

ACT ONE

We see before us a dark and seemingly barren stage without any life or animation about it. The curtain has been pulled aside throughout the entrance of the audience members into the theater. They would find little to examine or comment upon when glancing at the stage before them. The only objects noticeable include the slight silhouette of the furniture.

The play begins - silently, at first, with no sound, no rustle - perhaps making us wonder if someone has forgotten an entrance and the play has yet to start. Our doubts are addressed when we hear the intricate tingling of some orchestral pieces someplace off in the near distance. The tingling grows into a concerto of sorts - modern Classical in style - reaching carefully out of the darkness and flooding the stage with a frail majesty.

A WHIRRING SOUND of unknown identity is soon heard mingling uneasily with the Classical tune - but soon "mingle" ceases to be the correct word. The sound quickly turns guttural, mechanical, frightening, and then all too familiar - the maniacal steel of a speeding car. The sound grows and grows, the car coming closer... and closer... and closer... A faint reflection of HEADLIGHTS soon shines upon the stage and brightens alongside the car's growl - and then...

SWERVE! SHRIEK! The HEADLIGHTS swing jerkily and violently towards the wings as if fleeing a terrifying ghost - the stage is dark. The only residue from the brief illumination is the momentary glimpse we receive of a WOMAN'S SILHOUETTE on the stage - the silhouette of MELODY BAINES.

Then - CRASH!

The car-like shriek dies a sudden and foreboding death. All we hear is A HIGH-PITCHED CAR HORN that appears to be more a harmonic compliment to the music than the sound of a smashed skull on a steering wheel.

The HORN sounds... and sounds... and sounds... holding its note with the crescendo of the tune...

Silence. The song has concluded with appropriately deprecated aplomb. The HORN dies, too, with meticulous and respectful musical timing. It appears that everything on the stage has returned to normal, when...

CLICK! A door someplace opens and the LIGHTS abruptly rise. A rigidly Easter Island-like figure has just entered the stage through the front door of the house and turned on the lights. HIS name is CARTER HARRIMAN.

The new figure before us moves at a steady, relaxed pace - sufficient enough for us to examine HIM at ease. The first thing we notice is that HARRIMAN does not move "slowly," per se, but rather "methodically," as if a blind person so sure of his surroundings and his daily schedule that he requires no thought as to his next move. We also can't help but sense that our "blind" friend doesn't want to move too fast, too quick, too adventurously, for fear of upsetting some unknown balance that maintains his pre-set rhythm. The second thing we notice is that HARRIMAN is dressed (or well-dressed) as tidily and cleanly as HE moves - crisp, sanitized, cool - a bit like a mannequin in a window display. The third thing we notice (or will soon notice) is that HARRIMAN perennially maintains a matter-of-fact bearing that appears to be unshaken and unscarred by any human emotion - warm, cold, or otherwise. The end result is a man whose social graces are almost nonexistent and who perpetually treats humanity as a third-party intrusion into his private world.

As we observe HIM, HARRIMAN enters the stage and proceeds to take off his coat and hang it up someplace. HE turns towards the photograph on the wall and nods a "hello" to the woman in the photograph. It doesn't appear SHE responds - but no matter: HARRIMAN exits into the kitchen and re-enters with a glass of water in HIS hands. HE sips the water gingerly, walks over to the piano, and is about to sit - but not quite. HE catches the glare of the woman in the photograph again and raises his glass to her. HARRIMAN takes another sip of water, moves closer towards the photograph, and stares intently at it. We sense that HE is somehow trying to speak to the woman with HIS eyes - or perhaps coax her to speak to HIM? A pause ensues. HARRIMAN slowly turns around like a figure on a music box and searches the room. HE is clearly sensing (or hoping?) that someone is watching HIM.

After a beat, HARRIMAN turns towards the piano and sits down before it. HE opens the drawer of a nearby table, takes out a voice recorder, turns on the contraption (we can tell by the red light), and puts it carefully on the side table. HARRIMAN gives another expectant glance around the room (perhaps daring something to make itself known), takes another casual sip of his water, turns to the piano, and proceeds to play a lilting tune of some sort - and play and play and play and play - until...

HARRIMAN stops playing the piano with abrupt horror. A light from the voice-messaging system located on the coffee table has caught his attention. HARRIMAN visibly congeals before us. HE turns off the voice recorder, rises from the piano, tepidly moves towards the voicemail box, pushes a button, and warily listens.

VOICEMAIL

You have reached your Voicemail Box. You have fifty-eight new messages. To listen to your new messages, press one. To listen

VOICEMAIL (CONT)

your saved messages, press two. To change your voicemail greeting, press three.

A long pause ensues - similar to one you'd find at an awkward date.

VOICEMAIL

I'm sorry - I did not understand your selection. To listen to your new messages, press one. To listen to your saved messages, press two. To change...

BEEP! HARRIMAN pressed the "1" key on the voicemail box.

VOICEMAIL

You have fifty-eight new messages. First saved message...

BEEP! HARRIMAN has deleted the message - but the VOICE mockingly continues:

VOICEMAIL

Message deleted. Next saved message...

BEEP! HARRIMAN has deleted another message - but the VOICE pushes on:

VOICEMAIL

Message deleted. Next saved...

BEEP! HARRIMAN has... BEEP!... deleted another... BEEP!... message and then... BEEP!... deleted another... BEEP!... and another... BEEP!... and another... BEEP!... faster and faster and faster... in a determined and perhaps even maniacal rush to quiet the mechanical voice... until - BEEP!

VOICEMAIL

You have no new messages.

HARRIMAN sighs in relief and begins to walk away from the voicemail box with casual comfort, when... RING! RING! The phone on the table is shrieking with the shrillness of a wailing cat. HARRIMAN freezes in dread and turns towards the phone. RING! HE doesn't move. RING! HE still doesn't move. RING! The phone goes to voicemail.

VOICEMAIL

Thank you for your call. You have reached the phone of...

A rustled sound - no recorded voice in the usual spot.

VOICEMAIL

You may leave a message at the sound of the beep.

And after an appropriately placed pause... BEEP!

VOICE OF AXEL WHEEL

Hey again, Mr. Harriman! This is Axel Wheel from "Music Today." Did you think I forgot about you? I think by now you've gotten my fifty-eight messages - or were there fifty-four? I forget... I never have been good with numbers - only names - and your name is high on my list. I've left you so many messages now I feel like you're the big brother I never wanted. My main fraternal complaint is that you don't put your name on the voicemail recording. I might have thought I was leaving a message for the lady down the street. She recently changed her curtains, by the way, and they look horrible.

HARRIMAN has openly curdled with displeasure and wariness. HE moves towards the voicemail box and prepares to pull out its plug, when:

VOICE OF AXEL WHEEL

Oh, no, you don't want to unplug me! Funny thing, after one long, audio-only Zoom call and a shit ton of research, I know you pretty damn well. I know you and yet I haven't met you - not in person, that is... but aha! Times they are a-changin'! Now, you're probably thinking to yourself "what is this jerk talking about?" Well, I have a one word answer for you - even a clue. It starts with an "A" and it ends with an "A." I'll give you a hint - it isn't "aardvark."

HARRIMAN

(Outraged, thinking to HIMSELF.)

Andra!

VOICE OF AXEL WHEEL

Yes, sir, we had a little talk last night - your agent and I. One thing led to another. The bottle emptied fast. My wallet emptied faster. Next thing you know we're both having a long night of unbridled passion. I use people to get information and then I discard them. I'm allowed to do that, because I'm a journalist - and thanks to all that...

(A horror-movie voice.)

I know where you live!

The VOICE laughs nefariously - then dead serious:

VOICE OF AXEL WHEEL

No, honestly - I have your address right here. I found it tucked away in Andra's drawers - the mahogany ones. I'll be stopping by in just a little bit. Feel free to save me some dinner and we can sit and chat about...

HARRIMAN has just pulled out the plug for the voicemail box - silence. HE stands for an empty moment like a cornered panther pondering his next move. Then - a decision made - HARRIMAN grabs the coat HE so recently discarded, heads for the front door, swings it open, and freezes...

A youngish-looking MAN is standing in the doorframe. This man - AXEL WHEEL, no less - holds a smartphone up to HIS ear and wears a knowing and confident smirk on HIS face. HARRIMAN stares blankly at this rude intruder with full comprehension as to his likely identity. AXEL just continues to smile back with a certain Cheshire-Cat-like smarminess that is both annoying and yet refreshing. We will soon learn that there is a distinct lack of depth behind the smirk and the quips and the stand-up comic-like cockiness of this young man. We nevertheless also sense that this smarminess is a façade of sorts designed to hide some human heart that beats (and perhaps hurts) underneath all the caustic barbs.

Throughout, AXEL has continued to smile and smile and smile. HE then calmly puts the cell phone into HIS pocket.

AXEL

You shouldn't hang up on someone.

HARRIMAN stares back at AXEL with a dismissive glower. AXEL multiplies HIS smirk and extends HIS hand.

AXEL

I'm Axel Wheel - how rude of me.

HARRIMAN looks at the hand, but doesn't move. AXEL soon retracts the offer anyway.

AXEL

Sorry - let me rephrase that. I didn't mean that it's rude to be me. I mean it's too bad we couldn't meet face-to-face under better circumstances. I've got to say, after chatting on the phone before, you look different than I thought. I pictured an Easter Island head with a body. If I squint, though, I could actually mistake you for a human being.

AXEL tentatively peeks into the house.

AXEL

I bet you're going to ask me to come in.

HARRIMAN continues to stare at HIM.

AXEL

Don't mind if I do - thanks.

AXEL stops and takes a look around.

AXEL

(Gesturing to the front door.)
Better close that door. You never know what creature will wander in off the streets.

HARRIMAN closes the door and watches the newcomer as if he were a rat loose in the house. AXEL, meanwhile, examines the various posters on the wall - the ones screeching "Harriman" and "Baines" all over the place. HE eventually turns back to HARRIMAN and smiles at HIM with a predatory grin ("nice posters") - but still no reaction.

AXEL

(Pointing at one poster.)
"Summers in Spring" - I liked that one! That was your first - right? Your first work with Melody Baines? You're always supposed to remember your first.

(Zooming in on the photograph.)
Ah, this must be you and the lady herself! I remember when I used to look at my wife like that.

(Smirking at HARRIMAN.)
What a cute little couple.

AXEL has sat down on the couch.

HARRIMAN

I didn't ask you to sit down, Mr. Wheel.

AXEL

Oh, good - you can still talk. I was getting worried we'd spend the rest of the night exchanging scraps of paper. I was having

AXEL (CONT)

flashbacks to the last row in Mrs. Lewis's class. The only thing is that you're not Myra Beemer. She had big braces and big glasses and thought mitochondria were cool.

(Suddenly, leaning forward.)

Do you know the difference between "mitochondria" and "mitochondrion?"

HARRIMAN

Yes.

AXEL

Myra did, too.

HARRIMAN

Good for Myra.

AXEL

Actually, screw her - let's talk about you.

HARRIMAN

If I recall, Mr. Wheel, the bargain framing your mini extortion was that I would provide you with information about my professional life with the explicit understanding that you would not have any further need to research my personal existence.

AXEL

Yours, yes - but what about Melody Baines?

HARRIMAN

(Suspiciously.)

What about Melody Baines?

AXEL.

She's your collaborator... or was.

HARRIMAN

A brilliant observation - and?

AXEL jumps up from the couch and begins to circle the room, loudly and obnoxiously reading from HIS smartphone:

AXEL

"In this modern age of mass-produced celebrities, there is no secrecy, no mystery, no areas of gray. Every slivery snippet of a celebrity life is analyzed under the microscope of media by that mad scientist we call "the public."

(To HARRIMAN.)

Pretty good - don't you think?

(Back to reading.)

"However, in every evolutionary chain, there is a missing link - a relic to a peaceful past - a troglodyte..."

AXEL (CONT)

(To HARRIMAN.)

I'll have to spellcheck that one later...

(Back to reading.)

"In our time, we have a troglodyte celebrity, who has managed to stay huddled within the shadows of life. The scorching rays of the blinding light of fame..."

(To HARRIMAN.)

Perhaps I'm stretching that one a bit...

(Back to reading.)

"...have not yet pierced his dark haven - until now..."

(To HARRIMAN.)

Dot. Dot. Dot.

AXEL smiles cheekily at HARRIMAN and then continues on:

AXEL

"Of course, I write of composer Carter Harriman. No other man has managed to tiptoe so tenderly across the wobbly fence dividing fame from forgetfulness. A composer since the age of nineteen, Carter Harriman rose to fame five years ago with his fortuitous collaboration with the late poet Melody Baines. Since that time, he has published four albums - two of them Platinum - and his music has inspired five national and regional concert tours of the continental United States and Canada. His concertos - especially his magnum opus: "Summers in Spring" - all written to Ms. Baines's lyrics - have attracted over 80 million fans worldwide and spawned 1,118 fan clubs in eighty-nine countries. Compositions by Mr. Harriman have been performed by such renowned celebrities as Andrea Bocelli, Plácido Domingo, Kiri Te Kanawa, Sarah Brightman, and the Trans-Siberian Orchestra and in such varied locations as Greece, Sweden, Germany, Russia, Italy, Brazil, Japan, Korea, and Botswana.

(Looking up with mocking surprise.)

...Botswana?

HARRIMAN acknowledges this with a regal nod, as AXEL continues:

AXEL

"Until recently, however, Mr. Harriman eschewed his growing fame and wrapped himself in a splendid isolation free from interviews and public performances... but no longer! The recent inclusion of Mr. Harriman's music in the Oscar-winning film "Stardust At Dawn" has pulled back the iron curtain and tossed the composer's name into the public arena."

(Looking up.)

Dot. Dot. Dot. Dot.

HARRIMAN

You have plentiful dots in your scandal sheet.

AXEL

There are still some gaps that I need to fill.

HARRIMAN

I suppose that's where I come in.

AXEL

I wouldn't want to leave you out.

HARRIMAN

That's most considerate.

AXEL

It just seems a wee bit silly to write about you and your great career without having much juicy information about your dead-as-a-doornail partner.

(A beat.)

What the hell is a doornail anyway?

HARRIMAN

What if I refuse to cooperate, Mr. Wheel?

AXEL

Well, Mr. Harriman, I look at this little situation we have here and I see two options for you. I really like it that way, too. It makes things simpler and easier - for me anyway. So let me take this brief moment to review the options available to you... Option One: you fess up and help me with information on your deceased collaborator. Option Two: I go ahead and publish what I already know about your personal life.

HARRIMAN

Which exactly is what, Mr. Wheel?

AXEL

Well, let me see... I know you are a hermetically sealed shadow of a man who is scared shitless of the outside world - a feeling that's probably (and deservedly) mutual. I know you are ingenious, imperious, brilliant, but, perhaps, way too brilliant for your own good or for anybody else's either. I know you are clever, complicated, cruel, all-knowing, bland, clueless, and just plain stupid all rolled uncomfortably into the most unwholesomest of wholes. And, if that doesn't do it, I guess I'll just have to be honest with everyone and tell the world that your real name is Michael Horley.

HARRIMAN freezes upon hearing the name.

AXEL

Yes, Carter, m' boy - or should I call you "Michael?" It's amazing how much you can find out about someone when you have their real name. The tax records. The property records. The newspaper articles. Google is your friend - except in China. You know how I see it? It's a bit like Adam and Eve and that apple

AXEL (CONT)

tree in Eden. I look at you as one huge apple waiting to be plucked. The analogy has a certain sensual quality about it - don't you think? I want to pluck you, Carter Harriman - pluck you long and hard. All I have to do is lead the world to your tree for them to take a bite - or...

HARRIMAN

Or what?

AXEL

Or, Carter-Michael-Harriman-Horley, you can provide me with so much information about Melody Baines and the relationship you shared together that I may not have enough room to put in that bit about your real name.

HARRIMAN

Why should I worry about that, Mr. Wheel?

AXEL

Why are you worrying about it, Mr. Horley?

HARRIMAN

If you think you are frightening me, Mr. Wheel...

AXEL

Hell, man, I know I am. I mentioned your suspicious alias and you went instant Albino on me. I haven't even fully checked out "Michael Horley" or your surname yet to see what little tidbits I might be able to dig up. Child molestation? Mental disease? Incest? Hell - even the rumor of incest? I'll take whatever I can get. I'm a journalist. Hey, if it comes down to it, courtesy of Uncle Sam and his oh-so-loose libel laws, I could always make stuff up, too, thanks to a few trusty "anonymous sources" - which, coincidentally, all happen to be me.

A stalemate pause. HARRIMAN looks at AXEL. AXEL looks at HARRIMAN. EACH of THEM waits for some reaction (even a flinch) from the other party. An eternity seems to pass as the Wild-West-style stare-down continues - then:

AXEL

Okay, Carter - you've dawdled enough and I have a deadline to meet. My boss wants to see some results from all my snooping "or else." I need a draft of an article by next week or I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself. As for me, I'm off to the Starbucks in town. My vocal chords cry out for a heinously expensive beverage. I'll quench my thirst, puncture my bank account, and - espresso - I'll be back. You can have a little more time to ponder your options.

AXEL is at the front door, just about to exit - but HE quickly turns:

AXEL

(Cheekily.)
Don't do anything I would do.

AXEL opens the door, salutes mockingly, and exits - finally. HARRIMAN remains frozen like a man who has just been slapped in the face by the iron fist of reality. A tense pause of indecision fills the stage. HARRIMAN just stands before us, deep in thought, pondering his next move. HE then turns again to face the woman in the photograph on the wall. It appears as if HE is looking her way for some advice as to what HE should do next. Does she grant her approval? Does she register horror at the thought? We don't really know - and neither does HARRIMAN. HE tenderly approaches the photograph, kisses HIS forefinger, places HIS forefinger on the woman's forehead - and then pauses. HARRIMAN thinks for a moment, goes to the piano, sits, turns on the voice recorder, and begins to play, as:

HARRIMAN

I don't like people. I reached that conclusion when I was very young. I started to play the piano when I was four and I found my hands seemed to know the keys by heart. The next thing I knew I saw cousins, uncles, aunts, friends, acquaintances, then strangers watching me play. A few more years passed and I found my mother plopping me down in front of pianos in small theaters like some performing monkey in a circus.

HARRIMAN, reflexive, stops playing and ponders the memory:

HARRIMAN

One night, I refused to play. I tore off my bowtie and I threw it onto the floor. My mother was furious, because there was a paid audience waiting. She marched me out onto the stage to face the crowd and announced I wouldn't play for them. She then made me stand at the theater door and apologize to every audience member as they left the theater that night.

HARRIMAN thinks for a moment and then returns to playing the piano. HE plays louder and louder as HE continues HIS monologue. We sense a hidden fury (or fear?) welling up inside HIM:

HARRIMAN

Since then, I've never liked people. I won't say I "hate" them, because that implies a certain strength of feeling. I prefer instead to believe that I don't think about them at all.

HARRIMAN ends the piano playing on a sour note. A pause descends upon the stage. HARRIMAN then glances ever so slightly back at the photograph. HE has returned to a certain calm.

HARRIMAN

And then there's you... Yours are the only eyes that don't simply look at me for their own amusement. I need you and want you here with me - every day and always.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

HARRIMAN hears the sound emanating from the front door and freezes. It seems for a moment that HE is too terrified to move - could that be the omnipresent and ever-persecutory Axel Wheel? KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! HARRIMAN turns off the voice recorder, rises, takes a breath, strides towards the front door with great gusto, crisply opens it - and freezes.

A small, squeaky, plain-looking little creature - about 30 or maybe a young 35 - is standing in the doorway: MINNIE BAINES. The woman herself reminds one in some indeterminate way of a drooping daisy in need of water and sunshine. SHE is cute and adorable, but not someone you'd particularly take seriously - not unless SHE held a gun to your head. One can't help but sense a certain plastic sunniness about MINNIE that makes HER appear idiotic and superficial. Despite this, there is a certain depth of soul behind the Disney Land smile that appears to be oddly out of reach to human perception. The mundane rest of the woman can best be described as banal frumpiness - youngish-looking, chubby, fumbling... pathetically pointless.

Uncomfortably, HARRIMAN and MINNIE just stare at EACH OTHER for an embarrassed moment - until:

MINNIE

(Like a nuclear blast of sunshine.)
Hi there!

HARRIMAN

(Blandly.)
Hello.

MINNIE

(Trying again.)
Long time, no see!

HARRIMAN

Until now. Why are you here?

MINNIE

Oh, well... you said you wanted to meet up.

HARRIMAN

That was next week, if I recall - was it not?

MINNIE

Oh. Gosh. I'm sorry. I thought it was this week. Besides, I was in the neighborhood anyway, so thought I might as well stop by and say "hello."

HARRIMAN continues to stare.

MINNIE

Hello.

HARRIMAN

(As before.)
Hello.

MINNIE

Is it... is it a bad time?

HARRIMAN

Would it matter if it was?

MINNIE

Oh. Yes. Of course. I mean... it's rude.
(A beat.)
...isn't it?

HARRIMAN

Extremely.

MINNIE

Well, there you go.

HARRIMAN

Besides, I'm expecting company.

MINNIE

(Surprised - "You? Company?")
Ah, well, in that case... company?

HARRIMAN

Yes. I had that reaction, too.

MINNIE

(Disappointed.)
If it's something private...

HARRIMAN

A reporter from "Music Today."

MINNIE

(Relieved.)
Oh! Neat. Is that all? I mean... not "all." I didn't mean it like that. I think it's great you have an interview. I love that magazine - "Musical Day!"

HARRIMAN

"Music Today."

MINNIE

Yes, that one.

HARRIMAN

You look nervous.

MINNIE

Relieved, that's all! I haven't seen you in six months. A lot can happen in six months. I thought you were going to tell me that you'd met some woman online and were going to run away with her to Bermuda.

HARRIMAN responds with a "not-likely" glower.

MINNIE

...Paris?

HARRIMAN

I am not the sort of person who has a tendency to "run" anywhere. I appreciate your stopping by and would be happy to reconnect some other time.

MINNIE

(A chastised schoolgirl - thinking to herself.)
Oh. Yes. Well. I was kind of looking forward to checking up with you again - you know? Then again, I've waited six months, so what's six more minutes? I'd love to get together some other time - this week maybe? Mom has a doctor's appointment at 9 Thursday morning and a meeting with friends at 6. Then she has a physical therapy appointment at 5 Friday afternoon and then I

MINNIE (CONT)

have to inject her with her medication. Then she has her bridge night at the Women's Club on Saturday at 3 and - oh, yes - lunch with Betty and Francis the next afternoon.

(Aside, to HARRIMAN.)

Mom lost her driver's license after the stroke.

(Back to thinking.)

And then... ooo, let me see...

MINNIE has whipped out an appointment book and begins to flip frantically through the pages.

HARRIMAN

Thank you, but all this really isn't necessary.

MINNIE

Oh. No. It is. I don't want to interrupt you again.

HARRIMAN

You're interrupting me now.

MINNIE

Exactly.

MINNIE has returned to combing through HER book and then suddenly:

MINNIE

Ah! Wait. Here we go. I'm free at 3 next Tuesday... or maybe it's 4... Wait a second...

HARRIMAN

I don't have a "second."

MINNIE

Oh. I get it. I really do. I just want to get this scheduling thing down. Now, about Tuesday...

HARRIMAN

Can't it wait?

MINNIE

(With unexpected forcefulness.)

Can it?

MINNIE has just shoved some papers in HARRIMAN's direction. HARRIMAN freezes upon seeing the papers and slowly takes them in HIS hand like an archeologist handling an ancient artifact.

MINNIE

I found them with some of Mel's things. They're a little beat up, but you can still read them. She hid them inside a scrapbook locked in a box in the attic. I never thought to go through it before, but just yesterday I...

HARRIMAN

(Almost accusingly.)
I thought there were no more.

MINNIE

I did, too, but... there are.

HARRIMAN examines the papers with a subtle euphoria that only barely manages to be detectable.

MINNIE

(Tentatively.)
There's something else, too.

HARRIMAN looks up: "what?"

MINNIE

She wants to speak with you.

HARRIMAN just stares at HER.

MINNIE

She misses you, she says - terribly.

HARRIMAN lowers HIS eyes in unease.

MINNIE

Did you hear what I said?

HARRIMAN

Yes, I did.

MINNIE

You're not saying anything.

HARRIMAN

I'm thinking.

MINNIE

Oh. Good. About Tuesday?

HARRIMAN

What do you mean - "Tuesday?"

MINNIE

About meeting up on Tuesday.

HARRIMAN

What's wrong with right now?

MINNIE

(With barely suppressed glee.)
I don't know. Now is great. I love now.

HARRIMAN opens the front door in full and gestures MINNIE to enter. SHE does so with the pleasure of a child being ushered into some magical place.

MINNIE

Oh, wow - it looks just the same!

HARRIMAN

I don't quite see why it wouldn't.

MINNIE

Well, people decorate... or redecorate.

HARRIMAN

It's only been six months.

MINNIE

Oh, yeah. That's true. Besides, you know what they say: "If it ain't broke..."

HARRIMAN

I despise that word - "ain't."

MINNIE

Oh, yes. I do, too. Hate it.

MINNIE is about to take another step, but freezes and gasps.

HARRIMAN

What's wrong?

MINNIE

(Pointing to the floor.)
The carpets - they're new!

HARRIMAN

Yes, they are indeed.

MINNIE

(A bit preoccupied.)
That's... really nice.

HARRIMAN

(Sensing the oddness in HER tone.)
Is it?

MINNIE

Sorry - I don't mean to sound weird about it. It's just that my Dad used to have this thing about me walking on his carpets. He was a diplomat who traveled the world, as you know, and he'd buy these really expensive carpets from China, India, Iran, and... and... eh... what's that other place... I forget - but he'd buy them and he'd lay them all over the house - which is weird, because he never even seemed to like them that much. I think he just liked to point them out to people.

HARRIMAN turns away from HER and walks further into the house. MINNIE hurriedly follows HIM like a chirpy little bird.

MINNIE

Anyway, like I said, my Dad would get upset with me walking on his carpets - I mean always. Melody could get away with it easily enough, but I never could. I asked my Dad why one day and he said "because she floats." "Floats?" I thought - "is she a feather?" I know Melody was always thinner than I was, but, trust me, she never "floated." I was starting to have my weight problem, then, too, which didn't help, so...

HARRIMAN

I sympathize - but about the papers...

MINNIE

I used to dance - did you know that?

HARRIMAN

(Hating to respond and invite more conversation.)

No.

MINNIE

I had a few extra pounds on me, but I knew how to use them - give or take a tumble. I started dancing at five - just by myself - since my parents wouldn't pay for lessons. They were putting "everything" into Melody's harp, which she gave up. So I learned most of my dances from those really old movies. You remember those? Nelson Eddy. Janet McDowell.

HARRIMAN

Jeanette MacDonald.

MINNIE

Her, too - I loved them all! I'd watch those old movies nonstop and practice my steps - but Dad hated me pounding on the ground with my big feet. He told me to stop twirling one day and, since that was my favorite part, I stopped the rest, too. I wasn't really good at it anyway - but I might have been better with a few more lessons and a few less carpets

Silence. It appears MINNIE has finished. HARRIMAN peers up at HER to see if there is any further commentary.

HARRIMAN

Is that all?

MINNIE shakes HER head nervously.

MINNIE

She's here.

MINNIE looks up and towards a mysterious FIGURE that has seemingly materialized onto the stage. It's the same FIGURE that we saw previously. HARRIMAN quickly turns around.

HARRIMAN

(Suddenly enlivened.)
Where?

MINNIE

(Nodding at the FIGURE.)
There.

HARRIMAN, entranced, looks at the spot with great intensity to see if HE can perceive the FIGURE in the shadows - but no luck. MINNIE continues to stare at the FIGURE as if afraid what threshold might be crossed by bringing HER here and now into the world.

The resultant pause gives us a moment to examine the FIGURE itself - the ghostly presence of MELODY BAINES. SHE is a strikingly beautiful woman in HER 30s with a certain sensual hardness about HER nature. SHE appears rather confident in HER poise - head straight and high, shoulders firm and back - and HER clothes are immaculate and well-branded. There is nevertheless a distinct cruelty in the sharp angularity of the woman's form and in the Mona Lisa-like smile we can discern on HER lips. We immediately sense that we are in the presence of some celebrity, some well-known fashion model, rather than being among the everyday banal. There is a self-knowing importance about MELODY BAINES that is attractive, revolting, and yet envy-

inducing - all rolled into one. There is definitely more of the panther in HER than the pansy - and it uncomfortably shows.

Meanwhile, the pause onstage has lived an unbearable lifespan:

HARRIMAN

What is she doing?

MINNIE

Nothing. She's just staring.

MELODY smiles patronizingly and saunters with attractive confidence over to the posters on the far wall. MINNIE turns and watches HER and HARRIMAN follows HER in this - even though HE cannot see the spirit. MELODY casually begins to examine each of the posters one by one and stops upon seeing the photograph.

MELODY

(To MINNIE.)

I have missed him - tell him that.

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)

She... she says she has missed you.

HARRIMAN

I missed her, too - very much.

MELODY

I know that.

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)

She knows.

HARRIMAN

(To MINNIE.)

What... what is she doing now?

MINNIE

(To MELODY.)

She is looking at the photograph.

MELODY

(Pointing at HER figure in the photograph.)
I look quite good here - that is, for someone who is alive. It's so much harder to stay thin when you're still eating. I think death is decidedly the best diet plan.

MELODY

(To HARRIMAN.)
She says she likes how she looks in the photograph.

HARRIMAN

She is... was... and will ever be... perfection.

MELODY smiles seductively.

MELODY

I was very happy when you picked up the phone this time. I so wanted to come and see you again. The six months seem even longer when you're dead... if that's possible.

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)
She says it was unbearable not to see you for the past six months.

HARRIMAN

It was the very same for me.

MELODY

(Blandly, not desperately.)
Were you... upset with me?

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)
She wonders if you were upset with her.

HARRIMAN

No, no - just... indisposed. I could never be upset with her.
(Turning to face some unseen figure.)
... with you.

HARRIMAN is enlightened by some inspiration and goes to the piano. HE begins to play a lilting tune. MELODY smirks at the sound - but MINNIE is enchanted. After some 30 seconds, HARRIMAN stops playing.

HARRIMAN

(Out to MELODY.)
Do you remember?

MINNIE

She remembers, yes.

HARRIMAN

(Out to MELODY.)

They were the first notes I ever wrote to your words - the very first. I remember them by heart as the glorious fanfare of our relationship.

HARRIMAN waits for a reaction. HE is straining to hear something in the silence. MELODY just smirks patronizingly at the scene. A SMALL CREAK sounds from somewhere in the room.

HARRIMAN

Did you hear that? It's her.

MINNIE

She didn't say anything.

HARRIMAN

Maybe not to you.

HARRIMAN proceeds to address HIS words to MELODY, who smiles broadly. MINNIE watches rather perturbed that HARRIMAN has turned away from communicating through HER.

HARRIMAN

(Speaking variously to different crevices of the room.)
I never thought I could survive six months without you. I only know that I cannot possibly survive six more. You cannot die for me and fade into dusk once all your poems have been read and all your journals have been unlocked. I depend on you and your thoughts for my art, for my life, for my humanity and I find myself lost in a gray desert without you. I want you to know that I was trying to reach you for the whole six months. I spoke to you wherever and whenever I could.

(A beat.)

Did you... did you hear me?

MINNIE uncertainly peers at MELODY for the appropriate reply to a subject that is evidently a sensitive one requiring a sensitive answer. MELODY smiles lightly and nods back a telepathic response.

MINNIE

She... she couldn't hear you.

HARRIMAN appears deflated.

MINNIE

(Quickly - a correction?)
... but she could feel you.

MELODY raises HER hand and back-strokes it against the air. HARRIMAN shutters slightly as if being able to feel the touch. MELODY smirks cheekily and zeroes in on MINNIE like a well-directed laser. HER tone has become commandeering and caustic.

MELODY

So... you found the papers.

MINNIE

Yes. Yes, I did - in the attic.

HARRIMAN

What is it? What is she asking about?

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)
She's asking about the poems I showed you.

MELODY

I was wondering how long it would be before you found them.

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)
She seems surprised it took me so long to find the papers.

MELODY

I'm a little displeased, though...

MINNIE

She says she's a little distressed...

MELODY

(Snapping.)
Displeased.

MINNIE

(Frightened.)
I mean - displeased.

MELODY

They're not me at my best - the poems.

MINNIE

She says the poems are not her best.

HARRIMAN

(Looking in the direction of MELODY.)
Everything she wrote was her best.

MELODY unfurls a silvery laugh.

MELODY

I like him - him and his compliments.

MINNIE

(To HARRIMAN.)
She likes you, because you compliment her.

MELODY

(Annoyed - to MINNIE.)
No, you fool - that's not what I said.

HARRIMAN

Tell her that she complements me, as well.

MELODY

(To MINNIE.)
There. You see? You're messing him up.

MINNIE

(Rushing to correct.)
No - sorry - she meant to say...

MELODY

(Barging on.)
Usually, for people who are dead, the compliments don't outlive the wake - so I am appreciative. I only wish I was there to hear all the praise in person.

(Glaring at MINNIE.)
It's very frustrating having to communicate with you through this... little shit.

HARRIMAN

What is she saying?

MINNIE

I'm... I'm trying to concentrate.

MELODY

Ah, if only I were here... What would I do? Would I laugh? Would I cry? Would I drink? Certainly, yes... Would I fuck? Now that's an idea. Yes, I think I would - deliciously. I would take him, here and now, if I could.

MELODY freezes and turns to MINNIE.

MELODY

(Pointedly - "I dare you.")
Tell him that.

MINNIE - embarrassed - cannot respond.

MELODY

(Threateningly now.)
I said tell him that.

MINNIE shakes HER head desperately.

MELODY

No, of course - you're right. You'd rather tell him that while playing... yourself - wouldn't you?

HARRIMAN

(To MINNIE, increasingly
anxious.)
What is it? What's going on?

MINNIE

It's hard to understand her
right now.

MELODY

Now there's an idea - my
sister using her own
mouth for her own thoughts.
You think I don't know them?
I live inside that fucked up
head of yours more than you
do. Very cushy, isn't it? You
can speak it through me, but
feel it through you.

HARRIMAN

You mean you can't understand anything she's saying?

MELODY

Tell him I admire his wit, his art, and his passion.

MINNIE

She admires your wit, your art... and your passion.

HARRIMAN

(HIS interest piqued.)
My passion? For what?

MINNIE

(Hesitantly.)
For... for her.

HARRIMAN, despite himself, feels HIS
heart skip a beat or two, as MELODY
suavely continues:

MELODY

I know it has been a while, but I knew I had to see you again. I
knew there were too many loose ends left on the fabric. You are
cold at night with only half a blanket.