

The first act of

## *Jennifer's Birth*

a heart-wrenching comedy

by Rich Orloff

### *Characters*

JENNIFER, 57

ADELE, Jennifer's mother, early 20's

MEL, Jennifer's father, late 20's

PEARL, Jennifer's grandmother, late 50's\*  
(\*which in 1953 was considered old)

LEE, Jennifer's uncle, early 20's

CONNIE, Lee's girlfriend, early 20's

### *Time*

Autumn 1953

### *Place*

The living room/dining room of a three-bedroom apartment  
in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago

## ACT ONE

### SCENE ONE

It's about 4 p.m. on October 5, 1953. The living room and dining area of a second-floor apartment in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. The sturdy brick building is a few decades old and has only three floors and three apartments, one per floor, each designed for a typical nuclear family.

In one area are a couch, a coffee table, an easy chair, and a TV set. In another area are a dining table and chairs, and a buffet table. The furnishings are new but not flashy. Everything is built to last.

There is a swinging door to the breakfast room and kitchen, a hall that leads to the apartment's three bedrooms, and a door to the building's hallway.

As the play begins, the lights fade up on... an empty apartment. The apartment is clean and tidy; everything is in its place. On the coffee table is the morning's *Chicago Tribune*. For a while, the lights linger on the empty apartment. Then they slowly fade to black.

A moment later, the lights fade up again. In the center of the room is JENNIFER, just shy of 57 years old, dressed in comfortable but stylish clothing for the year 2010. She is amazed to be there, like someone who hoped for something but who never expected it to actually happen.

JENNIFER  
(simply)

God.

Jennifer begins walking around the living room and dining area, looking at things and taking them in. As memories come back, her excitement builds. She exits into the kitchen, but she quickly returns. She exits down the hallway. Several moments later, she returns. She has a lot to absorb.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

Wow.

(to someone unseen – the actress  
probably faces out but is talking  
to someone near her:)

I really got here. You really got me here.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

(referring to the newspaper\*:) )

October 5th, 1953. An important day in my family history. I'm not sure how you did it, but when your new therapist *insists* you have to go back to the time of your birth to find out why you're so screwed up, well...

(\*Note: She does not and cannot touch the newspaper, or anything in the apartment.)

JENNIFER (cont'd)

So this is what the chair looked like new.

Everything used to look so much bigger.

Of course, / was so much smaller. I used to sit on one end of the couch, and it was like a five-mile walk to the other end.

(walking to the dining table:)

I used to have to sit on a phone book to reach the dining table. It was a big day when I could finally reach the table on my own...

(with a hint of devilish glee:)

...and my little brothers still needed phone books.

The buffet. Where we kept the good silver and the sharp knives. I could've sworn there was a lock on the knife drawer. My mother was petrified we might play with the knives. You could hurt yourself – and embarrass the entire neighborhood.

(noticing a clock:)

Four o'clock. My grandmother should be waking up from her nap. We shared a bedroom. Gram was the only member of our family who ever farted. The older I got, the more I appreciated that. "You go, Gram," I'd think.

PEARL enters. Her hair is gray, and she wears just a bit of rouge and simple red lipstick. She wears a simple housedress and a button-down sweater which has probably never been buttoned. Inside one of the pockets is hard candy. Inside one of the turned-back sleeves are a few tissues. Pearl is inherently sweet, but she has quiet strength when it's needed. Pearl speaks with an Eastern European accent, which she never lost.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

Look at her. From my first memory of her until the day she died, this is how she looked. Old. Classic old. God, I loved her. She never had a negative word to say about anyone. At least in English. In Yiddish, watch out.

My parents only spoke Yiddish when they didn't want me to know what they were saying. Late at night, Gram gave me Yiddish lessons. "This is our secret," she said. How could you not love a woman like that?

The door buzzer gives two short bursts, followed by two more short bursts.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

(a memory coming back:)

The door buzzer.

Pearl opens the front door and exits. She leaves the door open.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

The intercom never worked. Or maybe we didn't have one. Someone buzzed, we let them in. In Rogers Park in Chicago in the fifties, we didn't worry too much about crime. We lived on the second floor, and as my dad said, "The people on the first floor have much better stuff." Oh, the two buzzes followed by two buzzes – that meant, I have lots of groceries and could use help. Who needed an intercom?

Jennifer looks out the doorway.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

Oh my God. Here comes my mom. With *me*.

A moment later, ADELE enters, carrying two bags of groceries. (In 1953, these would be paper bags.) In her early 20's, Adele is a modest woman, cautious and non-confrontational, but fundamentally content with herself and her life. A dutiful wife and daughter, she wears inexpensive but not cheap clothing that is nice-looking but durable. By far the most noticeable aspect of her appearance is that she's seven months pregnant.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

(noting the pregnancy:)

Aren't I adorable?

Adele walks to the kitchen door, as Pearl enters, carrying one bag.

PEARL

Did you get –

ADELE

Everything you asked for.

PEARL

I just want to be prepared.

ADELE

He won't be here for another three days.

PEARL

In three days I'll be too nervous to cook.

They both exit into the kitchen, as Jennifer calls after them.

JENNIFER

No, no, no. He's coming tonight. October 5th, 1953. They told me it was an important day in our family history, the night Uncle Lee came home from Korea. Did they mess up that story, too?

Adele has entered and hangs up her coat. Pearl enters.

PEARL

I'll get the cart.

ADELE

I'll get it in a second. I just need to rest a moment.

PEARL

In your condition you shouldn't push yourself so much.

ADELE

(warmly)

Is this advice from the woman who gave birth to me in a field?

PEARL

The field wasn't on the second floor.

ADELE

We should start putting away the groceries.

PEARL

I'll do it. Rest.

Pearl exits into the kitchen. As she goes:

ADELE

I'm fine.

JENNIFER

My mom. Born in a field in Russia, she's been fine ever since. In 2010, she's on her deathbed, and she still claims to be fine. I don't know what age I was when I began to wonder if my mom was really fine... or just afraid to be anything *but* fine.

The door opens. MEL enters, carrying the shopping cart. (It's the collapsible kind people used before people drove to the supermarket.) In his late 20's, boisterous and volatile, MEL is a force of nature. Subtlety is not among his skills, and volume is his most used tool. However, beneath all that, he's a decent guy. Mel dresses well and takes pride in his appearance.

ADELE

Hi, darling – you're early.

JENNIFER

My father.

MEL

(a complaint, but not a serious one,  
just everyday exasperation:)

You left the cart downstairs!

Mel gives Adele a peck on the cheek.

ADELE

I was just going to get it. What are you doing home so early?

MEL

It's my home; I can't be early?!

ADELE

I haven't made dinner yet.

MEL

That's okay, I have no appetite.

ADELE

What happened?

MEL

My brother happened; that's what happened.

ADELE

What'd he do this time?

MEL

I just saw our accountant. My dealership is doing great, but for some reason, *his* dealership is doing lousy.

ADELE

That's too bad.

MEL

No, it's fishy. We both sell the same cars, we're both in good areas. And we're both selling the same amount of cars. Why should *my* dealership be making more than his?

ADELE

You run yours better.

MEL

That's not it. It's true, but that's not it. The accountant thinks something's fishy.

ADELE

Like what?

MEL

(erupting a bit, as is his style:)  
Does it look like I know the answer?!

ADELE

(shrinking a bit, as is her style:)  
Just asking.

MEL

I swear, every time I see my brother, it's like a knife in my heart. No, worse: It's like a butter knife in my heart.

ADELE

You're a better man than he'll ever be.

MEL

That's irrelevant; he's still my brother.

Pearl enters.

PEARL

Mel, you're home early.

MEL

(a genuinely charming son-in-law:)

I was in my office when a little voice said,  
"Your mother-in-law's in the kitchen; go home."

PEARL

Are you hungry?

MEL

If you're cooking, I'm hungry.

PEARL

I'm cooking.

MEL

I'm hungry.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

ADELE

I don't see why you and Sam don't each  
take one dealership instead of co-owning two.

MEL

(once again erupting a bit:)

Because this is how my father wanted it!

ADELE

(once again shrinking a bit:)

Well, I'm sure he knew best.

Mel exits down the hall. Adele exits into the kitchen.  
The lights change during the following.



JENNIFER

Welcome to my family!

(a light sigh, then:)

You know, a child needs a solid structure growing up, certain things she can depend on. I could depend on my dad coming home in a foul mood every night. Whether it was something about the business, or a family thing, or something he heard on the radio, every night Dad came home upset, argumentative and irritable. Or as we called it, "normal". The great thing about Dad is he taught me how to not hold in your anger. The bad thing is that until my second marriage, I didn't know a lot of people *want* you to hold in your anger.

But why dwell on that now;

I haven't even been born yet.

(from a more reflective place:)

In any way, shape or form.

The lights shift slightly.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

So... it's oh a couple hours later. Everyone has had dinner, in the breakfast room not the dining room, where we only ate on Friday night and special occasions. We weren't Jewish enough to have separate plates, but we *were* Jewish enough to have separate rooms for eating. So much I never understood.

And still don't.

The door buzzer buzzes. Mel enters from the hall and buzzes back to open the downstairs door. He opens the door. Adele and Pearl enter from the kitchen.

ADELE

Who do you think it is?

MEL

How should I know? Maybe it's an encyclopedia salesman who wants to climb two flights of stairs to get the door slammed in his face.

Pearl, who senses who it might be, is too filled with emotion to stay in the room. She returns to the kitchen.

ADELE

We should get an encyclopedia.

MEL

Shouldn't we wait until the kid learns to read?

ADELE

You're right.

JENNIFER

My mom gave in easily. And she expected the same from her children.

Adele, who is at the door with Mel, sees who it is.

ADELE

Lee!

Adele exits down the hall.

JENNIFER

I *told* you it was an important day in our family history.

MEL

Can I help you with that?

LEE (o.s.)

I got it.

LEE enters, carrying a duffel bag. Two years older than Adele, Lee is tall, thin and strong. Zestful and passionate, he's a man prone to exclamation points. He wears an Army uniform, which he'll never wear again, and a jacket. Mel extends his hand.

MEL

Hi, Lee. I'm Mel.

They shake hands.

LEE

Pleased to meet you.

Pearl enters. She has touched herself up.

LEE (cont'd)

Hi, Ma!

Lee and Pearl hug. She touches his sides and looks at his middle as if she remembers his exact width.

PEARL

You lost weight.

LEE

Ma.

PEARL

I'll fix you something.

Pearl exits into the kitchen. Lee turns to Adele.

LEE

Look at you! C'mere.

Lee goes to hug Adele.

ADELE

Be careful.

LEE

(actually thinking "I wanna  
squeeze you with all my might!")

I'll be careful!

Lee hugs Adele fully. Adele isn't comfortable with this.

LEE (cont'd)

If the baby has a squished nose, blame me!  
How far along are you?

ADELE

About seven months.

LEE

You look great.

ADELE

I look fat.

LEE

You look great!

(to Mel:)

When Adele was this high, all she used  
to say was, "When I grow up, I wanna be  
a wife and mommy."

(to Adele:)

And now you are.

ADELE

The first time I got a letter addressed  
to "Mrs. Mel Simon", I almost cried.

JENNIFER

The first time I got a letter addressed  
to me in my husband's name, I thought,  
"Who the fuck is that?"

LEE

What a nice place you have.

ADELE

Well, it's a little messy.

LEE

If there's any mess here, you're hiding it well.

ADELE

We weren't expecting you for another three days.

LEE

I knew if I told you I was coming home today,  
Ma wouldn't sleep well for three days.

ADELE

Ma hasn't slept well since you enlisted.

MEL

Even when the war ended, she kept worrying:  
What if a new war starts? What if the ship  
coming back from Korea encounters a hurricane?  
What if there's a cow on the railroad tracks  
somewhere between San Francisco and  
Chicago, and the train crashes?

Adele exits into the kitchen.

JENNIFER

My family believed in preemptive worrying.  
Why wait till the last moment when you can  
start worrying now? I always thought that  
if the apocalypse came, my parents would  
say, "Well, it's not as bad as we expected."

Pearl and Adele have entered with a setting for the dining table.  
They set a place for Lee.

PEARL

(warmly)

Come. Sit. Eat.

JENNIFER

This is going to be good. Trust me.

LEE

Ma, you don't have to make a fuss.  
I can eat in the kitchen.

PEARL

"Cultured people" don't call that part  
of the kitchen "the kitchen". It's called  
"the breakfast nook".

LEE

Then I'll eat in the breakfast nook.

PEARL

No. Sit here. This is a special occasion.  
On special occasions, we use "the dining room".  
To me, it looks like a nook, but it's a room.

LEE

Ma –

PEARL

Everything will be ready in a moment.

Pearl and Adele exit.

LEE

Thank you for taking in Ma after our dad died.

MEL

It's nothing. And you're welcome to stay  
as long as you want, too. This is your home.

LEE

I'll start looking for a place tomorrow, I promise.

MEL

Listen to me: You can stay *forever*. And if  
I hear one more word about it, I'll kick you out!

JENNIFER

I think I got my sense of humor not from my  
parents but from trying to figure out my parents.

Pearl and Adele enter with a bowl of soup and more.

PEARL

Come. Eat.

LEE

Let me wash my hands first.

MEL

The bathrooms are down the hall.

LEE

(to Adele:)

One more hug!

Lee hugs Adele again. She's not comfortable with this.

LEE (cont'd)

If the baby has small feet, blame me!

Lee exits down the hall. Pearl exits into the kitchen.

ADELE

Thank you for letting my brother stay with us.

MEL

(some temper showing:)

I'm just doing what's right. Why does everybody have to make such a big thing about it?!

ADELE

(with gratitude and awareness:)

Not every man would do this.

MEL

Let's drop it, okay?!

ADELE

Okay.

Adele exits into the kitchen.

JENNIFER

My dad wasn't good with compliments.  
Even though he yearned for them.

Pearl enters with more food, as Mel sits with the newspaper.  
Pearl exits.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

When Dad proposed to Mom – well, the second time; the first time was on their second date, and she thought he was nuts – he asked *one* thing: "Don't make me go into in the kitchen!"

Pearl enters with more food, as Lee enters from the hall.

LEE

What did you make, Ma?

PEARL

I made all your favorites.

LEE

What did you make? Pot roast? Chicken in the pot? Potato latkes? Knishes? Chopped liver?

PEARL

I made all your favorites.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

MEL

We had to talk her out of making a salami.

LEE

I'm really not that hungry.

MEL

Guess again.

Pearl enters with more food.

PEARL

The soup's getting cold.

Lee sits at the table.

LEE

This smells great, Ma.

PEARL

You can smell later. Eat.

LEE

Could I possibly have a piece of bread?

PEARL

I'll see what we have.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

LEE

How long has she been cooking?

MEL

Since they signed the peace treaty.

LEE

Would you like to join me?

MEL

I already ate. And I meant what I said. You want to go to school on the G.I. Bill, you can stay here. If you'd like a job at my dealership, just ask. And if you want to stare at the ceiling for a few months, that's fine, too. Whatever you want.

LEE

I'm just looking forward to sleeping on a real bed.

Pearl enters with an array of breads.

LEE (cont'd)

This all looks great, Ma.

PEARL

I didn't cook a photograph; start eating.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

LEE

What a spread. I think I *am* getting hungry.

MEL

Save room for dessert.

LEE

What'd she make for dessert?

MEL

Do you like baklava?

LEE

Not really.

MEL

Good. It's the only thing she didn't make.

Pearl returns with more food. Adele brings a tall glass of water. Lee starts to eat. Pearl sits near him and watches.



LEE

Wow. This is delicious.

PEARL

I didn't want you should be disappointed.

LEE

You could never disappoint me.

PEARL

I'm not one to rest on my laurels.

Pearl watches Lee eat. Watching him eat tonight is one of the greatest joys she has ever experienced. Pearl starts to cry. She takes out a tissue from her sleeve to wipe tears.

LEE

Ma, I can't eat if you're going to cry.

PEARL

I'm done.

She dabs her eyes and stops.

JENNIFER

In my family, we had a ten-second limit on crying.

Pearl continues to watch with delight. Lee is much hungrier than he thought. Silence for awhile, then:

PEARL

I never thought you'd come back.

LEE

(the reassurance of simplicity:)

I came back, Ma.

Pearl holds back tears. After a moment, Lee notices.

LEE (cont'd)

You can cry, Ma.

PEARL

Thank you.

Pearl starts to cry quietly. Lee continues to eat.

The lights dim, except around Jennifer.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

Wow. I don't know how you got me here.  
And on the first session. I'm so glad I decided  
to see you, even if you *don't* take insurance.

I, I forgot how, how not 2010 1953 was.  
Oh, and if you're doing the math, yes in 2010  
I'm about to turn 57.

(even hard for her to believe:)

57. My dad's dead, my grandmother is  
long gone, and my mother is in a hospice in  
Rogers Park, dying. I moved to L.A. decades  
ago, and I keep putting off getting on a plane  
to say goodbye to her. I...

(from a raw and personal place:)

I just can't do it... It's, it's not that I'm afraid  
it'd be too emotional; I'm, I'm afraid it wouldn't  
be emotional at all. I mean, I love her,  
like a daughter should love her mother, but...

(hard to admit, even to herself:)

but I don't *feel* love for her. I'm I'm sorry  
to say this, I really am. I know how to *fake*  
loving her; for years I was so good at it  
I even convinced myself. But real love...

You know, I've probably gone over  
every year of my childhood, at least the ones  
I remember, and well... my mom lived up  
to all her responsibilities, and she never  
beat me or anything, but I, I can't forgive her.  
And I I don't even know what I'm not forgiving  
her for. I... I have no idea what her soul looks  
like. Not a clue. It's like her soul was – off-limits.  
And I'm, I'm not sure you can do this for me,  
but I hope I'll learn – *something*, so if I ever  
work up the courage to get on that plane...  
I won't say goodbye to someone who's been  
part of my whole life... and who's still a stranger.

The lights transition into the next scene.

## ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

About five weeks later, early evening. Adele and Pearl are at the dining table, polishing the "good" silverware. Jennifer is checking her watch.

JENNIFER

So it's been, I don't know, what, five weeks now? If you're wondering what's happened since our last session... *Nothing*. My mom's still pregnant, Pearl's still old, my dad still hasn't figured out why Uncle Sammy's dealership is doing so much worse than his, and Uncle Lee, he mostly just disappears.

I've spent hours watching Mom and Gram polish the "good" silver. You knew it was good because we polished it more than we ever used it. The only thing more boring than polishing silver is watching people polish silver. Are you really sure me coming back here's a good idea?

It's November 11th – Veteran's Day – or as they called it then, Armistice Day. I hope it's an important day – it'd be a nice change of pace.

PEARL

Where does he go every day and night?

ADELE

He says he sees his buddies.

PEARL

How much seeing can you do?

ADELE

If you're curious, why don't you ask him?

PEARL

I don't want to pry.

JENNIFER

Wait a second, boundaries?!

Okay, finally I've seen something new.

Lee enters from outside. He's wearing a light coat. He's in great spirits. As he greets the women, he kisses Pearl on the cheek and grabs Adele's head to kiss the top of it.

LEE

My two favorite ladies! Hello, Ma. Hello, Sis.

ADELE

(overlapping as he greets her:)

Lee, please, my hair.

LEE

(playing with her hair:)

If you end up bald, sue me!

JENNIFER

See that? Uncle Lee was the only member of my family who believed in touching people. Growing up I *never* saw my parents touch beyond a peck on the cheek. I think Dad was scared of touching me because I was a girl, and scared of touching his sons because they were boys. My family believed that intimacy was best achieved at a distance.

ADELE

Are you joining us for dinner?

LEE

You betcha.

PEARL

There are some good shows on TV tonight.

LEE

I made plans.

PEARL

Where are you going?

LEE

I'm seeing some buddies.

Lee exits down the hall.

PEARL

He's in a better mood every single day.

ADELE

I know.

PEARL

I don't like it.

ADELE

You don't want him to be happy?

PEARL

I want he should be the happiest boy on Earth.  
But this fast doesn't feel right.

Mel enters. He's in a particularly foul mood, even for Mel.

MEL

Hi.

Adele pushes back her chair to get up. Mel gives her a peck on the cheek.

ADELE

Hi, darling.

MEL

Don't get up. When's dinner?

ADELE

Whenever you want it. Are you okay?

MEL

I used to read about Cain and Abel and feel  
for Abel. Now I'm beginning to root for Cain.

ADELE

Didn't the meeting go well?

MEL

Of course the meeting didn't go well.  
I didn't expect the meeting to go well.  
Meetings with my brother never go well.  
I just didn't expect it to go *this* not well.

PEARL

I'll start dinner.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

MEL

The accountant showed Sammy the books.  
My brother didn't even seem that upset.  
I told him if we didn't co-own *both* dealerships,  
maybe he'd be more upset.

ADELE

What did he say?

MEL

He just shrugged. I swear, if you lit  
a fire under my brother, he'd just  
smother it with his tushie.

JENNIFER

That's – that's about as profane as Dad ever got.  
He could raise the roof if he couldn't find his  
red socks, but he never swore. At restaurants,  
he'd ask where the "little boy's room" was.  
All of my friends found that charming.  
So did I, after my first decade of therapy.

Lee enters.

LEE

Hi, Mel.

(to Adele:)

Time for another hug!

Lee gives Adele quite a hug.

LEE (cont'd)

If the kid's a vegetable, blame me.

ADELE

(to Mel:)

Lee's going out again tonight.

MEL

Well, why shouldn't he? It's Armistice Day!

ADELE

Yes, well –

MEL

He's earned the right to celebrate.

LEE

Celebrate?!!

MEL

Of course!

LEE

Enlisting's the stupidest thing I ever did.  
I thought I'd learn something. They said they'd  
give me *skills*. They lie. They'll say anything  
because they need bodies. Not men, bodies.

MEL

Still, you served –

LEE

(slight overlap with the above:)

Who knew we'd have another war so soon?

Who knew anyone would choose *that* place  
to make such a fuss about.

MEL

I just –

LEE

(slight overlap with the above:)

Then once you're there... I tell ya, being in war  
is like waiting forever for a bus that's going  
to take you someplace you don't want to go.

I mean, I'm glad I wasn't wounded. I'm grateful  
I didn't die. They only took... *part* of my life.

JENNIFER

Uncle Lee never mentioned the war to me. Not once.

MEL

I think I can make you feel better. One of  
my worst salesmen just quit. You want a job?

JENNIFER

Dad's been offering Lee a job every night for weeks.

LEE

Sure.

Pearl enters.

MEL

You mean it?

LEE

If I can do it for six months, tops.  
I need to save some money.

PEARL

You've decided to go to college?

LEE

Ma, I told you. I'm not an intellectual.  
Why would I want to go to college?

ADELE

Then what do you need the money for?

LEE

(cautious; he knows this is a big thing:)  
I... I'm moving to California.

PEARL

You just got home.

LEE

I'm not going for six months.

PEARL

You want to leave the country again?

LEE

It's California, Ma. It's in this country.

PEARL

You're entitled to your opinion.

LEE

When I was stationed there, it was like –  
In California, everybody's new to the neighborhood.  
And every day was beautiful. When it rains,  
the clouds apologize. It's the New Land, Ma.

PEARL

When did Chicago become the Old Country?

ADELE

You're just going to go there by yourself?

LEE

I won't be going alone.

MEL

Are you going with one of your buddies?

LEE

(cautious; he knows this  
is a *very* big thing:)  
No. I... I met a girl.

Everyone moves in a step toward Lee, including Jennifer.

PEARL

Where did you meet her?

LEE

In a bar. She's a friend of a friend.

PEARL

In a bar?



JENNIFER

Nobody had ever met a woman in a bar in our entire family history, going back to... the ark.

PEARL

You like bars?

LEE

I like hanging out with my buddies,  
and the library's closed at night.

PEARL

What's her name?

LEE

Connie.

JENNIFER

(after some silence:)

That silence is all of them trying to figure out  
if Connie is a Jewish name.

PEARL

What's her last name?

LEE

(a quick think, then:)

Harrisburg.

PEARL

Harrisburg.

JENNIFER

It's O'Hara! She's *from* Harrisburg.

MEL

You should invite her over.

ADELE

Would she like to come to Shabbas dinner?

LEE

I'm sure she'd like that.

PEARL

I'll make flanken.

LEE

I'm sure it'll be the best flanken she's ever had.

JENNIFER

I'd put money on that.

PEARL

Dinner will be ready in a moment.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

LEE

When would you like me to start?

MEL

Anytime you're ready.

LEE

I'll start tomorrow.

Lee exits down the hall. Adele starts to put away the box of silverware.

MEL

Let me do that.

Mel takes the box.

MEL (cont'd)

How are things... inside?

ADELE

It's kicking more.

JENNIFER

Even prenatally, I wanted more space.

MEL

About this morning...

ADELE

It's nothing.

MEL

(defensively, but trying  
to say the right thing:)

I'm sorry I left the bathroom door ajar.

ADELE

I should've knocked.

MEL

(laying down the law, or trying to:)

A man has needs, Adele.

ADELE

I've never been a man.

MEL

A lot of men do what I did. Most probably.

ADELE

(slight overlap:)

It's my fault. I should've knocked.

MEL

You haven't let me touch you in months.

ADELE

The doctor said –

MEL

One of my poker buddies is a doctor, and he –

ADELE

He's not my doctor.

MEL

(getting angry)

Well, maybe you should get a second opinion.

ADELE

If you ever need to do that again... out of courtesy, make sure the door is shut. Please.

MEL

Why can't I even kiss you?

ADELE

You kiss me, you'll get ideas.

MEL

I see you; I get ideas. You're my wife.

ADELE

(a mixture of reassurance and shame:)

I will be a good wife. Just not that way right now.

Adele exits into the kitchen.

JENNIFER

*This* conversation I never knew about.

The lights transition into the next scene.

### ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

JENNIFER

If you want to know more about my parents... well, so do I. My mom and Uncle Lee came to America when they were children. When I asked how it felt growing up during the Depression and World War II, they said everyone in the neighborhood was poor, so they didn't know better; end of story. My dad's dad had a little money, risked it *all* getting into the automobile business, and became rich. When I asked my dad what his childhood was like, he said "Normal"; end of story. When I asked my mom what my birth was like, she said, "Uneventful"; end of story. But there was something in her voice that made me think, no, I don't believe you. I don't believe "end of story" at all.

Two nights later, a Friday evening. Adele and Pearl light the Sabbath candles.

ADELE and PEARL

(In Hebrew, they recite the Kiddush  
for lighting the Sabbath candles)

JENNIFER (cont'd)

And if you're wondering if we were religious, well, how to put it. We strictly observed token observance.

The one ritual that was held sacred was the Friday night dinner. Candles, wine, challah, Kiddush. We ate in the dining room, and attendance was mandatory. After the births of my two brothers – the Prince and the Disappointment – the "men" would sit at one end of the table and the "women" at the other. The men argued about *everything*: Vietnam, civil rights, and mostly, what you did that day and how everyone else in the family could live your life better than you could. Oodles of fun, let me tell you. My mom just watched. I tried to act like her, but at a certain point, I decided to join the debate, even if I risked having my life ripped to shreds. At least, unlike my mom... I wasn't invisible.

Pearl has exited into the kitchen. Adele makes sure everything on the table is in its place. Mel enters from the hall.

MEL

Dinner smells great.

ADELE

Mother spent a lot. Dinners will be very simple for the next week.

MEL

(upset)

Look, if you need a bigger allowance, why don't you just ask?

ADELE

I don't know how much we can afford.

MEL

How many times have I told you?  
All you have to do is ask me.

ADELE

We could use a little more this week.

MEL

(handing her some money:)

Here. And next time –

ADELE

I know, I know.

MEL

We're not poor!

ADELE

This week we're not poor.

MEL

What did you tell the others about  
you sleeping on the couch last night?

ADELE

I just said you snored a lot.

MEL

You didn't have to leave the bed.  
I wasn't going to do anything.

ADELE

I slept fine.

MEL

(a bit loud and angry)

Sometimes men get – get hard in their sleep.

ADELE

(quietly)

Do you have to broadcast that to everyone?

MEL

This isn't right, Adele.

ADELE

(shyly; she doesn't like asserting herself:)

Well for now, this is how it has to be.

The front door buzzer buzzes.

MEL

Doesn't Lee have a key?

ADELE

Mother wanted a warning signal.

MEL

You're not going to sleep on the –

ADELE

(overlapping, ending the conversation:)

I'm fine.

JENNIFER

I think "I'm fine" were the first words Mom learned in English. Even when she told me the doctor said her cancer was inoperable, when I asked how she was, she said, "Well, it's a lot, but I'm fine." How, how can I get on a plane to say goodbye to someone who insists she's still fine?

Mel has opened the front door and is in the doorway.

MEL

Come in, come in. I'm Mel.

CONNIE (o.s.)

Hi, Mel. I'm Connie.

CONNIE enters with Lee. In her early 20's, Connie has average looks but above average spirit, and it's easy to see why men would be attracted to her.

MEL

And this is my wife Adele.

CONNIE

Wow, you look like you're about to pop any day now.

ADELE

Nice to meet you.

LEE

Ma, we're here!

MEL

Let me take your coat.

CONNIE

Thank you.

Mel takes Connie's coat. Though her dress shows a modest income, there's a bit of glitz to it. Pearl enters. She's touched herself up a bit, but she's not vain.

LEE

Ma, I'd like you to meet Connie.

CONNIE

Oh, Mrs. Kaufman. The way Lee describes you, you must be the best mother in the world.

PEARL

Well, I raised him to be an honest boy.

ADELE

Would you like something to drink – seltzer or –

CONNIE

I'd love a beer.

Nobody quite knows how to respond to that.

JENNIFER

It was at that moment that Connie became known as "The Drinker".

LEE

I'm afraid we're out of beer.

MEL

Adele, where did you put that bottle  
of French wine I bought?

ADELE

I don't know, I haven't seen it for awhile –

PEARL

I think I may have thrown it out.

ADELE

Mama.

PEARL

It was old.

ADELE

For wine, that's good.

PEARL

Who knew? For milk, that's bad.

MEL

Would you like a glass of Mogen David?

CONNIE

What's Mogen David?

Nobody quite knows how to respond to that.

JENNIFER

It was at that moment that Connie  
became known as "The Shikse".

PEARL

You don't know Mogen David?

MEL

Mogen David is a sweet wine made for  
Jews who can't stand the taste of wine.

PEARL

(speaking Yiddish to the others:)  
In a bar iz Mogn Dovid mestame nisht keyn breyre.

JENNIFER

(trying to remember her Yiddish,  
which she hasn't used in years:)  
Roughly... "I guess Mogen David's not on the bar menu."



LEE

Ma, please.

CONNIE

I'll be glad to try a glass.

ADELE

I'll get it.

MEL

(to Connie and Lee:)

Sit, sit.

LEE

How soon will dinner be ready?

PEARL

It's only food; let it cook.

JENNIFER

This is not a good sign.

CONNIE

This is a very nice apartment.

MEL

Adele decorated it.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

ADELE

I just did some shopping.

MEL

I told her, "Spend whatever you want. Money is no object, as long as it doesn't cost too much."

CONNIE

So how you'd two meet?

MEL

Tell her, tell her. Adele tells this story great.

ADELE

You can tell them.

MEL

Tell 'em.

ADELE

Well, my family, we weren't rich.

MEL

(defending their family honor:)

They were rich in every way but money!

ADELE

But I was working –

MEL

(a big deal:)

At the *Chicago Tribune*.

ADELE

And I saved up all year to go on  
a one-week vacation in Michigan.

MEL

A very nice place.

ADELE

I met Mel there, and here we are.

MEL

You left out the best part.

ADELE

(she'd love to... someday)

I don't want to brag.

MEL

Brag. You deserve it. Brag.

JENNIFER

Mom took *enormous* pride in her humility.  
It took three therapists before I realized  
that made no sense whatsoever.

MEL

(to Adele:)

Well?

ADELE

Well... My girlfriends talked me  
into entering a beauty contest.

LEE

A beauty contest!

ADELE

I don't know how they did it.

MEL

And she won. First place.

LEE

First place?! Why didn't you tell me?

ADELE

I thought you might not approve.

LEE

Third place I wouldn't have approved;  
first place I approve.

ADELE

I don't know how my friends talked me into it.

LEE

I told you you were pretty!

Pearl enters.

CONNIE

And what were you doing there, Mel,  
hunting for beauty queens?

MEL

I was there with friends, bored out of my skull.

ADELE

Mel had been there two hours.

LEE

I love that, I love that!

MEL

I told my friends I can't stand it anymore,  
I'm leaving. And then I saw her.

ADELE

When he picked me up for our first date, in a  
new car, wearing a hand-tailored suit, I thought,  
"Here's my prince, coming to rescue me."

MEL

Really? You played so hard to get.

ADELE

No I didn't.

MEL

After our first date, you wouldn't go out with me for another three weeks.

ADELE

(an embarrassed admission:)

I didn't have another nice dress. I had to save up.

MEL

(arguing, not reassuring)

I didn't care what you wore.

ADELE

I did.

CONNIE

So, what are you two hoping for, a boy or a girl?

JENNIFER

I'm not sure I want to hear this.

MEL

Well, every father wants a son.

JENNIFER

(sarcastic)

Thanks, Dad.

LEE

Mel's right. It's what every father wants.  
Every father in the world.

JENNIFER

(sarcastic)

Thanks, Uncle Lee.

ADELE

It doesn't matter to me.

JENNIFER

(*not* sarcastic)

Thanks, Mom.

ADELE

If it's a girl, we'll just have another.

Jennifer sighs.

CONNIE

And what do you want, Mrs. Kaufman?

PEARL

God never asks me what I want,  
Miss Harrisburg.

CONNIE

(to Lee:)

Miss Harrisburg?

LEE

(slight overlap with the above:)

Ma, what Connie meant was, do you want  
your first grandchild to be a boy or a girl?

JENNIFER

Tell 'em, Gram. You and me, we're going to be  
closer than my brothers ever were with you.

PEARL

I just want the child to be healthy.  
Nothing else matters. *Nothing.*

JENNIFER

Thank you, Gram. Thank you.

PEARL

Of course, a boy would be good.

Jennifer sighs. By now, Adele has served everyone a glass of wine.

CONNIE

To babies. The greatest blessing on earth.

Everyone but Pearl and Adele takes a sip of Mogen David.  
(Connie's toast brings up feelings in Pearl, as we'll learn later.)

CONNIE (cont'd)

(responding to the taste:)

Jesus.

Nobody quite knows how to respond to this *at all*.

JENNIFER

I was never close to Connie, but it was  
always fun when she showed up.

CONNIE

You know, I don't know if Lee told you,  
Mrs. Kaufman, but I got some books  
from the library on how to be a Jew.  
And I've decided to convert.

PEARL

Es vet zayn vi a Rebe's brokhe iber khazer.

JENNIFER

Roughly... "It'll be like a rabbi giving  
a blessing on a pork chop."

LEE

Ma, let's just speak English, okay?

PEARL

Oyb zi ken Yiddish, red ikh bald af English.

JENNIFER

"If she knew Yiddish, I'd speak English."

CONNIE

But here I am, rattling on. Tonight's not about me.

JENNIFER

Ohhh yes it is.

CONNIE

Tonight should be about celebrating your  
new baby. And well, I hope I'm not out  
of line saying this, but whether it's a boy  
or a girl – and I do hope it's a boy –

Jennifer sighs.

CONNIE (cont'd)

I'm sure you two will be wonderful parents.

LEE

Amen.

Everyone drinks but Adele.

MEL

To my wife, who will be the best mother  
in the world.

Everyone drinks but Adele.

MEL (cont'd)

Why aren't you drinking?

ADELE

I'm not thirsty.

CONNIE

A little wine is good for the baby.  
It settles them down.

MEL

Really?

CONNIE

That's what everyone told my mom.  
Or was it "whiskey"?

LEE

You're gonna be a great mom, sis.

ADELE

How do you know?

MEL

(an argumentative tone:)

Why won't you be a great mom?

ADELE

What if the baby starts to cry? One book says  
pick it up, another book says don't pick it up.

PEARL

I'm lucky I had children before I learned to read.

ADELE

Then I read –

PEARL

Why do you have to make things so complicated?  
If you want to pick the baby up, pick it up.  
If you don't want to pick it up, don't pick it up.  
If you don't want to pick it up but you're  
sick of it crying, pick it up.

ADELE

And what if it still cries after I pick it up?

PEARL

Then you jiggle it a little.

ADELE

And what if that doesn't work?

PEARL

You go

(holding the imaginary baby  
and puffing her cheeks:)

"bubububububu".

ADELE

But what if that –

MEL

By that point, the baby will be in college.

LEE

You're smart; you'll figure it out.

ADELE

You don't know that.

PEARL

Bubbeleh, you'll be a fine mother.

ADELE

How do you know?

PEARL

I know.

ADELE

But *how* do you know?

PEARL

I know.

ADELE

But how –

PEARL

I just know.

ADELE

But –

PEARL

I know.

MEL

(topping the argument:)

Why won't you listen to her?



ADELE

Because she also knew Ezra wouldn't die on the boat coming over. He got sicker and sicker, and she said, "Your brother will get better, I know."

Silence.

JENNIFER

Who's Ezra? I had an uncle named Ezra?

ADELE

I'm sorry, Mama, I –

PEARL

No, no, you're right. I don't know anything. I'm sure the people who wrote those books are very smart.

ADELE

Mama, when you bake challah, you never use a recipe. You use a pinch of this, a dash of that, and every time it's the most delicious challah I've ever had. I watch you, I take notes, and when I make challah, it's awful.

MEL

It's not – awful.

ADELE

(who knows the truth:)

Please.

(to Pearl:)

With a pinch of this and a dash of that, you raised us. How do I know my children will turn out any better than my challah?

Tears well up in Pearl's eyes, and then:

PEARL

Ezra. I... Excuse me.

Pearl exits into the kitchen.

ADELE

I will never mention him again.

LEE

Good idea.

JENNIFER

Not a good idea! Who's Ezra? How did he die?

(to Adele:)

Is this why you always got so scared whenever  
any of us got sick? You were more worried  
about my sniffles than you are about your cancer.

(to her therapist:)

Sometimes I think our family motto was,  
"If you close your eyes, you won't see the darkness."

ADELE

I better help her in the kitchen.

CONNIE

Can I help?

ADELE

You're company. Relax.

Adele exits. An awkward moment, then:

CONNIE

So Lee tells me you have a brother.

MEL

Let's discuss something else, shall we?

JENNIFER

Who *are* you people?! Just how much did you  
sweep under the rug?! As Connie might say, "Jesus!"  
(to her therapist:)

The rest of the evening – it went okay, if  
you define okay as "Nobody died." Connie  
reminded Gram that she planned to convert,  
to which Gram replied, in Yiddish, "You can  
put a beautiful linen on a crappy table, but  
the table doesn't change." Later Lee and  
Gram had a *big* fight, which wasn't really  
a fight, because he was the undisputed  
winner on yelling but she completely aced  
him on sighing. The one point they agreed  
on was that it was *his* life, and he had the  
right to ruin it. It was a truce just like the  
Korean War, but with less defined boundaries.

I... I'm not sure how much I like being here.

The lights transition into the next scene.

**ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR**

A Sunday evening in mid-November. Mel, Adele, Lee and Pearl are watching television.

JENNIFER

Oh, there was one other weekly ritual my family observed religiously: Sunday night TV. We may have yelled and screamed at each other every night at dinner – everyone trying to put little dents in each others' souls – but Sunday night... when we watched TV, it was like we had reached an oasis.

LEE

How does he convince all those performers to appear on one show?

MEL

That's his job.

LEE

TV is amazing!

MEL

TV will revolutionize this country. Every night there are plays, beautiful singers, documentaries, you name it. Mark my words. Ten years from now, everyone in America will own a TV, and we'll be a much smarter country.

JENNIFER

What Dad lacked in insight he made up for in conviction.

MEL

Once Adele and I watched an opera – in our own home! MADAME BUTTERFLY. I swear, the parts I was awake for were beautiful.

ADELE

And the best part is, when I have the baby, if he gets fussy, I can just put him in front of the TV for hours. And if I want to punish him, I won't let him watch any TV at all.

JENNIFER

It's sure going to be fun growing up in this family.

ADELE

Mama, help me in the kitchen.

PEARL

Okay.

As Adele and Pearl exit, Mel walks over to the TV set.

LEE

What's on next?

MEL

A conversation.

LEE

About what?

Mel turns off the TV set.

MEL

The *women* want me to talk to you.

LEE

Mel –

MEL

Just hear me out.

LEE

You're wasting your time.

MEL

Just listen to me, one minute!

LEE

You're not going to –

MEL

One minute!

LEE

For you, one minute.

MEL

Lee... do you want to destroy your life and  
break the hearts of everyone in your family?

LEE

Mel, one favor. Could you start with the *small* stupid questions before you ask the *big* stupid questions?

MEL

You just got back, Lee. Why rush into things?

LEE

I know it looks –

MEL

I mean, I'm sure it's been a long time since you've been with a woman.

LEE

Not really.

MEL

Well, of course. I didn't mean those places I'm sure you and the boys went to –

LEE

No. Not me.

MEL

You don't have to pretend –

LEE

(slight overlap with the above:)

I... I met someone over there.

MEL

You had a girlfriend in Korea?

LEE

Don't ask if she was Jewish.

MEL

I'm glad you had company.

LEE

God, did I have company. A Korean girl. Very prim on the outside. But inside...

(leans forward:)

Can I be honest?

JENNIFER

Definitely.

LEE

It's not like I was a virgin when I went over,  
but till I met her, I had no idea what sex could be.

MEL

I thought Asian women were shy.

LEE

Apparently she didn't know that. The things  
she showed me. With her hands, with her *mouth*.  
May I really be frank?

MEL and JENNIFER  
(simultaneously)

Definitely.

LEE

One night, I still can't believe this,  
one night she was on the rag, and  
she told me to use her back entrance.

MEL

You had sex in her tushie?!

Jennifer responds with amused disbelief.

LEE

She liked it. She liked everything.  
No shame, no guilt. Just pleasure.

MEL

What'd you do when you knew you were –

LEE

(slight overlap with the above:)

I wasn't going to bring her *home*.  
She knew that. We broke up.

MEL

Do you have any idea what –

LEE

Two weeks later, she convinced some kid  
from Nebraska to elope with her.

MEL

I guess she wasn't too devastated.

LEE

War teaches you great survival skills.

MEL

Look, Lee, you're still young.

LEE

Nobody who comes back from war is young.

MEL

Connie's nice, but she's not one of us.

LEE

She'll convert.

MEL

She still won't be –

LEE

Mel, you know how they say there are no atheists in foxholes? That's crap. You spend enough time in war, you realize there's either no God or he's an idiot. I hope I'm not offending you –

MEL

It's okay.

LEE

She'll convert, and we'll raise our kids Jewish. But don't ask me to believe. You're not a good enough salesman.

MEL

Then at least slow down. See how you feel in six months, a year –

LEE

I want to go to California, and I'm taking Connie.

MEL

(letting out frustration:)

What's so special about California?!

LEE

If I want an orange, I don't want to wait till it's put in a box, shipped to Chicago, trucked to a store and unpacked. I want to grab it off the tree while it still has life in it.

MEL

(a mix of desperation and exasperation:)  
Just think about it awhile.

LEE

Mel –

MEL

I'm being selfish. I see how you sell cars.  
You have a gift. You get in the customers'  
heads. Most salesmen can't do that. Stay  
with me, and I'll make it worth your while.  
And if in a few years you –

LEE

A few years?!

MEL

(slight overlap with the above:)  
I'll try to connect you with a dealership out there.

LEE

I'm honored, Mel, I really am. But you're you're  
trying to sell me a car I don't want.

MEL

Just think it over.

LEE

Mel I, uh, I had lunch like you asked with one  
of the salesman from your brother's dealership,  
and uh... you're right. Your brother's embezzling.

MEL

That bastard. That goddam bastard.

JENNIFER

Wow, my dad knows words stronger than "tushie".

LEE

He said it's, it's like an open secret there.

MEL

That goddam – You know, when he was six,  
a, a streetcar hit him. It was bad. He needed  
a transfusion, and I begged to give him blood.  
"You're too young," my father said. From  
that point on, everyone coddled him.  
"Poor Sammy", they said. Poor Sammy.  
I guess he's finally gotten my blood.



LEE

What will you do?

MEL

Who knows? First I have to get used to a world where my own brother would steal from me.

LEE

I'm sorry, Mel.

MEL

So, Connie. How much do you even know about her?

LEE

What do I need to know? I like her; she likes me. She's a good person, she has a good head on her shoulders, we get along great, and if I can be frank –

MEL and JENNIFER  
(simultaneously)

*Definitely!*

LEE

In the bedroom...

MEL

You've already –

LEE

If I don't have the patience for an orange to be picked, you think I'm going to wait till the honeymoon?!

MEL

You're going to go through with this regardless of what I say, aren't you?

LEE

I'm afraid so.

MEL

And there's absolutely nothing I can say or do to convince you otherwise.

LEE

Not a thing.

MEL

Can you afford to get married?

LEE

We'll elope.

MEL

No. *I forbid it.*

LEE

Mel –

MEL

(laying down the law:)

If you're getting married, you're not going to sneak off to City Hall. I insist you have a proper wedding. You're getting married in this house, and the conversation is *closed*.

LEE

But I thought you didn't approve –

MEL

So? I don't approve of half the things I do; why should I hold you to a higher standard?

JENNIFER

Oh Dad. He could be impossible to please, but he had a beautiful fire.

LEE

It's really okay if I –

MEL

You know, my mother insisted I go to law school. I wanted to go to engineering school but no – she insisted. So I went to law school –

LEE

You're a – ?

MEL

I dropped out after two weeks. I don't think she ever forgave me.

LEE

You really think your mom never forgave you?

MEL

It's no big deal. If I *had* become a lawyer,  
I'm sure my mother would've never forgiven  
me for some other reason.

LEE

She must've been pleased when  
you started working for your dad?

MEL

I'm not sure she was ever too pleased  
with my dad. She had very high standards.  
If they were humanly attainable,  
they were too low. *Adele!*

Adele and Pearl enter.

ADELE

What?

MEL

Lee and I have talked, and it's been decided.  
You and I are giving him a wedding.

ADELE

What?

MEL

In this house. I'll let you work out the details.

ADELE

Me?

MEL

You arranged *our* wedding.

ADELE

Yes, but –

MEL

It's easy. All you have to do is get flowers,  
decorations, musicians, food, drinks, plates,  
silverware, serving dishes, chairs and a chuppah.  
You work out the details.

ADELE

But –

MEL

But what?

ADELE

I'm about to have a baby.

MEL

Then have the wedding on another night.

LEE

Look, I don't want to cause trouble.

MEL

You're not causing trouble.

ADELE

What does Connie want?

LEE

I don't know.

MEL

Ask Connie.

ADELE

How much should I spend?

MEL

Spend all you want. Just don't waste anything.

Jennifer responds, as if to say, "There he goes again."

ADELE

I thought you and he were going to talk about –

MEL

Apparently he has a mind of his own!

LEE

Look, if you two need to discuss –

MEL

This has nothing to do with you!

(to Adele, intimidating:)

Okay?!

ADELE

(acquiescing without resentment)

Whatever you think is best.

JENNIFER

*This* is what my parents called "communication".

Pearl starts to go back to the kitchen. Lee calls after her.  
The following conversation isn't easy for either of them.

LEE

Ma...

PEARL

Yes, boychik?

LEE

Will you come to the wedding?

PEARL

I haven't gotten an invitation yet.

LEE

You're invited.

Pearl looks away to think. Then she looks back.

PEARL

If you want me to bake something, you'll have to tell me how many people are coming.

LEE

Thanks, Ma.

PEARL

When you were born, your father and I looked at you and I said, "Oy, this one's going to be trouble." And your father, may he rest, said, "Good. He'll distract us from bigger troubles."

Pearl exits.

LEE

Mel, would you be my best man?

MEL

(emphatically)

Nothing would give me greater joy.

JENNIFER

How about having a daughter?!!!

MEL

We should celebrate.

ADELE

Shall I pour some wine?

MEL

I thought your mother threw out the wine.

ADELE

We have Mogen David.

MEL

That's not wine; that's what Jews drink  
to avoid becoming alcoholics.

(to Lee:)

I'm taking you out for a drink.

ADELE

But –

MEL

I'm his best man; I'm buying him a drink.

(to Lee:)

What do you say?

LEE

If you buy one round, I'll get the next.

MEL

You reach for the check; I'll chop off your hand.

JENNIFER

That's my dad's version of "I love you".

MEL

(kisses Adele on the cheek:)

Don't wait up.

ADELE

Remember, tomorrow's a work day.

MEL

Great. For once I'll see what it's like  
with a hangover.

LEE

Sis, your husband is one of the greatest men  
I ever met, you know that?

ADELE

Don't let him drink too much. Please.

Mel opens the door.

MEL

I know a place where they pour liberally.

LEE

(kisses Adele on the cheek:)

Don't worry.

MEL

And don't wait up.

Lee and Mel exit. Adele looks very concerned.

JENNIFER

I don't know how much I know about life,  
but I do know this: Saying "Don't worry"  
to a Jewish mother has *never* stopped  
a Jewish mother from worrying.

My dad and alcohol, it was something.  
One drink, fine. Two drinks, fine. But after  
three drinks, a real Jekyll and Hyde thing  
happened. He became... happy. At weddings  
and Bar Mitzvahs, he would dance for hours.  
Never heard the beat – never even listened.  
He didn't care. He was in heaven.

My mom never drank, never danced.  
Just like now, I think my mom spent  
most of her life sitting, waiting patiently.

Mom, did you *ever* get silly?  
Or misbehave? Did you ever let yourself  
go too far?

When you took me to the playground,  
you just sat on a bench and watched. Other  
moms played, they schmoozed with each other.  
You just sat there, by yourself, waiting patiently.  
And soon, I don't know why, I stopped playing  
with others very much. Most kids associate  
playgrounds with fun. I associated playgrounds  
with... loneliness.

The lights transition into the next scene.

**ACT ONE, SCENE FIVE**

Later that night. Adele has fallen asleep watching television. From the TV, we hear static, the kind of sound made after a station finished broadcasting for the day.

JENNIFER

A few hours later...

The front door opens. Mel and Lee enter. Adele awakens.

MEL

(to Lee:)

Shh.

Adele turns on the light.

ADELE

Mel?

MEL

I told you not to wait up.

ADELE

I was watching a movie.

LEE

Well, I better go to sleep. I want to make sure I'm rested in the morning.

(smiling at Mel:)

I don't want to upset my boss.

Lee exits.

MEL

How was the movie?

ADELE

Very small. I don't think people will get used to watching movies on such small screens.

MEL

(beaming and effusive)

You're going to be a wonderful mother, you know that?



ADELE

You look tired. You should go to bed.

MEL

You know how I know you'll be a wonderful mother?

ADELE

(a bit unsettled, but trying  
not to show it:)

I know I married a prince, who looks tired.

MEL

I know you'll be a wonderful mother because  
you're a wonderful wife. You give me a good  
home, and you never complain about anything.

ADELE

We should go to bed.

MEL

Are you suggesting something?

ADELE

I have a lot to do tomorrow.

MEL

Call in sick.

ADELE

How can a housewife call in sick?  
Who should I call – myself?

MEL

Why not?

(picking up an imaginary phone,  
imitates female voices:)

"Hello, me? I need to come in late tomorrow."

"Okay, me."

(hangs up imaginary phone:)

Click. Everything's fixed.

ADELE

You should go to bed.

MEL

Not without my beauty queen.

ADELE

Do you want me to make you coffee?

MEL

I could kiss you in places you didn't know  
you could be kissed.

ADELE

Please. Mel.

MEL

Places you would *enjoy* being kissed.

ADELE

I'm tired.

Mel kisses Adele. It starts cautiously, his desire balanced by timidity. Adele gives a passive response. When he tries to build in passion, she pulls away.

ADELE (cont'd)

Please. Someone could come in.

MEL

Your brother's passed out, and your mother  
would be thrilled you're kissing a Jewish boy.

ADELE

I'm going to sleep.

Adele tries to get up from the couch, but Mel prevents her. It's firm, but not any more extreme than necessary, and Adele doesn't resist with much force.

MEL

(a complaint:)

I just want to kiss you.

ADELE

I told you. The baby.

JENNIFER

Don't make me the scapegoat.  
I didn't ask to be born.

ADELE

If you respect me...

Mel lets go. Adele gets up and starts to go, but is stopped by:

MEL

(an accusation, not a question:)

Do you find me attractive?

ADELE

Of course I do.

MEL

Do you... desire me?

ADELE

Look, if you, if you have – needs, go to the bathroom. I promise I won't interrupt.

MEL

Are those the only needs you think I have?

ADELE

I don't know.

MEL

You're my wife. I need to be with you sometimes.

ADELE

(slight overlap with the above:)

After the baby is born –

MEL

Why did you marry me?

ADELE

I have no idea what you're talking about.

JENNIFER

Why *did* you marry him, Mom?

MEL

Do you love me?

ADELE

Of course I do.

JENNIFER

Do you, Mom? Or... or did you just need a prince?

MEL

I could fool around, you know.

ADELE

(her own anger beginning to show:)

Then why don't you?

MEL

I'm married.

ADELE

That doesn't stop most men.

MEL

(getting louder:)

Do you want me to fool around?

ADELE

I want you to lower your voice.

MEL

Do I ever deny you anything? *Anything?*

ADELE

Lower your voice.

MEL

I support you, I support your mother,  
I support your brother, and damn it,  
I'm supporting *my* goddam brother.

ADELE

I'm eight months pregnant. Do you want to  
risk hurting the baby? Is that what you want?

MEL

There are things you can do that won't  
hurt the baby. Things with your hand,  
with your mouth –

ADELE

(with a fire we haven't seen before:)

*I am not a whore!*

MEL

Are you sure? I'm told whores  
don't want to be kissed, either.

ADELE

I could say something mean, but I won't.

MEL

Say something mean, I dare you.  
You're always so good, so nice.  
Let's see if you have some devil in you.

ADELE

(pure steel)

What the hell do you want from me?

MEL

I want you to show me you love me.

ADELE

And if I don't?

MEL

I'm a good man. I play by the rules.  
Am I the only sucker in the world  
who plays by the rules?

ADELE

What are you talking about?

MEL

It's one thing to be treated like a fool by  
my brother. But when I come home, I don't  
like being treated like a fool by my wife.

ADELE

It's the baby. Dr. Kahan\* said –

(\*pronounced "KAY-han")

MEL

I saw Dr. Kahan last week. You told me  
he said you shouldn't have sex once you  
got pregnant. He told me he never said that.

ADELE

Maybe he didn't remember.

MEL

I don't have to be such a prince, you know.  
I could throw your mother and your brother  
out on the street!

ADELE

What do you want from me?

MEL

It's your job to show me you love me!

ADELE

(confronting with strength:)

And if I don't?

MEL

(a threat:)

Then don't expect me to be the only  
one around here who's dumb enough  
to live up to his responsibilities.

Adele stares at Mel. She wipes a couple of tears, but she refuses to feel sad.

JENNIFER

Mom?

MEL

Well?

ADELE

I will be there in a moment.

MEL

Thank you.

(a beat, then:)

The first time I saw you... I finally understood  
how people could be happy just *looking* at beauty.

Mel exits down the hall. Adele walks over to her purse. She opens it and puts on lipstick. Then she takes out her compact and touches up her face. Nothing extreme, but even in this situation, she wants to look good. As Adele works on her face, Jennifer walks up to her.

JENNIFER

Mom, you don't have to go in there.  
You don't.... Don't do this, Mom...  
It'll affect you and it'll affect me and  
it could affect generations. *Don't.*

Jennifer is standing on the other side of the compact. Adele closes her compact and lowers it. Jennifer is now staring directly at Adele, but Adele cannot see Jennifer.

JENNIFER (cont'd)

You're so... young.

Adele exits down the hall. Jennifer looks out at her therapist.

The lights fade.

**END OF ACT ONE**