

Excerpt from HANDS (a play in one-act)

CHARACTERS:

MARY, *49*

PHILIP, *51*

JUNIOR, *23*

SCENERY:

Extremely simple. A chair (R, occupied by PHILIP), a table with a vase of azaleas, bare, white walls.

MARY is free to use all the space the director deems necessary.

JUNIOR's playing space is stage left.

OTHER NOTES:

We are never to see the faces of PHILIP and JUNIOR. In a proscenium setting, PHILIP and JUNIOR are to be facing U at all times. In non-proscenium settings, the director can make arrangements involving lighting, blocking, etc, to ensure that the faces of PHILIP and JUNIOR are never seen.

(Lights up. MARY is C. PHILIP is seated in a chair, R, reading a newspaper, his back to the audience.)

MARY: Philip.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: Mary.

(Pause.)

MARY: Happy anniversary, Philip.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: What?

MARY: Happy anniversary.

PHILIP: Why do you say it that way?

MARY: What way?

PHILIP: As if you thought I'd forgotten.

MARY: What are you talking about?

PHILIP: I didn't forget.

MARY: I didn't think you did.

PHILIP: I did not forget.

MARY: Did I say you did? *(Pause.)* Philip.

PHILIP: Mary.

MARY: Guess who I ran into the other day.

PHILIP: Anne Barrie.

MARY: How did you know?

PHILIP: I just guessed.

MARY: Guessed?

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: Yes. I saw Anne Barrie the other day. It's been aeons since I last saw her. She invited me to her house and we had a long, wonderful chat. She's as radiant as ever.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: The kids are off to college. John Junior's engaged to be married.

PHILIP: And John?

MARY: Engaged to be married.

PHILIP: Senior.

MARY: Senior?

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: I don't know. He wasn't there.

PHILIP: Oh.

MARY: No. But Anne was as radiant as ever. They've redecorated the house since the last time we visited. Anne told me she was so sick of that house that after the kids moved out she wanted to sell it. But John refused, and after ferocious debate she agreed to stay as long as they could redecorate it. Oh, Philip, you should have seen their new wallpaper. The most gorgeous floral design I'd ever seen.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: A flurry of azaleas on a burgundy backdrop.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: I thought it was wonderful. It made the house seem warm.

PHILIP: It made the house seem dark.

MARY: You weren't there. How would you know?

PHILIP: Because I know. I just know.

MARY: It made it warm.

PHILIP: Dark.

MARY: Warm! *(Pause.)* It made it warm. *(Pause.)* As a matter of fact I'd like to get the same kind of wallpaper myself.

PHILIP: *(Firmly.)* You will do no such thing. I like the walls bare. White.

MARY: Yes, Philip.

PHILIP: Simplicity.

MARY: Yes, Philip. *(Pause.)* Anne was as radiant as ever.

PHILIP: Yes.

(Pause.)

MARY: Philip.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: I didn't forget.

MARY: Forget what?

PHILIP: Our anniversary.

MARY: I never said you did.

PHILIP: I am not a stupid man.

MARY: I never said you were. *(Pause.)* You should have seen Anne Barrie's kitchen. It was as clean and spotless as ever. So clean you could practically eat breakfast off it.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: Anne is an incredible homemaker.

PHILIP: Not unlike yourself, Mary.

MARY: Do you think so?

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: You're not just saying that.

PHILIP: No, Mary.

MARY: I try, my darling.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: I *do* try.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: But it's so difficult sometimes.

PHILIP: I know, Mary.

MARY: But I *do* try.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: Please believe me.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

(Pause.)

MARY: Philip.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: Give me your hand.

PHILIP: My what?

MARY: Your hand, darling. Your hand. *(She takes his hand, caresses it, kisses it.)* This may surprise you, but it was your hands that first attracted me to you.

PHILIP: Really.

MARY: We shook hands. It was so strong, your handshake, so *certain*. I knew after that that I didn't want to be with anyone else. *(Pause.)* Philip.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: About the wallpaper.

PHILIP: There will be no wallpaper.

MARY: But Philip—

PHILIP: I like the walls bare.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: White.

MARY: Yes. *(Pause.)* Philip.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: Put your paper down.

PHILIP: What?

MARY: *(With some anger.)* Put your paper down.

PHILIP: I don't think I will.

(Pause. MARY snatches paper from PHILIP, crumples it, hurls it across the room.)

MARY: Guess what I found.

PHILIP: I don't appreciate your doing that.

MARY: GUESS WHAT I FOUND.

PHILIP: HOW DARE YOU DO THAT.

MARY: Guess what I found in the basement this morning.

(From her skirt pocket she withdraws a pair of mittens.)

Junior's mittens. You remember, don't you? The mittens I made for him for his sixth birthday. Or was it Christmas? Yes, it was Christmas. Yes. His birthday and Christmas are only a month apart—that's why I keep getting them mixed up. It was the year we first discovered his incredible talent, remember? The year that professor at the academy declared him a prodigy. So I simply had to make him new mittens, to protect those hands of his from the cold. He has beautiful hands. He has *beautiful* hands.

PHILIP: Has?

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: The present tense?

(Pause.)

MARY: Let's not get into this.

PHILIP: We agreed never to speak of him in the present tense.

MARY: Let's not get into this.

PHILIP: He *had* beautiful hands.

MARY: Let's just forget it, all right?

PHILIP: HE *HAD* BEAUTIFUL HANDS. *(Pause. Calmly.)* He *had* beautiful hands, just like his father—that is until his mother pushed him into piano lessons and made moth wings out of them.

MARY: He had talent!

PHILIP: His hands were never meant to unfold! (*He raises his fist.*) His hands were never meant to unfold. But they did. Just like that (*on 'that' he snaps his fingers*). And he proved himself incompetent.

MARY: He is *not* incompetent.

PHILIP: Is?

MARY: He is a prodigy.

PHILIP: Is?

MARY: He is our son.

PHILIP: Is? (*Beat.*) Is? Is? Is? (*Pause.*) Shut up if you insist on speaking of him in the present tense.
(*Silence.*)

MARY: Anne Barrie... she's such an expert homemaker.

PHILIP: Not unlike yourself, Mary.

MARY: Do you think so?

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: You're not just saying that?

PHILIP: No, Mary.

MARY: I *do* try. Really. I *do* try.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: (*On the verge of tears, hugging him.*) I *do* try, my darling. Please believe me.

PHILIP: Yes, Mary.

MARY: Please believe me!

(*Silence.*)

PHILIP: So you like my hands, do you?

MARY: Very much, Philip.

PHILIP: I'm not the least bit surprised. I like them myself.

MARY: They're so strong.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: They have a certain...rough beauty.

(*Pause.*)

PHILIP: I was a boy. A very bad boy. Every time I pulled a stunt my father would have me hold my hand out and he'd take a whip to it, five strikes of the whip—one, two, three, four, five—five strikes of the whip and nothing else, just the whip my great-grandfather had left my grandfather had left my father. And you know what? It thrilled me. I was mesmerized by the rhythm, the rhythm of it all, the motion, the

controlled motion of his hand—he had beautiful hands—the curve of that whip falling flat on my palm, the blue vein of determination popping out between his brows, the sweat oozing from his temples, the glorious glow in his beautiful eyes. I needed it, I knew I needed it, despite the pain, oh the pain, but it was necessary. It was right. And it gave me a thrill.

MARY: A thrill?

PHILIP: It was all... for the sake of... simplicity. (*Pause.*) Could you retrieve my paper, please?

MARY: Of course, Philip. (*She picks up paper, irons it out, gives it to PHILIP. Pause.*) Philip.

PHILIP: (*Reading the paper again.*) What?

MARY: (*Hesitantly.*) Aren't you tired of this house?

PHILIP: (*Putting the paper down.*) What?

MARY: This house. Aren't you tired of it?

PHILIP: Why do you ask that?

MARY: Please don't be angry...

PHILIP: ... how dare you even suggest that...

MARY: ... but it's been something I've been meaning to ask you...

PHILIP: HOW DARE YOU ASK THAT.

MARY: Please, darling, just listen to me.

PHILIP: We've lived in this house for twenty-five years and I have no intention of ever leaving it. Is that clear?

MARY: Philip, please—

PHILIP: IS THAT CLEAR?

(*Pause. PHILIP returns to his newspaper.*)

MARY: (*A tremor in her voice.*) Philip?

PHILIP: What?

MARY: There is something I must tell you, something I've been meaning to tell you for quite a while now, but I haven't had the courage, and you haven't had the time.

(*Pause.*)

I...I think we have to do something about this house. Every morning I sit in this room, my hands folded in my lap, and I see this table, this vase of azaleas, these chairs, these walls. I will sit here motionless for hours on end, trying to see more than what is here. But I can't. I can't live like this, darling—it's tearing me apart. One day you'll walk in on me and I'll be cutting my skin open with the broken pieces of this vase. (*Pause. She turns to PHILIP.*) Have you been listening to me?

(*Pause.*)

PHILIP: If you want to leave me, Mary, no one's stopping you. (*Pause.*) If you hate this house so much, just leave. (*Pause.*) Go on. (*Pause. Angrier.*) LEAVE!

(Silence.)

(MARY rises, laughs a helpless laugh. Talking as if simply for the hell of it, she again takes mittens out of skirt pocket.)

MARY: These mittens. They were Junior's, remember? I found them while I was rummaging in the basement this morning. Christmas, wasn't it? Yes, Christmas, of course, Christmas. I gave them to him when he was six years old. How small his hands were. How big they are now.

PHILIP: Are?

(Pause.)

MARY: Yes.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: Why do you use the present tense?

(Pause.)

MARY: *(Hesitantly, but with some defiance.)* Because... I want to.

PHILIP: I thought we agreed never to speak of him in the present tense.

MARY: I think I've forgotten the exact reason why we shouldn't.

PHILIP: Well, perhaps I should remind you.

MARY: Well, perhaps you should.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: He failed us, Mary...

MARY: He has not failed us...

PHILIP: ... he nearly brought this house down...

MARY: ... you're just imagining things...

PHILIP: ... he *wanted* to bring this house down...

MARY: ... this is absolute nonsense...

PHILIP: ... but you know what? He

didn't! He couldn't! I saved our souls

and I saved this house from the

rage of that disgusting pervert.

MARY: Anne Barrie is as radiant as

ever. She redid the walls—did I tell

you that? With the most gorgeous

floral design I've ever seen.

(Pause.)

MARY: I think wallpaper would do wonders for our house, don't you?

PHILIP: I saved this house, Mary, and don't you forget it.

MARY: Our walls have been bare for too long now, don't you think?

PHILIP: I stood my ground. I saved us both.

MARY: They're practically screaming for cover.

PHILIP: He's dead.

MARY: We're going to get exactly the same kind of wallpaper the Barries have.

PHILIP: He's dead.

MARY: I'll start first thing in the morning.

PHILIP: He's dead.

MARY: I'm going to the kitchen.

PHILIP: You're not going anywhere.

MARY: I have to make you coffee.

PHILIP: You wanted to talk about him and that's exactly what we're going to do.

MARY: Philip, please—

PHILIP: He's dead.

MARY: He's not dead.

PHILIP: He is dead.

MARY: He is *not* dead!

PHILIP: But we must go on living as if he were.

MARY: He is *not* dead! He's coming home this afternoon!

(Pause.)

PHILIP: He is *not* coming home.

MARY: Philip, he is.

PHILIP: You're lying!

MARY: I'm not lying!

PHILIP: *(In absolute terror.)* HE IS *NOT* COMING HOME! HE IS *NOT* COMING HOME! *(Pause. He takes a deep breath, clears his throat, regains his composure.)* Why... why would he come home, after all that's happened?

MARY: *What's* happened?

PHILIP: Oh, Mary, you really are testing my patience today, you know that?

MARY: I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about.

(Silence.)

PHILIP: Our child... our only child... is a degenerate.

(Silence.)

MARY: He is not... that.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: Oh, Mary, he told us right to our face.

(Pause.)

MARY: It was a lie! It was just a silly story he made up!

(Pause.)

PHILIP: Mary, get this straight: he's dead.

MARY: No!

PHILIP: He died the day he walked out that door! And nothing will ever change that.

(Silence.)

(PHILIP returns to newspaper. MARY, visibly shaken, begins to speak tremulously.)

MARY: Guess who I ran into the other day.

PHILIP: Anne Barrie.

MARY: How did you know?

PHILIP: I just guessed.

MARY: Anne was as radiant as ever. John Jr.'s engaged to be married.

PHILIP: And John?

MARY: Engaged to be married.

PHILIP: Senior.

MARY: Senior.

PHILIP: Yes.

MARY: Oh. *(Pause.)* I didn't see him. He wasn't there.

PHILIP: He wasn't there.

MARY: No.

PHILIP: It *has* been a long time since we last saw them, hasn't it?

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: The four of us used to be so close.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: We used to spend all our weekends with them.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: They'd come to our place or we'd go to theirs.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: But for some reason we just drifted apart.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: They stopped calling us and we stopped calling them.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: It's too bad. I'm beginning to miss them. *(Pause.)* It *has* been a long time since we last saw them.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: I've known John since I was a kid.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: I think he was always very fond of you.

MARY: Was he?

PHILIP: I was never really sure what you thought of him.

MARY: Not much.

PHILIP: Not much?

MARY: I never cared for him.

PHILIP: No?

MARY: No.

(Pause.)

PHILIP: The four of us used to be so close.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: All those weekends we spent with them.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: All the fun things we did with them.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: Camping.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: Eating.

MARY: Yes.

PHILIP: Swinging.

(Pause.)

MARY: What?

PHILIP: Oh, yes. That's right. I forgot.

(Pause.)

I took a rain check. I think Anne's a dog.

(Intense silence.)

MARY: *(Nervously, turning to leave.)* I really must make your coffee now.

(Pause. MARY does not leave.)

PHILIP: Mary. Really. There's no use hiding. It's all out in the open now. *(Pause. He speaks slowly, very calmly.)* Oh, Mary, really. There's no use crying. I knew about you and John a long time ago. Believe me, I understand. These things happen. I saw the two of you fucking but I took it in stride. Really, Mary, you must stop crying. Because no matter what you do, nothing will ever change. Our house will remain as it is.

(Pause.)

(PHILIP returns to his newspaper. MARY is trembling.)

MARY: Philip.

PHILIP: Mary.

MARY: John and I called it off a long time ago.

PHILIP: Really, Mary, there's no need to explain.

MARY: I never meant to hurt you.

PHILIP: Of course not.

MARY: Please forgive me.

PHILIP: I already have.

MARY: *(Kneeling before him.)* I never meant to—

PHILIP: Be quiet.

MARY: But Philip—

PHILIP: BE QUIET! *(Pause. Very calmly.)* I'm on the edge, Mary. Just on the edge. I'm fifty-one years old, and I've learned to believe what I want to believe. Right now I'm making myself believe that you're the girl I married twenty-five years ago, not the haggard old baggage that you are now. But I'm also prepared to forget about your little thing with John Barrie, and simply chuckle at the idea of any man not fully off his rocker even thinking of having an affair with you. But I *am* on the edge, Mary—*just* on the edge. So either you shut the fuck up right here and now or I'll drag you by the hair to the garage and blow your brains out. Really, Mary, it's up to you.

(Silence.)

MARY: *(Slowly rising.)* Oh, Philip... What is happening? *(Pause.)* What in hell on earth is happening?

(The doorbell rings.)