

# ***GRAND UNION***

A new play  
in 10 scenes and a coda

by

Jerry Slaff

14303 Briarwood Terrace  
Rockville, Maryland 20853  
202.389.2825  
*jerry.slaff@gmail.com*

Literary Representative  
Susan F. Schulman Literary Agency  
454 West 44th Street  
New York, New York 10036  
212.713.1633  
*susan@schulmanagency.com*

## **CHARACTERS**

***NOTE:** All of the characters are seen at different ages in different scenes but should be played by the same actor. For instance, the actor who plays Joan should play her at all her ages. There should be no “Young Joan” or “Older Joan.”*

JOAN, white, Ben’s daughter and Tom’s sister. We see her from age 15 to age 55.

TOM, white, Ben’s son and Joan’s brother; from 10 to 45.

BEN, white, patriarch of the Birnbaum family, 55 to 88. He wears reading glasses throughout much of the play, and takes them on and off as the situation requires.

SAM, African-American, Ben’s shop assistant and later Darlene’s husband and Dwayne’s father, 25 and 50. Does not wear glasses except in Scene 8.

DARLENE, African-American, Ben’s long-time housekeeper, substitute mother to Tom and especially to Joan, Sam’s wife and Dwayne’s mother, ages 20 to 60.

RABBI MIKE Taub, white, homegrown spiritual leader of the town’s small Jewish community, ages 25 and 55.

DWAYNE, African-American, Darlene and Sam’s son, ages 9 to 24.

## **SETTINGS**

The parlor and bedroom of Ben’s old house, the front of Birnbaum’s clothing store, and other places in the nearly forgotten railroad town of Grand Union, Pennsylvania, just north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

***A guide to each scene’s setting and character ages follows the last scene.***

## **TIME**

A span of 40 years, from 1980 to the present.

***The play is performed without an intermission.***

## **A NOTE ON THE PLAY’S STRUCTURE**

The play’s 10 scenes and coda jump back and forth in time over 40 years. Much like the layout of a modern museum, with a straight chronological line through and side rooms where topics can be explored in more depth, scenes 1, 5 and 10 are set in the present and form the play’s spine. The rest explain how the characters got where they were, and how they formed the attitudes that result in those scenes.

TOM explains the structure in Scene 1 when describing his painting:

*“...it's like an old river. It meanders from here to there. Each turn tells a different part of the story, turns back on itself, comes out here, leads to there, but it's all of one piece. It eventually gets where it's supposed to go, but it takes its own time. You just have to give yourself to it, and let it work on you.”*

**Scene One: THE PRESENT**

(TIME: The present.

(We begin in, and will later return to, the parlor and dining room of a large but dated house in Grand Union, a small, once-thriving industrial town in rural central Pennsylvania, just north of the Mason-Dixon Line, the site of a huge railroad junction that sustained the town and its factories until a highway bypass was built and the junction abandoned.

(Opened moving boxes are scattered around the room, brimming with clothes, small knick-knacks, lamps, books, etc.

(This was BEN's house for 90 years, and his parents' before that, until he passed away a month ago.

(His daughter, JOAN, age 55 here, and his son, TOM, age 45, are clearing the house, sorting through his belongings and papers.

(In the midst of all this is a dining table with six or eight chairs. It's too large for the space – all the leaves are in it – and it too is covered in boxes and other odd things.

(NOTE: The chairs will be used in other scenes taking place in the parlor.

(On the table, amid the boxes and other junk is a platter of cold cuts, sliced rye bread, tubs of potato salad and jars of mustard.

(JOAN is agitated, preparing the space and lunch for visitors, while TOM is nonchalantly looking through the boxes, picking things up, looking at them, and putting them back, as if there is all the time in the world.)

JOAN

*(sharply)*

All I thought is that we should have some lunch for her. Let her down easy. It's probably the last time we'll ever see her.

TOM

Yeah, but...

JOAN

And this time, *we* should serve *her*. It's the least we can do. She's been through so much.

TOM

But platters? Really? Supermarket cold cut platters?

JOAN

Don't knock Redner's. I'm sorry if it's not Katz's or Nate 'n Al's. You make do.

TOM

Wasn't there some place more, I don't know, homey? Aren't there any Amish around here anymore? Amish with food stores. German bologna, that sort of thing. I think there's one by my hotel.

JOAN

Like she'll care.

TOM

Supermarket roast beef?

JOAN

She's a simple black housekeeper from a small town in Pennsylvania. She's not expecting anything more and wouldn't know the difference.

TOM

Huh.

JOAN

Huh what?

TOM

I never thought of her as black. She was always just Darlene. Dad always said he was colorblind. I guess I am, too. But still. She was like a second mother to us.

JOAN

Then *you* should have ordered the food. And it's the last thing on my mind, frankly. I have too much to deal with, like what to do with this house, to worry about what deli we're serving to dad's maid.

TOM

She was more than just dad's maid. You used to call her "sister."

JOAN

That was a very long time ago.

(TOM has turned his attention to the boxes of papers.)

TOM

Just look at all this stuff. A 1976 bill from Penelec for the store. Sixty-two dollars and twenty-nine cents. Marked paid. Four-hundred eighty-seven dollars for 55 all-cotton shirts, assorted colors. With a copy of the check stapled on it. I didn't know dad was a hoarder.

JOAN

If you had visited more often you would have. It started when mom died.

TOM

That was seven years ago.

JOAN

And he's kept every scrap of paper since then.

TOM

Didn't you ever clean stuff out?

JOAN

I wanted to, but he threw such a fit. I told him it wasn't safe, it was a fire hazard. You know what he said? "It'll give you and your brother something to do when I die."

TOM

He was right there. I mean, I can understand some of this. Old photos, slides – does he even have a slide projector? Do they even make them anymore? A baseball glove.

JOAN

He wanted to give that to Paulie. See – it has Roberto Clemente’s autograph.

TOM

Really? That could be worth something. How is Paulie anyway?

JOAN

I’m sure he’s fine.

TOM

You two still not talking?

JOAN

Twice a year. Three times, maybe. If he calls.

TOM

You know, the phone works both ways.

JOAN

He writes.

TOM

Emails?

JOAN

Letters.

TOM

Letters? Really?

JOAN

It’s like playing chess by mail. He writes, but he doesn’t say a lot. So I write back, and ask him what’s going on. He writes back and tells me a little. He’s working at a startup in Detroit. So I write back and ask Doing what. And he writes back and doesn’t tell me. All of a sudden, six months have gone by and I don’t know anything. It’s so we don’t have to talk.

TOM

I never really spent much time with him. I regret that.

JOAN

You and Kate should have. You're his uncle.

TOM

Kate never wanted to come east. "I'll come east for your father's funeral," she'd say.

JOAN

That's horrible.

TOM

I haven't seen her for three years.

JOAN

Three years?

TOM

In some ways it's a blink of an eye. And in other ways it's like getting rid of conjunctivitis.

JOAN

Dad could barely see at the end. Cataracts, glaucoma, the whole thing. You remember him and his reading glasses. Always taking them off and putting them on. Plus his legs. Darlene had to help him around.

(TOM notices JOAN has put out a fourth place setting.)

TOM

Who's this one for? Is she seeing someone?

JOAN

She says she's 60 but I think she's older. What's to see?

TOM

You can have a...*companion* at 60 or 70.

JOAN

When I'm 70, I don't want a companion. I want peace and quiet, a cup of tea, a comfortable chair, a badly written book that I don't have to think too much about, and maybe a cat. In fact, I want that all now. She said she might bring Dwayne.

TOM

Wow – I haven't seen him since he went to Penn State.

JOAN

Well, he's been back for a year. You...

TOM

Yes, I heard. Poor kid.

JOAN

Yeah. Such promise. He didn't deserve that. No one does.

TOM

Least of all Dwayne. Kid did everything right, just made one mistake. Horrible.

JOAN

And Darlene too. She didn't deserve it either.

TOM

Of course.

(Pause.)

JOAN

You know Gary didn't want me to come out here so often.

TOM

I can imagine.

JOAN

He said I stuck him with Paulie for the weekends. Imagine that. A father complaining that he was stuck at home with his only son. Go to a ball game, I said. Go play catch. Isn't that what fathers and sons do?

TOM

I wouldn't know. Dad was always at the store.

JOAN

Instead they both went looking for girls. And the son of a bitch found one.

TOM

I didn't know.

JOAN

I used to think he'd come to his senses one day.

TOM

Maybe he thought he did.

JOAN

Meaning?

TOM

Well, you're not exactly a bundle of laughs, Joanie. You never have been.

JOAN

Yes. I'm the responsible one.

TOM

I was a lawyer. I made my money, and I got out as soon as I could.

JOAN

And now you're an artist. Was it birth order? Or because you left for California the minute you got out of college and I stayed back home in New Jersey to be closer to him?

TOM

I didn't leave to get away from you or him.

JOAN

Yes you did. The only reason you didn't keep going west after Stanford is that you couldn't drive to Hawaii. You wanted to put as many miles between us as you could.

TOM

That's not true.

JOAN

And you got to live the artist's life with your Malibu girlfriend and her rich relatives in a beach house and I stayed back in Succasunna, New Jersey. Good old Sucky-sauna. The Paris of Interstate 80.

TOM

Hey -- I finished my painting! The one of downtown. Finished it last week. I brought it with me to give to the museum in dad's honor.

JOAN

Can I see it?

TOM

Maybe later, before the museum opening. It's an odd piece. Most of my work is representational. A bowl of fruit, a countryside. Like a street—it goes from A to Z in a straight line. But this one, it's like an old river. It meanders from here to there. Each turn tells a different part of the story, turns back on itself, comes out here, leads to there, but it's all of one piece. It eventually gets where it's supposed to go, but it takes its own time. You just have to give yourself to it, and let it work on you.

JOAN

Sounds awful.

(TOM wanders around the room, and inspects the walls and woodwork.)

TOM

The house looks in good shape. It needs work, of course. It needs a friend. Like you.

JOAN

You think so?

TOM

Sure. The bones are good. Old houses are like people, and people need friends. They creak, they breathe, they break. They can even get sad. I've seen sad houses and I've seen happy houses. Not the people in them. The houses themselves. It's strange. They have emotions, old houses. Good days and bad days. Just like people. Except you can restore them back to their youth.

JOAN

You see the poetic side of this place. I do too sometimes. But I also see a leaking roof, a water heater that's about to blow, 14 bedrooms that need painting or new wallpaper, and floors that creak and bend. Fourteen bedrooms! Why in hell did he buy a house with 14 fucking bedrooms, six baths and three kitchens? For the four of us!

TOM

Distress sale. It was the grandest house in town. He said it was good for the Jews, and great advertising for the store. People would pass the place and say, "Who lives there?" "That's Birnbaum's house." "That's Birnbaum's house? You know, I might need a new suit..."

JOAN

Do you know how much it will cost to restore it? Thousands, tens of thousands.

TOM

Then why did you want it?

JOAN

It's where I grew up.

TOM

I grew up here too.

JOAN

It's my space. And I really have nowhere else to go.

TOM

I can't believe that.

JOAN

You have California and two hundred fifty thousand dollars from dad. I have this house. This ninety-thousand-dollar-if-I'm-lucky house that needs thirty thousand in repairs. He asked me if I wanted it ten years ago. Of course I said yes. He knew I loved it.

TOM

What are you going to do with it after you fix it up? You can't live here all by yourself?

JOAN

Why not?

TOM

You want to be the crazy old lady who lives in the tumbledown mansion on the cover of *Battered Homes & Gardens*?

JOAN

I don't know. Probably a bed and breakfast.

TOM

Here? Who's going to come here to a bed and breakfast in the middle of Pennsylvania? And you'll cook?

JOAN

I'll make it a resort. I was an interior designer for a while. I can do that on the cheap. Yes – maybe a writers' retreat. They'll go anywhere quiet. All they need is some coffee and WiFi. Add a sun room, convert some of the bedrooms into libraries, build a gazebo on the lawn in the back. Have lecturers speak on architecture and French cinema. We have the land. It's certainly quiet. And I can bring in Darlene to do the cooking.

TOM

I'm just glad he didn't saddle me with it.

JOAN

*Saddle?*

TOM

In the end, Joanie, it's just a house. A thing. Something to use. It has a price.

JOAN

*(angry)*

No, dammit. It is not "just a house." We were born here. Physically, upstairs, with a midwife and everything, in the same bed Mom and Dad died in. I had my first kiss on the porch. People would come over and I'd play piano. Rabbi Mike held services here – here in this room – when the temple burned down. Dad gave her those pearl earrings for their thirtieth anniversary right there. Got down on one knee and asked her to marry him all over again, just like in the commercials. So it's not "just a house." It's our lives. Everyone shopped at dad's store. Birnbaum's was known for a square, honest deal. We were just up the street from Braverman's candy store. Remember Sol Braverman?

TOM

He sold and moved to L.A. to get out of this place. I had dinner with his grandson Terry last week. He opened a medical marijuana dispensary on Pico. A Gen X candy store.

JOAN

It was the corner of Main and Pine streets, but everyone used to say “Meet me at the corner of Birnbaum and Braverman.” We were an important part of this town once. There were twenty Jewish families here, and we were part of this town just like anyone else. We didn’t have to prove anything. We fit in.

TOM

They let us fit in. To a point. They came to our bar mitzvahs, but we weren’t invited to their confirmations or their weddings.

JOAN

Us, the Bravermans, Kaplan’s shoes, Shapiro’s piano store, old man Finkelstein in the creepy house on Maple, Mrs. Goldberg the witch from Romania – we used to run past her house when we walked home from school. And mom, she was the kind of woman who dressed up to take out the garbage.

TOM

Mom never took out the garbage. She left that to Darlene. Or me. She was always out playing *mahjong* and puffing on her Chesterfields with her friends. I’m surprised neither of us have asthma from her smoke.

JOAN

She did her share until she got sick. Until the railroad stopped running down by the bay and the Walmart opened and killed downtown and all the stores. So don’t tell me it’s “just a house.” Because it’s not. It’s not.

(SHE glares at him, half-crying.)

TOM

Joanie...

JOAN

I’m done. You fix the sandwiches for a while.

(SHE exits, abruptly leaving TOM in the dining room.)

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Two: 1985**

(We now go back 35 years, to 1985.

(We are in the front of Birnbaum's men's clothing store, on the main street of Grand Union. There are tables with folded shirts, casual pants and sweaters. If we could see them, there would be suits hanging from racks on the sides, and shoes in the back. While it is not immaculate, it is well-kept and well-stocked, a place where a small-town businessman could buy a good suit and set of clothing, nothing designer, but solid American-made clothing.

(BEN, the store's owner and father to JOAN and TOM from the previous scene, is folding the contents of a recently delivered carton of shirts onto the display table, along with his assistant, SAM, who works beside him. BEN is wearing reading glasses, and takes them on and off during the scene as the situation requires.

(BEN is 55 and white; SAM is 25 and African-American.

(BEN is having trouble folding the shirts appropriately. HE winces from pain in his fingers and hands every so often. Reading glasses hang from his neck.

(SAM notices BEN isn't folding the shirts well, and his occasional mumbles of pain, sadness and embarrassment.)

SAM

Here, boss. Let me help you.

BEN

*(exasperated, not angry)*

I've been folding these shirts for 40 years, since before your daddy ever caught sight of your mother. I don't need your help now.

SAM

I think today you might.

(BEN winces again, and stops.)

BEN

Maybe you're right. Dammit. You hit 55 and your body turns to shit.

SAM

That's not old. My daddy's still kicking at 65, and he says every day you spend above ground is a good one.

BEN

That's because he's retired. I visited him at the home last week. Good man, your daddy. We go back a long way. If you were having a bad day, he'd make it his business to cheer you up. Put a smile on your face...

*(a slight beat)*

...and a shine on your shoes. He looked good. He told me he just sits around all day drinking Miller High Life and watching old Fred Astaire movies on TV. Come to think of it, that's not a bad way to live. Is he okay there? Didn't look like a very hospitable place, but I guess that was all you could afford.

SAM

He's as well as could be expected, with the oxygen tubes and the walker and that buzzer that calls the nurses. And he hasn't had a drink in years. Not allowed.

BEN

*(conspiratorially, laughing)*

But you sneak him in some, don'tcha?

SAM

*(laughing)*

Maybe every so often.

BEN

Me too!

(THEY share a laugh.)

Y'know, Sam, you're a good boy.

(SAM reacts ever so slightly to being called "boy," but his reaction is tempered by the fact that BEN is older, is acting paternal and has been good to him – but also that BEN could easily fire him.)

You treat your father right. I only hope my kids do the same for me.

SAM

I'm sure they will. Your boy's only, what, ten?

BEN

Yeah, but you can already tell he's looking to break away. Always looking for something new. When the world goes right, Tom goes left. Joan's a good girl. She'll take care of me.

SAM

How's Mrs. Birnbaum these days? I haven't seen her in weeks.

BEN

She's usually playing *mahjong* or bridge with the doctors' wives most nights. Doesn't get back until late. Darlene makes us dinner, and we all sit and talk.

SAM

Darlene's a fine cook. She, uh...I'm not sure I should tell you this. She sends me your leftovers.

BEN

She does?

SAM

Man, what that woman can do with some ground beef, mushrooms and a few potatoes! I hope you don't mind, me taking your food.

BEN

Nah. Make some good use of them. Mrs. Birnbaum used to throw away the leftovers. Wasn't good enough for her.

(Pause, as THEY work on the shirts as before.)

You sweet on Darlene? Not that it's any of my business.

(SAM slightly grins. HE's not very happy about discussing this topic, but defers to BEN because of age, and to keep his job.)

Hard to tell if you're blushing, son, but that's all right with me. She's a good woman. A fine woman. Knows her way around a kitchen and a nursery. Make someone a good wife.

*(kidding him)*

You better hurry!

(BEN winces again from the pain in his fingers. SAM notices and takes the shirt BEN was folding and quietly folds it and lays it out.)

SAM

*(changing the subject, trying to deflect from BEN's pain)*

This is nice material. Linen? Hard to believe it's March and we're already getting in summer goods. Maybe I'll get one of those white summer suits for a Saturday night with Darlene. A simple white linen suit, like they wear down south.

Why don't you take a rest, boss. Let me do the folding. You don't look so well.

BEN

Perhaps you're right.

SAM

You want a Coke or something?

BEN

You got any of that stuff you smuggle in to your daddy?

(SAM reacts.)

It's okay. I know it's early. But it's just us here.

SAM

You sure?

BEN

*(defiantly)*

Sure I'm sure.

SAM

It ain't Mogen David.

BEN

It's nine in the morning. I'm not choosy.

(SAM goes to a coatstand and fishes in the pocket of his coat for a flask-sized bottle in a bag. HE takes it out and gives it to BEN.

(BEN twists the cap off and cleans the top with his hand. HE brings it to his lips, stops, and puts it down. HE eyes SAM closely. HE gets a handkerchief from his pocket and cleans it again more thoroughly. Then HE drinks, and reacts strongly – it's strong stuff.)

Man oh Manischewitz! Where'd you get this stuff? Some of you boys cook it up in a still out in the mountains?

(HE takes another swig, and reacts.)

Lord! Do I still have eyebrows?

SAM

Wake you up of a morning, don't it?

BEN

That it does. That it surely does.

(Pause.)

Sam, we're two men here. We can talk. Man to man. Right?

(SAM is unsure what this will lead to. HE returns to folding shirts and arranging other stock.)

SAM

Uh, sure, boss. Something on your mind?

BEN

Sam, I've always tried to treat you right. Given you days off, time to see your daddy, bonuses when your people come in and buy – and that was smart of you to talk up the store with them. A lot of stores here wouldn't want their traffic, thought it was too much of a hassle, didn't want that type of customer. But we expanded our business 35 percent once we started selling to them.

SAM

No one's selling these kind of clothes in the Diamond. But you know how some of them, well, they don't really like coming down here. Don't want to come down here unless they need to.

BEN

Why is that?

SAM

They just don't feel comfortable.

BEN

Not comfortable? Why, I've been here all my life. I never felt uncomfortable coming downtown to buy a pair of shoes, or have lunch at Peduzzo's. You ever been to Peduzzo's? Donna there makes a great chicken salad sandwich.

SAM

We kinda have our own places to eat. More to our liking.

BEN

I get you. You know what means "*hamish*"<sup>1</sup>?

SAM

Can't say I do.

BEN

---

<sup>1</sup> pronounced HAY-mish

It's Yiddish for "homey."

SAM

*(misunderstanding it for his own vernacular)*

*Homie?*

BEN

Home. Like they say, where they have to let you in. Peduzzo's is *hamish* for me, just like wherever it is you go is *hamish* for you.

SAM

Sally's.

BEN

Hmmm?

SAM

Sally's. It's called Sally's. Where I go.

BEN

Sally's? I never heard of it.

SAM

Not many white folks have. Just like not a lot of black folk go to Peduzzo's.

BEN

Where is it? The Diamond?

SAM

Way past there. Sugar Bay Lane.

BEN

Sugar Bay Lane? By the dump? The old train yard? All the way out there?

SAM

It's not that far.

BEN

Last time I was out Sugar Bay Lane I was hauling the missus' old stove to the landfill. If that don't beat all. Sugar Bay Lane. Never knew there was a restaurant

there. Like I said, I've lived all my life in Grand Union but there's always a surprise.

You're a good fella, Sam. You're articulate and bright and clean. You can appeal to folks in the Diamond, and to regular folks. You're a young man. You know I'm going to be getting out of this racket in 10 years or so. Mrs. Biurnbaum wants to move to Florida with all the other Jews. We do all seem to end up there!

But what do I need with Florida when I've got everything I need right here? My friends, my store, my synagogue, my community, my whole life wrapped up in this little town. She says times are changing, everyone's moving out of these small towns, especially our kind of people. Give it twenty years and it'll just be you and Sally's. She'll probably buy out Peduzzo's!

Sam, I've always believed in a universal truth, a bargain among people, among communities, and that's if you do right by someone, they'll do right by you. Doesn't matter man or woman, young or old, Jew or Gentile, white or black. If you do right by them, they'll do right by you. Like the way you and your boys helped us out last year when the temple burned down. You know me. I'm colorblind, I guess. I don't see color. Not a lot of people in this town can say that.

Sam...now I'm just gassing here, but Sam, and just hear me out...maybe you'd buy the store from me in ten years when I retire to wherever the hell she wants me to go.

(SAM is stunned.)

SAM

Buy the store? This store?

(SAM starts laughing.)

BEN

What...what's so funny? My father opened this store in 1945, just after the war. Fought in the Pacific, came back here, worked twelve hours a day and sixteen on the weekend. He let me have it when he passed. My brother Victor didn't see the use for it. But it gave me and my family a life, and the biggest house in town. That was old man Cornish's mansion, the railroad king, they called him. I grew up from riding my bike and throwing newspapers on the porch when I was a kid to owning it. They didn't want to sell it to my father, to a Jew, but for the right price anything's for sale to anybody. If it weren't for him and his sacrifices, it would be

like I was buried in one of those coal mines out west. You'd never hear about me. Now I'm offering you that opportunity.

SAM

Buy the store? Wouldn't that be a trick.

BEN

I...I don't get it.

SAM

First of all, where am I gonna get the hundreds of thousands of dollars it would take to buy this store?

BEN

Would it really be that much?

SAM

Are you serious? The biggest men's clothing store in the county? Doing the kind of business we do? It's worth at least three hundred thousand dollars now, probably three seventy-five or four hundred in ten years' time.

BEN

I wouldn't know. The cash flow is good, I'll grant you, but I've never thought of putting a dollar value on it until just now. And I can sell for whatever I want to you. How's fifty bucks?

SAM

You sell me the store for fifty dollars and all the other storeowners in town will come after you with pitchforks. If you don't sell it for what it's worth, their property value goes down.

BEN

I didn't think of that. But still, you can raise that, can't you?

SAM

A black man in central Pennsylvania can't just stroll into a bank and come out with three hundred thousand dollars unless he's got a machine gun in his hand!

BEN

I can set you up with Morris from United Federal down the block. We go through him for credit for the goods.

SAM

You go through Morris, or Johnny or Pete or whoever. You pay me in cash, and I put it in the First National Bank of My Pants Pocket.

And anyway, do you actually think the men in this town will buy their clothes from me? *From me?*

BEN

They do now.

SAM

They buy them from *you*. I just open the door and stock the shelves. Did you know that last week your pal Mel from the supermarket wouldn't let me measure him for a new suit? He wanted you.

BEN

Really? Mel Greenburg? Why is that?

SAM

You tell me.

(Pause.)

Now, I don't want to hear anything about you selling the store to me. You're going to move to Florida and leave it to your children, like your father did. And I don't want to hear anything about where I eat or what I do or who I'm sweet on. I'll fold the shirts and stock the shelves like I always do. I'll be the best goddamn employee you've ever had. But that's what I am. Your employee. Are we clear?

BEN

Don't you want to lift yourself up, son?

SAM

I *am* lifted up. I have a high school education, a job, a place to lay my head at night and a good woman. This is as *lifted up* as I'm gonna get in this town. And yes, Darlene and I are seeing each other. I was going to ask if you were all right with that, but I don't have to ask your permission to see her.

(Pause.)

BEN

Sam, did I do anything wrong?

(Pause.)

I try my best. We all do. At least most of us do. You know some of my long time customers told me they'd take their business elsewhere if I hired you. I told them if that was the case, I didn't want it. But they came back. I knew they would. Sometimes it takes a long time for people to change. Look at me. I'm 55. Maybe I don't say the right thing all the time, but *my heart*...my heart is pure.

(Pause.)

Why don't you take the rest of the day off. No one's coming in today. Maybe I'll close early.

(HE gets up, stops, fishes for his wallet, takes out a ten dollar bill and gives it to SAM.)

Here. Take Darlene out for dinner. Take her to Sally's, or Peduzzo's, or wherever you want.

(Pause. SAM hesitates, but eventually takes the money.)

Just leave me that bottle, okay?

(SAM gives BEN the bottle, gets his coat, and leaves.

(BEN walks around the store, takes a healthy drink from the bottle, and sits on the side of a display table.)

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Three: 1985**

(We are still in 1985, approximately.)

(RABBI MIKE, age 25, is holding a Friday night service in the living room of BEN's house – because the temple has just burned down.)

(A number of chairs are set up facing upstage, their backs to the audience.)

(SAM, age 25, is standing to one side, trying to get 25-year old DARLENE's attention, but she's occupied with JOAN, who is 20 here. SHE's also looking for BEN, age 55. TOM, aged 10 here, is wandering around bored, acting like a bored ten-year-old.)

TOM

(to JOAN)

Another boring service.

JOAN

Oh be quiet.

TOM

I will not! You're not my boss!

JOAN

Yes I am. I'm your older sister, and if your older sister says to be quiet, you should be quiet.

TOM

*(shouting)*

No I don't! I hate services!

(ALL look at TOM, then quickly return to what they were doing.)

DARLENE

Now some respect, son. Tonight is very important to your daddy, so behave yourself.

JOAN  
(to TOM)

See?

DARLENE  
And you too, Miss Joan, or else I won't braid your hair like you like it and you'll have to go back to college with frizzy hair.

JOAN  
Okay.

(SAM walks over to DARLENE.)

SAM  
Hi.

DARLENE  
(*quietly*)  
Not now.

SAM  
When?

DARLENE  
After. Two hours I guess. I've heard these rabbis can go on and on. After the food. Why're you here anyway?

SAM  
Ben, uh, Mister Birnbaum asked me to. 'Cause of how we helped. Me and the boys.

DARLENE  
That's nice of them. Some folk appreciate people more than others.

SAM  
Darlene, I...

DARLENE  
(*cutting him off*)  
Later. Now scoot. Plenty of time later.

(SAM walks away dejectedly.)

(BEN enters with RABBI MIKE, deep in conversation. BEN is wearing reading glasses, and takes them on and off during the scene as the situation requires.)

RABBI MIKE

Ben, I wanted to publicly thank you for letting us use your house tonight on such short notice.

BEN

No trouble at all. It's the least I could do after what happened. I feel sick about it.

RABBI MIKE

Really, in the end, Ben, it's just stuff. Books, furniture, things. We'll recover.

BEN

But it's...it's like my second home. Who would do such a thing?

RABBI MIKE

Let's not jump to conclusions. There was no graffiti, no one broke in, and we found out who our real friends are. Remember, I grew up here too.

BEN

My father actually helped build some of the pews.

RABBI MIKE

I remember your father well. He sold me my bar mitzvah suit.

BEN and RABBI MIKE

*(together, as if it's a joke they've told all their lives)*

At cost!

(THEY share a small laugh.)

BEN

After I saw it, I never thought I could tell a joke or laugh again. It's like losing a friend, or my right hand, or my wife. But you're right. We'll rebuild. We must rebuild.

RABBI MIKE

Incidentally, I found my old school yearbooks when I moved back to town. When was the last time you heard from Victor?

BEN

*(totally taken aback)*

Who?

RABBI MIKE

*(quizzically)*

Victor, your brother, Ben. When did he leave for San Francisco? I remember him from school.

BEN

*(acidly)*

No one's heard from Victor in 15 years, and we prefer it that way.

*(Pause.)*

Oh, Mrs. Birnbaum won't be joining us. She's up in bed. Too upset over the whole thing.

RABBI MIKE

Should we try to keep it down a little?

BEN

She took two Ambien. She'll be dead to the world soon enough.

*(HE sees JOAN and TOM with DARLENE, and can tell they're not enthusiastic.)*

And there they are, my two little rays of sunshine. They giving you any trouble, Darlene?

DARLENE

No, Mister Birnbaum. Well, this one, a little.

*(SHE means TOM.)*

TOM

I hate services.

BEN

I'll let you in on a little secret. No one likes services. Not even the Rabbi. But it's the price you have to pay for having that sponge cake after.

(to JOAN and TOM)

Say *Shabbat shalom* to Rabbi Taub, children.

JOAN and TOM

(together, very perfunctory and whiny)

*Shabbat shalom*, Rabbi Taub.

RABBI MIKE

Why, hello Joan. Ben, you shouldn't treat her like a child. She's in college. Aren't you?

JOAN

Hello, Mike. Yes, my second year at Pitt. I'm studying psychology.

RABBI MIKE

Really? I did too, before the seminary, at Muhlenberg. Say, maybe we can have a cup of coffee later? I'd love to hear about your classes.

JOAN

Uh, sure. I'd...yes. I'd actually like that. Yes.

RABBI MIKE

How long are you in town for?

JOAN

Another week or two.

RABBI MIKE

Great – I'll give you a call this week. I must tell Jennifer I saw you.

And as for you young man, all the local congregations have a baseball league. I play shortstop on our team. Keeps me involved with the kids. And we need a second baseman. Maybe you can play, Tommy. Just think of me as your friend. Maybe we can turn a double play together!

(RABBI MIKE turns back to BEN.)

BEN

Rabbi, I'm honored. And like I said before you can use it for as long as you'd like. Don't think anything of it.

TOM

*(interrupting)*

Can you sit with us, dad?

JOAN

Yeah, dad, could you?

*(BEN crouches down to talk to his children.)*

BEN

Now kids, I have important business to discuss with the Rabbi. Maybe later we can do something together. I know—we can play checkers.

TOM

I hate checkers.

BEN

*(mildly annoyed)*

You just mind Darlene.

*(BEN gets up and re-engages with RABBI MIKE.)*

RABBI MIKE

Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. It's a kind and generous offer, but not a very feasible one, holding services in your parlor every Friday night and Saturday morning. And then religious school on Sundays. So I was talking to some of the other clergy in town about perhaps sharing their space.

BEN

Sharing their space?

RABBI MIKE

For the time being. Until we rebuild.

BEN

You mean Father Tim at Holy Redeemer? That's a beautiful building. Right downtown, too. A dignified, gorgeous building. We'd have to cover up a few things, of course.

RABBI MIKE

Of course.

BEN

The crosses. And the statues.

RABBI MIKE

Actually, we won't be using Holy Redeemer. Father Tim turned us down.

BEN

Is it money?

RABBI MIKE

We didn't get far enough to discuss money.

BEN

What about Trinity Reformed?

RABBI MIKE

Reverend Andrews didn't return my call.

(Pause.)

But you know who did welcome us? Do you know First Zion Ebenezer?

BEN

*(unbelieving)*

First Zion Ebenezer?

RABBI MIKE

It's down in the Diamond. Reverend Clifton is a lovely man. In fact, I didn't have to approach him. He came to me and offered.

BEN

*(softly, as if he is trying to come to grips with this)*

In the Diamond?

RABBI MIKE

For free. Not that it matters.

BEN

The Diamond?

RABBI MIKE

He said he and his congregation would be honored to host their brothers and sisters in exile.

BEN

*(sharply)*

Rabbi, do you think this congregation would seriously...

RABBI MIKE

We share a lot with them, Ben. Similar stories. And they've already helped us once in our time of need. I could hardly refuse.

*(BEN glares at RABBI MIKE.)*

I know the...*sensitivities*. I grew up here. This is my home temple. But it's 1985.

*(Pause, as BEN looks at him, holds for a few seconds, and stiffly walks away.)*

Do you want me to start?

*(BEN ignores him.)*

RABBI MIKE

*(to the others)*

Friends, we'll be starting in a moment, so please take your seats.

*(JOAN gets up and approaches him.)*

JOAN

Mike, is there anything I can do to help?

RABBI MIKE

That's very kind of you. Maybe you can help Darlene hand out the little cups of wine later on.

(SHE returns to her seat, mission accomplished.)

(As everyone begins to get settled...)

TOM

I don't wanna take my seat.

DARLENE

Just do as you're told.

(SHE looks at him out of the corner of her eye.)

If you stay real still for twenty minutes, you can help me in the kitchen and I'll give you some of the Rocky Road ice cream I tucked away in the freezer.

TOM

Twenty? How about fifteen?

DARLENE

You hush or I'll make it thirty!

(TOM thinks it over.)

TOM

Okay. Twenty minutes.

DARLENE

That's my young man.

(Eventually, RABBI MIKE takes center stage and addresses the makeshift congregation.)

RABBI MIKE

*Baruch ha-bah b'shem adonai.* All blessings to those here who have come in the name of the Lord.

My friends, these are unusual times. Sad, divisive and unusual times, times we must stand against bigotry, against hate, together as Jews, and with our friends in the larger community. And I thank Ben, his wife who couldn't be with us tonight, and his young children for opening up their home to us for tonight's service. And I

especially thank young Sam over there, who brought all his friends over from the Diamond to help us clean up. We'll be seeing more of them soon, but that's for another time.

(BEN stands up, looks at RABBI MIKE, and leaves.)

Last Tuesday, we suffered an unthinkable tragedy. Who is responsible – and I pray that no one is, that our beautiful eighty-year-old building was not the target of intolerance, but of a simple gas leak or stray spark – that is not my concern tonight. Sometimes there is no answer. Sometimes acceptance is the only answer. But somewhere there is another place, maybe not as verdant and large, but a place where we can make a life.

My concern tonight is what we can do, how we can respond, again, as Jews, and as a community.

While this is only my sixth month as your rabbi, and only my first year out of the seminary, I see many friends from my younger days growing up here at this congregation. I see many of you I don't know as well, and in the coming months – and years, I hope – I'll get to know you too.

When I grew up here, I was told an interesting story about why this town is named Grand Union. It speaks directly to our situation tonight, and how we can respond.

Don't worry, I'll keep it short.

DARLENE

*(quietly, but audibly)*

Praise the Lord.

RABBI MIKE

As many of you know, this was a railroad town. A hub, between the coal fields in western Pennsylvania and the cities in the east. And at the edge of town, down by the bay, there was a huge rail yard with trains coming in on eight different sets of tracks in sixteen directions. They all met at the junction, which the railroad men called a grand union. And the trains would pass each other, either loaded with coal headed east or with passengers from the city headed west, doing an intricate ballet, moving alongside each other, sometimes within inches, but never touching, never on the same track – because that would mean disaster.

And once a town built up around the junction, it was named Grand Union.

But then they built the interstate, and more trucks meant fewer trains. And as the trains got longer, they couldn't use it anymore, so they abandoned the junction in the Sixties. You can still see traces of it if you walk along Sugar Bay Lane and look carefully.

It's a pretty generic name for a town, but still, I think, it's a good name. *Grand Union*. It's what we're hoping for, something we're striving to be. And so tonight, as we pray in our grief, let us also pray that our town becomes a grand union once more – a grand union of humanity.

And I look forward to seeing where we all are in twenty years. We will rebuild, and I see a great future ahead for this town, for our temple, and for everyone in our community.

Now, let's have some of that sponge cake.

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Four: 1980**

(We go back five years to 1980.

(JOAN, age 15, is sitting upright in a chair, as DARLENE, age 20, is brushing her long hair.

(DARLENE takes a few long strokes, and JOAN is quiet, enjoying herself and the attention, but pensive, deep in thought.

(DARLENE gets JOAN's hair caught in a knot, and pulls a bit too hard, as JOAN reacts.)

JOAN

Ow! Be careful!

DARLENE

Sorry Miss Joan, but your hair is so kinky, sometimes I think we must be related.

(THEY both laugh, as they've done before at this.)

JOAN

Sisters.

DARLENE

Of a type. Sure, like sisters.

JOAN

Good. I'd like you to be my sister. Then we could share everything.

DARLENE

Oh? Like what.

JOAN

Oh, books. Stories. Our diaries! Do you keep a diary, Darlene?

DARLENE

A diary? I don't want to write down any of what I'm thinking half the time. Sometimes it might not be too pretty. We don't live in a world where everyone gets to be angry.

JOAN

I write down everything. So one day, when I'm a famous actress in Hollywood, they'll have something to publish and everyone in this town will know it and treat me with the respect I deserve.

DARLENE

Your friends treat you badly at school?

JOAN

That stupid Jennifer Taub. Thinks she can run around all airy like because her father owns all the taxis in town. Last week, she got picked up in a limousine from school and everybody went inside except me. Even her dumb brother Mike.

DARLENE

Why was that, dollface? Is she angry at you? Did you say something to her?

JOAN

Well, I did make her look dumb in history class. Mister Cole asked what we knew about the War of 1812 and I said "Ask Jennifer if she knows when it started."

DARLENE

That was kinda mean. But I know that family. Girl probably didn't!

JOAN

I know!

(THEY laugh.)

She goes out with boys a lot. Lots of boys. You know.

DARLENE

She'd better watch herself. No boy's worth getting yourself in trouble for. And certainly not at your age.

(Pause.)

But dollface, boys aren't all bad. Isn't there a boy you like? You're fifteen. There must be something churning away inside you by now when you see a fine boy walking by.

JOAN

Well, maybe.

DARLENE

Nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, if it weren't for boys, there'd be no babies, and none of us would be here. But all in good time, I guess. My mama found a fine man when she wasn't too much older than you, younger than I am, in fact. And they're still together, just waiting for me and my sisters to give them some grandbabies. It's all nature. It takes its time.

JOAN

Still. The boys in this town are horrible. All they want to do is kiss girls, play football, and roll around in the mud.

DARLENE

Jennifer's brother Mike seems like a nice boy.

JOAN

Michael Taub? *Ugh*. That's why I'm going to Hollywood as soon as I can.

DARLENE

Are the boys better there?

JOAN

I'm gonna marry Timothy Hutton whether he likes it or not!

DARLENE

As long as you leave me Denzel!

(THEY laugh.)

JOAN

I know a boy who's sweet on you, Darlene.

DARLENE

Who's that, dollface?

JOAN

Sammy. The boy who works at dad's store.

DARLENE

Now you hush about Sam.

JOAN

Dad's always saying he's a good fella. That's what he calls him.

(SHE puts on a deep voice.)

"That Sam's a good fella. Make a good husband for Darlene one day."

(DARLENE stops brushing JOAN's hair.)

DARLENE

He said that?

JOAN

He most certainly did.

DARLENE

I'm not sure I like your daddy talking about who I'm sweet on, or who's sweet on me.

JOAN

Why is that?

DARLENE

Because I'm my own person, and it's none of his business. Just because I do your laundry and cook your food, and Sam works at his store, doesn't mean he can talk about our business all over town.

JOAN

Daddy says next year when we go to Florida, he might take you with us. That'd be fun.

DARLENE

It'd be more fun if he paid me double for it.

(Pause.)

JOAN

Don't you like us, Darlene?

(DARLENE sighs.)

I like you all fine, dollface. But after I take care of you, I have to take care of my own family, too. My mamma needs me to look after her. She has terrible cramps in her legs. Can barely get around these days.

JOAN

*(looks up and around at DARLENE)*

I'm sorry.

DARLENE

Nothing you had to do with, and nothing you or me can do anything about. She takes her pain pills and watches Oprah. That's all the medicine she needs.

(DARLENE resumes brushing JOAN's hair.)

That's a very pretty hair clip you have.

JOAN

It's called a barrette. Daddy gave it to me for my birthday.

DARLENE

I love how the little pieces of glass shine the light in all directions. It highlights your pretty face.

(JOAN turns around to DARLENE.)

JOAN

Do you want it?

DARLENE

Dollface, I couldn't.

JOAN

You need to be pretty for when Sammy comes by.

DARLENE

Now I told you, you leave Sam out of this. Besides, what would your father say if he saw me with it? He'd accuse me of stealing.

JOAN

No he wouldn't. And if he did, I tell him I gave it to you. As a gift.

(JOAN takes off the hair clip, gets up, and puts it in DARLENE's hair. DARLENE has a tone of unease here. This is far more intimate than she would like, as if JOAN is forcing it on her.)

There. You look beautiful. It's easier to clip it to your hair than to mine anyway.

DARLENE

Thank you, dollface.

(JOAN sits down again, and DARLENE resumes brushing her hair.)

JOAN

One day, when I come back to this town with my Academy Award, they're going to have a big parade for me, and dumb old Jennifer Taub will drive me in her limousine because that's all she's good for, is doing stuff for other people, not for herself.

(DARLENE slightly reacts to JOAN's small insult, but eventually takes it in stride.)

And you and Sammy can sit right next to me and my husband, Timothy Hutton.

DARLENE

That's a lovely dream, dollface.

JOAN

It's no dream. I'm gonna make it happen. You watch.

DARLENE

I'll make myself ready for it.

JOAN

'Cause we're sisters. Always have been, always will be.

(DARLENE continues to brush JOAN's hair.)

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Five: THE PRESENT**

(And now we're back in the present.)

(As we were in the beginning, TOM, age 45, is going through BEN's effects, the cold cuts for lunch on the table, waiting for DARLENE, who is 60.)

(HE goes through one box, and pulls out books, papers, old bills and the other remnants of a life. HE looks them over and puts them back in the box.)

TOM (age 45)

*(definitively)*

It's all going. All of it. Every last paper, every last utility bill. I'm calling 1-800-Get My Father's Shit Out Of Here.

(HE picks up one large box and looks inside.)

Look at all these reading glasses. He really was blind at the end, I guess.

(HE digs deeper into it.)

Old batteries, broken pens. C'mon, let's find something good I can put on eBay, like an "I Like Ike" button. That's a good forty bucks. Pay for a nice steak dinner in this shitty little town.

(HE finds a large box and looks it over.)

One hundred gross of plastic collar stays! Unbelievable.

(JOAN, age 55, comes in, still as upset and agitated as SHE exited in Scene One.)

JOAN

I see you found his secret stash of collar stays. The Great Collar Stay Disaster of 1982, mom called it. You were too young to remember. He thought he'd bought enough collar stays to last a lifetime. He thought he'd cornered the market. Except they went out of fashion that season. All his shirts came with the collar stays already sewn in. Mom gave him hell for it. "You wasted all that money on collar stays!" They didn't talk for days.

TOM

All over collar stays?

JOAN

It's funny what married people will fight over. The littlest thing to the wife is a big deal to the husband.

TOM

Plastic collar stays. Who would have thought? I'll just pitch it with the rest of his junk.

(JOAN goes picking through BEN's stuff.)

JOAN

No. Don't be so cavalier. This is the sum of dad's life, and it's going to the junkyard. It's strange how the smallest things fill up with memories. Do you remember the duck?

TOM

Oh my God. The duck! I think I saw that yesterday. It's got to be here somewhere.

JOAN

Someone came in the store, some old hunter guy from outside town. He had to go to his mother's funeral but he didn't have a black suit, and couldn't pay for even the cheapest we had. Dad gave it to him on credit, and the guy comes back the next week with a beautifully carved and painted decoy duck to pay for the suit! Dad said he couldn't turn him down. It was for his mother's funeral after all. So he took the duck, even though he never hunted a day in his life and hated the idea of it. And it sat above the fireplace for 15 years until mom said one day she despised it, and it was either the duck or her. So out went the duck. I never knew what happened to it.

TOM

I found it in a box of old broken calculators and a dial telephone.

JOAN

We can't just throw out the duck.

TOM

You take it.

JOAN

I'll put it back above the fireplace. It will remind me of him, and the joy on his face when he brought it home.

(Pause.)

Who's going to do this for us, Tom?

TOM

Hmm?

JOAN

This. Go through our things when we die. Who's going to decide what to keep and what to throw out? What was important and what was junk? Who?

TOM

You've got Paulie.

JOAN

He'll see it as just as much a burden as you do. If I go first, you'll clear my stuff out for me, right?

(Pause.)

Right?

TOM

*(sarcastically)*

Nothing would give me more pleasure.

JOAN

And you'll put the duck above your fireplace. If you have a fireplace.

TOM

Of course.

(HE finds a framed photograph, which throws him for a loop for a second.)

Joan! Look what I found.

(HE shows her the photo.)

JOAN

I remember going, but I...we took her?

TOM

Yep. Look, see – there's you, me, mom, Mickey, The Little Mermaid, dad and Darlene. And it looks like dad has his hand on the Little Mermaid's ass.

JOAN

I can't believe we took her. Why?

TOM

Do mermaids have asses? Or just kinda plump scales? And look at the gills on her!

JOAN

Couldn't mom take care of us herself? For even a week?

TOM

I seem to remember you two were very close.

JOAN

I was a kid.

TOM

You were sixteen.

JOAN

That's a kid.

TOM

*I* was a kid. I loved it. No rules. Mom stayed in the room complaining most of the time, and dad bought me whatever I wanted. Rode all the rides, ran around and drove everyone nuts. You and her went to the stores and complained about the heat.

JOAN

It was hot!

TOM

It was December.

JOAN

It can be hot in Florida in December.

TOM

She left her family alone to take care of us. In December. Wasn't it around Christmas?

JOAN

Dad would let Sam run the store around Christmas. I never understood that. We're not celebrating anything, let them have a good time, some vacation.

TOM

He paid him double.

JOAN

Money doesn't make everything right. It doesn't excuse everything.

TOM

Now you're sounding like me.

JOAN

The well-fed artist.

TOM

The only glory in starving for your art is looking back on it as you push away from the banquet table.

JOAN

Speaking of banquet, you doing okay with those sandwiches?

TOM

Sure. Turkey on the left, roast beef on the right, there's your rye bread, your spicy brown mustard – nice touch – potato salad and cole slaw. You went all out, Joanie.

JOAN

Stop it.

TOM

Must have run you, what, twenty-five, thirty dollars?

JOAN

Look. This is probably the last time we'll ever see her. She's been through a lot. First Sam, then Dwayne. Maybe you can help her out.

TOM

Me?

JOAN

You got money. I got this house.

TOM

I know it seems uneven. But he knew you loved this place.

JOAN

Yes. Yes I do. I truly do. Every chipped brick, every leaky copper pipe, every rusty gutter, every squeaky door, every rotten joist and rafter. The way the upstairs bathroom shower head drips and gushes and drips and gushes. How the whole house goes dark if I run my hair dryer. How it's too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter.

(Pause. Then SHE changes.)

How soft the bed covers were. How Dad's big chair in the living room fit him and me together just right. How the sweet smell of his breath made me forget Mom's cigarette smoke. He practically kept the Certs breath mint company in business. There's things about this house you'll never know. Things that I'll never know too. Things as faded as the wallpaper in the kitchen, as the paint above the old front door.

(And SHE snaps out of her reverie.)

Oh, I don't know. Maybe I *will* make it a bed and breakfast. Not that anyone would want to come here. Fourteen bedrooms, six baths, a basement, an attic, three kitchens.

TOM

It's a lot of house.

JOAN

Enough for me to lose myself in. Or maybe...maybe I'll sleep in a different bedroom every night. Depending on how I feel.

TOM

How's this. I'll give her fifty thousand. It's mostly hers anyway from what they paid for the store. And her choice of what's left of the furniture. Okay by you?

JOAN

Sure. But I keep that big chair.

(As she's arranging things, she notices an easel tucked out of the way. SHE picks it up to move it, but TOM stops her.)

TOM

Don't – it's for the painting. I wanted Darlene to see it before I brought it to the museum. I drove out from California with it all the way here. Didn't want to trust the airlines with it.

(TOM goes to a corner and retrieves a painting wrapped in brown paper and twine,)

JOAN

Can't I see it first?

TOM

I want it to be a surprise.

JOAN

Please? It's the least you could do for your older sister.

TOM

*(reluctantly)*

Just don't touch it.

(TOM removes the paper and twine, and shows the painting to JOAN, who is momentarily stunned.)

JOAN

It's...it's just like I remembered it. It's so full of life! Like it used to be when we were kids.

TOM

Yes. There's the store on the right, United Bank just in the foreground, Bressner's TVs on the corner...

JOAN

Is that...

TOM

Mister Braverman playing checkers with Mister Donaldson the lawyer outside Peduzzo's. And that's dad walking down the street, in a blue striped seersucker suit and straw hat. I call it *Main Street, Grand Union, 1969*.

JOAN

How long did this take you?

TOM

Two years. Took me seventeen pencil sketches to get everything right. All the little stories buried in it, all the town intrigue. You know, you turn 40, things have happened to you, and you begin to reflect. A lousy childhood suddenly becomes all rosy and bright.

JOAN

Lousy? Our childhood wasn't lousy. At least mine wasn't.

TOM

No mom, dad always at the store.

JOAN

We had a mother.

TOM

So I heard.

JOAN

That's awful.

TOM

That's what you said to me at her funeral. "I didn't think I could identify the body without a cigarette and a mahjong tile in her hand."

JOAN

That was mom.

TOM

At least you had Darlene.

JOAN

And now we have to settle with her. Are you sure he didn't leave her anything?

TOM

I'm not the executor. Last I heard from Donaldson was when dad first got sick, five years ago. I get money, you get the house, and the junkman gets all this.

(HE indicates the furnishings in the room.)

JOAN

You know why he chose Donaldson and not Jakey Lebowitz? He told me, "Even I don't trust a small-town Jewish lawyer, especially one I went to Hebrew school with."

(SHE checks her watch.)

She was supposed to be here ten minutes ago.

TOM

You have some place to be?

JOAN

So we give her money?

TOM

I got much more than you, and it's more than enough.

JOAN

You're still left with more than double what I got.

TOM

But you have the house. And all the memories.

JOAN

But you got more. You always got more. More from mom, more from dad.

TOM

Don't give me this "dad liked you better" bullshit. He may have given me things, but he gave you *his time*. I got nothing. You were the big sister, and everyone doted on you. I was the little runt. You were the star. I was Joanie's little brother.

JOAN

(getting angry)

Says who?

TOM

Every teacher at school, every girl I tried and failed with.

JOAN

Why was that so horrible? Was I a witch?

TOM

You were a selfish brat and you know it!

(Their heated argument is interrupted by the sound of a weak and dying doorbell, the type of doorbell that plays the first few bars of *The Star Spangled Banner* or *God Save the Queen*, but the battery is dying so it sounds like a funeral dirge.)

JOAN

He never could change the battery in that damn doorbell.

(to TOM)

We only have two more days here before you can go back to California and forget about me. That will make you very happy, I'm sure. So just keep it together, for God's sake.

(to the door:)

Coming!

(JOAN exits to answer the door – it's DARLENE. We hear them greet each other off-stage, but mostly we hear JOAN.)

(DARLENE, holding her purse and a plastic grocery bag, enters with JOAN, and just looks around.

(SHE is 60, but looks and feels older than her years. Perhaps SHE has a cane. But the overall feeling is that DARLENE is just tired, and worn out from life.)

DARLENE

This place sure seems empty without Mister Birnbaum. Empty of life. And it's so cluttered.

TOM

Well, we're taking a lot of his stuff out.

DARLENE

The phone bills?

TOM

And electric bills, and rubber bands and old plastic tubs.

DARLENE

He always told me to keep those, that he might have a use for them. I'd throw out half of them when he wasn't looking and he never caught on. Of course he was old at the time. Could barely make it downstairs or out of bed.

TOM

Darlene, it's so good to see you after all these years.

DARLENE

Tommy. Let me look at you. Little Tommy boy. Always squirming and shifting around. Little Tommy. Not so little anymore.

TOM

Darlene, can I ask you something? Something a little personal?

DARLENE

Depends what it is.

TOM

I'm kind of in a dilemma here. When Sam passed, what did you do with his clothes?

DARLENE

Why Tom, they'd never fit you.

TOM

No, I don't mean that. I mean...I have so much of my father's clothes, and first he was so big, and then at the end he was so small, so they're in so many different sizes. I can't use them. And I'd feel kind of, I don't know, weird wearing his clothes. How did you get rid of them?

DARLENE

Get rid? Tommy, all my relatives came and picked through them after the funeral. Waste not, want not. They felt it was an honor to wear his clothes. I kept one of his ties, made it into a bow for my hair. That way he's always with me.

*(quietly, to TOM, so JOAN can't hear)*

You should do that for Miss Joan. I can tell she's really going through a time without him.

TOM

You were so good to him.

DARLENE

Thank you. You still like Rocky Road ice cream?

TOM

Of course! You didn't bring any, did you?

DARLENE

Well, I knew you were having lunch, and a good guest should bring something, so...

*(DARLENE reaches into the grocery bag, takes out a pint of Rocky Road ice cream, and hands it to TOM.)*

*(in a motherly tone:)*

We'll keep this for dessert, little Tommy. Dwayne's coming later. He always liked to share his ice cream with you.

*(TOM is overcome. HE's like a kid again. Pause as he composes himself.)*

TOM

I'll...I'll go put this in the freezer.

(HE exits with the ice cream, and DARLENE gets up and starts preparing a sandwich for JOAN.)

DARLENE

What would you like to eat, dollface?

(JOAN is totally taken aback.)

JOAN

Let me serve you today, Darlene.

DARLENE

It's no trouble. But that would be lovely.

(DARLENE returns to her seat.)

JOAN

Roast beef? Roast beef looks good. Or turkey? Or both?

DARLENE

I'll leave it up to you. I always remember the night after you had your Yom Kippurs, Mrs. Birnbaum would have all these cold cuts and sandwiches and the whole temple would come over. Your father paid me double those nights, and he snuck me out the leftovers for Sam and my mamma.

JOAN

How is your mother?

DARLENE

Oh, you know. Nobody's getting any younger. Now the doctor's say there's something with her feet.

JOAN

Does she have to go to a home? Like where Sam's father went?

DARLENE

We could never afford that for her, too. But the bigger house would help for all the equipment and stuff she needs. Dwayne too. And soon I'll be needing help. A house like this would be good for all of us.

(JOAN glosses over that last bit, as if SHE didn't even hear it.)

JOAN

Potato salad?

DARLENE

Thank you, yes. You people sure do know your deli sandwiches!

(SHE reaches into her purse and gets out a small pouch.)

Oh, Joanie, Mister Birnbaum, before he passed, he gave me these earrings. I think they were your mother's. I wanted you to have them.

(JOAN opens the pouch.)

JOAN

These were mom's pearl earrings! From their thirtieth anniversary! He gave them to you?

DARLENE

Some people, before they pass, they start giving things away. I didn't know if he was in his right mind, and besides, what do I need with them?

JOAN

*(crestfallen and unbelieving)*

He gave them to you?

DARLENE

I'm an old widow lady. I don't go out. You could use them. Go find yourself a new man.

(DARLENE gets up and puts the earrings on JOAN.)

See? You're beautiful, Miss Joanie.

JOAN

*(quietly, almost to herself)*

He gave them to you?

*(DARLENE sits back down and starts eating.)*

DARLENE

Dwayne will be here shortly. Could I trouble you for some mustard, Miss Joanie?

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Six: 2005**

(We go back 15 years to 2005.)

(TOM is 30, DWAYNE is 9. They are playing a leisurely game of catch with baseballs and gloves. There should be a satisfying *thwack* sound when the ball hits the glove, punctuating the dialogue like a metronome.)

(After a few long, looping throws:)

TOM

You've got a good arm for a 9-year old, Dwayne.

DWAYNE

Thanks, Mister Birnbaum.

TOM

Mister Birnbaum is my father. Call me Tom.

DWAYNE

*(liking being able to call an adult by his first name)*

Okay, Tom.

TOM

You ever lose the ball in the sun?

DWAYNE

What do you mean?

TOM

In the summer sun?

DWAYNE

I don't play much catch. Just when you're visiting.

TOM

How's school going for you?

DWAYNE

Oh, just fine.

TOM

What's your favorite subject?

DWAYNE

That's easy. Math.

TOM

Math?

DWAYNE

There's only one answer to any math problem. I can do the entire times table. Up to twelve! Ask me.

TOM

Okay. Eight times seven.

DWAYNE

Fifty-six.

TOM

Is it?

(HE stops and thinks.)

I guess it is. I use my calculator too much. Four times nine.

DWAYNE

Thirty-six.

*(hurriedly, like a little kid trying to get lots of information out in a short time)*

Did you know in the nine times table, if you add up the individual numbers, they add up to nine? Like thirty-six, three plus six equals nine. Forty-five, four plus five equals nine.

TOM

You're too smart for me, Dwayne.

DWAYNE

I like math because you can do a problem, and then you come back to it three days later and the answer is still the same. And it doesn't matter who's marking the test, or where you are, eight times nine is always 72. I do the times tables in my head to go to sleep. One times one is one, one times two is two, one times three is three. I usually fall asleep by the middle of the fours.

TOM

That's a good system. You know what I think of? I think about everybody who played for the Pirates when I was a kid. Stargell at first, Mazeroski at second, Freddie Patek at short and Richie Hebner at third. By the time I get to Clemente in right field I'm asleep.

DWAYNE

You saw them play?

TOM

My father took me to Three Rivers a few times. I was too young to go to Forbes Field.

DWAYNE

That must have been cool.

TOM

I was about your age, a little older. He was real sad. The temple had burned down, and he was very upset about it. Your father and his friends helped us out, but he was never the same after that. He was happy at the ballpark. I remember him sneaking me a little sip of beer. I hated it! It tasted like old socks. But it made me feel like I was more than his son. Like I was his friend too. I'll never forget that.

DWAYNE

My dad's always at the store.

TOM

I'm sorry. He's doing a good job with it too, now that he owns it.

DWAYNE

He works hard for me and mom.

(Pause. A few throws up and back.)

Tom?

TOM

Yeah, Dwayne?

DWAYNE

What did you do to get into college?

TOM

Well, I just applied. Penn State will take a smart kid like you. I'm lucky they took me, but I had a plan.

DWAYNE

What plan?

TOM

Well, I thought I'd become someone *they* wanted. See, everyone in school was taking Spanish. But me, I decided to take French, because I figured they'd need students to fill out a French class, and keep the French professors employed. And when it came time to go, they gave me a nice scholarship to study French.

DWAYNE

So you kinda changed yourself to fit what they wanted?

TOM

That's the ticket to a lot in life. Find an empty shape, and bend yourself to fit in it.

(Pause, as they continue to play.)

DWAYNE

Tom, what's it like to have money?

(TOM stops.)

TOM

What do you mean?

DWAYNE

Well, my parents always said if we had more money, they wouldn't have to work as hard.

TOM

My father worked hard at the store until he retired. Now your father has the store and works hard. One day he'll retire, and someone else will have the store. That's how life works.

(Pause.)

DWAYNE

But what's it like?

TOM

Well, when you get older, sure, you have more money, but you have more responsibilities. A house, a family, maybe an employee like your father. If you're asking me what it's like to be rich, I wouldn't know.

DWAYNE

Tom?

TOM

Yes, Dwayne?

DWAYNE

Can I ask you something?

TOM

Sure. What do you want to know?

DWAYNE

Am I going to be rich?

TOM

If you want to be, and if you work hard, and if you're lucky, sure. I don't see why not.

DWAYNE

Even though I'm black?

(TOM stops again.)

TOM

I...I can't answer that, Dwayne.

(TOM takes off the baseball glove.)

What if I take you for some ice cream? How's that?

DWAYNE

Mom always says it'll spoil my dinner.

TOM

We don't have to tell her.

DWAYNE

Only if it's two scoops.

TOM

How's three scoops?

DWAYNE

*Three scoops?*

TOM

In a waffle cone.

DWAYNE

Three scoops in waffle cone! *All right!* Tom, you're the best!

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Seven: 2017**

(BEN's bedroom. HE is 88, and in poor health after a fall. It is mid-morning, but the room is dark, and HE is quietly dozing in the bed, the effect of various pain medications.

(His daughter JOAN, age 53 here, peeks in the room, and enters quietly, not to disturb him. She checks various things in the room—his medications, his clothes, etc.—and eventually sits quietly in a chair near bed, watching him, trying to make herself as small as possible.

(After a bit of this, DARLENE, age 58, enters, opens the curtains, and light floods in. BEN reacts badly. SHE is not as frail as SHE was in the previous scene, but SHE is slowing down.

(JOAN is furious.)

BEN

*(groggy from sleep and his medications)*

Goddammit, Barbara! Can't a man get some sleep in his own bed without his wife waking him for no goddamn reason!

DARLENE

*(evenly, taking no notice of his tirade or JOAN's anger)*

'Morning, Mister Birnbaum. Time to get up. It's nearly ten-thirty.

BEN

Oh. Ten-thirty?

DARLENE

Yes. Time to wash up and join the world. Humanity ain't gonna stop just because you're taking the Percocet.

JOAN

Just what do you think you're doing?

DARLENE

Oh hello, Miss Joan. Did he have a good night? You can leave now if you'd like.

JOAN

Leave? This is my father!

DARLENE

I'm aware of that. I can take care of him just fine now.

BEN

*(to DARLENE, embarrassed)*

Did I call out for her again?

DARLENE

Don't let it bother you.

BEN

I miss her, Darlene. It's been five years but I still miss her. I still keep her face powder open in the bathroom, like she's coming back to use it.

DARLENE

You're still grieving. My mother says grief is just love with no other place to go.

BEN

When she was here, I barely saw her. Now that she's gone, I miss not seeing her, but knowing she's here.

DARLENE

You see her every night though.

BEN

Only when I take those pills. Do you see Sam like that, too?

DARLENE

I don't need pills to see my Sammy. He's in everything he touched in our house. He's in Dwayne. He's with me right now.

*(SHE touches a hair band she's wearing.)*

Look at us. Two old foolish widow folks yammering on about seeing ghosts.

JOAN

*(to BEN)*

Dad. How are you? Did you get those cramps in your legs again? Here, let me massage them out.

*(JOAN places her hands on BEN's lower legs, and HE reacts badly.)*

BEN

Joan? Is that you? What are you doing?

JOAN

I'm massaging your legs to get the cramps out.

BEN

I don't have any cramps. Stop meddling with me like that. I'm just fine.

JOAN

But dad, I...

BEN

Why don't you let the two old people here have a conversation?

JOAN

I thought we could, you know, talk.

BEN

About what?

JOAN

About the old days. With you and me and mom and Tommy.

BEN

Joanie, I love you. But I'm in no mood to reminisce. I'm 88, I just got up, I'm hungry, I feel like shit, and I haven't...you know...

DARLENE

For three days. It's worrying me.

BEN

It's the painkillers.

DARLENE

Since when did you go to medical school, doctor? My mother has the same thing. More water and more fiber is what you need. Today you're eating two bowls of bran and that's final. You hear me?

BEN

That stuff tastes like last year's telephone book.

DARLENE

What if I put some maple syrup on it?

JOAN

*(interjecting)*

Mom used to...

DARLENE

*(ignoring her)*

Spoonful of syrup makes the fiber go down. Now let's get you out of bed and moving. It's the only way you're going to recover.

JOAN

Are you sure? He looks like he's in pain.

DARLENE

Oh, he'll be fine. We all gotta keep moving. Just one foot in front of another, keep moving, or else you'll be left behind.

BEN

*(joking with her)*

You talking about my left behind again?

*(DARLENE gives him a playful smack on the arm, and starts walking him gingerly around the room. HE reaches for his ubiquitous reading glasses.)*

Let me get my glasses.

DARLENE

You don't need your glasses with me. Just let me lead you around.

BEN

How am I supposed to see, dammit?

DARLENE

Now you be quiet or else. You hear what they do to those people in those homes, right? You don't want to scare me off. I have enough to deal with back at my own house.

BEN

Your mama doing okay?

DARLENE

Not since Sam died. He'd take care of her when I was taking care of you. But now with him gone...

BEN

I'm sorry for anything I did, Darlene.

DARLENE

You didn't do anything. He just worked himself to death. You didn't know they were building those big stores outside of town.

(Pause.)

You didn't, did you? You and your friends?

BEN

*(hesitantly)*

No. No, I did not.

DARLENE

Twelve hours a day at the store, four more at home taking care of my mother, paying back the loan to you, no wonder his heart gave out. And worrying about whatever crowd Dwayne was running around with at college, too.

BEN

Boy's doing okay for himself, isn't he?

DARLENE

He'll be fine. If he can handle being the only black boy at Mercersburg, he can handle being the only one on the Penn State lacrosse team.

(JOAN is concerned by his slow, hesitant walking.)

JOAN

Don't you think you're taking him along too fast?

DARLENE

Miss Joanie, I love you like a sister, I do. But I can take care of your daddy just fine. Why don't you...why don't you get him some breakfast together. Some coffee and that oat bran.

BEN

Don't forget the maple syrup!

DARLENE

Can you do that for me, Joan?

JOAN

Uh, sure. Sure I can. Dad, is that what you want?

BEN

Listen to Darlene, Joanie. Let us two old folks be.

(Pause, as JOAN angers.)

JOAN

It's...it's just not fair. Not fair at all.

BEN

What isn't fair?

JOAN

I'm your child. Your only daughter. Now that you don't have the store to go to I thought we could spend time together. Like a family. Especially with mom gone.

BEN

Your mother was never around to begin with. You know that. Darlene knows what I need right now.

JOAN

I moved back home to be with you!

(BEN and DARLENE stop walking around the room.)

DARLENE

Joan, if you want to help your father, you'll keep him calm and get him some breakfast. I've got this all under control.

(JOAN glares at DARLENE and walks off in a huff.)

BEN

She always was an excitable child. Always picking fights with people. Maybe she's right. That store killed Sam and it damn near killed me. Maybe it's haunted.

DARLENE

Maybe the men in this town should have bought more suits.

(BEN laughs.)

BEN

You always were a card, Darlene. Thank you.

DARLENE

Thank me for what?

BEN

For not judging me.

DARLENE

Judging you? Sometimes you white people make everything so dramatic. You paid me for a job. I did that job. I like you, I even like Joan, and I like being paid for what I do.

BEN

I'm hope I'm more than just your employer, that this is more than just a job.

(DARLENE looks at him.)

DARLENE

Let's get you walking again. How's this. One more turn around the floor and we'll have breakfast.

BEN

I hope Joanie remembered the maple syrup.

DARLENE

You and your maple syrup. Now let's walk...

(THEY continue to walk around the floor.)

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Eight: 2010**

(TIME: Ten years ago. SAM is 50, and DWAYNE is 14.

(We are back in the front of Birnbaum's men's clothing store. Even though SAM bought it ten years ago, it's still called Birnbaum's.

(SAM is arranging the stock, and DWAYNE is going over the books—a handwritten ledger book he is transferring into a laptop.

(SAM is wearing reading glasses, and takes them on and off as the situation requires.)

DWAYNE

Dad, do you know how much we're paying for electricity?

SAM

That's why I pay you your allowance.

DWAYNE

How long has it been since you went over the books?

SAM

It *has* been a while.

DWAYNE

We're paying over five hundred dollars a month.

SAM

Is that a lot?

DWAYNE

I don't know if it's a lot, but I'll bet we can do something about it. Change the lighting for those new bulbs, maybe work something out with the electric company. Have you ever called them?

SAM

No. Can you do that?

DWAYNE

Dad, I'm 14.

SAM

So? Tell them you're my partner.

DWAYNE

Well, it wouldn't hurt to call them. The money's better in our account than theirs.

SAM

How did you get so smart? Sending you to Mercersburg with all those white boys will be worth the investment. Even if I have to keep this store open 12 hours a day to afford it.

DWAYNE

Do I have to go, dad?

SAM

Damn straight you have to go.

DWAYNE

But all my friends are staying here.

SAM

And that's exactly why you're going to Mercersburg.

DWAYNE

You and mom think I hang out with thugs.

SAM

We know you don't. But let me tell you, they're all around you. Black *and* white. All those boys with the funny names. Ashante. Kalijah. Duh-wayne. What the hell kinda name is Duh-wayne? It's *Dwayne*. We named you Dwayne, not *Duh*-wayne. You'd best stay away from those kids. No good can come from hanging around boys named LaQuinta or Emoji. Stick your neck out the window, son. This is central Pennsylvania, not Nairobi. They're nothing but trouble.

DWAYNE

You don't know them.

SAM

The hell I don't! Boy, I've lived in this town for the entire 50 years of my life. Fifty years of side glances from the police. Fifty years of women crossing the street late at night when they see me. Fifty years of my friends dying from dope, drinking, working too hard or working too little. And fifty years of busting my ass, all so we can send you someplace where you can make something of yourself.

DWAYNE

You made something of yourself. You've got the biggest clothing store in the county.

SAM

I didn't create it. I bought it, for too much money. And I don't even have the self respect or the gumption to change the name from Birnbaum's. I may own it, but really, it's not mine.

(SAM walks over to DWAYNE.)

Son, we need to have a talk.

DWAYNE

I know, I know. Stay away from the police. Always keep your hands where they can see them. Call everybody sir or ma'am.

SAM

Not that talk. We need to talk about white people.

DWAYNE

We do?

SAM

Yes we do.

DWAYNE

You mean rich people.

SAM

Don't tell me what I mean, boy. Mercersburg is a good place, and I know they try, but it's never going to be like your school here. It's a different environment. You'll be dealing with white boys, white boys with money, not like the hoodlums here.

DWAYNE

You always say my friends are hoodlums!

SAM

Watch those boys. Study what they do. If you want to succeed in this world, like it or not, be like them. If they go out, go with them. If they start talking about some TV show, watch it and join in.

DWAYNE

So you're telling me not to be black?

SAM

Of course not. First of all, that black isn't coming off your face. Just...just don't be *too* black. Don't deny your people, but don't...well...

You've got to walk a tightrope, boy. Blacks on your left, whites on your right. And you're carrying a balance beam that's as big and heavy as a telephone pole. You've got to be a goddamn circus performer if you're a black man and want to make something of yourself. I can only imagine if you've got the added misfortune of being a black woman like your mother.

Do what the white boys do, son. At your school, what sports do the white boys play?

DWAYNE

Sports? Basketball, just like everybody else.

SAM

Yeah, but you don't have enough white boys at your school to make a difference. I hear they play lacrosse a lot. You ever play lacrosse?

DWAYNE

Lacrosse? With the sticks and the nets?

SAM

Yeah. I'll bet Mercersburg has a lacrosse team. Go out for it. Even if you're not good, watch them and learn. Be part of the team. Even if means being the only black boy playing lacrosse in all of Pennsylvania. And then, that's how you get into a good college. By being the only black lacrosse player in Pennsylvania.

DWAYNE

I don't know, dad. I just want to be myself. You know, video games, computers, that kinda stuff.

SAM

"Just wanting to be yourself" is something you can't afford, son. Maybe some white boy from Philadelphia can just be himself, but you can't if you want to do something more with your life than run a store and measure white peoples' inseams.

DWAYNE

Why? And why do I have to leave home for school?

SAM

Because there's nothing in this town for you. Not for you or any young man, black or white, but especially a smart black boy like yourself. Get out of here while you can. And don't you dare look back.

DWAYNE

You and mom stayed here. You get along with everyone. Old man Birnbaum.

SAM

Mister Birnbaum's a good enough man, and he treats me and your mama fine. But there's something about that whole family. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about them. They try, but sometimes good enough isn't good enough.

DWAYNE

Tom's a good guy. Your friends from the Diamond helped them when the temple burned down.

SAM

You know why we helped them? Not because we're such good people. We're people like everyone else. We were all afraid we were going to get blamed for it.

DWAYNE

Blamed? For the temple burning down? Why would they do that?

SAM

And you asking that question is exactly why you're going to Mercersburg. So you won't ever have to clean up someone else's shit. So you won't ever have to live in fear of people turning on you.

Son, I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. And all the mistakes we've ever made is what makes a life. You can't have a good life without making mistakes. I used to think I'd learn from them and move on. And that one day at my funeral they'd say what a great man I was, a solid husband and father and a "credit to my people," which is what they say about black people when they can't think of anything else to say.

But you know what? I'm tired. I'm tired of looking over my shoulder every goddamn minute of every goddamn day. I'm tired of being tired. I don't want that for you. Go play lacrosse for Mercersburg. Study hard. Then go to a college far away from here. I want you to be so smart, white people are afraid of you. Just get out of this goddamn town and never look back. Promise?

DWAYNE

I don't want to do that. I like it here.

SAM

I don't give a shit what you *like*, boy. I am your father, and I will tell you what my father never told me. There's nothing for you here. The only things to do in this town are eat McDonald's and die. Get out and stay out.

DWAYNE

*(shaken)*

Can't...can't I visit?

SAM

Of course. Just make sure you have a way to get out of here. A nice car. A round trip ticket. New York. Chicago. L.A. is a good place. I wanted to go to California when I was your age. Make a life for myself. Before I met your mother. What's it cost to go to California? Five hundred bucks?

*(HE goes to the ledger DWAYNE is working on, and takes a blank envelope out of the back, then gets his wallet and puts some money in it.)*

This is twenty dollars. It's your California money. I'll put some in there every so often. In ten years, you'll have enough to go to California. Deal?

DWAYNE

I don't know, dad.

SAM

Of course you don't. You're 14.

(SAM takes the envelope and hides in an obscure place  
in the store.)

There it is. And there it will stay. It will be there when you're ready. Now go call  
the electric company and work something out with them.

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Nine: 2015**

(TIME: Five years ago.

(We open on the parlor of BEN's house. It is quiet and still for a few seconds, then we hear a rattle of keys in a door, and the door opening.

(DARLENE enters slowly. SHE is 55 here, but feels older and tired. As SHE enters, SHE takes off a winter coat, and hangs it up. Under the coat we see she is wearing a maid's apron. SHE disappears into the kitchen.

(A few seconds later, everyone else enters--JOAN, TOM, BEN, DWAYNE and RABBI MIKE.

(JOAN, 50, is her usual dyspeptic self, trying to keep everyone in line and things moving.

(TOM, 40, is more languid, looking around the old house.

(BEN, 85, is slowly shuffling in. Perhaps HE uses a walker.

(DWAYNE, 19, is quiet and silent, doing things by rote.

(RABBI MIKE, 55, is thoughtful and despondent.)

JOAN

(to RABBI MIKE)

I don't understand why you had to pick the coldest day in February to do this. They could barely dig the ground!

RABBI MIKE

It was time, Joan. The cemetery had a free weekend, and I could find the time to come back from Pittsburgh.

JOAN

How's Alanna?

RABBI MIKE

She's fine. I try to visit her every day, but my schedule is so packed when I get there she's usually asleep.

JOAN

I'm sorry.

RABBI MIKE

You come to terms with it. She seems to be happy in her own world. Some days she knows who I am, others I'm a complete stranger. But she watches TV, listens to the radio, falls asleep to the Pirates games. I used to take her to the ballpark when we were first married. She hated baseball, but she loved the hot dogs. Chili dogs. She could never get enough of those chili dogs. Our insurance is good, thank God.

JOAN

Is there anything...?

RABBI MIKE

She is who she is and who she will be is who she will be. Jennifer used to come to see her but she needs to live her own life. She comes once a year. It's expensive to fly from France. She told me to send you her love, by the way.

JOAN

And you?

RABBI MIKE

My work keeps me busy.

JOAN

Mine too. And dad. Caring for him. Mike, you remember all those years ago...

(SHE takes his hands in hers.)

RABBI MIKE

No what-ifs.

(SHE drops his hands.)

JOAN

Of course.

*(Changing the subject abruptly and awkwardly:)*

Where are the sandwiches?

RABBI MIKE

Sandwiches? You know you and Ben didn't have to.

BEN

I hope you didn't make Darlene set things up. She's still grieving.

JOAN

I invited her back when I saw her at the grave. I hope she didn't think she had to...oh, no. *Darlene!*

*(JOAN exits to the kitchen.)*

BEN

*(to RABBI MIKE)*

She's just like her mother was. Controlled chaos, without the control.

RABBI MIKE

How are you, Ben? I'm sorry I haven't been able to see you much. It's only a two hour drive, but my new congregation has me hopping.

BEN

Don't worry about it. Us guys, we can not talk to an old friend for 20 years, and then take up just where we left off like no time had passed.

RABBI MIKE

You doing okay?

BEN

You know that occasional crick everyone gets when they turn 55?

RABBI MIKE

Yes, in my lower back.

BEN

Imagine that, but all over. And you know I'm 85. I'm in my last rounds.

RABBI MIKE

Don't say that.

BEN

I don't mind, really. Life is still good right now. Joan helps. Darlene keeps me company and works out my legs. But it's a challenge sometimes, and I know that once I can't face those challenges, I'll come down with something like pneumonia and that will be that. Pneumonia is nature telling us that bacteria will eventually destroy us all. They used to call it the "old man's friend," pneumonia. I never knew what that meant. But I do now.

It's like when they built the Walmart outside town and the temple burned down, the factories closed and the trains stopped running. There's no need for this town anymore. We're all just selling insurance to each other. The temple is my heart, the factories are my lungs, and the trains are my joints. And the Walmart is this town's pneumonia. It killed Sam, and it will probably get me too. Everyone has a time, and every town has its day. I came in when things were good around here, and I'm checking out at the right time.

TOM

Sit down, dad. Can I help you? Oh, hi, Mike.

RABBI MIKE

Hello, Tom. What brings you back to town?

TOM

I'm driving cross country just to clear my head. Katie and I split up.

RABBI MIKE

I'm sorry to hear that.

TOM

I'm also doing a little research for a project. A few sketches of the old home town, look over some old photos at the museum.

(Pause.)

And check on dad and Joan, of course. You? Why now?

## RABBI MIKE

Well, we all thought it was time. The books and the tallits<sup>2</sup> and the plaques had been in storage for so long. We had given two of our three torahs to temples just coming back to life, one in Poland and one in a tiny community in Indonesia, so they're in a good place. But it was time to face facts that there weren't enough people to ever rebuild, and it had been 30 years since the fire. The town got older, the young people like yourself left. Not that I'm blaming you. I mean, I left too. We haven't had enough people to make a minyan here in 15 years.

## BEN

We never ran out of money. We ran out of people.

(DARLENE and JOAN return, squabbling.)

## JOAN

No no no. You do not need to serve us, least of all today.

## DARLENE

It's a way to get my mind off things, to be at peace. To be useful. We all need to be useful.

## JOAN

Not today and not you. Tom and I will put the food out. You take care of Dwayne. And take off that apron.

(SHE sees DWAYNE.)

Oh, hello Dwayne. How's school?

## DWAYNE

I'm settling in, thank you.

## TOM

(to DWAYNE)

There's my little brother! How's it going? Keeping away from that sophomore slump?

## DWAYNE

---

<sup>2</sup> A Jewish prayer shawl. Pronounced tal-LEET. Plural is technically *talleeseem*, but tal-LEETS is colloquial English.

I'm hitting the books.

TOM

Any idea what you're going to major in?

DWAYNE

Math.

TOM

Math? Wow. I think I got through college without one single math class. I still have nightmares about high school calculus. I remember you liked math when you were a kid. But college level math? Even though you got that lacrosse scholarship?

DWAYNE

I love math. It's sure. It's constant. A right angle is always going to be 90 degrees, no matter who measures it or where. I like that. And when you get to higher types of math, it's like the numbers, they dance in my head. You ever watch a football game from high in the stands, and the players run a play, like a downfield pass. It looks totally random, but they all know where they're going, and they each have a specific pattern, a job. Well, replace those players with numbers, and that's math. There's math in everything, in art, in music. It's beautiful. Sometimes I dream in numbers.

TOM

I have a friend in California who has this thing, synesthesia. Numbers are colors to her, they're sounds. She told me once three was a red thumping bass line, and seven was a yellow violin.

DWAYNE

I'd love to have that.

TOM

I don't think it's contagious.

JOAN

Tom, can you *please* help me here?

TOM

We'll talk more later. Coming, Joanie!

(As HE passes BEN:)

Hiya, dad. Oh, dad – you’ll never believe who I ran into just before I left California. Uncle Victor.

(Pause.)

BEN

*(menacingly)*

You ran into who?

TOM

Uncle Victor. I was showing a few paintings at a gallery in San Francisco, and who should walk in but Victor. And his friend, Uncle Eric. He looked just like I remembered him when I was at Stanford. Put on a little weight, but they looked happy.

BEN

Do not mention his name to me. You can see him and your “Uncle” Eric all you want, but I do not want to hear about it. Understand?

TOM

He said to say hello. He wanted to talk, to explain.

BEN

There’s nothing that person can say to me. Nothing.

TOM

He told me there were no hard feelings, that he knew he would have made life difficult for you if he had stayed here.

BEN

Victor brought shame to this family and shame to the standing of the Jewish community in this town. I’m glad he’s found peace, even with someone like Eric. But I’m equally glad he’s three thousand miles away. I don’t want to hear another word. Now go help your sister.

TOM

Dad...

BEN

Do I have to say it again? *Go help your sister!*

(Pause, as HE calms down and shuffles over to  
DWAYNE.)

Dwayne, I never told you how sorry I was to hear about your daddy.

DWAYNE

Thank you, Mister Birnbaum.

BEN

He was a good man, Sam was. Top of the line in my book. A hard worker. And I know he loved you and your mother. Hard to believe it's been a year. He worked his ass...uh, behind off to send you to that school, and you did him so proud. He always talked about you.

DWAYNE

Thank you.

BEN

I'm sorry he's not here. I considered him a friend. You know, you'll find out when you're grown, but sometimes when your family gets on your nerves, going to work in the morning can be like a Jamaican vacation. Your dad was always there with a smile and a joke. You know one he told me before he passed? A young man asks one of the old men in the town about finding the right girl, and the old man tells him to find a girl like his mother. A girl who looks like his mother, cooks like his mother, and talks like his mother. A few weeks later, the boy comes back to the old man and says "I found just the right girl! She looks like my mother, cooks like my mother, and talks like my mother. There's just one problem. Dad hates her."

He was always joking, always smiling. A good, happy man. I only hope you can be as happy in life as your father was. And I've been meaning to give this to you. Found it when I was going through some things last time I was at the store after your father passed. It has your name on it.

(BEN hands DWAYNE an envelope from his jacket.)

There's a few hundred dollars in there. He must have been putting it away for you.

RABBI MIKE

Everyone, I'd like to say a few words.

(JOAN and TOM come out from the kitchen with cold cuts on a platter for everyone. DARLENE walks quietly behind them. DWAYNE comes to her, hugs her, and shows her the envelope.)

DARLENE

(to DWAYNE)

He was a good man, your father.

TOM

(to JOAN)

Cold cuts are not the answer to all of life's questions, Joanie. Although this roast beef isn't bad.

JOAN

Quiet. Mike's going to speak.

TOM

Let me get a pillow.

RABBI MIKE

Can I have everyone's attention? Thanks. You can all be seated.

I was counting on the drive over here today, and in the 30 years I've been a rabbi, I've buried more than twelve hundred people, and blessed more than two thousand babies. So my won-loss record is better than the Steelers. But I've never buried a synagogue, until this morning.

According to Jewish tradition, which is the vague phrasing we rabbis rely on when we can't find an actual scriptural passage, when a temple shuts down for good, we bury everything we can't give away. We found good homes for our Torah scrolls. But we honor everything else – the books, the plaques, the tallits, the yarmulkes, all the things that turn a cold empty hall into a place of worship – as we honor a righteous person, with a burial, a tear, a hug, and companionship.

But we will not, we cannot bury our stories. Sometimes, when people tell their stories, they're mourning the loss of a way of life. And such it is with us here.

We must also realize that there would be nothing to bury if it hadn't been for this temple's great friends, Sam, of blessed memory, and his friends and family, who

courageously went into that horrible fire 30 years ago and saved as much as they could. And it was they who opened their own home to us when we wandered in a spiritual darkness. We never recovered from that tragic day, but the graciousness and love shown to us by them can never be repaid or forgotten. We wandered from place to place, from church to storefront to union hall to office building, but they were there for us in the beginning, when we needed them the most.

The town cemetery in Grand Union has a fence running down the middle. On one side, there's the Catholics and the Protestants, our city fathers and founders. On the other side, there's yet another fence. Jews here, and what they call the African burial ground there. I know there are ritual laws about keeping a sacred Jewish space, but as I've grown older and seen more of the world than just my small Pennsylvania home town, it strikes me as wrong. Why should we cut ourselves off from the wide world, and why should others cut us off? Let's face it – we could never fully integrate ourselves into the wider world here, even in 2015. But it's that second fence, the one on our side, that troubles me. Call me a rabble rouser, but now that there's no more temple, there's no need for that fence between us and our friends.

I don't know. Maybe a bunch of us can go down there one night when it's really dark and cold and no one's looking, and we can just tear it down. Tear down the fence between us. All the fences. Maybe we need to blow our ram's horns for everyone to hear, like Joshua at Jericho, so that all may tremble. Maybe the concrete holding the fence in place has gotten soft over the years. Maybe we can just lift it up and get rid of it. Or maybe it's so fully sunken into the earth than nothing, not a bulldozer, not brute strength, not even a dozen righteous men and women can tear it down. I hope that's not the case. I hope so for this town's sake. Because what separates us should not be stronger than what unites us. We owe it to our ancestors buried there, our friends on both sides of that fence, to Sam and to Ben's wife Barbara, to the memory of the thousands of people who have passed through our congregation and taken comfort from its blessings and fellowship.

Now, all this talking has made me hungry. Tom and Joan have graciously provided us with some lunch.

BEN

Can I say something?

RABBI MIKE

Of course. It's your house.

(BEN slowly gets up, but it clearly exhausts him.)

BEN

Tommy boy, Joanie, you know with your mother gone these two years, I don't have much time left...

JOAN

Not again with that, dad.

TOM

C'mon, dad. Your legs may be gone but everything else is like a bull.

BEN

You don't know that.

JOAN

After all this time, dad, cut the crap. You'll outlive us all.

BEN

I just wanted to say...

JOAN

No more bullshit, dad. I can't take another day of your bullshit!

(Pause.)

BEN

Oh, fuck it. Let's eat.

(DARLENE comes over to him.)

DARLENE

I'll get you a sandwich, Mister Birnbaum.

(HE reaches for her hand and grasps it.)

BEN

Thank you, Darlene. Thank you very much.

(DARLENE walks over to make BEN a sandwich.)

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Scene Ten: THE PRESENT**

(TIME: The present.

(We are where we left TOM, JOAN and DARLENE at the end of Scene Five — having lunch at the too-large dining table in Ben's home. ALL are eating sandwiches and potato salad.

TOM

I'm so glad you could come, Darlene. I know it would have meant so much to my father.

DARLENE

How could I refuse my Tommy boy? Your father was a good man. Like my Sammy. Two good men, gone too soon. I want to thank you for canceling the loan for the store when he passed, Tommy. That was very kind of you.

TOM

That was dad's idea. He knew you would have trouble paying it off. He didn't want it to be a burden once Sam died.

JOAN

Yes, and now it's all boarded up, an empty shell of a store in an empty shell of a town. Dwayne could have taken Birnbaum's over. He should have.

TOM

Not in his condition.

JOAN

Then you should have, to continue the tradition.

TOM

What about you?

JOAN

Me? I should have taken over a men's clothing store?

DARLENE

Children! And I'm calling you that because that's what you're acting like. It's over. Just let it all be. If there's one thing all this has taught me is there's no time for fighting in this life. There's a time for learning, a time for working, and time for relaxing and eating some of this fine potato salad. But you keep the squabbling to a minimum.

JOAN

You're right. I'm sorry, Darlene. You've been so kind and generous with your time. That's why we invited you here today.

DARLENE

Is it? I thought it was just to say goodbye.

JOAN

Goodbye?

DARLENE

Well sure. Mister Birnbaum's gone, and Tom's going to run back to California, and you'll be heading back to New Jersey, no doubt.

JOAN

Who told you that?

DARLENE

Why, with your father gone...

JOAN

I was thinking I might stay. That's what I wanted to talk to you about.

TOM

Before you get into all that, Darlene, I wanted to show you my painting.

JOAN

Tom, you're making this more difficult for me.

(TOM unveils the painting.)

I painted it especially for the town art museum, in honor of my father. It's called *Main Street, Grand Union, 1969*.

DARLENE

I knew you painted, Tommy, but this is...this is beautiful. There's the store, and that little white dot inside it – is that your father? But why is it so gray? There's no color to it.

TOM

I wanted it to look like an old black and white photograph.

DARLENE

When you look back on it, sure, black and white seems a way to make it look old, but you weren't alive then. The way it remember it, it wasn't plain old black and white. There were colors. The store's sign was a deep blue, like my Sammy's Oldsmobile. The women's clothing, well, I remember a lot of women wearing red checked dresses and white gloves to come downtown. The bank had a green awning, like a dollar bill, and the candy store was red and white, like a peppermint candy cane. It wasn't just black and white. There were colors, beautiful bright colors. Looks like you left those out here.

TOM

Well, it's how I remember it.

DARLENE

So it's not really downtown. It's what you think downtown was.

TOM

My impression of it, yes.

DARLENE

It's a beautiful painting, Tommy, and I'm not saying it's not, but that's a painting of your downtown, not mine. Mine was happy and colorful, even though we couldn't take advantage of everything the white folks could, like the movie theater. But I never gave that much thought. I just liked walking downtown, seeing everyone running around, all the activity, the cars and trucks whizzing by, like I was in the middle of a big book someone was writing, and that I was watching it all go by. If anyone's memories should be dark and gray, it's me. But I remember the colors. All those colors. It's funny how some people can see the same thing different, isn't it?

(The odd doorbell rings again.)

That's probably Dwayne. I hope it's all right with you if he comes and has some lunch with us.

TOM

Of course! I haven't seen him since he came back from State College.

JOAN

Darlene, I hope we'll have some time to talk about things.

DARLENE

Things?

JOAN

Well, we wanted to make sure you were taken care of after dad died.

DARLENE

Oh, he remembered me just fine.

(Doorbell again.)

JOAN

I've got to fix that.

(SHE exits to open the door.)

TOM

I think Joan wanted to keep her father's big chair, but other than that...

DARLENE

They'll be plenty of time for the moving vans to sort everything out.

(JOAN enters along with DWAYNE, who walks slowly, haltingly and with difficulty with the aid of two forearm crutches. HE walks to a chair, falls back into it, and puts his crutches on the floor.)

DWAYNE

Momma, can you make me a sandwich, please?

DARLENE

How long did you have to wait for the bus today, baby?

DWAYNE

Only twenty minutes.

TOM

In this weather? I can give you both a ride home later if you'd like.

DARLENE

That's very kind of you, Tommy.

DWAYNE

Thanks.

(DARLENE slowly gets up and begins to make a sandwich for DWAYNE. JOAN gets up as well.)

JOAN

Here, let me.

DARLENE

It's no trouble.

JOAN

No, I insist.

DWAYNE

It's just a damn sandwich!

(Pause.)

I'm sorry.

DARLENE

His medication upsets him sometimes. You want some potato salad and a Coke with that, son? Coke settles his stomach.

DWAYNE

Thank you, momma.

TOM

Man, I haven't seen you in years, Dwayne. I heard what happened. How are you coping?

DARLENE

He has his good days and his bad days.

DWAYNE

Mostly bad.

TOM

Where were you shot?

JOAN

Tom!

DWAYNE

It's pretty obvious, isn't it?

DARLENE

The state lawyer said they're training the police now to aim for the legs. I'm just relieved it wasn't worse.

DWAYNE

*(ticked at her)*

They're not your legs, momma.

DARLENE

You could have been killed, son! Serves you right for hanging around with those townboy thugs.

DWAYNE

Thugs?

DARLENE

You were in college, boy! You were the first person in our family to go to college. And on an athletic scholarship! Free tuition to one of the best schools in the country. And you riding around with thugs with the names of Malik and Jamal. We tried to raise you right, but you needed to be Malcolm X. You don't need to double-down on your color. Everybody can take one look at you and see you're a black boy. Ain't nobody gonna take you for Norwegian. If you had just listened to your father. Police wouldn't dare bother four white boys in a car, and they'd overlook you.

DWAYNE

Enough, mamma! You've been telling me that since I got out of the hospital. It was one car ride. One ride to get some hamburgers with some guys I knew.

DARLENE

That's just the way the world works, except you're too young and got your head in the sky. Eat your sandwich and we'll discuss this later. Mister Tom and Miss Joan don't need to hear about your misfortunes.

TOM

I'd like to hear about it.

DARLENE

Tommy boy, I love you like your own mother, but some things are not for sharing.

DWAYNE

Some days I feel like I'm living on borrowed time, like I shouldn't be alive.

(DARLENE cuts him off.)

DARLENE

*No! Now you hush and eat your sandwich!*

(An awkward pause.)

TOM

Say, Dwayne, remember how I used to take you to Peduzzo's downtown for a milk shake? We'd meet at the store after you got out from school, and we'd stop there for milk shakes before I helped you with your history homework.

DWAYNE

Everyone gave me dirty looks.

TOM

No they didn't.

DWAYNE

I was the only black kid ever in there. My daddy worked 100 feet from the place and he never set foot in there because he knew he wasn't welcome.

TOM

Of course he was! Old Man Peduzzo was as kind and nice as guy as I've ever met.

DWAYNE

As *you've* ever met.

TOM

Well, I'm sorry you felt that way. But I want to show you something.

(TOM brings out the painting, puts it on the easel.)

See? There's your dad's store, back when my father owned it and he worked there. There's...well, there's all of downtown, 1969. The summer of the moon landing. What do you think?

(DWAYNE gets up slowly, and walks haltingly to the painting with his crutches. HE stands in front of the painting and looks it over.)

DWAYNE

Why is it in black and white?

TOM

Well, that how I remember it. Like a photo. An old photo. I thought of giving it a sepia tone, too, but that was too obvious.

DWAYNE

You're missing a lot.

TOM

Well, I had to exclude...

DWAYNE

This is your town, Tom. Your town, not mine. Where am I? Where are my people? The people you pushed out to the Diamond, to Sugar Bay Lane by the dump?

TOM

Dwayne, you know me, I didn't...

DWAYNE

Huh? Where are they? Because they sure ain't here. They sure ain't in this picture. This goddamn town killed my father, wore down my mother and crippled me. *But I will not let you erase us!*

(With that, DWAYNE takes the picture and attempts to destroy it by throwing it to the floor and stomping on it, using his crutches.)

Hang that up in your California gallery.

DARLENE

Dwayne! You apologize to Mister Tom right now!

(DWAYNE gets his coat and slowly walks to the front door.)

DWAYNE

I'll see you at home, momma. I'll take the bus.

(HE exits.)

DARLENE

Oh, Tom, I'm so sorry. That boy is just angry at the universe, and you're much easier for him to punch. I hope he didn't cause too much damage.

TOM

I'll have to take it back home to repair it.

DARLENE

I'm sure that when you do, it will be even twice as good.

JOAN

In a way, he did you a favor, Tom.

TOM

A favor?

JOAN

A chance to re-examine it, with a new perspective. All it needs is a good cleaning and a little more paint.

TOM

Three years. But I can't...I mean, it's Dwayne. We were so close.

DARLENE

That boy has been in a constant rage since he came back home. Just sits around all day playing video games like a ten-year old. I try to get him to do something but he just stares at me and goes back to playing. Maybe you can talk to him, Tom.

JOAN

After what he did?

TOM

I don't think he's going to listen to me, of all people.

DARLENE

I suspect you're right. See, with the bus line coming right up this street practically to the door, he could get a job downtown, something sitting down, like a bank teller. I always told him to get a good government job like be a mailman, but that's not possible now. You know anyone at the bank, Miss Joan?

JOAN

Well, you know, they're cutting staff at all the banks.

DARLENE

Still, maybe you can put in a good word before you go.

JOAN

Go?

DARLENE

When you go back to New Jersey.

JOAN

I told you, I'm not going back. I'm going to turn this place into a bed and breakfast.

DARLENE

What's that?

JOAN

It's like a small hotel, but all tasteful and homey. Four-poster beds, soft linens, firm pillows. And you serve the guests breakfast in the morning. Maybe an artists' retreat.

DARLENE

Here? Who'd come here?

JOAN

We'll drum up business. We're not far from Pittsburgh.

DARLENE

Well, the way I was looking at it, I'm going to convert the back room on this floor for a bedroom for Dwayne, and my momma and I will take two of the rooms upstairs. She can still do stairs. Maybe we'll put in one of those chair lift things, though, just in case.

JOAN

What do you mean?

(Pause. DARLENE gets her purse and fishes in it for a paper.)

DARLENE

When you invited me over, I thought it was you saying goodbye. Not me.

(Pause.)

So he never told you either?

JOAN

Who?

DARLENE

Your father. Here. It's all in here.

(DARLENE hands her a one-page memo. JOAN looks it over, then hurriedly gets out her reading glasses and reads it again.)

JOAN

How...? Tom. Tom! Come here! Look!

(SHE hands it to TOM, who reads it without needing reading glasses.)

TOM

When did you get this?

DARLENE

About three months ago. After one of his bad spells with his hip. Just came in the mail one day from Mister Donaldson the lawyer. Said it was a codicil.

JOAN

How could he? Can we contest this? Tom, you were a lawyer. We must be able to do something.

TOM

It looks pretty legal. Witnesses, notaries. Even a seal. You and I split the money, but you get the furniture. I get his "effects." Which means all the old utility bills. But Darlene, it's a very old house. What's going to happen when the plumbing goes? What's going to happen when the roof leaks?

DARLENE

We'll find a way to fix it on our own.

TOM

Enjoy this place, Darlene. I know it's in good hands.

(JOAN slumps into a chair.)

JOAN

I was going to stay here and build a new life. Meet artists.

DARLENE

There's always a place for you with us, Miss Joan. There's the extra bedroom upstairs. I wouldn't even charge you.

(Pause, after which JOAN gets up from the chair.)

JOAN

Get out.

DARLENE

Joan, I....

JOAN

*Get out!*

TOM

Now Joan, c'mon...

JOAN

You're going to have to drag me out of here. The only way I'm leaving is feet first. This is my home. My home! Now get the fuck out of my house before I call the police and they shoot you down like they shot your son.

(DARLENE is quiet and still, and gets her coat.)

DARLENE

Joan, I will always love you, always. But your time here in Grand Union is over, and it has been for years. Everyone you know has moved on. Go. Find a better life. You're still young. Leave this town to the old folks. Go.

JOAN

Go? Go? Where should I go?

DARLENE

You'll know it when you see it, dollface. You'll know it.

Now, Tom, I've scheduled the moving vans for next Tuesday. They can set you up with storage for what you want to keep and a junk hauler for what you don't. And I'm sorry about the picture. I hope it won't take too much work to fix it all. Just a little more black and little more white will do.

And take care of her.

TOM

I will. You take care of yourself. And Dwayne.

DARLENE

I will. Goodbye, Tommy boy. And goodbye, Miss Joan. Maybe I can catch Dwayne at the bus stop.

(SHE exits. TOM and JOAN look at each other.)

(JOAN goes to the table, and picks at the cold cuts. SHE picks up a slice, and throws it down.)

JOAN

Everyone needs a place, Tom.

(SHE does that again, with more food and stronger.)

Everyone needs a place.

(And again, but more forceful.)

Where's mine?

(HER actions continue getting stronger and stronger.)

*Where's mine?*

(SHE eventually picks up one of the platters and overturns it violently, scattering the food.)

*Where's my place?*

(SHE does it again and again, screaming "*Where's my place?*" until all the food is gone and she's physically exhausted.

(SHE slumps down in her father's big chair.)

Can't you do anything?

TOM

No, Joan. No, I can't. Help me clean up.

JOAN

It's her house now. Let her clean it up.

**(END OF SCENE.)**

**Coda: 1980**

(We're back in 1980, and as we were in Scene Four.

(JOAN, age 15, is sitting upright in a chair, as  
DARLENE, age 20, is brushing her long hair.)

DARLENE

What are you going to be when you grow up, dollface?

JOAN

I told you. A famous actress.

DARLENE

You know not all actresses are famous. I was watching the TV with my mother last night, some show about two black boys living with a white daddy and a maid in New York, and I couldn't name any of those people.

JOAN

I wouldn't know. I don't watch that show.

DARLENE

There's about four different shows like that. Notice how it's always the black boys living with the white folks, and never the other way around. I'd pay cash money to see *that* show!

JOAN

I won't need to work on television. I'm going to Hollywood and become a famous actress in quality roles. Shakespeare. Here, listen:

(SHE takes a flowery and over-dramatic air:)

*O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name.*

Most people think that means she wants to know where he is, but Mister Lipp taught us she's asking why he's a Montague and she's a Capulet. Because they love each other, but their families don't get along.

DARLENE

Why don't they?

JOAN

Why don't they what?

DARLENE

Get along?

JOAN

Well, if they did, there wouldn't be a story, would there? "Hi, Romeo." "Hi, Juliet." "Wanna get married?" "OK." *Curtain.*

DARLENE

Seems silly to me. I read that in school. You've got two families, both alike in lots of ways, and they hate each other. Just seems, I don't know, a long way to go to prove a point.

JOAN

What point is that?

DARLENE

These two families, they knew each other, but they didn't really know each other *too* well. They lived all together, but they didn't know enough about each other to get along. Like they were two trains in the night, all alike and right next to each other, curving together on the same curves, but on their own track just going their own way. Maybe one's the Super Chief, got a bright headlight up top, going to New York, and the other's the Liberty Bell Zephyr off to California, with sleeper cars and a big old caboose. But they never know they were next to another big, beautiful train just like them, only going another way.

JOAN

You should be a teacher talking like that. That's why I'm glad you're here. You think you're going to be a teacher?

DARLENE

Don't say such foolish things.

JOAN

Well, what are you going to be?

DARLENE

*(slightly annoyed)*

Going to be? I'm doing it now.

(Pause.)

So what if you don't become a famous actress?

JOAN

I read a book that said to visualize your goals, see yourself in them, and they'll happen. So I'm in seat C-101 of the Pantages Theater in Hollywood ready to accept my Academy Award for my own production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Co-starring Timothy Hutton, but I get first billing.

DARLENE

And if that doesn't happen?

JOAN

I don't allow myself to think like that.

DARLENE

Maybe you can be an interior designer like your mother?

JOAN

Ugh.

DARLENE

What do you mean, *Ugh*. It's a good respectable job. Making people's houses look fine.

JOAN

Making *other* people's houses look fine. I'm going to hire an interior designer to work on *my* house.

(DARLENE gives a small laugh.)

DARLENE

Someday you'll own this town, dollface.

JOAN

And you can be my best friend.

DARLENE

(teasing her)

Maybe I could come work for you in your daddy's store?

JOAN

I don't want no old store. I'm going to go to California and be a movie star. You can have the store! You and Sam.

DARLENE

Oh dollface, don't talk foolish.

JOAN

I know you're sweet on him. You can have the store. And this dirty old house. I'll be in Hollywood, and you and Sam can live here in this house and run the store, and have lots of babies.

DARLENE

Oh now, you know that's not going to happen. We're not going to own the store, and we're not going to live in this house. You know that.

JOAN

Why? My daddy says anyone can grow up to be anything they want in this country.

DARLENE

Well, that's not exactly the way it is for everyone.

JOAN

Why?

DARLENE

That's just the way it is.

JOAN

But no matter where we are, or what we do, or where we live or who we marry, we'll always be together. Like sisters.

(Pause.)

DARLENE

Yes, dollface. Like sisters. Just like sisters.

JOAN

Good.

**(END OF SCENE.**

**(END OF PLAY.)**

**SETTINGS AND CHARACTERS' AGES**

**\*Not in scene**

**Scene 1: Dining room of Ben's house, the present**

Joan: 55

Tom: 45

Ben: 90\* (dead)

Sam: 60\* (dead)

Darlene: 60\*

Rabbi Mike: 60\*

Dwight: 24\*

**Scene 2: Birnbaum's clothing store, 1985**

Joan: 20\*

Tom: 10\*

Ben: 55

Sam: 25

Darlene: 25\*

Rabbi Mike: 25\*

Dwight: Not yet born\*

**Scene 3: Living room of Ben's house, adjoining the dining room, 1985**

Joan: 20

Tom: 10

Ben: 55

Sam: 25

Darlene: 25

Rabbi Mike: 25

Dwight: Not yet born\*

**Scene 4: Joan's bedroom in Ben's house, 1980**

Joan: 15

Tom: 5\*

Ben: 50\*

Sam: 20\*

Darlene: 20

Rabbi Mike: 20\*

Dwight: Not yet born\*

**Scene 5: Dining room of Ben's house, the present**

Joan: 55

Tom: 45

Ben: 90\* (dead)  
Sam: 60\* (dead)  
Darlene:60  
Rabbi Mike: 60\*  
Dwight: 24\*

**Scene 6: A park in Grand Union, 2005**

Joan: 40\*  
Tom: 30  
Ben: 75\*  
Sam: 45\*  
Darlene: 45\*  
Rabbi Mike: 45\*  
Dwight: 9

**Scene 7: Ben's bedroom, 2018**

Joan: 53  
Tom: 45\*  
Ben: 88  
Sam: 58\* (dead)  
Darlene:58  
Rabbi Mike: 58\*  
Dwight: 28\*

**Scene 8: Birnbaum's clothing store, 2010**

Joan: 45\*  
Tom: 35\*  
Ben: 80\*  
Sam: 50  
Darlene:50\*  
Rabbi Mike: 50\*  
Dwight: 14

**Scene 9: Living room of Ben's house, adjoining the dining room, 2015**

Joan: 50  
Tom: 40  
Ben: 85  
Sam: 55\* (dead)  
Darlene:55  
Rabbi Mike: 55  
Dwight: 19

**Scene 10: Dining room of Ben's house, the present**

Joan: 55

Tom: 45

Ben: 90\* (dead)

Sam: 60\* (dead)

Darlene: 60\*

Rabbi Mike: 60\*

Dwight: 24

**Coda: Joan's bedroom in Ben's house, 1980**

Joan: 15

Tom: 5\*

Ben: 50\*

Sam: 20\*

Darlene: 20

Rabbi Mike: 20\*

Dwight: Not yet born\*