

TRANSATLANTIC

A Play in Two Acts

by

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Cast of Characters

BERNARD GREENFIELD: Ambitious, self-absorbed New Yorker in his thirties. Smart, rakishly sexy in a slightly nebbishy way. In his heart, BERNIE is an Anglophile, but HE still has a chip on his shoulder about the disdain HE encountered as a student in England. HE has divested himself of his background and accent far more than has his wife.

LORI GREENFIELD: His good-hearted wife, who grew up in a less intellectual household. Same age. SHE is open and happy about her Anglophilia, unsure of herself, seemingly ditsy, but smarter than BERNARD thinks.

FIONA THORPE: A beautiful English woman in her thirties. High-strung, impatient with stupidity. SHE loves wit and danger and excitement, much like BERNARD, but SHE is opposed to working with Americans for both political and aesthetic reasons.

NICHOLAS THORPE: FIONA's soft-spoken husband, an English banker in his late thirties or forties who is still smitten with his artistic, more colorful wife. Despite his narrow background and the occasional verbal faux pas, NICK is a stout fellow: sensible, kind, with a keen sense of honor.

Time

In Act One, the year is 2003. The US is heading to war in Iraq, taking Tony Blair and England along with it.

Act Two takes place a few months later.

TRANSATLANTIC: SCENES

ACT I

Scene One: BERNARD and LORI's London hotel room.

Scene Two: NICHOLAS and FIONA's bedroom.

Scene Three: NICHOLAS and FIONA's living/dining room.

Scene Four: NICHOLAS and FIONA's guest bedroom.

Scene Five: NICHOLAS and FIONA's living/dining room.

ACT II

Scene One: NICHOLAS and FIONA's New York hotel room.

Scene Two: BERNARD and LORI's living/dining room.

Scene Three: A street in Chinatown.

Scene Four: BERNARD and LORI's living/dining room.

Scene Five: NICHOLAS and FIONA's hotel room.

Scene Six: BERNARD and LORI's living/dining room.

A Note on Scene Changes:

The above may make it sound as though this play requires a lot of sets. But a closer look will show that, except for the scene in Chinatown (which could be represented by a table with a few touristy items on the apron of the stage) all the scenes are set in bedrooms or living rooms.

THUS, ONE DOUBLE BED CAN SUGGEST BOTH HOTEL ROOMS, THE THORPES' BEDROOM, AND THEIR GUEST ROOM, WITH REVERSIBLE DUVETS, DIFFERENT BLANKETS, DIFFERENT LIGHTING AND A FEW SMALL PROPS TO MAKE THEM SEEM LIKE DIFFERENT ROOMS.

The living room in ACT ONE could have a dining room table across the stage from the couch; in ACT TWO, there would be no dining room table, just a coffee table in front of the couch. A five foot high partition upstage could hold the GREENFIELDS' answering machine and chopsticks, and hold the food that BERNIE has been preparing in the kitchen, obscured from view; we don't have to see the microwave, or where he has been cooking.

With the addition of a vanity for FIONA in Act One, Scene Two, a water stand in Act Two, Scene Five, and a few other minimal (or minimalist) things, the dialogue should be enough to create the different spaces (which are not all that different) in which the scenes take place.

Act I

(While the lights are down, we hear
the beginning of Simon and Garfunkel's
"Kathy's Song":)

I hear the drizzle of the rain
Like a memory it falls
Soft and warm, continuing
Tapping on my roof and walls
And from the shelter of my mind
Through the window of my eyes
I gaze beyond the rain-drenched streets
To England, where my heart lies

Scene 1

SETTING: A small, cheap London bed and breakfast hotel.

AT RISE: It is early evening. BERNARD and LORI GREENFIELD are
unpacking and settling in. LORI is hyper and exuberant, after their flight.

LORI

Sweetie? Did you pack the clothes steamer?

BERNARD

Yup.

LORI

Good, I'm glad one of us remembered it. What should I wear for dinner?

(SHE is taking out her blouses, skirts and dresses, smoothing them out on the
bed. He is putting his shirts away in the chest of drawers)

BERNARD

Mmm. Something quiet, low-key --

LORI

That's all I've got, Bernie. You had me pack, like, every blue-gray thing I own.

BERNARD

Then -- whatever you think.

(LORI sits on the bed, looks around, beaming)

LORI

My God. I can't believe we're actually over here!

BERNARD

Yeah, I can't believe we finally made it out of Gatwick.

LORI

It's like a dream, I have wanted to come here for so long! Look at this room! Look at those lacy curtains! Look at these sweet, chintzy polyester sheets!

(SHE rubs them between her fingers)

BERNARD

And the mushy mattress. The Brits prefer cheap, uncomfortable things. They like to pretend the War's still going on.

LORI

No, this is great. Look at this fat, fluffy comforter thing.

BERNARD

It's called a duvet.

(HE stresses the first syllable: duo-vay)

LORI

It's so fucking quaint!

BERNARD

Yeah, Lori, listen. Remember what I said, all right?

LORI

I know, I know, don't tell them how much I liked "Brideshead" and "Bridget Jones' Diary"--

BERNARD

Beyond that. Try not to fawn all over the British, please. It's bad for them, it only encourages them.

LORI

What do you mean -- fawn on them?

BERNIE

I mean, don't degrade yourself, sweetheart, for a bunch of limey bastards with poles up their ass. It's not worth it.

LORI

(Taken aback)

Bernie -- my God. What do you think I'm going to say?

BERNARD

It's just . . . look. Every time you hear a British accent, you start gushing, and they quietly sneer, and you're so entranced, you don't even notice.

LORI

(Hurt)

When? When has that ever happened?

BERNIE

I don't know. At parties . . .

LORI

You want me to be rude to the Thorpes tonight -- is that it? You're the one who supposedly needs this deal. I'm just a supportive little wifey, right?

BERNARD

I'm not saying be rude. I'm just saying -- we're not a colony anymore. There was a big revolution. The sun has set. There's no need to grovel.

(LORI gets up, angry, and walks around him. SHE fishes in his open suitcase, and pulls out the steamer)

LORI

Where's the adapter?

BERNARD

In my ditty bag, I think.

LORI

Great.

(SHE fishes it out, takes it to the wall socket, and plugs the steamer into it. SHE stamps over to a water pitcher on the bureau, and pours water into the steamer. SHE begins to steam-iron her clothes)

BERNARD

Look, honey, don't take what I'm saying the wrong way.

LORI

Bernard, gimme a break. You're making me self-conscious.

BERNARD

God forbid.

LORI

I was really hoping this trip could be good for us. You know?

(HE moves to her, to soothe her)

BERNARD

It will be.

LORI

London's so romantic, I was hoping we could spend some time --

BERNARD

We will. Lazy afternoons. Long walks. Wild sex. The whole second honeymoon schmeer, just like you want. But meanwhile, I need this woman's respect.

LORI

I know.

BERNARD

And little things matter. You're -- both of us are loud, exuberant Americans. We've got to tone it down around the Brits. Not be too eager. Hmm?

LORI

Are you ashamed of me?

BERNARD

No. No, of course not.

LORI

(Moves away)

Look. I'm just tired, I'm sorry, I don't want to argue with you.

BERNARD

We're not arguing. We're having a conversation.

LORI

Fine, whatever.

BERNARD

I just want to spare you some soggy British contempt. As it is, we chose the worst possible moment to come over. When I was a student here, under Reagan and Daddy Bush, they hated us enough, but now -- with W. dragging them into the war -- they freaking despise us all over again. Why didn't I come back during the Clinton years, huh? They loved his ass. Now, they're all pissed off that W.'s made Blair into his poodle, and they're looking for random Yanks to take it out on.

LORI

I don't see that.

BERNARD

Then you're blind.

LORI

I don't understand your whole problem with the British. It's infantile.

BERNARD

I don't have a problem with them.

LORI

Oh, come on. You've got a complex. Just because they speak beautifully, and they're smart -
- you're insecure.

BERNARD

Look, Lori, believe me, I swear I used to be just like you. Raised in a house full of raving Anglophile Jews. I was weaned on PBS, you know? Same as you. And then I came over here . . .

LORI

And now you think they suck in every possible way.

(BERNARD moves to the window and lifts
the curtain, to look out at the rain
HE takes on a rather lofty tone)

BERNARD

Lori, try to understand my position. I appreciate British rock. Except for Phil Collins.

LORI

What's wrong with Phil Collins?

BERNARD

(Trying to be patient)

I'll pretend I didn't hear that. I appreciate British literature. I admire their command of irony and understatement, and the high level of discourse on their TV.

LORI

Oh, here we go. The Grand Rabbi's back in town. Lecture away.

BERNARD

They have good cheap theater -- we should catch some this week. They have funny alternative comedians, or used to.

(SHE holds up a steamed silk blouse against her, looks down at it)

LORI

Great. Well, you've shown me how objective you are, Bernie. You can stop, I'm convinced.

(HE leaves the window and walks
toward her, still pompous)

BERNARD

The British make better beer than we do, and woollier sweaters. I like this country. It's just the people I could do without.

LORI

That's right. That's why you went to school over here for, what? Two years? And you didn't make a single British friend, did you? So, what does that tell you?

BERNARD

(Pointing a warning finger)

Now, hold it, Lori. Don't start in with the psychoanalysis. And don't you dare lapse into any of your New Age psycho-babble at dinner with the Thorpes tonight!

LORI

You didn't make friends, 'cause you can't open up to people --even when you're dying to impress them. You just bought their woolly sweaters and drank their beer with other Rhodes scholars, right?

BERNARD

(Moving to her, gentler)

I tried to meet the natives, Lor. I wanted to. After awhile, you stop waiting for them to defrost.

LORI

Sure. Like you tried really hard.

BERNARD

And they don't say "school" except when they're talking about little kids. They say "college" or "university." And remember: state schools are public schools and public schools are really private schools --

LORI

(Moving away)

I know, I know, and fries are chips, and chips are crisps, and you lectured me on all this before. And I still say it's sad you didn't stay in touch with anybody here.

BERNARD

Lori, I'm telling you: British hospitality is a fucking oxymoron! As it is, they've probably killed me with their fucking Mad Cow Disease.

LORI

(Wearily)

Oh, please don't start with this.

BERNARD

(Genuinely scared)

I was here during the danger years, you know. They say your brain gets full of holes like a swiss cheese, and you just keel over -- dead.

LORI

Bernie, you do not have Mad Cow Disease.

BERNARD

And it could happen any time in the next forty years -- and there's no way to test. Do you know what it's like being killed by British cooking? It's like getting HIV from the worst sex you've ever had.

LORI

(Dismayed)

Bernie, that's not funny.

BERNARD

Oh, sorry, was that joke not P.C. enough for you? The Thorpes just better not be serving us hoof 'n mouth-fried beef tonight!

LORI

Just relax. Let's just have a nice time.

BERNARD

(Suppressed agitation)

Sure. Whatever.

LORI

You've been treating me like you think I'll say something terrible. Since we left JFK. It's really hurtful.

BERNARD

Lori, it's just -- being around them again. I used to get this way in Oxford, I'd hear some American tourist walking down Broad Street, loudly asking his wife: "But, honey, where's the campus? Where's the University?" And I'd just cringe!

LORI

Why? Where was the University?

BERNARD

All around them! The colleges are all over the city. That's the point, that's -- it's just so easy for us to expose ourselves to them. And they're waiting for it. They're licking their chops.

LORI

Where do you get this idea that they hate Americans?

BERNARD

Oh, they hate all foreigners -- but we're the only ones they can still make fun of, without seeming racist. They can't bash Indians and Pakistanis now, or be openly anti-Semitic.

LORI

Bernie, can't you see, you're out of control with this --

BERNARD

(Jerking clothes out of his suitcase)

They can't bash blacks, or the Irish -- no more jokes about Paddy. Or the Scottish, or the Welsh, or even Northerners.

LORI

You don't understand their sense of humor, that's your problem.

BERNARD

White South Africans used to be the only people lower than Yanks over here -- but even they're being rehabilitated.

LORI

Are Brits really anti-Semitic?

(He throws her a look of disbelief)

LORI (CONT'D)

I'm just asking.

BERNARD

Don't worry, they're really stupid about it. The Thorpes probably won't even figure out we're Jewish.

LORI

Come on, Bernie. Our name is Greenfield, we reek of New York --

BERNARD

Yanks all look and sound alike to them. And even Jews can't be snubbed openly anymore. It must be tough on the Brits. If they want to bash outsiders and feel self-righteous, Americans really are the final frontier.

(SHE responds brightly, trying to change the subject.)

LORI

Do you think they get the Star Trek programs over here?

BERNARD

Sure they do. They get all our junk. They sit and watch hours of American shows like -- like "Baywatch," going:

(HE bugs out his eyes as if watching TV and
puts on a high, false British accent)

"This is trash! This is cultural imperialism, this is!" Then they go stuff their face at MacDonald's and say: "Ooh, the poor rainforests! Those dreadful Americans! Would you like another cheeseburger, Alistair?"

(Normal accent)

Then they set up bogus American programs to pay for their universities so they won't have to, and write screenplays they want us to fund, and sneer, and hate us the more money they get out of us!

(LORI stares at him in fury. Finally, he notices.)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

What?

LORI

Nothing. I was excited to be here, that's all. But now you've ruined the trip for me in advance. Okay?

BERNARD

What, I was only trying to get you culturally acclimated --

LORI

(Almost in tears)

I'm taking a shower. We've got, like, an hour before we're supposed to meet the Thorpes.

BERNARD

Watch out, you'll probably have to take a bath, the British don't believe in mixed taps --

LORI

LAY OFF!

(SHE storms into the bathroom and slams the door. There is a pause as SHE sees that HE is right. We hear her:)

LORI (OFFSTAGE) (CONT'D)

FUCK!

BERNARD

(Chuckling)

Told ya.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE ONE

ACT I

Scene 2

(During the scene change, we hear a compressed version of Richard Thompson's song "Yankee Go Home." The lyrics go:)

Well, GI Joe, put your gun away, the sun is setting on another day
 Why don't you leave us alone? Yankee go home!
 I've lost track of the chewing gum that I've had, and Coca-cola, make my teeth go bad
 We'll handle this on our own, Yankee go home!
 Dow Jones going into a stall, spray paint say it on every wall
 The climb was fine, now it's time to decline and fall
 Overpaid, oversexed, and over here, get smart, gringo, disappear
 The Hun's at the gates of Rome, Yankee go home!
 Go home!

SETTING: The bedroom of NICHOLAS and FIONA THORPE.

AT RISE: It is roughly one half-hour after the previous scene. NICHOLAS and FIONA are dressing for dinner, SHE putting on make-up and jewelry before a vanity, HE buttoning his shirt.

FIONA

What's the time?

NICHOLAS

About half past.

FIONA

(Nervous, muttering)

Oh, bloody marvelous. And I can't even find a pair of earrings to match this.

NICHOLAS

You look lovely.

FIONA

I'm not trying to look lovely. I'm trying to look like a flashy corporate wheeler-dealer. Something this fellow respect. Am I overdressing?

NICHOLAS

Not a bit of it.

FIONA

Do you suppose he'll turn up in trainers and a torn sweatshirt, with five day stubble and a little pony-tail at the back?

NICHOLAS

He'll be in a dinner jacket with a white bow tie and a frilly shirt, I expect.

FIONA

How's dinner coming along? Shouldn't you --

NICHOLAS

I'd rather not. It makes Sharon jumpy if I hover about too much.

(Distraught, FIONA studies herself in the mirror.)

FIONA

What is the matter with my hair? It's frightful!

NICHOLAS

Shall I ring them and ask them to turn up a bit later?

FIONA

(Snapping at him)

No! They'll suppose we're incompetent, what do you think? Just sit tight.

NICHOLAS

Ah, yes dear.

(HE sits on the bed. FIONA shakes her head.)

FIONA

Oh, I'm sorry, Nick, I'm a mess. Don't mind me.

NICHOLAS

I try not to.

FIONA

I'm counting on you, you know that. You've got to save me from myself. You mustn't let me say an honest word this whole grisly evening.

(SHE takes a sip from a glass of wine at her elbow.)

NICHOLAS

I'll see what I can do. But if they're going to be over here for a week, perhaps we ought to offer to show them around London for the next few days --

FIONA

Yes, we'll have to show them where all the MacDonalds are, and take them to "Cats," and to the Guinness Book of Records Museum.

(Fake Yank accent)

"Gee, this is a great little country you got here, honey. Think I'll buy it."

NICHOLAS

After all, Fee, you may find you quite like them. It is theoretically possible.

FIONA

Not a chance. I know what type he is from our chats on the phone. He's all charm, and bluff good fellowship. He'll have a handshake that'll crush every bone in your fingers, wait and see. Followed by rude jokes and casual bragging, meant to inspire "Shock," and "Awe."

NICHOLAS

Well. Something to look forward to. What's the wife like?

(HE goes to the bureau, chooses a pair of cuff links.)

FIONA

I've no idea. Probably some ghastly, cosmetically altered little trollope.

NICHOLAS

Maybe they're not Hollywood types. Maybe they're tough, gritty New Yorkers. Al Pacino. Ellen Barkin.

FIONA

If they're in the film industry they'll ooze Hollywood wherever they live, trust me.

NICHOLAS

Fee, let's give the evening a chance . . .

FIONA

(Bitterly, with fake Yank accent)

That's right, we gotta think positive. We're gonna bond with these swell people. They're our new best friends!

(SHE throws an earring down in disgust,
chooses another pair, and speaks normally)

It's ironic, actually. Here I've been a good girl, toadying up to the men in the company, and finally I get a chance to produce my film, with my script -- and I've got to impress some Yank bastard, and sell my soul to coax money out of him. It makes perfect sense.

NICHOLAS

He told you on the phone you'd retain creative control, isn't that right?

(FIONA stares at him, disbelieving, amused.
SHE considers him naive)

FIONA

Yes, dear, that's right. Which means precisely nothing. They come up with that sort of jargon to fill up their contracts to keep their five million lawyers per square inch employed, when they're not suing each other. But if his company puts up more than half the funds, you can bet they'll have their sweaty little hands all over the film.

NICHOLAS

What surprises me is that they should be interested in it at all.

FIONA

(Stopped short)

Why?

NICHOLAS

Well, it doesn't exactly promise to be a blockbuster.

FIONA

(Defensive)

Oh yes, it's going to be a colossal flop, isn't it? Who would want to see a film about John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor? How snoringly dull!

NICHOLAS

Fee, I didn't mean that. I only meant that -- for an American audience . . .

FIONA

No, you're right, of course. It's not their sort of thing. Mill was an intellect, and American culture is all about celebrating stupidity, just switch on Jerry Springer.

FIONA (CONT'D)

I should know, I have to read their cinema trade papers.

(SHE yanks a comb through her hair as she
says each name:)

Wayne's World. Dumb and Dumber. Dude, Where's My Car? And the apotheosis of Forrest Gump. No wonder they loved Reagan so much, or "Dubya." Smirking stupidity is what they value. They see an intelligent script and they don't know what to do with it -- any more than they do with an intelligent president who can talk in complete sentences.

NICHOLAS

Then, why are they after your film?

(FIONA swigs her wine. When SHE says
"Bernard," SHE pronounces it the
British way. When SHE quotes him,
SHE lapses into fake American again)

FIONA

Well, according to our good friend Bernard, WaveLine Productions is a young "highbrow, alternative" company, looking for "arty, intellectual projects." So, just imagine what "arty" suggestions he'll make to enhance my script.

NICHOLAS

(Smiling)

Well, you may have to put a bit of shagging in, for a start.

FIONA

Oh, of course!

(Fake accent)

Can't have a sexless marriage, lady. What we got here is boy meets girl, boy is impotent, girl is frigid -- but they get over it! They go on to have wild, crazy, technicolor sex!

NICHOLAS

And perhaps you need a bit more violence.

FIONA

Violence? In the life of Mill? That's a difficult proposition, let's see -- Oh, I know

(With fake accent)

-- Okay, here's the pitch. Mill goes down the pub -- goes into a bar, see? And there's Carlyle. And Mill says, Tom, I'm an abolitionist, ya wanna make something of it? And Carlyle says, yeah, John, I think the wogs on the Jamaican plantations should stay slaves.

FIONA (CONT'D)

So Mill pops him one -- whammo! -- right in the kisser. Now that's a movie! Plus a car chase scene. A bit of MTV flash editing, a throbbing title track by Bryan Adams . . .

NICHOLAS

(Embracing her)

It actually sounds rather jolly. I would go and see it.

FIONA

(Sadly)

Yes, you would do, wouldn't you.

NICHOLAS

Fee . . .

FIONA

Are you sure you don't want to ask Sharon to stay and serve?

NICHOLAS

Oh, we'll manage all right.

FIONA

Do you suppose they're highly evolved people, these Greenfields? Will they be groovy and relate to us, and start sharing their feelings the moment they meet us?

NICHOLAS

Fee --

FIONA

(Pulling away)

If he introduces me to his inner child, I'll molest it on the spot, I swear to God I will --

NICHOLAS

As I say, I'll do my best -- but you mustn't patronize them, Fee, and you mustn't bait them. When you're sarcastic with business people, they cotton on faster than you think. At any rate, you seemed to like him well enough during your phone chats. He likes your script --

FIONA

Oh, they always begin that way, we love it, we think it's brilliant! Then it turns out they want you to rewrite it three times and give the lead role to their "aromatherapist."

NICHOLAS

Even if he has ideas and suggestions, all I'm saying is -- hear him out. Simply because, at the end of the day, he does have the money to make it possible, and you do want this deal.

FIONA

It's my film. I'll not compromise it just to get something made. Success in cinema is measured differently from success in the -- context in which you operate.

NICHOLAS

Darling, I'd just hate to see you throw everything away just to prove a point --

FIONA

You're saying I can't handle myself in a business transaction, is that it?

NICHOLAS

No, but as you keep pointing out, you're under a strain --

FIONA

Well, we can't all be as calm as bankers, Nick. I just hope you're not going to marvel at these people if it turns out they know the proper use of cutlery.

NICHOLAS

(Stung, embarrassed)

That happened once, very long ago. I had honestly heard that they don't use forks in America. I apologized after I said it. The woman was amused, not offended.

FIONA

It's all right, darling, you're much less likely to say something rude than I am. And if I put my foot in it tonight, I rely on you to get us all out of it with some thrilling stories of non-fluctuating premiums --

NICHOLAS

Stop it.

FIONA

Stop what?

NICHOLAS

Let off steam if you must. But not by taking the mickey out of me.

FIONA

(Remorseful)

Was I? You're right, I was, I know I was. I'm a beast.

NICHOLAS

You're a love. You get yourself all wound up with worry, that's all. It's going to be all right.

FIONA

Yes, of course it will. Why shouldn't it?

NICHOLAS

You know, I seem to remember you once saying you actually like some commercial American films. You thought they had a raw, savage beauty. Dangerous and virile.

FIONA

Savage isn't quite the word for them. They're post-civilised, not pre-civilised. It's an important distinction to make. It's all hi-tech danger, synthetic virility.

NICHOLAS

Let's not start up again.

FIONA

Don't worry, Nick. I'll be a good girl, tonight. I've had ample training.

(HE goes to her, massages her back)

NICHOLAS

Mmm. From theatre hack, to Girl Friday, to film producer.

FIONA

And on to pimp -- soliciting for my beloved little project. Trying to get hold of some of that lovely American money.

NICHOLAS

Every producer solicits. The money's got to come from somewhere.

FIONA

Who do you think they'll suggest for the role of Mill? Bruce Willis? Schwarzenegger?

(HE kisses the back of her neck)

NICHOLAS

Stallone.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 2

ACT ONE

Scene 3

(During the scene change, we hear the chorus of "The Battle of New Orleans," sung by Johnny Horton, or Johnny Cash, or the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band:)

We looked down the river and seen the British come
 Musta been a hundred of 'em beatin' on the drum
 Steppin' so high, they made their bugles ring
 We stood beside our cotton bales, and didn't said a thing
 Fired our guns, and the British kept a'comin'
 Wasn't nigh as many was there was an hour ago
 Fired once more, and they began a'runnin'
 Down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico
 They ran through the briars and they ran through the brambles
 They ran through the places where a rabbit couldn't go
 Ran so fast that the hounds couldn't catch 'em
 Down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico

SETTING: The THORPES' dining room and living room area.

AT RISE: All is in readiness. FIONA and NICK sit at the table, waiting.

FIONA

They might have phoned and said they'd been held up.

(SHE checks her watch and stands, tense, impatient)

NICHOLAS

They've only just landed.

FIONA

They can figure out how a telephone works, I think!

NICHOLAS

(Soothing)

Shhhh.

FIONA

Don't shush me!

(The doorbell rings. NICHOLAS moves toward it)

NICHOLAS

Thank goodness.

(Opening door)

Ah, hello!

(BERNARD enters, vigorously pumps NICHOLAS's hand.
NICHOLAS's eyes nearly pop out)

BERNARD

You must be Nick.

NICHOLAS

So I am.

BERNARD

Great to see you.

(FIONA has moved to the door, all smiles. BERNARD now shares his
mighty shake with her)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

And Fiona --

FIONA

Yes, hello.

BERNARD

Great to see you. This is my wife, Lori --

(LORI waves a little wave, self-consciously)

LORI

Hi.

FIONA

It's so nice to meet you. Let me take your coats.

(SHE does, and disappears into the kitchen with them. NICHOLAS examines his injured hand)

NICHOLAS

Quite a firm grip you've got there, old man.

BERNARD

Yeah well. Great place you have here, Nick. And such a quiet neighborhood!

NICHOLAS

Thank you.

(To Lori)

Would you care for a drink? Sherry?

LORI

Um, Lori.

NICHOLAS

Or G&T?

LORI

(Baffled)

Ummm . . .

BERNARD

Gin and tonic, honey. Sounds great.

NICHOLAS

Coming right up. Please. Sit down.

(HE indicates the couch, as he moves to make the drinks. BERNIE and LORI sit)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Yes, this place is a bit out of the way, but it's a step up from the poky little flat we were in before.

(FIONA returns from the kitchen, sits in a chair)

FIONA

Did you find the place all right?

BERNARD

Yeah, your directions were great -- sorry we're late. Lori's a little giddy from the flight.

LORI

(Apologetically)

I haven't taken a bath since I was a little girl. It took a lot longer than I thought.

(NICHOLAS and FIONA are puzzled. They don't want to be rude, but . . .)

FIONA
I'm sorry -- you don't normally . . . bathe?

LORI
Well, no -- I mean, I take showers, most of the time.

FIONA
Oh, of course, I see.

BERNARD
And then the traffic was unbelievable!

LORI
We took forever getting around one of those round things --what do you call it?

BERNARD
(Whispered)
Lori!

NICHOLAS
(Bringing drinks)
A roundabout?

LORI
Yeah. Those are, like, the weirdest intersections --

BERNARD
Honey, skip it.
(To the others)
Our driver was amazing, though. Those London cabbies really know their stuff, huh?
(There is an awkward pause)

FIONA
So, did you enjoy your flight?

BERNARD
Yeah. Yeah, we had a pretty good flight.
(Another awkward pause)

FIONA
So, Lori, what is it that you do?

LORI
I teach. I teach junior high.

FIONA
I see. In a private school?

LORI

No, a public school. I mean, what we call a public school, a regular school.

NICHOLAS

(Sitting in a chair)

Isn't that a bit dangerous? In New York City, I mean?

LORI

Well, not really. Some of my kids are a little out of control, but they're mostly really sweet. It's challenging, it's like, it's been a total learning experience for me. These last few years I've really, like, evolved as a person.

(LORI is animated; BERNARD is visibly uncomfortable due to her gushing and her use of buzz words FIONA tries to give her husband a significant look)

NICHOLAS

And what sort of things do you teach them?

LORI

Well, we work together a lot on self-esteem issues, celebrating differences, cooperation, awareness of others, personal growth, remembering to take medication.

FIONA

(Ironically)

That's so important in an education.

NICHOLAS

How many pupils do you have?

LORI

Just twelve in each class. You see, I work with kids who face a lot of physical and mental challenges.

BERNARD

Cripples and dummies.

LORI

(Horried)

Bernie!

BERNARD

Well, they don't have all those euphemisms over here.

NICHOLAS

(Reproving)

I was able to gather what she meant.

LORI

Bernie, my God.

BERNARD

And what do you do, Nick? Are you in the movie business too?

NICHOLAS

No, nothing that exciting, I'm afraid. I'm a stodgy old banker. Not in the City, right here in Wimbledon.

BERNARD

(Bored, polite.)

Really.

LORI

So is this, like, not still London?

NICHOLAS

Well, it's not Central London. But yes, it is London in a sense.

BERNARD

I bet you folks get to see a lot of good tennis.

NICHOLAS

Why, yes, we do, rather.

(They nod and smile. Yet another awkward pause. NICHOLAS indicates the drinks)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Would you like a refill?

BERNARD

Look -- I don't know how to say this. I feel like we've held you up long enough, so, if you guys are hungry --

FIONA

Yes, let's eat. You must be famished, after your flight.

(They rise, and head for the table)

BERNARD

We're hanging in there.

NICHOLAS

Well, we can't take credit or blame for the food we're about to serve -- we have a girl who comes in and cooks for us now and then. I'll go see about it.

(HE heads into the kitchen, as they are seated)

FIONA

Nicholas is actually quite a good cook. I'm hopeless. He planned tonight's menu. Chicken Dijon, I believe. He's taught me a proper appreciation of Frog food.

LORI

(Dismayed)

We're having, like, frog's legs?

BERNARD

(Embarrassed)

We're having chicken, honey. She means French food.

LORI

Oh.

(NICHOLAS returns with a bottle of white wine and a covered silver dish.)

NICHOLAS

Here we are.

(HE starts pouring, chuckles, pleased to have a story to tell)

This wine was a bit of a find, actually. We bought it ourselves in France, in a small town called Bône, the last time we went through the Chunnel.

LORI

Wow!

NICHOLAS

It was rather an adventure. You see, it's not quite a Burgundy, but the region is very near Burgundy --

FIONA

Oh God, Nick, just slosh it in.

NICHOLAS

(Startled, chagrinned)

Oh. All right, then.

(He passes the glasses around)

There you are. And so, on to the food.

(He uncovers the dish)

Stuffed mushrooms for starters, if that's all right.

BERNARD

That sounds great, Nick.

(NICHOLAS serves the mushrooms)

NICHOLAS

We each get one. There's plenty more wine on ice, so do drink up.

FIONA

Yes, I counted three more bottles in the fridge.

(BERNARD lifts his glass in a toast)

BERNARD

To our new friends, Nick and Fiona. To a special relationship -- in motion pictures.

NICHOLAS

Here, here.

(They clink, and drink)

FIONA

Bernard, I know we shouldn't be talking business over dinner -- but I simply can't keep from asking: what are your thoughts about the script? I know you didn't want to get into details over the phone --

BERNARD

Actually, I'm glad you asked. I re-read it on the plane. I don't want to talk shop either, right now, but -- I'm excited. I'm really excited.

FIONA

Really.

BERNARD

(Expansive)

Yes, I am. I mean, a lot of screenplays cross my desk. But this is the sort of tasteful, quiet, artistic project that WaveLine Productions wants to develop and nurture.

FIONA

And the funding is there?

BERNARD

Absolutely. Right now we're looking at a five to seven million dollar budget.

FIONA

My God. It seems incredible.

(SHE is dazzled. NICHOLAS reaches over and squeezes her hand)

BERNARD

Yeah, things are happening.

FIONA

You're all agreed, then?

BERNARD

Well, this is really my baby. I've been pushing for it. But they listen to me when it comes to what we put up money for. And I think I've got 'em sold on this project.

FIONA

What, then, in your view, still remains to be done?

BERNARD

Well, we don't need to get into all the hairsplitting right now.

FIONA

No, please tell me. I'd like to hear it.

LORI

(To NICHOLAS)

The movie business is so high pressure. I don't know how they can stand it.

NICHOLAS

Nor do I.

FIONA

It's all right, Bernard, I can listen to criticism -- and if there are things that concern you, I'd like to know at the start.

BERNARD

Okay, listen. Your screenplay is an impressive read. I think you've almost reached the final draft.

FIONA

Really. I fancied I had, but --

BERNARD

Well, pretty much, yeah. I'm just talking about running it through the machine one more time -- some very minor polishing.

FIONA

What sort of polishing?

(NICHOLAS rises, takes the empty mushroom dish)

NICHOLAS

I'll go see about the main course. Won't be a moment.

(HE exits)

LORI

Fiona, Bernie really loves your screenplay. He was telling me how knocked out he was by it. I've, like, never seen him so -- moved.

FIONA

I'm so glad to hear it. What sort of polishing are we talking about?

BERNARD

Well -- and obviously, Fiona, this is your concept, and I respect that -- but there are maybe ways to tweak it, to enhance Mill and Harriet's relationship. I mean, anyone seeing the movie as it's written now would think they never had sex.

FIONA

It's very likely that they didn't. They were both damaged Victorians, and by the time they were married --

BERNARD

Okay, I understand. You don't want to make it some kind of racy film, neither do I. But they may or may not have had a platonic marriage. We don't know for sure. It's just something to think about -- to maybe work in.

FIONA

For its own sake?

BERNARD

Well, to make the script a little less talky and stagey, for one thing. And a little more humor wouldn't hurt. I mean, it's sort of wry and understated right now --

FIONA

But it needs more belly laughs.

BERNARD

I don't know about belly laughs -- but the scene where Mill takes her to a dinner party, and she's still married to what's his face, and everyone's sneering and whispering and pointing at them --

FIONA

Yes, I know the scene.

(NICHOLAS returns with a platter, and begins dishing food onto plates)

BERNARD

You can just cut all the dialogue there. That's a visual gag. Have somebody's monocle fall into the soup from shock --that kind of thing. Film is essentially a visual medium.

FIONA

So I've heard. What else?

BERNARD

Well, we may have to change some locations, to be practical. It makes sense to shoot most of it up in Canada.

FIONA

Canada as 19th century London? Are you serious?

BERNARD

It's cheaper to film up there. And backers don't like to put up money for an overseas production.

FIONA

(Sputtering)

Overseas . . .

(NICHOLAS, serving them, cuts off her outburst)

NICHOLAS

Here we are then. Chicken Dijon, potato croquettes, and brussel sprouts done to a turn.

LORI

Thanks. It looks great.

BERNARD

You know, Fiona, you really should come over to New York, and meet the other guys in the company.

FIONA

New York? I mean, I don't know --

BERNARD

Yeah, 'cause Donny and Steve are into the idea, but they'll be more into it when they hear your presentation. And also, there's an actress who just might be our Harriet.

FIONA

(Stares at him)

A British actress?

BERNARD

No, American. But she can do a pretty good accent. And, obviously, we'd hire a dialogue coach.

FIONA

I see. And you think she'd be right for the part, do you?

BERNARD

Well, you probably have people in mind yourself. But she's had some exposure -- she's done TV movies, and she had a stint on a daytime soap, one of the better ones --

LORI

She was even in a Police Academy movie way back when.

BERNARD

(Hurriedly)

Plus she's done small films, more serious stuff. She's got some name recognition. And her dad's filthy rich. Shampoo empire. I knew her at Princeton.

FIONA

And that makes her our Harriet? Rich father and a Police Academy role?

BERNARD

Well, the thing is -- her dad's very anxious to help her career. I think he'd put some money toward the film and ask for, like, zero input. I mean, we wouldn't have to beef up Harriet's role, 'cause she's already half the picture.

LORI

She's a terrific actress. We saw her do Shakespeare in the park. Honey, what was the show?

FIONA

I thought WaveLine was to put up the money. I thought that's where you came in.

BERNARD

We'll put up most of it, yes. But you've got a period piece here, and that costs. The more we have, the more lavishly we can do it up.

FIONA

And that's a reason to cast an actress?

BERNARD

It's one reason. And the investors might feel better about a familiar face.

FIONA

I don't believe this . . . this is a British film about two British intellectuals and it ought to be filmed with British actors here in Britain!

NICHOLAS

Fee -- steady on.

FIONA

Sorry.

(SHE tears into her food)

BERNARD

Fiona, I get where you're coming from. I know that the script is like your baby right now, and you don't want to touch it. But we've got to make some compromises. Remember, I'm on your side here.

FIONA

Yes, I'll try to.

(They eat in uncomfortable silence)

NICHOLAS

Food all right?

LORI

It's delicious! I mean, I was afraid the Chicken Dijon would be, like, really, really mustardy, you know?

BERNARD

(Sharply)

Lori!

LORI

(Sheepish)

But -- it's not.

NICHOLAS

Glad to hear it. And the portions aren't too small, are they?

LORI

No, no, there's plenty!

NICHOLAS

I told Sharon to double what the recipes called for. I got them out one of those nouvelle cookbooks -- they're always a bit Jewish with the portions.

BERNARD

What?

(NICHOLAS looks up, realizes they might be Jewish)

NICHOLAS

Oh. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize, are you --

BERNARD

Nothing, forget it, we never heard it, just keep going.

NICHOLAS

No, but don't you see, it's just an expression. I suppose I should have realized, with you being in the film industry --

BERNARD

What about the film industry?

FIONA

Nicholas, my dear, don't dig yourself in any deeper. Be quiet for awhile, there's a good boy.

NICHOLAS

I'm most terribly sorry.

(More chewing and swallowing.)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Really . . . dreadfully sorry . . .

(LORI feels sorry for him. SHE tries to cheer him up and relieve tension)

LORI

Have you guys ever seen "The Nanny"?

FIONA

Is that a film?

LORI

No, it's a TV show. I think you'd like it, Nick.

NICHOLAS

Would I?

LORI

You should try to catch it if it's on over here.

BERNARD

Lori, we don't really need to hear about this right now.

NICHOLAS

No, please go ahead. I'm interested. What's it about?

LORI

Well, it starts out,

(Sings)

"She was working in a bridal shop in Flushing, Queens --"

NICHOLAS

Is that where you're from?

LORI

No, Bernie and I are from Long Island, but we live in Manhattan. But, so, anyway, she goes with this little make-up case to this rich man's house -- he's English, actually! And he's got these kids --

BERNARD

(Embarrassed, in agony)

Sweetheart, we're talking movies at the moment, not TV sit-coms.

LORI

Just let me finish, okay? So, he's very proper. And Fran --the Nanny -- she's really flashy, and she's got, like, this really big hair, like mall hair --

BERNARD

(Mortified, warning her)

Lori -- don't make me sorry I brought you on this trip.

LORI

Oh, Bernie, look, I'm babbling but so what --

BERNARD

Can't you just SHUT UP, and eat your dinner?

(LORI is shocked and embarrassed. They all eat in silence. LORI begins to cry)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

Oh, Jesus.

(SHE wipes her eyes with the napkin)

LORI

I'm sorry, I can't help it.

BERNARD

Oh, here we go.

(To the Thorpes)

We had a long flight, and she's just a little hyper, that's all.

NICHOLAS

(To LORI)

Would you like to borrow my handkerchief?

LORI

Yeah, I guess so . . . thanks.

(SHE borrows it, dabs her eyes, blows her nose. SHE then unsure what to do with it -- to hand it back or what. BERNARD and FIONA exchange what almost amounts to a knowing look, about the way things are going)

BERNARD

This is really dynamite food.

FIONA

It is good, isn't it.

(LORI begins crying uncontrollably again)

BERNARD

Oh, Christ. Lori . . .

LORI

I'm sorry.

BERNARD

Look, why don't you go to the bathroom and throw up or something? Then maybe you'll feel better.

(SHE stares at him in horror. Then SHE stands.)

FIONA

Ah . . . it's right off the kitchen, if you need . . .

LORI

Excuse me.

(SHE runs into the kitchen)

BERNARD

Looks like it's going to be one of those evenings, huh, folks? Listen, Fiona, I'm sorry about all the miscommunication. It sounds like you've got very fixed ideas about how you want this movie to be, and I can respect that. It's a British historical subject, and maybe a transatlantic production is not a good idea.

(FIONA and NICHOLAS exchange looks of panic)

FIONA

No, Bernard, really -- I didn't mean to give the impression that I wouldn't consider your ideas. Really. I'm sorry if I seemed to reject them out of hand. I just need a bit of time to mull them over, that's all.

BERNARD

Well, maybe we can take a meeting sometime before Lori and I go back home. We're both really fried after that flight.

NICHOLAS

Of course, you must have terrible jet lag. I'd be completely knackered. Where are you staying?

BERNARD

Some dumpy little place in Earl's Court. I got it out of my old Let's Go England and Ireland.

NICHOLAS

Absolutely not. You're staying here with us.

BERNARD

What? No, no, really, we're fine.

NICHOLAS

No, I insist.

BERNARD

It's not such a bad place. They, uh, serve a traditional English breakfast.

NICHOLAS

Well, so do we.

FIONA

Nicholas is quite right. It's late, you must stay with us. We'll lend you pyjamas, and pop 'round tomorrow to collect your things.

BERNARD

Gee -- I dunno. I guess, if it's okay with Lori -- she's really pretty beat.

FIONA

Oh dear, her food will get cold. Perhaps I'd better go see to her.

BERNARD

She's done. She'll be fine. Every now and then -- bang! --we just have a little episode, that's all.

(LORI comes back, slowly, dry-eyed and composed)

LORI

Did I miss anything exciting?

BERNARD

Honey, Nick and Fiona have invited us to come stay with them tonight.

NICHOLAS

And as long as you like.

LORI

(Startled)

Oh. Oh, I don't think we want to be a lot of trouble --

FIONA

(Firmly)

It's no trouble at all.

LORI

It's just that -- we were just settling into the bed and breakfast --

FIONA

We've got a lovely, cosy guest room. It hardly ever gets used. I think you'll be very comfortable.

NICHOLAS

So, you see, it's all settled, then.
 (Warmly, to Lori)
 Chin up.

LORI

It's really very nice of you.

FIONA

Not at all, don't be silly. Darling, shall I clear?

NICHOLAS

I can manage. Perhaps you could get the room set up.

(FIONA heads for the stairs)

FIONA

All right. Why don't you switch on the fireplace for them? It's a bit chilly.

NICHOLAS

(As SHE EXITS)

Good idea.

(HE switches it on, and says to BERNARD as
 HE gathers dishes and leaves:)

You see? Central heating after all.

BERNARD

I wasn't worried.

(Once BERNARD and LORI are alone, HE stands beside her before the
 glowing artificial fireplace.)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

Will you look at that? All British homes have fake fireplaces. It's strange, because you think of the British being tasteful, you know? But not just tacky people here that have these things.

LORI

It's homey. They like to sit by a cosy hearth.

(Pointing)

That's supposed to be a log, right?

BERNARD

Yeah. Can you believe it? It looks more like a great big plastic turd, with a halo around it.

LORI

Shhhhhh!

BERNARD

Relax, honey. You've already fucked the evening beyond repair.

LORI

Fuck you.

BERNARD

My wife, and her witty comebacks.

LORI

(Wearily)

Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.

(NICHOLAS comes in again, beaming)

NICHOLAS

How are we getting on, then?

BERNARD

Just toasting ourselves by the fire, like a couple of marshmallows.

NICHOLAS

Splendid. And if the room is too chilly, there's a portable heater.

LORI

That sounds great. I'm really beat.

NICHOLAS

Would you like a nightcap before you turn in?

BERNARD

Yeah, why not.

(NICHOLAS goes to the liquor cabinet)

NICHOLAS

Port or whisky? I've got rather a good single malt here. Or brandy, if you prefer.

BERNARD

Whisky sounds good.

(NICHOLAS gets out the bottle and pours. FIONA comes downstairs)

FIONA

Well, I was able to turn up some fresh sheets for you. The room's a bit musty, so I've left the windows open. But there's a little heater.

BERNARD

Nick was telling us.

FIONA

And there's a hot water bottle on the bureau.

BERNARD

We'll be fine.

(NICHOLAS brings drinks to each of them, and keeps one)

NICHOLAS

Here we are.

LORI

Thanks.

NICHOLAS

You know what American film I was thinking about? Annie Hall. It's got that warm, zany New York Jewish humour --

FIONA

Nick, I think we've had enough input out of you on that subject. Give it a rest.
(To the others)
I expect you'll both be wanting to turn in.

LORI

Yeah, I'm --

BERNARD

I'm actually wired. I get this way right after a flight. The jet lag doesn't hit until the day after.

FIONA

I know what you mean. I'm much the same way.

BERNARD

So, Fiona, I hope I haven't soured you on the project. But if you come over, you'll meet Blair and see that she can act. And, after all, a little name recognition is not such a terrible thing.

FIONA

Hmm. Well then, how about asking Madonna or Sharon Stone?

BERNARD

If they'd read for it, I'd say sure, let's give it a shot.

FIONA

I -- don't know quite what to say.

NICHOLAS

Perhaps we could ask that Nanny person.

FIONA

Nicholas, do shut up!

NICHOLAS

Sorry.

BERNARD

In fact, I was thinking we should go for Stallone to play John Stuart Mill. He's looking for a new project . . .

(FIONA stares at him in horror. SHE glances over at NICHOLAS, then back at BERNARD)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

I'm kidding, Fiona. I mean, my God, obviously. You must think me capable of anything.

NICHOLAS

We're just all very tired. You two should bat names back and forth tomorrow, over tea and crumpets.

LORI

That reminds me, I've always wanted to ask. What's a crumpet?

NICHOLAS

What do you mean?

LORI

What kind of food is it? Is it, like, a cake?

FIONA

Here's a literary exercise for you, Nick. Describe a crumpet for us.

NICHOLAS

It's not a cake, it's a sort of -- a muffin. A bit like scones. One eats it with butter -- or jam, I suppose.

LORI

So, it's not like a cracker?

BERNARD

(Exaggerated patience)

It's an English muffin, honey. You know, with the little nooks and crannies?

LORI

Oh.

BERNARD

They just don't call them English muffins over here in England. Strangely enough.

(LORI is playing dumb, being silly to lighten the mood)

LORI

Oh, but hey, what about the commercial for Thomas's, then? You know, with the guy talking about when he was a kid --

BERNARD

Oh, please, don't start with this.

LORI

And how he and Sally would go skipping down to Mr. Thomas's shop -- the guy had an accent and everything --

BERNARD

(Explodes)

Why do you do this?

(They all freeze. LORI looks like SHE might cry again)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

No, I'm out of line, Lori, I'm sorry. Go ahead, tell us about the commercial.

LORI

I'm really pretty tired. Is it okay with you all if I just go up to bed?

FIONA

Of course.

NICHOLAS

Let me show you where the room is.

LORI

I can figure it out.

NICHOLAS

Yes, but it's no trouble. I have to fetch you some towels from the airing cupboard. Please.

(In a butler's voice)

Allow me to "escort Madam" to her room.

(HE goes to the stairs and gestures for her to go ahead.)

Lead on, MacDuff.

(SHE glances at FIONA and BERNARD, then at NICHOLAS, and heads up the stairs. HE follows)

BERNARD

I guess I shouldn't blow up at her like that.

FIONA

These things happen.

BERNARD

Well, tonight they sure do, anyway.

(Sipping drink)

So. Now that the children have gone to bed, maybe we can get down to business.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 3

ACT ONEScene 4

(We hear the Pet Shop Boys singing "Dreaming of the Queen":)

Dreaming of the Queen, visiting for tea
 You and her and I, and Lady Di
 The Queen said "I'm aghast, love never seems to last
 However hard you try," and Di replied
 That there are no more lovers left alive
 No one has survived
 So there are no more lovers left alive
 And that's why love has died . . .

SETTING: The Thorpes' guest room.

AT RISE: NICHOLAS enters, looks around, and enters to remove
 a large sheet of blackened paper that is leaning against the chair.
 LORI enters from the guest toilet, in a borrowed nightgown.

NICHOLAS

Oh! I'm so sorry!

LORI

No, hey, it's okay. I'm just about ready to conk out.

(SHE crawls into bed. NICHOLAS hesitates for a moment, unsure what to do)

NICHOLAS

I just came in to tidy up, remove some of this clutter. . . you see, I sometimes use this room as a storeroom.

LORI

Feel free. All I need is a bed.

NICHOLAS

Feeling any better?

LORI

Yeah. A little.

NICHOLAS

Good. Well, I've put fresh towels and flannels for both of you in the larger bathroom down the hall.

LORI

Great. I think I'm too tired and drunk to get out of bed again. I'd be dizzy.

(Pointing to paper)

What's that?

NICHOLAS

This? Oh. Well, perhaps it might amuse you -- or I could show it to you in the morning.

LORI

What is it?

NICHOLAS

Oh, it's just one of my rubbings.

LORI

One of your what?

NICHOLAS

Brass rubbings. From a tomb. This one's from Arundel.

LORI

I'm sorry, I don't really know what you're talking about.

NICHOLAS

(Handing it to her)

You see, it was made by rubbing on the contours of a figure on a tomb. Arundel is in Sussex. There's a poem about the tombs there. By Larkin. Not this tomb.

LORI

This is really cool.

NICHOLAS

I'm a bit of a collector. Whenever we go on holiday, I'm always nipping into the local church to see if there isn't something I can rub.

LORI

(Laughing)

No kidding.

NICHOLAS

That sounded a bit rude, actually.

LORI

Don't worry about it. Actually, I do stuff like this with my classes sometimes.

NICHOLAS

Really?

LORI

Well, not exactly. But we put objects -- like nickels, or, like, a leaf, or a comb -- under paper, and go over it with a crayon.

NICHOLAS

And they rub through?

LORI

Yeah, and the kids can see different textures, like cloth, or a sponge -- or sometimes, they cover construction paper with, like, waves of color -- and coat it all with black crayon.

NICHOLAS

Why? To learn about penitence?

LORI

Yeah, I teach them that word. But, see, then we take toothpicks --

NICHOLAS

And scratch out pictures?

(HE sits in the chair near the bed)

LORI

Exactly. They love carving out colors, from under the black. And then we put the pictures up in the hall. Some of them are actually really good.

NICHOLAS

Well. It must brighten things up.

LORI

It makes the kids feel really proud. Here -- thanks.

(SHE gives the rubbing back to him)

NICHOLAS

So, there's some sort of advert for crumpets on telly in America?

LORI

(Glumly)

Yeah, there was. Ye Olde English Muffin Shop.

NICHOLAS

I find it hard to understand why your husband flies off the handle like that -- forgive me, it's none of my business --

LORI

(Speaking rapidly)

It's okay. Bernie's just nervous. He, like, wants to impress you guys so bad -- and I keep embarrassing him. I'm so "LonGUYland." And I babble. I can't help it, even when I know I'm doing it.

NICHOLAS

He's the one behaving badly, not you.

LORI

No, I'm a babbler. That's always my problem. And Bernie's so smart. He's turned me on to so many ideas, so many good books, Nick -- I wish I could tell you. I learn a lot just being around him.

NICHOLAS

I suppose no one's in top form after a long trip.

LORI

It's hard to understand him sometimes. I've known him for ages, so it's easier for me.

NICHOLAS

Yes, of course. Been married a long time, have you?

LORI

Just three years, but I had a big crush on him in high school. I was too shy to even talk to him. Then years later, I saw him at my cousin Craig's bar mitzvah.

NICHOLAS

Craig? Is that a Jewish name?

LORI

It is on Long Island. So, I'd heard that he went to Princeton and won the Rhodes and all. But I saw him, and I thought: this time I'm gonna say something. This time I won't let him get away!

NICHOLAS

And so . . . you were married.

LORI

Yeah, well, we lived together for a long time. I was surprised he was interested in me -- but, you know, Bernie's kind of a lonely guy. He's got all these defense systems. I was getting my degree in child psychology, and he didn't think it was so funny back then. He was real supportive.

NICHOLAS

Perhaps I've misjudged him.

LORI

Bernie puts up with a lot from me. 'Cause, like, I've got all these problems, like bulimia sometimes. And plus, I can be a little neurotic-compulsive, and I get insomnia when I'm alone.

NICHOLAS

You know, I don't think I'd even heard of bulimia, until it turned out that Princess Diana suffered from it. I asked Fiona, I remember, and she had to tell me what it was.

LORI

Yeah? I really felt terrible about what happened to her.

NICHOLAS

Yes, it was a dreadful thing.

LORI

It was such a shame. She was such a beautiful person. And those two kids . . .

NICHOLAS

Yes.

(They are silent for a moment)

LORI

Bernie made fun of me for staying up all night to watch the funeral. But I remember, when I first moved in with him, and she was getting divorced, and the papers kept saying how unhappy she was and all?

NICHOLAS

Mmmm.

LORI

And her lousy marriage, and how she kept trying to kill herself? I'd see the tabloid headlines, and I'd kind of identify with her -- 'cause of the bulimia and all. And I thought, maybe it's a bad sign for my relationship that I'm so sad for Princess Di. But, y'know, I love Bernie so much.

(SHE has been sinking into the pillows. Now
SHE sits up)

LORI (CONT'D)

He just -- makes me nuts when he goes into his Grand Rabbi routine. He starts lecturing me, explaining stuff -- and he just out-words me.

NICHOLAS

You're not fond of verbal combat.

LORI

I'm not in his league, let's face it. Plus, it's a weird marriage. Like, Bernie explained to me -- he's not afraid of commitment. But he doesn't believe in monogamy -- he thinks most marriages stifle both parties. So, we keep things open.

NICHOLAS

You . . . well. That must be rather rough on you.

LORI

(Shrugs)

Why? I mean, technically, I'm free too. But after a long day, just want to curl up with him. I hope this trip will be good for us.

NICHOLAS

And how are you enjoying London?

LORI

I'm so excited to be here! I've always loved British TV shows, and movies, and accents. It still doesn't seem real --you know, the money looks like Monopoly money. Bernie didn't want to take me, I practically begged him. I'm making him sound awful. It's just -- he's so smart, and sometimes I can't keep up.

NICHOLAS

Well, it's no secret that Fiona is cleverer than I am. I couldn't blame her if she resents it.

LORI

How did you guys meet?

NICHOLAS

At a party. Friend of a friend. People like her don't wander into my grey flannel circle very often. She was all in red that night -- a great, flaming firebird. I've always been drawn to creative people, never had a clue how to approach them. But Fee gave me a chance. She maintains that somewhere deep in my murky soul I'm more than just a stuffy old banker. She does fly off the handle now and then -- she's even -- stormed off and left a few times.

LORI

Does she sleep around?

NICHOLAS

(Taken aback)

No! That is, I -- don't rightly know. We haven't drawn up any formal contract about that, and signed on the dotted line, the way you did, from the sound of things.

LORI

But what does she say when you ask her?

NICHOLAS

It's never really been discussed. It's one of the subjects we talk around.

LORI

I can't understand that. That's so weird.

NICHOLAS

Oh, elliptical conversations keep a marriage running smoothly.

LORI

(Yawns, stretches)

You don't have any kids, right? At boarding school or anything?

NICHOLAS

No, no. We'd like to have children. But it's difficult, with our careers.

LORI

Yeah, Bernie keeps telling me wait, wait. But if he makes your wife's movie, maybe he'll be secure enough about WaveLine to start a family.

NICHOLAS

It may not seem as if Fiona and I are well-suited. But I do think I do her good -- she needs someone steady and sensible to fall back on.

LORI

Oh, I know Bernie needs me too. We've got this crazy co-dependent thing going.

NICHOLAS

You know, I can't believe I'm talking about my personal life like this with someone I've only just met. It's quite extraordinary.

LORI

(Smiles)

That's because I studied to be a shrink, got my degree and all. We're trained to get people to open up.

NICHOLAS

I suppose that must be it. You look as though you're ready to nod off.

LORI

It's just been such a long day. And last night I couldn't sleep -- I was scared of flying.

NICHOLAS

Of course, you must be knackered. I'll let you get some rest.

(HE stands. LORI sits up, alarmed)

LORI

No, don't go yet, please. Like I said, I have trouble falling asleep when I'm alone. I've got a stuffed bear at home from when I was little, but Bernie didn't want me to take it, and I was scared the luggage would get lost.

NICHOLAS

(Sitting)

Would you like me to stay here for just a bit?

LORI

If you don't mind. That would be really nice.

NICHOLAS

To be honest, I'm not very keen to go back down there and listen to them row about that film.

LORI

They're probably having fun in their own way. And I think we were both very good tonight, trying to ease the tension, you and me.

NICHOLAS

Yes, we did our duty, with a few minor foul-ups here and there. You mustn't mind what I said earlier about Jews. It's just -- I don't believe I've ever met a Jewish person before. Actually knowing that he was Jewish.

LORI

(Murmurs)

That's weird. I'm so tired, I feel like I'm floating out of the bed. Why don't you sing me some kind of British lullabye?

(Startled, NICHOLAS clears his throat)

NICHOLAS

Ah. I'm afraid -- my singing voice -- But, perhaps I could start telling you about what I do all day at the bank. That usually helps Fiona drift off.

LORI

Could you just sit there, Nick? Could you switch off the light, and sit there, and just wait till I fall asleep?

NICHOLAS

Absolutely.

(HE gets up and switches off the light. They are now both silhouettes, as HE sits once more, on his chair)

LORI

Thank you.

NICHOLAS

Not at all.

LORI

You're a nice guy.

NICHOLAS

Pleasant dreams.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 4

ACT ONE

Scene 5

(During the scene change, we hear Rita Hayworth singing "What Does an English Girl Think of a Yank?")

What does an English girl think of a Yank?
Oh, he's a doll, and just as solid as a tank
What does an English girl think of his looks?
And when he says "What's cookin'?"
Does she know what cooks?

SETTING: The same as Scene 3.

AT RISE: BERNARD and FIONA sit on the couch, sipping drinks, mid-conversation.

BERNARD

All I'm saying is, you guys are taking such good care of us --I thought Lori and I could return the favor. New York's a great city. With a lot to see.

FIONA

So I've heard.

(A beat)

I suppose I do have a few people in mind for Harriet. It's quite a demanding role.

BERNARD

Sure it is, it's a great role. You've really captured her on paper. Even when she leaves her husband to travel with Mill, we're rooting for her all the way.

FIONA

You didn't disapprove, then?

BERNARD

(Not just speaking about Harriet)

Not at all. She's totally sympathetic. Her husband isn't a bad guy, but he just isn't on her level intellectually, and Mill is, and she needs that challenge.

FIONA

But won't it shock an American audience when she goes off and does that?

BERNARD

Well, if we play it your way and they never even shutup, I don't see a problem. But, seriously, Fiona, they don't need to get sexual until the husband's dead and they get married.

FIONA

What if they never did have it off, Bernard? What if it was a chaste union? Doesn't historical accuracy matter in the least?

BERNARD

It matters, but hell, you gotta be flexible. This isn't a documentary we're making here. And in terms of what's dramatic, in terms of giving characters an arc . . . Think of Shadowlands, with Anthony Hopkins as that repressed old writer guy.

FIONA

C.S. Lewis.

BERNARD

Exactly. And he learns to express his feelings of love, even physical love. That can be powerful.

FIONA

But I'm trying to create the mood of another century -- and write about a very unusual couple.

BERNARD

(Slightly sexual)

And you do it -- I got all that. They can be repressed. Repression is very erotic.

(Back to business)

But you've made these people all philosophical debate. It even plays like Harriet told Mill what to think, and wrote his best stuff for him.

FIONA

There's a school of thought that says she did. Mill indicates that many of his ideas were originally hers, in his autobiography, and in On the Subjection of Women.

BERNARD

Yes, she helped him, she was his muse --

FIONA

(Annoyed)

She was a great deal more than that!

BERNARD

Fiona, I know a little about this stuff, too. I read literature when I was at Oxford--

FIONA

What has that got to do with it?

BERNARD

And I took a lot of philosophy courses at Princeton. And I think Mill wrote Mill, and he was a great man, and he deserves to get laid in your movie.

FIONA

I see.

BERNARD

Now, I hate to tell you, but you don't take criticism well. And in New York, you'll meet potential backers who'll all want to put their two cents in.

FIONA

(Bewildered)

What do you mean?

BERNARD

They'll all have notes. And the trick is to make them feel like they have input, but hang on to the heart of the picture. It's tricky, but I think we can do it.

FIONA

I don't believe this. I'm sorry, but you definitely gave me the impression that WaveLine, in association with High Street Films, would put up the money.

BERNARD

Sure, we're setting up the package --

FIONA

Five to seven million, you said.

BERNARD

Hey, Fiona, listen. Maybe I didn't spell it out to you, about needing other backers, but that's because I figured you knew the business.

FIONA

I do know the business.

BERNARD

Okay, then. We've got a small indie company at WaveLine. We've made some art films we've lost money on, and one shlock thriller we made it back with. This could be the breakout film for both of us -- you and me. A highbrow period piece and a sleeper -- but you can't expect WaveLine to do it alone. Just 'cause we're American, that doesn't mean we're made of money.

FIONA

How much have you got, right this moment?

BERNARD

How much have I got? How much is the company worth? I don't believe this. I've been busting my ass for a month, talking to people . . .

FIONA

What is it, exactly, that you're offering me?

BERNARD

I'm offering to get this picture made! I can pull it together. You don't have to worry about it. But you gotta make a few concessions.

FIONA

(Pouring more white wine)

All right then, here's a concession. Perhaps your actress friend could play Mill's maid.

BERNARD

What?

FIONA

It's important. Carlyle comes round and drops off his history of the French Revolution, the maid can't read and thinks it's a bundle of scrap paper and burns the lot in the fireplace. Carlyle has to write it all over again.

BERNARD

I know. I've read your screenplay.

FIONA

Well, it really happened. Mill and Harriet felt dreadful, of course. I don't know what happened to the maid -- I assume she was sacked. We could expand the role a bit. She could even play it as an American, I don't mind.

BERNARD

Fiona, I'm trying to have a serious talk with you about this.

FIONA

Well, it's a nice comic role, she could have fun with it, her first "highbrow" film --

BERNARD

Don't be bullshitting me, I know how to bullshit people. This girl's father is not going to put up a couple million so his daughter can play a maid. And Blair is a beautiful, glamorous woman. She's never gonna go for it.

(FIONA studies him for a moment)

FIONA

You've slept with her, haven't you.

BERNARD

What?

FIONA

The actress. She's your bit on the side.

BERNARD

Oh, please.

FIONA

She's your mistress, and you've promised her a role in this film.

BERNARD

No, I have not slept with her. But I'll tell you what, I would if I thought it could help us get this picture made.

FIONA

Why are you so insistent about this?

BERNARD

Fiona, don't you understand? All the other Rhodes scholars from my year -- they all went to law school. They're either in politics now, in office, some of them, or working a twenty-hour day at some corporate law firm. I didn't go that route. But I'll look like a fucking idiot if I can't make a film I'm proud of. One that does more than just play in festivals in Greenwich Village. I believe we've got a good -- no, a great script here. This is the project that will blow the sky wide open -- for both of us!

FIONA

(Slightly sexual)

You really want this, don't you?

BERNARD

Yes, I really do.

FIONA

But if you try to make me compromise everything away --

BERNARD

I'm not, you've just got to trust me. My God, it's not like you've got much choice here.

FIONA

What do you mean?

BERNARD

Well, frankly, it doesn't seem like James Merchant is banging down the door to make your movie.

FIONA

(Stung)

Now, look, just where the hell do you think you get off --

BERNARD

I'm just saying. You're hungry. Like me. And hungry people get things done.

(Beat)

FIONA

I don't know what you'll spring on me next. You say you care about the film, but all you seem to talk about is money.

BERNARD

Oh, I see, and you're above money. I forgot, people don't earn or spend money over here, that's vulgar. They're just supposed to inherit it.

FIONA

You just seem very quick to let the sordid side of things take over.

BERNARD

The sordid side of things is my department. You shouldn't soil your hands with it. But I hope you want people to see your film.

FIONA

Yes!

BERNARD

Well, then, there are commercial considerations. You target the American audience, just 'cause we've got more warm butts filling seats in America. And we don't know from John Stuart Mill. You have to teach us. You have to give us visuals, and some sex and some humor, you have to take us by the hand and show why these people are important. Maybe with a flashback montage of Mill's childhood--

FIONA

(Incredulous)

Flashback montage?

BERNARD

Yes! His father was a Utilitarian nut, right? He raised Mill to be some kind of thinking machine. So, show that. Begin with a montage of Mill being catechised and drilled, at age three, learning Latin, looking out the window while other boys get to play cricket or whatever -- then they'll understand why he's such a basket case. That's the beginning of your picture. And again, when her husband's dying -- it's gloomy. Too much staggering toward the chamber pot, and Harriet weeping and tucking him in. Speed it up, take out the dialogue.

(Snapping fingers)

You can show it all in a few quick cuts.

FIONA

(Very upset)

Don't you see? That's not what I'm trying to do. This isn't about chop chop video editing. It's all to do with pacing--

BERNIE

Exactly!

FIONA

No! It has to be filmed as a stately Victorian narrative --

BERNARD

Or not at all.

FIONA

Yes. Or not at all. Bernard --

BERNARD

Call me Bernie.

FIONA

Bernie. I know you mean well. I do. And believe me, I want to see this film made. But I honestly don't think this is going to work. We don't speak the same language.

BERNARD

Look, you know what, it's been a long day, we got a whole week to hash things out --

FIONA

No, really. I think I'd better be firm now, while I still have the resolve. I made a promise to myself, before you arrived. I'm not going to let this be done to my screenplay. I'd rather that it not be filmed. I'm afraid that's my final decision.

(Both realize that they can now freely vent their hostility and frustration)

BERNARD

So. That's it. I bust my ass finding you backers, I work up a set of ideas, and I come all the way over here for nothing, huh?

FIONA

Of course, you and Lori are quite welcome to stay with us for the remainder of your time here -- or until you can make other plans.

BERNARD

Really. Well, that's very generous of you. The warmth and kindness of the English always knocks me out.

FIONA

Does it.

BERNARD

I can't believe I thought I could find flexibility in a narrow-minded, sanctimonious Brit.

FIONA

I think perhaps you'd better --

BERNARD

You are completely negative, lady, completely rigid, smug and self-satisfied -- like everyone else in this goddamned country! I don't know why we even try.

FIONA

Oh, and so I suppose the answer is, if we're not properly grateful and respectful, if we don't appreciate American patronage, and grovel, and lick your hands if you should happen to call on us --

BERNARD

Patronage? You're supposed to be our allies, "now more than ever."

FIONA

And in what way are we failing to hop to it, collectively, and do your bidding?

BERNARD

I'm saying -- look at this whole attitude of yours! Like I'm threatening you. Like sneering at me and rejecting my ideas is a way to strike a blow for your country against mine. Why all this hostility, for its own sake? If you want to make this about geopolitics, which it shouldn't be, then fine. We stand by you people in NATO, we're a peace-loving nation with problems of our own, but we stabilized Europe again and again, we absorb the wrath of places that got screwed up as part of your Empire, we pulled your chestnuts out of the fire in two World Wars --

FIONA

Surely you can't be serious.

BERNARD

Oh, c'mon, the Germans would have turned your grandparents into sauerkraut if we hadn't risked our butts to save your pale, pasty carcasses. Shouldn't that inspire a little loyalty and, yes, gratitude? Do you really need to get so choked up with spite and envy you go looking for individual Americans to turn up your little nose at?

FIONA

(Incredulous)

Listen to you. You really believe what you're saying, don't you.

BERNARD

Always.

FIONA

Well then, hear this, you fucking imperialist, stupid, infantile Yank. We see how you're making a ball's up of your policy in the East, but we stand by you anyway -- God knows why -- maybe because we think of you as our dim-witted younger brother and someone has got to wipe your nose and tell you when your fly is hanging open. No one else will do it for you, everybody else hates you -- yes, hates you -- and we know why, but we seem to have some sort of -- residual affection, and so we put our soldiers' lives on the line, and turn our cities into targets, for old time's sake.

BERNARD

Aw, don't hold back, honey. Tell me how you really feel.

FIONA

As for the World War II, you sat on your fat butts and let us fight off the Nazis for years -- but you actually remember it differently. You think you won the war single-handed, and acted alone on D-Day, and captured the Enigma machine, and broke the code yourselves, and fought the Battle of Britain as well. And that makes us your lapdogs. But I suppose, since you feel no need to work with the rest of the family of nations, when you decide we've outlived our usefulness completely, you'll simply buy us out, or invade us, like you do your neighbors.

BERNARD

Say what?! You know, it's that kind of P.C., inaccurate English garbage -- Whatever countries we're pushing around right now we're doing it with your help and blessing. We never wanted an "Empire" in the sense that you --

FIONA

No, not as directly. You put spin on it. You call it your "sphere of influence." But you still see the world as --

BERNARD

Oh Christ, am I sick of that! That's all I got over here when I was a student. This Greenham Common self-righteous crap.

(Fake accent)

"Oh, hoorah, let's bash a Yank to save Nick-uh-rag-yu-uh!" Why don't you people at least learn to pronounce these things, huh? And why do you assume every American is Ronald Reagan or one of the Bushes, incarnate? I didn't assume every fucking Brit was Mrs. Thatcher.

FIONA

(Upset, voicing concerns SHE really cares about)

Perhaps people assumed things about you because you're rude and aggressive and you try to push them around -- like Rambo Reagan with his cutthroat Contras -- yes, I was at university as well, in those years. Or Bush the First in Panama or the Gulf -- or his ridiculous, idiot off-spring bumbling about on the world stage, handing down edicts of doom for Planet Earth which he can't even pronounce. Oh, excuse me! Am I allowed to say that again? Are we permitted, yet, to notice once more that you have a chimpanzee sitting --

BERNARD

Hey, look, we don't like it either, we didn't elect him, exactly, but under the circumstances --

FIONA

And of course, Tony Blair has just rolled over to let Dubya tickle his tummy, because that's what our PMs do, isn't it, for every ugly American demigod you vomit up, but if you think we'll all sit idly by while you trash the Kyoto Accord, and just let him build Son of Star Wars --

BERNARD

Dammit, do you think we like it any more than --

FIONA

And I have some news for you and for your “president.” And your hideous, grinning Donald Rumsfeld. The rest of the world is not your back yard, and not your barbecue pit, nor your rubbish tip --

BERNARD

Oh, here we go. Let it all hang out, now, go ahead. Take your best shot.

(HE spreads his arms wide, making himself a target, and sloshes his drink in the process)

FIONA

You think you've a right to dominate everyone and everything on the planet, and that you're doing us all an enormous favor.

BERNARD

Whatever you say, sweetheart.

FIONA

But your shouting and swaggering only prove how pathetic and insecure you are. Everyone knows Americans have such huge cars, and cameras with ten meter lenses projecting out of their flowered Hawaiian shirts, because they're afraid something else is too small.

BERNARD

Really.

FIONA

You're ignorant of every other culture and language, you don't even know the geography of your own country, or what's to the north and the south of you --

BERNARD

Damn. I've never visited a country with women as cold and unnatural as here. I mean you're nasty, and you just cut men dead -- no wonder the guys here are a bunch of scared, pussy-whipped wimps.

FIONA

Unlike American macho men.

(SHE pronounces the first syllable of “macho” to rhyme with “catch.” HE mimics her)

BERNARD

Yeah, I guess I do seem a little “match-o” over here, but I don't care. I flew all the way across the Atlantic, and I've had to humor you all evening --

FIONA

Oh, you've been humouring me? Funny, I thought my husband and I had done our best to kiss your American arse.

BERNARD

Yeah, well, you would think that. You people have no sense of being neighborly. You hate your own children. You prefer your cats and your corgies and your little budgie birds--

FIONA

(Almost amused, it's so idiotic)

We hate children?

BERNARD

(Half-joking)

Yeah, that's why you pack them off to boarding school at the age of three, and shove them up chimneys and down coal mines --

FIONA

Aren't you generalising just a little bit?

BERNARD

And your cuisine. It's the only explanation. You're punishing your young. You're trying to bland them to death.

FIONA

I think perhaps you've had too much to drink.

BERNARD

We've both had too much to drink. But explain lardy cake to me, lady. I tried it. That's not a pastry. That's an act of hostility.

FIONA

You're being silly.

(BERNIE is drunk, tired, and taking their mutual bashing to an absurd extreme, on purpose)

BERNARD

I'm being totally serious. Every dessert here is some kind of soggy bread, and you pour glop over it and call it jam roly-poly, or toad in the hole, or spotted dick . . .

FIONA

Well, we certainly have nothing to compare with the great American cuisine you lavish on the world. The Whopper. The Egg McMuffin. The Chicken McNugget. The sun never sets on MacDonalds' golden arches.

BERNARD

You savor offal. Lard, kidneys, intestines, brains, blood. You eat rabbits and squirrels, and other small rodents I have no doubt--

FIONA

(Laughs)

Now you are being silly.

BERNARD

Hey, I'm not making it up. You think potatoes are, like, a serious vegetable. I used to wonder about the Irish potato famine -- you know, why didn't they just eat broccoli instead? Then I came over here and found out: potatoes are all there is. Potatoes with every fucking meal.

(His attempts to lighten the mood have finally worked. They size each other up for a moment.)

FIONA

It's odd. I find you both repellent and amusing.

BERNARD

Why, thank you. So, now that we've cleared the air, worked through some issues, and jettisoned some of the baggage -- you gonna let me help you make that movie?

FIONA

You don't give up, do you.

BERNARD

Nope. Knock me down, and I come back for more.

FIONA

It's fun to have someone to spar with.

BERNARD

Yes, it is. Keeps me on my toes.

FIONA

At least we're well-matched in our appreciation of each other's country.

BERNARD

Balance. Balance is key.

FIONA

I wouldn't have it any other way.

BERNARD

Ready for another round?

FIONA

All right!

(SHE smashes her glass
against the wall)

FIONA (CONT'D)

En garde!

(BERNARD is startled -- then
grins and does the same)

BERNARD

Heads up, Brit.

FIONA

What shall we insult about each other next?

BERNARD

Oh, next comes the physical assault round.

FIONA

Oh?

BERNARD

This is where you prove yourself at the manly art of self-defense. Let's go.

(HE picks up a sofa cushion and pokes her with it.)

FIONA

(Laughing)

Stop it!

(SHE picks up another cushion: what follows is essentially a drunken pillow fight. BERNIE puts on a Monty Python voice, from the Spanish Inquisition)

BERNIE

You like the Pythons? "Old woman! How do you plead? Confess! Confess!"

(They are both nearly falling over with laughter. At last, FIONA in the midst of fighting, puts her arms around him and kisses him on the lips. His arms come up to embrace her.)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF ACT I

ACT TWO

(While the lights are down, we hear part of the Pet Shop Boys' song "Two Divided by Zero":)

We'll catch a plane to New York, get a cab going down
Cross the bridges and tunnels, straight into town
When the postman calls we'll be miles away
On another continent and another day
Let's not go home or call it a day
You won't be alone -- let's run away

Scene 1

SETTING: NICHOLAS and FIONA's New York hotel room.

AT RISE: It is their second day in the US. SHE is in her slip, holding holding sexy, nice dresses before her in front of a large mirror. More are on the bed. NICHOLAS enters, from the bathroom. HE studies her a moment.

NICHOLAS

You're really going to wear one of those?

FIONA

I brought them. I may as well.

(Her tone is light, brisk, amused. SHE speaks to him as if HE were a silly child -- until just before the end of the scene)

NICHOLAS

I thought we were having breakfast at their flat.

FIONA

We are. Bernie's sticking up for American cooking.

NICHOLAS

You didn't get half that dressed up last night.

FIONA

Oh well, you always manage to pick such frumpy, dowdy places.

NICHOLAS

You liked the look of it yourself. You said so.

FIONA

Let's not argue about it. Anyhow, I feel like dressing up this morning, that's all.

(HE continues to stare at her as SHE happily poses with a dress)

NICHOLAS

I've been trying to be a good sport about this, Fee. But there's no need to rub my face in it.

FIONA

I knew it was mad for you to come with me. I knew you'd sulk the whole time. I did warn you.

NICHOLAS

(Reluctantly direct)

Then you really do mean to continue this affair?

FIONA

We have no definite plans one way or the other. Whatever happens happens. Bernie is trying to teach me to be more spontaneous. I doubt I'd ever learn that from you.

NICHOLAS

No. There are things I value more than -- spontaneity.

(SHE turns to confront him directly --still light. Even her reproaches are playful and teasing)

FIONA

Then why on earth did you suddenly insist on coming? I mean it, Nick, why are you here? It's very awkward.

NICHOLAS

You're my wife. My place is with you.

FIONA

Most of the time, yes. At the moment, if you don't want your face "rubbed in" things, it makes for a hopeless situation.

NICHOLAS

You don't know what you're doing. You haven't really thought. You're on unfamiliar ground, and you need looking after.

FIONA

So you came along as my chaperone?

NICHOLAS

No. But perhaps I did come along . . . as your conscience.

(SHE takes up another dress, turns away from him again)

FIONA

Oh, lucky me.

NICHOLAS

And I think the reason you're being so arch and breezy and bright right now is because your conscience is troubling you.

FIONA

(Pulling on dress)

So you are. But I think you came along to see Bernie's little wife again.

NICHOLAS

To see Lori?

FIONA

That's the wife I meant. I think you fancy her.

NICHOLAS

Don't talk rot.

FIONA

You'd taken her everywhere by the end of their visit. You've never taken me to see the crown jewels. Not one sodding tiara.

NICHOLAS

You put us both in an extraordinary position. Half the week had gone by before we knew for sure that you and her husband were -- carrying on. Lori realized it much sooner than I did.

FIONA

Did she? Perhaps she's not as thick as she looks. Of course, it would be hard for anyone to be as thick as she looks.

NICHOLAS

Fiona . . .

FIONA

Yes? What is it? Spit it out.

NICHOLAS

Nothing. Never mind.

FIONA

Alright, then.

NICHOLAS

(Forcing himself)

Fiona, this is not easy for me. But -- I've got to have this out with you.

FIONA

(Still impenetrably breezy)

Oh dear, no ultimatums before breakfast. We haven't even seen them yet. Perhaps he'll have grown one of those horrid little goatees, and I'll have gone off him, and he'll have gone off me, and it will all be for nothing.

NICHOLAS

This goes beyond whether or not you sleep with Bernard again. I've just been thinking.

FIONA

And what have you been thinking?

NICHOLAS

I'm worried about you, Fiona.

(FIONA is experimenting with a silk scarf: should SHE wear it around her neck? Her waist? In her hair?)

FIONA

Worried? Why?

NICHOLAS

I'm afraid that you're not a very nice person.

FIONA

You fear for my immortal soul, do you?

NICHOLAS

Not especially. I'm just worried that you're not -- nice.

FIONA

Well, Nick, to be honest, I've never particularly aspired to being "nice." That's a bit too bourgeois for me.

NICHOLAS

I don't mean nice in some wet, twee sense: "Oh, isn't that nice!" I mean kindness, compassion, basic decency.

FIONA

And I have none of those qualities.

NICHOLAS

I'm beginning to wonder.

FIONA

Well, it still sounds as if you're worried about you, then, not me.

(SHE smooths out the dress and turns her back to him: a silent wifely command. HE hesitates -- then, zips her up as HE always does)

NICHOLAS

No, I believe I'm worried about you. Because I'm afraid that people who aren't nice wind up unhappy in the end.

FIONA

Well, but look at you. You're as nice as can be, and you're perfectly miserable.

NICHOLAS

It's the long run I'm talking about. The general scheme of things.

FIONA

Oh, I think we both know loads of not-nice, extremely unpleasant people who are wildly happy. Gareth, Prue, the Boyles. I'm sorry, I don't mean to bollocks up your theory --

NICHOLAS

Are they really happy? When they're alone with themselves?

FIONA

Spare me.

NICHOLAS

I'm worried that you don't really like yourself right now, Fiona, that you're rushing headlong into something you'll regret.

FIONA

Is that a threat, darling? Are you saying if I don't give up Bernard you'll be off? After all, it is coming down to an ultimatum.

NICHOLAS

I'm saying nothing definite. I doubt very much I'd ever have the strength to leave you. But if you turn our marriage into something shabby, it will reflect badly on you as well as me. And if you do things for money, not love --

FIONA

(Challenging)

What sort of things?

NICHOLAS

Fiona, you used to talk about being a pimp, whoring your screenplay for American money.

FIONA

And you're saying now I'm my own pimp. I'm whoring myself.

NICHOLAS

Something like that. Perhaps. I don't know, I can't be objective.

(SHE stares at him for a moment,
then picks up the brush to brush out her hair)

FIONA

You know, I believe I was attracted to Bernard from the first time I spoke to him on the telephone. That false swagger they all think it's necessary to put on. It amused me. That's why I was so testy about him -- I knew I'd find him charming.

NICHOLAS

I think you are attracted to him. But I don't know how much of this affair is about attraction and how much is about trying to get your film made. And at the end of the day, I don't think you know either. It's two kinds of negotiation that don't mix well --

FIONA

(Stung)

Piss off!

NICHOLAS

(Quietly)

Yes, dear.

(Getting his coat, moving to the door)

I'll just wait down in the lobby, shall I?

(HE exits. LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE ONE

ACT TWO

Scene 2

(During the scene change, we hear the strains of Tammy Wynette, singing her most important tune:)

Sometimes, it's hard to be a woman
Giving all your love to just one man
You'll have bad times and he'll have good times
Doing things that you don't understand . . .

SETTING: BERNARD and LORI's apartment. The front door, the living room and the kitchen nook are visible.

AT RISE: BERNARD moves around the kitchen nook, cleaning, arranging fruit in a bowl. A pan of sausages stands on the stove, and a bowl of cream and a plate of pancakes are on the counter. LORI stands watching him.

LORI

Bernie?

BERNARD

Mmm. Where's that bowl of blueberries? Did you see what I did with it?

LORI

Bernie, I've been trying since last night --

BERNARD

It's okay, I'll find it myself.

(Picking it up)

Here we go.

(HE sprinkles some into the bowl of cream. SHE is frustrated with his preoccupation, and his bored, mild manner of speaking)

LORI

Bernie, will you stop moving around and talk to me?

BERNARD

Lori, we gotta get ready here. I'm listening to you, keep talking.

LORI

Bernie, I can't keep this up. I really don't feel good about things between us. We never make love anymore --

BERNARD

That seemed to be your idea. You burst into tears every time I come near you.

LORI

Well, maybe I just can't take this arrangement. It's --brutalizing.

BERNARD

Which arrangement?

LORI

The one you built into our marriage. I just -- can't take it.

BERNARD

We've had it this way for five years now, Lori. We're solid. I don't see why you're suddenly making an issue of this.

LORI

I'm not suddenly -- I've never felt good about it.

BERNARD

Then you were foolish to agree to it. 'Cause I was pretty clear about my needs, and how I want to live my life.

LORI

Anyway, it's different this time. It's not like all your other quickie fucks. When you talk to her long distance . . . or the way you're getting ready for her coming over. It is different this time, Bernie, be honest. Can you please put the spatula down and be honest with me?

BERNARD

(Fussing with the pan of sausages)

I'll be honest with you while I'm making breakfast.

LORI

No! I'm tired of talking to your back.

(SHE starts to cry. BERNARD turns around, a bit more willing to try to mollify her)

BERNARD

Lori, I don't know what to say. None of this is new. I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but you're being a little irrational right now.

(LORI says something incoherent; SHE is crying too hard to be understood. It comes out as a squeal almost. HE hands her a Kleenex, and rubs her shoulder.)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

What? Slow down, I can't hear. Try taking it a couple octaves lower.

LORI

You -- told me you cared about me most of all. That whatever else happened, you would always come back to me, and love me.

BERNARD

That's right. That's what I said.

LORI

That's what you said years ago. I don't get anything from you now -- nothing loving and kind.

BERNARD

You want me to repeat the same thing, day after day?

LORI

Yes! If you really mean it, you should tell me every day.

BERNARD

I'm sorry you have so little self-esteem, and so little faith in our relationship.

LORI

Bernie, you never say anything nice to me anymore. But you joke and whisper to her on the phone, and send her dirty e-mail --

BERNARD

(Indignant)

Have you been reading my e-mail? Are you spying on me now?

LORI

No, but -- my God, I can hear you in your study, chortling over your computer.

BERNARD

These sausages are cold, I better nuke 'em.

(Pops them into the microwave)

Look, you have a wild imagination. Yes, we do talk on the phone, and we do send e-mail. We're working on a project together and it's important to my future -- to our future. You say you want to have a baby? Let me make one film I can be proud of, and then we'll have a baby.

LORI

You've been saying that for ages.

BERNARD

And this time I am that close to getting it done.

(LORI tries another approach. SHE is genuinely trying to get through to BERNARD -- not just mocking him)

LORI

Bernie, you want to be something you're not. You're more in love with the British than I am. You think they're so classy and wonderful, you think you're going to make this big, elegant Merchant-Ivory film --

BERNARD

I really don't need your psycho-analytic routine right now --

LORI

And you went out and bought that fat, deluxe edition of Jane Austen, just so she'll see it on our shelf.

BERNARD

(Irritated, defensive)

I happen to like Jane Austen.

LORI

You think by making this picture and by fucking her, some of their world will rub off on you -- what you couldn't be part of when you were a Rhodes scholar. But, sweetheart, you'll never be part of that world, in her eyes or anyone else's. You'll never get their acceptance or approval.

BERNARD

Lori. I need you to either help me make breakfast, or get out of the way. And I need you to either sue me for divorce, or accept our marriage for what it is, within the framework that we've created.

LORI

I used to try to accept things this way -- but you've changed!

BERNARD

I have not changed at all. You know the rules, and you agreed to them. You are free to pursue other relationships also, and when they end I'll still be here for you. But if what you're saying is true, if this relationship is no longer working, it can also be ended.

LORI

(Near tears)

I'm not asking to end our marriage. God, why is it every time I say I'm not happy or I want to work things out, you shut me up by threatening to dump me?

BERNARD

You really treasure the passive victim role, don't you?

LORI

I can't help it if you treat me badly.

BERNARD

But why is it always me treating you some way, hurting you, doing things to you? Are you a child? Are you some object that I can pick up and set down like this plate?

(Demonstrates)

You say you're afraid I'm going to dump you -- are you a load of garbage or laundry that I can "dump"?

LORI

You keep acting like you're breaking up with me, Bernie --

BERNARD

"Break up," "dump," I've never understood that kind of violent language. It degrades both parties. Two people have something going, they get together, it's good or it's not, it lasts or it doesn't. It's an organic process, and both parties contribute. Why not describe it appropriately?

LORI

You always do this, every time we argue. You split hairs and get into word games to avoid what I'm saying.

BERNARD

This is about more than just semantics. It's a philosophical difference. And we're not having an argument. We're having a conversation.

LORI

No we fucking are not! We are not having a conversation! We are having an argument! Do you hear me? We are having an argument! Because I say so!

(SHE stamps her foot. HE stares at her, amused. Then, mildly:)

BERNARD

Another pristine pyramid of logic. Too bad you were never a senator in ancient Rome, Lori. What an orator you would have made.

LORI

(Defeated)

I'm going to go lie down until they get here.

(The doorbell sounds)

BERNARD

Whoops. Too late.

(HE moves to answer it. SHE stands, uncertain. BERNARD opens the door; FIONA, and then NICHOLAS, enter. FIONA carries an overnight bag. The hem of a dress peeks out of it)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

Hey! You made it. Good timing.

(HE hugs FIONA, with a peck on her cheek)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

Nick! Great you could be here too.

(HE is about to offer his hand for NICHOLAS to shake, but then catches his hostile expression, and just slaps him on the shoulder a few times)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

We thought, for awhile there, that Fiona would be coming over all on her lonesome.

NICHOLAS

No. I was -- able to take a leave of absence from the bank.

BERNARD

That's terrific. Glad to have you with us, the more the merrier. Breakfast is almost ready.

(FIONA follows him into the kitchen nook. NICHOLAS and LORI trail behind)

FIONA

How have you been, Lori?

LORI

(Mumbled)

Fine. Yourself?

FIONA

We've been having a marvelous time. We attempted to take the subway yesterday, and got royally lost. Ended up in Queens, at one point.

LORI

It happens.

FIONA

Very different from the Underground.

(LORI screws up her courage and indicates FIONA's overnight bag)

LORI

Planning to stay awhile, huh?

FIONA

What? Oh no, I just wanted to consult Bernie on what I should wear to those meetings he has lined up for tomorrow. Something prim, something casual -- perhaps you could advise me as well.

LORI

Oh, I really don't think you should be asking me.

(A tense pause)

BERNARD

Hey, can I get you guys anything? Orange juice, apple juice?

FIONA

Apple juice sounds about right.

BERNARD

Nick, how 'bout it? Nice glass of apple juice? Huh?

NICHOLAS

Fine.

BERNARD

Okay, coming up.

(HE pours)

Oh, and Nick, can I give you some rocks?

NICHOLAS

(Sharply)

What?

BERNARD

(Smiling)

Would you like a couple of rocks? For your apple juice?

NICHOLAS

No, thanks.

BERNARD

Straight up then, huh?

(HE hands them the drinks)

FIONA

We had dinner at that place -- the Rainbow Room last evening. Well, I suppose we can plant a flag now, and say we've done it.

BERNARD

Yeah? I've never been. Have you, Lori? Lori?

LORI

Nope.

BERNARD

Native New Yorkers don't get around to it, you know how it is.

(NICHOLAS has picked up a pair of silver chopsticks which lay near the phone on the counter dividing the kitchen nook from the living room. HE holds them to the light)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

Yeah, aren't those nice, Nick? Real silver. We eat take-out Chinese so much, it seemed like a good investment.

FIONA

There's quite a good take-away in our road -- well, of course, we took you there.

BERNARD

Well, yeah, it was okay. But British Chinese food -- don't get me started.

(Peers at NICHOLAS)

You're holding that chopstick up like a lethal weapon, Nick. You ever do any fencing?

NICHOLAS

No.

(BERNARD goads him, takes the other chopstick from his hand)

BERNARD

I did, at Princeton. The reason I ask is, you look like you'd like to challenge someone to a duel. Are you a dueling kinda guy?

(HE knocks his chopstick against NICHOLAS's, and moves as if they are sword-fighting. NICHOLAS looks at him, furious, helpless. HE's almost ready to throw the chopstick at BERNARD or do something violent. HE forces himself to set it gently on the counter, and moves away)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

I guess not. Well, hang on a second, folks. The sausages are ready.

FIONA

Bernie, how wonderful. You've made a feast.

BERNARD

Yup. Eggs, sausages, and a mountain of pancakes. A big old American breakfast.

(HE carries the platter of pancakes into the living room. LORI realizes SHE wants to get out of there)

LORI

You know what, honey? I've just realized, I'm not really hungry. I'm gonna have to skip your big breakfast.

BERNARD

Lori, don't start in with this. I've been cooking all morning --

LORI

Yeah, but I promised to show Nick around Manhattan if he came over, and I've been thinking. If we leave now, we can see Chinatown, and grab a bowl of noodles or something --

BERNARD

At nine-thirty in the morning?

LORI

Sure, and then maybe we'd still have time to take the ferry out and visit the Ellis Island Museum. Wouldn't you like that, Nick?

(NICHOLAS, torn, uneasy, glances from FIONA to BERNARD, then back to LORI)

NICHOLAS

I -- don't know.

BERNARD

(Annoyed)

You can go after breakfast, honey. There's plenty of time. I got enough here to feed an army.

LORI

No, I think you and Fiona should have it all. We want to get an early start, there's so much to see at the museum. I don't think we should visit Ground Zero, though. It just makes me sad. Unless you want to. And we don't have to go up the Statue of Liberty -- really, Nick, the museum's much more fun.

BERNARD

Folks, the food is ready -- right now.

FIONA

(With meaning)

Bernie, if they really want to go, I don't think we ought to stop them.

NICHOLAS

Wouldn't you rather -- spend the day with me instead, Fiona?

FIONA

Nicholas. Let's not be rude. Bernie's made this lovely breakfast -- we can't all run out on him. And then he and I have to talk about the film.

NICHOLAS

That's your decision. You're -- quite sure that you want to stay here, then?

FIONA

Quite sure. But you run along.

NICHOLAS

Fee --

BERNARD

Actually, come to think of it, I can scratch the rest of the food. We can do it some other time.

NICHOLAS

(Barely contained fury)

You stay out of this. I'm talking to my wife.

(BERNARD backs up, puts out his hands)

BERNARD

Talk away.

NICHOLAS

Fee --

FIONA

Yes, darling. What is it?

(HE stares at her with a look that is angry, pleading. SHE looks back at him, innocent and bemused. HE cannot penetrate the facade)

LORI

Let's get out of here, Nick. Let's leave them to their big breakfast. They'd give us fifty cents and send us to the movies afterward, anyhow. Let me show you the city.

(HE is still hesitating, reconsidering, as SHE pulls him out the door)

FIONA

Well. I think that worked out for the best. Very obliging of them.

BERNARD

Yeah, I just wish she'd thought of that before I started cooking.

(FIONA goes to him, puts her arms around him)

FIONA

Don't you think you'll get over it?

(HE kisses her, smiles)

BERNARD

I might.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 2

ACT TWOScene 3

(During the scene change, we hear Ella Fitzgerald singing the Rodgers and Hart song "I'll Take Manhattan":)

We'll have Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island too
 It's lovely strolling through the zoo
 It's very fancy on old Delancey Street, you know
 The subway thrills us so
 When balmy breezes blow, to and fro
 And tell me what street compares with Mott Street in July?
 Sweet pushcarts gently gliding by . . .

SETTING: Chinatown -- which can be represented by a small table of touristy bric-a-brac, porcelain buddhas, postcards etc, along the apron of the stage.

AT RISE: LORI and NICHOLAS walk along, taking in the sights and sounds of Chinatown.

LORI

So you liked the noodles?

NICHOLAS

They were very good.

LORI

We should go for Szechuan sometime when we're uptown -- but not in Chinatown. Bernie taught me that.

NICHOLAS

You two seem to consume a great deal of Chinese food.

LORI

Yeah, all Jews do. There's some kind of genetic glitch, no one's figured it out yet.

NICHOLAS

Well, thank you for rescuing me from breakfast at your flat. Before I made a fool of myself.

LORI

I figured we both needed some space.

(They walk on. NICHOLAS looks around)

NICHOLAS

You know, our Chinatown in London isn't a patch on this. I've never seen so much . . .

LORI

Dead fish?

NICHOLAS

Everything! It's so vast. It's like a city within a city.

LORI

There are a lot of cities within this city. Most of this used to be the old Lower East Side. I love walking through different parts of Manhattan.

NICHOLAS

Well, to me it's all very exotic. Just shows how ignorant I am, when it comes to New York.

LORI

You know, Nick, you keep mentioning things you haven't done, words you haven't heard of -- you keep putting yourself down.

NICHOLAS

Oh? Well, perhaps I do sometimes -- but there really are a lot of things a man ought to know that I find I don't. Huge gaps. And then Fee, or a few old friends, have to act as my interpreters, explain the world to me.

LORI

But why? You live in London.

NICHOLAS

Yes, but. I suppose I've lived rather a sheltered life. I've been taking stock, recently, of just how little I know. The school I went to prepared me for my A levels and not much else. And then at Exeter I was a dreadful swot.

LORI

I'm sorry. I don't understand a lot of what you're saying. What was wrong with your school?

NICHOLAS

Oh, nothing particularly wrong with it. It was an unremarkable, second-rate sort of place, full of nouveau riche boys and relatively posh boys with no money -- I was one of those.

LORI

Did they, like, paddle you there?

NICHOLAS

Did they what?

LORI

Like, beat you? I'm sorry, I saw this mini-series of "Tom Brown's Schooldays" once --

NICHOLAS

It wasn't quite like that. Though boys did get caned sometimes, in my day. I imagine they've cut all that out by now. I was caned once. Deserved it, too.

LORI

That's awful!

NICHOLAS

I don't know. If the master is fair, and if a boy is acting up, I think it does help keep discipline. It's only when the master is a fool or a sadist that it's a problem. But it was such a cloistered environment.

LORI

You wanted to go someplace co-ed?

NICHOLAS

I didn't think about it in those terms. My job there was to cram as hard as I could to get into university. I scraped in. And I did all right -- any fool can get a second from Exeter, even me. And so, here I am: a dull, unimaginative banker with very little else to say for himself.

LORI

I don't see that.

NICHOLAS

Well, over here I suppose I seem rather exotic.

LORI

(Smiles)

Yeah, you do.

(They are passing the low stand with touristy bric-a-brac displayed. LORI stops to look)

LORI (CONT'D)

You want to stop and get some chatchkas to bring home to your friends? A buddha or a fan or something?

NICHOLAS

Perhaps a few postcards . . . It doesn't really matter.

(He looks preoccupied. LORI picks up a headband with antennae attached --bobbly wires with heavy, glowing balls at the end of each. SHE tries it on, and the antennae wave back and forth. NICHOLAS manages a smile)

LORI

What do you think? Huh?

NICHOLAS

Very becoming. It looks dead good on you.

LORI

You want to try it on?

NICHOLAS

I -- hardly think so.

LORI

Come on, Nick, it's you.

NICHOLAS

No, really. Perhaps if they had a pair of cuckold's horns I could try on . . .

LORI

(Puzzled)

What?

NICHOLAS

Nothing. Bad joke. Never mind.

LORI

We better head west if we're taking the ferry. You want to walk it, or take a cab?

NICHOLAS

You know best.

LORI

I'm a walker. I say we're walking.

NICHOLAS

Very well, then. Lead on, MacDuff.

(SHE leads him off. LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 3

ACT TWO

Scene 4

(During the scene change, we hear David Bowie from the seventies:)

They pulled in just behind the fridge
 He lays her down, he frowns,
 "Gee, my life's a funny thing
 Am I still too young?"
 He kissed her then and there
 She took his ring, took his babies
 It took him minutes, took her nowhere
 Heaven knows she'd have taken anything, but

All night, she wants the young American
 Young American, young American
 She wants the young American . . .

SETTING: BERNARD and LORI's apartment.

AT RISE: FIONA and BERNARD are in bed on the opened fold-out couch. SHE is in a lacy slip, and HE in boxers. They are drowsy, post-coital.

FIONA

Whew. My goodness.

BERNARD

Yeah, we need a little time out.

FIONA

You certainly know how to make a girl feel welcome.

BERNARD

Still got it, huh?

FIONA

Yes. Yes, you do.

BERNARD

Well, so do you. Sleepy?

FIONA

Yes, a bit. Deliciously sleepy.

BERNARD

I hope you're comfortable. The one thing Lori insists on is that I don't bring other people into our bed -- and I make it a point to respect that.

FIONA

(Teasing)

It's admirable how well you've got her trained -- in all other respects, I mean.

BERNARD

I don't have her "trained." We have an understanding.

FIONA

Please. Bernie. Look at the way she obediently hopped to it and left with Nick this morning.

BERNARD

She did that just to irritate me, because I'd been making us all breakfast . . . forget it. Don't try to understand someone else's marriage.

FIONA

All right.

(She sits up)

I hope Nick isn't out asking the people in Chinatown how they can see out of slitty eyes, or something. I hope he isn't getting himself mugged.

BERNARD

They'll be okay. Lori's got the right idea, actually. I should show you all around this city.

FIONA

I'd like that. I'd like to see Harlem and Chinatown, but also the regular New York bits.

BERNARD

Where?

FIONA

You know, the average neighborhoods -- not just the ethnic enclaves.

BERNARD

Hey, look. This is a city full of ethnic enclaves. We're a scruffy, immigrant nation -- that's what Lori is probably showing your husband at the museum right now.

FIONA

Mmm. I've never understood that, actually. How that makes for a country. That many cultures and languages --

BERNARD

Most of us speak English.

FIONA

You speak American, at any rate. It's not quite the same thing.

(They are stepping, yet again, upon each other's patriotism and pride)

BERNARD

Well, but look at England. You all talk so differently you can't understand each other. Every class, every region -- you hate each other's guts. Accent is everything.

FIONA

Certain sounds that come out of your wife's mouth do seem to make you cringe.

BERNARD

Well, but that's not class. Or region, exactly. Okay, maybe. Point taken.

FIONA

And there are certain things that we share in England -- that we have shared for centuries.

BERNARD

A common gene pool, going stagnant.

FIONA

A common culture and history, religion, rulers, institutions. What do your people share?

BERNARD

(Shrugs)

I dunno. The Brady Bunch. The Constitution -- we're big on that. Plus an enterprising spirit.

FIONA

You mean a willingness to make a fast buck. I'm sorry, it's just that Americans are always waving flags and singing patriotic songs --

BERNARD

You're damned right, lady. "Now more than ever."

FIONA

And I've never quite been sure what you're going on about.

BERNARD

Mmm. You make me so glad I don't live in England, Fiona. 'Cause I know -- you could be Indian or Jewish or black, and three generations later, they'd still be treating your kids like they're from Mars. Whereas when you move here, you get off the plane --

FIONA

Or crawl through a Mexican sewer.

BERNARD

Whatever. You find some way to get a green card, and we stick a baseball cap on your head and a hotdog in your hand, and -- hey, presto! You're an American.

FIONA

And that's a culture.

BERNARD

Of sorts.

FIONA

If you say so.

(Sighs)

I hope Nick's not getting into any mischief. He's such a clueless, wide-eyed innocent to be wandering around a big city like this.

BERNARD

Having second thoughts?

FIONA

Second thoughts about what?

BERNARD

About being here with me. About starting things up again, doing the nasty.

FIONA

I'd say it was worth it, whatever happens, wouldn't you?

BERNARD

Hey, don't look at me. I'm having a great time here.

FIONA

I am looking at you.

BERNARD

Okay, have it your way. Look at me.

(HE kisses her)

And it'll all be worth it if it helps make a movie, huh?

FIONA

(Upset)

Don't say that! That's horrid!

BERNARD

What? I was joking. I'm not saying that's why you're here.

FIONA

Well, don't even joke about that. Ever.

BERNARD

Okay, okay. Relax. You're here because I'm sex on wheels. I can accept that.

FIONA

Good. Because you'd better.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 4

ACT TWO

Scene 5

(We hear the Smiths, doing "Ask":)

Shyness is nice and shyness can stop you
From doing all the things in life you'd like to
Shyness is nice and shyness can stop you
From doing all the things in life you'd like to

So if there's something you'd like to try
If there's something you'd like to try, then
Ask me, I won't say no, how could I?

SETTING: NICHOLAS and FIONA's hotel room.

AT RISE: NICHOLAS and LORI are back from their day of adventures.
SHE sits on the bed with her purse. HE paces.

LORI

Nick. Are you okay?

NICHOLAS

Mmm.

LORI

You seemed happy with the museum and the ferry, but now you're real uptight, all of a sudden.

NICHOLAS

Can you guess why?

LORI

'Cause you're wondering if they're fucking back at my place.

NICHOLAS

Well -- yes. It's getting late, and I'd like to ring Fiona and tell her what I think of her, actually.

(Bitterly)

But I wouldn't want to interrupt anything.

(As HE speaks, LORI opens her purse, and begins to roll a joint.
NICHOLAS does not notice)

LORI

I'm afraid to go home. I don't really want to walk in on them swinging from the chandeliers.

NICHOLAS

It just shows me the truth about myself, and I'm not very keen to face it. I'm a mouse, not a man. If I were a man, I would go out and buy a pistol and shoot the both of them. This is New York, I could buy a gun if I wanted to, couldn't I?

(HE seems to be almost considering it)

LORI

Nick, calm down, stop pacing.

NICHOLAS

Why, why should I?

LORI

Because. You're getting me worried, here.

NICHOLAS

Well, how can you stand it?

LORI

Bernie breaks my heart so much, it's all broke already, and I don't really notice. Here, sit down, I think I know what we both need.

(NICHOLAS sits down, cautiously)

NICHOLAS

Yes?

LORI

(Brandishing joint)

Here we go. Tada.

NICHOLAS
What's that?

LORI
It's a joint, silly.

NICHOLAS
What, marijuana?

LORI
No, crack cocaine.

(HE clearly thinks SHE might be serious)

LORI (CONT'D)
Yes, marijuana.

NICHOLAS
(Still alarmed, unnerved)
Lori -- you're not some sort of -- drug dealer, are you?

LORI
Not quite.

NICHOLAS
Well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to "just say no" in any case. No harm done, no hard feelings all 'round.

LORI
Why? Why are you looking at me like that?

NICHOLAS
No reason. It must simply be a cultural difference. We're from two different sides of the pond, that's all.

LORI
Of what?

NICHOLAS
The pond. The pond.

LORI
Oh. Look, Nick, you're on my side of the pond, in America now, right? Land of crime and vice and guns. Your wife is back at my apartment, fucking my husband. So, what the hell? Why not try a joint?

(HE stares at her for a moment, considering)

NICHOLAS
I don't have a lighter.

LORI
That's okay, I got one here.

(SHE puts the joint in her mouth, and lights it. SHE puffs, then hands it to him. HE gingerly accepts it)

NICHOLAS

You're supposed to inhale very deeply?

LORI

Well, not if you're gonna run for political office. But if you want to get high, yeah. Hold the smoke in your lungs for as long as you can.

(NICHOLAS inhales, and holds it. His eyes bug out and HE starts coughing. HE hands her the joint)

LORI (CONT'D)

It's a little strong. I got it from my brother Tad. He's a real pothead.

NICHOLAS

"Tad" is a Jewish name?

(Then, they both say simultaneously, smiling:)

NICHOLAS AND LORI

On Long Island.

(LORI inhales, passes it back to him. HE inhales wipes tears from his eyes, passes it back. HE croaks:)

NICHOLAS

I don't feel anything happening.

LORI

Give it a minute. But it may not be much fun for you, your first time.

NICHOLAS

That is true of so many things.

(They continue to pass the joint back and forth. Again, NICHOLAS takes a drag, and has a violent coughing fit. LORI, alarmed, gets up and goes to a tray of glasses and a pitcher on the bureau, compliments of the hotel)

LORI

Are you okay? Here, let me get you some water.

(SHE fills a glass, brings it over, and takes the joint from him as HE drinks)

LORI (CONT'D)

Better?

NICHOLAS

Yes, thank you. I don't know why I'm having so much trouble. I gave up fags only a few years ago.

LORI

What?

NICHOLAS

I say it's only a few years since I stopped smoking tobacco.

LORI

Oh. I must've heard you wrong.

(SHE takes his empty glass back to the bureau)

LORI (CONT'D)

Want more water?

NICHOLAS

No, thank you.

(Sniffs)

You know I've smelled this sweet smell before, at concerts and things. I always assumed it was some sort of herbal cigarette. I suppose it is, in a way.

(SHE rejoins him on the bed)

LORI

You go to rock concerts?

NICHOLAS

Not in many, many years.

(They each take a drag, and sit quietly for a moment)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

Well. I may as well do this properly.

(HE unbuttons the top button of his shirt, and removes his sport jacket)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

There, that's better.

LORI

You wild man, you.

NICHOLAS

That's me. A crazed drug fiend.

LORI

Bernie says the British are so busy getting drunk, they don't have time to try other drugs. He says you're just a nation of frustrated, gloomy alcoholics.

NICHOLAS

Bernie is a right wanker.

LORI

(Laughs)

Yeah, I guess so. But your wife isn't any prize, either.

NICHOLAS

Oh, Fee's all right.

(A beat)

True, she can be a bit of a cow sometimes . . .

(LORI laughs at this. They are both starting to get high, and silly)

LORI

Moooo! Mooooo!

(SHE does a pretty good imitation of a cow lowing. NICHOLAS chuckles)

LORI (CONT'D)

Bernie's scared he got Mad Cow Disease when he was at Oxford.

NICHOLAS

One can only hope.

LORI

Maybe him and your cow, they can give it to each other, huh? Mooooooo!

NICHOLAS

Mooooooo!

(They giggle, and look at each other fondly)

LORI

I think it's starting to do something for you.

NICHOLAS

Yes, I feel very groovy, man, very mellow.

(Imitating a British hippy)

Wow, this is, like, really amazing stuff, man. Heavy. It's, like, really expanding my head. I think I'd like a bowl of muesli, next, actually.

LORI

(Laughing)

You sound like the hippy on "The Young Ones."

NICHOLAS

"The Young Ones," do you get that here?

LORI

Sometimes.

NICHOLAS

I always saw the Neil character as being rather like Eeyore in Winnie-the-Pooh. He was such a gloomy gus: "No one listens to me. I feel like a Leonard Cohen record."

(HE imitates Nigel Planer's low, drawn-out monotone, and LORI cracks up. Everything is hilarious now. LORI tries to say something, but can't, for laughing)

NICHOLAS (CONT'D)

What?

LORI

(Gasping)

Mooooo!

(HE cracks up also. They both lie back on the bed, exhausted. SHE takes his hand. They both sit up slightly, and they kiss)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF SCENE 5

ACT TWO

Scene 6

(During the scene change, we hear a bit of Eurythmics doing "King and Queen of America":)

Well, come on, darling, the stars are burnin' bright
Come on now, darling, our luck is good tonight
'Cause we're the all-time winners in the all-time losers' game
Yeah, we're the all-time winners, and here we go again

The King and Queen of America
The King and Queen of America
The King and Queen of America
The King and Queen of America

Yeah, it's the king of nothing and the queen of rage
We're the pile of confusion upon the glittering stage
You know we never did anything to make ourselves feel proud
No, we never did anything, so let's play it loud . . .

SETTING: LORI and BERNARD'S apartment. The next morning.

AT RISE: BERNARD and FIONA walk in, and throw their coats on the re-made couch. BERNARD moves toward the phone.

FIONA

Are there any messages?

BERNIE

Let's see.

(HE hits the playback button. We hear a taped man's voice:)

STEVE(VO)

Bernie, Steve here. That was quite a meeting this morning. You two totally kicked butt. (Beep.)

BERNIE

Yes!

(Another message begins:)

RANDY (VO)

Hey guy, it's Randy, what's up? Let me know if you're up for squash sometime this week. And hey to you, Lori -- Shari says hello. (Beep.)

FIONA

(Incredulous)

Randy? Have you really got a friend called Randy?

BERNIE

Yeah, it doesn't mean horny over here.

(SHE moves to him as HE rewinds the tape.)

FIONA

And there were no other messages?

BERNIE

Nope. I guess Lori and Nick are still out painting the town.

FIONA

(Not pleased)

I suppose they really did spend the night at our hotel room, then.

BERNARD

Maybe she took him out to Massapequa to show him off to her Mom. Good news from Steve, though, huh?

(Dialing)

I better call Randy and tell him squash is out this week --

FIONA

Bernie, wait!

(HE looks up)

FIONA (CONT'D)

Before you start phoning people up -- there are a few things we'd better get sorted.

(HE sets the phone down.)

BERNARD

Okay. Shoot.

FIONA

I've been thinking about . . . the people we met today. All of them. And the things you didn't tell me before.

BERNARD

I don't know what you're driving at. I asked you what you thought of Blair -- you were pretty tight-lipped.

FIONA

What did you think of her monologue?

BERNARD

I thought she did a good job.

FIONA

You didn't find it the least bit . . . insipid?

BERNARD

Now that you mention it -- no.

FIONA

And the posh, phony accent she put on. That didn't irritate you?

BERNARD

Well, okay, so she's no Meryl Streep. But I told you -- if we cast Blair as Harriet, we hire a dialogue coach. Those guys are whizzes. They, like, taught Schwarzenegger how to talk, practically.

FIONA

And my last question: why didn't you tell me you'd slept with her?

(Startled, HE sputters, SHE cuts him off.)

FIONA (CONT'D)

Don't deny it again, please. It was obvious, just from the way you teased each other, and the way she kept glancing at me.

BERNARD

You're observant, I'll give you that.

FIONA

Why didn't you tell me?

BERNARD

Fiona, we're talking, like, comedy of errors, freshman year of college. It was the second time for both of us, okay? And it did not last.

BERNARD (CONT'D)

We're old friends -- she's like a sister to me now. A very rich sister, who can help us make this film.

FIONA

Why did you lie to me about it, that first night, in England?

BERNARD

Hey. Take it easy. You're married and I'm married. Getting into a jealous rage . . . that's a little out of whack.

FIONA

Jealousy isn't the point. The point is you lied.

BERNARD

Sure, okay, yes. We had just met face to face, I'd just flown over, you were ready to send me packing. What was I supposed to say? Now that we know each other, biblically and other ways, I'm telling you the truth.

FIONA

You've also told me that you think I should direct this film.

BERNARD

I do think that. You showed me your reel, this is your project, I think you'd be great.

FIONA

Then why in the meeting today did you go along with Steve and Donny when they said we have to consider all those people?

BERNARD

Those are big name directors, Fiona. We'd be lucky if they wanted to get aboard this project. We'd have backers up the wazoo. But the odds against any of them --

FIONA

Why did you not tell me you felt that way before the meeting?

(HE stares at her, becoming pissed off)

BERNARD

Honey, you've really got to grow up. You think it's that easy -- you just snap your fingers and you're a writer-director auteur? If not this project, then our next project, can't you understand that? I'm thinking about our future collaborations. I'm looking at the long-term trajectory --

(SHE sinks wearily into the couch.)

FIONA

Bernie, it's not what you do, don't you see? It's the way you go about it.

BERNARD

What? None of what happened today should surprise you. You see and hear what you want.

(SHE won't look up. HE wants a response.)

BERNARD (CONT'D)

What? What?

FIONA

Perhaps you're right. I've no one to blame for this situation but myself.

BERNARD

Well, don't sound so funereal. I've gotten you this far. I think things went really well today. From the minute they heard your accent, you could see them sit up straight, and try to look smart --
(Sees she's upset)

Hey. What is it?

FIONA

I don't know.

(Struggling for words)

I've re-written the script the way you wanted, and maybe it's better, and maybe I've destroyed what I set out to do, I can't even tell anymore, I can't even remember why I bothered to start this --

BERNARD

You're burned out. It happens. Back away from it for a few days, we'll see a show or something --

FIONA

No, listen. I made those changes not because I thought they were better, but because I needed your money. And you don't even have money, it's all those men in that room who have it, and they come at me with their ridiculous notions --

BERNARD

Yeah, Ted does run off at the mouth a lot. But you don't have to listen to him.

FIONA

And some of the suggestions -- I don't know, they're not bad, they might make for a good film -- but not a better film, don't you see? It's change for the sake of change. It's hierarchy and assertion of the male ego -- oh, you must see that's all it is.

BERNARD

And people don't make movies that way in England?

FIONA

They do, all over the world, obviously. But in England and elsewhere, there isn't this horror of allowing the writer to have a vision and be true to it. There isn't this -- scriptwriting done by committee, on an assembly line. I don't know.

BERNARD

Fiona, these guys are businessmen, okay? But they want to think of themselves as creative. So, if they diddle with your screenplay, and suggest a few changes, they feel like artists! It's like -- Salieri writing down notes for Mozart, trying to insert himself into the process somewhere.

FIONA

That isn't historically accurate either. But I like it -- it makes me Mozart.

BERNARD

Absolutely. So, let these clowns give you ideas, and use a few that won't hurt the movie, and smile at them, and use the accent for all its worth -- and we're there.

FIONA

But when all of you start explaining my film to me, and I just have to take it, in order to get the money --

BERNARD

(Hurt, annoyed)

Oh, you're lumping me in with them now, huh? I'm Salieri too, huh?

FIONA

I'm only saying -- you do use the money to bully me, to get your way. And I've put in the sex, and your montages, and watered down Harriet, and now they want it dumbed down even more -- at what point does one call it a day and give up?

BERNARD

Look, you're tired, and maybe even a little homesick.

FIONA

Yes, I am. I'm homesick for Nick, and our house, and the way things work at High Street Films, and a world with less swagger and strutting -- and I keep thinking about what Nick said.

BERNARD

What did Nick say?

FIONA

The other morning, before we came by here. He said I don't know myself how much of my affair with you is genuine attraction, and how much is trying to make the film. And it's been gnawing at me. He all but called me a whore.

BERNARD

He's full of shit. He came over here to ruin this for you --all of it.

FIONA

That's beside the point.

BERNARD

Look, I don't know how much of this would have happened, for either of us, if it weren't for the project. I'm not dissecting it -- I'm having a good time being with you.

FIONA

But it's not balanced between us, Bernie. In bed or in business. I'm too much the poor relative, the junior partner, the charity case. And I'm better than that, I'm better than this nonsense, and so is my country for that matter, and so is my script!

BERNARD

Fiona, don't start fucking with my mind again, threatening to pull out of the movie deal. Is that what you're doing here? Is it?

FIONA

(Near tears)

I don't know! I can't think!

(The doorbell rings. They both freeze and look up. BERNARD goes to the door, and opens it. NICHOLAS and LORI enter, looking nervous -- but they are resolved.)

BERNARD

Hey, how are you? We've been worried about you guys. Afraid you fell into the Hudson or something.

LORI

No, we're doing okay.

FIONA

Nick. I'm so glad to see you, darling. You've no idea.

NICHOLAS

(Quick nod)

Fee.

(HE looks away. BERNARD is addressing LORI, warmly.)

BERNARD

Where you been? Did you go by your mom's last night?

LORI

No -- we've been going for walks, a lot. We just went by the park. Nick wanted to see the Dakota, and Strawberry Fields.

BERNARD

That's great. That's really sweet.

FIONA

Nick's a sentimental guy, aren't you, darling?

LORI

And then we walked over here -- and we've decided to keep walking.

BERNARD

What do you mean?

NICHOLAS

We've decided to go back to England together. For awhile, at any rate. Fiona, here's your return ticket, I was able to exchange mine for one this evening. Oh, and here's your passport. The rest of your things are at the hotel -- I've paid for another night. No hurry going round to fetch them.

BERNARD

Wait a minute. You're just taking off, to England? What the hell is this? What about your job, Lori?

LORI

(Shrugs)

They can bring in a sub. If they fire me, they fire me. I've got to do this, Bernard.

BERNARD

Why? Why do you have to do this?

LORI

Because if I don't do this now I'll stay with you. And I can't stay with you.

FIONA

I realize you feel put out. But this seems a rather childish and dramatic way for the two of you to punish us, don't you think?

LORI

We're not punishing you. We're going to the Cotswolds.

FIONA

The Cotswolds?

LORI

Yeah, Nick was telling me about them. We were walking through rush hour. And it was gritty and dirty, and he starts telling me about thatched cottages, and winding roads, it just sounded magical.

NICHOLAS

Villages nestled among the trees. No main roads. Little sheep dotting the roly poly hills.

LORI

Nice little pubs serving ancient beers.

BERNARD

(Sarcastic)

Ancient beers?

LORI

Or, like, really old ones. Excuse me, I've got to grab a few things.

(SHE disappears happily into the bedroom.)

FIONA

Nick, this isn't like you. What has she been doing to you?

NICHOLAS

Oh, this and that.

FIONA

You're just going to leave me here? Like this? You're the one who always says I need looking after. You're the one who's supposed to save me from myself.

NICHOLAS

(Not unkind)

You do need looking after, Fiona. But I'm afraid I'm not the man for the job.

(More brisk, businesslike)

Now, we'll be staying at the house, when we're in London. You can phone us there and leave messages, that's probably best.

BERNARD

Hold on just a second, pal. Slow down. We're gonna take this nice and easy. Have a seat.

NICHOLAS

No, thanks just the same.

BERNARD

I said sit!

FIONA

(Turning on BERNARD)

Don't you talk to him that way!

(To NICHOLAS)

Now, Nicholas, just what are you saying?

NICHOLAS

We've already said it. It's all fairly straightforward. Lori and I are going on holiday together in the Cotswolds. Full stop.

FIONA

Do you want a divorce?

NICHOLAS

Don't know about the long-term. Difficult to say. Play it by ear, shall we?

FIONA

Well. If that's how you want it, then fine. Brilliant. Super.

NICHOLAS

Hope the film is going well.

FIONA

Oh, I'll bet you do.

NICHOLAS

No, I do, actually. You two may end up making something worth seeing.

FIONA

Nicholas, don't do this.

NICHOLAS

I'm afraid I must, Fee. It seems that perhaps I need looking after as well. And a bit of spontaneity -- just like you.

FIONA

Oh, fuck spontaneity!

(NICHOLAS calls to the other room)

NICHOLAS

Lori? Almost ready, darling?

(LORI enters with a big bag full of clothes, and an enormous teddy bear tucked under her arm.)

LORI

Yeah, I guess I can send for the rest. You wouldn't throw my things out, would you, Bernie?

BERNARD

What's yours is yours.

LORI

Thanks.

NICHOLAS

And we can always buy you some new things when we're in London.

BERNARD

(Contemptuous)

You're quite the big spender all of a sudden, aren't you, Nick?

NICHOLAS

Well, after all, I am a banker, and I have quite a bit put away. Seems a shame not to enjoy it.

BERNARD

Yeah, well, you know what they say about bankers.

NICHOLAS

What?

BERNARD

Interest penalty for early withdrawal.

NICHOLAS

(Cheerful)

Yes. I'm afraid I don't get that. Went right over my head.

LORI

(Cheerful)

Mine too.

BERNARD

Lori, I think you're making a mistake. I'm ready to have that kid. We've been building a relationship for a long time now --

LORI

Have we?

BERNARD

And I hate to see you throw it all away. I wish --

LORI

What? What do you wish? Do you have something to say to me, Bernie?

BERNARD

(Hesitates, then --)

I wish you'd think rationally for a moment before you jump off --

LORI

I didn't think so. Tell my mom I'm okay if she calls. Come on, Nick, we better catch a cab.

NICHOLAS

Yes. One last thing.

(Stopping in front of BERNARD, eyeball to eyeball)

You're a bastard.

(To LORI...)

That's it, darling, let's go.

(HE grabs one strap of her bag, and they hurry out the door.

BERNARD and FIONA are left staring at each other, as the music comes up -- Eurythmics again, doing the final chorus of "The King and Queen of America")

The King and Queen of America

The King and Queen of America

The King and Queen of America

The King and Queen of America

(The music swells as the curtain falls. LIGHTS DOWN)

END OF PLAY