

**ABERNATHY IN MARIETTA!**  
(The Community Play)

By Jason Half

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**ABERNATHY IN MARIETTA! (The Community Play)**

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A new comedy in two acts

CAST OF CHARACTERS (6 M, 6 F)

CAROLYN GARDNER - 40s

CLAIRE GARDNER - 18

HARRISON P. "HARRY" ABERNATHY - 40s

HANK ABERNATHY - 18

BUTCH WALKER - 20s/30s

TOBY SIMMS - 30s

HORACE HOFNAGEL - 50s/60s

DELIA HOFNAGEL - 50s/60s

PAM RUDDIGER - 30s/40s

CONNIE DOW - 40s

JOHNNY DOW - 10

BONNIE DOW - 8

Setting: the stage of Marietta Players Community Theater

Time: present

Act One - Rehearsal, an evening in July.

Act Two - Four weeks later; one hour before Opening Night

## ACT ONE

Lights rise on a stage with just a few chairs and blocks waiting in different areas. A canvas or wooden town skyline runs across the upstage area, with some recognizable town icons (the City Hall clock spire, the Lafayette Hotel) giving the horizon line variety.

TOBY SIMMS enters and addresses the audience. He wears a period seller's apron and hat.

TOBY

Marietta. It's a town all of us know very well. Most of us have lived here our whole lives. It's so familiar to us that we tend to take it for granted: the tree-lined streets paved with red brick, the collection of local shops and restaurants, the confluence of the two rivers, the Ohio and the Muskingum.

Over the decades, many people have called Marietta home, and many have found much happiness and success. But neither is ever guaranteed in life, and that's one reason why the story we present tonight is so special. The man whose life will appear on this stage may not appear prominently in our history books, but he deserves to be recognized and celebrated for the hero that he is. This is the story of one man who was greatly changed by Marietta, and who greatly changed this town in turn.

So let's travel back in time, more than 150 years, to 1867, as we proudly present to you the story of Harrison Patrick Abernathy.

Toby pivots and becomes a produce merchant. He takes a cart of prop fruit and breads from CONNIE DOW, who enters wearing a half-finished period costume, such as a bonnet and bustle over contemporary clothes. She picks up a broom and starts to sweep upstage.

TOBY

Fresh produce! Baked goods and groceries, right here at Weber's fruit stand.

CONNIE

Nice, clean rooms at the Union House, by the day or by the week!

During this, DELIA HOFNAGEL and JOHNNY DOW also enter, also eclectically dressed, carrying props and claiming a section of the stage.

DELIA

(holding out hat)

Stylish chapeaus of European fashion! Exquisite millinery for men and ladies.

JOHNNY

(holding out belt and boot)

Schafer Leather, it's the finest. From saddlery to belts and boots!

Eight-year old BONNIE DOW, dressed in jeans and Oliver Twist cap, wanders conspicuously over to Toby's fruit stand.

BUTCH WALKER, entering opposite and wearing a bushy fake mustache and police tunic with badge (as well as blue jeans and sneakers), surveys the scene.

With Toby turned away, Bonnie reaches for an apple. Toby turns and notices the theft.

TOBY

Hey! Thief!

BUTCH

Stop, urchin!

Bonnie grabs the apple and runs up stage, barreling right into Butch and effectively headbutting him in the stomach. Bonnie runs into the wings.

From the house, CAROLYN GARDNER's voice is heard.

CAROLYN

Bonnie, too hard!

BUTCH

I hate that part. I hate that part.

CAROLYN

You're supposed to give Butch the apple.

The plastic apple is tossed from the wings and rolls down to Butch.

CONNIE

(frustrated; calling to wings)

Bonnie Elizabeth Dow! Sorry, Butch. Sorry, Carolyn. Should we take it again?

BUTCH

Please no.

CAROLYN

Let's just keep going. Horace, are you ready?

HORACE HOFNAGEL, downstage and off it, responds.

HORACE

I'm patiently waiting for my cue.

CAROLYN

Johnny, your line?

Johnny holds out belt and boot.

JOHNNY

What do I do with these? This is the first rehearsal I've had 'em.

Bonnie runs out of the wings, grabs the objects, and disappears again into the wings.

JOHNNY

Bonnie!

CONNIE

Bonnie Elizabeth!

BONNIE (OFF STAGE)

I'm urchining!

Connie starts angrily for the wings.

CAROLYN

Connie, go back. Bonnie, don't ad lib. Johnny, we'll have you put those down before the next line.

HORACE

I'm still patiently waiting for my cue.

JOHNNY

(out to Carolyn)

Do I go now?

CAROLYN

Go now.

Johnny moves downstage, to a ramp leading up to the stage apron.

JOHNNY

Welcome, you've landed on Ohio Street in bustling Marietta. Can I help you up the gangway?

Horace enters with PAM RUDDIGER. Horace is dressed in period tie and jacket while Pam has on a ladies' hat and skirt. She carries a bundle in a blanket.

HORACE

Thank you, young man. Help my wife ashore, will you? She's in a weakened condition.

PAM

Nonsense, Harrison, I'm just tired from the trip.

Johnny helps Pam up the ramp. Horace, moving center, surveys the merchants.

HORACE

Tell me, boy, is there opportunity for a hard-working man here in Marietta?

JOHNNY

A fair amount, sir. If one has initiative and knows where to look.

Horace turns to find Johnny with palm outstretched.

HORACE

Oh yes, I see that.

He places a coin in Johnny's hand.

JOHNNY

Thank you kindly.

PAM

Dear, be mindful. We don't have much left in our purse.

HORACE

We'll make do, Sarah. One way or another.

(to Johnny)

One more thing. Where is a respectable place for a couple to stay in this town?

JOHNNY

Try the Union House, sir, just up the street.

HORACE

Much obliged. Come, Sarah.

Johnny moves to wings, holding out the coin to admire it.  
Bonnie runs in to try to knock it from his grasp.

JOHNNY

Knock it off!

CAROLYN

Bonnie, stop!

Johnny and Bonnie exit as Horace helps Pam upstage to a block representing a counter. Connie is on the other side, sweeping.

CONNIE

Welcome to our hotel, 18 rooms with all the amenities, bathrooms shared by floors. You look like weary travelers. Where have you come from?

PAM

We come down from Wheeling, where Harrison had been seeking work.

HORACE

But found none.

(Distracted, calling out)

Carolyn, dear, I feel like I should be ringing a bell.

CAROLYN

(from audience)

What do you mean?

HORACE

Well, we enter the hotel, the proprietor is sweeping, sweeping.

(to Connie)

Go back to sweeping.

Connie starts to sweep.

HORACE

And then to get her attention:

(mimes ringing a desk bell)

Ding ding! Ding ding!

CONNIE

(turning on cue)

Welcome to our hotel, 18 rooms with all the amenities--

DELIA

Horace, why would you need to ring a bell? She's three feet away.

HORACE

She's engaged in an activity. The bell would get her attention.

DELIA

Just clear your throat. She'll hear you.

HORACE

The bell helps define the hotel, Delia. It tells the audience, "This is a hotel."

PAM

I don't think--



CONNIE

I already say it's a hotel. "Welcome to our hotel, 18 rooms with all the amenities--"

HORACE

(miming)

Ding ding! Ding ding! Hotel.

CAROLYN

Horace. Connie. I'll make a note, but for now play it without a bell.

HORACE

Connie, at your bed and breakfast, do you have a bell at the desk?

CONNIE

I tried one, but Bonnie kept playing with it. Now there's a sign that says, "If you need something, holler."

HORACE

In this scene, there should be a bell.

DELIA

You don't need a bell!

CAROLYN

Let's move on.

PAM

Can I say something? If we use a bell at all, it shouldn't be a bell for the counter. I don't think they had counter bells in the 1870s.

HORACE

Ding ding.

PAM

Now they could've had a handbell. If I were in the audience, I'd buy a handbell, with a handle. You know.

(miming)

Tinkle tinkle.

HORACE

Ding ding.

PAM

Tinkle Tinkle.

Horace tries out imaginary bell props.

HORACE

Tinkle tinkle. Ding ding. Tinkle tinkle.

DELIA

There will be no bells at the hat shop.

CAROLYN

Okay, I made a note. Let's continue.

PAM

Where were we?

CONNIE

Welcome to our hotel--

HORACE

But found none. If we're not using the bell, we can take it from But found none.

DELIA

(out to Carolyn)

May I make a hat while this is going on?

CAROLYN

Make a hat?

DELIA

Yes, I could start with a hat form and then add some flowers and a ribbon. That way I'll have some stage business.

HORACE

Delia, this is the hotel scene. When it's the millinery scene, then you can make your hat.

DELIA

You're not the director, Carolyn is.

CONNIE

(to Horace)

Yeah, let her make a hat. What's wrong with that?

HORACE

She will turn it into a whole production, just you watch. It will become the Delia Hofnagel show. We'll all be upstaged by a bunch of daisies and three yards of felt.

The following lines overlap in conversation:

PAM

I don't think that's true at all.

CONNIE

You shouldn't say that about your wife!

DELIA

You can't stand the spotlight shining on anyone else!

HORACE

It's not your scene, Delia!

Through this, Carolyn steps onstage. She carries a prompt book/director's binder.

CAROLYN

All right. ALL RIGHT! As director, I say we can add some non-intrusive stage business. I'll see if Lottie can get you some material to use.

Horace starts to object.

CAROLYN

And if it becomes too much, then we'll pull it back or cut it altogether. Now we really have to move on. The hotel scene, please.

Butch enters from the wings.

PAM

The desk scene or the room scene?

DELIA

Is the room scene before or after the hat scene?

BUTCH

Excuse me, Carolyn. Remember, I need to go and check in with the sheriff. That was the only way he'd give me time off to rehearse.

CAROLYN

Right. Okay. We'll jump to your scenes now and then you can go after that, all right?

DELIA

If we're breaking, I can check with Lottie about those hat trimmings.

CAROLYN

We're not breaking, we've got to keep pushing forward. Butch, ten more minutes, okay? We'll do the jail scene at the end of Act One.

BUTCH

Sorry, Carolyn. I'm still on call at the department. But if they don't need me, I'll come back as soon as I can.

CAROLYN

I. Okay. Go. We could really use you here.

BUTCH

I know. I'll be back.

Butch exits. Attention turns to Pam, whose baby bundle appears to be making a Ping sound. Pam reaches inside and takes out a smartphone. She reads the screen.

While this is going on, Carolyn's daughter CLAIRE GARDNER, 18, quietly enters through the house and stands at the lip of the stage.

DELIA

(to Pam and the bundle)

What's going on with your baby?

PAM

Oh, I've been training a new girl to run the diner while I'm here. She's been texting me every five minutes with questions. Carolyn, can I have a minute to call her back?

CAROLYN

We really need to keep going. Pam, can that wait?

PAM

I might lose customers if I do.

CAROLYN

(frustrated)

Look, we're only two scenes into the first act, we keep stopping and starting, there's always some new problem that comes up--

Carolyn turns and sees Claire.

CLAIRE

Hi, mom.

CAROLYN

Oh, hi, honey.

CLAIRE

When you have a minute, I need to talk to you. It's important.

CAROLYN

We're in the middle of rehearsal.

HORACE

Seems like we're at a stopping place.

PAM

It'll be faster if I can talk with her instead of responding to a dozen text messages.

CONNIE

And Butch has already left.

DELIA

But he's coming back. Right, Carolyn?

HORACE

But he's not here now.

CLAIRE

Mom.

CAROLYN

All right! Everybody. Ten minute break. And I want all actors to check in with Lottie and see how your costumes are coming along.

PAM

Thanks, Carolyn.

The actors start to exit. Pam exits making her call. Claire waits.

CAROLYN

Ten minutes!

Horace approaches Carolyn.

CAROLYN

(writing in her prompt book)

Horace, if this is about the bell...

HORACE

No. I have other concerns. Have you seen the author of this little drama hanging about?

CAROLYN

Harry? No. His son hasn't been around either.

HORACE

I don't care about the son. It's Abernathy père I'm interested in.

CLAIRE

Why, does he owe you money?

HORACE

No, but he owes us all a better script than this one.

CLAIRE

Gee, Mr. Hofnagel, what's wrong with it, in your esteemed opinion?

Horace takes a deep breath in preparation of an answer, but Carolyn cuts him off.

CAROLYN

Horace, you're on break. Go see Lottie about your costume. We can talk about the script later.

HORACE

Good. We can have a productive discussion about narrative pacing.

CAROLYN

I'd settle for a productive rehearsal. Let's aim for that.

Horace smiles and exits. Carolyn finds a chair on the opposite side of the stage from Claire and sits. She opens the prompt book, starts to study it, and slams it shut again. She looks over at Claire.

CAROLYN

What?

CLAIRE

I didn't think I'd ever set foot on stage again, yet here I am.

CAROLYN

You grew up on this stage. Children's theater, comedies, musicals. And suddenly you decide to say no to this one.

CLAIRE

From the looks of it? I made the right choice.

CAROLYN

Are you too mature to be an actor now?

CLAIRE

(considering; nodding)

You get to a point where you need to move on.

CAROLYN

All right. So, as an outside but informed observer, what do you think of the play?

CLAIRE

Of *Abernathy in Marietta*? You don't want me to tell you.

CAROLYN

Okay. So what did you want to tell me?

CLAIRE

That I heard back from somebody today. And I thought you should know.

CAROLYN

You heard back from somebody. What does that mean?

CLAIRE

Well, this affects my plans for fall and... beyond.

CAROLYN

You heard something from the college?

CLAIRE

No, from Theresa Ruiz in Brooklyn. She confirmed a sublet starting August first.

CAROLYN

Wait. Back up. How did you meet this Theresa person from Brooklyn?

CLAIRE

I was checking out apartment rentals online. Manhattan was way too pricey, so I started looking at the neighborhoods.

CAROLYN

So this is Brooklyn, New York.

CLAIRE

Yes, and I have a chance at renting a sublet starting August first.

CAROLYN

What're you saying? You're thinking about moving to New York?

CLAIRE

I've been thinking about it. Now I've decided to go.

CAROLYN

No, you're not.



CLAIRE

Not what?

CAROLYN

You're not going. You can't. You've been accepted to Marietta College. Grants, scholarships, you're starting there this fall.

CLAIRE

That's what I mean. This affects my plans.

CAROLYN

Well, yeah! What you're saying, that's going to affect your life.

CLAIRE

I know. That's right.

CAROLYN

So you're not going to Marietta College? You're going to another school?

CLAIRE

Maybe. Not at first.

Carolyn stares at Claire, at a loss for words. Then:

CAROLYN

No. I'm sorry. You're not moving to New York at 18. We spent the last six months getting your ducks in a row for Marietta College, you can't just change that on a whim.

CLAIRE

It's not a whim. We've talked about me moving somewhere else. Like I would say, "I wonder what it's like to live in L.A.?" "I wonder what it's like to live in New York?"

CAROLYN

Well, keep wondering.

CLAIRE

"I wonder what it's like to live anywhere other than small-town Marietta?"

CAROLYN

You want to move away? Fine, but get a college education first. Now, you're enrolled and all set to start college this fall--

CLAIRE

At Marietta College.

CAROLYN

Yes, at Marietta College! Where your great-grandmother went and where I went and where you will go if you have any sense. Honey, I understand the desire to see other places, but that's what spring break is for. You belong here.

CLAIRE

Mom, you always talk to me about opportunities. Working a summer job is an opportunity. Going to college is an opportunity.

CAROLYN

It is! An important one.

CLAIRE

So is moving out, seeing the world. Making your way in life. You know what's not an opportunity? Staying exactly where you are, going to school five minutes away from your house, and then remaining the rest of your life in the same spot.

CAROLYN

Three generations of my family spent their lives in this town, a town that they loved. And you think you're gonna be happier in a city of millions of people, where everyone's a stranger to each other?

CLAIRE

I'm gonna find out. And when I meet new people, they'll no longer be strangers.

CAROLYN

You're not going.

CLAIRE

I have a sublet lined up.

CAROLYN

That's nothing.

CLAIRE

I'm going.

CAROLYN

Claire--

CLAIRE

I'm done with Marietta. Maybe I'll come back at some point, but I want to see the rest of the world first.

A beat, then:

CAROLYN

I've got a show to rehearse.

Carolyn picks up her prompt book and moves to the wings.

CAROLYN

(calling to wings)

All actors, meet at the props table! Let's see who still needs what.

She turns back to Claire.

CAROLYN

This discussion isn't over.

Carolyn exits.

CLAIRE

(To herself)

It never is with you.

Alone on the stage, Claire surveys the space. Then she finds a spot and strikes an orator's pose.

During this, HANK ABERNATHY, 18, will enter from upstage and listen to Claire.

CLAIRE

To leave or not to leave: that is the question.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the heat and humidity of southern Ohio, or to take arms against a sea of mosquitoes and by opposing end them?

To stay, to rot, in town. And by rotting to say we stay

Where nothing happens and a thousand Sternwheelers come and go.

'Tis a consummation not likely to be missed.

To go, to New York, to live, to live the dream: aye, there's the rub.  
 For only in the doing can the dream become reality.  
 My mother wants me ever shuffling here, and yet she does not see.  
 What good is so long a life if you never change your speed?

And the New York fashions and flavors and the chance to meet fine men.  
 An entire city of fit, bare bodkins. Shakespeare's use aside,  
 is not the undiscover'd country always worth the discov'ry?  
 I'm ready for the change, even if yon Carolyn is not.

Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all --  
 Until we have the courage to break free and live.

HANK

That was very good.

Claire turns and notices Hank.

CLAIRE

That may very well be my final soliloquy.  
 (Pause. No response from Hank)  
 That's a speech a character makes when no one's looking.

HANK

Oh.

CLAIRE

What're you doing here?

HANK

Oh, I was just looking for my dad. Have you seen him?

CLAIRE

No. But the actors are looking for him too. I think they want your daddy to do a rewrite.

HANK

Really? Did they say... what they wanted rewritten?

CLAIRE

I have no idea. Let's let the grown-ups sort it out. They like feeling important, like they've got everything planned.

HANK

Maybe I'll check the diner. For my dad. He likes their coffee. And pretty much all of the food. Maybe you want to come with, that is, if you're hungry. Or not.

CLAIRE

Tell me something. You've traveled around, right? Didn't you tell me you've lived in a bunch of different places?

HANK

Did I say that?

CLAIRE

Is it true?

HANK

Yeah, I guess. I mean, different states. Not outside the U.S.

CLAIRE

Like where?

HANK

Oh, I... I don't know.

CLAIRE

Of course you know. Did you ever live in New York?

HANK

New York City? No.

CLAIRE

How 'bout L.A.?

HANK

No, my dad-- he kind of likes the smaller towns. Like this one. Calls them the Jewels of America. Says the people are approachable.

CLAIRE

New Yorkers are approachable.

(Beat. No response)

Well, they can be. Okay, so maybe this town is a jewel, but if it is, it's a pearl and the clam is still shut tight around it, keeping everyone in darkness and ignorant of the rest of the world.

HANK

Oyster.

CLAIRE

Oyster then. Be honest. Where would you be happier, in a little town with nothing to do or in a big city with lots going on and opportunities all around you?

HANK

(looking at Claire)

I don't think it depends on where you are. It's more about who you're with.

CLAIRE

I was happy here my whole life, right up to two years ago. And then one day I woke up and it's like I was looking at Marietta through filtered glasses. And all of a sudden, the town felt small. And stifling. And the opposite of where I wanted to be. Did you ever have that feeling?

HANK

No.

CLAIRE

So you loved everywhere you've been?

HANK

No.

CLAIRE

Such stimulating conversation. Just tell me the best place you ever lived. I dare you.

HANK

I don't know. I mean, we lived a lot of places.

CLAIRE

Forget it.

Bonnie rushes on stage from the wings.

BONNIE

Hi, Hank.

HANK

Hi, troublemaker.

BONNIE

Carolyn says we're running Act One in two minutes.

CLAIRE

Why are you telling us? We don't care.

Bonnie sticks out her tongue at Claire, then runs off.  
Claire begins to move to the audience/house area.

CLAIRE

I'm guessing my mother the director will be lurching the cast through the rest of the show.  
That's the last thing I need to see. If you're smart, you'll escape while you can.

HANK

Poughkeepsie.

CLAIRE

Excuse me?

HANK

If I had to choose my favorite place. I guess it would be... Poughkeepsie.

CLAIRE

Why?

HANK

It's the last town I remember living in as a family. Before my mother died.

A beat, then a bustle as actors [Toby, Connie, Pam, Horace, Delia, Johnny, Bonnie] enter, corraled by Carolyn. Claire exits into the house, and Hank follows.

Butch enters from wings opposite; he is slightly winded from running back to the theater.

BUTCH

I'm back. They don't need me right now. A few collisions, no fatalities, two drunk and disorderlies and a domestic disturbance.

CAROLYN

That's great. That you're available, I mean.

CONNIE

Pammy, did you get your new help straightened out?

PAM

She didn't even know how to turn the open sign off. God help her with the grills.

TOBY

Where are we starting, Carolyn?

CAROLYN

Since we've got Butch, and since we've only blocked it once, let's jump to the jail scene at the end of Act One, and then we'll go into the tableau. Okay? Everybody?

General murmuring.

HORACE

What are we doing?

CAROLYN

I just said it. Harrison Abernathy -- that's you -- in the jail cell, and the sheriff walks in.

BUTCH

I like this play, 'cause I get a promotion.

DELIA

I'm not in this scene.

CAROLYN

Most of you aren't. Just Horace and Butch. The rest of you exit. Thank you.



CONNIE

Hon, the hotel desk is gone at this point.

CAROLYN

Leave it.

The actors exit. Horace and Butch remain, take their positions apart from each other.

HORACE

I have overalls on in this scene.

Bonnie runs out and throws a pair of overalls at Horace. She runs back. He pushes the pants away in frustration.

HORACE

Not now!

BUTCH

She is a menace.

CAROLYN

Start the scene, please.

BUTCH

Harrison Abernathy?

HORACE

You know I am. You've kept me three days in this cell.

BUTCH

I'm aware.

HORACE

Three days, all but forgotten about, while my wife and child wait and worry. Line.

CAROLYN

“And what charge keeps me--”

HORACE

And what charge keeps me locked up here? Larceny, vagrancy. Fine words, Sheriff, but is it my fault no work is to be found?

I wait outside offices, on the docks, in the street, begging for a job, for a chance at an honest turn of income. But luck is against me. The law is against me.

Butch mimes opening a cell door. He stands beside it.

BUTCH

Come with me, please.

HORACE

What next? Am I to go on trial?

BUTCH

No trial. I'm releasing you.

HORACE

Surely it isn't because you sympathize. The law is too rigid for such revelations.

BUTCH

Please exit the cell.

HORACE

Line.

CAROLYN

"I go back into the streets--"

HORACE

I go back into the streets and I'll always be under suspicion, one step away from another arrest. It's not fair to me or to my wife.

BUTCH

Mr. Abernathy...

HORACE

What?

BUTCH

Your wife is dead, sir. She passed in the night. A chambermaid found her in the room this morning. It was very cold. The fire had gone out.

HORACE

My Sarah. Dead.

BUTCH

I'm sorry. Come out of the cell please.

Horace sits on a bench/block.

HORACE

I don't think I will move again. If I had been more responsible, more ambitious, this never would have happened. She didn't want to press east. She wanted to stay, and I should have listened. Let me stay here on this bench, eat nothing, and waste away.

Butch exits to the wings, returns with the blanket bundle.

BUTCH

Your son needs you.

Butch holds out the bundle. Beat. Then Horace slowly rises and crosses to Butch. He gently takes the bundle, cradles it. He moves downstage center and kneels. Grimaces.

HORACE

(Out to Carolyn)

Make a note. Knee pads.

A pause. It stretches. Butch and Horace stand still, waiting. Mouth words: "What now?" "I don't know."

CAROLYN

What's happening?

Pam enters from the wings.

PAM

Is this the tableau?

CAROLYN

Yes! End of Act One tableau, everybody on stage!

Bonnie, Delia, Toby, and Johnny enter and join Butch, forming a semi-circle around Horace. There is a gap.

HORACE

I wait, on bended knee, once again for my cue.

TOBY

Someone's missing.

DELIA

(motioning to Pam)

Pam, come join the circle.

PAM

No, I can't. I'm dead.

DELIA

Oh, that's right. Who's missing?

BONNIE

My mom. I'll get her.

JOHNNY

Bonnie!

But Bonnie has already raced off stage. Toby raises a hand.

TOBY

Carolyn, while we're stopped--

CAROLYN

No, we have to keep going!

TOBY

I just wanted to say that I think this play feels a little choppy.

CAROLYN

Let's just get through the rehearsal first.

TOBY

I mean it's the writing, the scenes. It's very episodic.

DELIA

I feel that way too.

HORACE

May I get up now?

Horace stands, ignoring the bundle at his feet.

TOBY

All I'm saying is, we've got the playwright right here in town, staying at Connie's bed and breakfast and eating at Pam's diner--

PAM

And running up a tab.

TOBY

--So why can't we ask him for a rewrite, make him fix the choppy narrative?

DELIA

And the fact that the characters aren't well-defined. For instance, who is this hat shop owner in nineteenth century Marietta? What are her passions, her hobbies?

JOHNNY

I thought it was hatmaking.

DELIA

Is she able to pay her store rent? Does her business change with the seasons? Does she sell mufflers in the winter?

JOHNNY

Car mufflers?

DELIA

No dear.

HORACE

Delia, it doesn't matter.

DELIA

Doesn't matter to you, Horace. You're Harrison Abernathy, star of the show!

TOBY

She's right, you know.

BUTCH

A little more definition would be good.

General agreement and cross-talk. Through this, Bonnie enters with Connie.

CONNIE

What'd I miss? I was in the loo.

DELIA

Carolyn's going to ask for a rewrite.

CONNIE

Is this about the bell?

CAROLYN

Let's move on. This is the tableau at the end of Act One.

CONNIE

It is? (Re: Horace) Then why isn't he on the ground?

HORACE

Acute discomfort.

CAROLYN

All right. Horace, in the center, you don't have to kneel but at least pick up your son. Everyone else, semi-circle around him.

Horace moves to center and retrieves bundle as the others surround him. There is some confusion about placement.

DELIA

I thought I was further downstage.

CONNIE

Oh, I need my broom.

Connie goes to retrieve broom. Bonnie blocks Johnny in the circle by standing in front of him.

JOHNNY

Bonnie, you need to move!

Johnny pushes Bonnie away, and Bonnie retaliates with a quick shove that sends Johnny into Butch, who is thrown off balance.

JOHNNY

Stop it!

BONNIE

I'm an urchin!

BUTCH

That is not an excuse, young lady.

CAROLYN

Just start the scene.

CONNIE

(sweeping)

Clean and comfortable rooms! By the day or by the--

CAROLYN

No, Horace needs to talk to his bundle.

CONNIE

We've only run this once.

CAROLYN

I'm quite aware of that. Horace, go on.

HORACE

Imagine me kneeling.

Horace lifts up the bundle and holds it directly in front of him.

HORACE

Today I lost one person whom I loved--

CAROLYN

Hold the bundle lower. You're blocking your face.

Horace is irritated, but he makes the adjustment. A pause as he finds the emotion for the moment.

HORACE

(Quietly, tenderly)

Today I lost one person whom I loved--

DELIA

Louder.

HORACE

Delia!

DELIA

I'm on stage with him and I can't hear him.

HORACE

(to Delia)

Darling, just let me emote!

(A beat; an actor resets)

Today I lost one person whom I loved and who dearly loved me. This place has been very hard on us, but that means we must work even harder if we want to succeed. I may have lost my Sarah, but I'll never let you go, my son. We are going to stay right here. Because despite the loss and the setbacks, I know that together we can thrive in this rough little town.

TOBY

(with fruit cart)

Fresh produce! Baked goods and groceries!

HORACE

We need to look sharp, find ways to help this community grow.

CONNIE

(sweeping)

Clean and comfortable rooms! By the day or by the week!

HORACE

(breaking character; out)

This is another spot that could use a rewrite.



My character just spent all of Act One stockpiling misfortunes, and then he decides to remain in the town where he's been widowed and serially unemployed, and for what? If he was sensible, he'd pack up and take the next train to Toledo.

CAROLYN

(exasperated)

Why can't we get through this scene?

TOBY

That's what I've been saying. It's a choppy script. Fragmented.

HORACE

With unconvincing character turns.

DELIA

And underwritten supporting characters.

PAM

It has a lot of town history, though. That's nice.

HORACE

I'm in jail, I want to stay in jail, then I want to leave jail...

BONNIE

I want to steal more things!

JOHNNY

(to Bonnie)

You should be the one in jail.

BONNIE

Shut up.

JOHNNY

You shut up!

CONNIE

Both of you, stop it.

CAROLYN

Everybody! We need to get through this scene! After that, we can talk about any revisions that need to be made. Let's just finish this speech.

HORACE

I don't see the point.

HARRY

No, you don't! None of you do, with the possible exception of Mrs. Carolyn Gardner, your beleaguered director, and even that's up for debate.

Enter HARRY ABERNATHY, who keeps the monologue going as he crosses the house and storms the stage. Hank follows him and stays at the side of the stage.

A quick note here: Harry is in the mold of a quick-witted patterer, someone who uses energy, talk, and bluster to get his way, like Groucho Marx or *The Music Man's* Harold Hill. Except when the moment calls for it, he is usually in control, even when there's chaos and confusion around him.

HARRY

(to Horace)

You don't see the point, that's abundantly clear, but I expected more from the rest of you. I slip in quietly, thinking I'll hover at the back, proudly watch my play taking shape, and what do I witness? Nothing short of an actor mutiny, a greasepaint insurrection!

CAROLYN

Mr. Abernathy, I didn't know you were in the house. How much did you see?

HARRY

All of it, I regret to say. From the first thrown apple, through the carol of the bells and then to the stop-and-start jail scene in front of me. If I had any sense, I would've run screaming from the theater. Instead I stayed and I listened nonplussed, dumbfounded, and speechless as this traitorous troupe ran through its litany of complaints. So it's my play that's causing all the problems, is it? It's Act One of *Abernathy in Marietta* that's so congenitally unstageable that it makes less sense than a Beckett play.

CAROLYN

We never said it didn't make sense.

TOBY

I implied it.

HARRY

He implied it! Oh, Director Gardner, kind Carolyn, you're an angel for trying to soften the blow, but I'm a realist. I want my dissension undiluted. So let's have it, cast. Hank, take notes. What of this script needs to be discarded, reshuffled, and dealt again?

HORACE

Where do we start?

HARRY

Why don't you move from the general to the specific.

(moving to Toby)

I keep hearing from the fruitmonger that my humble play is hopelessly choppy. Hmm?

Harry stares at Toby expectantly, waiting him out. The pose is a bit unnerving.

TOBY

Well, yes. I mean, you're the author--

HARRY

Playwright.

TOBY

Playwright. So if something's not working, like it's not flowing, then you should rewrite and make it... better.

HARRY

Revision can be invaluable.

TOBY

Yes. Right.

HARRY

Except in the case where no revision is needed, and then it's redundant. Hank, write down "Choppy" and then cross it off.

Hank writes. Harry crosses to Delia.

HARRY

Over here, nervously fingering a spray of artificial flowers, we have the delightful Delia Hofnagel.

DELIA

Hello, Mr. Abernathy.

HARRY

Harry, please. We've gone through too much to be formal. You, madam, have submitted a more reasonable request. Why can't your aspiring hatmaker have her own subplot?

DELIA

Or at least a character name. In the script, you just call her Milliner.

CONNIE

And I'm Proprietor.

JOHNNY

And I'm just Boy.

HARRY

But my talented friends, there's nothing stopping you from naming your characters. In fact, I encourage it. You should each complete a comprehensive character biography that provides, among other things, family history, marital status, life aspirations, and favorite foods. That's how you bring these people to life!

PAM

I think what they're saying is that you don't offer any of those details on the stage. I get a few, because I'm playing Harrison Abernathy's wife--

CONNIE

Who dies at the end of Act One.

PAM

--But the rest of them have a character with an occupation and a scene or two and that's it.

HARRY

That's by design. Hank, write down "Characters - Question Mark." Mr. Hofnagel, whose story are we telling?

HORACE

Mine. That is, my character's.

HARRY

And who is that character?

HORACE

Harrison P. Abernathy.

HARRY

Harrison Patrick Abernathy, my great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, a man who started with nothing and with life against him, and then rose up to become something great. Innovator, planner, investor, leader, that's Harrison P. Abernathy. By staging this play, ladies and gentlemen, you're paying tribute to a founding member of this town whose story needs to be, nay, demands to be told. And the best way to do that is to keep the focus on the principal character while using this colorful panoply of second bananas--

(gesturing to the group)

--to help tell that tale. Why, you're all vital, an instrumental element of Carolyn Gardner's theatrical vision. You provide the canvas on which the artist paints her masterpiece. You're all essential.

JOHNNY

Even me? I'm holding a belt and a boot.

HARRY

Completely essential! And as for complaints of dramatic inconsistency and episodic wobbliness, I have only one question for you. How many times have you run this little local gem without stopping?

HORACE

We're in rehearsal. We're supposed to stop.

HARRY

(to Carolyn)

How many times?

CAROLYN

Well, none. We're still working on the blocking.

HARRY

(to Toby)

Then how can you possibly judge its flow? How can this cast cast aspersions?

I watch you all from my seat in the back and my heart drops all the way to Row E to see all this stopping and starting, like a bunch of indecisive motorists contemplating an onramp. Push the pedal, I tell you! Move forward! Go!

BUTCH

So we keep rehearsing then?

HARRY

No, not the way you're doing it! All right. I'm going to show this group of Doubting Thomases and Polly Pessimists that the story of Harrison P. Abernathy works just fine as it is. Now. Places from the top of Act One, have your props in hand, and be ready to emote.

Shuffling and talking as the group gets ready. Carolyn moves to the house.

JOHNNY

We're doing Act One again? That's gonna take an hour!

HARRY

Not the way I do it. Go on.

The actors have moved into the wings. Harry and Hank are alone on stage. Harry paces it, calling to the wings.

HARRY

No flow, you say? Underdeveloped characters, you charge? Lack of motivation, you infer? Well. Keep your eyes open and be quick on your feet. Hank, sit down. Toby, your cue!

Hank moves to the house.

TOBY

What cue?

HARRY

Marietta.

TOBY

That's my opening line.

HARRY

I know. Get out here and say it before I crown you with a Golden Delicious.

Toby enters, takes his place.

TOBY

Marietta. It's a town all of us know very well.

HARRY

From the trees and the streets to the sainted rivers, people Know. This. Town.

TOBY

Don't you want me to say my lines?

HARRY

Not all of them. We're capturing the essence here. Say the last line of the speech.

TOBY

Um. We travel back more than 150 years, to 1867, to proudly present the story of Harrison Patrick Abernathy.

HARRY

Cue Connie, cue Johnny!

Connie enters with fruit cart, Johnny and Delia enter and take positions. Bonnie runs out.

HARRY

Urchin, not yet.

Bonnie runs back into wings.

HARRY

Lines, the start of 'em.

TOBY

Fresh produce!

CONNIE

Nice, clean rooms at the Union House!

DELIA

Chapeaus of European fashion!

HARRY

(signaling to each)

We've got our vendors, our managers, our merchants. Cue the kids.

Bonnie and Butch appear.

JOHNNY

Schafer Leather, it's the finest.

HARRY

You see, we're establishing our setting. A bustling, busy, hardworking town with an occasional spot of crime.

Bonnie steals an apple.

TOBY

Hey! Thief!

Bonnie charges right at Harry, who stands in front of Butch. At the last moment Harry sidesteps and Bonnie runs into Butch, knocking him over. She disappears into the wings.

HARRY

This is important because the theme of crime and punishment will come back later.

The apple rolls onstage from the wings.

HARRY

Much like that apple. Our stage is set, we are ready for our story to begin. Johnny, if you would.

Johnny hands Harry the belt and boot and moves to the ramp. Horace and Pam enter.

JOHNNY

Welcome, you've landed on Ohio Street--



HARRY

They've landed on Ohio Street, fresh from Wheeling, West Virginia and a difficult run of Mountaineer hardships. Johnny, help the lady up. In just a few brief words--

HORACE

Am I supposed to say them?

HARRY

Nope. --We have a Russian novel's worth of suffering and pathos. One, Abernathy is looking for a better life, meaning the one he's had so far isn't worth a wooden nickel. Two, he's got a loving wife and a presumably loving son in tow, and must find a way to provide for both of 'em. Two-A, wife is not in the best of health; pocket that for later. Three, Abernathy is willing to work! How do we know that? Horace, how do we know?

HORACE

Well, he asks the boy about opportunities.

HARRY

Opportunities! A complete character sketch in six and a half lines. Harrison P. Abernathy, hardworking, forward-looking family provider. Immediate need: a roof over their heads.

Harry crosses to hotel counter. Pam and Horace follow.  
Connie, startled, starts sweeping. Harry mimes  
aggressively ringing a desk bell.

HARRY

Dingdingdingdingdingding!

CONNIE

(out to Carolyn)

So we're using the bell then?

HARRY

And what does this little exchange with the manageress tell us? There's not much money, they're taking it day by day, but still he provides. For wife, for son. And here is where you got sidetracked and started picking apart the play. But had you simply moved on, kept the narrative arc pushing forward, you would have been completely satisfied. I'll prove it to you. Consider this the highlights reel.

Harry moves Pam and Horace to another part of the stage.

HARRY

Into the modest hotel room with you. An intimate conversation between husband and wife. Give us a few lines.

PAM

A small room, but I am grateful for it. So cold, though.

HORACE

(moving and miming working a fireplace)

I'll soon have the hearth running.

HARRY

Again with the providing. What a man. Skip to the middle.

HORACE

Which part?

HARRY

Isn't there something about calluses?

HORACE

Oh, right. What is that line? Line!

From house, both Carolyn and Hank answer.

CAROLYN

"These callused and pitch-marked hands..."

HANK

"These callused and pitch-marked hands..."  
Sorry, Carolyn.

HORACE

These callused and pitch-marked hands may be rough and unfeeling--

HARRY

Three months at a logging camp 'll do that.

HORACE

--but it is worth it each moment I hold you and my son.

HARRY

And you do just that. A nice family moment, calluses and all. There you go.

Horace puts arms around Pam and the bundle.

PAM

We left that logging town to find a better life. And a safer one. My darling, you were almost killed.

HARRY

Backstory.

HORACE

Sarah, don't distress yourself.

PAM

Promise me you won't take on a dangerous occupation ever again, even for us. I couldn't stand to lose you.

HORACE

Nor I you. We will prosper here, my darling. You'll see.

HARRY

Dramatic irony, and it provides your end of act motivation, Horace, so don't tell me there's no consistency of character. So. He tucks wife and Junior in for the night, and the next a.m... Job Search!

Through this, Harry moves Horace to each station, meeting one character at a time.

HARRY

Where do we go first?

HANK

(from house)

The fruit seller.

Harry and Horace move to Toby and his cart.

TOBY

What can I get you, sir?

HORACE

Have you need of a hard worker? I am new to Marietta and wish to provide for my wife and child.

HARRY

The grocer likes the cut of his jib and gives him a job, but what happens on his watch? People take advantage of the new guy.

Connie, in bonnet and shawl, addresses Horace.

CONNIE

Mr. Weber allows me to charge my goods to my account. I assure you, I will pay you next week.

Horace gives Connie a small crate with groceries.

HORACE

And the name, madam?

CONNIE

Smith.

Connie exits. Johnny is next, wearing a hat and Butch's mustache.

HORACE

And you, sir?

JOHNNY

The same. Place it on account.

HORACE

(handing out another crate)

Very good. Thank, you, Mister...?

JOHNNY

Jones.

Johnny leaves. Toby re-enters.

HARRY

What a patsy! He's too trusting, that's his problem. So the owner finds out about it and it's bye bye fruit stand.

TOBY

Do you want my line?

HARRY

No. Next up, the docks. Come along, hero.

Harry steers Horace to the ramp, where Butch and Bonnie wear wool sailor caps and coil rope.

HORACE

Is there any work to be found on the waterfront?

Butch chuckles in character, and Bonnie overdoes it with a prolonged -- and very loud -- mad scientist cackle.

HARRY

Down a notch, Sailor Number Two. Okay, Butch you say:

BUTCH

Um. No work to be found at the docks, but if ye be willing to work on a steamer for the length of a trip down river...

HORACE

How long must I be away?

BONNIE

Between three and eight weeks, depending on the cargo.

HARRY

More lines, but we'll skip 'em. So Abernathy returns to his room -- we're also skipping the scene where they get booted from the hotel and have to downgrade to a flophouse.

During this description, Connie enters with apron and broom, moves to counter, and then turns and exits again.

HARRY

And a first-class domestic argument ensues.

Horace and Pam (with bundle) take positions and look at each other angrily.

PAM

I don't want you leaving us for weeks, Harrison!

HORACE

I'm trying to provide for you and the boy!

HARRY

He's angry! She's angry! The kid is upset. Bitter recriminations all around, but at last he agrees. Surely there must be some work around here, some way to get ahead. So Abernathy's back on the streets, but the cards are stacked against him. He tries the furniture maker--

Toby enters with a chair as Harry pulls Horace over to him.

TOBY

Welcome to Cawley and Sons...

HARRY

This is a speed-through. Just shake your head at him.

Toby shakes his head at Horace.

HARRY

So he tries the leather maker.

Harry moves Horace to Johnny, back again with belt and boot.

HARRY

Shake your head, son.

Johnny shakes his head.

HARRY

And finally, of all places, he winds up huddled in the doorway of the neighborhood hat shop.

Delia enters and sits on a stool behind a counter/block. She holds a hat that she has obviously been working on backstage. It is festooned with a garden's worth of flowers and feathers. Horace addresses her.

HORACE

Pardon me. I know this may sound strange, but have you any work for an industrious and honest man? I'm in need of employment.

DELIA

(shaking her head like the others)

No, dear, I don't. I'm just a humble milliner.

HORACE

That hat. It's-- (beat)

I know I'm supposed to say, "It's beautiful," but look at it.

HARRY

Let's keep moving.

DELIA

Lottie said I could use them.

HORACE

You didn't have to use all of them!

HARRY

Your director can sort it out. For now, we play the scene. What happens?

DELIA

There's a lot of lines about how he would like to buy the hat for his wife, but he doesn't have any money. So then I leave the hat here and go to check on a customer.

HARRY

So do so.

Delia puts hat on counter and exits into the wings, making a great pantomime of spotting a customer.

DELIA

(as she exits)

Well hello, Mrs. Cumberland!

HORACE

She is ad libbing.

HARRY

Skip it. Now comes the pathos. You find the perfect way to express your love for your wife, but you have no cash and no prospect of future income. Yes, you have a monologue here, but actions speak louder than words. You pick up the tantalizing topiary and you thrust it under your coat! Go on, man, thrust!

Horace picks up the hat and awkwardly hides it under his suit jacket.

HARRY

And you make your way back to the flophouse, but before you get there...

Horace moves downstage but Butch enters, again in mustache and police tunic.

BUTCH

Stop right there, sir. We've had a report of a theft from a house of fashion.

HARRY

Into the clink you go, with the evidence surrendered and a lot of high-falutin' dialogue about due process and the unfairness of life.

Butch takes hat and places Horace in jail, as in the earlier scene.

HARRY

And here we have our climactic moment. Nothing needs to be trimmed or tweaked or rewritten, because it is all building to this beautiful spot. Sheriff, what news? Show us.

Harry passes the bundle to Butch, who holds it out to Horace.

[From this moment on, the scene plays as it should be, coming together at last. It's even a little moving.]



BUTCH

Your son needs you, Mr. Abernathy.

Horace finds the emotion, takes the bundle tenderly, and crosses downstage. He kneels.

HORACE

Today I lost one person whom I loved and who loved me. And I vow never to lose you, my son. This town has been very hard, but that means we must in turn work hard to succeed. For I still believe that, despite all the setbacks, despite the loss of our beloved Sarah, there is still opportunity here in this rough little town.

The cast enters, one by one, to form the semi-circle tableau.

TOBY

Fresh produce! Baked goods and groceries.

HORACE

We need to look sharp, see how we can help the community grow.

CONNIE

Clean and comfortable rooms! By the day or by the week.

HORACE

Because there is opportunity. I feel it all around us.

DELIA

Chapeaus of European fashion.

HORACE

I've made some terrible mistakes, but I believe that coming to this town is not one of them.

JOHNNY

Schafer leather, it's the finest!

HORACE

This is where our dear mother and wife will rest, and this is where we will stay. I will raise you here, and we will grow with this town.

TOBY

Fresh produce!

CONNIE

Clean rooms!

JOHNNY

Belts and boots!

HORACE

For you and I, our story is the story of Marietta. Its values are our values, its work ethic our own. You just watch. No lies or compromises moving forward, just honesty and truth. Marietta, this is your story, our story. And it's one, I have no doubt, in which we can all be proud.

Everyone holds for a beat, then Harry bursts into applause.

HARRY

Stunning! Magnificent! That's the way to play it. Cast, did you feel that potential?

Affirmatives and happy crosstalk. Carolyn returns to the stage. Hank returns and stays off to the side.

HARRY

Our dear director, does that conform to your vision?

CAROLYN

Yes, it was very good.

HARRY

In general, cast, does the play give satisfaction?

More affirmatives.

TOBY

Well, I see the flow of the scenes now a little clearer.

HARRY

Excellent. My devoted Delia?

DELIA

You know, it's interesting how everyone adds to this story.

HARRY

As intended. The very definition of ensemble. Youngsters?

BONNIE

I want something to yell or hit at the end.

HARRY

Remember that you have more lines to yell and people to hit in Act Two.

BONNIE

Oh yeah.

Harry paces, a politician among constituents.

HARRY

Everyone, what you have just given the audience was a heartbreaking first act. A man has been pulled down by life. Now, with the help of this beautiful town, Act Two is all about rising up, up, up!

DELIA

It's an inspirational story.

HARRY

And it's all true! My great-times-nine grandfather's rags-to-riches story, a man and a town working together to achieve success.

CONNIE

Everyone in the town is going to eat this up.

BUTCH

I bet you're right. Everyone wants to hear a story about where they live.

PAM

And who they are.

HARRY

Certainly. Each and every one of you, Harrison P. Abernathy's story is your story too.

HORACE

It is, isn't it?

HARRY

Of course it is. It's an American story, it's an Ohio story, and by gum, it's a Marietta story. Be proud of the role you're playing.

(almost walks into Hank)

Hank, get out of the way.

CAROLYN

Thank you, Mr. Abernathy. I think that's just what we needed, and we can end there. We'll cover notes first thing tomorrow. Before you leave, please see Lottie to double-check your costume list. Most of you are playing different characters in Act Two. I'd like to start tomorrow's rehearsal at seven p.m. sharp. Agreed?

General assents. Bonnie, who has been running on and off stage:

BONNIE

Lottie has a question for you, Carolyn.

CAROLYN

All right.

(to the group)

Follow me to double-check your costumes!

All stream out, conversing and in high spirits, until two couples are left: Connie and Pam, who are talking with each other, and Harry and Hank.

HANK

Dad...

HARRY

Not now. And cheer up, will ya? I just pulled this thing together for us.

(switching, a salesman smile)

Ah, ladies! I'm delighted that you are giving voice to my words. Pure muses, both of you. What more could a humble playwright ask?

CONNIE

Mr. Abernathy.

HARRY

Harry, please.

PAM

You see, Harry, it's like this. You and your son have been staying at Connie's bed and breakfast--

CONNIE

And eating at Pammy's diner.

PAM

--And everything's been put on a tab.

HARRY

Yes, that was part of the agreement, for coming to town to write *Abernathy in Marietta*. We wanted to be close to the spirit of my great-times-nine and Hank's great-times-ten grandfather, didn't we, Hank?

PAM

Well, the tabs have been great-times-ten as well.

HARRY

And they will be paid when I get my full commission for the play, which, rather inconveniently, will not be until opening night.

CONNIE

But maybe you could put a little something towards it now, you know, to cover?

HARRY

Ladies, do you not think I'm as good as my word?

CONNIE

Oh, sure, we didn't mean that.

PAM

That's not what we're saying.

PAM

But it's costing us to feed you two and to put you up.

HARRY

I sympathize with you both, I do. But it will all be made right in the end. Until this play opens, my boy and I are on limited wind. Isn't that right, Hank?

And ladies, I will add this: I don't need anything for myself and would gladly sacrifice for the good of the community, eating nothing but grasses and wild berries and sleeping under the stars. But I worry about my son here, a sensitive and still-growing young man who needs his three squares a day and his forty winks at night. Without it, his health may decline, and we don't want that, do we?

CONNIE

Well, it's no more expensive to house two people instead of one.

PAM

But it'd be cheaper to feed one mouth instead of two. And that tab is growing.

HARRY

Ladies, you're pulling at my heartstrings. We'd give you everything we had if only we had it to give. Isn't that right, Hank?

Hank, who has been pursing his lips, pushes forward and brings out a wallet.

HANK

That's right, Dad. In fact, I don't have much on me, but you're both right. I've got--  
(counting bills)  
Twenty, forty, two, three, four...

HARRY

Ha ha, son, what're you doing?

HANK

I'm paying them. We owe them money.

HARRY

They're gonna get their money when we get ours a month from now.

HANK

So it's a down payment. Here, Mrs. Dow, This is for you.  
(hands bills to Connie)

And Ms. Ruddiger, for you.

(hands bills to Pam)

It's all I have, but you should take it.

PAM

Well, thanks. But this only covers about two dinners.

CONNIE

Aw, Pammy, it's a nice gesture. Thank you, Hank.

HARRY

We could all have waited.

HANK

I'm tired of waiting.

Hank exits. Harry moves to follow.

HARRY

Hank...

(turns back to Pam and Connie)

He's got a soft heart.

PAM

I would've called it a conscience.

Pam pockets the money as Harry watches. A grimace for the departed bills, then Harry exits. Carolyn enters.

PAM

I need to make sure the diner's still standing. Bye, Connie. See you tomorrow, Carolyn.

CAROLYN

(distracted)

Sure.

Pam exits. Carolyn stands, thinking. To break the silence:

CONNIE

I thought that went pretty well tonight. At least the end part, anyway. Honey, anything wrong?

CAROLYN

Huh? Sorry. (beat) Connie, what would you do if your kids wanted to leave you?

CONNIE

Oh! What a vacation I'd have. I keep trying to set that up. "Go to your father's house, drive him crazy for a change." Or "Summer camp looks like fun, try that for a week." But they never take the bait.

CAROLYN

No, I mean... What if they wanted to leave for good?

CONNIE

Hon, what're you saying?

CAROLYN

Claire is moving to New York. She doesn't want to live here anymore.

CONNIE

Claire's going to New York? When? She's going to the college this fall.

CAROLYN

Not anymore.

CONNIE

Carolyn, honey, this is... It's just a whim. It's not gonna happen. She's eighteen years old. When I was eighteen, I was sure I was gonna go to Hollywood, be the next Julia Roberts. Instead I stayed here, met Ronnie, had the hellions and got divorced. Now I run a bed and breakfast on Fifth Street. So, you know... life finds you wherever you wind up.

CAROLYN

I don't want to lose her. She's too young to go out on her own. Marietta is all she knows.

CONNIE

She'll come around. The next day or next week, she'll say, "Mom, forget about New York. I want to stay right here."

CAROLYN

You think you can coach her on those lines? She's pretty stubborn.

CONNIE

(affectionately)

She's kind of like her mom.

Arguing voices from the wings. Bonnie and Johnny run on, in a fierce tug-of-war over a slingshot.



BONNIE  
It's mine!

JOHNNY  
It's mine! Stop it!

CONNIE  
Their natural state. Give it to me. Give it to me!

BONNIE  
(to Connie)  
I'll give it to you, then you can give it to me.

JOHNNY  
No! It's for Boy!

BONNIE  
It's for Urchin!

CONNIE  
In my hand, now!

Begrudgingly, they both raise the object and put it in  
Connie's open palm.

CONNIE  
A slingshot. That's great. 'Cause that's what you both need: another weapon.

JOHNNY  
Lottie gave it to me as a prop for the Boy character. 'Cause boys. Have. Slingshots.

BONNIE  
So. Do. Urchins.

CONNIE  
Tonight, neither the boy nor the urchin's bringing home squat. It's gonna stay at the  
theater and Carolyn can decide who gets it in tomorrow's rehearsal. My vote is that it  
disappears and is never heard from again.

JOHNNY  
That's not fair!

BONNIE

I want it!

CONNIE

Go wait in the car. Car! Car!

Bonnie and Johnny sulk off into the wings, pushing each other at the last moment.

CONNIE

Hon, it'll be fine, you'll see. Claire'll come around. And if not, maybe you can pop her tires with this.

Connie hands the slingshot to Carolyn, gives her shoulder a squeeze, and exits.

A beat, and Carolyn starts to gather a chair or two and move them to the side. Harry enters, looking angry.

HARRY

Hank!

(sees Carolyn)

Oh, hello, Madam Director. Have you seen my wayward son?

CAROLYN

No, I'm afraid not.

HARRY

I seem to have misplaced him.

CAROLYN

When you find him, hold on to him.

HARRY

Oh, I'll hold onto him. Around the neck. Tightly.

(changing the subject)

It's a little rocky, but I think it's coming together. The play. Are you happy with it?

CAROLYN

It's a good play. It's got a useful message.

HARRY

Very useful.

CAROLYN

About persevering, about looking to the future. And about being honest, with yourself and with others.

HARRY

Is that in there?

CAROLYN

You're right, Mr. Abernathy. We really should be looking forward. Please excuse me. I want to go home and talk to my daughter. I'll tell Horace and Delia to lock up the theater.

Carolyn, carrying prompt book, begins to exit. Harry rushes over, stops her.

HARRY

One little addendum, ma'am. A minor matter of money.

CAROLYN

Money?

HARRY

To wit, my commission for your play.

Unseen by the pair, Hank enters at the back and listens.

CAROLYN

Mr. Abernathy, we discussed your terms before you came to town to write.

HARRY

I know, but--

CAROLYN

And you agreed to those terms.

HARRY

I know, but--

CAROLYN

Specifically, that you would write this play focused on this community and your great-great-great-great etcetera grandfather, and that while staying here you would write and promote this play, and at your suggestion, meals and lodging costs would be deferred until after the show opened. Tickets would be sold, you would be paid, and in turn you would pay your creditors.

HARRY

A wonderful setup. But it's leaving me and the boy a little strapped for cash. So I'm wondering if we could negotiate an advance payment. A little loan against the principal.

CAROLYN

I'm sorry, but the theater doesn't have it. We're counting on the appeal of *Abernathy in Marietta* to boost season ticket sales and cover your commission. Until then...

HARRY

I'm not asking for myself, of course. But my poor, struggling son--

HANK

Your poor, struggling son can take care of himself.

HARRY

That's up for debate. My dear Carolyn...

CAROLYN

I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. If you'll excuse me, I really need to go. Delia and Horace will lock up. Good night.

Carolyn exits. Harry turns and looks at Hank, who is frowning at the floor. Beat.

HARRY

Well. I hope you're happy. You just gave away forty-eight dollars of my money--

HANK

My money.

HARRY

--and for what? What do we gain by your little act of kindness? Nothing. You know the rule: you don't put money down unless you know it'll pay out two-to-one. And even then-- Ah, why do I bother? I'll tell you, sonny, ever since Topeka you've been very moody. And what was Topeka? Three towns ago?

HANK

Four.

HARRY

So you better shake off that teenage angst of yours and start bringing your A-game pretty quick, 'cause this ain't gettin' any easier.

HANK

No, it was never easy. It was never fun.

HARRY

We had fun at first.

HANK

No we didn't! I never wanted to do this, you made me do this. And every town we go to, every scam we pull--

HARRY

Hey.

HANK

--It's always the same. We arrive in town, big fanfare, you're the celebrated artist, here to capture the community spirit. But it's always the same. We have to keep one eye on the payout and the other eye on the exit!

HARRY

Will you keep your voice down? There's two Hofnagels running about.

HANK

I'm tired of it, Dad. I don't want to do it anymore. I want out.

HARRY

You want "out"? You don't get to go out. We're a family here.

HANK

No. You made me your partner in crime, and I'm not gonna do it anymore.

HARRY

I don't know what you're complaining about. We're the ones giving all these people exactly what they want. Didn't I prove it again tonight? We give them a story they can feel good about, and we get paid for it. Then we move on. Nothing wrong with that.

HANK

Except we leave a pile of unpaid bills and lies behind us, and all those happy people get the shaft. I'm tired of it all.

HARRY

Then sleep on it. We got comfortable beds for four more weeks.

HANK

And then we pack up, move on, and do it all over again.

HARRY

Yes, we do! Lots of people in lots of towns out there, just waiting for their own personalized community play, only they don't know it yet. So we give it to 'em. A little research, we take the play, we change some dates, we add a store name here and switch some geography there, and we sell 'em a play written just for them. And for six weeks we live off the kindness of rubes. And they're happy to have us! Remember the reception we got for *Spanglerhaven in Scarborough*? And what about the money we made off of *Donderlinger in Cottonwood Falls*? They loved us there.

HANK

And each time we slink away, thieves in the night that we are.

HARRY

You've got a real identity crisis, kid. All these small towns filled with gullible, trusting people. They're the jewels of America, just ready to be plucked.

HANK

It's wrong.

HARRY

It's too late for a crisis of conscience. You've been my willing partner in this venture for the last four years--

HANK

Right after Mom died.

HARRY

--And I-- Yes! After your mother died. And now it's me and you, and I take care of you. I provide.

HANK

And now I'm eighteen. And I want out. I'm tired of the moving, I'm tired of the lies, and right now... I'm tired of you.

HARRY

Now listen to me, you ungrateful progeny--

From the wings, Horace calls out.

HORACE (OFF)

Hello! Is the theater empty?

DELIA (OFF)

That's a silly thing to ask, Horace. If it's empty, you won't get an answer.

HORACE (OFF)

Will you be quiet!

HARRY

(to Hank, quiet but intense)

Just stop talking about this. You're my boy, but you don't know what you're saying.

HANK

I know how I feel, Dad. I don't feel like I belong anywhere.

HARRY

That's enough. We get through this gift, and then we can talk about it on the road.

HANK

Why do I have to keep lying to everyone?

HARRY

Because it's what the rubes want. Now shut your trap and smile.

Horace walks onstage, followed by Delia.

HORACE

Well! Our playwright is still among us.

HARRY

It's hard to leave such formidable talent. You, sir, are the consummate Harrison P. Abernathy, and you, madam, are unparalleled as the resourceful hatmaker.

HORACE

Well, we're just your humble actors, trying our best to tell your story.

HARRY

It wouldn't be a play without great actors.

HORACE

And we wouldn't be actors without a great play.

HANK

I need some air.

DELIA

Horace, let's close the theater. I'll go in back and get the lights.

Hank exits into the wings. Delia exits into the house.

HARRY

(calling to Hank)

Don't go far, son.

(to Horace)

Excuse me.

Harry begins to follow Hank's exit. Before he leaves, he turns to Horace, who is looking into the house.

HARRY

Mr. Hofnagel. One quick question. Be completely honest. Do you think this play will be a success?

HORACE

I'm certain of it. This is just what our community deserves.

Harry grins.

HARRY

That's exactly what I think too.

Harry exits.



DELIA (FROM HOUSE)

Horace, the master switch is the one on the left, right?

Ignoring this question, Horace moves downstage center and looks out at the audience. The words he speaks clearly resonate with him.

HORACE

Our story is the story of Marietta. Its values are our values, its work ethic our own. You just watch. No lies or compromises moving forward, just honesty and truth. Marietta, this is your story. And it's one, I have no doubt, in which we can all be proud.

Blackout.

**END OF ACT ONE**

**ACT TWO**

Four weeks later, about an hour before opening night performance.

Lights up half. The wooden skyline border at the back has been completed, with buildings and landmarks now visible.

Hank enters, surveys the empty stage area. He walks slowly across the apron, thinking. His circle takes him to the skyline, and he studies it for a moment. Then he steps behind the set piece and begins to walk its length, trailing his fingers over the top of the cut-out. A moment of communion.

Then lights up full as Carolyn enters with purpose. She carries an older style flash camera. She does not see Hank.

CAROLYN

(Calling into wings)

All right, everyone on stage for the cast photo! In costume!

Carolyn crosses to apron as people enter singly and in pairs. General crosstalk. Horace fidgets with his collar; the kids dart and swipe playfully at each other, etc.

CONNIE

Act One or Act Two costume?

CAROLYN

Act One. Let's all meet center stage.

She spots Johnny, who is in his Act Two costume as young Harrison Junior.

CAROLYN

Johnny, you need to be in your Act One costume as the street seller.

BONNIE

Told you so.

JOHNNY

Shut up.

Johnny runs offstage.

HORACE

Carolyn, dear, I hate to complain. When are we going to run that charm box scene? First Toby was absent, then young Johnny missed two rehearsals due to Little League...

Delia adjusts Horace's pocket handkerchief.

DELIA

Your kerchief is crooked.

HORACE

Leave it be, woman!

DELIA

I'm a milliner, I have an eye for details.

CAROLYN

We can run that scene after the photo. Let's get this photo first.

HORACE

Or we can run the scene now and take the picture after the show.

BUTCH

No, not after. Everyone will be sweaty and disheveled.

HORACE

Speak for yourself, deputy.

CONNIE

How about taking the picture during the show?

BONNIE

(As if quoting from the announcement)

"Flash photography during the performance is strictly prohibited."

CAROLYN

Thank you, Bonnie. Okay everybody, form two rows please.

The actors, now costumed in community theater period clothing, begin to shuffle into two rows center stage.

BONNIE

“Please take a moment to silence your cell phones and pagers now.”

TOBY

You should save that for the curtain speech.

Johnny reenters wearing his street seller apron and cap.

CAROLYN

Horace, don't block Toby. Oh good, Johnny. Stand by your sister.

BONNIE

“If you have candies in cellophane wrappers, take a moment to unwrap them now.”

JOHNNY

(to group)

What is she talking about?

CONNIE

Can you see everybody in back? I think we should use a riser.

Carolyn, on apron, looks through camera.

CAROLYN

We're okay. Pam, switch places with Butch.

Butch moves to back row and Pam moves in front.

HORACE

So we have Butch for tonight's performance. Well, that's progress, I suppose.

CAROLYN

(Looking through camera)

Okay, let me see. I want everyone to take one step back so you're closer to the skyline.

The actors do so. Carolyn reassesses.

CAROLYN

Yeah, I think that's... Oh! Hank, is that you? What are you doing back there?

All heads turn to look at Hank, who is awkwardly stooping to the side, behind the sky line.

HANK

Hi. I just... wanted to look...

CONNIE

Come on out, we're taking pictures.

HANK

Sure, sorry.

Hank steps over the sky line, all eyes on him.

HORACE

Try not to tread on the First Settlement Savings and Loan.

CAROLYN

Okay, nice group picture. Ready? Take one more step to the side, Hank.

Hank, upstage at the periphery, steps further away.

CAROLYN

Good. On three. One...

TOBY

Wait, what are we doing?

DELIA

We're taking a group picture, dear.

TOBY

I know, but I mean, what should we be doing? Are we in character or just smiling or what?

BONNIE

I'm gonna make my urchin face.

CAROLYN

No, it's just a cast photo, in costume. Don't overthink this.

DELIA

I should be holding my hat.

HORACE

Holding it is a slight improvement to wearing it.

DELIA

Carolyn, should I get my hat? It's over on the props table.

JOHNNY

I can get my belt and boot.

Uncertain movement from the group.

CAROLYN

No! No props for anyone. No belt, no hat, let's just take this picture.

TOBY

So we smile then? Instead of a character pose?

CAROLYN

Yes, you smile! Everybody smiles, on three. One...

PAM

I can't believe this group made it through five weeks of rehearsal.

CAROLYN

Two...

JOHNNY

(to Bonnie)

You're standing on my foot.

Butch, behind Bonnie, lifts her off the ground and deposits her six inches away from Johnny, solving the problem.

CAROLYN

Three!

All smiles. FLASH. Some movement.

CAROLYN

Everyone stay there. I want another one. Hank, come here a minute.

Hank, surprised, moves toward the group. Delia, on the end, is friendly to him.

DELIA

Hello, darling. How have you been?

HANK

Fine, thanks.

DELIA

Come over here, that's right.

Delia puts her hand on Hank's shoulder. The tableau shows Hank as part of the group, even if only for a fleeting moment.

CAROLYN

Hank, is your father with you?

HANK

Uh, no. I'm not sure where he is.

CAROLYN

That's a pity. It would be so nice to get a photo of the playwright with the cast.

DELIA

Oh, that would be nice.

CAROLYN

You don't think he's in the theater?

HANK

I'd be surprised if he was. And Dad is a little... reluctant about getting his picture taken.

TOBY

Funny, he never struck me as modest.

CAROLYN

Then Hank, could you do me a favor?

HANK

(brightening)

Okay.

CAROLYN

Come over here and take one of me with the cast?

A moment to recover, then:

HANK

Yeah, sure.

CONNIE

Oh good, the director with the cast, for posterity!

Hank crosses down, takes the camera and frames the shot. Carolyn joins the group.

BUTCH

You should count to three like Carolyn does, so we'll be ready.

HORACE

I think the young man can handle it, Butch.

(to Hank, backseat driving)

Does it look all right? You're not cutting off anyone's head, are you?

HANK

No, you all look great. Bonnie, you need to face front. On three, okay? One...

CONNIE

Everyone smile, this is Carolyn's shot.

HANK

Two...

HORACE

(ironically)

The suspense is killing me.



DELIA

(mishearing)

You're not wearing suspenders.

HANK

Three!

Camera FLASH.

CONNIE

That was nice.

HORACE

Are we done? Can we run the charm box scene now?

Carolyn moves and takes camera from Hank, speaking as she goes.

CAROLYN

Everyone, listen. I want everybody in the green room in two minutes to start a line speed-through, both acts.

(Some protests and crosstalk)

No! Last night's final dress did not inspire confidence, and I want everyone to have their lines fresh in their heads for tonight's show.

TOBY

But that's two hours of lines to run and the show opens in one hour!

CAROLYN

That's why it's a speed-through. Horace, Toby, and Johnny, we'll run the Act Two charm box scene right before the house opens. Be ready. Right now, speed-through. Go go!

Actors make their way to the wings. On her way out, Pam approaches Hank.

HANK

Hello, Miz Pam.

PAM

You know, Hank, I had the strangest experience at the diner today. All through the lunch rush I kept waiting for your father to sidle in and take his usual booth, then order the farmer's platter for six-ninety-five and his bottomless glass of unsweetened ice tea, a dollar-fifty extra. For the last sixty-two days, ever since he came to this town and settled in as resident artiste, he's been racking up a tab. And that tab is about to roll over into four digits, but I remain optimistic that you and he are gonna settle. So wouldn't you know it, the one day I thought I could collect from him, he decides to skip his eight dollar and forty-five cent lunch. Now what're the odds?

HANK

Well, I don't think he's received his commission for the show yet. But I'll be happy to give him a message.

PAM

(with menace)

Sure. Do that. Tell him I'm looking for him.

Hank smiles unconvincingly. Pam exits.

A beat, then Claire charges in from the house.

HANK

Hi, Claire.

Claire ignores him, looks and calls into the wings.

CLAIRE

Mother!

HANK

She's uh, in the green room with the actors. You want me to get her?

CLAIRE

Sure. Give her this and tell her I'm responding to the summons.

Claire hands Hank a piece of note paper.

HANK

Okay. Just a sec.

Hank exits. Claire waits. Her body language shows she is ready for battle. Beat.

Then Bonnie runs from one side of the wings toward the other side, ringing a handbell up high as she runs. Claire takes a step back, avoiding a collision.

Johnny enters, chasing Bonnie across.

JOHNNY

Stop playing with the hotel desk bell!

Bonnie, still ringing, runs off and Johnny follows.

CLAIRE

I am so glad I'm not in this play.

Carolyn enters, with Hank following. Mother and daughter look stonily at each other.

HANK

There you go. Carolyn, there's Claire. Claire, uh, ... your mom.

CAROLYN

Give us a minute please, Hank.

HANK

Sure.

Hank exits. Beat. Then:

CLAIRE

(motioning to note in Carolyn's hand)

I take it that's your note? It wasn't signed, just stuck under my car's windshield wiper. "You need to see me at once." Fittingly dramatic. Well, I'm here.

CAROLYN

Do you have anything you want to say to me?

CLAIRE

You're asking me? For two weeks, you refuse to acknowledge that I'm moving to New York, and now today you want to have this conversation?

CAROLYN

Looks like I can't avoid it any longer. Last night I get home from rehearsal to find your little Honda stuffed to the rafters with boxes and furniture.

CLAIRE

Hondas don't have rafters.

CAROLYN

Don't get smart.

CLAIRE

Yes, I packed everything up while you were at rehearsal because I thought it would be easier to do when I wasn't under your watchful eye.

CAROLYN

You're still leaving on the thirtieth?

(Beat. No response)

Claire?

CLAIRE

Plans changed a little. I'm leaving tomorrow.

CAROLYN

Are you kidding me?!

CLAIRE

I just found out about this! The Brooklyn sublet fell through, but Molly Waterman's friend's cousin is looking for a fourth roommate to share an apartment in Queens...

CAROLYN

Claire, this is not how you make a major life change! All this sounds tenuous at best --

CLAIRE

I know what I'm doing.

CAROLYN

You know what this is? This is the universe telling you, “Claire, don’t do this. Be smart and get your education right here in town.”

CLAIRE

It’s also telling me about a four-bedroom apartment in Queens, so it sounds like the universe is sending mixed messages.

CAROLYN

You’ll need rent money. Grocery money. How are you gonna pay for everything?

CLAIRE

I told you. I saved money from my summer job.

CAROLYN

Is that even gonna cover the cost of your trip out there?

CLAIRE

I’ll be fine! I’ll get a job as soon as I get there. And starting pay is fifteen dollars an hour there, you know.

CAROLYN

It has to be to offset the cost of living.

Carolyn takes out an envelope.

CAROLYN

You know that your great-grandmother started a savings account for you the day you were born. It’s in my name, but Grandma Elsa wanted to make sure you had that money. And she was very specific: the funds were to help you pay for a college education. But after seeing that car packed up with everything you have in the world...

(Carolyn sighs, makes a decision)

This morning I went to the bank and took out some money from the account. In this envelope is three thousand dollars.

CLAIRE

(moved)

From great-grandma Elsa?

CAROLYN

Yeah. If you’re so determined to move away, I’m not going to stop you. But I don’t want you to jump off a cliff without a little safety cushion to break your fall.

CLAIRE

(simply)

See, there's the difference. You think I'm gonna jump and fall, and maybe, but I still need to jump. It's the only way to see if I can fly.

CAROLYN

Claire...

CLAIRE

That money would help me a lot, Mom.

CAROLYN

I know. And I'm going to give it to you... on one condition. I still want you to enroll for Spring semester here at the college.

A beat.

CLAIRE

How would that work? In spring, I'll be in New York.

CAROLYN

You can be home by Christmas and ready to start school in January. It's not as good as starting in the fall, but that way you'll have your little New York experience --

CLAIRE

What? No.

CAROLYN

-- And you can still honor your great-grandmother's wishes.

CLAIRE

No! First, why would I work that hard to build a new life in a new city only to abandon it a few months later --

CAROLYN

Who says you'll like it out there?

CLAIRE

-- And second, maybe Grandma Elsa would've wanted me to travel! Learning about the world, meeting new people, that counts as an education, right?

CAROLYN

I think I know what she would have wanted for you.

CLAIRE

Yeah, that's the problem. You think you know, but you don't. You only know how you want the world to work. You know what? That role of director fits you perfectly. You get to tell everyone what to do, move 'em around on your stage, make sure you get your world exactly the way you want it. But life doesn't work that way.

Carolyn pockets the envelope. Hank enters quietly and stands upstage, unnoticed.

CAROLYN

I was wrong. I expected you to be sensible, but after 18 years with you, I really should have known better.

CLAIRE

Mom, I could use that money, I just can't promise that I'll come back here to start school.

CAROLYN

(coolly)

No, you're right. Here I am, trying to direct, when all you want to do is get off the stage. So let me leave you to it and I'll go back to actors who actually need me.

Carolyn starts to exit.

CLAIRE

So I can't promise to come back, but three thousand dollars. That's a pretty great safety cushion, don't you think?

CAROLYN

Yes, it is. Right up there with a caring mother and a college degree.

Carolyn exits. A beat, then Claire growls in frustration.

CLAIRE

Aaaaah! Rrrrrgh!

HANK

Is there... Is something wrong?

CLAIRE

I'm an idiot. An absolute moron.

HANK

What d'you mean?

CLAIRE

Three thousand dollars in an envelope, she's holding it out to me, daring me to take it. And do I take it? No! Because I have principles. When it would have been so easy to just agree to anything she wanted. "Back by Christmas?" Sure, Mommy. "Register for classes?" Anything you say. Money, please. Those first few months as my own person, that's what really matters. I'd have a dozen excuses by December why I couldn't come back. And the clincher is that I need that cash. I've been stressing out all week. I won't make it on just my savings and a hundred bucks in pawnable electronics.

HANK

You think you can still get it?

CLAIRE

I don't know. She's stubborn. Now I'll have to grovel and apologize and tell her what a wonderful mom she is.

HANK

She seems like an okay mom to me.

CLAIRE

Easy for you to say. You're on the outside looking in.

HANK

My dad used to tell me, if you have to choose between family and money, choose family. But get the money if you can.

CLAIRE

That's your Act Two.

HANK

What?



CLAIRE

Your play. Well, your dad's play. That's your Act Two message, right? The father gives his kid that wooden box with the family history inside, and then when the kid's grown up, at the end he refuses to let his dad sell off the family lumber mill. Then the box comes back at the end.

HANK

That's right.

CLAIRE

I read through my mom's script. So how come I can't find anything about the Abernathy lumber mill?

HANK

You mean you looked into...

CLAIRE

I got curious. You think there'd be something about this great Abernathy lumber mill, but there's nothing on the Internet.

HANK

Well, the Internet. That was a business that existed 150 years ago, and also, the mill did get sold sometime after Abernathy Senior died, and it was renamed something else. But that's not in the play.

CLAIRE

So not always family before money.

HANK

I guess. Sometimes it feels like they're running neck and neck.

CLAIRE

I need to rethink my approach. Family can get you money, if you play your cards right. Thanks for the pep talk.

Claire exits.

HANK

(to himself)

I can't tell the grifters from the marks anymore.

HARRY

(from the wings)

Psst! Psst! Hey!

Harry appears from the opposite wings, looks around warily.

HANK

Where have you been?

HARRY

Packing up, lying low, getting ready to scoot. You know the schedule by now.

HANK

Usually by now we're halfway to the state line. What's the hold-up?

HARRY

The hold-up is one Carolyn Gardner and her infernal checkbook. Last night I showed up and demanded my fee.

HANK

So what happened?

HARRY

Nothing happened! She told me to stop in before the performance tonight and she'd give it to me then.

HANK

You must be slipping. When it comes to separating the rubes from their money, your powers of persuasion are second to none.

HARRY

Listen Sonny, I tried the hat-in-hand, I tried the ticking clock, I even dusted off the ailing aunt in Peoria. Nothing opened that purse.

HANK

Speaking of paying up, Pam from the diner is looking for you.

HARRY

Yeah, and I've been dodging Connie and her bed and breakfast bill all day.

HANK

She's here too, you know.

HARRY

Which is why I never want to be in the theater when we're ready to leave town!

(Beat)

Say, son, what if you picked up my paycheck? Then you could meet me back at the truck and we could skedaddle.

HANK

I'm surprised you trust me not to double-cross you and start a life on my own.

HARRY

Oh no, don't start that again. We get our money and we get out. Then we can talk about what to do next.

HANK

And who to fleece next.

HARRY

Exactly. You're good at it when you try. Get that check, son.

Harry starts to exit.

HANK

I'm gonna hate myself for doing this, but... Dad. Carolyn Gardner's carrying an envelope with three thousand dollars in it.

Harry stops, turns.

HARRY

Cash? Which pocket? What denominations?

HANK

I don't know. She was gonna give it to Claire to help with her New York trip, but then they had a fight, like parents and children do. Dad?

HARRY

Quiet, I'm thinking.

(beat)

Okay, we'll try this. Bring Carolyn Gardner back here, and give me a ninety count.

HANK

What're you gonna do?

HARRY

Trust me.

HANK

I never trust you. What're you gonna do?

HARRY

We're gonna run the Stiff Shoulder.

HANK

Stiff shoulder? Really?

HARRY

Don't argue, just do it. Ninety count. One, two, three...

Hank begrudgingly joins in, counting as he exits.

HANK

Four, five, six...

Hank exits. Harry goes into action, assessing, counting under his breath, his mouth moving. He surveys, pulls two wood chairs onstage from one wing, then runs to the opposite wing, disappears, and returns with Delia's overstuffed hat.

From the hat he pulls out a large hatpin, studies it, turns it as if to jab it into his arm, then shakes his head. He replaces the pin, continues to count, drops the hat on the ground. Mimes walking up to the hat and "tripping", but is not satisfied. He picks it up, runs back into the wing.

He returns, counting, with a few pieces of wax fruit from the Act One cart. He gets down on the floor beside a chair, holds the fruit.

HARRY

84, 85, 86, 87...

He flips over a chair and leans against it, and with the last numbers bowls first the apple, and then the orange, a few feet away from him and begins to groan.

HARRY

... 88, 89, 90. Ooooooahh!

Carolyn enters with Hank.

CAROLYN

Mr. Abernathy, what happened?

HANK

Dad, are you okay?

HARRY

Is that you, son? One minute I was walking across this impressive stage, then my foot suddenly trod on something round and waxen, and the next thing I know I'm seeing stars, and not of the celebrity kind.

Carolyn picks up the apple.

CAROLYN

Oh my goodness. The kids must have been playing with the props again.

HARRY

Children can cause such pain, Carolyn, and they don't even know they're doing it.

CAROLYN

Are you all right? Can you stand?

Carolyn begins to help Harry rise.

HANK

You're not gonna sue the theater, are you, Dad?

HARRY

Of course not, son, don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't dream of it. Besides, I'm perfectly AAAAHHHH!

On his feet, Harry moans and clutches his shoulder in pain.

CAROLYN

Oh no! Oh dear.

HARRY

Aaaaaaahhh. My right shoulder, great pain. Stiffness in the lower neck, tenderness in the upper arm. Try to move my shoulder, can't. Aaaaaaahhh. Maybe just a sprain?

HANK

But probably worse.

CAROLYN

Let me go get an ice pack.

Harry stops her with his "good" arm. Claire enters.

HARRY

That's kind of you, but no. Please don't leave me in this pitiable condition.

CLAIRE

What happened?

CAROLYN

Mr. Abernathy has had an accident. Go to the freezer and get an ice pack.

CLAIRE

(noticing the orange)

Where did that fruit come from? That wasn't here a minute ago.

CAROLYN

Claire, get the ice pack, please!

Claire, frowning, exits.

HARRY

My dear son?

HANK

I'm here, Dad.

HARRY

I think I am in need of medical attention. Could you drive me to an emergency clinic?

HANK

I could, but Dad.

HARRY

What is it, son?

HANK

How are we going to pay? Because of our transient lifestyle, we don't have insurance cards. And we're not Ohio residents.

HARRY

Ohhhh.

(A flare of pain.)

AAAHHH! Ohhhh. You're right, son. No insurance and no residency. But if we had cash at the ready. Miz Gardner, before I slipped on that fateful fruit I came here to collect my payment for the play. But now the banks are closed and a check does me no good in my current situation.

CAROLYN

If you need a hospital --

HARRY

I do. This may be a fracture, hairline or otherwise.

CAROLYN

-- then I can bring you to one. And I can talk to the billing office about payment.

HARRY

So kind, but no. You have a show to open and a story to tell. My story, our story. So perhaps if you could provide a cash advance on my commission, I can get the help I need to lift me from this agony.

CAROLYN

I'd still prefer to issue a check.

HARRY

As would I, but circumstances have changed, due to prophan negligence. My son had mentioned filing a suit, an idea that I once more dismiss-- AAAAHHH!

HANK

My poor dad...

CAROLYN

Well... I do just have some cash I could turn into an advance. I wasn't planning to use it this way --

HARRY

And I wasn't planning on a dislocated shoulder.

CAROLYN

How much do you think you'll need?

HARRY

Oh, one or two thousand should...

CAROLYN

Two thousand?

HARRY

Against my commissioned fee for the play, of course.

HANK

We'll just hope there's no overnight observation.

HARRY

Oh, an overnight observation!

HANK

That would really add up.

HARRY

And we must be prepared for such a contingency. Shall we say three thousand, Carolyn?

HANK

Against the commissioned fee.

HARRY

Of course. Money already earned.



HANK

And already spent.

Claire returns holding a can of soda.

CLAIRE

The refrigerator freezer only had ice cubes but no pack, and I couldn't find a bag, and the mini-fridge didn't even have a freezer so here we are with a cold can of Sprite.

HARRY

With or without that money, son, you need to get me to a doctor.

CLAIRE

What money?

CAROLYN

I'll -- I can give you two.

HARRY

Two might not cover it.

CAROLYN

All right, three. An advance on your fee.

HARRY

That's all we ask. Take me to the truck, son. Miz Gardner, if you please.

Carolyn starts to hand the envelope of money to Harry,  
but Hank intercepts and pockets it.

HANK

In case you lose consciousness.

HARRY

(threatening)

Just make sure you don't lose yours.

CLAIRE

Hey! Wait a minute! Is that my money?

CAROLYN

It is not your money. It is an advance on the money the theater owes Mr. Abernathy. He needed it sooner than we thought.

Claire moves to block Hank and Harry, who are heading to the exit.

CLAIRE

Now hold it! Mom, they're pulling something over on you. Something's not right here.

HARRY

Young lady, I am in a lot of pain.

CLAIRE

You'll be in even more once I figure out what's really going on.

CAROLYN

Claire, let them go.

CLAIRE

But Mom!

CAROLYN

Let them go!

A beat, and Claire reluctantly steps aside.

HARRY

To the nearest available X-ray machine, please.

Harry and Hank exit. Claire storms over to Carolyn.

CLAIRE

I was going to agree to your conditions, but there's no reason to now! You just gave Grandma Elsa's money to a couple of con men.

CAROLYN

The money will go back into the account on Monday, and it will still be available to you to fund your college education. I can't trust you, Claire. Leave the state of Ohio if you want, but Elsa Sullivan's money is staying right here, in the town that she loved. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a show to open.

Carolyn exits. Claire watches her go. She frowns, then sets soda can on one chair, rights the overturned chair and stands behind it, thinking. Beat.

Bonnie runs out, stops.

BONNIE

Your mom wanted me to pick up the fruit and put it back in the fruit cart.

CLAIRE

Knock yourself out.

Bonnie picks up the orange, then the apple, then spies the soda. Claire notices. Bonnie decides and runs to the soda can, but Claire is faster. She grabs it and holds it high, out of Bonnie's reach.

CLAIRE

Uh uh uh!

BONNIE

(Staring up at soda)

I want it.

CLAIRE

Tough.

BONNIE

I'm thirsty. I need it.

CLAIRE

You need sugar before a performance like I need a hole in the head.

BONNIE

Come on.

CLAIRE

Put the fruit away and let's talk.

Bonnie eyes her warily, then starts to canter to the wings with the fruit. Turns back.

BONNIE

You're not gonna drink it, are you?

CLAIRE

Maybe.

Beat. Then Bonnie runs into the wings. Claire pulls a chair downstage. Bonnie runs back in.

CLAIRE

Take a seat.

Bonnie sits. The following has the vibe of a police interrogation, with Claire holding the soda can and walking in an arc behind Bonnie, who is seated and looking out.

CLAIRE

So. Bonnie. The Abernathys have been renting rooms at your mom's bed and breakfast for several weeks now. You and your brother ever go snooping around in their bedrooms?

BONNIE

Mom says the guest rooms are strictly off limits.

CLAIRE

You gonna answer the question?

BONNIE

We're in there a bit.

CLAIRE

What's a bit?

BONNIE

Often.

CLAIRE

How often?

BONNIE

Every day.

CLAIRE  
While they're gone?

BONNIE  
Yeah.

CLAIRE  
And what did you find?

BONNIE  
Can I have the Sprite?

CLAIRE  
Not yet. What did you find?

BONNIE  
Stuff. Clothes, books, pictures.

CLAIRE  
What kind of pictures?

BONNIE  
Just pictures. People, places. Things.

CLAIRE  
What else?

BONNIE  
Two big trunks and a smaller box. The box has the pictures in it, and other stuff.

CLAIRE  
What other stuff?

BONNIE  
I don't know. Papers. Why do you wanna know?

CLAIRE  
If you still want that Sprite, here's what you're gonna do. That box, is it heavy?  
(Bonnie shakes her head)  
Then I want you to sneak back to your house and get that box and bring it to me. But they might be around, so you have to be careful. Deal?

Bonnie holds out her hand like a handshake. Claire holds out the soda can and Bonnie takes it, opens it, drinks.

CLAIRE

Now get going, my little double agent.

Bonnie runs to the far wing, stops and turns.

BONNIE

I like doing stuff like this. I'd even do it without the Sprite.

CLAIRE

I figured you would.

Bonnie exits.

Horace, Johnny, and Carolyn enter from other wing. Johnny carries a wooden curio box, decorated simply on the outside.

CAROLYN

(acknowledging)

Claire.

CLAIRE

Madam Director.

Claire exits into house.

HORACE

We need to run it, it's important. We've been through it exactly once and that was without the props, and we have to get the order right. And since I'm working with a child actor--

JOHNNY

I know my lines.

HORACE

That may be, but do you know the sequence, dear boy?

CAROLYN

Okay, so let's run this. Johnny, give Horace the charm box. Horace, move the chair to your Act Two spike marks.

Horace aligns a chair and sits upstage, facing away.

JOHNNY

(to Carolyn)

It's purse, ring, letter, feather, right?

CAROLYN

Purse, ring, feather, letter.

HORACE

(re: chair placement)

This doesn't feel right.

CAROLYN

Wrong spike marks. It's blue tape for Act One and pink tape for Act Two.

HORACE

Nobody tells me anything.

Horace repositions chair downstage, aligns with marks.

CAROLYN

So remember, this comes after the scene where young Harrison is asked by the foreman to join him. Then after this scene, it's twenty years later and Harrison is played by Toby.

JOHNNY

And then I don't have any more lines.

CAROLYN

But you have a lot here, and that's what counts.

HORACE

I should have my lap blanket, for the character.

CAROLYN

Do you really need it now?

HORACE

As an actor, I really do.

CAROLYN

Fine. I'll get the blanket. Start the scene.

Carolyn goes to wings.

JOHNNY

Do we need the hearth?

CAROLYN

No, no hearth! Just start the scene.

HORACE

You go off to enter.

JOHNNY

Oh, right.

Johnny exits. Pause. Enters, moves to Horace.

HORACE

You have a gleam in your eye. What is it, son?

JOHNNY

You've always told me to seek opportunity, father.

HORACE

I have?

As Carolyn re-enters carrying a quilted blanket.

CAROLYN

It's a statement, Horace.

HORACE

I have.

She plunks the blanket in his lap; Horace unfolds and tucks it fussily.



JOHNNY

(speeding line)

This morning I was at the docks and met a man seeking volunteers. He will be digging for minerals in the mountains of Kentucky.

CAROLYN

Not so fast, please.

JOHNNY

(slower speed)

Iron ore, copper. With factories growing everywhere, and such a need for base metals, this could be my chance for security.

HORACE

And quite possibly an early grave. Your heart is in the right place, but we don't need to look beyond Marietta for our fortune.

JOHNNY

I believe we do. We continue to struggle, both of us working at the mill, planing lumber and pulping the dust.

HORACE

We won't be doing that forever.

JOHNNY

How do you know? What plans do you have?

HORACE

You must trust me, son.

At this point, the other actors in the troupe enter individually, organically, and quietly stand along the periphery, watching the scene as an audience. This occurs one person at a time over the course of minutes.

JOHNNY

Father, I want to make my own way. If I take this chance, then who knows what opportunities might follow?

HORACE

There's no guarantee.

JOHNNY

And there's not one here. Mill work, that's fine for you. But I want more.

HORACE

You think I don't? I've been saving every penny I could since starting at the mill, back when you were still a swaddled babe.

JOHNNY

Saving towards what?

HORACE

Our destiny. If not ownership of this mill, then we start our own. Abernathy and son.

Horace picks up the box at his side. He opens the lid, holds it out.

HORACE

Take out the purse. Go ahead.

Pause. Johnny reaches into the box and takes out a small but full cloth sack.

HORACE

You see this simple wooden box. It was the first piece I made for you at that mill. It was a present for your first birthday. It also-- It also honors the anniversary of your dear mother's death. The box is yours, as are the items inside. I was waiting until your fifteenth birthday, but... if you're leaving me well before then...

JOHNNY

What's in this purse?

HORACE

My savings. All that I have. It's yours.

JOHNNY

You said you would use the savings to buy a business.

HORACE

Only if I have someone to continue my legacy. With you not here and Sarah departed, I won't have need of one.

Johnny puts the purse back in the box, still held out.

HORACE

Everything here belongs to you. Take something else. Go on.

Johnny reaches in and holds up a simple gold band ring.

HORACE

Your mother's wedding ring. I debated mightily whether to leave it with her. But I knew she would have wanted you to have it, a gift to your future bride.

Johnny carefully replaces the ring, removes a single large feather. Horace smiles.

HORACE

That's a feather from a certain hat. Serves to remind us both that sometimes the best of intentions are not enough.

Johnny puts back the feather and takes out a folded square of period parchment paper.

JOHNNY

A letter? May I open it?

Horace nods. Johnny unfolds the paper.

JOHNNY

It's blank.

HORACE

It's for you, to record your future. I would like you to stay here with me, but I will not order you. You must make your own decision. And whatever choice you make, it will become the story you tell on that page.

A pause. By now, the cast is on the sides of the stage, unobtrusively watching the moment. Johnny folds the paper, replaces it, then takes the box. He closes it gently.

JOHNNY

I choose to stay here, where you remain and where mother rests. It is a community that has much to offer. Only one change should be made.

Johnny holds out box to Horace.

JOHNNY

This is not my destiny alone. We are family, and the destiny is ours.

Horace takes box reverently. Johnny steps in and hugs Horace. Hold.

HORACE

And lights transition and we're twenty years later, right, Carolyn? Carolyn?

Carolyn, who has been off to the side, breaks her trance and steps forward. She wipes and blinks her eyes to clear them; the content has hit home.

CAROLYN

Yes, exactly. Excuse me. Um. Right. Johnny, you can put the box back on the props table.

JOHNNY

That was good, right?

CAROLYN

Yes. Yes, it was.

Johnny exits. Carolyn notices cast standing around.

CAROLYN

I thought you were all running a line speed-through.

DELIA

Well, we were, but then everyone was coming and going and no one was there to answer. So I'd say,

(speaking in rushed speed-through delivery)

“StylishChapeausOfEuropeanFashion! ExquisiteMillineryForMenAndLadies!” And no one would say anything else.

TOBY

Should we keep going with the speed-through?

CAROLYN

(checking watch)

No. There's only twenty minutes before house opens. Just run any lines that have been giving you problems this week. We're sold out, and we want a strong opening night!

PAM

A full house, that's fantastic.

BUTCH

I'm nervous. The sheriff's office bought out the entire Row E, and if we don't have a homicide they'll all be here.

CONNIE

You know what? There's a lot of buzz about this play. Everyone in town I run into says they can't wait to see it. So much buzz and excitement. It's like the female version of *The Odd Couple* all over again!

TOBY

Well, sure. People love their town and they want to see a show that tells their story.

DELIA

And that's what we're doing, isn't it? We're really representing everyone in Marietta.

HORACE

Everyone from 1867 to 1903.

DELIA

No, Horace. It's not just a history play, it's a play about who we all are today.

CONNIE

Nicely said. And I'm grateful to be a part of that.

PAM

Me too.

BUTCH

Me three.

CAROLYN

And I'm proud of you all, and I'm proud of this show. Let's start our warm-up exercises before house opens. Everyone, deep breath in and...

(breathes in; exhaling)

*Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh.*

Carolyn's voice lowers in pitch and the group follows suit. A couple organized group warm-ups: ahhs, ha-ha-hahas, Oohs, etc.

CAROLYN

Great! Keep going with individual warm-ups. Check your diction, do some mouth and movement exercises. Fifteen minutes till house opens.

Carolyn exits to check props. Actors on stage move and speak in different exercises. Some do bird flaps, others leg lunges, all while reciting tongue twisters or doing mouth movements or running lines. The effect is not unlike observing benign inmates at an asylum.

During this, Bonnie runs in from wings with a worn cardboard box. (It is large enough to hold a stack of papers and a few other items.) She moves to the apron, looks out.

BONNIE

Psst! Claire! I got it.

Claire appears from house, takes box.

CLAIRE

Good kid. Did anyone see you?

BONNIE

Hank chased me, but I gave him the slip.

CLAIRE

If you're asked, play dumb. Thanks, Bonnie.

BONNIE

What're you looking for?

CLAIRE

I don't know, kid. But I'll know it when I find it.

Claire exits into house. Bonnie joins actors warming up.

A moment, then Hank enters, looks around. Spots Bonnie, crosses to her. Bonnie continues with warm-up exercises.

HANK

Hey, Bonnie. Where's my box?

No response, just vocal exercise.

HANK

I'm talking to you. I saw you take my box from the back of the truck. Where is it?

Bonnie's physicality becomes an exaggerated "No" headshake.

HANK

Listen, I'm not fooling around. I want my property back.

CONNIE

Hello, Hank. Is something wrong?

HANK

No, I just -- I wanted to ask Bonnie something.

CONNIE

My girl is popular today. First Claire wants to talk to her, and now you do.

HANK

Claire?

(Turns back to Bonnie)

Did you give my box to Claire? Where'd she go?

(No reply; more exercises)

Come on, Bonnie, you and I are friends. Tell me where she is.

Bonnie stretches in a way that indicates the wings.

HANK

Did she go that way? Is that what you're saying?

BONNIE

(descending pitch)

Maaaaaaaaay-beeeee!

DELIA

Hank! Make sure you tell your father how excited we are to be telling his story.

TOBY

We're sold out tonight. How about that?

HANK

(to himself)

I've sold out.

DELIA

Well, we've sold out, dear.

HANK

Excuse me.

Hank exits into the wings. Carolyn passes him as she enters.

CAROLYN

(calling)

Hank! How is your father doing?

(No response)

All right, everyone, listen up please. Just a short while ago Harry Abernathy hurt his shoulder, and he's seeing a doctor. But you know the old phrase, the show must go on, so I want to dedicate our opening night performance to him. So let's perform this play in honor of our playwright and the story he's given us to tell.

Murmurs of agreement and "hear hear." Then, a voice from the house:

CLAIRE

(from house)

After y'all see this, you may want to reconsider.

Claire enters with opened box, steps onstage.



CLAIRE

You think you're telling a noble story, huh? All about Marietta and the great people who built it. That's the story that the theater commissioned from Harrison Abernathy, right, Mom?

CAROLYN

Claire, what are you doing?

CLAIRE

I'm showing you that you've been snookered, bamboozled, and fooled. All of you. H.P. Abernathy and his ancestors have been playing you for suckers.

Hank enters in a rush from wing, sees Claire with the box, and stops abruptly.

CLAIRE

Well, look who's here. Where's Daddy?

HANK

Claire, wait. Please don't do this.

CLAIRE

The theater and the community have a right to know, don't you think?

HANK

Maybe, but... later. After the show.

CLAIRE

No. The truth comes out now.

Claire takes from the box six scripts, brad-bound photocopied scripts each with a different colored cover. When she takes out the scripts, a handful of photographs spill on the ground. Claire ignores them, but Hank kneels and collects them.

As she reads the names she hands that script to a cast member. The person takes it, confused.

CLAIRE

(handing out scripts)

*Laborieux in Lancaster. Fudderman in Fayetteville. Spanglerhaven in Scarborough. Sundergard in Solon Springs. Donderlinger in Cottonwood Falls. And last but not least, Palmer in Poughkeepsie.*

HANK

Please.

CLAIRE

Six scripts, same story. Family arrives in town, 1860-something, Mom dies, father builds his fortune, bonds with his son, and becomes a pillar of the community.

TOBY

That's our play.

CLAIRE

That's every play. Toby, what's the first line of *Fudderman in Fayetteville*?

Toby open his script, reads. The others look through their scripts.

TOBY

"Fayetteville. It's a town all of us know very well. Most of us have lived here our whole lives."

CLAIRE

You all have the same Page One speech. The town name changes and different landmarks are referenced, but it's the same play.

BUTCH

How come there are six scripts? They can't all be the same.

CLAIRE

They are, more or less. I figure that father and son have been doing this for a while, going to a new town in a new state and living off the people there, like parasites. Racking up debt, promising a new story all about them and their town, then they grab the money and move out before anyone sees the scam.

HORACE

Here's my charm box scene with Young Harrison, word for word!

TOBY

And my Weber's Market fruit stand. It's called Taylor Grocery here.

DELIA

And here's the milliner, helping Sundergard in Spring Green.

PAM

(to Hank)

You and your Dad were planning to skip town?

BONNIE

Their truck's all packed up and everything.

CLAIRE

Sorry, Hank. Looks like your dad's game is up. These scripts are a total fraud.

HANK

(still kneeling, looking at the top photograph)

Not a total fraud.

CLAIRE

Close enough. You didn't really get your money's worth, did you, Mom?

PAM

Claire's right. This isn't our story. It's a lie, and a copy of a copy.

CONNIE

Well, what do we do, Carolyn? Are we still performing *Abernathy in Marietta*?

HORACE

We can't! We've just found out it's a lie.

BUTCH

But we can't cancel. We've sold all those tickets.

JOHNNY

But people expect a true story about Marietta, right?

PAM

If we back up a lie, then we'll be complicit.

HORACE

Butch, this is grounds for arrest, right? Tell Row E to put out an A-P-B for Harrison Abernathy!

Excited talking, arguing. Hank still kneels.

CAROLYN

Everybody, stop. Stop!

(looking at Hank)

Hank. What do you have to say about all this?

Beat.

HANK

I don't know what to say except that I'm sorry and I am so, so.... tired.

Harry enters, energized and indignant.

HARRY

He doesn't have to say anything! He gets to plead the Fifth. Get up, Hank.

TOBY

We don't need to ask him to explain, we can ask you, you... inauthentic dramatist!

HARRY

(to Hank)

This is why you stay away from the theater on opening night.

CLAIRE

Lest anyone forget, those two still have the theater's three thousand dollars.

HORACE

Butch, arrest that man! And then frisk him.

HARRY

Now hold it. Not a step. Uh uh uh UH!

Some advancing members stop.

HARRY

Now I came back here to collect my son, but you're making me mount a defense. Well, here it is, thespians. I'm not the one to blame for all this, you are! All of you, even the kids.

Indignant protests; Harry talks over them.

HARRY

Oh no, you're not shifting the blame! I gave you a story that anyone of you could have looked into, I gave you plenty of time to ask questions about this script's authenticity, but did you ask me? No!

TOBY

But you're peddling a lie!

HARRY

And you believed it! Because you wanted to believe it. Because it affirms how great this town is and how great the people are in it, and you lapped it up! I gave you what you wanted to hear and you heard it. So I earned that money. You got your script, you got a full house, I don't see a downside. Now shut up and open the house. Come on, Hank, let's go.

Harry starts to exit upstage. Hank doesn't move.

PAM

Hey! You need to settle your diner tab. And you owe Connie for your rooms at her B and B.

CONNIE

That's right.

HARRY

Mrs. Gardner can pay you from the balance of my commission. Somehow I don't think I'll be seeing that money personally. Hank, get up now.

HORACE

Butch, stop that man!

HARRY

You stop me and you stop the play. As writer, I still own this script. And if I pull the rights at this eleventh hour, then the show is canceled, not just tonight's performance but the whole run. And how many advance tickets have you sold?

That's a mighty amount of refunds and a whole bunch of disgruntled customers. And with that, I exit stage left. Hank, for the last time: we are going.

HANK

No.

Beat. Then Hank stands.

HORACE

What're you, nuts?

HANK

No, Dad. I'm tired. I'm disconnected. I'm staying here.

HORACE

Staying where?

HANK

Here. Marietta.

HARRY

Uh... Maybe you haven't been following the plot for the last ten minutes, but we've burned our bridges here. You and me, we're personae non gratis.

HANK

I don't care. I'm tired of reinventing myself every four months, just so we can grift a new group of nice people.

HARRY

This is not the place -- [as in, for this conversation]

HANK

It is the place. I think so. I wanna see. I'm gonna stay here, and find a job, and connect with nice people.

Harry and Hank are still spatially distant. Hank turns to group. He takes out the envelope of money from a back pocket.

HARRY

(warning)

Son, what're you doing?

HANK

Miz Pam, Miz Connie, I have the cash and I promise I will settle up with you both.

HARRY

(angry)

Hank, stop it!

Hank puts the envelope back in his pocket.

PAM

What if this is just another con? How can I trust him?

CONNIE

I trust him.

HANK

And about this play that's caused all these problems. There's something everyone should know. My father didn't write it. I did.

Harry shakes his head.

HARRY

Point of no return now, kiddo.

TOBY

So you're to blame?

CONNIE

Let's hear him out.

HANK

As a kid, I was always writing stories. And my mom-- This is my mom.

Hank gives a photo of a smiling young woman with a baby to Carolyn beside him. The picture is quietly passed around the circle, each actor looking at the image. At the end is Harry, who is given the photo last.

HANK

She would always encourage me to keep going, keep writing. We moved around a lot, and friends were hard to make and keep, but I always had these notebooks. And for a little while, we stayed in one spot. Mom always said she had distant relatives in Poughkeepsie, which is the town where we lived for almost three years. I thought it would make a good birthday present, so I started to write her a play. But she died before I could finish it. And then it was Dad and me, on the road again, moving, always moving. I finished *Palmer in Poughkeepsie* to honor my mother -- Palmer was her maiden name -- and to keep myself sane. And then, in a moment of weakness, I showed the script to my father. I wanted him to appreciate it, and to appreciate Mom.

HARRY

(now holding the photo)

Hey. I loved this woman as much as you did.

HANK

Well. Love or not, all he saw in my story was the foundation for a scam. While we were traveling around, the two of us, we were doing some... not very respectable things.

HARRY

No need for specifics, son.

HANK

No. But I made a number of changes to the script, and I played up the heroics and the history angle. And I made it generic enough so you could just plug in a town name and some details and you'd have a tailor-made play for a new community. Which is how those scripts came to be.

Hank, still holding the photos, walks to each actor and collects the scripts one by one and replacing them in the box.

HANK

(as he collects them)

*Laborieux in Lancaster. Fudderman in Fayetteville. Spanglerhaven in Scarborough. Sundergard in Solon Springs. Donderlinger in Cottonwood Falls.*

Hank stops at Johnny, who holds out a script.

JOHNNY

Here's *Palmer in Poughkeepsie*.



HANK

Thanks, Johnny.

Hank steps to Harry, who is studying his son. Hank holds out his hand. A beat, and Harry gives him the photo. Hank takes it, adds it with the other photos, holds them. He holds the box of scripts out to Harry.

HANK

You can keep going with the gift, Dad, but I'm done. I'm out. I don't want to tell the same old story anymore. I need to move on.

HARRY

You need me, kid. How d'you think you're gonna survive without me looking after you?

HANK

I don't know. But I need the freedom to figure it out.

HARRY

What kind of a father would I be if I let my own son leave?

HANK

What kind of a father are you if you make me go with you? Dad, I'm staying here.

HARRY

After everything I've done. You're ungrateful and wrongheaded to boot.

DELIA

Don't be so hard on him!

CAROLYN

Yes, you're not exactly parent of the year, Mr. Abernathy.

CLAIRE

Easy on the irony, mother.

HARRY

(frustrated, angry)

Fine, I hereby disown, disavow, and generally ignore my offspring until he comes to his senses and leaves with me. Are you coming or not?

HANK

I am not.

HORACE

(to Harry)

He is not. And you should recognize your exit line. We've got the entire sheriff's department waiting in the lobby if you don't let him be.

HARRY

(to Hank)

Fine, is that what you really want? Fine! I'll really be able to soar now that I won't have you dragging me down.

BUTCH

Just make sure you soar in another state. You've punctured your balloon here in Ohio.

HARRY

All right, I'm going. A dubious pleasure making everyone's acquaintance, and I mean it sincerely when I tell each and every one of you: break a leg.

DELIA

Don't leave in such an angry state.

HORACE

Oh Delia, just let him go.

DELIA

He should be more kind to Hank. That would make a happy ending.

Harry, who has turned to leave, pauses and turns back.

HARRY

You know, you're right. I should not leave in this condition. I really need a reconciliation moment with my dear son. Don't you think so, Hank?

Hank looks across the stage at Harry.

HANK

What're you talking about?

Harry gives a wide, artificial smile and, still holding the box, flings his free hand out.

HANK

Come on. The charm box scene. I remember that you wrote in an Act Two hug.

HARRY

You hate hugs. I try to show any affection and you say “Don’t touch me.”

HANK

Well, I’m offering it to you now. Come on, you little ingrate.

Harry still holds the smile and the outstretched arm.  
Hank doesn’t move, skeptical.

CONNIE

Aw, come on, Hank. Hug your father.

HANK

I might not get out alive.

HARRY

You big lug. Fine. The mountain will come to Mohammed.

Harry moves downstage and embraces Hank in a one-arm bear hug. After a moment, Hank cautiously hugs back.

HARRY

There. That was very nice and worthwhile, don’t you think?

Harry walks back upstage with box.

HANK

Why, what’d you get out of it?

HARRY

One last sentimental exchange with my son, that’s what! What do you think I was going for?

HANK

The three thousand dollars. It’s not in my pocket anymore. So it must be in the box.

Toby reaches for the box and gets it, but Harry grabs the envelope on top and holds it high.

HARRY

My scheme, my scam, my money!

CAROLYN

But it's not your play. So it's not your money. It's your son's.

HARRY

Then it's a loan from him. Payback for providing for him all these years.

HANK

No deal. I'm using that money to settle your debts.

HORACE

Butch, do something!

HARRY

I earned this money, and nobody's going to stop me. So long, patsies.

TOBY

Stop, thief!

BUTCH

(looking at Bonnie)

Hey, urchin! Bonnie! URCHIN!

Bonnie gets it. She barrels up stage, the same trajectory her character uses at the top of Act One. She headbutts Harry, and the envelope skids downstage. A heavy "Oof!" as Harry is knocked over. Hank collects the envelope.

BUTCH

Good work, young lady.

(to a dazed Harry)

I'm going to have an officer personally accompany you to the state line, following behind your truck the whole way.

(turning to Carolyn)

Hey Carolyn, could I get a comp ticket for Officer Sykes if he misses tonight's show?

CAROLYN

Absolutely.

BUTCH

Excellent. Come on.

Butch takes Harry into the wings and they exit. Hank crosses to Pam and Connie and gives them both several bills from the envelope.

CONNIE

Thank you, Hank.

PAM

Yes, it's appreciated.

HANK

If this doesn't cover our costs, please know that I'll make it up to you. Somehow. I'm not going anywhere.

CONNIE

I'm glad of that.

Connie moves away, but Pam remains.

PAM

Listen. There's gonna be a position available at the diner. I mean, my current unreliable worker doesn't know it yet, but there will be. So if you need a job around here, you're welcome to apply.

HANK

Thanks very much, Miz Pam.

PAM

Don't mention it.

Hank moves to Claire, who has been standing off to the side. She reacts, wary. He takes out the final few bills in the envelope, hands it out to her.

CLAIRE

What's this?

HANK

A little bit to help you out in New York.

CLAIRE

Are you crazy? After what I did to you just now?

HANK

Exactly. I feel like I owe you something. Take it. Please. And good luck.

Claire takes the money. Hank, at peace, moves downstage towards Carolyn,

HANK

Miz Gardner, I think the house is about to open.

CAROLYN

Oh, gosh, you're right. Okay. Everybody, places and have a great show.

TOBY

I hate to say it, but can we still do the show as is? Even if it's not... honest?

DELIA

It's honest, it's just not really true.

CAROLYN

Hank, do you have any suggestions?

HANK

Yeah. Toby, I'm gonna write up something to read right before the show.

TOBY

I'm not good with memorizing new lines.

HANK

You won't have to. Just read it from the card I give you. I'll have it in five minutes.

TOBY

Sounds good.

Toby and Hank exit into the wings.

CAROLYN

Every one backstage, please. House is about to open!

As the actors head to the wings:

DELIA

This has been exciting!

HORACE

A little too exciting, if you ask me.

DELIA

That's the magic of the theater: you never know what to expect.

HORACE

That reminds me. I want to see that hat you made. I don't want any surprises.

Only Carolyn and Claire remain on the apron of the stage.

CAROLYN

Claire. Are you still planning to leave for New York tomorrow?

CLAIRE

Yeah. Are you okay with that?

A pause, then Carolyn reacts honestly.

CAROLYN

I don't know. I guess I'll have to be.

(beat)

I'm still going to give you Grandma Elsa's money. Just promise --

She cuts herself off. Claire waits.

CAROLYN

Promise me you'll use it to stay safe and happy.

CLAIRE

Thanks.

Carolyn smiles and brushes a lock of hair off Claire's forehead, and Claire surprises her with a sincere hug. A beat, then they break the hold.

CAROLYN

The house is opening.

CLAIRE

Right. Hey, Mom. Do you think I could sit with you in the lighting booth and watch the show?

CAROLYN

You haven't done that since you were a little girl.

CLAIRE

Yeah, but tonight's sold out, and... I thought it'd be a nice thing to do.

CAROLYN

I'd like that very much.

CLAIRE

So it's a date.

Carolyn and Claire exit through the house.

Lights transition and darken, with a pool of light downstage center. The town skyline is illuminated. Toby, in Act One fruitseller costume, enters, takes a moment, and then reads from an index card that he holds.

TOBY

Welcome, everyone. It's so wonderful to see so many kind and friendly people all in one place. A brief note about tonight's production.

All of the other actors, in costume, enter unobtrusively in half-light and line the periphery of both wings. Also visible is Hank, who looks at home as part of the company.

TOBY

Harrison P. Abernathy is a fictional character; he never existed. But the human story you are about to experience, which shows the strong and loving bonds of individuals who come together to support and inspire each other, is the truth. Whether it's a town, a family, or a theater troupe, it's essential to have a sense of place and belonging. It's more than just a single person that gives us meaning. It's our community.



Toby finishes and lowers the card. He waits a beat, smiles, and begins the play.

TOBY

Marietta. It's a town all of us know very well.

He continues to smile out at the audience as lights fade.

END OF PLAY