have you been taking Arvilla lessons?

SHIRLEY

(raises crossed canes) Stay back! We Arvillas can bite.

ALYCE

Tell me before I break your canes and maroon you with the old biddy for the rest of your life.

SHIRLEY

Not long enough to be a threat but long enough to be intolerable. You're carrying a girl.

ALYCE

A girl? (disappointment) Oh. I'd expected a...a girl? My little girl.

SHIRLEY

(continuing down the path) You're carrying a boy.

ALYCE

A boy?

SHIRLEY

A girl.

ALYCE

You said a boy.

SHIRLEY

And a girl.

ALYCE

And a boy?

SHIRLEY

No, a girl.

ALYCE

A girl! A boy! What are they...twins?

SHIRLEY

No.

ALYCE

No? I will not be run through mazes by a fake Arvilla in a fright wig! (snatches away Shirley's canes)

SHIRLEY

(adjusting her wig) What wig?

ALYCE

Tell me before I break them. Is it a girl (holds up crook) or is it a boy? (holds up tip) Or are they twins? Or are they a girl...and a boy...and...oh no, another girl?

Arvilla re-enters.

ARVILLA

Triplets. Three cheers, hell, three of everything, Hip hip hurrah... (to Shirley) Come on. It's Triplets. Hip Hip...

ARVILLA & SHIRLEY

Hurrah. Hip hip hurrah. Hip hip hurrah!

ALYCE

I feel like puking.

Alyce returns the canes and she hurries toward the water and convulses over the edge of the stage.

ARVILLA

Not in the tide pool. You'll kill the starfish.

SHIRLEY

Is that an endangered species?

ARVILLA

We'll know in a minute.

ALYCE

(doubling over in dry wretches) Ahh. Ahh

SHIRLEY

You're scaring the seagulls.

ARVILLA

Alyce, go home!

SHIRLEY

Don't worry about me.. You've worries enough with the that Superior Court Judge. Now go.

ARVILLA

You heard, Mother. Go.

Alyce makes her way up the path to the cliff top.

ARVILLA

The first baby is always the hardest.

SHIRLEY

Hardest when it's your last.

ALYCE

(After a dry wretch) And don't think I'm going to name them after either of you. Especially the boy. And damn if their names will start with the letter 'V'! (exits)

ARVILLA

You're looking thin. How long do you have?

SHIRLEY

That's none of your business.

ARVILLA

How's your muscle tone?

Arvilla reaches out to touch Shirley, but Shirley raises a cane to ward her off.

SHIRLEY

Stay back!

ARVILLA

It's safe. My sharp teeth are in my cave.

Arvilla comes closer. Shirley swings her cane.

SHIRLEY

Don't come any closer you...you she bear!

The two women glare at each other.

ARVILLA

Being attacked by a bear has been the right medicine.

SHIRLEY

My doctor said you probably aren't rabid. (rubs back of neck)

ARVILLA

I'm happy to learn that about myself.

SHIRLEY

Alyce is going to need help, make her your business.

ARVILLA

She's a business woman and can take care of herself.

SHIRLEY

What happens to babies born in prison? Do they take them away?

ARVILLA

No one will take her babies.

SHIRLEY

The army took Ed away. Then Father had the Salvation Army take me to their home for expectant sinners.

ARVILLA

A thrifty choice.

SHIRLEY

Three months of scrubbing woolen uniforms and I woke up when a nurse placed my baby in my arms. Ten minutes later they took him away. Not just one baby, but all my babies.



ARVILLA

Do you still have that large pot?

SHIRLEY

I'm a size four.

ARVILLA

I was asking about your iron kettle. Tonight is a full moon and we should dine on crabs before you die.

SHIRLEY

I am not dying.

ARVILLA

I'll pluck them at low tide and you can bring a knot of chilies from your garden so after the night's gone cold, our lips will stay hot until the sun rises.

SHIRLEY

And will we see gray gulls slice the lavender brine for breakfast? (knowing smile)

ARVILLA

Ahh, you're quickening.

SHIRLEY

Quickening? Isn't that the first time you feel a baby move?

ARVILLA

That wasn't my meaning, but in your case...

SHIRLEY

I want so much to hold her babies for much more than ten minutes. I want to be their Ga-ga.

ARVILLA

The Indian storyteller?

SHIRLEY

Yes, and tell them stories that she told me. I so want to give them something. Alyce helped me draft a new will.

ARVILLA

She's a business woman.

SHIRLEY

I'm leaving my house to her and my savings will raise her babies.

ARVILLA

And this was her suggestion?

SHIRLEY

Hers? Ahh, yes, yes it was.

ARVILLA

And you think it's fair?

SHIRLEY

Fair? No, I think it's cruel. Cruel that my house will comfort her babies, that my money will feed them, that they will grow up seeing my picture on the piano and never know who I was?

ARVILLA

Be sure to smile when they take that picture.

SHIRLEY

I know what you're thinking.

ARVILLA

She's taking advantage of you when you're vulnerable?

The two women stare silently at each other.

SHIRLEY

No. You're thinking you'd like another bath at my house.

ARVILLA

With bubbles?

SHIRLEY

You're invited. But only if you leave your sharp teeth in your cave.

ARVILLA

I'll only take my 'talking teeth'.

Shirley starts back up the path, but is unable to go up the modest incline until Arvilla takes her by the waist. Together they walk to the top.

SHIRLEY

I feel worthless, hauled off my own beach. I should be helping you. You're the one old enough to be my mother.

ARVILLA

I think the universe too indifferent for so great a kindness.

SHIRLEY

A kindness?

ARVILLA

To discover that you are my daughter.

SHIRLEY

I'm glad I have a big kettle for the crabs.

ARVILLA

You have a big appetite?

SHIRLEY

It's going to take an ocean of crabs if we're to re-think the indifference of the universe.

Shirley missteps along the path. Arvilla pulls her back from the edge. They breathe hard a moment.

SHIRLEY

Be careful.

ARVILLA

Do I hear caution from the dying?

SHIRLEY

Arvilla...Mother, I won't be alive in a million years, but I want to be alive tonight, to crack crab with you, tell dangerous lies, see the morning gulls slice the lavender brine and fall into gentle sleep with my lips tasting of hot peppers and saltwater.

ARVILLA

Be careful, my little girl, you're quickening.

They exit above the beach.

BLACKOUT

## SCENE TWO            SHIRLEY'S ATTIC            THAT EVENING

Alyce slides through the trap door into the attic. Clicking on the stand lamp, she finds the iron kettle, pounds on the trapdoor and shouts.

ALYCE

Fire up the driftwood, I've found the kettle! (slaps the kettle, it rings) Sure, brag about your firm little belly, but after we're emptied, mine will be flatter. (rings kettle again) I'd pity you, always sitting on hot coals, if I didn't envy your cast iron resolve. (rings kettle) Want to trade places? I'd happily be the one filled with boiled fish if you'd be the one who pees her panties with every sneeze. (rings kettle) Ahhh. (clutches her side) Don't kick me and no running in the halls.

SHIRLEY

(calls) Alyce? (her head enters) Alyce? I'm an evil witch.

ALYCE

Evil?

SHIRLEY

I poured my good shampoo out of it's French porcelain bottle into an empty container of dandruff scrub.

ALYCE

So?

SHIRLEY

Then I re-filled the French porcelain bottle and left it by the bathtub for Arvilla to find.

ALYCE

What did you re-fill it with?

SHIRLEY

Lillie's left over flea and tick shampoo.

ALYCE

Serves her highness right.

SHIRLEY

I have to tell her. (drops out of sight)

ALYCE

Wait. If she hears you deceived her, she'll be offended. But don't tell her and she'll only think you're a simpleton who's been duped by a fancy bottle.

SHIRLEY

(returns) A deceiver or a simpleton? Disagreeable choices.

ALYCE

Most choices are disagreeable. Pregnancy or abortion?

SHIRLEY

Chemotherapy or dying? (steps fully into the attic)

ALYCE

That's no choice.

SHIRLEY

I'm afraid to be that sick a second time.

ALYCE

I'm afraid to give birth but I have to.

SHIRLEY

And I have to deny my illness. There, I feel better already.

ALYCE

But Vinnie may need you.

SHIRLEY

Vinnie need me? He's never even written me, not really.

The doorbell rings

ARVILLA (O.S.)

(calling) I'll answer it.

ALYCE

He still could. There's a typewriter in his room.

SHIRLEY

It's broken. The letters T and P are missing their bottoms.

ARVILLA (O.S.)

It's a registered letter. I'll sign for it.

SHIRLEY

She's going to mention the shampoo bottle.

ALYCE

How can you worry about bottles when...

SHIRLEY

When I should be choosing an urn to hold my ashes?

ALYCE

Don't talk like that.

SHIRLEY

Last night you ordered me to sign my new will, but tonight you forbid me to talk about ashes?

Wrapped in towels, Arvilla rises into the attic, sits in the opening vigorously drying her hair.

ARVILLA

I don't know which is worse, hair reeking of stale bear breath or that sweet, stinking dandruff goop you buy.

ALYCE

Bravo. You've expanded your choices to include 'victim'.

SHIRLEY

I thought you enjoyed the smell of...

ALYCE

Hot bear?

ARVILLA

Ah, my summer bear. That starry evening of stubbed toes is as faded as the August flavors of wild blackberries. All that remains are the thrilling memories of a terrifying romance.

SHIRLEY

Romance? Imagine that.

ALYCE

I couldn't even begin.

ARVILLA

But my winter bear, a white whiskered logger who preferred whiskey to books, whose cabin stank of unwashed woolens and wood smoke, it is the lingering scent of his rank odor that wasted your hot water and cheap shampoo.

(Fiercely rubbing her knuckles)

It is the memory of the dead December darkness that kept me scrubbing and pumicing till I am half raw. And still I cannot forget that, after the deep snow had blocked my retreat, he tore my books, pressed the door shut, and he beat me. Long and deep...and mean.

Her towel drops from her back to reveal purple bruises where she had been beaten.

SHIRLEY

Oh Arvilla. Use all the shampoo you need.

Alyce goes to Arvilla and covers her back.

ALYCE

I hope you... Damn, whatever you did, I hope it killed him.

SHIRLEY

No, not that.

ARVILLA

In the morning he growled excuses. In the afternoon, while he and his whiskey hibernated, I packed food and books and fled. That night he drank himself into a state of anger until he found me hiding in the fuel shed. He roared for me to come out. When I refused he began chopping at the door with a logger's axe. The wooden door was old and he splintered it into kindling. Then he jerked his axe up and came after me. I had already barricaded myself at the back of the shed behind dripping cans of gasoline and had no where left to retreat.

SHIRLEY

What did you do?

ARVILLA

I lit a match.

ALYCE

Oh my god.

ARVILLA

A good thing I wasn't the only one of us who'd seen what fire does to skin.

ALYCE

A stand off.

ARVILLA

I survived in that unheated fuel shed, my lair in the forest, for seven more weeks of winter. When the snow melted and mud on the logging road was only ankle deep, I left the white bear and came here.

ALYCE

God damn him. Damn them all.

ARVILLA

Damn the whole male sex?

SHIRLEY

Not my son, he's male.

ARVILLA

Then just damn Special Delivery mail.

SHIRLEY

Not my Post Man either. He's Ga-ga's grandson.

ARVILLA

Handsome fellow. He asked me for my signature.

ALYCE

You signed for a letter?

ARVILLA

It was for some other woman, with some other name.

ALYCE

You gave it back?

ARVILLA

No. I'll give it to her myself.

ALYCE

What makes you think you'll find her?

ARVILLA

Call it a premonition.

SHIRLEY

What's her name?

ARVILLA

Colleen Doolittle. You know her?

ALYCE

How could I? I'm a stranger here too.

SHIRLEY

I know several Colleens. But no Doolittles. Who is it from?

ARVILLA

A Superior Court Judge in California. He's sent her a warrant to appear or be arrested.

ALYCE

You read someone else's mail?

ARVILLA

It's not a crime.

SHIRLEY

Yes it is.

ARVILLA

Not compared to Colleen's.

SHIRLEY

Really? What's she wanted for?

ALYCE

I don't want to hear this.

ARVILLA

Fraud. Forgery. Embezzlement. Nineteen counts.

SHIRLEY

Is she dangerous?

ARVILLA

Only for lonely widows with paid off mortgages.

SHIRLEY

Did she murder them?

ARVILLA

Why don't you ask Colleen Doolittle? (to Alyce) Did you murder them before you took their homes or did you kill them slowly, drip by drip between green walls of the poverty ward?

ALYCE

You have no right to read my mail.

ARVILLA

I'm sorry to hear it's your mail.

ALYCE

You're awfully god damned noble for a doctor who murdered her husband. (rushes down the trapdoor)

SHIRLEY

Alyce! (to Arvilla) Why did you do that?

ARVILLA

Gratitude for favors shown.



SHIRLEY

You thinks she's trying to cheat me out of my home?

ARVILLA

It's one possible diagnosis.

SHIRLEY

And being pregnant is part of her flimflam?

ARVILLA

The right tool for the right job.

SHIRLEY

Don't protect me. This is my house and I'll give it away as I choose. I don't want your gratitude.

ARVILLA

It was gratitude to her.

SHIRLEY

To Alyce? Colleen?

ARVILLA

This morning she read a letter for me. Tonight I read a letter for her and, free of charge, provided a little medical service and released some nasty pus she had hidden in her gut.

SHIRLEY

What gave you the right?

ARVILLA

Medicine is not a right. It's a responsibility.

Alyce climbs up through the trapdoor in a rage. A letter is clutched in her hand

ALYCE

You wanted to give Colleen her letter? Well don't bother, she has it. Yes, I'm Colleen. Yes, I bilked old biddies like Shirley out of their homes and maybe their lives, too, I don't know. They were old, weak and stupid and I ran every con I knew on them and I was good at it. Real good.

SHIRLEY

Why would you do such a thing?

ALYCE

I did it for Vance. But what's your excuse, doctor... (grabs Arvilla by the hair) for carving into people's hearts? You want to perform your bloody surgery on my gut too?

SHIRLEY

Stop it!

ALYCE

Sharpened your teeth? Go ahead. Bite me. You know how. You're good at that. Damn you! God damn you to hell!

SHIRLEY

Stop it! Stoooppp! Both of you! I will not have this in my life. You will not steal each other from me. You're mine! Do you hear? For once, something is mine and I get to keep it.

Shirley abruptly shoots bolt upright and writhes in a silent scream. She stomps the floor as she fights downstage, fighting for every word.

SHIRLEY

It's... my... life... too!

Shirley collapses.

ALYCE

Oh God. What have we done?

ARVILLA

(kneeling to read her vital signs) We paid attention.

BLACKOUT

### ACT THREE

#### SCENE ONE            THE BEACH            SUMMER

A line is tied to the ruins of Arvilla's bicycle. The line runs to offstage and is yanked in attempts to free the bicycle from the sand. The bicycle horn HONKS with each yank. After several yanks the bicycle is freed and tumbles down the cliff. Alyce enters at the top of the cliff. No longer pregnant, she wears baggy shorts and a nursing blouse. She hurries to Arvilla's cave.

ALYCE

Arvilla! Arvilla?

(scans inside the cave and surveys the beach)  
The old biddy's vanished again! Or been vandalized! But who could tell?

(she hears HONK, HONK and sees the line tug at the bicycle.)

Better not be messing with the old biddy's bike.

(the line is yanked) )

I'm warning you.

(Alyce digs into her bag and, finding nothing more lethal than a baby toy, rattles it)

I'll... I'll put a curse on you.

A BEEP BEEP offstage. Arvilla enters riding a three-wheel bicycle. She is holding the rope.

ARVILLA

The wanderlust is curse enough.

ALYCE

(relieved) I was afraid you'd left.

ARVILLA

Soon as I dig up my treasure and dispose of my trash. Give me a hand. This rusty steed is too much for me.

ALYCE

You're out of here, just like that? Without saying goodbye?

ARVILLA

(pushing the old bike) Alaska is a long ride and I pedal slowly.

ALYCE

You're pedaling to Alaska?

ARVILLA

The trillium bloom one week a year in Nome and I've yet to sleep beneath the midnight sun

ALYCE

It'll kill you!

ARVILLA

I have a fresh steed and endless desire. Now, put your back into it and help me drag Gershwin to the dump.

ALYCE

I probably owe you anything you ask except assisting suicide...or nursing. (cups her breasts) My nipples have been sucked raw.

ARVILLA

More babies than breasts.

ALYCE

I wish Shirley were home. I visited her this morning.

ARVILLA

Has she received her letter from Vinnie yet?

ALYCE

You know about the letter?

ARVILLA

A few nights ago I was rummaging through Shirley's cupboard when I heard the click of typing coming from Vinnie's room. How is her latest round of chemotherapy going?

ALYCE

She refused more treatment. Said she didn't want to be sick and that was her choice and she was making it.

ARVILLA

She's learned to fight.

ALYCE

If she lives another week, it will be a blessing.

ARVILLA

A blessing for her, purgatory for her nurses

ALYCE

She's become quite the empress, even gives orders to the doctors.

ARVILLA

In charge of her destiny. I'll miss her. I'll miss her shampoo.

ALYCE

Maybe you should stay?

ARVILLA

Or that I should hire the kid at the gas station to drag away this dead bicycle

ALYCE

You bought a three wheeled bicycle?

ARVILLA

I've gotten a little... wobbly.

ALYCE

I see lots of...

ARVILLA

Old ladies?

ALYCE

...on three wheelers.

ARVILLA

But how many do it with panache?

Arvilla opens her duster. She is wearing multicolored bicycle pants and a racing bra.

ALYCE

You're astounding!

ARVILLA

I'm going to miss your little trio.

ALYCE

You don't have too. You can be their great-grandmother.

ARVILLA

They could use a father.

ALYCE

I'm testifying against him.

ARVILLA

Strike a blow for integrity.

ALYCE

I gave the court all the account numbers and the key to the safety deposit box. I can make restitution to most of my victims, except to Mrs. Leet who died, and to Shirley, who I never had a chance to cheat. And to you, who can't be cheated. (touches Arvilla's arm) Don't go. I need you.

ARVILLA

You have your family.

ALYCE

Honestly, I liked you better when you drew blood. Don't leave.

Arvilla pushes on the bike. Alyce rolls up a sleeve and presents her exposed veins to Arvilla.

ALYCE

Stay. I'll open one of my veins.

ARVILLA

So, now it my turn again. Who are you, really?

ALYCE

Colleen Doolittle. Thirty-seven, mother of three, and confessed cheater of helpless old women.

ARVILLA

I might stay one night.

ALYCE

I was twenty-three when my mother died. I'd come back for the funeral and my Dad opened a bottle of his favorite remorse. He poured a tall glass and emptied the dregs, telling me my mother had been his second wife and that she was "not my real mother". There I was, half grieving for the loss of a mother who had tossed me out when daddy chopped away half my family tree with a single boozy breath.

ARVILLA

I'll stay two nights. Who was your real mother?

ALYCE

He had drunk his mind incapable of remembering what my real mother even looked like. Hell, he couldn't even remember her name, except to call her, "That god damned slut who cheated on me every day." With the one name "slut", he told me I wasn't even his. I wasn't the drunkard's little girl. Dad had chopped me from the entire family tree! Can you understand the loss I felt? My sense of loneliness?

Arvilla takes Alyce's hand.

ARVILLA

I've never completely understood why we all need each other so very much, I only know we do.

ALYCE

I'd been cut off from my family. Discarded.

ARVILLA

You are not an ornament bobbing from the branch of a single family tree. You are the colors of little mountain flowers and you are rooted where they are rooted.

ALYCE

But I am not rooted. I come from no one. I'm a bastard.

ARVILLA

Birth certificates are not breeding papers and none of us are bastards. We are all the daughters of star dust and our family surrounds us. The ocean, the land, the air we breathe and the crabs we eat are your grandparents and cousins and the whole blessed noble universe is your family and the stars are your family tree.

ALYCE

Do you ever give short answers?

ARVILLA

Yes.

ALYCE

(pause) Will you...?

ARVILLA

Yes.

ALYCE

Shirley...

ARVILLA

(cutting her off) I know.

ALYCE

I don't think I do.

ARVILLA

Open the trunk in the attic and bring the longest flowing sarong you find.

ALYCE

Sarong?

ARVILLA

(gets on bicycle) She'll want to dress if she's going to Bora Bora

ALYCE

Bora Bora?

ARVILLA

(riding offstage) To thy own dreams be true.

ALYCE

(calling after her) Where are you going?

ARVILLA

(offstage) To change my costume.

Alyce hurries up the path as the lights dim.

BLACKOUT

## SCENE TWO

### A HOSPITAL GARDEN      AN HOUR LATER

Shirley is sleeping in a wheelchair by a garden bench. A blanket covers her legs and an IV bottle, attached above her chair, drips into her arm. A typed letter lies open on her lap. An offstage BEEP BEEP.

SHIRLEY

(waking with a start) Vinnie? Vinnie?

Shirley, momentarily confused, searches her blanket for the letter and reads.

SHIRLEY

"I know it may be a shock to receive a letter from me after so long. But I didn't know you existed. I thought I already had a mother. Not a good one like you, who's kept my room for me even though I've never seen it. Even though you've never seen me. The night I came home from my high school graduation my mother, not my real mother, had changed the locks on the house. She allowed me to stay three more days while I found a place of my own. Oh Mother, I wish I'd known you kept a room for me.

Because I am sure you would not have refused me, even if I was your... daughter." (puts down the letter) Daughter? Vinnie was a girl? They never gave me time to really look at him... her. They said "he" and I believed. Wouldn't that be something? Ha! A little girl? My daughter. We would have been best friends. Instead of agonizing over narrow ties and wide lapels, I'd have sewn you dresses. We'd have shared our closets. We still could. You'd look good in this. (fingers her hospital gown) No, you wouldn't. Nobody would.

Alyce enters with a dress box.

SHIRLEY

Where are the babies? Put the boy on my lap.

ALYCE

I'll bring them next time.

SHIRLEY

You said that last time. Did you bring Arvilla?

ALYCE

She's chaining her bicycle. I brought a gift.

SHIRLEY

I don't need practical gifts.

ALYCE

This isn't practical.

SHIRLEY

If it's clothes, I'll wear it with the tags on so in a few days, when my ashes have cooled, you can take it back.

ALYCE

Isn't that beginning to sound practical?

SHIRLEY

That's not practical. It's dishonest. Maybe even a sin. And I need a few sins, if I'm to be remembered. Did you tell Arvilla why I wanted to see her?

ALYCE

You didn't tell me.

SHIRLEY

You don't know? But why should you. You've just squeezed three lives onto the world. Your whole body is hyped up to feed babies. You're Spring. And Spring never hears anything that doesn't eat.

ALYCE

The way my babies nurse, I'm more a geyser than a spring.



SHIRLEY

I meant Springtime, as in new.

ALYCE

I don't feel new. My back aches and the delivery gave me hemorrhoids.

SHIRLEY

So you're Indian Summer. Remember the first time I saw you, beating your fists against the sand? If I'd been capable of that when I was young, I'd be... still rotting in a hospital, but with a hell of a lot racier memories. Were you ever unfaithful?

ALYCE

Did I cheat on Vance? Hmmm. Well, a couple of times.

SHIRLEY

Did you enjoy it?

ALYCE

Yes, I did... enjoy it... a lot.

SHIRLEY

Who was he?

ALYCE

A smooth Hawaiian guy.

SHIRLEY

Polynesians don't have body hair?

ALYCE

Hair? No, smooth with me.

SHIRLEY

What did he do?

ALYCE

It's private.

SHIRLEY

Share your secret. Let me believe he was my Polynesian too.

ALYCE

Ah...well. First he began by warming me all over with caresses from his cheeks. Then strokes with the back of his fingernails until I was as steamy as an island stream. But you don't want to hear this.

SHIRLEY

I don't want to hear it. I want to be it.

ALYCE

On Bora Bora with your own smooth Polynesian?

SHIRLEY

On coral pink sands by a lagoon. Sweet ginger scenting my skin, (closing her eyes as she dreams) a mellow moon slipping over willowed waters, his raven hair nestling in the roundness of my breasts and our loins wrapped together in a silk sarong.

Alyce opens the dress box, unfurls a long, silk sarong and drapes it over her. Shirley sees the sarong and continues in her reverie.

SHIRLEY

Bora Bora.

Arvilla enters, dressed in a coral pink suit over which she wears a doctor's short, white lab coat and I.D. badge.

ARVILLA

Shall we go?

ALYCE

Go?

ARVILLA

Bora Bora is not coming here.

SHIRLEY

Blow in my ear and I'll follow you anywhere.

Arvilla blows in her ear. Shirley laughs and offers her other ear to Alyce. Arvilla nods to Alyce who blows in the other ear.

SHIRLEY

I'm your prisoner. Take me.

Arvilla starts to wheel Shirley away.

ALYCE

We're in a hospital.

SHIRLEY

This is a garden.

ALYCE

A hospital garden and you're under medical supervision.

ARVILLA

I am a doctor. And I prescribe an ocean voyage. Ah! A doctor again. It feels divine. Now go ahead of us and distract the orderly. We're busting her out. Skedaddle. Doctor's orders.

ALYCE

How am I supposed to distract a man? Don't answer. (exits)

SHIRLEY

It came yesterday but the stamp's not cancelled.

Shirley hands the letter to Arvilla, who begins to read it.

ARVILLA

You have a daughter?

SHIRLEY

I didn't think I did.

ARVILLA

A second pregnancy isn't likely to have gone unnoticed.

SHIRLEY

Maybe I only have a daughter.

ARVILLA

"I know you call me Vinnie. But do you really know?" That's funny, the bottoms of the letters T and P are all missing. "In the ten minutes that you held me, did you push back my wrap, did they let you? Dear Mother, give me time to know you. Another day, another year. Live a little for me. I need you. Your daughter, Veronica."

SHIRLEY

I've lived a lifetime for Vinnie, and now, when I'm like this, he needs me. Or she needs me. Why do children think they own you? What can I do?

ARVILLA

What do you need to do?

SHIRLEY

I want to live for me. Just for me. Even die for me.

ARVILLA

I'm out of that business.

SHIRLEY

I'm still able to do a few things for myself. Able to make my own disagreeable choices.

ARVILLA

I imagine I'm one of them.

SHIRLEY

You are the most disagreeable of all.

(Shirley tugs her down into an embrace.)

Your hair smells very good. You're welcome.

ARVILLA

And you smell like a newborn. It's been a long time since I delivered a baby.

SHIRLEY

It's been a long time since I've been hugged by a woman old enough to be my mother. Lord, I wish you had been.

Alyce dashes onstage and frantically waves for them to follow and exits again.

ARVILLA

Our decoy's done her job.

Arvilla wheels Shirley toward the exit

SHIRLEY

You think she bartered her virginity?

ARVILLA

If she did, she's a better con artist than I suspected.

Alyce runs past them toward the other exit.

ALYCE

Quick! The side gate. (she exits)

Arvilla turns Shirley to follow Alyce.

SHIRLEY

Maybe we should be wearing moustaches.

ARVILLA

I would be if I didn't pluck it out every week.

SHIRLEY

I won't miss that a bit.

Alyce runs in again, waving them back.

ARVILLA

Lost your touch with the testicle set?

ALYCE

No luck, he said he'd seen me in town nursing the triplets.

SHIRLEY

Motherhood is its own contraceptive.

ALYCE

I found an exit through the hospital laundry. I'll have the engine running and the car doors open. Follow me.

Alyce exits the way she came. Arvilla turns Shirley around.

ARVILLA

We're busting you out!

SHIRLEY

We're runaways.

ARVILLA

On the road.

SHIRLEY

What could be more thrilling?

ARVILLA

On the road and finding a clean rest room

Arvilla wheels Shirley offstage.

BLACKOUT

## SCENE THREE

## THE BEACH TWO HOURS LATER

Alyce paces the top of the cliff looking in all directions and at her watch.

ALYCE

Damn. Where are they? They left the hospital over two hours ago. (looks at watch) My babies must be crying with hunger. (touches her breasts) Oh no. Don't even think about it or I'll start leaking all over the beach.

There is an offstage BEEP from Arvilla's bicycle. Alyce looks and hears them singing, "THERE IS A TAVERN IN THE TOWN", a 19th Century glee club song, in simple harmony. Shirley sings the bass repeats alone

ARVILLA AND SHIRLEY:

There is a tavern in the town,  
In the town.  
And there my true love sits him down,  
Sits him down,

Arvilla pedals onto the beach. Shirley rides on the back with the tail of her sarong looped artfully over her shoulder.

ARVILLA AND SHIRLEY

(brightly)

And drinks his wine with his laughter and glee,  
And never ever thinks of me.  
Thinks of me  
Fare thee well for I must leave thee.  
Do not let the parting grieve thee.  
And remember that the best of friends must part,

Must part.  
 Adieu, adieu kind friends, adieu.  
 Sweet adieu.  
 I can no longer stay with you.  
 Stay with you.  
 I'll hang my heart on a weeping willow tree,  
 And may the world go well with thee  
     (Without waiting for the chorus, Shirley sings  
         another verse solo while Arvilla sings only the  
         bass repeats under largo)  
 Oh spread my ashes wide and deep.  
 Wide and deep.  
 And bid my dear friends never weep  
 Never weep.  
 And sing my dream to the wishing stars above  
     (molto largo)  
 That none should ever die of love.  
 Ever die...  
     (together, slowly and grandly)  
 Of... love..

Alyce applauds with slow sarcastic appreciation.

SHIRLEY

For their next amusement the Prospero Sisters will perform death defying...

ALYCE

(angry) I've had enough of your stunts.

SHIRLEY

We're outlaws on the run.

ALYCE

From hospital security! (to Arvilla) And that's no excuse for pedaling full tilt through the middle of the emergency ward.

SHIRLEY

Arvilla was looking for a get-away route.

ALYCE

That gives you the right to play chicken with an ambulance?  
 In the middle of the Coast Highway? In the fast lane?  
 (building anger) And still take two hours to get here?

SHIRLEY

We rode close to the cliff so the helicopter couldn't see us.

ALYCE

You had me worried sick.

ARVILLA

Her mother hen instinct is in full cluck. Cluck, cluck.

ALYCE

You two go ahead, conspire between yourselves. Rob a bank. I don't care. But if I don't get to a baby's mouth, I'm going to explode. (exits)

SHIRLEY

This a splendid afternoon? Help me to the top. I want to see Bora Bora.

(Shirley's legs buckle as she touches sand.)

The wheelchair put me off the habit of resisting gravity. Would you mind carrying me to the top?

ARVILLA

I'd be happy to. I'd also have to be an eighteen-year-old gymnast. But if we're not racing rabbits, a couple of patient hard-shells like us should cross the finish line in time for a ripping good sunset.

Arvilla helps her toward the path.

SHIRLEY

Don't you find it curious how patience is given to those with no time to use it.

ARVILLA

Most gifts are wasted on people who don't need more. Money to the rich.

SHIRLEY

Pain to the wounded.

ARVILLA

Muscles to men.

Arvilla helps Shirley sit on the rock by the cave.

SHIRLEY

See the sandy beach at the mouth of the creek? Ga-ga told me how her ancestors put out their nets and caught salmon by the blanket full. Now groups of boys and girls come down to the creek at night to put out their blankets and catch herpes. I won't miss them. But I will miss what they're missing.

ARVILLA

The medieval plague killed so many people, they were afraid there wouldn't be enough people to hold back the wilderness.

SHIRLEY

I'm afraid there won't be enough wilderness to hold back the people.

ARVILLA

Nothing can hold us back.

SHIRLEY

Not me, not you. (looking about) You look already packed.

ARVILLA

Except for one thing.

Arvilla digs at a rock in the cliff

SHIRLEY

Packing. That's another thing I won't miss. I tell you, if death were a holiday and travel agents lured people to the grave with glossy brochure reading, (her hands scribe the air) "Die now, easy terms, no payment until judgment day", the biggest red letters would read, "No packing required, come as you are, sleep wear optional."

Arvilla removes the rock and the plain wrapped package.

SHIRLEY

You keep something buried?

ARVILLA

And like your clams from the great beyond, it refuses to stay buried.

Arvilla starts to unwrap the package.

SHIRLEY

You're unwrapping it now?

ARVILLA

You want to see it. But you'll never ask and soon you'll get righteously angered at yourself, boil over and be embarrassed for losing your self control. And by then it'll be too dark to see what this is. So I'm unwrapping it for you now.

She unwraps the plain package and hold up a fifty year old black dress

SHIRLEY

A funeral dress? Your husband, from the morphine?

ARVILLA

My daughter, from her abductor.

SHIRLEY

Your daughter was stolen?

ARVILLA

Taken by a ruddy-cheeked man who had smiled at her dimples. She blew him kisses and he knocked me to the sidewalk and took her away. He took my baby and I was helpless to stop him. I tried to fight, but I didn't know how. My little girl was only four years old when she went out of my life forever.



The police searched for weeks and never found her. The official report was written to spare my feelings. "Maybe she was alive", it read, "because he liked her too much to kill."

SHIRLEY

That's worse than death.

ARVILLA

No, but it shares the same bed.

SHIRLEY

So you kept that dress.

ARVILLA

To remind me of what I'm looking for. But after fifty years this is all I have of her, an empty dress.

SHIRLEY

Life is a terrible sadness...

ARVILLA

...and such a great joy.

SHIRLEY

When we let it be anything at all.

Alyce enters at the top of the cliff. She carries a basket of mixed roses

ALYCE

What a load off.

SHIRLEY

Stay there. We were just coming up.

ALYCE

You're coming up to the top of the cliff? (suspicious) Why? What's up here that's not down there?

SHIRLEY

You, for one. (to Arvilla) I thought the rabbit wasn't supposed to beat the turtles?

ALYCE

I'm coming down. We'll be together.

SHIRLEY

You're marking our finish line. I'm coming up.

ALYCE

I want to put my feet in the high tide.

SHIRLEY

I want to put my toes on the cliff.

ALYCE

I'm not going to help you do that. And neither is she.

SHIRLEY

She's out of that business. Where did you get the roses?

ALYCE

From your garden.

SHIRLEY

(gesturing recklessly) Strew them before virgins.

ARVILLA

That should leave plenty for the rest of us.

ALYCE

Or honor an empress. (tosses a few toward Shirley)

SHIRLEY

As she triumphantly ascends.

ALYCE

Why does the sound of that worry me?

ARVILLA

Let down your mothering. She only means the top of the cliff.

ALYCE

You swear?

SHIRLEY

On my mother's grave.

ALYCE

Ah! You've become a matched pair. 'Ascend' before the whole basket wilts and nothing's left but a shower of petals.

Alyce rains rose petals onto Shirley as Arvilla assists her up the path carrying the trailing edge of her sarong. Alyce curtsies, offers her roses.

ALYCE

Roses to honor an eternal friend.

SHIRLEY

This is very sweet. But I'm not eternal.

Shirley glides back to Arvilla and hands her the outside corner of her sarong. Shirley slowly turns round and round, unwrapping her sarong. She hands the inmost end to Alyce. Alyce and Arvilla hold the sarong like a breast high curtain. Behind it, Shirley raises her arms high above her and turns round and round again to the center of the drape. Alyce looks down at her amazed.

ALYCE

You've nothing on!

SHIRLEY

I've learned never wear ugly underwear.

ALYCE

There are houses around. It's not decent.

SHIRLEY

I refuse indictments of indecency from mothers of triplets

ALYCE

We better go. They hospital will miss you.

SHIRLEY

Hospitals are used to missing people. It happens everyday.  
 (raises the rose basket over the sarong and  
 begins strewing rose petals into the ocean.) )  
 Like these rose petals, they too are carried away with the  
 tide.

ALYCE

It's time we go. I made a raspberry pie. (to Arvilla) No  
 seeds.

SHIRLEY

(continues her snow of rose petals)  
 Look, the full moon is rising, in the east, while the sun is  
 setting in the west. This must be a propitious moment for  
 the gods and the clams.

ALYCE

This isn't any moment, just another sunset. One of many we're  
 going to watch. You promised.

SHIRLEY

(to Arvilla) It's a disagreeable choice she has. Between my  
 modesty and my destiny.

ALYCE

To hell with modesty. You swore on your mother's grave.

SHIRLEY

Didn't I tell you? I never had a mother. My ruddy-cheeked  
 father said she died at my birth. That was the excuse he used  
 for pretending I belonged to him.

(the fiery colors of sunset begin)

What a marvel, nature granting us the privilege of witnessing  
 our earth turn in the heavens. To see the face of god. Ahh.

Shirley clutches the sarong as she struggles to  
 remain standing. Alyce reaches to her.

ALYCE

Shirley!

She is waved off by Arvilla, who keeps the sarong taut to support Shirley.

ARVILLA

Don't let go! Hold on, Alyce.

SHIRLEY

The ancient Greeks were right. The face of god is too overwhelming for any human to look upon and live. (regains composure) Yet, I think, we are twice blessed, that it's face is hidden from us, and that we can know of it at all.

The women stare quietly at the sunset. Shirley smiles and sinks behind the drape. Suddenly her figure pushes the sarong forward, tearing it from the women's hands. Hidden in the sarong, Shirley plunges over the cliff. Alyce screams. The sarong floats downward to rest on the beach. The sound of the rises.

BLACKOUT

#### SCENE FOUR

#### THE BEACH    A FEW DAYS LATER

Alyce, wearing a black hat and simple black funeral dress, appears at the top of the cliff. She carries a plain paper wrapped package. She removes her heels and slowly walks down the path to the beach. She goes to Arvilla's bicycle and puts the package on the bicycle seat. Arvilla, again in her riding clothes and duster, emerges from her lair carrying the original paper package.

ARVILLA

How was the funeral?

ALYCE

She needed you there. Oh my god! She's...

ARVILLA

Taken charge of her life.

ALYCE

Taken charge? She's dead and you helped her.

ARVILLA

I'm out of that business.

ALYCE

Then why? She was starting a new treatment.

ARVILLA

A treatment for her pain.

ALYCE

She had reason to hope.

ARVILLA

Your babies gave her hope.

ALYCE

The triplets were her hope?

ARVILLA

Three times more hope than even she expected. When we were pedaling along the beach, she told me to thank you. Thank you three times. Three times every day of your life.

(Arvilla kisses Alyce three times on the cheek)

Then Shirley told me that while she watched the chemicals drip into her arm she had finally distilled the memories of her life down to one simple regret.

ALYCE

Giving up her baby?

ARVILLA

Giving up her choices. Of all the passages of her life, she wanted one to be of her own choosing, to be forever... hers.

ALYCE

But you helped her die!

ARVILLA

We helped her live. The dying was her own.

ALYCE

The grieving will be ours.

ARVILLA

It's her gift to us and we shall cherish it always.

Arvilla goes to her bicycle and finds the plain package Alyce left for her. Arvilla holds up both packages together and looks at Alyce.

ALYCE

It's from Victor.

Arvilla opens the new package and unfolds the colorful sarong that Shirley at worn at her death.

ARVILLA

You said it was from Victor.

ALYCE

I guess telling the truth is something I still need to work on.

Arvilla holds the sarong to her cheek

ARVILLA

Goodbye my little flower. Bora Bora is forever. Travel well.

Arvilla returns to her bicycle.

ALYCE

Where are you going?

ARVILLA

North.

ALYCE

It's high tide. The beach is impassable and it'll be dark before you can get your bicycle, your 'Fate', off the sand.

ARVILLA

There's a full moon.

ALYCE

And your old eyes can barely see it.

ARVILLA

In Alaska, moonlight on the snow shines bright as the sun.

ALYCE

You want to find another bear, don't you? Oh, god, a polar bear.

ARVILLA

A polar bear, with a coat to match the color of my hair.

ALYCE

Arvilla, you're an half blind old woman with barely another winter in you. Don't you get it? There are no more bears. No more lovers, and if there were, you have damn few nights left to enjoy them.

ARVILLA

That's another of your lies! I will have my wild bears and you can't take them from me.

Arvilla goes to her three wheeled bicycle, but Alyce blocks her way.

ALYCE

Now who is cheating an old woman. This time it's not me, its you, cheating yourself out of the precious last years that you have so carefully..."save for good".

Arvilla, this is the good. Here on this beach, in Shirley's house with me. This is your good.

ARVILLA

I'm called to the North.

ALYCE

It's time to wear that dress, time to spend your savings, sell your preferred stock in General Motors. Time to live the good.

ARVILLA

But I'm riding 'Fate'. He needs a good pumping up a hill.

ALYCE

Fate is a god damned three wheel bicycle. If you ride off on that thing you won't make it to the state line.

ARVILLA

They'll find me and make me pay for what I did to my husband. I can't stay.

ALYCE

I checked the legal records on your husbands death. It was forty-five years ago.

ARVILLA

A lifetime, if he had lived.

ALYCE

The report called it death by natural causes.

ARVILLA

Morphine is not a natural cause.

ALYCE

The FBI haven't been looking for you. No one has ever been looking for you. Not even Victor.

ARVILLA

Not even Victor?

ALYCE

Only you. And now you've been found, healthy and safe, come home.

ARVILLA

But they are after me, chasing me from forest to forest.

ALYCE:

They're not. The only one chasing you... is you... Arvilla, it's time to stop running. It's time to come home and stay. Arvilla, come home.

ARVILLA

Home? Make this cave my home, forever?

ALYCE

Stay at Shirley's tonight. She'd like that. She left a bottle of bubble bath with your name on it.

ARVILLA

She was efficient that way.

ALYCE

I think she'd been saving it for good, whatever that is.

ARVILLA

I think Shirley's choice to die was her way of telling us that being alive is the good. (picks up both paper packages)

ALYCE

I'm going to need help explaining Shirley's fall from the cliff to the police. They may have reasons not to believe me, since I'm the beneficiary of her new will.

ARVILLA

The moonlight isn't as bright and I wouldn't want the police to make your whelps miss their mama. I could stay one night.

ALYCE

The raspberries near her house are almost ripe. Somebody has to help me pick them and make them into pies.

ARVILLA

I don't know much about making pies, but I do know how to carve pumpkins into wicked looking jack-o'-lanterns.

ALYCE

Won't they scare the babies?

ARVILLA

I'll carve smiling ones. Later, when they're two or three, we can start getting scary. They'll like it then.

Arvilla unfurls the sarong.

ALYCE

In the summer you can wear that when you go wading for crabs.

ARVILLA

(caresses sarong) I'm going to miss her.

ALYCE

Oh god, I'm going to miss her too. She was the mother I... Oh Arvilla, what is it? Why do I hurt so much? I want to swim after her... all the way to Bora Bora. We helped her, didn't we? Helped her live, and die, the way she wanted?



ARVILLA

My first conceived, my son who had known only the happiness of his own little house, in never being born had so filled my cup of passion to the rim that when my daughter, with the faerie kiss on her hand, was born, my passion over-flowed and nourished her with the greatest love a child could know. It had taken the loss of my son to know how to give love to my daughter. It had taken life's greatest pain to know its greatest love. As it has taken a billion stars to create a single yellow flower, it has taken a lifetime for Shirley to have her choice. We may have been the tiniest part of her life, but like a little yellow flower, it is through our love and our pain that she blossomed.

ALYCE

I still miss her.

ARVILLA

Mosquito bites itch. But they have to or we wouldn't know how comforting it feels to scratch them.

ALYCE

Did you look for the faerie kiss on Shirley's hand?

ARVILLA

Why should I?

ALYCE

Swear you never thought of it?

ARVILLA

Why should I?

ALYCE

If you want that bubble bath, swear to me.

ARVILLA

I swear, I never looked.

ALYCE

But now you'll...

ARVILLA

Always know. And if I'm to clear you with the police, swear you didn't write Shirley that last letter.

ALYCE

I swear Veronica wrote that letter. Now let's stop this while we're even.

ARVILLA

You still have to promise one last thing.

ALYCE

You always have one last thing, one last maze. I think someday I'm going to have to throw you off this cliff just to get the last word. One last thing, one last time.

ARVILLA

You'll help me tidy my stock portfolio?

ALYCE

I'm out of that business. Pick another last thing.

ARVILLA

Help me find a polar bear to hug.

ALYCE

I'm a little short of bears, but I have three little cubs.

ARVILLA

Winter is around the corner, and I could use a place to hibernate. And three little cubs are sure to keep me company. Not the hot company of a full grown bear, but comfortable enough to snuggle and tell them lies about their mother.

ALYCE

The biggest fairy tale whoppers your fake teeth can rattle out, I'm sure.

ARVILLA

But you have to promise me one thing.

ALYCE

(laughs) One more last thing?

ARVILLA

You won't let your whelps call me Dr. Kershaw.

ALYCE

Since I won't let them call you "the ol'biddy on the beach", what about Great-Grandmother?

ARVILLA

Presumptuous on the evidence... and too long for little mouths.

ALYCE

How about just... Grandmother?

ARVILLA

Grandma would be better. (thinks) Ga-ga would be best.

The sunset turns from brilliant orange, past deep red and through violet on it's way into night.

A surprise last ray of sunset rolls across Arvilla  
and Alyce as light gives way to dark.

BLACKOUT

THE END

SALT WATER WOMEN

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