

HALLWAY HOUSE

A FULL-LENGTH PLAY IN ONE ACT

By Judy Klass

Judy Klass  
1304 Caldwell Avenue  
Nashville, Tennessee 37212  
Landline: (615) 818-0364  
JudyKwrites@aol.com

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

MICHAEL: Late twenties to early fifties.

CONNOR: Early twenties.

EMILY: Late twenties to early fifties.

DIANNE: Late twenties to early fifties.

BRETT: Late twenties to late fifties.

MICHAEL, EMILY, and DIANNE should all be around the same age.

SETTING:

The living room of a house owned by Dianne -- the Present.

NOTE: The play is written with the assumption that the staircase is off-stage, but it could be on-stage.

THE LIVING ROOM OF HALLWAY HOUSE: It's a comfortable living space, with a bookcase containing DVDs and a whole lot of books. There is a TV in a watchable place, and a couch, and some chairs around a coffee table. On the table is a working replica of a 1920s telephone: black or mostly black, with a candlestick stem, a mouthpiece on a hook and a rotary dial.

MICHAEL has just brought CONNOR into the house, and is showing him around.

CONNOR

This is actually a nice space. Could we rehearse here?

MICHAEL

Um. If the other people who live here are up for it.

CONNOR

How many roommates?

MICHAEL

House mates.

CONNOR

House mates.

MICHAEL

Two at the moment. Dianne owns the place. She lives on the top floor, sometimes for weeks at a time. So, she might not mind. And Emily moved in last week.

CONNOR

And you know these people ...?

MICHAEL

From college. We were on the same hallway freshman year.

(EMILY enters from the kitchen, talking into her cell phone.)

EMILY

Oh! Hey, Michael's home.

MICHAEL

This is Emily.

EMILY

Michael, do you want to talk to Jake?

MICHAEL

Um.

EMILY

(into phone)

Michael's being anti-social, and plus, he's got a young person with him.

(to CONNOR)

Hello, young person. Welcome to Hallway House!

CONNOR

Hello.

EMILY

(into phone)

Should I be rude, and not take the hint, and interrupt their conversation?

(listens)

Michael, I think Jake prefers you to me, he wants to talk.

MICHAEL

Not right now.

EMILY

But Jake's all angry and suicidal.

MICHAEL

Well, Jake's always angry and suicidal.

EMILY

Michael! We do not make jokes about suicide in front of young people. It's something that the kids of today do not understand or appreciate. Get with the times.

MICHAEL

(to CONNOR)

My apologies.

EMILY

(into phone)

Should I remind him of all the nights you've talked him off a ledge?

MICHAEL

Give me the phone.

(SHE does.)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Hello, Jake.

(listens)

I'm sorry to hear that. No, you wouldn't find it inspiring and uplifting, we're not having a very good time.

EMILY

Speak for yourself -- I'm having a blast!

MICHAEL

(into phone)

I mean, it doesn't feel like we're back at Applegate, we don't have pizza parties and bull sessions, it feels kind of lame and sad. Forced nostalgia. Like when you were here last year.

(listens to question)

No, Dianne hasn't rented it, but why would you want it? You said the pipes clang.

(listens to question)

She's in the room next to mine, across the hall from the one you had. And we haven't really been hanging out. And she says the pipes clang also.

EMILY

(so that Jake can hear)

Yeah, they clang, so what. Come on back, Jake, we'd love to have you!

MICHAEL

Come on back, by all means, but I honestly don't think it'll get you out of your funk. I mean, you remember what it's like. I've been here two years, and I've been depressed and miserable to be around the whole time.

EMILY

(loud, for Jake's benefit)

See? Just like back at Applegate!

MICHAEL

I'm sure Dianne would be fine with it, Jake, and we'd be glad to --

(listens)

No, I'm not trying to keep you away. I'm just reminding you that once you're here, you'll wonder why you bothered.

(listens)

Fine, here she is.

(HE hands the phone back to EMILY.)

EMILY

Hot damn, right, Jake? With Michael on the welcoming committee, what's not to love?

(listens)

Okay, talk to you later.

(SHE gets off the phone. Surveys CONNOR.)

EMILY (CONT'D)

So. It's so rare that someone tender, beautiful and young gets dragged into our lair of aging monsters. Are we all meant to feed upon you? Or are you a sacrifice Michael is offering to the gods?

CONNOR

I hope not.

EMILY

Are you a date? Michael, are you cruising around school playgrounds now?

CONNOR

I'm -- over 21.

EMILY

Wonderful, so, you can drink and everything! Sorry, I'm being rude. I'm Emily, Michael's arch, pushy, tactless college friend.

(SHE shakes hands with CONNOR.)

CONNOR

Nice to meet you.

MICHAEL

Connor is an actor. He does a one-man show in a bar -- songs and monologues ... And I happened to catch it. A time or two, or five. I was impressed, and I'm writing a piece for him now. Either a one-man full-length play, or maybe we'll add a few other actors.

CONNOR

Maybe even some original songs -- I write songs.

MICHAEL

Maybe some songs -- absolutely.

EMILY

Well, that's a wonderful idea. We'll put on a show! I've got some costumes in the barn --

MICHAEL

Emily, stop it.

(to CONNOR)

Emily is aware that I hardly ever get out of the house, and hardly ever meet new people or follow through on a writing project. So, she's taking it upon herself to sabotage this and make you as uncomfortable here as possible.

EMILY

Oh, boo hoo, Michael The Martyr. I'm not trying to sabotage anything. In my own obnoxious way, I'm trying to make friends with your new friend, and I'm glad to hear you're taking time off from your one-man pity parties, and from picking fluff out of your navel, and you're writing again. Where will you stage it?

MICHAEL

That's TBD.

EMILY

Well. Again, I'd make more jokes about this being a Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland film, but they're not going down well ... So, Connor, tell me about yourself.

CONNOR

What would you like to know?

EMILY

Employment status, living arrangements, philosophy of life, assessment of Michael --

MICHAEL

That's probably TBD also.

CONNOR

I think Michael is a really cool guy. A good writer, and good to hang out with. I'm majoring in drama at State -- I'm a day student, a few credits every term -- and I'm a professional dog walker and pet sitter, to cut down on student loan debt. So, I rent a room in a house with other people, kind of like this -- but you could say I'm also a migrant worker. I sleep in all kinds of places. This week, I've been staying in a beautiful mansion by the river, taking care of an elderly schnauzer.

EMILY

That actually sounds fun.

CONNOR

It's not bad. I take each day as it comes, and I try to get along with people, and their pets -- and that's about as philosophical as I get.

MICHAEL

And I hope, when bitchy, condescending people push at you, you push right back.

CONNOR

Mmm. Actually, I don't do a lot of pushing and pulling. And I'm not feeling pushed around right now.

EMILY

Good, 'cause I'm not trying to push you, or be condescending. Again, that's just miserable, paranoid, Bitterness Merchant Mike. That's his interpretation. Meanwhile, has he even been a proper host? Would you like a cup of coffee, or a Diet Coke from the fridge?

CONNOR

I'm good.

EMILY

Vino? Would you like some vino?

(SHE disappears into the kitchen. CONNOR calls after her:)

CONNOR

I'm good, really.

(EMILY returns with an open bottle of red wine and two wine glasses. SHE settles on the couch.)

EMILY

Well, I was just about to indulge in some day drinking when Jake called. I brought along an extra glass in case you change your mind -- I know Michael isn't drinking these days.

MICHAEL

Yes, I've cut all of that out.

EMILY

So, what were you doing in a bar watching a one-man show?

MICHAEL

Having dinner and a Seven-Up.

EMILY

Okay, well, please, guys, sit and watch me drink, make me self-conscious about it. Unless you're going somewhere.

CONNOR

I don't think we're going anywhere.

EMILY

Or, unless you'd like me to scat.

CONNOR

No, it's your house and -- no.

(They sit. CONNOR takes off his jacket.)

EMILY

Okay, good. And now, as a prize for putting up with my nosiness, you may ask me anything you like.

CONNOR

Why Hallway House?

EMILY

What?

CONNOR

You said "Welcome to Hallway House." When you first came in. I was wondering what that means.

EMILY

Oh. Well, it's sort of metaphysical, isn't it, a house that's also a hallway? Like a soup that's a meal, or a door that's ajar?

MICHAEL

Stop messing with him, Emily and answer the question.

EMILY

Oh, a serious answer. Okay. Right.

(takes a breath, pours more wine)

So, Michael, and Dianne, who owns this joint, and Jake and I, plus a few other people, were all on the same hallway, Hallway B, our freshman year at Applegate College. It's fine if you've never heard of it, it's an arty farty liberal arts place, very inter-disciplinary, you can come up with a split major like bio-chemistry and dancing with scarves ... a place like Bard or Oberlin or Sarah Lawrence. But teeny. Up in Maine. With surprisingly generous gobs of scholarship money for people who write clever, passionate essays on their college applications, which we all did. And it's quaint and beautiful, but there's this big, ugly dorm that was built in the 1970s and blights the campus, where they stick all the freshmen. And most hallways are all male or all female, but ours was an experiment in coed living we all signed up for. And a bunch of us hit it off and were friends, and so we got a suite together for sophomore year. And then junior year, some of us went abroad, or were living off campus in relationships, and of course, we made a mess of everything, because we always make a mess of our lives. So, senior year, we all got a house off campus together, again.

## EMILY (CONT'D)

And we called it Hallway House. To salute our state of arrested development -- that we were reconstructing our frosh hallway. And now, years later, we're all still broken and self-destructive, and our middle-aged lives are a shambles, and Dianne is rich and has this nice big place, so we all come crawling back to this sad, safe environment. And we call it Hallway House again.

## MICHAEL

To remind ourselves of how far we haven't come.

## EMILY

Well. To remind ourselves that in a world full of disposable, transactional relationships, we are lucky enough to have old friends.

## MICHAEL

Is that the gloss you're putting on it?

## EMILY

Currently, yes. Now that my marriage has blown up in my face and I'm back here. I'm telling myself that everyone craves friendship, and communities of people where they belong. Everyone watches sitcoms like Cheers or Friends or Seinfeld or Big Bang -- well, not young people like you, Connor, you don't watch sitcoms, you've moved on to other things -- but old people like us watch those shows because they're about groups of friends, and everybody feels isolated and disconnected, and longs for that. And we've got that in real life, and we should be glad.

## CONNOR

You *should* be glad. It's rare. I don't have that at State, even in my department.

## MICHAEL

Well. You never got to live on campus.

## CONNOR

I don't think it would make a difference. I mean, I like some people, there are people I choose to work with ...

## EMILY

But no soul mates. No evil twins.

## CONNOR

Not really, no.

## MICHAEL

'Cause, we basically saw ourselves as the Algonquin Round Table.

EMILY

See ourselves. Still. However sad and tired that may sound.

MICHAEL

Yeah, still.

CONNOR

I'm sorry. You -- you see yourself as what?

MICHAEL

It's -- never mind. No one's heard of it.

EMILY

When we were young, hardly anyone had heard about it. And by now, oh boy, has no one heard of it! You ever hear of Dorothy Parker?

CONNOR

I don't think so.

EMILY

George S. Kaufman? Edna Ferber?

CONNOR

No.

EMILY

Robert Benchley? Alexander Woollcott?

CONNOR

No.

MICHAEL

Emily, stop it. Like you said, we didn't know from any of that until Dianne started going on about it. First week of freshman year. We just forget.

EMILY

Yes, it's how we learned to feel all snooty and sophisticated. See, Dianne sees herself as Alexander Woollcott. She made us call her Alec for a while. And she'd greet us by saying: "Hello, Repulsive!"

MICHAEL

Some of us more than others.

EMILY

Yes, it was her favorite way to greet me. Woollcott was the deal broker in the group, he put Jerome Kern and Edna Ferber together. So Kern and Hammerstein could turn her novel *Show Boat* into a musical. Ever hear of *Show Boat*?

CONNOR

Nope.

EMILY

Ever hear of a song called "Old Man River"?

(starts to sing, deep:)

Old man --

MICHAEL

Emily stop it, he said no.

EMILY

Okay, fine. Woollcott also wrote a good review of the Marx Brothers and helped make them big. So, Dianne presides over us like that. She's like our den mother. And she identifies with Woollcott 'cause she prides herself on being asexual, as he was, or claimed to be, he was probably gay. And he had the mumps in his twenties, which left him impotent. I'm not 100% sure what's going on with Dianne.

MICHAEL

Though Emily asks her lots of rude questions about it.

EMILY

I used to, and they'd bounce right off her. I haven't asked any since moving in here: "Hi, Dianne, thanks for giving me shelter in a storm, thanks for charging me next to nothing in rent, and by the way, what's up with your sexuality?" But Alexander Woollcott was a critic, you know, back in the 1920s and '30s. He went to see the original production of *Peter Pan*, and when Tinker Bell was dying, and people had to show they believed in fairies to revive her, he stood up in the audience and shouted "I believe!" The jerk.

MICHAEL

Major jerk.

EMILY

And after one of Dorothy Parker's suicide attempts, he visited her in the hospital and said: "Dottie, you must stop this, you might hurt yourself."

(beat)

Are you sure you've never heard of Dorothy Parker?

CONNOR

I'm pretty sure.

EMILY

'Cause she was probably the most famous person in that group. They were all wits, and she was a highly quotable wit. She was the one who said: "Men never make passes at girls who wear glasses." That was her.

(CONNOR does not react; HE doesn't seem to have heard that line before.)

EMILY (CONT'D)

And you know, they were all playing a word game. And they'd give you a word and you had to use it in a sentence. And they gave Dorothy Parker the word "horticulture." And she said: "You can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her think."

CONNOR

(nods)

That's funny.

EMILY

Pretty quick, right? This other woman holds a door open for her, and says, "Age before beauty!" And Dorothy Parker sweeps through it, and says, "Pearls before swine."

MICHAEL

(applauding)

I think, when Emily is displaying her Dorothy Parker epigram collection, we're supposed to applaud. Show some appreciation.

EMILY

These aren't really her epigrams. Just her one-liners. She was a critic too, you know. She once wrote a review of a play Katherine Hepburn was in.

(eyes CONNOR)

Kate Hepburn ring any bells?

CONNOR

No. She sat at this -- round table?

EMILY

No. She was an actress. Movie star. I think even normal people knew who she was when we were younger, not just us. What do you think Michael?

MICHAEL

Some did, some didn't.

EMILY

Anyhow, she's a good actress, but she was apparently lousy in this play called *The Lake*, and Dorothy Parker wrote in her review: "She ran the gamut of emotions from A to B."

CONNOR

Not a review I'd want to get.

EMILY

No. She reviewed a book once, and said: "This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force."

MICHAEL

Ouch.

(HE applauds.)

EMILY

But she helped start *The New Yorker*. She was a famous woman poet and fiction writer and critic at a time when there were hardly any -- she was a role model for a lot of girls.

MICHAEL

Except that she was an alcoholic who kept trying to kill herself.

EMILY

Well, yes, except for that. She believed in red wine -- she called it the Red Badge of Courage.

(SHE toasts them)

And she said: "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy."

MICHAEL

She didn't just stick to red wine. Didn't she have an epigram about martinis --

EMILY

No, that's apocryphal. Everyone thinks she said: "I like to have a martini,/ Two at the very most./ After three I'm under the table,/ After four, I'm under my host." But that's from some college humor magazine. That wasn't her. She got sick of being famous for wisecracking, or "smartercracking." She thought it damaged her reputation, and the value of the more serious things she wrote. She hated being known for her quips.

MICHAEL

I find that hard to believe.

EMILY

She said: “There’s a hell of a distance between wisecracking and wit. Wit has truth in it; wisecracking is simply calisthenics with words.” And there were too many wisecracks wrongly attributed to her. She wanted to be known as a writer, first.

CONNOR

What did she write?

EMILY

She ... oh, here’s what she wrote that you’ve actually heard of, young person! She wrote the screenplay for the first version of *A Star Is Born*. With Janet Gaynor and Fredric March, whom you’ve never heard of. Then it was re-made with a script by Moss Hart whom you’ve never heard of, with Judy Garland and James Mason, whom --

CONNOR

I’ve heard of Judy Garland.

EMILY

Oh, right, you’ve seen *The Wizard of Oz*. Then it was re-made with Barbra Streisand --

CONNOR

Heard of her!

EMILY

Good job! And Kris Kristofferson. And then, you’ve seen the latest iteration.

CONNOR

So, Dorothy Parker wrote movies?

EMILY

She was more famous for fiction. Short fiction. She has one short story that takes place inside the head of a woman waiting for her phone to ring, terrified the guy won’t call her, terrified she’ll get so desperate she’ll call him, and she’s ready to pull the phone out of the wall by the roots -- that kind of phone.

(SHE points to the phone on the coffee table.)

It’s about how love, at its worst, can make us desperate, and we lie to ourselves and degrade ourselves. I think of that story when I look at that phone. And maybe that’s why Dianne bought it. It was in her room, from freshman year on. It’s totemic for all of us, as Algonquinites. It’s an important artifact. Like, if this was *Lord of the Flies*, that would be our conch.

MICHAEL

What was the name of Dianne’s freshman roommate?

EMILY

Who remembers? Dianne scared her away within the first month, and after that Dianne had the room as a single.

(to CONNOR)

And Dorothy Parker is maybe most remembered for a short story called “Big Blonde,” about a flapper. Have we heard of flappers?

CONNOR

We don’t think so, no.

EMILY

You know, it was the 1920s, and suddenly women could vote, and they didn’t have to wear corsets, and their hemlines were up, you could see their ankles, and even higher, and their hair was bobbed short, and they were wearing beads and doing the Charleston --

(demonstrates a step or two, arms up, palms forward)

And drinking! In speakeasies! So, the woman in “Big Blonde” likes to drink and party, and she’s with one guy after another, but then she gets depressed and starts crying. And she keeps frantically telling herself: “Don’t cry! Laugh! Smile! They like happy people!” With “they” meaning men. Only she’s still depressed, and one guy after another dumps her, and finally she takes a lot of pills to kill herself.

CONNOR

So, in real life, did Dorothy Parker ...? I mean, how many times did she try ...?

EMILY

When she died in the 1960s, everybody was surprised because they’d assumed she’d killed herself years earlier. She did try a number of times. It led to her most famous epigram: “Razors pain you;/Rivers are damp;/Acids stain you;/And drugs cause cramp;/Guns aren’t lawful;/Nooses give;/Gas smells awful;/You might as well live.” And she called it “Resumé.” Get it?

MICHAEL

If only she lived now, when guns are so much more lawful.

EMILY

Again, Michael, you’ll only confuse and upset Connor by joking about it.

MICHAEL

You’re the one reciting graveyard humor poems.

EMILY

All in all, even if she was ambivalent about it and thought it hurt her literary reputation, she liked being quotable. She said: "The first thing I do every morning is brush my teeth and sharpen my tongue." George S. Kaufman complained, and said, quote: "Everything I've ever said will be credited to Dorothy Parker," and he was probably right. She was the greatest, most quotable wit since Oscar Wilde. In fact, she wrote about that, too: "If, with the literate, I am/Impelled to try an epigram,/I never seek to take the credit;/We all assume that Oscar said it."

(beat -- to CONNOR)

Oscar Wilde ring any bells?

CONNOR

Nope.

MICHAEL

(disturbed)

Really? I thought -- I mean, he wrote some good plays, and for a young, gay man, I'm surprised --

CONNOR

At my ignorance?

MICHAEL

At -- the curriculum they give you these days. At the oversight of somebody or other, never telling you about Oscar Wilde.

EMILY

But that's what you're here for, Michael. He'll sit at your feet and learn.

MICHAEL

Oh, shut up, Emily, whatever you think you're doing --

CONNOR

I wouldn't mind that at all. I think Michael could teach me a lot.

EMILY

There you go, Michael. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, say no more.

MICHAEL

Could you get lost? Slither back into to whatever corner you crawled out of.

EMILY

I'm done in the kitchen. I've had my snack. And I've got my Red Badge of Courage.

(CONNOR gets out his phone and checks it.)

MICHAEL

Then, could you go to your room and soak your head in an ice bucket or something? We're trying to talk here, so if you're done interrogating Connor --

CONNOR

Actually, Michael, I've just got a text -- somebody I'm doing a scene with for class. Could I call him quickly?

MICHAEL

Sure.

EMILY

Try the kitchen. It has festive refrigerator magnets.

CONNOR

Thank you.

(HE goes into the kitchen. MICHAEL turns on EMILY. They try to keep their voices down so CONNOR won't hear, but sometimes they wind up with a kind of rasping/shouting whisper.)

MICHAEL

What the hell are you doing?

EMILY

I dunno. Just making small talk. Is he really your new squeeze?

MICHAEL

He's not my "squeeze," no, but he's a nice kid --

EMILY

Then, what is he to you? What are you doing with him?

MICHAEL

I told you. He's got songs and stories ... some original, plus scenes and songs from shows by other people. He does them in cabaret. And I'm going to help him shape his personal stories into a full-length show.

EMILY

"Adventures in Dog Walking"?

MICHAEL

Why not? That's not even a bad title.

EMILY

You can have it. I won't sue.

MICHAEL

Thanks so much. He's felt like he was on the outside looking in, a lot of his life, raised by his grandparents, moving several times. Now he moonlights in other people's homes and cares for their pets ... Always an observer, an interloper. It's an interesting situation for a young gay man. And he's talented, he's got stage presence ... and we're talking about a project.

EMILY

Fine, whatever, that's very inspiring. Have you fucked him?

MICHAEL

No, I have not, and stop interrogating him, and me, and stop being such an annoying, pestering, acid-spraying succubus banshee about this!

EMILY

What kind of succubus banshee should I be? I'm just curious. This seems unlike you. The old Michael I knew would have had him in bed at the word go.

MICHAEL

The old Michael you knew was a college boy, not a broken middle-aged man. Who is sadder and wiser, and also, incidentally, goes a little deeper, and wants more out of life.

EMILY

So -- is this, like, the first time you've hung out, or ...

MICHAEL

I've seen his show. A number of times. We've gotten together exactly twice before this, for a drink, and for coffee, and we've talked shop, about shows and what cabaret can be and can't be, and one-man shows in black box theaters.

EMILY

And that's it?

MICHAEL

That's it. I'm like an older, trusted friend and adviser. I think. And we were talking about maybe rehearsing here --

EMILY

Ooh! Can I watch?

MICHAEL

Why are you being such a pain? Like some hellish kid sister? Why are you hovering, and poking, and trying to spoil this for me?

EMILY

I'm not. My God, Michael, you're supposed to be a friend, in theory, someone I can kid, and say stupid, harmless, playful things, and schmooze, and maybe even give a hug to, once in a blue moon, when I'm drunk and sentimental. But ever since I moved in here, it's like you cut me dead. I'm just taking an interest --

MICHAEL

Yeah, you want to be around your sympathetic old friend Michael now that you need a shoulder to cry on --

EMILY

Well, yes, sure, we're both in Hallway House, we could take care of each other --

MICHAEL

Really. Hello. I've been here for two years, Emily. And when things blew up with Nicholas, where were you?

EMILY

I was ...

MICHAEL

Planning a great, big wedding --

EMILY

Well, yes, I was happy, you were miserable, it wasn't a good combination --

MICHAEL

And you were listening to your uptight, homophobic, petty, obnoxious husband who saw us as his rivals for your attention, and who resented you for having such wonderful "old friends." And that's pretty much where you've been up until last month, yes?

EMILY

Yeah, admittedly that made it a little tricky to see you guys, but the good news is I'm not with him anymore ...

MICHAEL

By choice?

EMILY

Kinda, sorta. He says we should leave the door open to getting back together. I've slammed the door shut, but he doesn't believe me. He thinks he's far too wonderful for me to walk away from.

MICHAEL

But the concept was initially his, right? To screw around behind your back --

EMILY

Yes, that was his original concept.

MICHAEL

Well, give him credit for it -- he doesn't have many.

EMILY

But are you being mean to me now because you're mad that I wasn't there for you two years ago? Is that what you're saying?

MICHAEL

I'm saying that you're in a down cycle, and right now you want an old friend to hold hands with, and curse at the world with you, and commiserate with you about how relationships don't work, and men are all hard-hearted brutes and douche-bags, and you resent me for my timing if I'm finally, maybe, starting something new, you want to wreck it because you're in the mood to curl up into our old life --

EMILY

No! I'm happy for you.

MICHAEL

Well, I don't trust you.

EMILY

Well, that's because you're touchy and vicious-minded.

MICHAEL

Exactly, I am, so back off. Grrr!

EMILY

Grrr!

(As they snarl at each other, CONNOR ENTERS. HE puts his phone away in the pocket of his jacket on the couch.)

CONNOR

Sorry for that.

MICHAEL

No problem.

CONNOR

This guy wants to take the scene we're doing in some strange directions. Kind of serious and earnest, you know, even though it's supposed to be a comedy? I don't want to be rude and say: Dude, I think you've completely missed the point.

EMILY

This is one of the people you choose to work with?

CONNOR

No, this scene pairing was assigned. I think I've talked him into running his interpretation by the professor, first. The professor's got a sense of humor.

MICHAEL

Good move.

CONNOR

So, what were we talking about?

MICHAEL

Well. Actually, Emily was just leaving. She has some -- paper clips up in her room, in a box, and she's going to hook them all together into a beautiful, shiny necklace.

EMILY

No, she is not.

MICHAEL

Well, then. She has a pad of post-it notes, all different colors, and she's going to stick them on her wall in a kind of gorgeous tile mosaic.

EMILY

Fine, Michael. I'll leave. I'll go upstairs. On one condition.

MICHAEL

Name it.

EMILY

You get the living room until Brett shows up. Then you go someplace else.

MICHAEL

Brett? Your husband?

EMILY

My soon-to-be-ex husband, yes.

MICHAEL

But you've "slammed the door."

EMILY

Right, I know, but he doesn't. He's suddenly decided to surface, and he says he wants a "conversation." If I met him in a coffee shop and hit him in the face with a sock full of manure -- they might arrest me. If I do it here and no one is around -- how does he prove it? It's a he said/she said situation.

MICHAEL

Well, see, now, this is a rare instance where I might actually be of use to you, still, as a friend because I've never liked Brett. Are you sure you don't want me to stick around and beat him up for you?

EMILY

(to CONNOR)

Isn't that sweet? Can you believe that some people say chivalry is dead?

(to MICHAEL)

No, it's fine, I'll handle this myself. But he's threatening to show up sometime this afternoon, and if he does, gimme a holler and I'll come down.

(to CONNOR)

It was very nice meeting you. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. That wasn't my goal, whatever Michael may think. I was only try to bait Michael, and annoy him a little -- out of sheer force of habit.

(SHE EXITS, with the wine bottle and glasses, to climb the staircase)

MICHAEL

Well, so, now you've met Emily.

CONNOR

Yup.

MICHAEL

And I bet if I asked her when she's drunk and in a good mood, she'd be all right with us rehearsing here sometimes. And wouldn't intrude. If I threaten her. And Dianne lives in solitary splendor, mostly upstairs, so I'm sure we could work something out.

CONNOR

But you seem upset.

MICHAEL

I'm upset with Emily, not you. I don't see why she had to quiz you about all our favorite celebrities from the Stone Age.

CONNOR

But I think *I've* upset you, too.

MICHAEL

No, she wanted to irritate me and she did, she's an old pro.

CONNOR

Then -- tell me more about this Oscar person. That I should have heard of, as a young gay man. Is he the guy they named the Oscars for?

MICHAEL

(distressed, incredulous, trying to hide it)

What? No. Oscar Wilde was a British writer in the late 1800s. No.

CONNOR

Uh oh. And now I've upset you even more by saying something *really* stupid. It's because I feel panicky. Because I've exposed something ridiculous about myself. Something I'm supposed to know. And you're trying to hide how disturbed it's making you.

MICHAEL

That's not true, you're not "supposed" to know anything. Emily just needs a nice, strong anthrax enema -- it would solve every problem we're having.

CONNOR

My family isn't really into books. I'm kind of self-taught, and even though I read some plays, and I've gotten to see some plays --

MICHAEL

You're fine, you're a smart, literate guy --

CONNOR

I know there are holes in what I'm supposed to know. Like, jumbo-sized craters. My grandparents had a nice, quiet rhythm, and I learned about the things they valued. But it was things like -- like watching re-runs of Bonanza and Gunsmoke, and John Wayne movies, and hearing about old-time World Series games --

MICHAEL

No, that's not really in my line. Those aren't the texts that I'd cite as crucial to a young gay man's education.

CONNOR

So, I try to catch up, and fill in the blanks. I'm kind of an auto ...

MICHAEL

Autodidact?

CONNOR

Yeah. Almost.

MICHAEL

Well, that's an admirable thing to be.

CONNOR

I mispronounce words in class sometimes 'cause I've never heard them out loud. I've only read them. I'm sorry I don't know this other stuff.

MICHAEL

I'm quite sure that nobody your age, not .99999 percent of the population, has heard of Katherine Hepburn, or Dorothy Parker or Oscar Wilde. Even the gay boys.

CONNOR

But gay boys used to know them?

MICHAEL

I don't know what's normal. I only know my group. From college.

CONNOR

The Hallway House people.

MICHAEL

Yes. And we did imprint on the Algonquin Round Table. But the Algonquin Round Table was a dreary collection of brittle, bitchy, insular, carping, chain-smoking snobs. Getting drunk and tossing off witticisms and ruining their romantic relationships. And making sure the witty things they said appeared in FPA's column. I mean, it was Prohibition, and so the Lost Generation was off getting drunk in Europe. You ... You have heard of --

CONNOR

I've heard of the Lost Generation. Like -- Hemingway?

MICHAEL

Right, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and so on. But these Algonquin Round Table people we spend too much time talking about, they stayed here in the US and got drunk anyway, Prohibition be damned, they went to speakeasies and got hold of booze somehow.

## MICHAEL (CONTD)

They're really a dated, self-promoting little group, and they didn't produce much in the way of good writing that's lasted. A few poems and stories by Parker. And some good plays by George S. Kaufman with Edna Ferber and then later Moss Hart. You've -- have you heard of *You Can't Take It With You*?

## CONNOR

Oh, yeah! In my department, there's a framed poster, they must have done that play one year.

## MICHAEL

Well, there you go, that's Kaufman and Hart. You could read it, and it wouldn't seem like a mystery -- like such a big deal. Or *The Man Who Came To Dinner*. That was their play about Woollcott, and what a pain in the ass he could be. Or *Merrily We Roll Along*. That's not so funny. It's got an unkind portrait of Dorothy Parker in it, more or less. That's the play that goes backwards. Where the people start out bitter and drunk and old and cynical, betraying their lovers and friends, and by the end they're young and hopeful and idealistic. I don't think I could stand to see it or read it again, at my age. That one became a Sondheim musical. You -- you did say, the other day, you've heard of --

## CONNOR

Sondheim? Sure. *Into the Woods*. I saw the movie.

## MICHAEL

Thank God. I mean, of course you know Sondheim, why wouldn't you.

## CONNOR

But these people in the 1920s. Were they into Camelot?

## MICHAEL

Camelot?

## CONNOR

I mean, I know that show, that's an old musical, and I've heard songs from it. But also, I know some stories about King Arthur. I thought maybe, if they talked about a "round table" ... I've said something stupid again, haven't I? In my desperation to show you that you shouldn't write me off --

## MICHAEL

I'm not writing you off, Connor --

## CONNOR

Tell me what I've said that's stupid. So I don't go through life doing it.

MICHAEL

You haven't ... The Algonquin ... I don't think they were into Arthurian legends. Particularly. They lived in hotels, some of them. They liked to have meals in the Algonquin Hotel in New York. There was one table where they always sat, and said witty things to each other that they wanted written down and quoted. And so, that's how they became known as the Algonquin Round Table.

CONNOR

Oh.

MICHAEL

And they tittered over their amusing stories with each other, and it prevented some of them from having a personal life, and I don't want to be like that. Not that -- I'm not saying that I was hitting on you or trying to make you part of my personal life.

CONNOR

Really? I was kind of hoping ...

MICHAEL

You were?

CONNOR

Well, it crossed my mind. But if you just want to write a fabulous one-man show for me, based on my wild anecdotes about growing up and dating, and dog-walking, and shampooing shih tzus, and giving them manicures -- all because of my amazing talent, with no casting couch involved --

MICHAEL

What casting couch, I'm a writer, writers are pathetic creatures with no money and no power --

CONNOR

Then I'll just accept the amazing, tailor-made show you create for me, and have to live with that.

MICHAEL

Connor ... a couple of things.

CONNOR

Yes?

MICHAEL

You're attractive. And you're talented, and you're smart and you're nice. And I don't know if we should mix creative collaboration with -- other stuff. That feels potentially creepy and -- wrong to me. Because even though I'm a pathetic writer with no power, I am in some sense the senior partner. Plus, I got out of a long-term relationship that suddenly imploded, in a big, ugly, nasty way, we didn't even remain friends, and I crawled in here -- and I've been here for two years. I'm not sure I'm ready to leap out and start functioning in the real world again. Plus, the age thing. The age thing, the age thing.

CONNOR

I'll keep quiet when you mention something I don't know. I'll write it down, and I'll Google it later, and you'll never even know I was confused. I'll get an education, you'll get a smart boyfriend, it'll work out great. You'll forget I was ever a space cadet --

MICHAEL

You're not a space cadet! It literally is the age thing. I feel like I'm robbing the cradle. This was never my thing. If anything, I wanted someone older. The relationship that blew up in my face after five years together -- it was with someone older. And when I was your age, I wanted someone older, I guess everybody does. I called up once, to a "father-son" hot-line phone thing for dating. It was all these guys saying: "Are you my daddy? Are you my daddy?" No one was looking for a son. Obviously. It was so sad. All these needy male voices calling out into a void. "Daddy? Are you there?" And now ... They say you become the man you want to marry. So, maybe I'm becoming the bear I always wanted to date back when I was a twinkie.

CONNOR

You were never a twinkie.

MICHAEL

No, but -- so to speak. But I'm saying -- I don't know that I'm ready to accept that yet. Make that transition. That I'm the older guy I wanted to date.

CONNOR

But my ignorance compounds it. Don't deny it, Michael, I can see you wince every time you talk about something, or a friend of yours talks about something I don't get.

MICHAEL

Oh, Emily was giving you a hard time on purpose. To needle me. To make me feel uncomfortable, like she said.

CONNOR

And it worked.

MICHAEL

I just -- it makes me feel like this lecherous, sad old man! To think of dating somebody who doesn't have -- certain reference points. That I took it for granted everybody would always have. It makes me feel like a fossil. But the Algonquinites -- like I said, they were snobs. I don't want to be a snob. I don't want to be locked away in this snippy, self-congratulatory world of my friends. This little kingdom we built with each other, where we sit here preening. I mean, sometimes we can mix the low-brow with the high-brow. Those people back in the '20s and '30s did, too -- they had Harpo Marx as part of their crowd.

(a beat)

Oh no. Have -- have you ever heard of the Marx Brothers?

CONNOR

Uh oh. Karl? Was he one of them?

MICHAEL

No, that's -- another Marx. I was thinking -- Groucho. You ever hear of Groucho?

CONNOR

Would you like me to lie?

MICHAEL

Have you ever -- on Halloween, have you ever seen a plastic nose in a CVS or Walgreen's, with dark glasses and bushy eyebrows attached? As a mask?

CONNOR

I guess.

MICHAEL

Well, that's -- basically Groucho. And -- his brother -- Harpo -- with a blond wig, honking a horn -- he hung out with the Algonquin Round Table crowd. I'm sorry, I don't think I can do this.

CONNOR

Michael, can I say something?

MICHAEL

Even writing the show for you ... I'd be lying if I said I didn't find you attractive, and so, creating a show for you ... while lecturing you about all this stuff from a hundred years ago ... it just feels predatory, like I'm becoming a sleazy Hollywood #MeToo predator, even though I know I'm a just a delusional loser unsuccessful writer, and it's -- too weird.

CONNOR

Can I talk about a couple of texts I *do* know?

MICHAEL

What, The Voice? Game of Thrones?

CONNOR

Fuck you.

MICHAEL

You're right. I deserved that. See, maybe you *can* push back.

CONNOR

Can I talk about a couple of plays that made an impression on me? Whether you know them or not? If you don't, maybe I can explain them to you.

MICHAEL

Sure, fire away.

CONNOR

So, okay. So, two playwrights I like a lot are Terence McNally and Christopher Durang. But I was going to audition for the youngest guy in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* I was invited to read for it, that's why I read the play --

MICHAEL

That's a thankless role.

CONNOR

Thank you, it's a thankless role. Not just 'cause you're sitting there in the buff, like a beautiful hunk of meat, for half an hour, sunning yourself when everyone is out swimming. Through the whole thing -- you're a sex object, like a woman would be in an old play or movie. And you're shallow and calculating -- and people pretend like they have to learn to respect your character, McNally pretends the kid is worth respecting, but there's no need for anyone to respect that character. And with Durang's *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* -- the young guy's a little like that also. I'm not sure I'd want that role, either. They're kind of the villains because they're young. It's like, the playwright, or the character standing in for the playwright, hates the young guy because they don't think the young guy would sleep with them, but they're also competing with the young guy, they're resentful because the world is changing and they feel they're losing their looks --

MICHAEL

It happens.

CONNOR

And so, they want to show that the next generation is evil and empty ... and maybe we are, I don't know. But maybe -- maybe older guys project weird stuff onto a guy like me. I don't think I want you to be my "daddy," Michael, or to replace Grandpa Fred in my life --

MICHAEL

Oh, good.

CONNOR

But I like you. I'd be willing to learn about this stuff, and willing to hang out with you and your friends, if you all stopped testing me, in weird ways. But if you view me as this ditsy, caricature Generation Z person when I haven't heard about the harp man --

MICHAEL

Harpo.

CONNOR

Or every time I make some other dumb mistake -- this is not going to work, you're right. In terms of creating a show together or anything else. And --

(getting upset)

I'm sorry. I was kind of happy and hopeful, when you said you were going to show me around your house. I haven't found a crowd I really fit in with at college, and there weren't people in high school, and the local dating scene sucks --

MICHAEL

Tell me about it.

CONNOR

And I don't really have a place -- that feels like mine. Either in the house I share with people, or even in a mansion by the river, taking care of an elderly schnauzer. That's what we were saying the show should be about.

MICHAEL

Yes.

CONNOR

So, I was hopeful about a lot of things. But I think I'd better turn around and get the hell out of here, now. And if you have a change of heart, a major change of heart, and you're willing to give me a chance -- with all of my limitations -- then, give me a call. And if not, I think we'd better just quit while we're behind.

(HE EXITS. The front door SLAMS when HE leaves the house.)

MICHAEL

Fuck.

DIANNE

Fuck is right.

(SHE ENTERS.)

DIANNE (CONT'D)

I was sitting on the staircase. Eavesdropping. New car parked in the driveway, Emily up and down the stairs, talking into her bottle of red wine, I was curious. Plus, my book isn't going well. I'm getting sick of these Regency period romances. I'll have to tell Harlequin I'm switching to another period. But they want these

(fake Scottish accent)

Scottish Highlander books, with brawny men in kilts and wee lassies running across the moors.

(normal voice)

I can't be bothered.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry.

DIANNE

Maybe they'll let me do one with flappers in the Jazz Age, or a future romance set on Mars.

(announcer's voice)

"After climate change makes Earth uninhabitable, passion erupts in the Sea of Tranquility."

MICHAEL

How much did you listen to?

DIANNE

Well, let's see. I heard Emily head into her room, muttering about your guest, and I came down soon after that. So -- a lot of your exchange with that kid. And I took a peek at him, naturally. He was cute.

(Scottish accent)

Harlequin might dress him in a kilt and pose him on the cover of a Highlander romance.

MICHAEL

So, did I do the right thing? Or shoot myself in the foot?

DIANNE

(shrugs)

Beats me. You should ask someone with an interest in sex and other human beings. I can fake it for my editor, but you reaaaally don't want my actual opinion.

MICHAEL

You saw how young he was.

DIANNE

Yes.

MICHAEL

So. Am I creepy to be interested in him?

DIANNE

It all depends. Were you meeting older guys when you were his age?

MICHAEL

Yes.

DIANNE

Shtupping them?

MICHAEL

Yes.

DIANNE

Were they all predators and creeps?

MICHAEL

No ...

DIANNE

Do you regret those involvements?

MICHAEL

No.

DIANNE

Well, then. Maybe you'd better call that young man up, and tell him you've had a major change of heart.

MICHAEL

It's great, in theory. When we're not together, I think I can handle being with him. But he's right -- every time he says something like -- he's never heard of Alfred Hitchcock, he's never watched a Star Trek show, he says "based off of" instead of "based on" and "adaption" instead of "adaptation." Or, it turns out he read Shakespeare in high school but he's never seen a Shakespeare play on stage ... I feel old and arrogant, and impatient, and disgusted with the passage of time, and disgusted with myself for lusting after him --

DIANNE

So, you do lust after him?

MICHAEL

Well, I'm romantically interested, and lust is certainly a component of that. But I'm not like the older guys who thought I was just a pretty young thing when I was in college. Old guys who were just out to have fun. All the time I was with Nicholas -- I liked that he was older and wiser. I liked learning from him. And even so, I could keep up. We respected each other's minds, more or less. We taught each other things. Young people now -- I mean, they live on their phones, they'd rather text than talk in person, or talk on the phone, or even send an e-mail, they zip through traffic on those crazy scooters while texting, with buds in their ears ... Connor was talking about Durang's play *Vanya and Sonia*. The Baby Boomer guy in that play has a melt-down because young people nowadays have never licked a stamp. They think of postage stamps as stickers, he says. And I'm reading it, thinking: what makes Durang think kids today have even heard of postage stamps? That they've ever put a stamp on an actual envelope and used snail mail?

DIANNE

So, are you like that? Do you do or you don't think it's silly to be upset about young people having their own culture?

MICHAEL

I don't know. I'm having a mid-life crisis, I can't justify it rationally.

DIANNE

I thought the boy sounded smart. I thought he stood up to you in a spirited way.

MICHAEL

He did.

DIANNE

I think he could keep you on your toes the way Nicholas did. Different but -- he wouldn't let you get away with things. He'd call you on your nonsense. That's important because you generate a great deal of nonsense.

MICHAEL

You're right.

DIANNE

There's even a chance that he could be Moss Hart to your George S. Kaufman. You read *Act One*.

MICHAEL

Yes, I did. And *I'm* Moss Hart. I identify with Hart. Why does he get to be Hart?

DIANNE

I'm saying. Look at how he was raised by troglodytes. And aspired to something more.

MICHAEL

Moss Hart had the crazy grandfather and crazy aunt to introduce him to theater, at least.

DIANNE

Mmm. And then they were gone, and he had to drop out of school and support people who didn't even know what wit and good writing were. And go to work for a furrier, hanging fur coats in a smelly vault. And Hart would watch Kaufman plays, and he hungered for that -- to be part of that vicious circle. It's time for you to move over and let this kid be Moss Hart.

MICHAEL

Maybe.

DIANNE

You've been hiding out in the house for too long. Like me. Only I have my cats. You don't have any cats, and you're perverse enough to enjoy the company of other humans. You should start stepping out.

MICHAEL

I know. But I'd rather just blame you.

DIANNE

Blame me?

MICHAEL

Blame you and Emily and the bunch of us. For Hallway B and Hallway House, and how it's distorted my life. Wherever I go, I expect to connect with someone *that* strongly. I expect to have a private language with them, and in-jokes, and shared obscure references --

DIANNE

That doesn't happen overnight.

MICHAEL

It did with us. Pretty fast. I mean, we have a history now -- but we became a family in a matter of weeks.

DIANNE

Because we were young. And impressionable. And we imprinted on each other. Like baby ducks.

MICHAEL

I think we all imprinted on you. And your Algonquin Round Table song and dance.

DIANNE

Well, I didn't entirely invent it. I got it from the aunts and uncles. They used to talk about it. They thought they were living it. The Zeitlin family dinner table was one big Athenian symposium, and one big Long Island garden party full of Algonquinites. And that really *was* a family, my family. Only they were cold and cruel and exacting, and they never quite let me be a part of it. So, I went to college, and I met some smart people, and I decided to build a better family, for myself.

MICHAEL

Well, I think it's damaged all of our relationships.

DIANNE

Nonsense. I'm not the reason your lover went mad and started acting out, and I'm not the reason Emily's worthless husband cheated on her.

MICHAEL

Well, no.

DIANNE

Or why Jake is bi-polar, or why Pamela keeps sabotaging every job she gets, and every relationship --

MICHAEL

Is Pamela moving in?

DIANNE

She was threatening to. But I think it's a false alarm. She's involved with some older woman who's rich, and this woman lets Pamela sit around the house watching soap operas all day ... And this woman has a really big TV set. Pamela says she's difficult, but I told Pamela to stick with the sugar mama she's already got.

MICHAEL

Well, good. 'Cause, where would you put her? I mean, if Jake and Pamela both moved here at once?

DIANNE

Certainly not up on *my* floor. If she's going to watch those soaps. If I want to experience lowest-common-denominator trash, I can read my own novels. I don't want any of you up on my floor, really. And neither do the cats. We love each other -- we have no use for the rest of you.

MICHAEL

Well, there you go.

DIANNE

Emily might try to sabotage your relationship, Michael. She might be threatened by the idea that you're finally ready to ditch this place, just when she's crawled back into the cocoon.

MICHAEL

That's exactly what she's doing.

DIANNE

But you're not going to get that from me. I'm all for you getting out of here, and getting on with your life. I don't need the rent money. My last bodice ripper is selling very nicely, thank you.

MICHAEL

Well, I didn't think it was \$300 a month from me that was keeping your refrigerator stocked with Amy's Enchiladas. But what if I *did* get involved with someone? Like this kid? What if -- what if he moved into my room? And paid some rent?

DIANNE

I wouldn't object. Like I said, he looked all right to me. But he said something about shampooing shih tzus. And elderly schnauzers.

MICHAEL

He takes care of people's dogs.

DIANNE

I don't want shih tzus and elderly schnauzers wandering around the house, and neither do the cats.

MICHAEL

That's fair.

DIANNE

Or big, scary barking dogs. Or any dogs.

MICHAEL

I don't think he owns a dog. He just walks them and dog-sits.

DIANNE

Well, he's not bringing them here. Otherwise, good luck to the both of you.

(EMILY, having descended the stairs, RAPS on a wall to make her presence known, and ENTERS.)

EMILY

Hello, again.

DIANNE

Hello, Repulsive.

EMILY

Good to see you, Dianne. Finally. You make me welcome in your home and then you disappear for five days.

DIANNE

I've got a freezer full of enchiladas up on my floor. Why would I ever come down?

EMILY

Why did you?

DIANNE

I was nosy about the car in the driveway. And whoever you were grumbling into your wine bottle about.

EMILY

Am I so easy to hear on your floor?

DIANNE

I was lurking. On the staircase. I like to lurk.

EMILY

So, no sign of Brett yet?

MICHAEL

Nope. No sign.

EMILY

Michael, I wanted to apologize to you if I was a bad friend when you had your breakup with Nicholas. If I hurt your feelings by staying away. But I was insanely happy at the time, head over heels, and I couldn't hide it --

MICHAEL

It was grating.

DIANNE

It was pretty annoying.

EMILY

And I sensed that you didn't want to be around it. But you're right -- these last two years ... I should have come around more. I was trying to lose myself in married life -- maybe a little too hard.

MICHAEL

Water under the bridge.

EMILY

While I'm at it, I'd like to apologize for today -- for being a bitch.

MICHAEL

You gotta be you.

EMILY

But I was just sounding your friend out.

MICHAEL

You certainly were.

EMILY

I actually liked him. Did I scare him away?

MICHAEL

No. *I* scared him away. After you threw into sharp relief all the problems we would have if we got involved. Very thoughtful of you.

EMILY

Well -- hey. What are friends for?

MICHAEL

Sharpening their claws on each other, in this house.

EMILY

I'm trying to retract my claws. But perhaps I'll just retract my apology instead.

MICHAEL

That would be true to form.

EMILY

If you ruin your relationship, or if you're not compatible with this kid, don't blame me.

MICHAEL

I'll blame you all I want, but don't worry, I'll blame myself more. I'm going for a walk.

(HE EXITS. EMILY and DIANNE look at each other. After a moment a DOOR SLAMS.)

EMILY

Well, nuts.

DIANNE

Don't take it to heart. He was blaming me also, and I didn't even meet the kid. I just scoped him out and eavesdropped.

EMILY

And Michael caught you, and blamed you?

DIANNE

No. I'm silent and mysterious when I creep around the house. Michael would never catch me. He was blaming me for starting our circle at Applegate, and creating an atmosphere where we all understand each other. He said it set an impossible standard for all of his other relationships.

EMILY

Oh. Well, I also blame you for that sometimes.

DIANNE

How nice.

EMILY

But I really thought I'd gotten past it, when I met Brett. Remember at the wedding, I hugged you and said I'd escaped you?

DIANNE

Yes, that was a misty-eyed moment.

EMILY

I was going to live a normal life.

DIANNE

You were working, with great intensity, at being normal. Straining away at it. I was afraid you might herniate something.

EMILY

I thought I was done with fag-hagging for Michael, and setting myself apart from the real world with my clever-clever friends, all of us making jokes behind the backs of the average yahoos, all of us sour, and nasty, and damaged. I thought I was going to have a life, and a family ...

EMILY (CONTD)

(crying)

And I really tried hard ... to be a good wife ...

DIANNE

(not really comforting)

Oh, now, really. There, there.

EMILY

Dianne -- I think I'm cracking up. Like, maybe I did sabotage Michael's date with the kid. I can't tell. I thought I was being all glittering and scintillating. I was manic. I was mean. I -- I don't really know what I'm doing anymore. I'm thinking of seeing a shrink.

DIANNE

Don't do that.

EMILY

I saw a shrink toward the end of our freshman year at Applegate. You expressly told me not to. I went to see her anyway, to defy you.

DIANNE

And how did that work out?

EMILY

She was awful. I mean, I was all set to start seeing her regularly, she offered me regular appointments, and it was free, she was the college shrink -- and it was so depressing. She insisted I come for a second appointment. It seemed impolite not to go. I made up stuff to tell her. About nothing, non-issues. She was so stupid, she didn't notice. And she told me that it might be difficult for me, over the summer, not having her to talk to. And I nodded very gravely, and managed not to laugh in her face.

DIANNE

What did she ask you? What made her so awful?

EMILY

I ... she just ... I was depressed, I was demoralized, my virginity was weighing heavy upon me, I'd put on the freshman fifteen pounds, I wasn't meeting anyone, I was spending all my time with the bunch of you in Hallway B, and I didn't think it was healthy. And she seemed convinced I was hot for you or hot for Michael, or sexually repressed or the victim of incest ... I mean, our group relationship is unhealthy and incestuous, somehow, without being sexual. She couldn't get that. Everything was about sex to her. I wanted to tell her -- Look, even Sigmund Freud said: "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

DIANNE

Mmm. I saw her, too.

EMILY

What?

DIANNE

Early in the year. That's why I tried to warn you away. I said that college shrinks are the bottom of the barrel: humorless, plodding, literal-minded people they hire straight out of grad school who don't know what they're doing. Because that's what she was.

EMILY

Why didn't you just tell me: "I saw her, and she's lousy"?

DIANNE

That would have been admitting to a chink in my armor. That would never do. I was busy being Woolcott. I made things happen, I cultivated bright young things, and I taught you all how to laugh at the world. You were lucky I deigned to give you a heads up about it.

EMILY

Then, why are you telling me about it now?

DIANNE

I care less about what you think of me. Or, I'm less interested in striking a pose. And I've gotten more distance from that depressing experience. I couldn't laugh about it then, but it's actually howlingly funny. I'd -- I'd thought for years that it would be nice to talk to someone about my situation at home. About the aunts, especially Aunt Lila. And the uncles, especially Uncle Lionel. But -- high school shrinks -- they don't have to keep what you say confidential like real shrinks do. They can tell the principal, they can talk to your parents and guardians ... and you know, my aunts and uncles were famous. Kind of, some of the time. An Emmy here, an Oscar nomination there, even some Grammy nominations, you know, Uncle Irwin wrote scores for films and produced jazz albums. I asked in high school if I could see a shrink, and Aunt Lila said I should talk to her and save money ... So, I never went. But in college, I found out that the usual rules about confidentiality applied. I went to see this woman. And ... maybe you *should* have talked to her about Sigmund Freud. That might have gotten through to her. I think she was some kind of Freudian. She couldn't handle the idea that my relationship with my parents was irrelevant. That they disappeared early on, and when I heard Mom died, I hardly noticed. This tiresome woman couldn't believe I had no desire to look Dad up after he disappeared. I just said: Good riddance to bad rubbish.

EMILY

Is he still alive?

DIANNE

Beats hell out of me. There wasn't much to him, even when he was younger. He'd hollowed out his cranium with drugs. He didn't know enough to stay away from the brown acid in Haight-Ashbury, if you know what I mean.

EMILY

Ah.

DIANNE

I tried to tell this college head-shrinker person that my primary, primal scream, visceral relationship was with the aunts and uncles, especially the aunts. She didn't believe me. I tried to tell her how they damaged me -- and she assumed it must have been sexual. I said they wielded their tongues like rapiers. Aunt Lila could carve me up with her tongue like Zorro wielding his sword. And all this stupid woman fixated on was the word "tongue." And maybe "rapier" sounded like "rape" to her. *What* had my aunt done to me with her tongue? She kept asking. I said: you're suggesting that I was molested and that I don't want to acknowledge it or admit it. She asked: *what* made me say that? Why did I assume that's what she was thinking? We went round and round. Finally, I said, I'm very sorry, I shouldn't have assumed I knew what you were thinking. I told her all about how they were screamingly funny, lively, observant, exciting to be around, how their dinner table conversation crackled and sparkled, as they mocked everyone in the industry, and they filled me with a sense of how the Zeitlins were superior to every other family in Hollywood. And sometimes they praised me as gifted and precocious, but then they'd cut me to smithereens with a look and a word. They'd see right through me, and eviscerate me, and my sense of self, and sometimes they did it publicly, in front of guests, and I had so much rage inside of me at all of them ... I'd flash on Aunt Lila mocking me at a dinner party for not knowing that Robert Towne wrote the screenplay for *Chinatown*, and I'd want to go after the bunch of them with a chain-saw. I still do, sometimes. It felt good to finally tell someone about it, you know? Just spill my guts. And she listened politely, and nodded. And then she asked me if Aunt Lila had ever touched me in a secret place. She just had her heart set on uncovering some child molesting -- she couldn't even conceive of a person being damaged by words. And I said: seriously? After you wasted my time, and we went in circles about this for ten minutes? Balls to you, lady! Take up a useful job you're good at, like chicken plucking! And I walked on out of there. And swore off shrinks.

EMILY

Wow.

DIANNE

Terrible shrinks like that can do damage. They make your guts shrivel up inside you. But there are probably good shrinks out there that are useful.

EMILY

You know, I have to admit.

DIANNE

What?

EMILY

I used to wonder if something like that had happened to you. Abuse. To make you asexual, or whatever you are.

DIANNE

Well, it did. To some degree.

EMILY

What?

DIANNE

Later. In my teens, I was groped, almost raped. There was a guy who flirted with both Uncle Irwin and Aunt Carla. Maybe he was fucking both of them, I don't know. They should have known better than to leave me around him. He was a sleazy guy. And he was drunk and all over me, upstairs, after a party, and I managed to get away. But the aunts and uncles didn't really believe me when I said what he'd done, what a scum-bag he was. They didn't drop him right away. They didn't hold him properly accountable. I took that *very* personally. I never trusted them again, I got mouthy, I made a great show of getting a lock for my door -- but it was a sensible precaution.

EMILY

And that put you off sex?

DIANNE

Everything put me off sex. I did try sex in high school, with girls and boys. I just don't see the point. I don't like the mess. I don't like the drama, and the effort of pretending to care about someone, and pretending there's a big, rare, connection, and you have to keep sharing your feelings, and working through your problems ... I understand the mechanics, and I understand how the rest of you feel about it. But I'd rather be numb, and fake it, and write romance novels, and pocket lots of money. Like a drug dealer who's not an actual user. A teetotaler bartender. I write steamy novels where people come together like the pounding surf on the shore, and hold each other close all night long ... and it's allowed me to buy this nice big house, and go to sleep every night in a huge bed with my cats.

EMILY

Well, don't tell the shrink at Applegate about that part.

DIANNE

You're right. I'm not sexually involved with my cats. But if she had me in for a session now, we'd spend forty minutes dancing around the issue of whether I touch them in a secret place.

DIANNE (CONT'D)

(beat)

I like being Alec Woollcott. I liked the sense of the Algonquin Round Table that the aunts and uncles gave me, when they were at their best, and the sense that one should always be funny and interesting -- the greatest crime is being boring. I tried to impart that to all of you -- with a bit less of the sneering at the world, and a bit less of the cutting meanness that I grew up with. And the meanness that Alec was into.

EMILY

Another difference is -- Woollcott never really wrote anything. Except for columns. People wrote about him. He's the guy in the movie *Laura*, right?

DIANNE

More or less.

EMILY

And did he tell Kaufman and Hart to write *The Man Who Came to Dinner* about him? Or was he offended by it? I feel like I've heard it both ways.

DIANNE

Well, it's true both ways. He wanted them to put him in a play so that he could play the role. He was a horrible house guest, staying with Hart, I think, and Kaufman and Hart joked about: what if he broke his hip and stayed a month. They were horrified by the idea, and then they saw that it would make a wonderful play. So, they wrote it and put him in it, in all his monstrosity, and dedicated it to him. He got the joke and was amused, but he didn't want to play the role. He did play it once before he died.

EMILY

So, he wasn't offended?

DIANNE

He acted all offended when Hollywood made a film of it. So that they had to pay him off, so he wouldn't make a fuss and sue them.

EMILY

Oh. But he, himself, never wrote -- creative things?

DIANNE

Not really. He wrote a strange biography of Irving Berlin. You know, he had a funny relationship with all his Jewish friends. He'd call George S. Kaufman "Christ Killer." As a pet name. A term of endearment. But he would never talk to shy, sensitive Irving Berlin that way. Woollcott saw Berlin as some sort of authentic, tragic, ancient voice of the Jewish people transplanted from Russia to Tin Pan Alley. Woollcott had lots of loony pet theories. But he never wrote fiction, if that's what you mean.

EMILY

Kind of. And that's where you're totally different from him. 'Cause, out of all of us -- Michael hardly ever finishes a play. I hardly finish the stories I write. And when I do, I don't send them out.

DIANNE

Well, you have day jobs.

EMILY

But I mean -- you *don't* have a day job. You write books for a living.

DIANNE

I write trash for a living. Well. On some days, I rather like what I do. I'm numb, but I write throbbing, passionate, Silhouette, Wildfire, pulsating swoon stories ... Sometimes it's fun. And I've learned all sorts of things about Regency England. Doing the research. Other days, I have nothing but contempt for my readers and myself.

EMILY

Okay. I just think -- it's ironic. Applegate believed in us. We believed in us. We were going to write amazing literature and change the world. And look at us.

DIANNE

I'm fine with what I'm doing. But if you want to write the Great American Novel, you should go ahead and do it. You still have plenty of time.

EMILY

No. It's too late.

DIANNE

Tut tut.

EMILY

Tut tut.

DIANNE

Tsk tsk.

EMILY

Tsk tsk.

DIANNE

First Michael's mid-life crisis, and now yours. I really should charge people, to be their shrink. March yourself upstairs, young lady, this instant, and go write a novel that will change everything.

EMILY

In a minute. I need to get another bottle of wine.

DIANNE

Stop trying to be Dorothy Parker, it's bad for your liver. And it won't help your writing.

EMILY

Fine. I'll lay off the sauce till dinner. But you're a bully.

DIANNE

That's right, I'm Woolcott. Now, what novel are you going to write?

EMILY

Which one do you want me to write?

DIANNE

Write the good one. I like that one best.

EMILY

Oh, all right, then. If --

(The DOORBELL RINGS.)

DIANNE

Do you suppose it's the kid Michael says he's not dating? He seems to have left his jacket.

EMILY

Could be, but it could be Brett.

DIANNE

Ew. I thought you wanted him to drop dead?

EMILY

I do, but he didn't get the memo. I explain it to him, in very clear words, and it's just water off a macho egotist's back.

(The DOORBELL RINGS again.)

DIANNE

Well, someone is very insistent. If it's him, tell him not to get any slime on my furniture. Should I let him in?

EMILY

Yeah, let me get myself together. Do I seem drunk?

DIANNE

Not so very.

EMILY

Defensive and spiteful?

DIANNE

No more than usual.

(The DOORBELL RINGS again.)

DIANNE (CONT'D)

Lord! He's not worth the worry. I'll let him in.

(SHE EXITS to open the front door. EMILY smooths her clothes and tries to look casual. DIANNE RETURNS with BRETT. HE doesn't like DIANNE, and HE doesn't like being here.)

DIANNE (CONT'D)

And here she is.

BRETT

Emily.

EMILY

Hey there, Brett.

DIANNE

I understand you've been stepping out with a dental hygienist, Brett. Has it improved your oral hygiene? Are you flossing more regularly?

BRETT

I really don't feel like discussing my personal life with you, Dianne.

DIANNE

But they're discovering such remarkable links, nowadays, between dental plaque and heart disease! Does your new lady love tell you about that?

BRETT

Dianne --

DIANNE

Has it been good for your heart, two-timing Emily, and maybe getting kinky with a water pick and gum massage --

EMILY

Dianne, I appreciate it, but you don't have to --

DIANNE

Oh, I know I don't *have* to --

BRETT

Dianne. Do you think you could leave us?

DIANNE

Of course. So delightful to see you again, Brett. It's such a comfort, so wonderful knowing you know where we live.

BRETT

Yeah, I'm as thrilled about seeing you again as you are.

DIANNE

You'll have to *friend* me on social media. Oh! That's right! I don't have any social media accounts. Darn!

(SHE EXITS. BRETT and EMILY stare at each other -- it's awkward.)

BRETT

Nasty as ever.

EMILY

Oh, nastier, I'd say. She used to grit her teeth and smile, and try to be polite to you. All my friends did.

BRETT

Well, the nasty still came shining through. I didn't miss it. I guess things don't ever really change, with you and your crowd.

EMILY

I was hoping some things would. You were the big change in my life that -- I hoped was going to last.

BRETT

Well, hey, Emily, I never said I was perfect.

EMILY

I never expected perfect. Only honest, and thoughtful, and half-way trustworthy --

BRETT

Oh, please, because you're so perfect, you're so judgemental, up there on your mountaintop --

EMILY

Brett, I was all for working through our problems, I know I caused some of them --

BRETT

Oh, sure. You and your friends comparing notes on me, and laughing about me behind my back -- that prize bitch and the rest of them!

EMILY

I never talked to them about you, or our marriage, before.

BRETT

Yeah, right.

EMILY

Even when we were dating. I kept our private life private. If they'd speculate or ask about things that were none of their business, I told them to go to hell. I was loyal to you -- until I found out that you're not loyal to me. Now -- it's open season on you.

BRETT

I'll bet.

EMILY

Every quirk, and every obnoxious habit.

BRETT

In and out of the bedroom.

EMILY

Absolutely. Think of it as verbal revenge porn.

BRETT

Well. You know, you're trashing any chance we had of getting back together.

EMILY

Good Lord. We *do not* have a chance of getting back together, Brett. You've shafted me in such a basic way that --

BRETT

Don't give me that. I'm trying to be honest. I'm dealing with a lot. I'm in a relationship -- I don't know where it's headed.

EMILY

You poor, tortured soul.

BRETT

But I still value you. I told you that it's painful for me. That I never wanted to see you get hurt.

EMILY

Yes, you've told me. And I don't accept your non-apology. And I don't get the point of this meeting. Do you have something new to say to me?

BRETT

Are you -- so childish, and spiteful, you really want to cut me out of your life?

EMILY

Well. Not immediately. There's a house to get rid of. I've got possessions there, still. I hope you haven't thrown them out?

BRETT

Of course not! It's our house. It's yours and mine.

EMILY

So, we've got to figure all of that out. I thought maybe you had some ideas about it -- and that's why you wanted to meet.

BRETT

But after everything we've been through together, you've given up on us getting past this? Getting our marriage back?

EMILY

Not gonna happen.

BRETT

Or even a friendship? Staying in touch?

EMILY

Long-term? Probably not.

BRETT

(shakes his head, smiles or laughs in disbelief)

And you really don't see what you're doing?

EMILY

No. Tell me. What am I doing?

BRETT

What you've always done. You self-destruct. You crawl away into this sick, little fantasy world with your bitchy friends. You wanted us to end up this way, all along. You made it happen.

EMILY

Um, no, Brett, you fucked around. You're the one who couldn't keep it in your pants. Like I said, I was loyal to you until I found out. Believe me or not, as you like.

BRETT

You drove me to it. You're living in that Dorothy Parker la-la-land, all of you --

EMILY

The Algonquinites aren't our only reference points. Sometimes we see ourselves as the horrible British schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*. And sometimes we see ourselves as the women in Mary McCarthy's novel *The Group*.

BRETT

I could not care less --

EMILY

It's a book about a group of friends who went to Vassar in the 1930s, they were up in a tower together, and then they graduate and wander around during the Great Depression and have lousy relationships. And meet a lot of manipulative jerks. Some of whom resent their friendship -- resent them for having the Group to rely on. Some of the guys get really pissy and jealous and competitive about it. You know the type.

BRETT

Yeah, you're so proud of yourselves that you've got your books and your quotes and your whole magic world that nobody else can share. That's why it's maybe a relief for a man to just be with someone non-judgemental, and giving, and kind --

EMILY

Good! Go be with her! God bless! But don't look me up just to tell me how much better it is than our marriage. Is that what you're here for?

BRETT

I'm here to see if we can find our way back --

EMILY

We can't! I don't respect you, and I don't trust you. Sorry! Time's up! Thank you! Next!

BRETT

Well, I can't just cut off my feelings for you like snapping my fingers! And the only reason you can cut me dead like this is that you never really gave our marriage a chance in the first place.

EMILY

You pin-headed twerp. You're so wrong. I was so happy because -- I could love you, I did love you.

BRETT

But not enough to compromise.

EMILY

I made all kinds of compromises. All your big games and your ESPN and your sports trivia. I tried to take it in stride. I told myself: that's the cross I have to bear, for being with a heterosexual man.

BRETT

Oh, like you never made fun of me for --

EMILY

I tried not to. No more than you teased me about things I liked that you didn't understand. Mostly I put up with it. And I got sick of you calling me crazy. In a joking way, in a serious way, gas-lighting me, like you were trying to *make* me crazy.

BRETT

You're already crazy.

EMILY

Fuck you, I'm really glad I don't have to listen to that anymore. And your friends -- I don't like most of your friends. I sure as hell won't miss them. But I didn't get mad at you for *having* old friends, I didn't try to make you choose between me and them.

BRETT

You could have been more fun to be around. When Dave and Glen and the rest came over.

EMILY

I tried. We didn't have a lot in common. I don't think they really wanted me there. I always made sure there were chips and salsa and a six-pack on hand, before I'd beat it.

BRETT

Sneer at the men watching sports. Sneer, sneer.

EMILY

I tried not to sneer. I tried not to judge you too hard. But God, I hated how you can never apologize, and never work through a problem. Never have an honest conversation when you fuck up. I don't mean a huge, deal-breaking snake-in-the-grass move like screwing around. There's no working through *this*. For me. I mean ordinary things, big things and little things, day to day. But I'd try to tell myself: he's apologizing indirectly. He knows he's been a prick, he's offering to do the dishes -- that's his idea of an apology. That's as close as a real man can come to it.

BRETT

You and your clique have such a condescending fucking view of the rest of us.

EMILY

But when it was good -- do you think I don't remember when it was good? That's what hurts so much about you throwing it all away. That's what's been -- really hard to wrap my head around.

BRETT

All right. You want an apology? You fetishize apologies, you think it's such a big deal that I never opened a vein, and emoted, and apologized to you?

EMILY

You can be exquisitely sensitive, Brett. To your own feelings. Just never to mine.

BRETT

I'm trying to tell you something! I've come here today -- and I'd like to apologize. For -- whatever you think I owe you an apology for. Whatever you think I've done wrong, however you think I've hurt you. I apologize.

EMILY

That's your apology?

BRETT

Yes.

EMILY

(considers)

Huh. It's kind of open-ended.

BRETT

I want it to be whatever you need it to be. Whatever you want to blame me for -- I accept it.

EMILY

Well, gee, I don't mean to sound critical. But I'm thinking you don't actually know what apologies are, or why people give them to each other.

BRETT

Aha. And so, all you've been doing, all along, demanding I say I'm sorry for things, was setting me up for another snotty lecture, when I actually do say it.

EMILY

Listen, I already rejected your non-apology. And I already told you that we're past the point where we can even be friends. It's bizarre that we spent years with this as a point of contention, before the wedding, after the wedding -- how good it could be if you admitted you were wrong sometimes, and it hurt our relationship, and then, you were as cold and cutting as possible when I heard you were fucking around with the tooth lady --

BRETT

Her name is Angelynn --

EMILY

And I was ill, and trembling, and you made it kind of brutal. So, to apologize *now* -- the timing is whack. It's like, if I'm out in the ocean, being pulled under the waves, shouting: Help! Throw me a life preserver! And you stand on the shore doing nothing. And I either drown and my corpse washes up on shore, or I find a way to swim ashore somehow, and I drag myself up on the beach, panting and coughing up water -- and you choose that moment to bounce a life preserver off my head? It feels kind of spiteful, and beside the point.

BRETT

To someone who only sees the bad in me. To someone out to reject and dump on everything that I do.

EMILY

So, now, when it's too late, you offer me an apology, just to show that you can, only this "apology" is so vague that it's meaningless. You're saying you're sorry for whatever *I* think you owe me an apology for? Like, if you call me names and say: "Sorry if you feel offended"?

BRETT

I didn't call you names.

EMILY

What if I call *you* names? What if I say you're a bozo, and a dog, and a pig, and you're as sleazy as a slime mold, and you're as dumb as a big pile of rocks?

BRETT

Well, that's -- really sad, that all you're left with is this kind of --

EMILY

Well, I'm sorry if you feel offended.

BRETT

If I feel -- *anyone* would feel offended!

EMILY

That's my point, Brett. *Hello*. Do you really not see?

BRETT

See what?

EMILY

(stares at him for a beat)

See that objectively offensive is objectively offensive, and the apology you gave me is meaningless. And it's just one more way of telling me I'm crazy. Humoring your crazy wife and saying: *Suuure*, honey, if you think you're Napoleon Bonaparte then you are, absolutely, and sorry about the Battle of Waterloo ...

BRETT

I should have known I was wasting my time, and you'd find some ugly way to take it.

EMILY

I'll tell you how I take it, Brett. It's -- you know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm being too cynical, and projecting the worst onto you. Maybe you're *not* trying to diss me and call me crazy one last time. Maybe it's a sincere apology.

BRETT

Thank you.

EMILY

Or -- maybe you are calling me crazy one more time to piss me off, to help me get past you, and make realize that I can do better, and I should hold out till I find a good man's love.

BRETT

What?

EMILY

And if that's what you're doing, acting like an asshole on purpose to help me get over you, then it's very noble and self-sacrificing. Or maybe you've got some other motive, and I just don't know what it is. So -- let me say that I take your incredibly open-ended apology in whatever way you want me to take it. If you're trying to offend me, I'm offended. If you're trying to touch me, I'm touched.

BRETT

What the fuck --

EMILY

If you're trying to light a fire under my butt to get me to move on and meet Mr. Right, then I appreciate the incentive. My reaction to your incredibly open-ended apology is incredibly open-ended. And what I'm feeling right now is whatever you want me to feel.

(BRETT stares at her, for a long moment of hatred.)

BRETT

Do you want to sell the house?

EMILY

Might as well.

BRETT

What's still there that you claim?

EMILY

The dishes my parents gave us at the wedding. The second-hand couch I moved in with.

BRETT

They've already got a couch here.

EMILY

So, I'll put it in storage. For when I move out and get my own place.

BRETT

Done.

EMILY

If you want to stay there, you could buy me out -- for my share of it.

(MICHAEL ENTERS. HE and BRETT eye each other with hostility.)

MICHAEL

Oh. Wow. He showed up.

EMILY

He showed up. But I think he's leaving soon.

(to BRETT)

We can work out the details via e-mail, or over the phone.

BRETT

Fine. That's great. How's it going, Michael?

MICHAEL

It's going good, Brett, thanks so much for asking. See, I went out walking. Through the park. Past the duck pond. And I was feeling kind of bad about living in this house with my old college friends. It seemed so limiting. But then, you turned up! And I saw your tight-jawed, snippy face, and I heard your self-satisfied "regular-guy" voice. And that makes me remember that the world outside my group of friends is a cold, dreary, unforgiving place full of humorless drones, and users, and shady con men. And *that* makes me realize: there's no place like home!

BRETT

Yeah? Well, great. I could say something similar. I was sorry about how my marriage fell apart. And then I entered this toxic environment, where Emily belongs, where she's always mentally lived, and I decided to count my blessings. Because all of you -- you're all part of the same monster.

MICHAEL

We're all one multi-headed organism, you mean? Cool.

EMILY

I can live with that.

BRETT

And I don't need to be around this. I'm happy to leave her here, to fester with the bunch of you.

MICHAEL

Wonderful. So, it's worked out great for everybody, then!

EMILY

And they all lived happily ever after.

(The PHONE on the coffee table RINGS: a tinny, old-fashioned telephone sound.)

BRETT

That thing actually works?

EMILY

Of course, it's a phone.

MICHAEL

But why doesn't Dianne answer it up on her floor?

EMILY

Because she's probably lurking on the staircase, and eavesdropping.

MICHAEL

That makes sense.

DIANNE (O.S.)

Bullseye!

(BRETT looks around, alarmed. EMILY goes to the phone. )

EMILY

I'll get it.

(SHE answers it.)

Hi, Pamela.

(listens)

Yeah, I'm doing okay here.

(listens)

You'd be welcome, but you should probably coordinate with Jake. If you both move back here at the same time, there could be a crunch, in terms of rooms.

(listens)

Not much, no. I hear you're into soaps. We've had a few unfolding around here -- but I think they're wrapping up. You're better off with the ones on TV.

BRETT

(angry)

I'm leaving, Emily. I'll contact you online.

EMILY

(cheery, dismissive)

'Bye!

(HE storms out, and DIANNE calls out, as HE passes the staircase)

DIANNE (O.S.)

Goodbye, Brett! Don't hurry back!

MICHAEL

(to EMILY)

Has she been on that staircase all afternoon?

EMILY

Apparently.

(listens to phone)

If I were you, I'd give Dianne a chance to get back up into her lair, and call her later. 'Bye Pamela.

(As SHE hangs up, CONNOR ENTERS. HE KNOCKS on the wall as HE does so.)

CONNOR

Hey. Sorry to walk right in. There was this guy leaving -- I asked if I could come in, he just kind of glared ...

EMILY

Did he touch you?

CONNOR

No.

EMILY

Then he probably didn't give you cooties.

(DIANNE ENTERS)

DIANNE

And you are Connor. Well, is nobody going to do the introductions?

MICHAEL

Connor, this is Dianne. She owns the place.

DIANNE

(With a grand gesture)

Welcome back to Hallway House.

CONNOR

Um, thanks. I just -- I came back because I realized I left my jacket.

MICHAEL

You could have called. I'd have dropped it off at the club for you.

CONNOR

Well, I would have but -- the phone's in the pocket.

MICHAEL

Oh.

CONNOR

I had my car keys in my jeans but ...

EMILY

You must have been upset when you left. I upset you.

DIANNE

No, Michael upset you. But he's sorry now.

EMILY

We're all sorry now. Or -- I am. You seem like a good guy, and -- I've just thrown out a crummy relationship, but I'd like to see Michael get into a good one. And if he's going to have someone coming around here to see him -- I'd rather it be someone I like. And I like you. And I'm sorry if I scared you away, or made trouble between you.

DIANNE

You see, Connor, we're eccentric and old, but that's part of our charm!

MICHAEL

Hopefully. Hopefully, that's part of our charm.

CONNOR

It is part of your charm.

(takes jacket)

But I've already said, I can't --

MICHAEL

I took a walk. I found -- this is my problem, nothing to do with Emily or Dianne. And I think I can get over it. I think I've had that change of heart you were talking about.

CONNOR

Really.

MICHAEL

Really.

DIANNE

Yes, and we all want to adopt you. We think it's horrible you went to a high school full of plodding, dull people, and you had to watch John Wayne movies and *Gunsmoke*, and you never got to live away from home at college, and find your circle. We'd like you to make us your geriatric circle, and we all want to be your strange parent figures slash friends.

MICHAEL

Except I don't want to be your parent figure -- that would be weird.

CONNOR

Good, 'cause like I said -- I don't want a daddy.

MICHAEL

But I'd like to be an older friend, and collaborate with you -- and maybe we can find our way to something more.

EMILY

And either I will pepper you with factlets about the Algonquin Round Table, or I'll shut up about it, whichever you like.

CONNOR

(staring at Michael)

You don't have to shut up. What did Dorothy Parker have to say about love? Besides that bit about "men like happy people"?

EMILY

Hmm, let's see. She said: "I require three things in a man: he must be handsome, ruthless, and stupid." And she did. Her later husband's name was on *A Star Is Born* with hers, but I don't think he wrote much of it.

CONNOR

Huh.

EMILY

And she said: "Take me or leave me; or, as is the usual order of things, both."

CONNOR

Well, that's not very hopeful.

EMILY

Oh no, you want hopeful? From Dorothy Parker? About love? As a good omen for your potential relationship? Dammit, dammit!

DIANNE

No, pressure, Emily, or anything.

EMILY

Well, wait, um, let's see what we can scrape up. She said "Brevity is the soul of lingerie." Will that do? I guess that's playful, but not really loving. She said: "Heterosexuality is not normal, it's just common." That's kind of positive, right? She said: "If you wear a short enough skirt, the party will come to you."

DIANNE

She said: "What fresh hell is this?" And what more could you need as you embark on a new adventure?

EMILY

She said "Excuse my dust" should be her epitaph. And it was. But while you're alive -- don't worry about that stuff! Just live. That's me. I said that part.

MICHAEL

The Algonquinites aren't good for romantic quotes. But they have their uses. And we can find other things to talk about, and other ways to live. Maybe.

CONNOR

Maybe.

DIANNE

With all of us here -- we can read plays aloud, like we used to, and play the different parts. Now that we've got a real actor among us. But if we read *The Man Who Came To Dinner*, then I get to be Sheridan Whiteside.

MICHAEL

As always.

EMILY

(to CONNOR)

See, Sherry is the Woolcott figure.

CONNOR

I figured.

DIANNE

(to CONNOR)

And if we read *You Can't Take It With You*, then you can be the handsome young man, and his fiancée -- who will be played by Michael -- is so embarrassed to bring him home to her crazy family. And that's us.

MICHAEL

Dianne --

EMILY  
 (ostensibly to CONNOR, but with meaning  
 for MICHAEL)

But of course, your fiancée in the play *really* hopes that her crazy family will like her nice young man, and vice versa, because deep down, despite all their faults, she forgives her crazy family, and she loves them --

MICHAEL  
 Yes, she does. She's lucky to have them.

EMILY  
 It's nice of her to reassure them.

(They share a beat.)

DIANNE  
 And if we read *Merrily We Roll Along* --

MICHAEL  
 By the way, we're not actually doing any of this --

CONNOR  
 We could, I'd be up for it --

DIANNE  
 (to CONNOR)  
*We'll* play the characters when they're old and jaded and compromised, and *you* can play them all at the end when they're fresh and young and hopeful -- single-handed.

CONNOR  
 Not a problem.

EMILY  
 And at other times, Dianne and I can bugger off, and you and Michael can spend some time alone.

MICHAEL  
 And we can spend time working on our project in this room?

DIANNE  
 Absolutely.

EMILY  
 Yes.

MICHAEL

And you won't always lurk on the staircase, Dianne? You'll respect our privacy?

DIANNE

I find romantic relationships utterly disgusting, and new love improbable and alienating. Why would I want to hover about and watch?

MICHAEL

Does it sound like it's worth a shot, Connor?

CONNOR

It's worth a shot.

(DIANNE extends her arms in an invocation, as if calling upon a higher power:)

DIANNE

Oh, gods of pretentious wits and literary dilettantes! You see we have a young person among us! Let us not destroy him as we feed upon him!

MICHAEL

Okay, Dianne, now you're just getting weird.

DIANNE

But dramatic!

MICHAEL

Very dramatic.

(to CONNOR)

You see, once we create the impression that we're colorful eccentrics, we fall over ourselves trying to live up to it.

EMILY

Maybe we should dial it back a notch. We could sit around, and you could tell us more about the show you're writing. Unless you guys want to be alone ...

CONNOR

That sounds good. Talking about the show. If you're up for it, Michael.

MICHAEL

Sounds good to me.

(They settle into the couch and chairs. DIANNE takes the phone off the hook of the old-fashioned telephone.)

DIANNE

Sounds good to me, too. Everyone: telephones off! Pamela and Jake and their crises can wait. We've got some new blood in our midst, and he is going to get our undivided.

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF PLAY