

BELLA. Noo!! You can't go yet, Louie ... You promised.

LOUIE. I promised I'd stay for dinner. I stayed for dinner. How many dinners you want me to stay for?

BELLA. But the family hasn't had a talk yet.

LOUIE. We did. We talked all through dinner. I never had a chance to swallow nothin'. I'm all talked out, Bella.

BELLA. There's still something that hasn't been talked about. It wasn't something that could be talked about at dinner ... You sit here. This is your place.

LOUIE. (*Exasperated.*) I told you I had to go right after the coffee. I had my coffee. I had my strudel. I had my dinner. I have to go, Bella.

BELLA. (*Nervously.*) Momma! Gert! Tell him to stay ... Louie, you can't go, you have to be here. The whole family has to be here. Momma, tell him.

GRANDMA. (*Sternly.*) You're getting excited, Bella.

BELLA. I won't get excited. I promise. I'm fine, Momma ... Just ask Louie to stay. Let me get the boys in.

GERT. He'll stay, Bella.

BELLA. (*Calls out.*) Jay? Arty! Forget the dishes. We'll do them later ... Everybody inside.

*(JAY comes in with Gert's coffee. ARTY follows, eating the last bite of a piece of strudel. HE is dressed now.)*

JAY. Here's your coffee, Aunt Gert.

GERT. Thank you.

BELLA. Jay! Arty! Sit on the sofa with Aunt Gert. Momma, you stay there. I'll sit here and, Louie, sit on the chair.

LOUIE. I've been sittin' all night, Bella. I can stand up, okay?

BELLA. But it would be so much better if you were sitting, Louie. I pictured everybody sitting.

LOUIE. *I don't wanna sit!!* Change the picture. Picture everybody sittin' and me standin', all right?

*(This is about to be the first time we hear AUNT GERT talk her first full sentence, where her affliction becomes apparent. SHE speaks normally for the first half of the sentence and then somewhere past the middle, SHE talks by sucking in her breath, so the words go to a higher pitch and it sounds very difficult for her.)*

GERT. Louie, can't you just sit for a few minutes until Bella tells us what it is—*(SHE sucks in now.)*—she wants to talk to us all about.

*(ARTY and JAY look at each other.)*

LOUIE. Okay. Okay. *(HE sits on the window seat.)* Here? All right? Is this the way you pictured it, Bella?

BELLA. No. I pictured you sitting on the chair I picked out.

LOUIE. *(Crosses to the "his" chair, but doesn't sit.)* Bella! It's very important that I leave here soon. Very important. I don't want to upset you, sweetheart, but I can't spend the rest of the night getting the seating arrangements right ... I'm gonna stand up, I'm gonna listen and then I'm gonna go.

BELLA. *(Puts her head down, sulks, childlike.)* I pictured everybody sitting.

LOUIE. Jesus!

GERT. Louie, stop arguing with her and sit down, for God sakes, before—(*SHE sucks in.*)—she gets into one of her moods again.

GRANDMA. Louie, sit! Gertrude, stop it.

LOUIE. Louie sit! Louie stand! Louie eat! ... You don't scare me anymore, Ma. Maybe everyone else here, but not me. You understand?

GRANDMA. (*Still crocheting.*) Sit down, Louie!

(*LOUIE sits.*)

BELLA. All right. (*SHE sits.*) Are we all seated now?

LOUIE. Yes, Bella. We're all seated. You wanna take a picture of what you pictured?

GERT. Stop it, Louie.

BELLA. (*Looks around, smiles, content with the seating.*) Now ... who wants to start?

LOUIE. (*Rises.*) Who wants to start? ... Start what? ... Momma, I haven't got time for this. Maybe when I was twelve years old, but not tonight. It's one of her games. Her crazy games, for crise sakes.

GERT. Is this a game, Bella? Are you just playing—(*Sucks in.*)—a game with us, darling?

BELLA. It's not a game. It's very important ... But I don't know how to start to say it. So somebody else has to help me and start first.

LOUIE. (*To BELLA.*) You have something important to tell us and you want us to start? (*HE starts towards the front door.*) Listen, Gert. You understand her better than I do. When you figure out what it is, let me know.

JAY. (*To BELLA.*) Aunt Bella, have you ...

*(LOUIE and EVERYONE ELSE stop and look at JAY.)*

JAY. ... Have you been going to the movies lately, Aunt Bella?

BELLA. *(Smiles.)* Thank you, Jay ... Yes. I have been going to the movies a lot lately ...

*(LOUIE looks at her in disbelief.)*

BELLA. ... Three times last week.

JAY. Really? ... Did you see anything good?

BELLA. Oh, yes. I saw a picture with William Holden and Jean Arthur ... I really liked it ... That's why I saw it three times.

LOUIE. This is what I stayed to dinner for? This is what I had to sit in the right seat to listen to? Jean Arthur and William Holden? Are they in the picture you pictured here?

GERT. Is that what this is about, Bella? Is this all about what movies—*(Sucks in.)*—you went to last week?

BELLA. No, but I'm getting to it. Ask me more questions, Jay. You're good at this.

JAY. Uh, let's see ... Did you—go alone?

BELLA. Oh, yes. I always go alone. But it's interesting you asked me that ... Because I met a friend there ... You can ask me questions too, Gert?

GERT. I don't know what kind of questions—*(Sucks in.)*—to ask you.

ARTY. Ask her who the friend was.

GERT. Who was the friend?

BELLA. Well, his name is Johnny, I always see him there because he's the head usher. He's very nice.

JAY. So you just saw him in the theater?

BELLA. Well, once or twice we went out for coffee and once we took a walk in the park.

LOUIE. ... You went to the park with this guy?

BELLA. Just to talk ... You have to sit down if you're going to ask me questions, Louie.

*(LOUIE comes back and sits down.)*

BELLA. Now whose turn is it?

GRANDMA. Dis is ven you came home at eleven o'clock?

BELLA. Maybe. I think so. Was that it?

GERT. What did you do until eleven—*(Sucks in.)*—o'clock?

BELLA. We walked and we talked ... And we got to know each other ... He doesn't want to be an usher forever. One day he wants to open up his own restaurant.

LOUIE. His own restaurant? And he's an usher? What is he, fifteen, sixteen?

BELLA. No. He's forty ... And he wants to open up the restaurant with me.

*(There is silence. SHE has finally gotten their attention.)*

LOUIE. Why with you?

BELLA. *(Starting to get nervous.)* Because I can do all the cooking ... and write out the menus ... and keep the books.

GERT. And what would he do?

BELLA. He would be the manager. (*SHE sees this isn't going too well.*)

LOUIE. If he's the manager, why doesn't *he* write out the menus and keep the books?

BELLA. Well, he has a—(*SHE looks at ARTY and JAY.*)—a reading handicap.

LOUIE. A what?

BELLA. A reading handicap.

LOUIE. Okay, hold it. Wait a minute. (*Rises.*) What do you mean? He can't read?

BELLA. You're not supposed to get out of your chair. That's not how I pictured it.

LOUIE. Yeah, well, now I'm getting my *own* picture ... This guy is what? Illiterate?

BELLA. He can read ... a little.

LOUIE. What's a little? His *name*? ... This guy is either pulling your leg or he's after something, Bella ... Is he after something?

BELLA. Maybe this isn't a good time to talk about it.

LOUIE. No, it's the *perfect* time to talk about it ... What is this guy after, Bella? Has he touched you? ... Has he fooled around with you?

BELLA. NO!!! He's not that kind of person.

LOUIE. Well, what kinda person *is* he? ... He's forty years old, he takes you to the park at night. He wants to open up a restaurant with you and he can't read or write ... How are you going to open up a restaurant? Who's going to put up the money?

BELLA. It'll only cost five thousand dollars.

LOUIE. (*Laughs.*) Five thousand dollars? Why not five million? And who's got the five grand? Him?

BELLA. I don't think so ... He doesn't have any money.

LOUIE. Oh. Too bad ... Well, then who does that leave?

BELLA. Don't yell at me, Louie.

LOUIE. I'm not yelling at you, Bella. I'm just asking you a question. Who does that leave to put up the five thousand dollars?

GERT. This is too terrible. Momma, please tell them—*(Sucks in.)*—to stop this awful thing.

LOUIE. Who does that leave, Bella?

BELLA. I'll get the money somewhere.

LOUIE. Where is somewhere, Bella? ... There is no somewhere. You want Momma to sell the store? Is that what this guy asked you to do?

BELLA. He didn't ask me anything.

LOUIE. Then he's either very smart or very dangerous. Well, he doesn't sound too smart to me. So that just leaves dangerous.

BELLA. He's *not* dangerous.

LOUIE. How do you know that?

BELLA. Because they don't take you at the Home if you're dangerous.

LOUIE. ... *The Home*???

GRANDMA. Oh, my Gott!!

GERT. I don't understand this. Can somebody please—*(Sucks in.)*—explain all this to me.

LOUIE. *(To BELLA.)* Bella, honey. This man sounds very troubled ... Is he living at the Home now?

BELLA. No. With his parents. He didn't like the Home. They weren't very nice to him there. *(Looks at GRANDMA, pointedly.)* ... It's not a *nice place*, Momma!

LOUIE. Bella, sweetheart. Don't go to that movie anymore. Don't see that fella again. He may be very nice but he sounds like he's got a lot of whacky ideas, you know what I mean, sweetheart?

BELLA. You promised you would support me ... Jay! Arty! You said you would back me up. You promised.

LOUIE. Back you up with what, Bella? ... The restaurant? The money? Is that what this guy is after?

BELLA. He wants *more* than that.

LOUIE. What could possibly be more than that, Bella?

BELLA. Me! He wants *me*! He wants to marry me! (*SHE starts to cry.*) I want to marry *him* ... I want to have his children ... I want my own babies.

LOUIE. (*Sits back.*) Jesus Christ!

GRANDMA. (*Shocked at this.*) Dot's enough! ... I don't want to hear dis anymore!

BELLA. You think I can't have healthy babies, Momma? Well, I can ... I'm as strong as an ox. I've worked in that store and taken care of you by myself since I'm twelve years old, that's how strong I am ... Like *steel*, Momma. Isn't that how we're supposed to be? ... But my babies won't die because I'll love them and take care of them ... And they won't get sick like me or Gert or be weak like Eddie and Louie ... My babies will be happier than we were because I'll teach them to be happy ... Not to grow up and run away or never visit when they're older and not be able to breathe because they're so frightened ... and never, *ever* to make them spend their lives rubbing my back and my legs because you never had anyone around who loved you enough to want to touch you because you made it so clear you never wanted to be touched with love ... Do you know what it's like to touch steel, Momma?