



The White Swan Compact

A full-length play
by Clark DesSoye

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Characters

Sophia Whitford 88, white woman

Regina Beasley 66, black woman, Sophie's next-door neighbor

Dashawn Jackson 25, black man, Sophie's new neighbor

Yasmine Ford 15, black girl from the neighborhood

Gladys Ramirez 14, black latina from the neighborhood

Will Lawrence 14, black boy from the neighborhood

Ella Reitz 55, Sophia's daughter

Jimmy Whitford 60, Sophia's son

John Whitford 62, Sophia's eldest son

Setting: A quiet residential street in Buffalo, NY, 1988
The action takes place on the sidewalk in front of two duplexes next to each other and in three of the flats:

- Sophia's upstairs flat (kitchen)
- The living room of Regina's downstairs flat next door.
- The living room of the unoccupied downstairs flat in Sophia's house.

The two living rooms can be the same set with small cosmetic changes (like different slip covers and/or drapes), illustrating how the two women are living in very similar spaces.

Act 1, Scene 1

Setting: *Outdoors. Piles of snow between the street and sidewalk.*

At Rise: *Seemingly unconscious, Sophia lies sprawled on a snowbank between the icy sidewalk and the street dressed in a heavy wool coat, scarf, gloves, boots and knit cap. Dashawn, dressed in a parka and knit cap, carefully replaces the spilled groceries back into the two cloth bags near Sophia. Throughout scene Sophia tries to get up, but Dashawn gently holds her still.*

SOPHIA

Wha... What happened?

DASHAWN

It's all right, Mrs. Whitford. Looks like you slipped on the ice there. Don't try to get up. Regina, you know in number 210 next door... called 911. They said you should try not to move. They'll be here soon...

SOPHIA

Who are... What time is it? My son's coming to dinner. I've got to...

DASHAWN

Don't try to move, you might 'ave broke something or...

SOPHIA

But I have to get John's dinner...

DASHAWN

Please, Mrs. Whitford. It's OK. Let them look you over first...

[The distant sound of an ambulance siren can be heard and slowly gets louder and closer. As they talk Regina joins them.]

SOPHIA

No, my groceries...

DASHAWN

It's OK, I put them back in your bags for you. Amazingly, the eggs survived...

SOPHIA

Who... What time is it?

DASHAWN

It's just going on five. It's early yet. Sounds like they're just a couple blocks away now.

REGINA

She's conscious?

DASHAWN

Just now...

SOPHIA

Who....?

DASHAWN

I'm Dashawn Jackson. We haven't met yet. I just moved in across the street there, number 215. Regina 's been telling me about the folks on the block...

SOPHIA

Wha... Where's my pocket book?!

[Curtain.]

Act 1, Scene 2

Setting: Two weeks later. A small eat-in kitchen with very dated appliances and a Formica table against the wall with two chairs.

At Rise: Sophia (dressed in a neatly pressed housedress - buttoned to her throat - and a sweater) sits at the table with a cup of tea, staring out the window over the kitchen sink across the room. There is a plate of cookies on the table as well as another tea cup and an ashtray with a smoking cigarette in it. Sophia's daughter Ella (dressed in slacks and blouse) stands behind the chair talking on the wall phone.

ELLA

OK, that's great. Thank you.

[She hangs up the phone, picks up and takes a deep drag on her cigarette and leans against the wall.]

ELLA (CONTINUES)

So that should be all of 'em. She says you should get your new MasterCard within "seven business days" – whatever that really means.

[Sophia turns to her briefly but doesn't say anything just turns back to the window.]

ELLA (CONTINUES)

Are you sure we cancelled all the cards you had in your purse?

SOPHIA

Mmm... You know, I've been living here, in this flat, for *twenty* years...

ELLA

Yes, since Dad died....

SOPHIA

In here... *[she turns to Ella, pressing her hands to her chest]* nothing has changed at all. But out there... *[turning back to the window]* everything's changed *[pause]* is changing...

ELLA

It's not the same neighborhood that it was when John bought this place, that's for sure. He figured he and Peggy would always be living downstairs to help you out, but now Peggy 's in Arizona with her sister and he's in Hamburg with Ruthie and kids... None of us imaged all that...

SOPHIA

The police, when they brought me my empty pocketbook, said they don't think they'll catch him —

ELLA

Well, you didn't see who pushed you down, so they don't have much to go on —

[Ella sits down, stubbing out her cigarette and picking up her tea. Sophia finally turns toward her and leans in conspiratorially.]

SOPHIA

I think it was that black guy who —

ELLA

Mom! We've been over this. Mr. Jackson found you passed out on the sidewalk. He didn't see what happened to you... thought you just slipped on the ice —

SOPHIA

Sure, he acts all *[pause]* helpful and dresses up like a regular —

ELLA

He's a dispatcher at the NFTA, where Peggy worked *[pause]* he's not gonna be prowling the streets snatching little old ladies' purses *[pause]* Didn't he get you a new bus pass?

[Sophia leans back and turns to the window again. Ella flips through a magazine and smokes her cigarette, half listening.]

SOPHIA

I keep thinking about my white swan. *[pause]* Why would they keep it? I mean it's just an old, beat up compact *[pause]* hasn't had powder in it for *[pause]* years. I mean, it's *[pause]* it's about where I came from. Granddad gave it to me when we left for Canada *[pause]* to remind me of the mill, our little house there, the estate and the beautiful pond, where those two white swans returned each spring. *[pause]* Do you remember your Shakespeare?

“To one that I would have him help to waste
His borrowed purse. Well, Jessica, go in,
Perhaps I will return immediately.
Do as I bid you, shut doors after you;
Fast bind, fast find – A proverb never stale in thrifty mind.”
To which Jessica replies,
“Farewell, and if my fortune be not cross'd,
I have a father, you a daughter, lost.”

Merchant of Venice, Act II, Scene V

How could I ever forget? I can still “see” it, it was just outside the kitchen window. The mill on one end. The stand of beech trees at the other. Why would they keep it? I don't understand *these* people. *[a long pause as she looks out the window, envisioning that pond. Abruptly she turns back to Ella.]*
Have a cookie. I was finally up to do some baking this morning. Nothing fancy – I've just been feeling so – I don't know – so —

[Ella bites into one of the cookies.]

ELLA

Mmm. Good.
You've had a shock, Mum. You always felt safe in your little neighborhood here. But now —

SOPHIA

Why is everyone moving away?
Letting *them* move in.

ELLA

Them? Mom, “they” are good neighbors, looking out for everyone. Didn't Mrs. Beasley call for an ambulance? Didn't Mr. Jackson put your groceries in order and wait with you? And haven't they both been by several times since you got out of the hospital?...

SOPHIA

Have another cookie, they used to be your favorite —

[A buzzer sounds.]

ELLA

Still are.

Ah, that must be Jimmy. I'll let him in.

[Ella leaves to answer the door downstairs. Sophia moves to the stove and takes the teakettle to the sink, fills it with water and then places it on the stove top, turning on the burner. She then takes a baking sheet with more cookies on it out of the oven and places several of the cookies on the plate on the table, leaving the empty cookie sheet on the countertop next to the sink. Muffled voices can be heard, but they aren't clear enough to be understood.]

[Sophia remains standing by the sink, looking out the window again. The offstage voices get louder and we can begin to hear what Ella and Jimmy are saying.]

JIMMY

Yes, I think John's onboard. He's been thinking about selling, while prices are still good. Right now, he could get twice what he paid —

ELLA

Shhhh, keep it down. We don't want her to think it's about money. *[pause]* It's about her safety.

She needs to be near someone who can watch out for her —

JIMMY

Of course, that's what we all want *[pause]* and to get her out of this cold —

[Ella and Jimmy (dressed in a parka, knit cap, khaki pants and snow boots) enter still talking. Jimmy removes his parka and hat and moves to give Sophia a hug.]

JIMMY (CONTINUES)

Ma. You're looking more like yourself and you've been baking. Smells delicious!

SOPHIA

I've put the kettle on; or would you rather have a beer?

JIMMY

I'll never say no to a beer. I'll get it. Sit Ma.

[Ella and Sophia sit while Jimmy grabs a bottle of beer from the refrigerator. He leaves the beer on the table and takes his parka to the next room, returning with a dining room chair that he places at the table between his sister and mother and sits.]

SOPHIA

Have you had lunch? I can —

JIMMY

Yes, Ma. We ate, relax. I will have one of these though...

[Jimmy takes a big bite out of a cookie.]

ELLA

Mum. We've — Jimmy, John and I — have been talking about your situation —

SOPHIA

My "situation"?

JIMMY

Now, Ma, you know you can't get around like you used to and the winters here seem to get worse every year —

ELLA

And you said it yourself, this neighborhood is changing —

[The tea kettle whistles loudly. Sophia goes to get it and fills the teapot during the following exchange.]

SOPHIA

I've been taking care of myself since well before the two - three - of you were in nappies —

ELLA

We know, Mom. We love how self-sufficient you are – you’ve always been. And we want you to live someplace where you can still be on your own, in your own place, coming and going as you please —

JIMMY

And that’s just gonna get more and more difficult here in Buffalo —

ELLA

Wouldn’t you like to have your own little house, with a yard, and safe streets and parks you can walk in?
And sunshine all year long?

SOPHIA

This is where I know. My church, my friends. I *know* the bus routes and the stores —

ELLA

We understand, Mum. It will be a change. A *big* change. But you figured all that stuff out when you moved here. You can do it again in Florida. And Ricky and I will be there to help you. And Jimmy and John have been coming down for years. The house we have our eye on for you is literally five minutes away from us —

JIMMY

There’s a nice little store you can walk to and lots of open parkland; a golf course —

SOPHIA

Huh. What do I need with a golf course?

[Sophia refills Ella’s tea cup and her own. Both mechanically take a sip of tea.]

JIMMY

I just meant that it’s a pretty area. Lots of trees and grass and walking trails —

ELLA

Right now, we’re just asking you to come down and look it over. We’ll show you the place we’re thinking about for you and maybe some others we’ve looked at and then you can decide. We don’t want to make you do something you don’t want, but it’s just, we all think this is for the best —

JIMMY

We worry about you, Ma. And getting mugged. It could a' been a lot worse. You're just lucky you didn't break anything. We were all so worried.

SOPHIA

Well, it would be nice to get out o' this weather for a bit. I'll go but I can't promise I'll like it - that I'm ready to pull up everything and —

ELLA

We know, Mum, that's all we're asking —

JIMMY

Yeah, Ma, this is just one idea. If you don't want to. We'll think of something else —

ELLA

So, we're agreed?

[Ella raises her tea cup and moves it toward the middle of the table. Jimmy clinks his beer bottle to it and, eventually, Sophia does the same with her teacup.]

SOPHIA

“Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that:
You take my house when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.”

[Merchant of Venice; Act IV, Scene I]

ELLA (ASIDE TO JIMMY)

She's been doing Shakespeare all morning —

SOPHIA

Have another cookie.
I made them special *[turning to Jimmy]* they're Ella's favorites —

[Curtain.]

Act 1, Scene 3

Setting: Later the same day, the street as in Scene 1, but now there is no snow.

At Rise: Ella and Jimmy (dressed in winter coats) are talking quietly on the sidewalk. John joins them, briefly embracing Ella and clamping Jimmy on shoulder. They slowly pace up and down as they talk.

JOHN

Sorry I couldn't get here earlier. How is she?

ELLA

You know —

JIMMY

She baked... But, still has that kinda glazed look... staring off at nothing —

ELLA

She did say she'd go to Florida with me and... you know... see what she thinks —

JOHN

That's something... I told her I'd take her out to dinner —

[John takes a few steps away, towards Sophia's door.]

ELLA

No, wait... We need to all be on the same page here —

JIMMY

Yes. Did you talk to the realtor?

JOHN

Well... no. I was going to, but then I thought. If I can find some nice couple to move into Peggy's flat. Hell, I haven't gotten any rent outta this place since the divorce. I thought that would be nice for a change — having some money coming in.

Maybe Ma could move downstairs; put the renters in her flat. She wouldn't have to be going up and down all the time —

ELLA

You really want to deal with all the problems? New heater last winter, burst pipe earlier this year —

JIMMY

It's gonna need a paint job and the driveway 'll need redoing. Have you even looked in the garage in the last ten years?

JOHN

Yeah, but Ma really loves it here. Could do without the likes a' some a' the "folks" moving in lately. But —

[Yasmine and Gladys, walk down the sidewalk past them, talking quietly to each other.]

GLADYS

I can't believe Franki asked me out. Isn't he just —

YASMINE

Oh, yeah. He reminds me of Axel Foley —

GLADYS

Axel?

YASMINE

You know, Eddie Murphy in **Beverly Hills Cop** —

GLADYS

Exactly! That smile —

YASMINE

He's certainly easy on the eyes. But I don't like those Kenny and Marco guys he hangs out with —

[As they walk out of sight, John leans into Ella.]

JOHN

It's getting' kinda dark around here?

ELLA

Don't *[pause]* Don't start with *that* again, John. Jimmy was saying that you could get a great price for it. *[indicating the house]*

JIMMY

I looked into what places on this block recently sold for and you'd do pretty good...

[Regina, walks down the sidewalk and stops to talk with them.]

REGINA

Hello, it's Ella and -a - Jimmy, right?

ELLA

Yes. Hello, Regina. This is our brother, John.
John this is Regina Beasley, she's the one who called 911 when Mom was *[pause]*
when Mom fell down —

[Jimmy and John nod their heads to Regina.]

REGINA

How is Mrs. Whitford doing today? I saw her venture out briefly yesterday, but she scurried back home before I could catch her up.
I was on my way home from my shopping —

ELLA

Much better, thanks. She's coming with me when I go home to Florida next week...
for a few days —

REGINA

That'll be a nice change for her. Supposed to snow again —

ELLA

Yeah, I haven't missed this Buffalo weather since we moved —

REGINA

Ah. We're used to it. Aren't we?

[Regina gestures toward Jimmy and John in their heavy parkas. Again, Jimmy and John nod in agreement.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

You just gotta dress for it —

ELLA

I was glad to give away all my cold weather gear though I wouldn't mind having my down coat right about now. Sharon, Jimmy's wife, loaned me this coat. It was supposed to be warmer today —

REGINA

Oh, those TV weather people. They don't have a clue —

[Everyone chuckles. Regina leans into Jimmy.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

Did I hear you say that you've been looking into prices for houses 'round here?

JIMMY

Actually, it was for John. He owns Sophia's house and the downstairs flat 's been vacant for a few months now —

[Regina turns to John.]

REGINA

So, you *are* looking to sell?

JOHN

I'm thinking about it, especially if Ma wants to relocate —

ELLA

We're hoping that Mom will come down to Florida permanently. Get out of this weather —

JIMMY

But it'll be up to her. We're just discussing options with her now —

[Regina turns back to John.]

REGINA

Well. If you decide to sell please let me make you an offer. We can skip all the commissions and stuff. I've been watching prices, too!

[Regina turns to start walking towards her house.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

Say “Hi” to Mrs. Whitford for me —

ELLA AND JIMMY (TOGETHER)

Yes. Thanks.

[John follows Regina for a few steps and they are seen having a short, quiet conversation. Then Regina continues to her house.]

ELLA

Isn't it interesting how the possibility of making a buck changes the equation for him?

JIMMY

Oh, you know, John, it's just talk. He doesn't really mean all that ugly stuff.

[John steps back to Ella and Jimmy.]

ELLA

Where are you taking Mom to eat?

JOHN

You know, that diner on Bailey Avenue she likes —

JIMMY

Oh. Big spender —

JOHN

She barely eats anything anyway. And she wants me to help her pick up some groceries on the way back —

ELLA

That's good, it's been a while. The fridge must be about empty.
So. Do we want her to move to Florida or not?

JIMMY

I think that's for the best —

JOHN

Yeah, I guess you're right. I did sink a few grand into this old place the last few years ago and —

[John gestures to the fading and chipped paint on the house.]

ELLA

Good. I know that once she sees the house we picked out for her, with a yard and screened-in porch. She's gonna love it.

JOHN

Yeah. I better get up there. She's expecting me —

*[John walks towards Sophia's house while Jimmy and Ella walk away, toward Jimmy's car parked further down the street.
Curtain.]*

Act 1, Scene 4

Setting: Later that evening. Sophia's kitchen (same as Scene 2).

At Rise: Sophia & John enter. John is carrying two heavy cloth shopping bags full of groceries that he sets on the table. Sophia is carrying an envelope that she also sets on the table. They exit to the dining room briefly and return after removing their heavy winter coats.

SOPHIA

I've been keeping track and every time someone moves out, one – or a family – of *them* moves in.

JOHN

What's the count up to?

SOPHIA

Just on these two blocks, there's now more of *them* than *us*. And "we're" moving or dying at an alarming rate. You know Rita Schultz, lost her husband a couple years ago?

JOHN

She died?

SOPHIA

No. Not yet. But they rushed her to the hospital a couple days ago. Her kids have been hovering, doing little fix ups around the yard. And inside her house, too, I imagine.

JOHN

We all know what *that* means.

SOPHIA

Last week it was the McCarthys. I think they went to Rochester. What do you suppose they're gonna do in Rochester?

JOHN

So, they've been leaving little notes in your door every couple days since your – since you where mugged?

SOPHIA

Yeah, the one next door *and* the guy who just moved in down the block.

JOHN

What do they say?

SOPHIA

Just, you know, “hope you feel better soon,” “let me know if I can get you something or help you with anything.” Stuff like that.

[John points to the envelope on the table.]

JOHN

You think this is from one of ‘em?

SOPHIA

Probably.

JOHN

Well, open it. Let’s see what it says.

SOPHIA

I want to get these groceries put away first. Here put the beer in the fridge. Have one if you want.

JOHN

Nah, I gotta get back. Ruthy’s taking some finance class at the community college later (god knows why she’s doing it) and I said I’d be home to watch the kids.

SOPHIA

Good for her. She’s got a good head on her shoulders. Why shouldn’t she try to learn some useful skills. There’s more to life than just taking care of the kids and waiting on you hand and foot.

JOHN

Ah, Ma. You know what I mean.

[The groceries are put away and Sophia sits at the table and carefully folds up the cloth bags. John stands impatiently waiting for her to open the envelope.]

JOHN (CONTINUES)

Come on, Ma. Open it. I wanna see what the darkies have to say now.

SOPHIA

This one seems more substantial. [*opening the envelope.*] Well look at this. It's like a formal invitation.

JOHN

Invitation? To what?

SOPHIA

Tea!

JOHN

Tea? Who's inviting you to tea?

SOPHIA

Both of 'em. The one next door and that bus company guy across the street. Do you think Peg knew him?

JOHN

She knew everyone there. To hear her tell it, she practically ran the place. I don't know how they've kept going since she hightailed it outta town.

SOPHIA

What do you suppose this is all about?

JOHN

I dunno.

SOPHIA

I think they want us - to get to know each other?

JOHN

Or. Maybe they're planning something. You said there's always a bunch of people over there. Could they be trying to stir up trouble?

SOPHIA

What kind of trouble.

JOHN

Have you already forgotten about the 60s?

SOPHIA

Do you think they may be up to something bad?

JOHN

Well, you could go to their little tea and find out.

SOPHIA

Oh, John, I don't know. I just wouldn't – feel comfortable – it says here that it's in her house.

JOHN

When?

SOPHIA

The week after next.

JOHN

You should go. Find out what they're up to with all those Juggle Bunnies coming and going all the time.

SOPHIA

I don't know, John. Besides, I'm going to Florida with Ella next week and –

JOHN

You'll be back in time for their "tea party." We need to find out what they're up to over there.

[Sophia stands up and walks over to the window. She stares off, lost in thought like earlier in the day. Absently, she recites part of Antonio's speech from the judgment scene in Merchant of Venice.]

SOPHIA

"Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you;
For herin Fortune shows herself more kind
Than is her custom..."

[John doesn't know what to make of what his mother is saying. He retrieves his coat for the other room and as he puts it on he walks up behind Sophia, hugging her awkwardly and kissing her cheek.]

SOPHIA

“Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,
And he repents not that he pays your debt;”

JOHN

Yeah. OK. But you should do it. Go to their little tea party and get the inside scoop.

*[Sophia nods slowly, lost in her reverie as John exits.
Curtain]*

Act 2, Scene 1

Setting: Two weeks later. A modest living room in the downstairs flat of Regina's house overlooking the same street as Act 1. A tea service is set out on a tray on the coffee table. There is a stack of cardboard file boxes at one end of the couch.

At Rise: Sophia, dressed in her usual housedress and sweater, is sitting stiffly in the chair, a cup of tea on her lap. Regina, dressed in a colorful, flowing wrap dress, relaxes comfortably on the couch. Her tea cup is perched on the edge of the side table. During the action they take sips of their tea, refilling their cups as they talk.

REGINA

I'm so glad you agreed to meet with us, Mrs. Whitford —

SOPHIA

Please *[pause]* please call me Sophia. Last names are so *[pause]* and I don't even know yours.

REGINA

Yeah, everyone just calls me Regina. It's Beasley. Mrs., though I haven't seen hide nor hair of the "Mr." since *[pause]* well —

SOPHIA

Oh, I had no idea *[pause]* Do you have any children?

REGINA

No. No that never - Troubles with the - inner workings. If you know what I mean —

SOPHIA

Oh! *[embarrassed pause]* I'm sorry - er - Did you and - and —

REGINA

Billy. Billy Beasley!
Ha! I wanted to call him William, but he thought the alliteration suited him —

SOPHIA

Cute?

REGINA

Billy and I got married way too young and it took us a long time to get our lives on track and then, well I was pregnant when he got transferred to the Pittsburgh plant. He was working at Bethlehem Steel by then. Anyway, I lost the baby; miscarriage in the second trimester —

SOPHIA

I'm so sorry for you. I lost one, too, two weeks after she was born. *[pause]* Cynthia was a beautiful little thing, but *[pause]* like you say *[pause]* the inner workings just didn't work right —

REGINA

That's so, so sad. *Going* all the way through and actually seeing and holding her and then, then —

SOPHIA

But I had my boys *[pause]* and was able to go on *[pause]* had Ella a few years later *[pause]* But you —

REGINA

Yeah. Billy came back the weekend *[pause]* the weekend after I lost her — they told me it was a girl *[pause]* I have no idea why they would tell you that — he was supportive. We talked about trying again. Said once he got a bigger place, he'd bring me down to Pittsburgh and we could *[pause]*. But - well - we were never the same. I never moved down there. He drifted off somewhere else when that plant closed down and —

SOPHIA

I'm *[pause]* sorry I didn't know you'd been through all that. You always seem so bright and cheery, always helping people in the neighborhood *[pause]* and all the kids —

REGINA

That's me. As Maya Angelou says, "But still, like air, I'll rise..." Just like you. That was quite a tumble you took back in January. But now, here you are up and about. Your independent self again —

SOPHIA

I've had more than my share of tumbles in my day —

REGINA

It is amazing what we manage to *[pause]* deal with *[pause]* and move on from in our lives. Isn't it?

SOPHIA

The stories I could tell —

REGINA

Yes. *Do* tell. What was your first really big scare?

SOPHIA

That's easy. Before kindergarten, back in England, when I would follow my sister to school. I so wanted to go too; to see what Elsie was doing there and her teacher let me stay. At just sat quietly in the back of the room, taking it all in.

But one day on our way to school, as we were crossing the field (it was quicker than the roads), this strange man came after us. It was like he appeared out of nowhere. We'd never seen him before. Elsie grabbed my hand and we just started running and he was right on our heels. We scampered over a stile – you know, those silly stair things over a fence - and I tripped and fell face first into a ditch. She turned me over and we looked back toward the fence, expecting him to be on top of us *[pause]* but he was gone *[pause]* disappeared as quickly as he'd come.

REGINA

My god, you must have been so frightened! Were you hurt?

SOPHIA

Scared to death, but no serious injuries, just - Elsie took me back home to get cleaned up and father took her to school on his horse —

REGINA

That's right, you were born in the horse and buggy days. And England! I didn't know you were English. *[pause]* Did they ever find the man?

SOPHIA

Mother thought we made it all up, that there was no giant man dressed in black with an evil glint in his eye. *[pause]* But Elsie and I definitely saw him and he did run after us. *[pause]* We stuck to the roads after that.

REGINA

Funny, I've never even *seen* a field, yet alone walked through one. Spent my whole life in the city, usually within a few square blocks on the south side most of my life *[pause]* then here since '85. You've got to share that story with the kids —

[Sophia looks at her confusedly.]

SOPHIA

What? *[pause]* Why did you decide to move here? This must be very *[pause]* different *[pause]* from the south side...

REGINA

No. Not really. I mean, things are improving in that part of town, but I wanted a change. I came into some money when our cookbook started selling —

SOPHIA

You wrote a cookbook?

[Regina jumps up and walks into the kitchen as she talks.]

REGINA

Oh, you didn't know. A "New York Times Best Seller" for five weeks? It's called *Grammy Patterson's Healthy Southern Cooking*. It's mainly my grandmother's recipes that she shared with us over the years. She grew up in LA *[pause]* which for southerners means Lower Alabama —

[Regina returns with the book and hands it to Sophia, who begins flipping through the pages. Regina sits back down on the couch.]

SOPHIA

My goodness. *[pause]* These — look — wonderful —

[Sophia flips the book to the back cover picture of Regina.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

And don't you look elegant?

REGINA

That was taken years ago *[pause]* that's my Grammy *[pause]* in the UG Railroad kitchen —

SOPHIA

She looks so sweet *[pause]* and tiny —

REGINA

Yes, she was a little thing with a huge heart *[pause]* died last year —

SOPHIA

I'm sorry *[pause]* you must miss her?

REGINA

Every day. *[pause]* Have you heard of the Underground Railroad? The restaurant where I was working. It was your typical greasy spoon place when I started there in the 60s. But gradually I started mixing in some of Grammy's dishes and people liked them. Grammy would sometimes help me in the kitchen when they let us start making more and more of her recipes. She always thought there were too many fried foods in southern cooking —

SOPHIA

I stick with English fare mostly *[pause]* But *[pause]* how did you get from there to "The New York Times Bestseller list"?

REGINA

Just a fluke, really. A very fortunate fluke. We had a booth set up at the Taste of Buffalo festival one year. You know it's downtown every summer. They close off Delaware Circle to traffic and vendors sell all kinds of foods and things —

SOPHIA

Yes, yes *[pause]* I've been a few times with a couple of the ladies from church —

REGINA

It's a big deal for restaurants all over western New York. Anyway, that year, I was serving up my - er - my Grammy's spinach soufflé and the food critic from the *Buffalo News*, remember him? Gordan Perkins. Quite a character. He loved it and promised to come to UG Railroad to do a review (till then it hadn't even been on his radar) —

SOPHIA

Oh yes. I used to read his reviews all the time *[pause]* whatever happened to him?

REGINA

Sadly, he passed. I think it was six years ago now. Cancer, I think —

SOPHIA

So, he came to your restaurant?

REGINA

Yes, and gave us a wonderful review. Really helped business. They expanded and Gordan would stop by occasionally to chat. He met Grammy and asked us if we'd ever thought of compiling our recipes in a book.

Well, you could a' knocked us over with a feather. He even set us up with a publisher friend of his from New York.

They were so nice, too. Sent a photographer to take pictures of the dishes.

If you flip to the front there, Gordan wrote the foreword —

[Sophia turns the book to the forward.]

SOPHIA

Let's see... "Like Dick Gregory, the comic turned nutrition expert turned activist..."

Oh, I remember him on Johnny Carson... "Grammy Patterson seems to recognize the looming healthcare crisis coming to this country and beyond. Current eating habits are making us fatter, leading to increased rates of diseases from diabetes to heart and artery risks. But unlike Mr. Gregory, Mrs. Patterson wants to preserve the social and entertainment aspects of dining by changing the nature of what we eat. Her challenge, which she has very successfully met with her unique recipes herein, was to rethink comfort foods with better ingredients and preparation methods while delivering the same familiar dining experience. For instance, the ever-popular fried chicken can be baked using far fewer saturated fats while retaining the same flavors and textures..."

Wow *[pause]* quite an endorsement —

[Sophia closes the book and extends it to Regina.]

REGINA

No. It's yours.

Here, let me sign it for you —

[Regina takes the book from Sophia and a pen from the end table and opens it to the inside cover.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

To my friend Sophia, happy cooking —

SOPHIA

Oh *[pause]* that's perfect. Thank you —

[Regina gives Sophia the book back and Sophia puts the book into her purse next to her chair as the doorbell sounds.]

REGINA

Ah that must be Dashawn. He's got a key.
Perfect timing. You asked why I moved here and he's the reason. When we started getting the royalty checks I looked around for someone to help me manage our "new found wealth" and he was a regular at UG Railroad, always pouring over his accounting books while he ate.
He told me he was studying to take the CPA exam, or whatever it's called.

[Off stage a door opens and closes. Dashawn can be heard walking through the flat.]

DASHAWN

It's me, Regina. I brought the —

[Dashawn enters, dressed in a windbreaker over his work clothes (a polo shirt with the NFTA logo on it khaki slacks and loafers). He is carrying a large, paper bag with handles and JoAnn Fabrics stenciled on it.]

DASHAWN (CONTINUES)

Oh good, Mrs. Whitford is —

REGINA AND SOPHIA (TOGETHER)

Sophia.

REGINA

We're going by our name names now. Enough 'a that formal foolishness —

[Dashawn puts the bag on the floor at the end of the coffee table, drapes his jacket over the back of the chair opposite Sophia and sits next to Regina on the couch, giving her a peck on the cheek.]

DASHAWN

Hello pretty lady. And Mrs. - Sophia has joined you for tea —

REGINA

Joined *us*. I told her you'd be here after work. There should be enough tea in there. And there's your cup. I was just telling Sophia how you advised us to invest our book money in real estate and how in this neighborhood it would be sure to appreciate —

[Dashawn fixes himself a cup of tea, but leaves it on the tray as he relaxes back on the couch. Meanwhile, Sophia puts her tea cup on the tray and sits up on the edge of her chair.]

DASHAWN

And that as soon as I'd saved up enough, I'd be buying here, too. And now here we are: neighbors!

REGINA

This was going to be Grammy's flat, the ground floor one. These were her things – but she passed a few weeks before we closed —

SOPHIA

That is a shame —

[There is an awkward silence as each fidget in their seats.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

I know you wanted to discuss some *[pause]*“project” you're working on *[pause]*but before *[pause]*before *that* *[pause]*I just want to *[pause]*to thank you *[pause]*both of you *[pause]*for helping me after my fall —

[Sophia gestures out the window toward the sidewalk. Regina sits up and reaches across the coffee table to gently touch Sophia's knee. Dashawn also sits up and smiles broadly at Sophia.]

REGINA

Oh, sweetie. Really, we just did what – you know – what neighbors do. We look out for each other —

DASHAWN

We're just glad you're all right now. Up and about again. Like before, doing your shopping and your church doings —

SOPHIA

No. *[pause]*No permanent damage done.

[Sophia sits back smoothing her dress with both hands as if to brush off some imagined dust. Regina and Dashawn also sit back on the couch as before.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

Anyway. I know I never really *[pause]* thanked you and wanted to —

REGINA

You've been through a lot – it's hard. It was great how your family rallied around. Has anything been —

DASHAWN (INTERRUPTS)

How was Florida?

[Dashawn gives Regina a look and she nods, grinning tightly.]

SOPHIA

Oh, it's lovely. *[pause]* St. Augustine is a beautiful little town and the beaches... *[pause]* Have you been?

[Dashawn and Regina shake their heads.]

REGINA

I've never been south of Lackawana. *[pause]* Ironic, right? Big shot author of a southern cookbook?

[Sophia and Dashawn chuckle.]

SOPHIA

Ella, my daughter *[pause]* Did you meet her?

REGINA

Yes, at the hospital that day and later coming and going —

SOPHIA

That's right. *[pause]* Anyway, we walked around the little subdivision where the house they'd picked out for me was... *[pause]* Did I tell you they want me to move down there?

DASHAWN

No. But we figured it might be something like that —

SOPHIA

It *is* beautiful; lots of palm trees and shrubs and grass. I swear all the lawns look like golf courses. And ponds. And the *sun*. As we walked around a bend in a little park area this giant allegator was sprawled across the pathway, also enjoying the sun —

DASHAWN

You're kidding —

SOPHIA

Yeah, with his big sleepy grin. Such teeth! We turned and slow walked outta there. Didn't say a word all the way back to the car and home. You know how they say: "it's a nice place to visit but..."

SOPHIA, REGINA AND DESHAWN (TOGETHER)

"I wouldn't wanna live there!"

SOPHIA

It's one of *those* places —

[All chuckle.]

REGINA

So, you're glad to be home?

SOPHIA

Yes. And I can't recall the last time I was invited for tea —

REGINA

More?

[Regina moves her teacup to the tray as Will quietly walks into the room from the back of the flat holding a damp cloth to the side of his face which is bruised.]

SOPHIA

No. No this was wonderful —

[Regina looks toward Dashawn, who shakes his head. Then Regina notices Will.]

REGINA

Oh, honey. You're awake Feeling any better?

WILL

I just wanted to get some more ice. I didn't know we were having a party.
Hi, Dashawn —

DASHAWN

What's all this? Did those guys get after you again?

WILL

Different guys (Marco and his gang) same results though, I'm afraid —

REGINA

Sophia, this is Will he's *[pause]* well he —

WILL

I'm the gay guy the *hyenas* love to use as a punching bag —

SOPHIA

Oh dear, you poor thing —

REGINA

Will, this is Sophia, the woman who lives next door. Your tormentors' victim *last* month —

WILL

Welcome to the club?

[Sophia stands up and she and Regina move toward Will reaching for the towel. Will turns away.]

WILL (CONTINUES)

No, please, I look disgusting. I'll just get some more ice.
I think the swelling has gone down a little —

DASHAWN

Let me —

[Will slowly walks toward the kitchen. Dashawn gets up and follows. Regina turns to Sophia and places her hands gently on Sophia's arms.]

REGINA

These poor kids. The other kids tease them relentlessly; and even beat them up!
And, too often, their parents throw them out, when they *come* out —

[Will and Dashawn can be heard talking quietly. The banging of the ice tray in the sink and then refilling it with water can be heard. Regina motions for Sophia to sit and returns to her seat on the end of the couch.]

SOPHIA

I guess *hyenas* makes sense *[pause]* attacking the weak and vulnerable —

[Will and Dashawn are seen coming out of the kitchen quietly. Will returns to the back of the flat and Dashawn, shaking his head, returns to sit on the couch next to Regina.]

REGINA

Yes, stupid, cruel pack animals —

DASHAWN

There is so much ugliness out there. So much ignorance —

SOPHIA

Does this *[pause]* happen often?

REGINA

Too often, I'm afraid —

DASHAWN

It doesn't help that, instead of finding a cure - for AIDS - HIV - they're just ginning up fear.

REGINA

We're trying to give them a safe place And show them how to protect themselves from this awful disease. But it's an uphill battle with all the *[pause]* the —

DASHAWN

Fist shaking and chest thumping —

[Regina stands and picks up the tea tray. Glancing down Regina notices that the hem of her dress is coming undone. She sets the tray down, fusses a moment with the loose hem, gives up on it, shaking her head, and again picks up the tray.]

REGINA

I'll just move this out of the way. We've got some things we want to show you —

SOPHIA

I can fix that for you, Regina —

REGINA

Oh *[pause]* What? That hem! I've stitched it up again and again, but it keeps coming undone —

SOPHIA

Really. It's no trouble, let me. Change out of that. I'll sew it up *right* for you —

REGINA

That would be wonderful. Thanks.
Dashawn, they're in the top box there...

[Regina points toward the stacked file boxes with her elbow as she strides out of the room with the tea tray. Sophia clasps her hands in front of chest looking from Regina to Dashawn. Dashawn begins digging into the file box and removing some brochure mock ups and spreadsheets that he begins laying out on the coffee table.]

SOPHIA

Goodness *[pause]* what's all this?

[Curtain.]

Act 2, Scene 2

Setting: *Same. An hour later. Now there are piles of forms and papers on the coffee table. The cardboard file boxes are all open and placed randomly around the room. Regina's dress from last scene is now draped across the arm of the chair where Dashawn draped his jacket earlier.*

At Rise: *Sophia, is sitting stiffly in the chair, turning her head to Regina and Dashawn as they talk. Regina, dressed in a different colorful, flowing wrap dress, is sitting forward on the couch showing Sophia a large poster mock-up. Dashawn is trying to put the stacks of papers into some sort of order throughout the scene, eventually putting different stacks of papers into the different file boxes and restacking them at the end of the couch (as they were at the start of last scene).*

REGINA

So, you see, we'll be pretty much doing what I've been doing with the kids here for years *but* with the blessing. And *hopefully* some funding – from the city. And Dashawn will be helping me after work and bringing in people he knows who can teach 'em useful skills like accounting and car repair and welding. And I'll keep giving my cooking lessons —

DASHAWN

We've been working with Councilman Jenkins on it for months, filling out all the paperwork and grant applications and I don't think you went to the public hearings but we presented our proposal at last month's council meeting.

REGINA

Jenkins was pushing us to do it in that old post office building on Kensington. You know the one that's been closed down for ten years? But we really want to have it here, right in the neighborhood where these kids live.

DASHAWN

And there we'd have to do a bunch of construction. Take out walls. Put in a kitchen area. Get furnishings.

REGINA

That would eat up most (if not all) of any grant money we might get. And, at the end of the day, it would still feel more like some government facility. We want the kids to feel like they're home. A safe place with people who aren't trying to judge them or tell them what to do —

DASHAWN

Keep it low key.

Look at the drawings Jenkins had drawn up for redoing the post office, that big ugly sign: "Kensington Youth Center" I mean really!

REGINA

He means well. And it'd be a feather in his cap if he can do something with that old rundown place on a busy road. But we stood firm and he eventually agreed to back the project, using my downstairs flat and garage —

DASHAWN

He did suggest that if we used my downstairs flat and garage too, we would increase our chances of getting a grant. And it would be *much* bigger. But I bought my house with an existing tenant. You know Mr. Grenski? He's a retired postman. I promised I'd let him stay as long as he wanted. And, my house is on the other side of the street —

REGINA

But you and I are right next each other, Sophia! And your lower flat is vacant —

SOPHIA

Oh, I'm just a tenant. My son John owns my house *[pause]* I don't think he'd want to be involved in anything like this —

REGINA

But what do *you* think about it?

SOPHIA

I *[pause]* well *[pause]* it's so... *[pause]* You put a lot of work into this and I'm sure the kids will... *[pause]* I had no idea... *[pause]* of course I noticed that there were teen agers coming and going all the time and wondered *[pause]* but... *[pause]* Well now it makes sense —

DASHAWN

That's the thing. It makes sense, doesn't it?

SOPHIA

This is a lot to take in. Isn't it?

REGINA

Of course. Sorry. You must feel like we're bombarding you. But we wanted you to know our plans —

DASHAWN

Yes. We didn't mean to overwhelm you.

[Dashawn stops fussing with the papers and boxes and moves next to Sophia's chair.]

DASHAWN (CONTINUES)

How's this? Think about it and, if you have any questions or concerns. We're here, just let us know.

[Regina and Sophia stand up. Sophia nods her head and looks around the room as they all move toward the door.]

REGINA

That's a good idea. Just give it some thought —

SOPHIA

Oh. Your dress. I promised I'd hem it for you —

REGINA

You don't have to —

SOPHIA

Yes. I want to do it *[pause]* for you —

[Sophia picks up her purse and Regina's dress from over the chair's arm and drapes it over her arm. Dashawn grabs his jacket from the chair.]

DASHAWN

I'll walk you home. I'm heading out, too.

REGINA

Your coat is in the dining room, Sophia. Dashawn, can you help her?

[Sophia and Dashawn leave the room. Curtain.]

Act 2, Scene 3

Setting: *Same. An hour later. Now the shopping bag that Dashawn brought in earlier is tipped over on its side, empty. There are long pieces of different colored fabrics draped over the two chairs, the table lamps, and the back of the couch.*

At Rise: *Regina sits on the edge of the couch hunched over the coffee table with a piece of fabric in her hand, working on it with a needle and thread. Yasmine is next to her helping while Gladys strolls around the room with another length of fabric flowing from her shoulders like a cape, humming quietly.*

GLADYS

Guess who's taking me to **Coming to America** tonight?

YASMINE

Franky is no Eddie Murphy, Glad. I told you – he's trouble —

GLADYS

The guys are just wannabe Sharks [*thoughtful pause*] or is it Jets?
You're just jealous —

YASMINE

Remember, they sang and danced at the beginning, but by the end, Tony gets knifed.

REGINA

Would you get your heads outta the clouds and help – get this right?

GLADYS

You're just jealous —

YASMINE (TO REGINA)

Are you sure it's supposed to go like that? It doesn't seem —

REGINA

I don't know. Where's that pamphlet we had last week?

YASMINE

I think it's in the kitchen —

[Yasmine jumps up and heads toward the other room, taking a twirl around the room with Gladys on the way.]

GLADYS

These are beautiful, Regina. They'll be perfect —

REGINA

Yes. If we can —

GLADYS

How did you pay for all this?

REGINA

Our partner in crime, Dashawn, put it on his MasterCard.
That's how sure he is that we're going to get that grant I told you about —

[Gladys drapes her fabric over the end of the coffee table, picks up another piece and resumes twirling around the room with it. The doorbell rings and Yasmine yells from off stage.]

YASMINE

I'll get it —

REGINA

Did you find it?

YASMINE

Not yet. *[opening the outer door OS]* Oh, it's the lady from next door —

REGINA

Really? Sophia - er - Mrs. Whitford. Let her in.

[Yasmine and Sophia talk briefly off stage.]

SOPHIA

Oh *[pause]*hello *[pause]*I have Regina's *[pause]*er *[pause]*Mrs. Beasley's dress —

YASMINE

Regina's dress? Oh. We all go my first names here. I'm Yasmine!

SOPHIA

Sophia. *[pause]* Is Regina here?

REGINA

In here (still), Sophia. Come in, come in —

[Yasmine and Sophia enter. Gladys bows dramatically.]

YASMINE

That's Gladys. Don't pay any attention to her. She got the lead in *Merchant of Venice* - well, I mean, Portia - there's absolutely *no* talking to her these days —

REGINA

Hello, again, Sophia. *[to Yasmine]* The pamphlet, Yas?

[Regina gives up on her attempt at sewing and moves to greet Sophia. Yasmine spins around and returns to the kitchen and can be heard opening and closing drawers and cabinets.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

Here. Let me take your coat —

SOPHIA

No. *[pause]* I don't want to interrupt. *[pause]* I just wanted to return your beautiful dress —

[Sophia holds the dress up to show the fixed hem. Regina and Gladys examine it carefully.]

GLADYS

You did that?

REGINA

Oh my. That's wonderful! Thank you so much. We're hopeless, I'm afraid —

[Regina gestures to the pile of fabric on the coffee table.]

SOPHIA

What's all this?

REGINA

The girls are in the school play this spring and we thought we could whip up the costumes for the cast. But —

GLADYS

I mean, how hard can it be *[pause]* to make a few togas?

REGINA

Well, for us, obviously *[pause]* pretty hard —

[Gladys wraps the fabric around herself and gestures as if speaking to an ancient Roman courtroom reciting from Act 1, Scene II, while Yasmine returns with a couple of sewing pamphlets in hand.]

GLADYS

“One half of me is yours, the other half yours,
Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours,
And so all yours.”

YASMINE

Here they are. They somehow wound up way in the back of that cupboard with all of Dashawn’s old accounting textbooks...

REGINA

He’s always putting things away. Can’t stand clutter – the dear!

SOPHIA

Wow! It’s gonna be quite a colorful production.
Do you have any drawings for what you want the *[pause]* costumes *[pause]* togas *[pause]* to look like?

REGINA

Yasmine?

[Yasmine spins around and heads toward to back of the flat, where Will went earlier. Sophia slips out of her coat, picks up a piece of fabric from a chair and drapes her coat over the chair.]

SOPHIA

This is beautiful fabric. *[pause]* I noticed the bag earlier and was wondering —

REGINA

Yes, we were there yesterday picking out the fabrics —

GLADYS

I *love* that place —

REGINA

Dashawn picked them up for us on his way from work —

[Yasmine returns with Will, who is no longer carrying the towel. It appears as though Will has tried, in vain, to cover his wounds with makeup, but he sports a black eye, a very bruised cheek and a long bandage along the edge of his forehead. Yasmine and Will are carrying several sheets of drawings. Yasmine arranges them on the coffee table and everyone leans in to look at them.]

YASMINE

Here they are —

WILL

I've been finishing them up, now that the throbbing has eased up. *[pause turning to Gladys]* Recognize your fella's handiwork?

GLADYS

I told you. Franky's not like them —

YASMINE

Like *I* told *you*. It gets *real* by the end!

WILL

Still hurts like hell!

Ooops! *[pause, turning to Regina and Sophia]* Sorry...

YASMINE

Mine's the blue one. Don't you just love it?

REGINA

So, here you see what we want —

[Regina gestures at the drawings then at the fabrics displayed around the room]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

... and there's what we have so far —

[Yasmine circles around the coffee table, grabs the fabric draped over the couch, holding it to her chest, and sits. Gladys grabs the fabric over the chair Sophia sat in the last scene and motions for her to sit, then joins Yasmine and Regina on the couch. Sophia leans in examining the drawings carefully.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

You *see* our dilemma —

GLADYS

“And earthly power doth then show likest God’s” *[pause]* Act Four, Scene One —

SOPHIA

“Sweet lady, you have given me life and living.”

[Everyone turns toward Sophia, giggling.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

Can you believe I remembered that? It's been - oh I don't know how many - years. We used to do Shakespeare in our living room when we were teen agers, my sisters and brother. I was Antonio 'cause we only had the one boy, but we learned all the parts —

YASMINE

I'm playing Antonio, too! We're being “innovative” with casting —

SOPHIA

Haven't thought about that for years.
That was in St. Catherines, in Canada —

YASMINE

You grew up in Canada?

REGINA

And England —

YASMINE, WILL AND GLADYS (TOGETHER)

That's so cool —

SOPHIA

Yes. I've been around.
Hey. I've got an idea —

[Sophia gets up, gathers up the drawings and walks over to get her coat.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

Grab the fabrics. Let's go to my house.
I'll show you how to use my sewing machine —

[Regina, Yasmine, Will and Gladys stand up, collect the fabrics and follow Sophia out of the room. Curtain.]

Act 2, Scene 4

Setting: An hour later. The living room in the downstairs flat of Sophia's house (laid out like Regina's but with fewer furnishings). There is a sewing machine against the wall and several cardboard boxes with bits of fabric showing from the tops. The drawings from the previous scene are pinned to the wall above the sewing machine. Four folding chairs are arranged around the sewing machine.

At Rise: Sophia is working the sewing machine, showing the others how to feed the material through it and turn it on and off with the foot pedal. Regina, Yasmine, Will and Gladys watch carefully for a few minutes in silence.]

SOPHIA

You see? It's simple. You need to keep pushing it through at a steady pace. Do you want to try, Portia? - I mean - Gladys?

GLADYS

Yes. This one will be mine. In Act five —

[Sophia and Gladys switch seats. Sophia leans in to help her feed the fabric through the machine.]

SOPHIA

That's right. Just like that —

GLADYS

Wow. This is so neat. Much better than *[pause]* well, we didn't really know what we were going to do.

You're a life saver, Sophia —

YASMINE

Yes. Where else have you lived - been?

SOPHIA

Oh. Do you know that back in the day- the twenties - the only way to get across the country was by train?

GLADYS

What do you mean?

SOPHIA

Well, very few people had cars and planes *[pause]* well planes were little two seaters. You had to *own* one to get anywhere with a plane. Nothing like the huge jets today.

Anyway, my brother Ed and his wife Eleanor had moved to the west coast – Vancouver – in 1919 and a couple years later they were expecting their first child and Eleanor wrote to me with train fare and asked me to come visit and to help out once the baby came —

WILL

How old were you, then?

REGINA

Will, you don't ask a lady —

SOPHIA

That's OK. I was 21, but still, my father wouldn't hear of a "young lady" traveling by train unaccompanied. He insisted that I send the money back to her. Which I said I'd do.

But instead, the next day as soon as he left for work, I packed a bag and made my way to the Canada Bell office – where I was working as an operator. *[pause]* But that's another story.

I put in my notice and made my way to the station. I got on the next Trans Canada train for the four-day journey to British Columbia.

Ed had written after they got out there and told me all about the trip. Oh the beautiful forests and breath-taking vistas – up and through the Rockies.

And Vancouver was just wonderful. Flowers everywhere. So green and lush —

YASMINE

Wow! You were quite the rebel.

I bet you were a flapper, weren't you?

SOPHIA

Not quite. But I did have my share of fun I paid the price when I got back home the next year. My Father was steaming mad, telling me what I would and would not be doing "as long as you live in my house..." but then I brought out the pictures of his first grandchild, little Freddy – and he just melted – asking me all about the little fella and Ed and Eleanor's antiques shop, where I helped out while I was there, and how high the Rockies are and what the Pacific Ocean breezes felt like blowing through my hair. *[pause]* Oh I had long, brown hair back then —

WILL

Oh, I can just picture you jitterbugging on the boardwalk —

[Regina, Will and Yasmine get up and wiggle their hips at each other, giggling.]

GLADYS

Hey. Careful, ladies. I'm working here —

SOPHIA

Here, Gladys, let me show you how to finish that up —

YASMINE

My turn. Let's do mine next. I have to wear the same thing in each scene, unlike fair Portia, who has three costume changes —

[Sophie finishes the piece in the sewing machine as Gladys and Yasmine watch closely nodding their heads. Sophie then starts feeding in the next piece and gestures for Yasmine to take over.]

YASMINE (CONTINUES)

Like this?

SOPHIA

That's right. You've got it. Keep doing it like that —

[Regina and Will walk across the room with Sophia.]

REGINA

I can't tell you how much this helps us, Sophia. Thank you.

WILL

Yes, you're a wonder, Sophia!

[Yasmine motions for Gladys to move closer.]

YASMINE

I'm serious, Glad! Maro and Franky and those guys are into some bad stuff. You can see what they did to Will —

GLADYS

I *know* Franky wouldn't —

YASMINE

He hangs with those guys —

GLADYS

Yeah, but *he's* different —

YASMINE

Is he? [*pause, turning to Sophia*] How do I do the next seam here, Sophia?

[*Curtain.*]

Act 3, Scene 1

Setting: Two weeks later. Sophia's kitchen (same as Act 1, Scene 2, but now there are brightly colored curtains on the window over the sink).

At Rise: Sophia, Jimmy and John are sitting at the table eating dinner.

JOHN

So, what - exactly - do they do over there?

SOPHIA

Help. They - *we* - help. Kids who have problems at home, problems at school —

JIMMY

We?

JOHN

What *kind* of problems?

SOPHIA

Well, Regina is showing them how to buy healthy foods and how to cook. And Dashawn is teaching them how to set up bank accounts and keep track of their expenses. They have a little metal shop set up in her garage —

JOHN

Don't they have classes for those things in the school?

JIMMY

So, she wants to expand this - operation - youth center - whatever they're calling it?

JOHN

Don't we - the homeowners - have a say?

SOPHIA

They've had public hearings on it and our Councilman is on board. Yes, it's all been voted on and approved. The only question is the scope. How big to make it —

JOHN

I don't know. Do you want kids like *that* hanging around here, next door, all the time - day and night?

SOPHIA

I've met several of *those* kids, John. They're just kids. Interested in learning - engaging. Many of them are hurting —

JIMMY

You've been over there with them?

SOPHIA

And they've been over here —

JOHN

Here, in your flat?

SOPHIA

Downstairs where you helped me move my sewing machine. The light 's much better in the front room.
I'm teaching these three wonderful kids how to sew. We're working on costumes for their school play —

JIMMY

So, you're *part* of all this? You're involved? You want to help them expand this - thing?

SOPHIA

Well, *[pause]*yes. It's important. These kids need someplace.
You should meet them. They're not anything like I expected just watching them on the street from up here. They're surprising - talented. Gladys has learned, from memory, dialogue from entire plays" O'Neal, Williams, Shakespeare.
She's going to be an impressive Portia.
And Will. You should see the sets and costumes he designed. They won't be able to make all the set changes he wants, but the costumes —

JOHN

My god! When did all this happen? How long have you been?

SOPHIA

Let me show you —

[Sophia gets up and goes to the back of the flat. Jimmy and John also get up and pace around the kitchen.]

JOHN

Did you know about all this?

JIMMY

Well, no. Not exactly. She's been talking about Regina a lot, and that she —

JOHN

I don't believe this. A half-way house next door —

JIMMY

It's not like *that*. They aren't criminals or anything. It sounds like they're helping keep these kids on the straight an' narrow —

[Sophia waltzes into the kitchen wearing one of the Portia costumes, twirling around between Jimmy and John.]

SOPHIA

Isn't this beautiful?

Oh you should see Gladys in it. Very striking. A judge you wouldn't mess with. I'd forgotten how much I loved making pieces like this. Will is designing the "perfect Sophia dragon slayer gown" for me. I'm sure it's going to be beautiful —

JIMMY AND JOHN

Dragon slayer?

SOPHIA

Oh. It's a long story. You see, we were both victims of the roving bands of bullies —

JOHN

Victims?

[Sophia twirls about again and then leaves the kitchen.]

JIMMY

Well. *That* was *[pause]* different —

JOHN

I don't believe what I'm hearing. What the hell is going on?

JIMMY

When was the last time you saw Ma twirl about the house? I mean, well, she's glowing!

JOHN

Glowing?

JIMMY

She seems happy. I mean, before the mugging she just seemed to be going along day after day without any enthusiasm or, Oh I don't know, but can't you see that she's different?

JOHN

She's definitely *different*, I'll give you that —

[Sophia comes back into the room, wearing a feathered fedora, smiling broadly. All three sit back down around the table.]

SOPHIA

She's in the room. And yes, *she* is, indeed, happy, Happier than *she* has been in quite some time. *[bowing sarcastically to them in turn.]* Thank you very much.

JIMMY

And you want to keep doing this? Working with these kids and this "project"?

SOPHIA

Yes. I'm having the time of my life —

JOHN

For how long? I mean, once they have their —

SOPHIA

For as long as they'll have me. It's so - so - rewarding. I feel useful, like I'm really needed. I have skills to share. A life to share. They're always asking me to tell them about my life, where I've been, what I've done. I'm giving them the type of history they can't get out of books —

JOHN

We need you, Ma. We've always needed you —

JIMMY

You *know* that, don't you?

SOPHIA

I know. I was always the dutiful daughter, helpful sister, obedient wife, supportive mother and reliable member of my church. But with this — This is me doing things I really enjoy that other people really appreciate.

Oh, you should see their enthusiasm. Hear their laughter.

You know, Regina 's told me that for some of these kids, this is the only place they laugh. Where they can be themselves —

JIMMY

This all sounds *[pause]*great, Ma —

JOHN

But *[pause]*I thought we were going to start packing. I got an appraisal —

JIMMY

No. John, I think we need to —

SOPHIA

No. *[pause]*Do what you have to do. *[pause]*But I intend to stay here.

JIMMY

Have you talked to Ella? When I talked with her last night, she wanted to get a timeline for your move down there —

SOPHIA

I'll call her tonight. *[Suddenly recalling something.]* Do you know where the key to the garage is?

JOHN

So that's that —

JIMMY

Isn't it the junk drawer next to the sink —

[Jimmy gets up and starts routing around in the drawer.]

JOHN

Now what's with the key?

SOPHIA

I want to see what's in there. Didn't we bring all of Dad's woodworking tools here?

JOHN

I know we boxed all that stuff up. I wasn't around for the actual move —

JIMMY

I think we put all that in the garage —

*[Jimmy turns toward them displaying a key.
Sophia jumps up and John reluctantly gets up, too.]*

SOPHIA

Good. Let's go see. I'll get Regina on the way back there —

*[Sophia goes in the back of the flat for her coat.
Jimmy and John follow her to get their coats.
Curtain.]*

Act 3, Scene 2

Setting: Half an hour later. The living room of the downstairs flat in Sophia's house.

At Rise: Sophia, John and Regina are sitting on folding chairs at a card table talking about what they discovered in the garage.

SOPHIA

Do you believe what's in there, Regina?

JOHN

Haven't thought about that stuff for years —

REGINA

You know that Dashawn and the kids are just flipping out in there right now.

[The door is heard opening and Jimmy, Dashawn, Yasmine, Gladys and Will come in, piling their coats on a chair along the back wall of the living room. Dashawn and the kids talk together quietly in the back of the room as Jimmy, carrying a legal pad, sits at the card table.]

JIMMY

I've started on an inventory —

JOHN

I remember the jig saw. Didn't we buy it for Dad after he retired, Jimmy?

JIMMY

Yeah —

REGINA

And a miter saw —

SOPHIA

He had every kind of saw and router - and extra blades and attachments. Remember how he had all those tools up on a pegboard and all the saws inside the bench?

JOHN

The benches are in all in the back, behind the boxes. And there's a bunch of plywood back there —

JIMMY

Yes. We brought everything when you moved here, Ma. Guess we thought we'd use them someday —

SOPHIA

Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Regina?

REGINA

I'm thinking that stuff would —

SOPHIA

Exactly. We can get Will his sets. Do you - does Dashawn - know anyone who knows how to use that stuff?

REGINA

I'm sure we can find —

JIMMY

I can. I used to work with Dad all the time. *[pause gesturing to group in the back]* I was telling them about the crib we made for Ella (she's the first one to have kids). I - sorta - already told them that I'd help.

REGINA

You? You 'd help teach?

JIMMY

Why not? It'll take a while to set everything up in there. We may need to bring in extra electric lines. And after that, I'd love to get back into it and help show them how everything works —

*[Sophia leans over to hug Jimmy as he continues to write out the inventory of tools and supplies.
Regina gets up and motions for John to follow her.
They walk to the back of the room and talk quietly.]*

SOPHIA

Did I ever tell you about that time at the auction? Oh, way back in the 60s. Your dad and I were taking a drive out in the country – Springville or Jamestown – you know down that way —

JIMMY

I remember you guys loved going antiquing. And those chairs he refinished. He did that one in the living room, right?

SOPHIA

Yes, that was one of his.

Anyway, we just happened upon a big old barn where they were having an estate auction. It was a huge place and it was packed with people, bidding and jockeying around to get a closer look at the pieces that were coming up for offer. Your Dad wandered off in one direction and I went in the other. I'd circled around a couple of times when a beautiful old chair came up for bidding. I knew your dad would love it, so, unlike myself, I bid on it and *[pause]* miraculously, I won. After paying for it I went searching for your dad to carry it to the car. When I finally found him, he was furious. "You wouldn't believe it," he fumed "I was bidding on this great old chair, but some old lady across the room out bid me!" "That was me!" I screamed. "I knew you would want it."

JIMMY

You were bidding against each other?

SOPHIA

Yes. *[laughing]* He was so upset with me. But I just laughed and laughed and eventually, he started laughing, too. And we stopped for a nice dinner on the way home —

[Regina and John have made their way back and join Jimmy and Sophia at the card table.]

REGINA

That is *too* precious, Sophia. You have to tell Dashawn and the kids *that* one —

[Regina turns to Jimmy and John.]

REGINA (CONTINUES)

Everyone just loves Sophia's stories. She's had such an interesting life —

JOHN

Yeah, that's our mom —

[John hugs Sophia tightly, whispering to her. Jimmy watches with a confused look. Then Sophia breaks away and moves over to face Regina, placing her hands on Regina's arms. Sophia and Regina speak quietly to each other and then step into a close embrace. As they separate, Dashawn and Will join them around the table, while Yasmine and Gladys go into the back rooms.]

SOPHIA

Here you are. Come, come. Did you see?

WILL

Are you kidding me? All that's been in there all this time? We'll be able to make the best sets that school 's ever seen. I'm just going to run next door and grab my drawings —

DASHAWN

Don't push —

JIMMY (INTERRUPTING)

That'd be great. He's fine, Dashawn. They're excited! And, frankly, so am I. We should probably set up the jig saw first —

[Will exits, grabbing his coat on his way out.]

DASHAWN

That stuff in the garage is amazing! Sitting out there all those years —

JIMMY

I'd forgotten all about it. Did you see any hand sanders?

DASHAWN

Oh yeah, a couple, in those cabinets in the back.

[Yasmine and Gladys stroll into the room wearing their colorful costumes for the play. They are distractedly fixing their hair and adjusting their makeup as they mix in random lines of Shakespeare.]

GLADYS

I can't believe he did that!

YASMINE

He actually hit you?

GLADYS

Hard. *[Gesturing to her cheek which is bruised.]* Hurt like hell, too —

YASMINE

Why?

GLADYS

I told him what Will said about Marco and them; asked if he was with them?

YASMINE

Was he?

GLADYS

This *[pointing to her cheek]* was his answer —

YASMINE

“How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend’ring none?”

GLADYS

“What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?
You have among you many a purchas’d slave,
Which like your asses, and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts...”

[Everyone sitting at the table stands up to admire their performance. As they continue, Gladys pulls a compact out of the clutch she’s carrying and opens it to powder her glowing cheek. Sophia stares at the white swan embossed on the top of the compact and quickly turns away. Regina notices and moves toward Sophia who turns back with a tortured smile, grasping Regina’s arm and gently turning her to watch the performance.]

Curtain.]

Act 4, Scene 1

Setting: Late afternoon, two months later. The living room of the downstairs flat in Sophia's house. There are now several upholstered chairs circled around a coffee table, as well as another sewing machine and more boxes of fabric. A card table is set up in the middle of the room with an open bottle of wine on it as well as a bowl of ice, several quart soda bottles, a stack of plastic cups and a vase with lilac branches carefully arranged in it with a broad ribbon with "Congratulations" written on it.

At Rise: Several indistinct conversations can be heard in the adjoining dining room. Sophia (dressed in a colorful Mandala wrap dress and carrying two wine glasses) enters the living room with Regina (dressed in her usual, colorful wrap dress), and Dashawn (dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and jeans).

SOPHIA

Let me get you some more wine, Dashawn —

DASHAWN

I can —

[Sophia places the wine glasses on the edge of the card table and fills them. Regina's glass still has wine in it, but she allows Sophia to top it off. Then Sophia picks up the wine glasses, handing one to Dashawn, clinking her glass with his and to Regina's.]

REGINA

To —

[Sophia looks from Regina to Dashawn.]

SOPHIA

You —

DASHAWN AND REGINA (TOGETHER)

Us —

DASHAWN

To this venture. Making a difference in kids lives.
Not to mention the change in you —

[Dashawn gestures to Sophia's colorful outfit. Sophia curtsies mockingly then sits in one of the chairs, gesturing for Dashawn and Regina to sit too. They sip their wine as they talk.]

SOPHIA

A Will Lawrence original. I do feel - younger - more alive —

DASHAWN

Well, you certainly look much better than when I found you in that snow bank *[gesturing out the window]*. My god, that seems like ages ago now. Did I tell you? I thought you were dead —

REGINA

You *were* in a real panic when you banged on my door to tell me to call 911 —

SOPHIA

Oh, you made such a fuss —

[Dashawn gently holds Sophia's wrist. Ella (wearing her usual polyester blouse and slacks) emerges from the back to join them at the table.]

DASHAWN

I was so relieved when I felt a pulse —

ELLA

We're so grateful that you were there.

SOPHIA

It'll take more than that to keep me down for the count —

REGINA

You tell 'em, girlfriend —

SOPHIA

And your team shopping schedules have been working out perfectly *[pause, turning toward Ella]* it was getting to be too much for me to carry on my own. Yasmine and Gladys are actually so much fun to shop with - always talking about the new recipes they're working on with you or practicing their lines —

REGINA

They're quite a team, aren't they?

SOPHIA

Definitely. Always asking about my "flapper days" as they call them —

ELLA

Flapper days?

DASHAWN

I know they especially enjoy your travel stories. Most of 'em haven't stepped foot outside these ten blocks with the school, the Seven-Eleven and church. And your European cruises and cross-country road trips. You're giving them wonderful history and geography lessons —

SOPHIA

Lessons?

ELLA

You always said you wanted to be a teacher —

SOPHIA

I - I love talking with them as I show them how to use my old sewing machine. And it's a lot more fun helping them make their *ethnic* outfits and costumes than making the same sock monkeys over and over again "because they're always the best sellers at the church bazaars"

[Sophia, Regina and Dashawn laugh and clink wine glasses again.]

ELLA

You've been making them for years —

REGINA

Oh, your sock monkeys are cute!

[Will enters the room dressed in one of the costumes for the school play.]

SOPHIA

Ugh. I'll show you how to make them. But I'm out of *that* business —

WILL

That's right, my dear. Your *talents* were wasted on those – creatures. We've got some big plans for our next project, and you – sweetie – will be far too busy —

[Will perches on the arm and Sophia's chair, leaning over to hug her tightly.]

SOPHIE

You and your *projects* —

REGINA

Yes, young man. Do *not* press your luck —

WILL

But “I've always depended on the kindness of strangers”

[Will stands up, gesturing to Sophia, Regina and Dashawn dramatically then moves over to make himself a glass of soda.]

REGINA

We're strangers no more. *I hope?*

WILL (SINGING)

No. “We — are — fa — mi — ly”

You, dear, dear, people are stuck with me for the duration now —

[Will strolls back to the dining room. Regina, Sophia and Dashawn watch with huge smiles. Yasmine and Gladys enter from the back, wearing flapper dresses. They parade by the group slowly.]

GLADYS

I told him “It's over!”

YASMINE

You did? “Dreamy Franky”?

GLADYS

More like “flaky Franky.” No — Bod — Y hits me!

[Sophia turns to Ella. During the introductions Ella grasps their hands in turn.]

SOPHIA

And these are the talented young ladies I was telling you about.
Yasmine, Gladys, this is my daughter, Ella (from Florida).

ELLA

Very nice to meet you. Are these Sophia pieces? She used to make my clothes for school. I hated them. Wanted to wear what the other kids were —

GLADYS

We looove them! If we could get away with it, we'd wear these to school every day.

YASMINE

“Oh wise young judge, how I do honor thee!”

[Ella turns to Sophia, questioningly.]

SOPHIA

Shakespeare. They're showing off —

GLADYS

“I pray you let me look upon the bond.”

ELLA

Merchant of Venice, again?

SOPHIA

Seems to be all around us these days.

YASMINE

“How much more elder art thou than thy looks!”

[Before answering, Gladys brings out the white swan compact to examine her make up. Elle notices the compact and turns abruptly to Sophia.]

GLADYS

“Therefore lay bare your bosom.”

[The girls stroll back towards the party in back. Ella pulls her mother off to the side, speaking quietly.]

ELLA

Is that your?

SOPHIA (INTERRUPTING)

It must be. And before you ask, No. I have no idea how it got from my purloined purse to her merciful hand —

ELLA

But —

SOPHIA

But *[pause]* it is where it should be now. Bringing the tale of distant lands to this deprived child who has only ever known these cold city blocks.

[She places her hand on Ella's arm and directs them back to the group, addressing the others.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

I have to confess. When you told me about your plans to help kids - give them a safe place to... I was thinking "St Augustine here I come!"

[They all laugh.]

SOPHIA (CONTINUES)

But, I mean, look at those beautiful young men and women. Did you two arrange for me to, just happen to, meet them?

[Regina and Dashawn look at each other in feigned shock.]

DASHAWN

We are not *that* clever —

REGINA

No. What happened, just happened. They are part of our life. We invited you to learn about the family we've created here. It *is* a family and you, I hope, chose to become a part of it, too!

SOPHIA

"You *are* stuck with *me*," as Will so elegantly put it, "for the duration."

[They again, bring their wine glasses together with a resounding clink. Jimmy enters the room carrying a bottle of beer.]

JIMMY

Hey, you started the party without me?

REGINA

Sorry. We were all so thrilled to see the size of the grant, there was just no holding back the celebrations!

[Jimmy sits on the arm of Regina's chair and adds his beer bottle to the ring of wine glasses. Another loud clink is heard.]

JIMMY

Well. Congratulations, team!

DASHAWN

It's thanks, in no small part, to this little lady here —

[Dashawn gestures toward Sophia.]

SOPHIA

Oh, stop! I'm just sharing what everyone learned when we were kids, every little girl knew how to mend and make their clothes.
The *real* hero here is our new landlady. *[placing her hand on Regina's shoulder.]*

REGINA

We've put together a great team!

[pause, gesturing to everyone around the table. Then turning to Sophia]

And yes, the world has changed a lot in your lifetime, Sophia. Mine, too. And even if everything out there seems awful and scary, in here, we *are* making a difference.

DASHAWN

Listen —

*[A sudden burst of teenage laughter from the dining room.
Curtain.
End of Play.]*