

THE STUDY

By Sophy Burnham

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THE STUDY

CAST

In order of appearance

Catherine Webster, also known as Cat or Kitty

Meredith Marshall, her sister, also known as Mouse

Bobby Marshall, their brother

Freida Marshall, their mother

Gordon Marshall, their father

A covey of voices: *the Shadows*

ACT I

The study, a day in winter around noon

ACT II

The Study later that afternoon

Same, late that night

ACT I

The library of a big house, appealingly shabby and well-used. The walls are lined with books and the tables piled with papers and magazines: an impression that years have passed in this room. It has developed a comfortable spread to the seat of its pants, lived in, and without the glitter of pretension. Its Persian carpets are muted with age and dirt. GORDON's sofa is near the door. At center, is a window with a windowseat. It is empty

Offstage

CAT

Well, where is everybody?

BOBBY

Are you sure it's locked?

MOUSE

I'm not surprised. Nothing would surprise me anymore.

The crunch of gravel. A woman's face appears at the window, indistinctly, peering in.

BOBBY

Can you see anything?

Face disappears

MOUSE

No.

CAT

Did you try the window?

MOUSE

Which window?

Man's face appears, another shadowy form—and is gone.

BOBBY

There's no one there.

CAT

Well, it's certainly strange.

(Man's face appears again as he tugs at window.)

BOBBY

There! I've got it open. Who'll go through. Cat?

CAT

I don't know. . .

MOUSE

I will. Give me a hand.

(We now see MOUSE, who crawls in head-first, awkwardly, all spidery legs and elbows.)

I'm going to run my stockings.I'm stuck.

CAT

There! You're in!

BOBBY

Are you all right?

*twisting
somehow
Tall,
Once
pleasure*

(MOUSE gets to feet, straightens her skirt, hips. She is dressed conservatively, but just a little wrong, as if in old wet wool. gawky, plain, she moves in fits and leaps. having settled clothing, she glances with around the room.)

CAT

(banging on window): Mouse! Mouse!

BOBBY

Open the door!

MOUSE

Oh yes. (*Lunges toward door, catching her hip against small table, spilling magazines everywhere.*)

Oh dear.

(*exits, rubbing hip.*)

From off-stage

There.

CAT

There, that's better.

BOBBY

What took you so long?

(*They enter study, stripping off coats, and sling themselves into chairs or stand according to inclination: 3 siblings. They are all in their 30's and 40's. An air of excited anticipation.*)

BOBBY

Brr. It's going to snow.

CAT

Well, how typical.

MOUSE

Help me with the magazines. I'm not surprised. Are you surprised?

CAT

Mouse, close the window, brr.

MOUSE

Only I wonder where they are.

BOBBY

Mm.

MOUSE

It just makes me so mad. I swear I could cry. Once I remember driving all the way down from New York, four hours, and I'd said I was coming. I mean, they knew. And when I got here there wasn't a soul around. And I waited and waited. (*she is close to tears*) I

mean they invited me. And then they came in, all smiles, just as if nothing was wrong.
They'd been playing golf. I mean--

CAT

(upset; leaping to her feet) Well, at least we know that's not where they are. *(exiting)*

Does anyone want coffee? I want a cup of coffee.

(exit CAT)

MOUSE

Oh, will you--? Well, she walked out. . . do you want some coffee, Bobby?

BOBBY

No, but some tea?

MOUSE

All right.

(starting to exit) I've always loved this table. I'd like this table when they go. Do you mind?

BOBBY

(who has just sat down, leaps up, scalded) You can have it all, for God's sake!

MOUSE

Well, I don't want it all.

BOBBY

I don't want any of it.

(exit BOBBY)

MOUSE

(following him to door) Well, what did I say? Is that so bad? They're going to die someday. It's unrealistic not to --

Beat

Offstage, the laughter of the siblings in the hallway, and they re-enter, carrying cups. .

MOUSE

How can that be?

CAT

I forget which tribe.

MOUSE

And these Indians don't have *any* word for time?

CAT

Well, that's what I heard.

MOUSE

But everything on this dimension operates on time. When you say grandmother you've used a concept of time. Or, it's a nice day. Day means time. Birth. . . death. . .

CAT

I don't remember really. It sounded right when the professor said it.

MOUSE

Find out if they have a past tense. If they don't have a past or future tense, maybe they really don't have time. I'd like to know.

CAT

Remember the discussion, Bobby, at the dinner table one night, when you brought up the clock on the landing?

MOUSE

I never did understand that.

CAT

It was Einstein's theory.

BOBBY

I don't remember.

MOUSE

I've been reading a lot of Buddhist stuff lately--

BOBBY

Oh Mouse!

MOUSE

--and they believe in reincarnation, of course, like the Hindus. But what I don't understand is why they all believe they'd be reincarnated forward in time. I mean probably it's only here on earth that time moves forward, and everywhere else--

BOBBY

All those other places, you mean?

MOUSE

It could move backwards. Or not move at all. I mean, why shouldn't you be reincarnated back to the Crusades. Or sideways. So you repeat your whole life from a different point of view. You re-live Hitler's holocaust again and again, acting different parts, like the refractions in a frog's eye.

BOBBY

What?

MOUSE

See, probably, in heaven, time is swirling all about, happening all at once, simultaneously, with no progression at all.

CAT

That's so complicated. Why can't you just believe in heaven and angels like everyone else? *(all laugh)* You know, it's almost a year since I've been home?

MOUSE

Oh Cat, no.

CAT

I love it so. All I do is walk in the house--the smell of leather and books--and I become a

child again. I used to read hiding in the windowseat—classics, junk novels. I'd read all day long. It's how I ruined my eyes. I can't see anything without my glasses now. . . .
The Dog of Flanders. Remember Black Beauty? All those sappy horse stories. And later it was Tolstoy and Jane Austin and Henry James.

MOUSE

Do you remember the time that criminal came after Daddy, and he broke in right here in the study, and Mummy and Daddy were sitting at the fire and just invited him to join them? “Well, how nice, we have a visitor, Gordon—“

BOBBY

You don't remember that.

MOUSE

No, but I've heard it, I mean, we were all too young. And the man had such fun he went off without taking revenge. I love that story.

BOBBY

I like the one where Daddy came bursting in one night, and I do remember this, because I'd just graduated from the kitchen to the dining room and you two already knew how to eat in the dining room. We were at the table, remember Cat? And Daddy burst in, slamming the front door: “I won! I won!

CAT

“99 years! My client got only—

CAT & BOBBY (*together*)

—99 years!”

MOUSE

I wish they'd hurry. Why do you suppose she invited us here?

CAT

I suppose it's Daddy.

(*Pause. Each considers the matter*)

MOUSE

I suppose he's dying. He was so weak the last time I was here.

BOBBY

He can hardly move at all.

CAT

If he can't move, how come he's not here, huh?

MOUSE

You don't suppose he's already dead, do you? She wouldn't have not told us, would she?

CAT

Oh Meredith! Of course she'd have told us. . . *(pause)*. . . Well, I suppose. . .

BOBBY

You know, she's perfectly capable of having him already underground by now. "Yes, I know, but I didn't want to upset you children."

MOUSE

Like the time she was in the hospital for a cancer operation and didn't tell us. I was so hurt.

CAT

Poor Mummy, what will she do without him?

MOUSE

You know I came to visit one weekend, and I was sitting over breakfast in the dining room with Daddy, reading the paper, just him and me; and suddenly he bellowed: "Freida! Freida!" And Mummy was all the way upstairs. "I'm coming," she called, and then clatter-clatter-clatter-clatter she clashes down the steps in her bedroom slippers, and clatter-clatter-clatter across the hall. "What is it, Gordon?" And he looked up at her innocently. "Can I have another cup of coffee?" He said. I was horrified! "Daddy!" I said. "You called Mummy all the way downstairs and all the way in here just to ask for a cup of coffee? And you're sitting right next to the kitchen. The coffee's on the stove. Did it occur to you to get a refill yourself?"

“No,” he said, “It never occurred to me.”

BOBBY

Well, that’s their relationship. I mean 46 years of marriage.

CAT

It’s true. She wants to wait on him.

MOUSE

I couldn’t bear it.

BOBBY

Watch the [table]—

CAT

So, that’s why you’re not married.

MOUSE

Listen, Cat—

CAT

(not listening, laughing) but it’s true, she loves to serve him. Feed the horses—

MOUSE

When we had them.

CAT

— chop the wood, mow the lawns. All the physical labor. Do you remember the big blizzard about five years ago? I remember it was right after Katrinka was born. And I telephoned from Ohio and Mummy told me how the snow was up to the window sills. The cars were completely covered, like marshmallows, and the snow was so deep the snowplows couldn’t get into the drive. “The snow was so deep,” she told me, “that your father came to the front door to watch me take the sledge out to the woodpile to get the wood, he was so worried about me.” *(All burst out laughing)* And she meant it! She was deeply touched!. . . Oh, it’s so sad, I can’t bear it!

MOUSE

He was the intellectual. . .

(pause)

BOBBY

We don't know that he's dying.

MOUSE

Oh Bobby, come on!

CAT

Poor Mummy.

MOUSE

(with a laugh): Poor Daddy.

CAT

I know, but you know you're not married so you don't know what a rare relationship they have, really. What will she do without him? Somehow I always thought she'd go first.

BOBBY

Did you?

CAT

I mean, when I was little, and. . . oh, it's so awful. Here I am, a grown woman, and I can't bear it. . .

MOUSE

Oh Kitty-cat.

(they embrace)

BOBBY

Well, maybe nothing's wrong. Maybe she just invited us to lunch, and in a minute they'll come in--

CAT

(brightening) And she'll make us a bologna sandwich--

MOUSE

On Wonder Bread--imitation bread--

BOBBY

With imitation mayonnaise.

(they break up laughing)

MOUSE

All right, enough. Now I shall do the Tarot cards and see what's in store.

CAT

Oh Mouse, for heaven's sake!

MOUSE

(beginning the ritual) This is a wonderful room. Do you feel the vibrations? But there are shadows. . . how strange. . .

CAT

I didn't know they had a Knight's edition of Shakespeare. Did you know they had the Knight's edition? Look at these books. Poetry, art. . . trout fishing. . . hunting. . . Rosseau. Here's Plautus in Latin. Did they read everything?

BOBBY

Well, some were Grandfather's.

CAT

I know. But still. Imagine. . . It makes my mouth water. Remember sitting here with Mummy and Daddy in the evenings. And Mummy in that chair there, with her knitting.

MOUSE

I remember that.

CAT

And Daddy always reading.

BOBBY

Or beating us at chess.

CAT

And he'd be concentrating so hard you couldn't get his attention: "Daddy," you'd say.

"Daddy I have a question. Daddy?" He never heard a word once he started reading.

MOUSE

I shall do a Tarot about them, here in this room.

BOBBY

I didn't know you could do it for other people.

MOUSE

I'm doing a lot of work with my dreams now, and they're showing me so much. And with painting too.

BOBBY

Painting?

MOUSE

In my group the other day we were supposed to pair up and then each of us had a half-page to work on, and when we'd each done our half-page we had to exchange the paper with our partners. I drew a snake. It came from a dream I'd had earlier that week, and it filled up my whole half-page; and then (*with increasing agitation*) we exchanged, and do you know what he'd done?

BOBBY

Who?

MOUSE

My partner. He left his page blank—all blank, except for the outline of a box, and inside that was another box, and then inside that another one. Three boxes. I wanted to scratch them all out!! Scribble-Scrabble! And then I saw it was a mirror and I drew my face inside the box.

(*silence*)

CAT

Oh.

MOUSE

You see, there's so much to learn. Do you think she'd like orbs or pentacles?

BOBBY

Maybe--

CAT

How can you do a Tarot for someone who's not here?

MOUSE

Pick a card.

CAT

(pointing with her foot) That one.

MOUSE

The Five of Sticks?

CAT

It just speaks to me.

MOUSE

You're teasing me.

BOBBY

This one. That's pretty.

MOUSE

Three above you. . . three below you. . .

the

(off-stage the sound of a car approaching;

children panic.)

BOBBY

Here they are!

CAT

You better put them away. She'll think you're nuts.

BOBBY

(To MOUSE) The lamp!

MOUSE

Ow!

(off-stage the slam of car doors, then

FREIDA's

voice)

Off-stage

FREIDA

All right, stand up! Stand UP! That's right! Put your hand there!

BOBBY

I'll go see if I can help.

(exit BOBBY)

FREIDA

(Off-stage) No, there! All right now. . . Move your feet! Lift it! Come lift it, Gordon!.

. . . OUT OF MY WAY!! DON'T TOUCH THAT!

CAT

Too bad. . .

(Off-stage)

FREIDA

Gordon! MOVE! Now the other foot!

GORDON

Goddam it! Goddam it!

FREIDA

DON'T SIT DOWN!!

CAT

There's nothing you can do.

MOUSE

I know but I can't stand listening to it. . .

BOBBY

(Off-stage) Can I help?

FREIDA
OUT OF MY WAY! GET OUT! TURN! TURN!

GORDON
Goddam it! OOOOHHHHHAAAAAAA!

FREIDA
THERE! All right, Bobby, you can wheel him in.

(CAT and MOUSE both rush out door, just in time to block it, as GORDON's wheelchair appears. They all tangle, untangle, spill back into the room.)

FREIDA
(Queenly) Well, aren't you going to say hello? Meredith? Catherine? Don't put him in the sofa. He'll be going upstairs any minute now. There's no point in getting him up and down.

(GORDON, now in his 70's is partially paralyzed by a stroke. He forces out words with effort and croaking breath. At times he seems unable to bring out any words at all, while at others, and especially under emotional stress, he suddenly opens to the flow, speaking easily. The same is true of his attention-span: sometimes he watches with sharp understanding and at others he reaches out one hand, as if to interrupt and collapses in confusion. At first we are not aware of the shadows of his mind.)

MOUSE moves to kiss father with a yearning wistfulness. She is followed dutifully by CAT.

MOUSE
Hello, Daddy.

GORDON
Mousie.

CAT
Good morning, Daddy.

GORDON
(Holding her hands) Kitty. . .

FREIDA

Well, I see you all got in all right.

CAT

No thanks to you. How come the door was locked?

MOUSE

Where were you anyway? Weren't we invited for noon?

FREIDA

We had to go out.

MOUSE

We had to crawl through the window.

FREIDA

This one? Oh, I thought I'd locked it.

MOUSE

Mother! Didn't you want us to come in?

CAT

It's our house.

FREIDA

Well, Bobby, how are you, dear? Is Henrietta well? Still winning at tennis? I think it's time for a drink. Anybody want a drink?

GORDON

I do.

FREIDA

Bobby? Kitty-Cat? I'm going to have a vermouth.

BOBBY

I'll get it. Daddy, bourbon?

GORDON

Yes. . . I'd like that.

FREIDA

Well, you can't have one! It's not good for you!

GORDON

I think it's damned good for me!

BOBBY

Let him have one. It's a celebration. For you, vermouth on the rocks?

FREIDA

Please. Not too much ice.

MOUSE

Nothing for me.

FREIDA

Meredith doesn't drink anymore. Is that part of your Hundu-bindu mumbo-jumbo?

MOUSE

Mummy!

CAT

Vermouth with soda please. I fall asleep if I drink in the afternoon. Why Daddy, your hand is so cold.

FREIDA

Well, it is nice to see you all. Meredith, you've gotten too thin.

CAT

How are you Daddy?

GORDON

I'm fine. . . Fine. . .

CAT

You look fine.

FREIDA

Hmf. . . . Now, don't start that! Gordon, you stop that this minute.

CAT

Oh, you startled me.

FREIDA

I'll send you right upstairs!

MOUSE

Well, but Mummy, how are you?

FREIDA

Oh I'm all right! What do you think?

GORDON

She's fine. . . fine...

FREIDA

I am not fine! How dare you? Fine indeed--

(Enter BOBBY with tray of drinks)

Oh good, that's what we need.

BOBBY

Mother. . . Cat. . . Daddy. . .

FREIDA

Put it on the table, put it on the table.

CAT

Here, Daddy.

FREIDA

He'll just spill it. Put it on the table.

(All drink except MOUSE. Pause)

FREIDA

The other day Michael Train came in. He drove all the way out here just to see Gordon and you should have seen how your father acted. I've never been so embarrassed.

CAT

What happened?

FREIDA

Michael's 75 years old you know. He doesn't look a day over 60. He got married last year. To Emma Cromwell. You remember her, Bobby? You were at school with her

son. Her mother was a Shirley of South Carolina. Very fine family.

CAT

What happened with Michael Train?

FREIDA

Well, he just dropped in for a scotch after Church on Sunday, as he often does, you know.

We have a very nice relationship. And we were talking, as usual about this and that. . .

the Service and who was there. . . Your father behaved like a perfect maniac. First he collapses against the cushion. You'd have thought there wasn't a bone in his body. His

eyes bug out *(To GORDON)* Oh yes, you did. And it's just an act. You don't have to

behave like that. We just ignored him, of course, as polite people should. And then he

began to. . . to. . . then he unzipped himself, and the next I know he's pulling at--at--

he's totally absorbed in his. . .

(CAT laughs, embarrassed)

MOUSE

Oh Mummy.

BOBBY

Good God.

FREIDA

I remember exactly. We were talking about Rita Bosworth. You heard her father died.

She had to sell the old place. The estate tax wipes them out entirely. Wipes them out.

This government effort to make everybody equal, it makes me so mad. As if being equal

in the eyes of God had anything to do with equal sums of money. Well, Mike was

distraught, you can imagine. He thought your father had lost his mind. And as if that

wasn't bad enough--*(to GORDON)* don't look away, you did everything you could to

embarrass me--roll your eyes, pretend you can't talk. And then suddenly I look over and

there's your father beginning to-- I can't imagine what got into him--wind up like a baseball pitcher. "Mike?" He croaks. He can speak perfectly well. "Mi-ike?" Poor Michael leaped to his feet. "What is it, old fella?" he said, and there's your father, reaching out--reaching out. He grabbed his jacket. Michael was leaning over him, and Gordon just poured his drink all down Michael's pants. "It's good to see you, old man," he said. Honestly, I've never been so. . . so. . .

MOUSE

Maybe he was jealous

FREIDA

Jealous of what?

MOUSE

Jealous of his health and. . . and all. . .

FREIDA

Well, he could do it if he wanted. Listen, your father is the laziest man I've ever met. It's sheer laziness, that's all.

CAT

Mummy, he's had a stroke!

MOUSE

It affects the brain. I mean, it isn't a matter of--

FREIDA

If he wanted to, he could get well. It's all a matter of willpower. He just doesn't care. Damned ice cubes.

MOUSE

You just threw the ice in the fire!

FREIDA

They'll melt. Give them a minute and you won't even know it's wet. (*spotting scarf with tarot cards*) Well, and what is this?

CAT

Oh nothing.

(FREIDA wards off CAT, opens scarf with exaggerated gesture, using two fingers and wide sweeps of the arm: play-acting but with an undercurrent of hostility.)

FREIDA

Ah, the future is at hand. This has to be more of your doing, Meredith.

MOUSE

Me?

FREIDA

Tarot, elephant gods. . .

MOUSE

I don't have elephant gods!

FREIDA

Look at them, my goodness, they're perfectly hideous. . . the hanging man. . . the bleeding heart. . . the King of. . . whatever, all covered with ivy. It looks like he's choking in it. Why would anyone want a fortune told with these?

CAT

I don't think it's your fortune exactly, is it, Mouse?

MOUSE

Would you like me to read your Tarot?

FREIDA

(laughing) Good heavens, no. If the future is anything like the present the sooner it's past the better. I believe in hope. Here, you can have them.

CAT

Ok, come on, Mummy. Spill the beans. Are you going to tell us why you asked us here?

We're all on tenterhooks.

(BOBBY and MOUSE murmur assent)

FREIDA

I'd have thought you could have guessed. . . Your father and I have decided to get a divorce.

CAT

Mummy!

MOUSE

A divorce?

BOBBY

(nervously laughing) A divorce! Ha ha!

FREIDA

That's right. We have a perfect right to get a divorce if we want.

CAT

But you've been married 46 years. People don't get divorced after 46 years.

FREIDA

And why not, may I ask? At least you can't say we didn't try. . .

MOUSE

Well, it's just so long.

FREIDA

Too long, I say. The trouble with you children is you're so conformist, isn't that right, Gordon? There's no one so conservative as a child.

BOBBY

No, but you—

FREIDA

You simply can't imagine any marriage breaking up except your own. You're all so. . . *shallow*.

BOBBY

But you've got to admit. . . I mean—

FREIDA

People get divorced all the time. It's not exactly socially unheard-of. I want another

drink please.

BOBBY

Goodness. You certainly downed that.

FREIDA

Well, it's a very small glass. There's a drop of vermouth in that decanter.

MOUSE

Daddy. . . Do you want a divorce too?

GORDON

That's right. . . We want a divorce!

MOUSE

Mummy?. . . Daddy?

FREIDA

So I've brought you here to take responsibility. It's time you began to take charge.

CAT

Responsibility?

FREIDA

For your father. I'm not going to be taking care of him anymore.

BOBBY

Oh my lord.

CAT

Mummy!

MOUSE

Daddy!

FREIDA

Oh yes, you know what they say, one mother and one father can raise ten children, but ten children can't care for one mother or one father! Well, it's time you took a little responsibility. And I don't mean by putting him in a nursing home either, that's no solution. I know Aunt Alice was sent to a nursing home, and the children *sold her house!*

Sold it right while she was there. And just the other day I heard about a man whose children were living right in the house with him, in *his* house, mind, and they put him in an institution without a thought and left him there. *They* took the house.

(Downs her drink and pours

another)

Now, I'll let you all think this over, while I make us some lunch, shall I? I thought bologna sandwiches would be nice.

MOUSE

Mummy!

(exit FREIDA. The 3 children stand avoiding each other's eyes)

BOBBY

Well. I guess I'll help.

(exit BOBBY)

MOUSE

Come on, Cat. We better help with lunch.

CAT

I'll be back in a minute, Daddy, with your lunch. Are you all right?

GORDON

(smiling up at her) I'm fine. . . Fine. . .

(exit MOUSE, followed by CAT. GORDON remains alone. He looks around. Lights dim. . .)

ACT I. Scene 2. a few minutes later:

Enter BOBBY with tray of sandwiches and a

glass
FREIDA,

of milk, followed by CAT and last by
carrying her drink.

Here's your lunch.

BOBBY

chair)

(FREIDA sets up folding tray from behind a

I don't see why.

CAT

FREIDA
Because he's a dirty old man, that's why. I won't live one more minute under the same
roof with him.

CAT
Daddy, you went to a lawyer this morning?

I want. . . to go. . . up

GORDON

FREIDA
That's right. Avoid the entire issue!

Oh Mummy.

CAT

FREIDA
plate
Eat your sandwich. Go on.

(Leans forward tapping GORDON's
with one finger)

(Enter MOUSE)

BOBBY
Mother!

BOBBY

FREIDA
Go on! You don't leave perfectly good food on your plate. . . That's better. I want

another drink.

CAT

Another!

FREIDA

The decanter's empty. Bobby, if you please?

BOBBY

Vermouth?

(exit BOBBY to kitchen)

FREIDA

(calling after him) With no ice.

MOUSE

Don't you thin--

FREIDA

No, I do not. I can have another drink if I wish without my children telling me what to do. When you get to be my age. . . Go on! I'm not taking you to your room until you eat every scrap on that plate. We're not throwing away perfectly good food. He only does it to torment me.

GORDON

I want. . . to go. . . my room. . . Can I--?

MOUSE

All right, I'll take him in.

FREIDA

I'm just going to wrap it up. You'll eat it for lunch tomorrow. I'm not throwing good food after bad.

(Exit MOUSE wheeling GORDON. In doorway she meets BOBBY and they stand blocking each other a moment before BOBBY retreats to let her pass. Enter BOBBY, hands FREIDA drink)

BOBBY

I'll help you with Daddy, Mouse.

(Exit BOBBY after GORDON and

MOUSE)

FREIDA

Thank you dear... Well, Kitty, it's nice to see you. How are the children?

CAT

They're fine.

FREIDA

And Katrinka? She must be in school by now.

CAT

Mummy, are you really filing for divorce?

FREIDA

Now now, don't worry. It has nothing to do with you.

CAT

It has everything to do with me. With us. My parents divorced. Unhappy. What's going on?

FREIDA

We've just decided it's time to split. Are glasses getting smaller now?

CAT

You're just drinking your lunch. You're going to turn into a lush.

FREIDA

I am not a lush. I should shay zchat I am not a lush....

(they laugh)

CAT

Oh Mummy, couldn't you get a nurse for him? It's just that it's too much for you here alone—

FREIDA

Now, Kitty, where am I going to get a nurse? You think I haven't tried? You know very well what happens. You hire some ignorant girl—

CAT

Oh Mummy!

FREIDA

Well, go ahead, you and your liberal ideas. I've lived longer than you, I know what they're like. You can't find decent help any more. (*lowering her voice*) I don't know what's the matter with them. No one wants to work anymore. You pay all this money and fill out papers for the government till you're blue in the face, and they come in for one week, or for three days, and that's it. You just begin to get them trained and they don't even have the courtesy to telephone. Oh no, just get their paycheck and run. Well, I'm sick of it. It's easier to do it all myself.

CAT

But you have to have some help.

FREIDA

I don't need any help. He's leaving, that's all.

CAT

Why then, you're serious!

FREIDA

Why is it that when I make a joke everyone thinks I'm serious and when I make a serious pronouncement everyone takes it as a joke? Is that a fault in me or them? The eye of the beholder sees a diminishing glass. Excuse me, dear, I think I'll just take out these—

(*staggers*) I'll be right back. I do so want to hear about Ohio. And Alan.

(*exit FREIDA*)

CAT

I can't bear it.

(*re-enter MOUSE and BOBBY*)

BOBBY

Where's Mummy?

CAT

In the kitchen getting smashed.

MOUSE

Anyone want my bologna?

BOBBY

Sure.

MOUSE

Drunk. Mummy never used to drink.

CAT

She does now.

MOUSE

What in God's name is happening?

CAT

What's happening, dear sister, is that she's close to collapse and she wants us to take care of Daddy. And I don't see how I can do it. I have this teeny-tiny house—

BOBBY

Well, not that tiny.

CAT

Oh, where would we put Daddy, I ask you? In the basement? I suppose we could build on a room, but my God, I have two children.

MOUSE

And I have a job. I'm out of the apartment all day.

BOBBY

He'd have to go to a nursing home. None of us can take proper care—

(enter FREIDA, pouring liberally from bottle into her glass. She overhears BOBBY's remark.)

FREIDA

Well, I know one thing. He's not staying in my house one more day.

MOUSE

It's his house too.

FREIDA

Not anymore, it's not. He's never cared for it. He just lived here. He's lazy...

MOUSE

Mummy!

FREIDA

Don't you Mummy me—

(from off-stage a horrible shriek,

GORDON's wail.

The children are transfixed)

GORDON

(from off-stage) OOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

MOUSE

Daddy!

BOBBY

Are you all right?

(Both exit running)

FREIDA

(calling after them) He's perfectly all right! He's fine. He's just doing it to torment me.

STOP THAT GORDON MARSHALL, YOU STOP THAT THIS MINUTE!!

CAT

But then he's very sick.

FREIDA

Oh poo, don't you believe it. He just wants attention. Anytime he's alone he gives that howl—

CAT

The Hound of the Baskervilles.

FREIDA

You go in. "Are you all right? What's wrong?" "I don't know," he says.

*(MOUSE and BOBBY return wheeling
GORDON)*

FREIDA

Back again. Well, all right, now you can tell them yourself. Go on, ask him! He'll tell you, won't you?

CAT

Tell what?

FREIDA

Why we want a divorce. Go on, Gordon, you tell them. They're your children. They deserve to know.

MOUSE

Why then, Daddy? Why do you want a divorce?

*(GORDON looks at her a long time,
eyes humble, brows wrinkled.
Leans forward, opens and closes his mouth,
unable to marshal his forces)*

FREIDA

Go on, tell her.

*(GORDON tries again, then
collapses, confused.)*

GORDON

I don't know.

CAT

You don't know!

MOUSE

Oh Mummy, this is absurd!

FREIDA

Absurd is it? You all make me sick. Absurd. Why? Because I'm old? It's not absurd when you, Catharine, come crying to me about Alan.

CAT

Mother!

BOBBY

I didn't know you and Alan—

CAT

Oh, it was long ago. It's not—

FREIDA

Or you, Meredith who have not even chosen to get married—

MOUSE

Mummy—

FREIDA

No, it's only absurd when you're—

BOBBY

She didn't mean it that way, Mummy. She just meant that we aren't accustomed to the idea yet. You have to give us time...And what would you do, have you given that any thought? What would you do without Daddy around?

FREIDA

Oh, just you wait! I shall blossom, flower and fruit. First I shall cut my hair—

MOUSE

Cut your hair!

FREIDA

Don't you think that would look nice? Short hair fluffing up around my face. Perhaps I'll dye it blond, like your Aunt Evie. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Gordon.

GORDON

I don't know.

FREIDA

And I'll get a beau. That's right, I'm not too old to step out to a dance (*executing a dance*).

CAT

You used to go out dancing all the time, remember? You and Daddy would dress up for a ball, and he'd pop his top hat at us—

MOUSE

I loved it. You were both so beautiful.

FREIDA

I don't know what you're talking about...But I am ready now to paint the town. I think I'll make a pass at Adele Potter's little brother. He's so divine. He's just divine.

MOUSE

Mummy!

CAT

(pulling MOUSE aside) Have you ever seen her like this?

MOUSE

I don't know what's wrong.

CAT

Does she do this every night? Get drunk?

MOUSE

Well, how should I know?

CAT

Do something.

MOUSE

Me?

FREIDA

And redecorate. Yes, I'll get him out and I'll recover all the chairs and paint the house. Buy new clothes. I'll be entirely new, a whole new beautiful person with a whole new world. You can tell my Tarot, right? You'll see my future. I have a fantastic future ahead of me. Love, romance on dusky ship-board under an autumn moon...

BOBBY

Well, listen Mummy, I can understand how you feel.

FREIDA

Oh you can, can you! What do you understand? OH!

stop

the

is still

over her

(losing her balance, she pitches forward slowly, one hand outstretched to

herself, the other holding her glass level all

while...MOUSE leaps to help, knocking over footstool.

FREIDA rolls to the floor on her back. She

miraculously holding her drink up-right

head.)

MOUSE

Mummy!

laughter)

(BOBBY bursts into horrified

FREIDA

I'm fine. I'm all right. I didn't even spill.

MOUSE

You just lost your balance, that's all.

FREIDA

Oh stop it, all of you!

tears.

(With a look of rage, she exits in

The others stand paralyzed.

little

There is an embarrassed silence, filled with embarrassed movements.)

CAT

It's just awful.

MOUSE

(lurching across room) Mummy!

*(MOUSE exits after FREIDA. CAT
sits beside her father, takes his hand and*

looks

deeply in his eyes.)

CAT

Daddy, please try to remember. Why is Mummy so upset? What's happened? . . .

(pause) Daddy, she's drunk, do you understand?

GORDON

Yes...I know.

CAT

What do you know?

GORDON

Why we want a divorce. It's because—

CAT

Yes?

GORDON

Bec—it's...my fault. Be-be-Because –

BOBBY

Why? What happened?

CAT

What's your fault?

GORDON

I did it. It was-- It was—

CAT

Go slow. It's all right. What did you do?

GORDON

We want a divorce!

CAT

Yes, Daddy. But why? What did you do?

*seated at
opposite)*

*(Enter MOUSE. BOBBY and CAT are
either side of GORDON. MOUSE sits*

CAT

Was it about money?

BOBBY

Anything to do with money?

GORDON

(shaking his head) No. No.

BOBBY

Not money.

CAT

They're not divorcing over money.

MOUSE

Work. Is it connected to work?

BOBBY

Your sickness? Is it related to the stroke?

CAT

You've done something to make Mummy mad. Something very recent?

GORDON

Yes. My fault.

BOBBY

You made a mistake?

GORDON

(gratefully) Yes. A mistake.

MOUSE

What mistake could he possibly make in his present condition?

BOBBY

Maybe that was the mistake.

MOUSE

And then you quarreled, is that it?

GORDON

Yes, a quarrel.

BOBBY

Of course, it's a quarrel.

MOUSE

Is it over religion, Daddy?*(to others)* Well, what could they possibly quarrel over after all these years?

BOBBY

(joking) How about a woman?

CAT

Oh Bobby, really!

GORDON

Yes, a woman!

MOUSE

Yes?

CAT

A woman? It's a quarrel over a woman?

MOUSE

He must mean a man.

BOBBY

Who is it, Daddy?

Do we know her? CAT

The sister. GORDON

You mean Mouse? CAT

You mean Cat? MOUSE

(impatiently) No! No. GORDON

Whose sister, Daddy? BOBBY

Do you mean your own sister, Daddy? CAT

Your mu-- muth— GORDON

Our mother's sister? MOUSE

(GORDON nodding)

(triumphant) Aunt Evie! Do you mean Aunt Evie? CAT

The one who died? It has to do with her? BOBBY

I told her—. . . GORDON

(gently; slowing him down) OK. It concerns Aunt Evie. You want a divorce because of CAT

Aunt Evie.

BOBBY

This makes no sense at all. Was it something about her death, Daddy?

CAT

Be quiet, Bobby. You confuse him. Go on, Daddy.

GORDON

I told her...yesterday . . .

CAT

It's all right.

GORDON

I told her...

MOUSE

Just go slow, Daddy.

GORDON

I told her I had an affair with her sister.

BOBBY

Oh my god!

CAT

With Aunt Evie!

MOUSE

Oh Daddy, but everyone has affairs.

CAT

Mou-sie!

BOBBY

(laughing) Oh my god. It's *le crime passionale*. We think they're so old... ha ha...that she's too old...

GORDON

(fiercely) She's not...old!

CAT

But Aunt Evie's been dead for years.

BOBBY

Before I was born. (*laughing*) They're quarrelling over something that happened before

I was born.

convulsed (off-stage, a squeal of tires. BOBBY is
with embarrassed and horrified laughter)

MOUSE

What's that?

BOBBY

We think they're practically dead, and they're quarrelling like teenage lovers.

CAT

Bobby! Stop it!

MOUSE

She's taken the car. She must be driving 50 miles an hour.

CAT

Bobby, have you no decency?

BOBBY

Oh god!

MOUSE

Oh Daddy, how could you tell her such a thing. You should never have told her!

CAT

I can't bear it.

BLACKOUT

end Act I
for Act II, please request play from Sophy Burnham