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The Widows of Ashur

Andrew Vorder Bruegge

Winthrop University, vorderbruegg@winthrop.edu

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The Widows of Ashur

A Drama

First Draft@March 2005

Written by

Andrew Vorder Bruegge, Ph.D.

Professor Theatre and Dance

115 Johnson Hall

Winthrop University

Rock Hill, SC 29733

803-323-2287 (w)

803-323-2560 (fax)

803-327-0813 (h)

vorderbruegg@winthrop.edu

Dramatis Personae

Father

Husband, Eldest Son of Father

Wife, Widow of Husband

Brother, Younger Son of Father

Soldier

Veteran

Two Children

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Setting: an older home. The incidents described below do not occur in chronological order in the scripts. The father is in a wheelchair--old, worn out, crippled by disease, delusional. The woman moved in to care for him after her husband (eldest child of the father) died in the war. Temporarily home for the holidays, the brother is a post-doctoral fellow at a large university on the west coast. Early in the action the children are away visiting relatives. Female soldier appears at the door. She brings the husband's dog tags to the family. The woman insists that the soldier stay a few days and get to know them. She is grateful for the soldier's gesture, but the dog tags unearth many painful memories. The soldier is actually AWOL. She did things during the war that haunt her. Soldier and brother develop an intimacy. The woman discovers them and rages, demanding that the brother leave the house. Father dies. An old vet comes to pay hollow respects. Brother and Soldier make a plan to run off to Canada together. Before departing, Soldier quietly smothers children upstairs. Soldier and brother depart. Woman is left alone to discover the brutal murder of her children.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

FATHER—A man in his eighties now confined to a wheelchair, hooked up to a portable oxygen tank with breathing tubes. The left side of his body is paralyzed, so his speech is slurred. He should speak distinctly enough for the audience to comprehend him, but his slur makes it difficult for strangers to understand him. He wears his VFW hat at all times. He has diabetes, so he gets shots on a regular basis from the Wife or Brother. He must eat on a rigid schedule. There is always a rolling tray next to him with his insulin, pills, syringes, water, etc.

HUSBAND—Older son of Father. We see him only in flashbacks or in the other characters' dreams. Mid-thirties. Career NCO in the military with all the natural authority, confidence and vigor of such a man.

WIFE—Mid-thirties. Spouse of Husband. Two children have thickened her just a little, but much of her youthful vitality remains. A high school graduate, she enjoys reading Regency romances and the local newspaper. She faithfully reads all the junk mail that comes to the house. She has her special chair LC where she sits to do crossword puzzles and knit. On either side of this chair are baskets overflowing with her various reading materials and projects. She has no living relatives on her side of the family.

BROTHER—Younger son of Father. Late twenties. Physically fit and alert. He is a graduate student who loves his studies and looks forward to a rewarding career. He is here for the summer to help Wife with some repair and maintenance jobs around the house. He has taken over a small writing desk SR, an antique heirloom. There are books stacked on it and on the floor around it. Also, there are folders, note cards and tablets of paper. It's all fairly neat and organized.

SOLDIER—Twenty-two or so. She joined the military right out of high school, glad to be away from her dysfunctional family. As a young soldier recently returned from active duty, she is in top physical condition. She seems to be just a typical soldier, who would not attract anyone's eye among a barrack of troops.

VETERAN—a courtly, arthritic man in his seventies, whose life has diminished to platitudes and sparse living.

CHILDREN—The two children of Husband and Wife. They are somewhere around five and eight.

GENERAL STAGE DIRECTIONS

(The house is an older home, the home that Father owns and where Husband and Brother grew up. It is not dilapidated, but it is well-worn. UL is the front door with a screen door. ULC an archway leads into a dining area. UC is the stairway upstairs to bedrooms. UR is a hallway leading off right to the kitchen and the backyard. Center is a small sofa and Wife's chair. DL is a window, and in front of it is a small table with the telephone and a small chair. DL of that is an open box of toys. There is at least one hunting/fishing trophy on display over the desk SR, and perhaps a gun case. It is summer, though not uncomfortably hot for the characters as long as they wear minimal clothing—gym shorts, sleeveless tops, barefoot, hair clipped up off their necks, etc. Because of Father's need for constant attention, the family has fallen into the habit of eating in the living room where one of them can feed Father while they munch and perhaps listen to the radio or read. The dining room is never used. During "dream" sequences there should be a lighting change and other cues such as music or stylization of gesture/movement to indicate the change from real time.)

AFFLICTION

(Wife is holding the flag that the Veteran gave her. She looks out the window DL. Light change. Enter Father and Husband. They wear loud Hawaiian shirts. Father sits on sofa.)

HUSBAND
Hello.

FATHER
Hello.

HUSBAND
Aren't you going to say anything?

WIFE
I'm afraid.

HUSBAND
Of what? We're only a couple of ghosts.

FATHER
Yeah. Boo! Hey, she didn't even flinch.

HUSBAND
Cut it out, Dad. She's mad about something.

WIFE
I'm afraid if I turn around, you really won't be there.

FATHER
We're as here as we're gonna get, for ghosts, that is. *(He giggles, trying to laugh. Husband nudges him.)*

WIFE
I must be dreaming this.

HUSBAND
As far as we're concerned, you're not. We're apparitions. To us, it's really happening.

FATHER
Boo! *(Wife jumps.)* Aha! Gotcha! See? We're as real as you want us to be.

HUSBAND
Don't get too metaphysical, Dad. It messes up their minds too much. *(To Wife.)* If you want to believe that you're dreaming, that's OK. Go ahead.

WIFE

So, why are you here?

HUSBAND

To see how you're doing and let you know we're doing fine.

WIFE

You're not still angry with me?

HUSBAND

No, of course not. It was really stupid of me to hold a grudge against you and go off and get myself killed.

FATHER

Just running away from your problems, that's what I've been telling him. Nothing but running away from them.

WIFE

But it was my fault. I did what no wife should do.

HUSBAND

Now don't go blaming yourself. I should've kept my cool and gotten over it. No guilt trips allowed. Alright?

WIFE

Alright, but . . .

HUSBAND

What?

WIFE

I'm afraid again.

HUSBAND

You've got nothing to fear. You're talking to a couple of ghosts, remember? What could we do to you?

FATHER

We could frighten her to death. Boo! Or better yet, we could tickle her to death! *(He lunges at Wife and tickles her vigorously. She doubles up and falls down, shrieking.)*

HUSBAND

Dad! Dad! Stop it now. *(Ad lib of a struggle to pull Father away.)* Just stop that.

FATHER

Oh, alright. I think I'll go in to the kitchen and get something to eat. Is there any of that potato salad left from the funeral? *(He exits to the kitchen.)*

WIFE

Ghosts eat?

HUSBAND

Sure, why not?

WIFE

Do you want anything?

HUSBAND

No, let Dad have it.

WIFE

Would you like something to drink?

HUSBAND

No, no thank you. Don't worry about me. *(He moves to touch her. She shies away.)*
Still afraid of me?

WIFE

Well, I'm afraid . . .

HUSBAND

Yes?

WIFE

I'm afraid to ask you to forgive me for what I did.

HUSBAND

Why is it so hard?

WIFE

I don't know. It just is. I never thought this would ever happen.

HUSBAND

Well, it did, and it's done.

WIFE

Yes, it is. *(Pause. He reaches out slowly and puts a hand on her shoulder.)* I forgive you. There. Feel better?

WIFE

Yes. *(She sinks into her chair and weeps. Husband sits on arm of chair and holds her. Father returns, eating from a leftovers plastic bowl.)*

FATHER

Mmmmm! This tastes great. Better even than when I was alive. Thanks. *(He sees Wife crying.)* Oh, sorry.

WIFE

No, that's OK. I'm glad you like it, Father-in-law. It's about all you'd eat those last couple weeks before you died.

FATHER

Well, looks like you two lovebirds have kissed and made up, huh?

HUSBAND

Yeah, looks like it.

FATHER

Well, great. I told you it'd be easy, son.

WIFE

But what am I going to do?

HUSBAND

What do you mean?

WIFE

What am I going to do without you?

FATHER

You've got the kids.

HUSBAND

Dad, that's not what she means.

FATHER

Well, I'd sure be grateful to have those kids in my life. What kind of grandfather was I? Stuck in a wheelchair and hardly able to talk. They were terrified of me.

WIFE

Yes, I have the children, and I love them to death. But in the blink of an eye they'll be grown up and gone. Your brother already has his life. He'll be going back west soon, and he won't be coming back to see me ever again.

FATHER

He'll want to see his niece and nephew, don't you think?

WIFE

His mind's on other things.

HUSBAND

What's your mind on?

WIFE

Nothing.

HUSBAND

If I had asked you that a couple years ago, you would've been lying.

WIFE

I never lied to you.

HUSBAND

Are you lying now?

WIFE

No. I'm staring a big, fat ugly truth in the face. *(Pause.)* Everything's slipping away.

FATHER

You're still young. Start another life. Neither of us had that chance.

FATHER

We're jealous. And there's nothing worse than a jealous ghost. Boo!

HUSBAND

Dad!

WIFE

I don't want a new life. I want you. *(She falls and clutches Husband's knees.)*

HUSBAND

You had your chance, and you drove me away from you. *(He and Father move to exit. She desperately struggles to hold his legs, ad libbing pleas of anguish.)* Once you're a ghost, you'll understand. We all make mistakes, but you can forgive yourself and everyone else here in the afterlife. Don't worry about it. You're gonna survive. You'll see. *(They exit out the front door. Wife lays on floor crying. Fadeout)*

CONDOLENCES

(Midday. The front doorbell rings. Wife answers it.)

WIFE

Yes?

VETERAN

(Offstage.) Hello, I'm from the VFW. Is this the Richardson residence?

WIFE

Yes, it is. Come in, sir. *(Veteran enters. He is in his eighties. He is somewhat down at heel in cheap polyester clothes, string tie and straw hat. He carries his hat in one hand and a Wal-Mart plastic bag in the other.)*

VETERAN

Thank you, thank you.

WIFE

Please, let me take your hat. *(He gives it to her and she quickly puts it by the door.)*
Won't you come in and sit down? *(They move DS to sit.)*

VETERAN

Thank you, thank you.

WIFE

I was startled when I heard the doorbell ring. We're not used to having visitors. No one comes here except people connected to the military. They always seem to bring bad news.

VETERAN

Well, don't worry. I'm not exactly from the government, ma'm. You have nothing to fear but fear itself. I'm from the VFW.

WIFE

Yes, well, I wasn't expecting a call . . .

VETERAN

We all served our country, ma'm. Overseas, you see? From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli and way down south in Dixie, too! Ha, ha!

WIFE

Yes, I understand. It's very nice of you to pay us a call. My father-in-law served overseas. Years ago, of course. Before he died.

VETERAN

No, no, no. Old soldiers never die. Remember that. Remember what he went through because he believed this country was worth fighting for. It's the land of the free because of the brave. Brave men like him.

WIFE

He was very proud of his military service. He wore his VFW hat right up until he . . . until the end.

VETERAN

And as a member of the VFW he was proud of his country, too. Love it or leave it. Love it or leave it.

WIFE

Patriotism is alive and well in this house, thanks to Father-in-law. We'll always honor his memory for that.

VETERAN

Rest assured, ma'm, that his soul has gone up to heaven, because he served his time in hell. But, I'm sorry, ma'm, I'm just babbling on here. I should get right to the point. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!

WIFE

You may fire when you are ready, Gridley.

VETERAN

What's that? Oh, yes! Exactly. Exactly. Ha, ha! Well, now. Whenever one of our members departs this life, the VFW presents the family with a flag.

WIFE

Well, that's very kind.

VETERAN

It's our way of paying respect to a brother in arms. Even though John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, we don't forget what he did. And every last one of us would do it again, if we could. Like your father-in-law, I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.

WIFE

I'm sure you do. You sound a lot like him. Did you know him?

VETERAN

No, ma'm, I didn't. I'm actually from over there in the state capital. I never had a chance to meet many of the folks from the post here in your town.

WIFE

It's not really my town. I just moved here a year or so ago to be with my father-in-law. My husband died, you see.

VETERAN

I'm sorry to hear that. My condolences, ma'm. My deepest condolences.

WIFE

Thank you.

VETERAN

Did your husband ever serve in the military?

WIFE

Oh, yes. Like father, like son, you know. He was a career man. A sergeant.

VETERAN

Good man! Both of them. God love 'em. Men from every generation must step forward if we want to keep our hope alive that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth.

WIFE

Yes, but it's strange how one can live through a war and die after many long years, and the other dies so young.

VETERAN

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, ma'm. Just keep your faith, that's all. Don't give up the ship. Tell me, did your husband die in service to his country?

WIFE

Yes, he did. That war that's going on right now over there. That stupid war that took my husband.

VETERAN

You have to fight wars to stop wars, you know.

WIFE

Perhaps, so.

VETERAN

Oh, you can be sure of that, ma'm. We must be ever vigilant if there's any hope of keeping the peace.

WIFE

Peace?

VETERAN

Yes, ma'm. Peace. Peace of mind. That's why I'm here, but I keep jumping off the track. My apologies, ma'm.

WIFE

Oh, that's quite alright. I've enjoyed talking to you, sir.

VETERAN

It's nice to chat, yes it is. But let me do my business and be on my way. On behalf of the VFW, I present to you this American flag. *(He takes it out of the bag and extends it to Wife.)* In memory of your father-in-law, a brave veteran of this country. *(She takes the flag.)*

WIFE

Thank you.

VETERAN

That flag flew over the US Capitol building. It was then delivered to our governor. It flew over the state capitol building this morning, before I brought it to you.

WIFE

That's quite an honor.

VETERAN

And always remember, ma'm. These colors never run.

WIFE

No, I suppose not. What good would running do anyway?

VETERAN

I don't read you, ma'm.

WIFE

I've got nowhere to run to. What's going to happen to me now that Father-in-law's dead? I'll be turned out of this house with no place to go. I married into this family for security and stability, but it's all gone now. My husband killed in the war. His father dead. His brother gone off to school. There's nothing here for me. I'm the unwelcome stranger, left with nothing. *(Pause.)*

VETERAN

You've got your country's gratitude, ma'm. *(Wife just looks at him in shock.)* Well, mission accomplished, so I won't take up any more of your time. *(He rises.)*

WIFE

(Rising.) Very well. Thank you for going to so much trouble.

VETERAN

(Moving to door.) Not at all. Not at all. This world would be a whole lot better if we all would ask not what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country.

WIFE

Yes, well, thank you again. *(She gives him his hat.)*

VETERAN

(Takes his hat.) I didn't ask if you wanted to keep this bag.

WIFE

No, that's alright. But I'll throw it away for you, if you like.

VETERAN

Oh, no. I'll keep it, if you don't mind. Waste not want not, you know. Could use it as a trash bag if nothing else. *(He looks around the house for the first time.)* You know, this is a real nice home. I had some in-laws that lived in this neighborhood years and years ago. A couple of blocks over, I think. We used to come over here and visit them over Memorial Day weekend or Fourth of July. We'd sit on their porch, grill up hot dogs and hamburger for the kids . . .

WIFE

Yes, I'm sure that was nice. *(Opening the screen door for him.)* Thank you again for coming all the way over here for this.

VETERAN

Oh, it's nothing, ma'm. I have not yet begun to fight! I've got three or four more flags to deliver here in town before my day is done. Good-bye. *(He exits.)*

WIFE

Good-bye. *(She returns DS and picks up flag. She tries to tear it, but it's too well stitched. She throws it on the sofa and starts beating it with one of the sofa pillows. Fadeout.)*

CONFESSION

(A meal. Early evening. Brother is feeding Father and occasionally taking a bite. Wife is looking out window SL as she munches. Soldier is on sofa eating.)

BROTHER

There you are, Dad. You're eating pretty well today.

FATHER

What else can I do?

BROTHER

(To Wife.) Dad's got quite an appetite for your potato salad.

WIFE

What?

BROTHER

I said Dad likes the potato salad.

WIFE

That's good. I'll make it more often.

FATHER

Is this another one of your girlfriends, boy?

BROTHER

No, Dad. You're confusing me with my older brother.

FATHER

She struts around here like a tramp.

WIFE

Father-in-law, just stop it now, you hear?

BROTHER

Here, Dad, try some soup. It's cooled off a little bit. It won't burn your tongue anymore.
(Father spits out soup. Brother sponges it up.)

SOLDIER

You sure do your best to take care of him. It's amazing how you can understand what he says. I'd be helpless.

WIFE

You learn to understand. Sort of like listening to a small child.

FATHER

When is she leaving?

BROTHER

I don't know, Dad. When the time is right.

FATHER

When I'm dead is what you mean.

WIFE

Don't be so morbid, father-in-law, especially when we have company. *(To Soldier.)* I'm sorry, I'm not being much of a hostess today. Would you like more food?

SOLDIER

I'm still working on this. Thanks.

WIFE

Here. I'll pour you some more lemonade. *(She does so.)*

SOLDIER

Thanks a lot.

WIFE

I just can't tell you how grateful we are that you've come here. How grateful I am. What you've done really means a lot to me.

BROTHER

Yeah, thanks. From all of us.

SOLDIER

I sort of figured you'd want what was his.

WIFE

Yes, yes. Your being here and bringing it. It's brought back a flood of memories. That's what's got me so distracted today. You understand?

SOLDIER

I think I do. I hope it was for the best that I came.

WIFE

You can be sure of that.

FATHER

I'm not so sure, not a bit.

BROTHER

Here, Dad, have a drink.

WIFE

You've put my mind at ease, that's the main thing. I know that's going to give me comfort for many, many years to come. And the children will be so glad to have some of their father's very special belongings. I can't wait for them to get back, now, because I want to give them all these little mementos.

SOLDIER

It's good to see you smiling, ma'm.

WIFE

Yes, we should be smiling, shouldn't we? Shouldn't be down in the mouth when guests are in the house. Yes, let's think happy thoughts.

BROTHER

I'm all for that. Just for today, let's remember good things about him. Things that'll make us all smile.

SOLDIER

What a great idea.

WIFE

Yeah, OK. I'll go first. Ever since the kids could walk, he loved to play with them. He'd come over here to the toy box (*She digs out soccer ball.*) and root around for something. He usually pulled out this soccer ball. He loved soccer. He played it in school, ever since he could walk. The children loved to roll it around with him.

BROTHER

Over here. (*He steps DR.*)

WIFE

Back and forth. (*They roll, throw and kick the ball back and forth.*) He always cheered them when they caught the ball or kicked it well. (*All three of them cheer whenever one of them does well.*) The children just squealed with delight when he'd cheer them.

SOLDIER

Let me play too! (*Standing.*)

BROTHER

Here, catch. (*He bounces the ball over her head and it goes US towards dining room. She returns with it to a position US of the sofa.*)

SOLDIER

Watch this. (*She bounces the ball off her head to Wife.*)

WIFE

Oh, and he loved to do all kinds of tricks and fancy moves with the ball. *(She tries to spin it on her forefinger. They all laugh.)*

SOLDIER

Here, I know one. *(Wife throws her the ball. Soldier passes around behind her back and over her head several times. They cheer. She throws it back to Wife, who tries to kick it up in the air off of one foot.)*

WIFE

Here, you try. *(She rolls the ball to Brother. He extends his foot and it rolls up his leg. He bounces it around with his feet and head with nimble skill. The others cheer his tricks.)*

BROTHER

Back earlier in the summer, I saw the children trying to do these moves like their father had taught them. *(Kicks the ball to Wife.)*

SOLDIER

I'll bet they looked cute doing it. How old are they?

WIFE

Seven and five now. *(She tosses the ball in the air, looking thoughtful.)*

FATHER

He made me a proud grandfather! Proudest in the world! Proud of him!

BROTHER

(Crossing to Wife, takes ball from her and stands using it like a basketball.) Yeah, well, he made me feel proud, because he taught me to play basketball. *(He crosses back SR dribbling. Soldier comes around to try to steal the ball from him. They move around DC and DR. Wife ad libs cheering for them.)* Taught me to dribble. Taught me to drive for the basket. Taught me how to work a pick. *(He dribbles US. Soldier moves with him and falls into sofa. They all laugh.)* See? I gotcha! *(Brother bounces ball off Soldier's head several times. More laughter.)* Oh, yeah, he taught me good. I'll never forget that. Back in seventh grade, I wanted to try out for the team. Of course, I was cut the first day.

WIFE

Oh, you weren't! You're so athletic.

BROTHER

I wasn't then.

SOLDIER

Just a gangly, awkward boy, huh?

BROTHER

Worse than that, I should think. But naturally, I was pretty sad about it. When I got home, he asked me what was the matter. I told him. Well, right then and there he took me out to the driveway and he started teaching me. Nearly every day after school and all summer long. We had those long summer evening after dinner where we'd play. He had me practicing free throws. *(He mimes it.)* Over and over. He took me through all kinds of dribbling exercises. *(He demonstrates.)* It took me forever to learn to bounce the ball between my legs, but I did it eventually. Sometimes we'd just play horse. By the end of the summer I could almost beat him. But he never let me quit, that's the thing. And he never stopped encouraging me. He showed me what it takes to succeed. I guess that's why he did so well in the military. He had that determination and that can-do attitude you need for that.

SOLDIER

So, did you make the team the next year?

BROTHER

Yeah, I did. *(Pause.)* Just before he left for that last tour of duty, we played basketball again. We hadn't done that in years. It was right here at the old house.

WIFE

I remember. We were all here for the holidays, weren't we? I remember pulling into the driveway, and there you two were. Shooting baskets and whooping it up. I had to honk to get your attention, you were playing so hard.

BROTHER

That was the last time I saw him. We played basketball. *(Pause.)* And that's a good memory, right?

WIFE

Right.

SOLDIER

Absolutely. *(Wife and Brother hug. Wife sustains the embrace.)*

BROTHER

(To Soldier.) So, what about you?

WIFE

Yeah, what good memories do you have of him?

SOLDIER

Oh, plenty, let me tell you. He always was saying, "Hot food and cold beer." All the time, to cheer us up. When we'd be running or doing grunge work or anything like that, he'd be shouting that at us. To remind us what our reward was when the day was done. And he delivered on it, too. Even if we were up front, snipers on the loose and mortar

rounds coming in, he'd show up outta nowhere with a crate full of rations that he'd heated up. Those rations in those bags aren't anything to cheer about, but he brought 'em up to us warm. It tasted great. And one time we were playing a softball game against another unit. We were getting a little R and R. After the game he took us all down into a basement room of the hospital, even the other team, and he had two or three ice chests loaded with beer. I don't know where he got it or how he got it inside that hospital, but he did. Nothing ever tasted so good.

WIFE

That sounds just like him, doesn't it?

BROTHER

Absolutely.

FATHER

My boy, my dear boy.

BROTHER

Yes, Dad. Just take it easy. Here, take a sip of this. *(He offers Father a drink.)*

SOLDIER

It's your turn. *(To Wife.)*

WIFE

Huh? Oh, yes. It is. Well, let's see. There're nothing but good memories for me, of course. Our first date, our wedding. The children being born. Buying our own home. *(Pause.)* I know. Back when we first started seeing each other, he invited me to go hunting with him.

SOLDIER

He asked you to go on a hunting date?

WIFE

What a guy, huh? I never had been much of an outdoors person, so it sounded like an adventure. Besides, it was a chance to be alone with him. I gotta admit, that was reason enough to say "yes" to the idea. As it turned out, the whole trip was wonderful. He showed me how to shoot his rifle. You know, he set up some tin cans and a few stumps as targets, and we banged away at 'em. He was very impressed with my shooting. "Natural ability" he kept saying.

SOLDIER

Women generally do better on the shooting range than men. We're more patient. We don't get as frustrated as men do.

BROTHER

Really? I had no idea.

WIFE

Well, that was just the start of it. He took me to a shooting range after that. I practiced and got really good. He declared me ready to take my first deer. That had me feeling a little nervous. I wasn't wild about killing an animal. I didn't think I could do it, but on the other hand the shooting was fun. Being able to hit the bullseye made me feel so good. It made me feel as strong as confident as he was. The shooting made us equals. I really liked that feeling.

BROTHER

I never knew any of this about the two of you. So, did you ever shoot any deer?

WIFE

The next season came around, and he bought licenses for both of us. He was sure I was gonna get one. So, we went out on the first weekend of the season. A perfect fall day. Cool and crisp and dry. We walked all morning, looking for tracks. He always stalked. He said sitting up in a tree was lazy and unsportsmanlike. He was very strict about that. It was fine with me. I was glad to be walking through the woods and enjoying the morning. I would've gone crazy sitting up in a deer stand. He was really good at tracking and stalking. He showed me a lot of things about wildlife and trees and plants and birds.

BROTHER

Dad taught us all that, didn't you, Dad?

FATHER

I sure did. Just like my father taught me. And don't forget about all the fishing we did, too.

BROTHER

Fishing brings up a whole different set of stories. We'd be here all day listening to those. But go on. Tell us about your first deer.

WIFE

Well, I had almost forgotten why we were out there in the woods. Like I said, it was pleasant to be out enjoying the day. But he came upon some fresh droppings and tracks. He told me to wait while he worked around to the other side. He said he'd flush 'em to me and I could take my shot. Well, I waited and waited and waited. Then, sure enough, I heard something out there. A slight series of snaps and rustles. Then I could hear hooves pounding. I raised my rifle up to the ready, and I was looking all over, trying to spot where the noise was coming from. Then I saw movement a little bit off to the left. The crashing and snapping and thudding grew louder. I could partially see him, now the white chest, now a leg, now the face, now the antlers as he was leaping and bounding in a jagged path. Then he was right in front of me. I don't think he really knew I was there, because he was headed right in my direction, still jumping back and forth and all over the place. I shot and he tumbled forward to the ground almost before I had time to recover

from the recoil. After the boom of the rifle in my ear, it all was so quiet. I just looked at him there on the ground. I had hit him perfectly and dropped him. He was huge. Bigger than I had realized, with tall antlers. I just looked at him, breathing hard. I'd never had an experience like that in my life. It was so exciting. My heart was pumping fast. I could actually hear it inside me pounding, like the deer's hooves on the ground. I wanted to do it again. I could've shot a hundred deer that day, the way I felt.

SOLDIER

Did you get any more that day?

WIFE

Oh, no. He was so excited for me that we hauled the deer right back to our camp, lashed it onto our car and headed straight to the taxidermist. But we went hunting lots of times after that, and he stalked many a deer for me to shoot. God love him for that. I didn't realize just how much I missed going hunting with him. The rush of excitement I felt every time I took aim at an onrushing buck.

SOLDIER

I can see how you'd miss him for that. But we can all respect him for serving his country the way he did. Volunteering to go back over there was certainly above and beyond the call of duty.

WIFE

Yes, it was. But not to him. His family has been military for four or five generations. They're all very proud of that. There were many medals earned. His father was one of the best. He was recognized for bravery and he was wounded. Twice. My husband expected no less from himself in his career. He wanted his children to know that their father was the bravest of all their family. He wanted to give them something to honor and respect.

BROTHER

Did he actually say these things?

WIFE

Well, yes. Of course he did. You grew up in this family. You shared his courage and patriotism.

BROTHER

No, I didn't. I've always loathed all the saber-rattling, jingoistic cant that's been spouted in this house.

WIFE

My husband's loyalty to his country was real. He wanted to serve his country, and that's why he went back over there.

BROTHER

He told me a very different story about his motivation for volunteering again. It had nothing to do with any high-minded ideals.

WIFE

What did he tell you?

BROTHER

He told me about his personal reasons for going back over there.

WIFE

What personal reasons? What did he tell you?

BROTHER

I think you know.

WIFE

He told you?

BROTHER

Yes.

WIFE

I don't believe it. He wouldn't have told you that. What did he tell you?

BROTHER

You want me to say it here? Now? In front of her? In front of Dad?

WIFE

He's asleep already. He won't hear.

SOLDIER

Would you like me to go upstairs and give you some privacy?

WIFE

It doesn't matter who hears this. If he told his brother, then the damage is done.

BROTHER

No, I think the damage was done long before that.

WIFE

Don't you think I know that? But I didn't ever believe he'd tell anyone else. I thought he was punishing me enough by going back over there and getting himself killed.

BROTHER

I don't think he meant to punish you when he told me. In fact, I know he was looking out for you.

WIFE

What do you mean?

BROTHER

When he called me, I was pretty surprised. Of course, I was concerned when he told me he was going back over there. It didn't make any sense. But he wanted me to do something for him, and I guess he figured that the only way to convince me to do it was to tell me the truth.

WIFE

A man has to convince his brother to help him?

BROTHER

Well, we had grown apart over the years. We each had our own lives. He had you and your children and his career. I had been going to school. But that wouldn't have mattered to me. That's what I'm trying to explain to you. Yes, he told me about what you'd done. But he also asked me to come help you out if anything happened to him. Help out with Dad. With the children. Help you out. To get over it. The grief.

WIFE

He asked you to do this?

BROTHER

Yes.

WIFE

Oh, God! *(She cries. Brother embraces her.)*

SOLDIER

No brother could refuse to keep that kind of promise to a soldier.

BROTHER

Yeah, that's right. He didn't need to tell me why, and I wish he hadn't.

WIFE

Thanks. *(She kisses him and holds him.)*

BROTHER

You're welcome. I wouldn't have said anything, but I couldn't help myself when you went on about his military heritage and the honor stuff. It just ticked me off, because I knew you weren't believing any of it.

WIFE

You're right. I was just keeping up a pretense to cover my shame.

BROTHER

It doesn't do anyone any good to whitewash a situation.

SOLDIER

Amen to that.

WIFE

I suppose you've figured out what happened.

SOLDIER

I get the picture. I've seen it happen to a lot of others. Don't worry, my lips are sealed, I swear it.

WIFE

Thank you. *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

(Uncomfortable about holding Wife for so long.) Well, let me get all these dishes cleaned up. *(General activity of collecting dishes.)*

WIFE

No, let me do that.

BROTHER

No, you two just relax. Remember, I promised someone that I'd help out around here. *(They all smile. He exits to kitchen.)*

SOLDIER

I'm sure he is a great comfort to you.

WIFE

Yes. And you are, too.

SOLDIER

Thank you, ma'm.

WIFE

I'm sorry that I broke down when you showed me his things.

SOLDIER

That's alright.

WIFE

It just came over me. I thought the pain had died down to a dull throb every once in a while.

SOLDIER

Don't worry about it.

WIFE

As soon as I saw those things of his, and held them in my hand, I couldn't control myself. My stomach started turning, my throat tightened up and I just started crying.

SOLDIER

I understand. Believe me, I understand.

WIFE

How could you? *(Her anger rising.)* You've never been married and raised children with a man.

SOLDIER

Trust me, I do.

WIFE

You think I'm some sort of lost little child who needs to be shushed.

SOLDIER

I wasn't trying to do anything like that, ma'm.

WIFE

You don't know how to feel at all, do you?

SOLDIER

I really do . . .

WIFE

(Ranting.) It wasn't your husband who died. They didn't ring your doorbell and come in to your living room with their long faces and their hats in their hands. It wasn't your husband who came home in a coffin. Buried out there on the edge of town. *(She goes to the telephone desk DL and pulls the small bags of Husband's possessions out of the drawer.)* It wasn't your husband's dearest possessions returned to you in a little sack!

SOLDIER

No, he wasn't my husband, but . . .

WIFE

But what?

SOLDIER

But the grief works on a soldier in other ways. *(Sternly.)* I watched my comrades die. The men and women in my unit. I had to drag their armless, legless, blood-soaked bodies out of exploded houses. I had to stuff their guts back inside their bellies after grenades

ripped them open. *(Grabbing Wife by the shoulders.)* And yes, I had to watch while your husband died. *(Pause.)*

WIFE

They never told me exactly what happened. They just told me where he died and said it was in the line of duty.

SOLDIER

Yeah, it was.

WIFE

I want to know.

SOLDIER

It was a duty no one else would carry out.

WIFE

What do you mean?

SOLDIER

I mean he took the suicide job.

WIFE

What was that? The unit wasn't supposed to be in the front lines, much less attacking, was it?

SOLDIER

The front lines are everywhere. Anyone is within range of a sniper or a mortar round or a guerilla ambush or a land mine.

WIFE

I guess you're right about that. But how is that a suicide job?

SOLDIER

We were getting cut up pretty badly by snipers and ambushes. So the word came down that whenever that happened, we were supposed to respond directly to the threat and eliminate it, then move on.

WIFE

How were you supposed to fight like that? You were just a supply unit.

SOLDIER

Even so, we all are trained to fight. And we usually were carrying ammunition, so we didn't like to be fired at a whole lot. Besides, they mixed in the troops from a security unit. That gave us some extra firepower whenever we were on the move.

WIFE

Then how did he end up with the suicide job?

SOLDIER

Because for most of us, you only did it once.

WIFE

Because it was so dangerous?

SOLDIER

Well, sort of. Either you died doing it, or you refused to do it again because of what you had to do.

WIFE

The soldiers were so afraid that they disobeyed orders?

SOLDIER

Oh, yes, ma'm. Happens a lot. *(Brother enters from kitchen and listens upstage.)*

WIFE

But my husband didn't refuse to do it?

SOLDIER

Oh, no. He did it. Time and time again. So that none of us under his command would have to.

WIFE

What was this dangerous assignment?

SOLDIER

Well, as I said, we were under orders to attack and eliminate any sort of resistance we encountered as we were moving supplies up. So, if a sniper fired on us, or if a group of partisans ambushed us, someone had to go out there and flush 'em out. What that meant was the one who took the suicide job had to go out there, along the walls, in the houses or in the ditches until they found the enemy. You had to get them before they got you. You fired into a window or tossed a grenade over the wall, and then you moved right in. You had to work fast before the enemy could slip away. See, that's what the brass upstairs was worried about. They wanted us to respond quickly. Pin 'em down and snuff 'em out, so that they'd not ever be a problem again. The problem was, when you're stalking enemy snipers or guerilla troops through buildings or along ravines, you gotta work slow and careful and thorough. When you work fast, you can make mistakes.

WIFE

And that's how it became the suicide job? Because your mistakes killed you?

SOLDIER

Well, that's not the worst part, actually. If it was just a matter of risking your neck, I don't think anybody in the unit would have refused to do it. And none of us would've let your husband do it in our places.

WIFE

What could have scared you more than dying?

SOLDIER

Fear of killing. Killing civilians. Killing children and old women.

WIFE

What?

SOLDIER

The soldier on the suicide job runs out there and crouches under a window sill of a house where a sniper was firing from. Now what are you gonna do? If you stick your head up to look inside, you're gonna get your head shot off if the sniper's still in there. If you drop a grenade through that window, you're gonna blow up a two-year-old infant and its sick, ageing, blind grandfather. You either died on the suicide job because you chose to stick your head up, or you refused to do it again because you blew up innocent, unarmed people. People who were smiling at you for handing out food to them the day before. And anyone who chose to throw grenades in the windows and walk away from the suicide job regretted the choice. Because forever after that they felt dirty. No one would talk to them. They'd never be able to shut their eyes and sleep without seeing the scattered limbs and decapitated bodies on the backs of their eyelids.

WIFE

And my husband threw grenades into many of those windows?

SOLDIER

Yes, ma'm, he did. He did it because we all wouldn't. Eventually, he couldn't defy the odds, though. It was, after all, the suicide job. He was out there exposed to enemy fire every second. Sooner or later his luck would run out.

WIFE

And it did.

SOLDIER

Yes, ma'm. *(As she continues, Wife takes items out of the sack and spreads them on the floor DC.)* But not like any of us expected. The one time he flipped a grenade over a low wall. We saw a kid, maybe ten years old, stand up on the other side of the wall and drop the grenade back over on your husband. The kid ducked back down as quick as he had sprung up and BLAM! He was half-splattered along the wall. We all just looked at him spread out there. A bloody pulp with boots and a helmet on either end.

WIFE

You left him out there?

SOLDIER

Once the ambushers slipped away, we went out and recovered the remains. After that there was no one in the outfit who would take the suicide job. We just reverted to our old ways. Whenever we were fired on, we just pushed on through, blazing away randomly until we were past the danger.

WIFE

How did you end up with my husband's personal possessions after he died? The chaplain who delivered his belongings to me said that was everything. Why did you have these things?

SOLDIER

Whoever was assigned to the suicide job would put their most important things in a little sack for someone to hold. Things that were just too personal to go through the hands of some bureaucrat. It was understood that whoever was holding the sack would make sure the stuff got back to the family. On that day he asked me to hold on to his sack. *(Wife, kneeling over the items, weeps. Soldier gathers them up and puts them in the sack. Then she caresses the sack.)*

BROTHER

(Moving DS to join the two women.) We all can imagine the close comradeship you feel with everyone in your unit. Bringing these personal items home to his family was a sacred obligation to you. We respect that, and we honor that.

SOLDIER

Yes, but there's something else.

WIFE

What?

BROTHER

Go on, tell us.

SOLDIER

I don't want to drag you into it.

WIFE

No, you can tell us. You brought the last, dearest remembrance of my husband home to me. *(She takes the sack from the soldier.)* You're like family now. Whatever happens to you, it happens to us. *(Returns the sack to the drawer.)*

SOLDIER

Very well. I did come here to deliver what's in that sack. But I also was running away.

WIFE

Running away?

SOLDIER

When they shipped us here back to the states, we all thought we were done. But as soon as we land back here, they tell us they're going to put us through a six-month training program and then ship us right back over there.

BROTHER

Oh, that is brutal.

SOLDIER

It's more than that. When I heard it, I made my decision right then and there. I'm not going back with my unit. I'm not going back over there. I'm not going to die senselessly from a sniper's bullet, and I'm sure as hell not going to go back there and kill children or grandmothers or blind, crippled, old men. I'm just not going to do it.

WIFE

Are you AWOL?

SOLDIER

I am now, yes. *(She checks her watch.)*

BROTHER

Who knows you're here.

SOLDIER

I didn't tell anyone directly, but my two best friends—the ones in the picture I showed you—they know I was holding his sack. They probably have figured out where I am, but I know they won't say anything. All the officers are too dumb to know how to track me down.

WIFE

I wouldn't be too sure of that. The military might be slow, but it grinds its way slowly forward.

SOLDIER

I've made sure they won't find me.

WIFE

Oh?

SOLDIER

Don't worry about it, just believe me that I've taken steps to throw them off my track. For good.

BROTHER

Who knows you're here in town?

WIFE

Well, no one. But the neighbors have seen her here. They know we have a visitor.

BROTHER

Have you told anyone who she is?

WIFE

No. But you arrived here in your uniform. You've been seen.

SOLDIER

It's a risk I was willing to take.

BROTHER

I know what we can do. You're my girlfriend visiting me.

WIFE

Your girlfriend?

BROTHER

Yes, it'll work, in case anybody asks. She's been seen with me, already. It makes sense. You can stay here as long as you want, of course.

SOLDIER

It could work for a while.

WIFE

Do you really think that's a good idea?

BROTHER

Yes. *(To Soldier.)* Do you want a lawyer?

SOLDIER

A lawyer?

BROTHER

Yes, to handle your case. You're refusing to commit war crimes. That's your defense.

SOLDIER

I don't need to defend myself. I'm not going back, and I don't plan on them finding me. Excuse me. *(she goes upstairs.)*

WIFE

You seemed mighty eager to help her.

BROTHER

What's that supposed to mean?

WIFE

Don't you be taking advantage of her.

BROTHER

If anybody tried to take advantage of her, I'm pretty sure they'd regret it.

WIFE

I just don't want any trouble. Not here in this house.

BROTHER

She needs our help and protection, let's don't forget that.

WIFE

If we're going to help her, we should help her get clear of here. I don't want to be mixed up in her . . .

BROTHER

This is her safe haven.

WIFE

That's not for you to decide.

BROTHER

What do you mean? I can do whatever I want.

WIFE

Not in this house.

BROTHER

It's as much mine as it is yours. Anyway, now that we both know she's AWOL, we're involved whether we like it or not. If the military police track her here, we're accomplices as far as they're concerned. They'd arrest us too. We're all in this together.

FATHER

War is hell. *(Fadeout.)*

CONQUEST

(Morning. Brother is working at desk SR. Father dozing in his wheelchair UR. Soldier comes downstairs.)

SOLDIER

Hello, there.

BROTHER

Hello. Feeling refreshed?

SOLDIER

Yeah, nothing like a great breakfast and a long, hot shower after a run.

BROTHER

Uh-huh.

SOLDIER

That was a great run this morning.

BROTHER

That's why I do it every day.

SOLDIER

Well, I ran hundreds of miles in basic and hated every minute of it, but it's fun running with you.

BROTHER

Well, thanks. Same here. It makes the time go faster when you're chatting with someone all the way. And you know what? I think I'm running faster. Having you there keeps the tempo up.

SOLDIER

I guess you bring out my competitive streak.

BROTHER

I guess so. *(Pause.)*

SOLDIER

I have some pictures I thought you might like to see.

BROTHER

Pictures?

SOLDIER

Of the unit. Of your older brother. Over there.

BROTHER
Have you shown them to her?

SOLDIER
No.

BROTHER
I think you should. He was her husband.

SOLDIER
He was your brother.

BROTHER
That was a long time ago.

SOLDIER
You're afraid?

BROTHER
I'd rather not.

SOLDIER
Oh, come on. *(She moves to him.)* They're great pictures. They'll make you smile. I always do when I look at them. Come on! *(She tickles him.)* Quit looking at all those old books for just a minute.

BROTHER
Stop! Stop! Alright. Stop! I'll look at them.

SOLDIER
Good. Here, let's sit down on the sofa. *(They sit.)* You're gonna be glad you saw these, OK?

BROTHER
OK. *(She tickles him again.)* Stop! Stop!

SOLDIER
I just like to see you squirm, that's all.

BROTHER
Well, don't. Gimme a break here. You wanted to show me your pictures, so show me. You have my undivided attention.

SOLDIER

Alright, then. *(Putting each photo on his leg as she explains it. He picks up each one and then sets it aside.)* These are all at the training base. That's just a shot of us loafing around in the barracks. There's me with my two best girlfriends.

BROTHER

You look like you've been drinking.

SOLDIER

A bunch of soldiers drinking? *(They laugh.)* Yeah, we were out on the town. Here's a couple of us working in the motorpool. It was a hot day. Oh, Lord, everything about that training camp was hot. But it was part of the training, don't you see?

BROTHER

Yeah, I guess.

SOLDIER

And here's your brother in his quarters. Since he was a sergeant, he got a nice one-bedroom place.

BROTHER

It looks like you caught him by surprise.

SOLDIER

Yeah, we did. See, here. Right after that we made him pose with all three of us. That was right before we were shipped out.

BROTHER

The way you're all smiling, you guys look like you're about to go on a vacation instead of into a war zone.

SOLDIER

Your brother was good at keeping our spirits up. Besides, we were his favorites. Sure we were scared, but he knew how to keep our minds from dwelling on the future.

BROTHER

He was always upbeat.

SOLDIER

Yeah, he was. Till we got over there. See. Here we are settling in there. Look at him in these. He's not happy.

BROTHER

Yeah, you're right. What do you think it was?

SOLDIER

I don't know. He never talked about it, but I could tell something was eating at him. But he always made an effort to be cheerful and optimistic most of the time. We all appreciated that. *(Pause.)* You know, you're a lot like him.

BROTHER

Yeah?

SOLDIER

Yeah. You put a good face on, and that makes everything go easy. I liked that about him, and I like that about you.

BROTHER

(He is feeling uncomfortable.) Er . . . that's . . . I mean . . . very kind of you.

SOLDIER

He never told me about you, and I can see why.

BROTHER

Whaddaya mean?

SOLDIER

He was jealous.

BROTHER

Jealous?

SOLDIER

Yeah, he was a good-looking guy, but you're even better.

BROTHER

Oh, no. You're just saying that . . .

SOLDIER

As soon as I saw you when I got here, I said to myself, "Oh, my goodness. A younger and even handsomer model!" And all the time I've been here, I've been wondering what you thought about me. You do like me, don't you?

BROTHER

Well, yes. Of course. You brought back my brother's dog tags. We're all grateful to you for that.

SOLDIER

But I mean do you like me even more now that you've gotten to know me? *(She puts a hand on his shoulder.)*

BROTHER

Well, yes.

SOLDIER

You seem a little uncertain when you say that. Is everything alright?

BROTHER

Fine, I'm fine. I'm just not used to . . .

SOLDIER

Not used to a girl letting you know how she feels?

BROTHER

Well, no. I'm . . .

SOLDIER

I like you a lot, and I wanted you to know that. *(She holds his hand.)*

BROTHER

I guess I . . .

SOLDIER

You don't believe me?

BROTHER

Oh, yes. Yes. I believe you, but it's . . . I mean . . .

SOLDIER

Go on. Tell me. I'm listening.

BROTHER

A woman like you . . . I've never . . . You're so beautiful.

SOLDIER

So, you do think I'm nice looking? I was getting worried. I would've died if you weren't interested. But you are interested, aren't you?

BROTHER

Well, yes . . . I never imagined . . .

SOLDIER

I'm so glad. *(She kisses him. Eventually, she moves her hand to his crotch and fondles him.)* Mmmmm! You are interested!

BROTHER

Please, stop. *(He tries to move her hand.)*

SOLDIER

Why? *(She kisses him warmly and pushes her hand under the waistband of his pants. He moans.)*

BROTHER

My father's sitting right over there.

SOLDIER

Oh, don't worry about him. He's fast asleep. *(Speaking to Father.)* Oh, Daddy-dear? Oh, Daddy-dear? I'm going to give your son the best head he's ever had in his life. *(To Brother.)* See? He's out like a light. *(She is unfastening his pants.)* Now, let me show you just how much I like you.

BROTHER

No, wait, I . . .

SOLDIER

Just relax. Don't worry about a thing. *(She is moving to kneel between his legs.)* Just leave your hands there at your sides. I'll take care of everything. Oh, yes. *(He moans. Fadeout.)*

CONSPIRACY

(Dusk. Brother and Soldier are comfortably entwined on the sofa. Wife is fast asleep in her chair, lightly snoring. Her snoring functions as a constant background rhythm to the conversation. Father's wheelchair is gone, but the other paraphernalia of his illness are up against the wall UR.)

BROTHER

Do you think they're tracking you down?

SOLDIER

Maybe.

BROTHER

It's been a couple of weeks.

SOLDIER

I didn't leave much of a trail. I haven't called anyone. Paid cash for everything. I don't even own credit cards.

BROTHER

Really? I didn't know it was possible.

SOLDIER

It's easy for anyone in the military. The eagle screams every Friday, you know.

BROTHER

I guess so. *(Pause.)* Still, I'm worried for you. I don't want anything to happen . . .

SOLDIER

Me neither. *(They kiss.)*

BROTHER

At some point you're going to have to make a move.

SOLDIER

I know.

BROTHER

What'll you do?

SOLDIER

I'm afraid.

BROTHER

That's understandable.

SOLDIER

No, I'm afraid to tell you.

BROTHER

Don't be. I want to know. I want to help. If I can.

SOLDIER

I was hoping you'd say that. I was so wanting you to say that.

BROTHER

I'm here for you.

SOLDIER

Well, I think there's only one good option.

BROTHER

What?

SOLDIER

Canada.

BROTHER

I was figuring that's what you'd end up doing.

SOLDIER

Will you go with me? I need you. Please. We could be together.

BROTHER

You'd want me to come with you and stay?

SOLDIER

Yes. Of course. I couldn't imagine being alone now.

BROTHER

I never dreamed I'd hear you say that.

SOLDIER

I'm saying it and I'm meaning it.

BROTHER

Well, that changes everything. I was thinking that you'd just move on, not wanting any baggage to slow you down.

SOLDIER

Well, there's baggage, and then there's baggage, you know? *(She nibbles at him.)*
You'll come with me, won't you?

BROTHER

I want to, but . . .

SOLDIER

What's holding you back? There's nothing here for you now, right?

BROTHER

Yes, you're right, but that's not it.

SOLDIER

What is it?

BROTHER

What about my studies? I'm so close to finishing. Just one more year. I can't throw all that away.

SOLDIER

Why can't you transfer to a Canadian university? We can relocate into one of the university towns. Any one you like. It doesn't make a bit of difference to me. I can get work anywhere to support us till you finish. Then you can get a job, right?

BROTHER

It's a lot more complicated than that . . .

SOLDIER

Then what you need is a good healthy dose of the military's can-do spirit, young man. So what if it's complicated? We'll just jump through all the hoops. Together.

BROTHER

I don't know . . .

SOLDIER

Just come with me up there. Just come and check it out with me. Be there for me. You'll see.

BROTHER

I want to . . . be with you . . .

SOLDIER

That makes me so happy.

BROTHER

I'll drive you up there. At least stay long enough to get you settled.

SOLDIER

And then leave me?

BROTHER

Sooner or later I'll have to go out west for my things. I'd only be leaving you for a little while.

SOLDIER

What's a little while?

BROTHER

Well, it depends. If I find out that there's a university up there that'll take me and let me complete a degree, then I'll simply run back down here to the states and collect my stuff and get back to you there. If not, then I'll go spend the year out west finishing up, and then come up to be with you after that. How does that sound?

SOLDIER

Let's don't talk about it anymore. *(Pause.)* Your education is really important to you.

BROTHER

It always has been.

SOLDIER

I like a man with backbone. *(She nibbles at him again.)* When can you leave?

BROTHER

Whenever you like.

SOLDIER

Tomorrow.

BROTHER

Then we'd better get cracking. *(He tries to get up.)*

SOLDIER

(Holding him there.) Not yet, please. Let me hold you like this just a little longer. It feels so good. *(They snuggle contentedly. It is dark now. Wife wakes up with a snort. She looks around, trying to get oriented. She slowly gets up, mumbling about going to bed, and heads up the stairs. Once she is gone, Soldier and Brother giggle and kiss.)*
You know what?

BROTHER

What?

SOLDIER

You know the stories I told her about her husband? How he was a hero, how he did the suicide job for our unit, how he took such good care of us over there?

BROTHER

Yeah?

SOLDIER

I made it all up. It was all bullshit. She really fell for it, didn't she?

BROTHER

I'll say. *(They giggle and kiss some more.)* So, how did he die?

SOLDIER

He's dead. Isn't that all that matters to you?

BROTHER

Well, yeah, but I'm just curious.

SOLDIER

He died in his sleep.

BROTHER

Huh?

SOLDIER

We got transferred back to guard duty, way back near headquarters. Nowhere near any combat zones. He was in his quarters sleeping. About three A.M. BLAM! Mortar round or rocket or something like that. Flattened the place and spread pieces of him in every direction.

BROTHER

(Thinking about what she's said.) Hmmph! It's kind of sad. He gets moved away from the fighting, and that's when he gets it.

SOLDIER

When you're over there, the fighting's everywhere. You're in your cot, in the latrine, eating in the mess tent. And all the time you're wondering if you're gonna get it.
(Pause.)

BROTHER

Have you been bullshitting about anything else?

SOLDIER

Yeah. It's a survival skill.

BROTHER

I don't ever want to know. I'd hate that. OK?

SOLDIER

I was counting on that. *(They kiss warmly. Fadeout.)*

DEMOBILIZATION

(After lunch. Brother reads at desk SR. Father dozes in wheelchair UR. Soldier stretched out on sofa dozing. Wife enters from kitchen, wearing apron and drying hands on towel. She sees Soldier sleeping.)

WIFE

(Speaking softly.) We ought to get to those bedrooms starting today. Before you know it school'll be starting, and I'll have to get back to work.

BROTHER

Ready when you are.

WIFE

Is he asleep?

BROTHER

Probably.

WIFE

Then, let's go down to the store and get the paint now.

BROTHER

Sure. *(She exits to kitchen. He rises and moves Father's tray out of the way upstage. He moves US of the sofa, looking down and smiling at Soldier. He gently strokes her arm. She smiles and shivers. He exits out to kitchen. We hear back door slam and car engines sounds. Pause.)*

FATHER

Why does my leg hurt so bad? I can't stand it. *(Pause. Soldier lifts her head to listen.)* Will someone please get me a pain killer? *(Pause.)* Medic! Over here! *(Pause. Soldier quietly rises with one of the sofa pillows and goes around to Father.)* All day long I'm stuck in this chair just rotting. They won't even turn the radio on. Where's my son? My son I loved? He'd know what to do. He'd give me a hug. Nobody here ever hugs me. *(Looks at Soldier.)* Which one are you?

SOLDIER

Not the one you love. *(She moves around behind Father. She bends down and gives him a hug.)*

FATHER

You smell like a girl. Like a girl I used to know. During the war. She spoke English. *(Soldier slowly stands up. She moves behind him and holds the pillow over Father's face, pushing his head back into her body. He struggles as much as a weak old man can resist, but he suffocates easily. Soldier returns to sofa, puts pillow down at one end, then lays down with her head on the pillow, staring out and smiling.)*

DOMINATION

(Pre-dawn. Brother is stretching. Light change. Husband enters to him from dining room.)

HUSBAND
Hey, little brother.

BROTHER
Hi. It's good to see you.

HUSBAND
You trying to be a marathon man?

BROTHER
Nah, that's too much work.

HUSBAND
That's just like you. No commitment. Just like with basketball.

BROTHER
I'm committed to my studies.

HUSBAND
Yeah, lotta good that'll do you. *(Pause.)* So, why are you doing it?

BROTHER
I'm must exercising to feel better. I'm not trying to win anything. Just doing it for myself.

HUSBAND
That's how you've lived your whole life. For yourself.

BROTHER
Maybe so.

HUSBAND
Has she figured that out yet? *(Brother stops stretching but says nothing.)* She probably has. You're two of a kind.

BROTHER
I don't know what you're talking about.

HUSBAND

Yeah, you do. Shut up and listen to me. And listen good. You two are so alike it stinks. But the thing is, she's way stronger than you. She's way more cruel. She'll make you her slave. Squirm all you want, it won't do any good. You'll see.

BROTHER

So you know so much about her? You're talking from experience?

HUSBAND

Oh, yeah.

BROTHER

Well, goody for you. Anything else?

HUSBAND

No. Yes. She's a good soldier. When she stays out of trouble.

BROTHER

You think I'm trouble for her? I thought you just said she was trouble for me. Which is it, brother?

HUSBAND

Both. She can't resist any chance she gets to squash a beetle flat.

BROTHER

That's OK with me.

HUSBAND

Maybe so. You'll know soon enough.

BROTHER

(He resumes stretching.) Why don't you just go back to wherever you came from?

HUSBAND

Sure thing. Oh, brother. You're sure in for it. *(Exits. Brother continues stretching more vigorously. Light change back to pre-dawn. Soldier comes downstairs to him. They look at each other. She goes to him and runs her finger over him, then strokes him with her hands, then grabs and fondles him and kisses him. He returns her ardor as they paw, fondle, grab, and kiss each other. Fadeout.)*

ENNUI

(Noon meal. Brother SR, Wife in her chair. Soldier on sofa. Father UR. Wife rises and moves SL to window.)

WIFE

The dandelions are back again. I think I'll go down to the store and get some weed killer.
(To Brother.) Will you spread it for me?

BROTHER

Yes. *(Wife exits to kitchen. We hear back door close. We hear automobile moving away. Brother and Soldier look at each other. Fadeout.)*

FLIRTATION

(Pre-dawn light. Father's wheelchair is empty UR. Brother is doing warm-up exercises and wearing a tank top and running tights. Soldier comes downstairs in gym shorts and sleeveless top. Soldier watches Brother for a while. Brother sees Soldier and stops, a little startled.)

SOLDIER

Hi. I didn't mean to scare you. I came down because I thought I heard something.

BROTHER

It's just me. I get up every morning for a nice, long run.

SOLDIER

You don't look like you're running to me.

BROTHER

(Resumes exercises.) I'm stretching out and warming up first. You ought to know all about that from your time in basic training.

SOLDIER

Sure. I've done plenty of calisthenics and runs. *(Pause.)* You're doing exercises just like we do in the military.

BROTHER

My older brother showed them to me when I first started running in college.

SOLDIER

Were you two very close?

BROTHER

(He thinks about it.) Compared to what?

SOLDIER

I never had any brothers or sisters. Someone to be close to.

BROTHER

Well, I guess we were close. When I was little he was around more, so I felt like we were good brothers. He looked out for me. He let me tag along with him a lot. That kind of thing.

SOLDIER

That must've been great for you. To have a big brother to love.

BROTHER

Yeah, it was. Now that he's gone, I can always think back to that and know that those happy memories will always be with me.

SOLDIER

I have good memories of him, too.

BROTHER

(Warily.) Uh-huh.

SOLDIER

You sound like you're a little bit doubtful.

BROTHER

I didn't know that sergeants left many fond memories in the minds of soldiers.

SOLDIER

Well, he did. That's for sure. At least with me. Talking to soldiers in other units, I realized pretty quickly that your brother was not a typical sergeant. Most sergeants play the bad guy. They make you hate them for bullying you. But not him. He knew how to make everyone in his unit dig down deep inside themselves to find what they needed to succeed. No bullying it out of you. I remember the first time he pulled it on me. I didn't have all my gear organized exactly right. It was early on and I was struggling, like a lot of the new recruits. When he inspected my gear, he told me it wasn't right. He didn't yell at me. He didn't throw my gear all over the barracks. He didn't make me do twenty push-ups or any of that Hollywood stuff. He called over two other soldiers and asked them to point out what was wrong with my gear. Then he ordered them to help me get it right. They helped me out and I was ship-shape in a minute. While they were helping me, your brother made a little speech to everyone. He told us that he wanted us to learn to look out for each other and help each other and cover each other. That's what we were gonna need to do when we were in a combat situation, and he wanted us to learn how to do it right from the start. Then he turned to me and asked me if I was ever gonna need help getting my gear organized again. Well, I was embarrassed as hell for being the only one who didn't have her gear organized properly, and I was relieved as hell that he didn't chew me out. I looked him right in the eye and proudly shouted, "Never again, sergeant!" He smiled back and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "That's exactly what I wanted to hear. I'm proud of you, soldier." That made me feel so good that I was about to burst into tears. I wanted to hug him. From that moment on he was like a god to me. I would've jumped into boiling oil for him.

BROTHER

Then we both've had a great brother.

SOLDIER

Oh, but more than that. Yeah, he was the best kind of big brother, but he was like a tough coach. Always there to push you on to your best effort. And he taught us all to do all

that for each other. He made us into a team. A family. The only family I ever loved.
(Pause. Someone is moving around upstairs. The noise breaks the moment.)

BROTHER

Hey, it's getting light out there. I'd better get running or I'll need to warm up all over again. *(He heads for the front door.)*

SOLDIER

It's starting to rain. Don't you want to put on a poncho or something?

BROTHER

Nah. Maybe the rain will save me having to take a shower.

SOLDIER

You're a lot like your brother. Always turning everything around with a little humor. I like that.

BROTHER

Yeah, well, see you later.

SOLDIER

Can I run with you tomorrow?

BROTHER

Whatever you like. I'm down here warming up at five.

SOLDIER

You make it sound like that's early. I'll be waiting for you.

BROTHER

Fine. I could use the company. It can get lonely out there.

SOLDIER

We'll look out for each other, then. *(Brother exits. Pause. Wife comes downstairs in robe. Soldier turns from door. They look at each other. Fadeout.)*

INSINUATION

(It's dark outside. Crickets chirping. Wife sits in her chair, crocheting. SR Brother is reading and writing at the desk. Father is UR dozing in his wheelchair. After a while Father coughs. Wife and Brother look at him. Father coughs more. Brother gets up and goes to him.)

WIFE

Give him some water.

BROTHER

(Lifts cup with straw to Father's mouth.) Here you go, Dad. (Father becomes quiet again. Pause. Brother and Wife look at each other. Brother returns to his desk. Pause.)

WIFE

Are you getting a lot of studying done?

BROTHER

Yes, I am. Thanks.

WIFE

Well, the kids'll be back before long, and you won't have a quiet moment at all.

BROTHER

That's OK. It'll be fun playing with them.

WIFE

They'll like that. You're their favorite uncle.

BROTHER

I'm their only uncle. *(Pause. Front doorbell rings.)*

WIFE

Who could that be?

FATHER

Mormons!

WIFE

(Going to door.) Oh, it is not.

BROTHER

What did he say?

WIFE

He said it was the Mormons. *(At the door.)* Yes?

SOLDIER

Is this the Richardson residence, ma'm?

WIFE

Yes, it is.

SOLDIER

I have something for the family of Sergeant Richardson.

WIFE

Oh, I see. Well, come in, please. *(Opens door.)*

SOLDIER

(Stepping inside.) Thank you, ma'm. *(She is in her late twenties. She wears casual battle dress, including a cap low over her face, and carries a full duffel bag. Brother stands.)*

WIFE

You must be tired from carrying all that around on a hot night. Here, let me help you take that off. *(They wrestle the duffel bag off her shoulders.)*

BROTHER

I'll take that for you. *(He takes the duffel bag into the dining room ULC.)*

WIFE

Take off your jacket, too, and come in. *(Wife helps Soldier remove her field jacket and she puts it over the banister. Soldier has a tee-shirt on. We can see that she has been sweating.)* Come in, come in. *(The three of them move DC.)* I'm his widow.

SOLDIER

I'm Specialist Mitchell, ma'm. I was in your husband's unit.

WIFE

I'm very glad to meet you. This is his brother.

SOLDIER

Hello, sir. *(Shaking hands with Brother.)*

WIFE

And this is his father.

SOLDIER

How do you do, sir?

FATHER

Never get used to women in the military.

SOLDIER

I'm sorry, sir, I didn't understand you.

WIFE

It's hard for him to talk, after his last stroke. He was just being an old fuddy-duddy, weren't you, father-in-law? He said he couldn't get used to seeing women in uniform.

SOLDIER

Well, I'm proud to have become a soldier, and I'm especially proud to have served with your son, sir. He was a great soldier.

FATHER

You bet he was!

WIFE

That's very kind of you to say that. Please, sit down. Let me get you something cool to drink.

SOLDIER

Thank you, ma'm.

BROTHER

I'll get it. What would you like? A soft drink? Beer? Lemonade? Water?

SOLDIER

Water sounds good. Thank you, sir.

WIFE

Bring a pitcher, then.

BROTHER

OK. *(He exits to kitchen.)*

SOLDIER

This is a very cozy old home.

WIFE

It's old alright. Needs a new roof, re-wiring and the shed out back oughta be torn down.

SOLDIER

It just feels very comfortable. Lived in, you know.

WIFE

Oh, it's been lived in. It was my husband's childhood home. Me and the kids moved in after . . .

SOLDIER

After he died.

WIFE

Yes, and to take care of his father. He was at the point where he needed so much help.

BROTHER

(Bringing refreshments in. During the conversation, they all drink.) What have I missed?

WIFE

Not a thing. I was just explaining about your father and this broken-down old house.

BROTHER

We're fixing it up, though, aren't we? We've done a little bit of plumbing. Fixed the back steps. Gonna paint some of the rooms next.

WIFE

He's been a lot of help this summer.

BROTHER

It just worked out for me. I'm in grad school out on the west coast. I was able to get away for the whole summer. To research and write while I'm helping out here.

WIFE

Oh, but we're talking too much. Tell us about you, Ms. Mitchell.

SOLDIER

There's not much to tell about me. I wanted to meet Sgt. Richardson's family, so I'm glad to listen to you.

WIFE

You came all this way just to meet us?

SOLDIER

Well, like I said, I have something for you. I'm making a delivery.

WIFE

(Warily.) Well, what is it?

SOLDIER

Some things that belonged to your husband, ma'm. Some personal items.

WIFE

Personal items?

SOLDIER

Here, I'll show you. *(Goes to her duffel bag and digs.)*

WIFE

I thought the military had returned all his possessions to us after the funeral. Two officers came here with the boxes. One was that nice chaplain who conducted the graveside service. *(To Brother.)* You remember?

BROTHER

I wasn't there.

WIFE

Oh, that's right.

SOLDIER

(Returning DS.) Here. *(Offers a small sack to Wife.)*

WIFE

Have you looked inside?

SOLDIER

No, ma'm.

WIFE

(To Brother.) You take it. *(Brother takes sack.)*

BROTHER

Do you want me to . . .

WIFE

Yes, I want to see.

BROTHER

(Reaching in and pulls out a house key.) Here's something you'll recognize.

WIFE

The key to the front door.

BROTHER

I'll bet it works, too. *(He bounces over to the front door and tries the key. It turns the lock.)* What did I tell you?

WIFE

Of course, it works. He always carried that key with him, ever since I'd known him.

BROTHER

Let's see what else we got. *(Returns DS and reaches in the sack.)* Look here. *(Pulls out a rabbit's foot.)*

WIFE

Oh, good Lord. The children gave him that. They wanted to give him a good luck token when he shipped out. I took them to three or four different places to find this.

SOLDIER

I didn't know you could buy something like that anymore.

WIFE

I don't think you can. We found this one in a junk store. The children loved it because it was so soft.

BROTHER

Do you carry a good luck charm?

SOLDIER

Yes, we all do. Anything to get through the day in one piece. *(Pause.)* I'm sorry, ma'm, that wasn't very kind.

WIFE

No, it's alright. I know what you meant to say. It's just . . . *(She holds the rabbit's foot.)* There's blood on it.

SOLDIER

I'm not surprised. *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

Here, I'll set it down here with the key. *(Takes it from Wife.)*

SOLDIER

What else is in there? It was a pretty bulky little sack.

BROTHER

Let's see. *(He digs into the sack.)* A family picture.

SOLDIER

We all had a family picture laminated and we kept them in our right chest pocket. It was a little secret ritual in our unit.

BROTHER

You're not supposed to have stuff like that on you in combat, right? In case you're captured.

SOLDIER

Yes, but we did it anyway. Getting captured was about the last thing on our minds.

WIFE

What do you mean?

SOLDIER

They didn't bother with prisoners. Not after what happened . . .

WIFE

Oh.

BROTHER

Let's see what else is in here. *(He digs again.)* An old-fashioned bottle opener!

SOLDIER

Yeah, he loved his beer!

WIFE

He sure did. I've never seen that before, though.

SOLDIER

I think he picked it up from a liquor store in Georgia.

BROTHER

No, he stole it. From an officers' club somewhere. He showed it to me once when he was home on leave.

WIFE

I wonder why he would do a thing like that?

SOLDIER

Like I said, he loved his beer. And he always seemed to find some, even up at the front lines. He was amazing like that.

WIFE

You liked him?

SOLDIER

As much as anyone can like their sergeant, ma'm. That's never easy. *(They all chuckle.)* But he took good care of us. He looked out for us. We trusted him.

WIFE

I'm sure you did. He was a good man like that.

BROTHER

There's something else in here, but I don't think I should touch it.

WIFE

Well, what is it?

BROTHER

Here, you see for yourself. *(Offers the sack to Wife. She is afraid to take it.)*

SOLDIER

Go on, ma'm. It's your husband's personal things. There's nothing to be afraid of.

WIFE

Alright. *(She takes the sack and looks inside. She slowly pulls out a bundle of letters.)*
It's the letters I wrote him while he was over there.

BROTHER

That's why I didn't want to pull them out.

WIFE

So many. *(She starts to cry.)* I don't remember this many, but I remember every one I wrote. Yes, they're all here. Except the ones that arrived after he died. Those were returned with his other possessions. They're upstairs.

BROTHER

How did you . . . ?

SOLDIER

That's not important right now. What matters is that I'm here as someone in his unit who is personally delivering these very personal articles to you.

WIFE

And I'm so grateful. When they gave me the other letters, I asked about these. The chaplain said that everything he gave me was everything that they knew about.

SOLDIER

That's the bureaucracy talking. You're looking at the human side of the military at work.

WIFE

How can I ever thank you enough? You've come all this way. Out of your way, I'm sure. You're taking your leave to do this, when you could be with your own family . . .

SOLDIER

Our unit is a family, too. If it were the other way around, I'd have wanted your husband to be paying a visit to my relatives right now.

WIFE

My husband never talked much about the people in his unit. *(Trying to get control of herself.)* Please, stay with us for a few days. We want to know everything about your unit, your time with my husband.

SOLDIER

Why, that's very kind of you, ma'm. I'd love to stay here for a while. It'd be a privilege to get to know you.

WIFE

Oh, this is wonderful. There's room upstairs. The children are away right now, visiting with relatives on the other side of the state. You can have my daughter's room.

SOLDIER

You sure I won't be crowding you?

WIFE

Oh, no. Father-in-law sleeps on this level now, of course. We've fixed him up back in the old study.

BROTHER

I'm usually sleeping down in the cellar, where it's cool. You won't be any trouble at all. I might put you to work painting the dining room in there if you're not too careful.

SOLDIER

Whatever I can do to help out.

WIFE

I don't know what kind of shape that room is in right now. I'll go up and get you some fresh linens and towels. *(She rises and heads US to the stairs.)* Just relax. I'll take care of it. Don't worry. Then I'll fix you something to eat. I'll bet you're hungry after traveling. *(She's gone.)*

BROTHER

How'd you get here? Bus?

SOLDIER

Yes, sir. What a hassle. You either end up sitting next to a bratty kid or a preacher who tries to convert you.

BROTHER

Yeah, that's happened to me a few times, going back and forth to school. *(Pause.)*

SOLDIER

So you sleep downstairs? *(Moving to him.)* Where it's cool?

BROTHER

Yeah. I try to keep out of the way.

SOLDIER

I'll come down to see you sometime.

BROTHER

Whenever you like.

SOLDIER

Excellent. *(Pause.)* I think I'll take my bag on upstairs and get into some fresh civvies.

BROTHER

You do look hot. You oughta take a shower, too. That'll cool you down. You can do that while we throw together some grub for you. Are you hungry?

SOLDIER

I wasn't feeling hungry earlier, but I am now. *(Pause. She moves US, grabs duffel bag and heads upstairs.)*

FATHER

Has he come home?

BROTHER

No, Dad. He's dead. Remember? *(Blackout.)*

JEALOUSY

(Morning. Brother is writing/reading at the desk DR. Towel around his neck and sweat stains on his clothes. Wife comes downstairs. During the conversation, Brother focuses as much as possible on his studies. Father's rolling tray is pushed up against wall.)

WIFE

Have you eaten anything yet?

BROTHER

No, I will in a while. What're you fixing?

WIFE

I haven't thought about it yet. *(Long Pause. She moves to look out window SL.)*
Where's . . .

BROTHER

She said she was going to take a shower.

WIFE

The two of you . . . ?

BROTHER

We ran this morning. It's a beautiful, cool morning out there.

WIFE

Yes. *(Long Pause.)* I think she . . . *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

What?

WIFE

She's a nice young lady.

BROTHER

Seems to be, as far as I can tell. *(Pause.)*

WIFE

You like her, don't you?

BROTHER

As a matter of fact, I do. *(Pause.)*

WIFE

You're attracted to her . . .

BROTHER

What if I am?

WIFE

I don't know. *(Long Pause.)* She says things . . . *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

Yes?

WIFE

She says things about him . . . *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

Yes?

WIFE

She knows a lot about him.

BROTHER

They served together. He was her unit leader . . .

WIFE

No. *(Pause.)* She knows things she shouldn't know. She talks about him like . . .
(Pause.)

BROTHER

Like what?

WIFE

You don't think . . . ?

BROTHER

What? *(Pause. We hear Soldier singing upstairs.)*

WIFE

Nothing. Never mind. *(Long Pause.)* I'm going into the kitchen. Would you bring your father in here and hook him up?

BROTHER

Sure. *(He rises and heads upstage.)*

WIFE

I'll fix him something. *(She heads towards kitchen.)*

BROTHER

Oatmeal?

WIFE

It's too hot around here for that. *(Offstage by now. Brother exits US in dining room. We hear him offstage waking Father and getting him into his wheelchair. After a while, Soldier comes downstairs. She sees no one around. She then hears Wife and Brother's activities and understands. She sits on the stairs and stretches out, shaking her hair out to dry. Enter Brother from dining room pushing Father in wheelchair.)*

SOLDIER

Hi there.

BROTHER

Hello.

FATHER

Who're you? Where's my boy?

BROTHER

Come on, Dad. *(Pushing him to his spot SR and hooking up oxygen. Soldier follows.)* Let's get you ready for breakfast. I don't know what you're having, though. Hey, where's your napkin? *(To Soldier.)* Would you go in to the kitchen and ask Julia Childs for a napkin for Dad?

SOLDIER

Sure. *(She exits. Brother brings the tray up to his Father.)*

BROTHER

Let's see. You'll need some more ice and water, won't you?

FATHER

Good hot coffee.

BROTHER

Well, you know you can't have that anymore.

FATHER

What's the use?

SOLDIER

(Skipping out from kitchen.) Here you go. *(Hands Brother the napkin, who tucks it into father's shirt.)*

BROTHER

Thanks. I'm gonna go get him some water. *(He takes pitcher and heads US. Soldier pursues him.)*

SOLDIER
You know what?

BROTHER
What?

SOLDIER
I enjoyed running with you.

BROTHER
Yeah? I enjoyed it, too.

SOLDIER
What else can we do together?

BROTHER
Whatever you like. You're our guest.

SOLDIER
(Moving close to him.) Surprise me.

BROTHER
That'll take some thought.

SOLDIER
(Reaching out to rub his face.) You need a shave.

BROTHER
Don't touch me, please. I feel nasty. It's my turn to get cleaned up.

SOLDIER
What if I told you I wanted to do that for you?

BROTHER
What . . . ?

SOLDIER
What if I told you that I want to lick every bead of sweat off your body? Lick you till you're clean. I like the taste of sweat. *(She wipes her finger along his neck and then licks the sweat off her finger.)* I like the smell of it. So strong. *(She puts her hands on his shoulders and squeezes. He is shuddering and squirming.)* Like everything else about you. *(Enter Wife from kitchen carrying bowl of fruit for Father. She stops when she sees what is going on.)*

BROTHER
(Flustered.) I . . . I was about to get Dad some water. *(He holds up pitcher.)*

WIFE

(Clearly angry.) So, go get it.

SOLDIER

We were just talking . . . about our run this morning. I was thanking him for letting me come along with him for his morning run.

WIFE

You certainly sounded very grateful.

BROTHER

What if she did?

SOLDIER

Don't. You don't need to defend me.

BROTHER

Well, I want to stand up for myself. *(To Wife.)* What's it to you what I do?

WIFE

I expect guests to behave with a bit more respect while they're under the roof . . .

BROTHER

Guests? You're calling me a guest? Wait just a minute. I grew up in this house. This is my home. There's my father right over there.

WIFE

It's not your home. You haven't lived here for almost . . .

BROTHER

It doesn't make any difference how many years I've lived somewhere else. It's the only home I ever had.

WIFE

Goody for you. And who's been keeping the home going these last couple years? Who's taken care of your father? And paid the bills? And kept the roof from falling in?

BROTHER

If you're gonna live here, you gotta take some responsibility, don't you think? He just moved you and the family in here when he shipped out. Didn't talk to anyone about it. He just did it.

WIFE

Either that or sell the place off and put your father in a rest home. You know he couldn't take care of himself anymore. Not after that last surgery.

FATHER

You boys were always fighting.

WIFE

See there? (*XR to Father.*) He doesn't know what's going on around him anymore. He's been like that since last Christmas. I've been taking care of him. And raising two children. And holding down a job. And where have you been when this home of yours needed its gutters fixed or the hot water heater replaced? Where were you?

BROTHER

I'm here now, aren't I?

WIFE

Maybe that makes everything alright in your mind, but . . .

BROTHER

But what? So, I have to have your approval? Where do you get off judging me? You're not my mother. You're not even related to me.

WIFE

Oh, yes I am! I married your brother. That makes me your sister.

BROTHER

Sister-in-law. We share no blood.

WIFE

What about your niece and nephew? You share blood with them.

BROTHER

Yes, because of their father.

WIFE

And I gave them life. Doesn't that seal the bond of family for us?

BROTHER

Not for me it doesn't. Not between you and me.

WIFE

Then there's nothing? If I were to disappear from your life, you wouldn't feel it?

BROTHER

What kind of question is that?

WIFE

It's a very important question.

BROTHER

Oh, really? I don't see how.

WIFE

I can't believe you'd treat me like this. When you came here to spend the summer I thought it was because you cared about your family. About your father. Your niece and nephew. About me.

BROTHER

I didn't come home to be bossed around by you.

WIFE

When have I bossed you around?

BROTHER

All the time. All damned summer. *(He throws the pitcher at Wife and heads for the door.)* I'm outta here. *(He exits through the front door. Wife fights back tears and starts to feed Father. Pause. Soldier picks up the pitcher.)*

SOLDIER

I'll go get the water. *(Pause.)* Would you like me to do that?

WIFE

Fine. *(Soldier heads for the kitchen.)* Put plenty of ice in it. *(Soldier looks at Wife, then exits. Feeding and sniveling continue. Soldier returns and puts pitcher on serving table next to Father.)* Thank you. *(She continues feeding Father. Soldier drifts SL and looks out the door and window, checking to see if Brother is in sight. Wife composes herself as she continues to feed Father.)* I don't think you should be acting like that.

SOLDIER

Guests are supposed to behave themselves, is that it?

WIFE

That's part of it. But . . .

SOLDIER

(Exploding.) Well, I think that's a load of crap. I'm sick and tired of being told I'm a guest. Being told to behave myself because I'm a guest. Before we shipped out, we had all this training about how we were going to be living in another country with a different culture. We were told how to behave, how to talk, how to dress, how to drink, how to walk. Spent every waking hour over there being a guest. I'm just sick of it, and I wasn't expecting to get it back here at home. Especially after you welcomed me in and insisted I stay as long as I wanted and make myself completely at home. One of the family, you said to me.

WIFE

I certainly meant that, but I wasn't expecting . . .

SOLDIER

What weren't you expecting?

WIFE

To see anyone behaving so . . . *(She doesn't know what word to use.)*

SOLDIER

Are you really that much of a prude?

WIFE

It's not right to do that to a man.

SOLDIER

What's not right?

WIFE

To make advances like that.

SOLDIER

We've moved past the Victorian era, haven't we?

WIFE

You're taking advantage of him.

SOLDIER

I like what I see, and I'm going to take advantage of him.

WIFE

Is it right to do that to a man?

SOLDIER

I enjoy it. It's so easy.

WIFE

You sound so cheap, talking like that.

SOLDIER

Not cheap. Blunt. And I'll be blunt about something else. Men aren't just easy. They're cowards.

WIFE

That's ridiculous. My father-in-law, sitting there every day fights with all the courage in the world to stay alive, and he had courage when he was in the military and fought for his

country. My husband had more courage than any man I ever knew. He volunteered to go back over there a second time. He had served his country, but that wasn't enough. Not for him. Now that's courage, and I loved him for it.

SOLDIER

You think all that blustering about patriotism and military toughness and winning medals for bravery and facing enemy fire in battle is courage? It's just how men hide from their own fears. Inside they're all cowards, because deep down they're all just scared, little, insecure boys.

WIFE

I won't stand for you calling my husband a coward.

SOLDIER

He was the worst kind of coward. He fought against his fears by making everyone around him more afraid of him than he was of himself. That made him a bully.

WIFE

Don't you talk that way.

SOLDIER

I'm gonna talk any way I want. I'm gonna tell you about your husband and make you see him for what he really was.

WIFE

I know what he was. A hero.

SOLDIER

Is that what you think? Well, just you let me tell you about your husband. There were three of us in the unit that he picked out to be his whores. He called us "Sex Slave Specialists, First Class."

WIFE

I don't believe . . .

SOLDIER

For a week he gave us hell. Working us from dawn till dusk. Running us five extra miles every day. Threw our gear all over the barracks six times a day, then made us restow it. Gave us every stinking bit of grunge work in the unit. By the end of that week we were worn out and desperate. We would've done anything to get him off our backs. He knew he had beaten us down, so that's when he made his move. He brought us into his quarters, just the three of us. He told us we could turn our lives around from torture to paradise. We'd get the easy jobs, he said. We'd get passes anytime we wanted them. We'd be the top dogs with him. We just had to do one little thing for him. He said that every night we had to draw straws. Whoever got the short straw had to come there to his quarters and service him. That's what he called it. We all just stood there at attention

thinking the same thing. That this was worth it to get him off our backs. So, we did that for a couple of weeks and everything was fine. After a while, though, we didn't draw straws anymore. I just volunteered for it. I told the other two that I'd do it. All three of us still got off easy with him. That never changed. But I'd go in there every night to him and worship his cock. It got to where I wanted to. I could show him that I understood him. He desperately needed to be loved, because he was so scared. Just a terrified little boy.

WIFE

That's disgusting. He'd never do that. I don't believe you.

SOLDIER

You can believe anything you want, but that doesn't change the fact that I pleased your husband every night.

WIFE

Stop it.

SOLDIER

And I enjoyed it.

WIFE

Stop it.

SOLDIER

Because I never felt such tenderness for a man ever in my life.

WIFE

Stop it, I said.

SOLDIER

And I never, ever would have betrayed him.

WIFE

What do you know . . .

SOLDIER

He told me everything. Everything.

WIFE

That's enough!

SOLDIER

It was my loyalty that brought me here to your doorstep. My final act of love and grief for him. That's all I wanted to do. He mattered more to me than the uniform we both wore. He mattered to me more than my own life.

WIFE

You've done your duty to him. Now get out. Leave me alone.

SOLDIER

I'll be leaving soon enough, but I'm not done here, yet.

WIFE

I want you out of here before my children come home. I don't want you to come anywhere near them.

SOLDIER

You don't have to worry about that. I'm not interested in children. You know what I want, don't you?

WIFE

(Warily.) I don't know what you mean.

SOLDIER

Oh, you don't? I want the same thing you want.

WIFE

What are you talking about?

SOLDIER

He's everything a woman could desire, isn't he?

WIFE

Don't be ridiculous.

SOLDIER

He's cheerful and friendly. He doesn't brood like his older brother did. And he's smarter, too.

WIFE

This is . . .

SOLDIER

And he's much handsomer. That's why you want him, don't you?

WIFE

What?

SOLDIER

You heard me. You're wanting to jump him.

WIFE

I beg your pardon . . .

SOLDIER

That's why you sent your children away, wasn't it? So you could . . .

WIFE

What is the meaning of this?

SOLDIER

What's held you back? You could've had him any time you wanted.

WIFE

You're hateful and evil.

SOLDIER

What's evil about wanting a man? Unless you've got some sort of Biblical hang up about taking a dead man's brother to your bed.

WIFE

I . . . that's . . .

SOLDIER

Or are you just feeling so guilty that you're not through punishing yourself for what you did to your husband?

WIFE

What do you know about guilt? A person has to have a sense of shame to understand anything about guilt or penance.

SOLDIER

You're wasting your time trying to insult me with that, let me tell you. The military wiped out any sense of shame I might have had. Serving over there. Killing children. Destroying everything that makes sense. There was nothing left of that inside me. Just like there was nothing left inside you after your husband died. But that started to change when his brother walked in through that door, didn't it? Didn't it?

WIFE

I've never known anyone to talk to me in such a way.

SOLDIER

How many nights have you lain there in your bed, tossing, turning, all the sheets damp with your sweat, your body throbbing?

WIFE

Don't . . .

SOLDIER

Every day getting up and wondering how you were going to keep your hands off him.

WIFE

I never felt that.

SOLDIER

Oh, you must have. You must have. I know. Because I've felt it. But I've got no silly fears holding me back. I'm gonna help myself to him. You had your chance at him, and you dithered. I'm taking him, and you can't stop either of us, now.

WIFE

Why are you doing this?

SOLDIER

It's what I want.

WIFE

You selfish little tramp! What about what I want? I'm trying to hold a family together here, but it's all slipping away right before my very eyes. First, my husband. His father's all but gone. Next, you've come here to rub my nose in my exploded marriage. Now, you want to take away my brother-in-law, the last link to the family. I'll be left alone to raise two children who'll have no idea . . .

SOLDIER

You drove your husband away. His father's death is inevitable. His brother desires me, not you. He looks at me and sees a woman who's alive and exciting. He looks at you and sees an old dishrag.

WIFE

Why, you nasty . . . *(She attacks Soldier. They struggle.)*

FATHER

Boys! Boys! Your mother will have a fit if she sees you two fighting. Stop! You'll break the furniture. *(Soldier throws Wife on sofa.)*

WIFE

Get out. Get out, please.

SOLDIER

I will, and I'll be taking him with me. You'll be all alone. *(Fadeout.)*

PATRIOTISM

(A noon meal. Brother SR feeding Father and occasionally taking a bite of his own food. Wife in her chair, eating and reading. Soldier eats on the sofa. After a while, Wife speaks.)

WIFE

Tell me, do you like to read?

SOLDIER

Well, ma'm, I never read much at all when I was growing up, but I did start reading once I signed up.

WIFE

Yeah? Why was that?

SOLDIER

In the service there's always a whole lot of waiting around.

FATHER

Hurry up and wait. Hurry up and wait. *(Brother and Wife smile.)*

SOLDIER

I didn't understand what he said.

BROTHER

(Imitating his father's voice.) "Hurry up and wait!" Dad was in the military, too. I'll bet you did plenty of waiting, huh, Dad?

FATHER

A lifetime's worth.

SOLDIER

Did he say something about a lifeline?

WIFE

No, he said "A lifetime's worth." I'll bet you did just that, Father-in-law. My husband talked a lot about the boredom he felt because of all the waiting they did. *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

Sounds like the perfect life for a graduate student.

WIFE

So, you started reading once you were in the service. What did you like to read?

SOLDIER

Nothing special. Just whatever was around. Comics, novels, murder mysteries, even the military manuals seemed real interesting when you're on a ten-hour flight.

WIFE

Well, I have lots of things right here, so you just help yourself any time you want.

SOLDIER

Thank you, ma'm.

BROTHER

You're certainly welcome to anything I have over here at the desk, but I don't know how interesting it'd be to you.

SOLDIER

Well, thank you, sir.

WIFE

(To Brother.) Just what kind of books are you reading?

BROTHER

Well, I've gotten kind of sidetracked by a book I bumped into on the shelf. I was retrieving some texts I needed for my study, when I came across it. It's a collection of poems about war. It was published during an outbreak of patriotic fever. It sort of relates in a tangential way to my research.

WIFE

What are the poems in it? Maybe I know some of them from school.

BROTHER

Well, let's see. *(He goes to desk and finds the poetry book.)* I'll just crack it open and read whatever I find. Ah, here's a good one. "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold, And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold; And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea, When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee."

FATHER

(Father recites the next couple of lines.) "Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green, That host with their banners at sunset were seen: Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown, That host on the morrow lay withered and strown."

WIFE

(Reciting more lines.) "For the angel of Death spread his wings on the blast, And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed; And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill, And their hearts but once heaved—and for ever grew still!"

SOLDIER

“And there lay the steed with his nostrils all wide, But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride; And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf, And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.”

WIFE

“And there lay the rider distorted and pale, With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail; And the tents were all silent—the banners alone—The lances unlifted—the trumpet unblown.”

SOLDIER AND WIFE AND FATHER

(Finishing reciting the poem. Pause.) “And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail, And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal; And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword, Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!”

FATHER

Had to learn that in grade school. Eighth grade, I think.

WIFE

Me too, Father-in-law.

SOLDIER

Me too. *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

I must've been absent that day. *(He closes the book and drops it on the desk with a thud. Fadeout.)*

PROMOTION

(The chair from the desk SR has been placed DC. Soldier enters wearing a very short, very slinky red minidress and stiletto heels. She leads Husband onstage by a halter and leash, handcuffed.)

SOLDIER

Sit down, won't you? *(Husband sits in chair. Soldier's voice, demeanor, facial expressions, and movements are soft and pleasing)* Now, I'm going to expect you to behave yourself while we're in here. Do you think you can behave? *(Husband looks down at the floor.)* I'll just bet you can. Look, I'm going to take those nasty old handcuffs off you. Would you like that? I have the key right here, see? It's on this nice gold chain around my neck, and it's snuggled down in there between my two gorgeous, white, luscious . . . *(She bends down so that her chest is right in front of Husband's face. He turns away.)* Well, you certainly know how to make a girl feel wanted. Oh, I've hurt your feelings. I'm sorry, and I promise I'll make it up to you. Just you wait and see. Now, come on, let's start with getting those handcuffs off you. Come on, hold your hand up here. *(He does so, but keeps his head turned away.)* Let me just get this key in there . . . *(She bends down so that she can unlock the cuffs with the key still looped around her neck. The Husband's hands naturally come in contact with Soldier's breasts as she fumbles with the lock. She has the key in the lock and throws back her arms in mock horror.)* Oh, my goodness. Just look at you acting so naughty, and you promised not two minutes ago to behave. Why did I ever trust you? *(She giggles and rubs her breasts up against Husband's hands.)* You like that, don't you? Come on, you can tell me. We shouldn't keep secrets from one another. You like to fondle my tits, don't you? Go ahead, fondle all you want. *(Husband's hands are trying to avoid contact with Soldier's chest. Suddenly Soldier's demeanor changes. She yells at him.)* Why aren't you fondling me? Don't you like to fondle tits? White woman's tits? What kind of a man are you? You must be a homo. Are you a homo? If you don't start fondling my tits right now, then I'm going to . . . *(Husband starts rubbing her breasts vaguely. Her voice and demeanor change back.)* Ooooh, yes. That's it. I knew you liked to do that. *(She giggles pleasurably.)* You know what? I'm gonna tell you a little secret. I like it when you fondle my tits. Can you tell? I can feel my nipples getting erect, and they're straining, oh, they're straining and craving for attention. Can you feel them pushing out against your tantalizing fingertips? Oh, yes. And do you like to look at my erect nipples making those two little points in the front of my dress? Does that inflame you? *(She reverts to rage mode.)* Will you look at my tits? I order you! Look at my tits! *(She grabs him by the hair and yanks his head around so that he's looking at her chest. She becomes calm again.)* There. Feast your eyes on my erect nipples. I hope it excites you. I hope I might be able to feast my eyes on something else that's erect. *(She giggles.)* And fondle my tits to your heart's content. I'm sure I'd like to return the compliment. *(She giggles again.)* Well, since you're behaving like the perfect gentleman, why don't we go ahead and get more comfortable? *(She unlocks and removes the cuffs. His hands fall to his lap and she stands up straight.)* There. Feel better? Now, let me take off that nasty old leash. *(She unhooks it from his collar.)* There. Now, would you like a drink? I'll bet you would. A nice, long, cool one, huh? Scotch on the rocks, right? I'll go get it

for you. *(She exits with the cuffs and leash. She returns with a drink.)* Here you are, my knight in shining armor. Take a long sip of this and let it relax you. Let it put you in the mood, if you know what I mean. *(She giggles.)* Well, let it put you in the mood, big boy. *(He doesn't move.)* Here, take it. *(She becomes violent.)* Drink this down now, you hear me? Now! *(she grabs his nose and tilts back his head. She pours the drink down his throat. He chokes and gasps and spews it back out at her. She stops and returns to normal.)* Oh, dear me. You didn't like your drink? Did I put too much ice in it? Oh, well, I'm so sorry. Let's not worry about that anymore, whaddaya say, you big hunk? Anything to make you happy. Speaking of which, what would make you happy? I know! Let's indulge your foot fetish. I couldn't help but notice that you've been looking at my feet quite a bit. Is that what turns you on? *(she puts one foot up on Husband's thigh.)* What do you think of my toenail polish? Sexy, huh? And I'm sure you noticed my cute little toe rings. Maybe you'll buy one for me? I'd like that. I'd like that a lot. Why don't you slip my shoe off and stroke my instep? I'm not ticklish a bit. Come on, I know you want to. *(She takes her shoe off and nudges his hand with her foot.)* There, I'll help you, because you're such a shy one. Ooooh, that feels nice. Do you like to feel my foot? I can tell you do. Would you like to do a little shrimping? Sure you would. I know I'd like it. My toes are just aching for your lips. *(She holds her foot up to his face.)* Please, take my toes into your mouth and caress them with that tongue of yours. Go ahead. *(He turns his head away. She switches to violent mode, grabs his head and tries to thrust her foot in his mouth.)* Will you lick my toes? What's the matter with you? Don't you want to please a beautiful woman? Aren't you excited by my desire for you? *(She gives up and puts her shoe back on and resumes her seductive demeanor and voice.)* Excuse me for just a moment. *(She exits and returns with a lit cigarette in her mouth. She inhales deeply and exhales the smoke slowly and pleurably.)* Aaaah! That tastes so good. *(She inhales and then bends over and blows the smoke in Husband's face.)* Doesn't that smell delicious? There's nothing like a nice, deep, long drag on a good-tasting cigarette. *(She blows smoke on him again.)* I'll bet you'd like one too. *(She flicks the ashes on his head.)* It tastes so good. Here. *(She extends the filter end towards his face. He turns his head away.)* Oh, it's OK. I like to share. Look, my lipstick is on it. You'll be able to taste my mouth there when you inhale. Don't you want a taste? Oh, I know you do. *(She switches to anger.)* Well, if you don't want a drag, then, I'll give you the business end of it. *(She burns his arm with the cigarette. He flinches.)* You like that? What about this? *(She burns his ear.)* Or This? *(She burns his hand.)* Ah, screw it. *(She tosses the cigarette down and grinds it out with her foot. She returns to her calm approach.)* I see you looking at my gyrating hips. You'd like to imagine your hips up against mine, wouldn't you? Pumping and rocking. You'd like to reach up under my skirt right now and worship my loins, and my crotch and my buttocks. You're just dying to know what's just hidden by the hem of my dress, aren't you? Well, I don't know if I'm going to show it to you or not. I'm not convinced that you've been a good little boy. I'm not even convinced that you're not a homo. But I will show you something almost as good. Do you know what it is? It's what I'm wearing underneath. Would you like to see that? I just know you do. *(She pulls off her thong underwear and very slowly and slinkily pulls them down her legs. Once they are down she has them hanging on one foot. She lifts her leg and dangles the thong in his face.)* There, a nice, sexy thong. That's all I had on underneath, and there it is. *(She giggles.)* And now I don't have anything on at

all down there. Would you like to have it as a souvenir? It's all yours. *(She lifts it up closer to his face. He turns his head away.)* Don't you want it? As a keepsake? I'll bet you never had a gift anything like this from your girl back home. You sure you don't want it? Alright. *(She flips it onto the floor in front of him and struts away.)* Well, now what'll we do? You don't have any suggestions? Oh, you are the shy one, aren't you, but I'll bet I know what you're thinking. I'll bet it's what I'm thinking. *(She moves to him.)* Oh, my goodness, I was right. I can see what you're thinking. Look at the bulge in your pants. You certainly know how to flatter a girl. And impress her. Just looking at what you've got gets me feeling excited. I can feel myself getting all skwooshy down there. Ooooh, I like the way you make me feel. *(She reaches under her skirt and massages her crotch.)* I'm getting all lubed up for you. You'll be able to slide into me in one clean stroke. Oh, that'll feel so good. Here, let me sit right down . . . *(She reaches for his shoulders and stops.)* Uh-oh, what's this on my hand? It looks like blood. *(She sniffs at it.)* Yes, it's blood. It's my menstrual blood. See? *(She holds her finger under his nose.)* Well, that is unfortunate, isn't it? Here I was, about to get the drilling of my life, and all of a sudden, I get my period. Not that I mind, of course, but I must respect you and your culture and your religion. I know it says in your holy book that a man should not have relations *(She giggles.)* with an unclean woman. And look here, I'm unclean. *(She holds her bloodied finger up to his face.)* Oh, well, too bad for you. *(She dabs his nose with the blood on her finger.)* There, that's just a little dab of what you're passing up. But I think a man who has strong moral convictions is super sexy. Yes, I respect you. Well, ta-ta. *(She struts away to get another cigarette. She lights it and takes a deep drag. Exhales. She looks out into the house. Speaks in a weary tone.)* These shoes are killing me. Can I take them off?

VOICE

Yes. *(She takes off the shoes. The husband wipes his nose on his sleeve and looks up too.)* You seemed kind of slow with the blood.

SOLDIER

Yeah, I had trouble pinching the capsule open.

VOICE

I'll talk to the lab folks. It's their problem.

SOLDIER

You know, menstrual blood doesn't look anything like this.

VOICE

Do you think your average Aye-rab, Islamic, sand nigger has ever seen menstrual blood in his entire life? *(Soldier shrugs slightly and picks up the thong. Husband takes out a stick of chewing gum and puts it in his mouth.)*

SOLDIER

We done?

VOICE

Yeah, hang up your thong and dress on the hook. We'll take care of them.

HUSBAND

You actually burned my ear.

SOLDIER

(Looks at him. Inhales on her cigarette. Exhales. Pause.) Sorry. *(She exits.)*

VOICE

Sergeant, get him out of that collar and clean him up. There're people waiting.
(Fadeout.)

PUNISHMENT

(Evening. Wife is looking out the window SL. Light change to indicate dreamworld. Husband enters to her. He's holding something behind his back.)

HUSBAND

Happy anniversary, my sweetheart. *(He offers her a small, wrapped box.)* You thought I'd forgotten, but I didn't. Got this the very day I came home. *(The Wife just looks at it.)* Here, it's for you. Open it. I picked it out just for . . . *(The Wife bursts into tears and sits down.)* What's the matter? It's our anniversary, sweetheart, aren't you happy?

WIFE

Please, don't say anything to me just at the moment. *(She composes herself. He tries to help her wipe away the tears. She swats his hand away but takes his offered handkerchief.)* I have to tell you something, and after you hear it, you may want to take that anniversary present back to the store.

HUSBAND

Are you alright? Is it the children? Something wrong with one of them? Dad? What is it? Has someone died?

WIFE

No, no, it's nothing like that. No one's going to die, even though I've felt like I've been dying for weeks now.

HUSBAND

Darling, I don't understand. Are you in trouble?

WIFE

It's just that something's bothering me. Something I've done. Something terrible. Just terrible.

HUSBAND

What is it? *(Jokingly.)* You haven't murdered someone, have you?

WIFE

No, I already told you, it's nothing like that. Nobody's dead. Let me tell you, alright? Just listen!

HUSBAND

Alright, I'm listening.

WIFE

While you were overseas, I was unfaithful to you. *(Pause.)* It was wrong, I know it. I've felt terrible ever since. That's why I've been so moody and unhappy. That's why I haven't wanted to make love to you, don't you see? It wasn't because I don't want you,

it's because I've felt too guilty. But I didn't know how to tell you. It's been just awful, that's why I'm telling you now. I couldn't bear it anymore.

HUSBAND

This'll be one anniversary I'll never forget.

WIFE

Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. I never thought I'd ever do anything to hurt you, but I did, and now I can't stop aching all over because of it.

HUSBAND

If I forgive you, will that make you feel better?

WIFE

Forgive me? Could you? After betraying you? Could you really do that?

HUSBAND

We ought to try to put this behind us.

WIFE

Can we? After what I've done? Are you sure?

HUSBAND

I think it's worth a try. It certainly couldn't make the situation any worse.

WIFE

Alright. I still feel so horrible about it.

HUSBAND

The past is the past.

WIFE

I know, I know. But I feel so bad about it, I just can't stop feeling that way all of a sudden.

HUSBAND

No, no, of course not, baby.

WIFE

And what'll I do if I see him again one day, while I'm walking around the base? I know I will. What'll I do? I know I'll lose it on the spot.

HUSBAND

He's someone on the base?

WIFE

Yes. He's an officer.

HUSBAND

An officer.

WIFE

Yes, he was transferred in to the general staff. He's a communications and PR officer.

HUSBAND

You had an affair with a staff officer?

WIFE

Yes. Oh, I'm so sorry. I met him through the Christmas committee. We worked together all through the fall. That's how I got to know him. Working on that committee. Well, you know how I love Christmas, especially with the children to spoil. I was just trying to keep myself from missing you too much, especially over the holidays. I wanted something to keep me busy. That's all it was. I swear I wasn't thinking about being unfaithful to you.

HUSBAND

I know you weren't. Let's don't . . .

WIFE

I just couldn't help myself. Being on the committee, being around him, it helped wipe out the loneliness of missing you. Oh, I know that sounds terrible . . .

HUSBAND

No, it doesn't. When I was over there, I couldn't wait to get up on the line every day. Up there I didn't have any time to think about how much I was missing you.

WIFE

Yes, you wrote me that in your letters, and I understood once I was in with both feet on this committee. Meeting and getting to know all these new people. Doing things for all the children. Doing that made me forget the emptiness of my life. I could be happy for a while. And he was part of that. I never knew a man like him before. He made me curious.

HUSBAND

Officers are different. You know that.

WIFE

Yes, I know. That's it exactly. I was curious about what made him different. And he welcomed my interest with perfect respectability and courtesy. He wasn't afraid to talk to me or anyone. He told me all about his family, and his college life and his dreams and his ambition in the service. He seemed so human. He wasn't a snob, like you'd expect from any other officer.

HUSBAND

Deep down inside, they all are. You just didn't dig deep enough.

WIFE

But he wasn't that way. I kept looking for it in him. I kept digging for it. I wanted to get at the truth that I knew he kept so well hidden deep down inside him. But he wasn't a conceited jerk, like so many of the rest of them.

HUSBAND

An officer who bangs an NCO's wife isn't a jerk?

WIFE

That was all my doing, not his. In the end I seduced him. Oh, yes, I could tell he was interested in me. Once we'd spent some time together, I would catch him looking at me over the way all guys look at women they want. I knew I could tempt him. So I went over to his place one evening. I just went. He let me in and did his best to keep things from getting out of hand. But I wanted him. To find out if I could uncover his real, true self. If he'd reveal himself as he really was.

HUSBAND

And he had you and then dumped you, didn't he? Just like a jerk.

WIFE

No, that's precisely what didn't happen, even though that's what I wanted to happen. I pushed myself on him and so he couldn't hold out. We saw each other for several weeks, and I kept expecting him to get tired of me or that something about me would make him blow up and cut off our affair. He only wanted more of me. He wanted a relationship. He wanted it to go on forever. I finally built up the courage to ask him what he wanted to happen with us, and he just said, "I'm just living in the present. I love you so much I don't want to know about the past or the future. All I want is this bliss with you."

HUSBAND

Why are you telling me this?

WIFE

I want you to understand what I was doing and why I feel so horrible inside.

HUSBAND

You cheated on me. That isn't enough? It would be for me!

WIFE

No, no, you must listen. It's not just that I was unfaithful to you. It's what I did to him.

HUSBAND

What do I care about that? You threw yourself at him.

WIFE

Yes, I know. I was trying to crack him open. But I didn't. I broke his heart is what I did. He really fell in love with me. He wanted a relationship. He was good all the way through. He wasn't hiding anything. I felt so ashamed for thinking that just because he was an officer, he'd turn on me. He never did. I had to be the one to end it all between us. When I told him it was over, he cried for an hour. I went home and stood under the shower for thirty minutes. Trying to feel clean again after what I'd done. So don't you see why I had to tell you all this?

HUSBAND

No. It would've been better not to know at all.

WIFE

But, please . . .

HUSBAND

Just shut up! *(Pause.)* I'm going to put in for another tour over there.

WIFE

Right now? You just got back.

HUSBAND

Yeah, right now. Tomorrow.

WIFE

But you could get killed this time.

HUSBAND

Maybe. *(Pause.)* Don't worry. Your name's still on the insurance policies. *(He exits.)*

WIFE

No, wait . . . *(She sees the anniversary present. She picks it up and opens it. Looks at the necklace. She weeps. Fadeout.)*

RESENTMENT

(Night. Father has been put to bed. Brother and Soldier are lying on the sofa, comfortably entwined, gently caressing each other. Soldier is on top.)

SOLDIER

Penny for your thoughts.

BROTHER

I was just trying to figure out why I ever agreed to come spend the summer here?

SOLDIER

(She snorts playfully and pinches him.) So that we could be together, silly. *(They kiss and snuggle contentedly for a minute.)*

BROTHER

But I hated this place when I was growing up, and it hasn't changed a bit since then. I still hate it.

SOLDIER

No one would ever know that from the way you act. You take care of your father, you're helping fix up . . .

BROTHER

And no matter what I do, my father only cares about his dead son. Never a word of thanks from him. And my brother's widow . . . *(Pause.)*

SOLDIER

What about her?

BROTHER

She's taken over everything. This is my family home, not hers.

SOLDIER

Where else does she have to go?

BROTHER

Exactly. I think she's trying to wrangle the house for herself before the old man kicks off.

SOLDIER

So?

BROTHER

So? She's stealing this place from me.

SOLDIER

So let her have it. You hate it, right? *(He stares hard at her. She smiles and nuzzles his crotch with her thigh. He smiles shyly and kisses her.)*

BROTHER

Yeah, you're right. It's not worth fighting over. *(Pause.)* But . . .

SOLDIER

But what?

BROTHER

I'm just tired of Dad always harping on and on about how great the military life is, and how great his son the soldier was, and his lovely daughter-in-law, the war bride, and his grandkids who'll carry on the family tradition, and . . .

SOLDIER

And never any love for you, the little peacenik. You, the little misfit, right? Shhh! *(She gently puts a finger to his lips.)* You can make all that go away, you know.

BROTHER

(Brother stares hard at her again.) Just let me survive another couple of weeks, and I'm outta here. And I never plan on coming back. Ever.

SOLDIER

I'll help you make it all go away, OK? *(She slips her hand beneath his clothes and smiles.)*

BROTHER

Mmmmm! You'll make a lotus-eater of me yet. *(He kisses her passionately.)*

SOLDIER

I've got something else I'd like you to nibble on first. *(They writhe in a wave of kisses and embraces, then eventually slide off the sofa onto the floor, kissing each other wildly and pulling each others' clothes off. Fadeout just as we get a glimpse of her thong underwear.)*

RETRIBUTION

(The family members are dressed for Father's funeral. Wheelchair is folded up in the dining room. Father's serving table is DS piled with leftovers for the wake. Brother SR at desk. Wife in her chair. Children and Soldier on the sofa. Soldier wears a uniform. They munch distractedly.)

SOLDIER

I'll get my things ready to go. *(Stands to exit upstairs.)*

BROTHER

I'll help. *(He follows her upstairs.)*

WIFE

Children, I want you to go upstairs to your room and play quietly. *(The children rise. They get some toys out of the box and run upstairs.)* Change out of those clothes and hang them up nicely. *(Pause. Soldier and Brother come downstairs with her duffel bag. They come DS. Wife rises, collects food and exits to kitchen.)*

SOLDIER

Are you ready to go?

BROTHER

Pretty much. I'll change into some other clothes for the long ride. *(He starts to exit towards the kitchen.)*

SOLDIER

I know it's a sad day for a lot of reasons, but we're gonna be together from now on. *(She embraces him and kisses him.)* Think about how good that's gonna be.

BROTHER

I know. I'll feel better once we're out of here. Let me go get my things. *(He exits to the kitchen. She picks up a pillow from the sofa. Soldier checks on the upstairs and the kitchen. She moves quietly but quickly upstairs. Pause. Brother returns. He has changed his shirt and carries several bags. He puts them down at the foot of the stairs by the Soldier's duffel bag. He looks around in the dining and living rooms. He looks out the front door. He exits into the kitchen. Pause. He and Wife return.)*

WIFE

Don't worry, we'll be alright here.

BROTHER

I'm sorry to be leaving right after the funeral, but it's for the best.

WIFE

You won't get any argument from me. *(He tries to embrace her. She pushes him away.)*
No, I don't want to . . .

BROTHER

To what?

WIFE

Never mind.

BROTHER

I thought we were family. *(No response.)* I guess not.

WIFE

I guess not. You've got your life to live. Just go on with it. *(Soldier is coming downstairs, carrying the pillow.)* Good-bye. *(She exits to kitchen.)*

SOLDIER

I guess she doesn't want to say good-bye to me. *(Pause.)*

BROTHER

What's that?

SOLDIER

It's one of the pillows from the sofa. I had it upstairs for reading. *(She returns it to the sofa.)* Ready?

BROTHER

Yeah.

SOLDIER

Let's go. *(They collect their bags and exit out the front door. Wife enters from kitchen. She watches them depart. She goes to her chair and sits. She leans back and closes her eyes. Light change to indicate passage of time. It's now dusk. She awakens and looks around.)*

WIFE

I can't believe how quiet it is. *(She rises and walks US to the stairs.)* Children? Are you hungry? Why don't we go out somewhere and get something? Wherever you want to go. Children? I know you can hear me. Children. *(She starts up the stairs.)* Why aren't you answering me? Come on, let's shake a leg up there. *(Fadeout.)*

SEDUCTION

(Evening meal. Dusk. Brother is eating at the desk SR. Soldier on sofa. Wife in her chair LC. Father UR. Wife rises and moves SL and looks out the window. She sighs. She turns and looks at Soldier and Brother. They stop eating and look back at her. Wife exits to kitchen. Soldier looks at Brother. He turns back toward the desk and resumes eating. Soldier walks over behind Brother's chair. She begins to caress and kiss him. Eventually, he responds.)

SOLDIER

Who's your girlfriend? *(Brother moans as they continue kissing.)*

WIFE

(Calling from the kitchen.) Will you put your father in bed, please, before it's dark?

BROTHER

In a minute. *(He and soldier resume kissing. Fadeout.)*