THE PERFECT PARTY

A COMEDY IN TWO ACTS

BY A.R. GURY


DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE INC.
CAST

TONY—a middle-aged college professor.
SALLY—his wife.
LOIS—a reporter.
WES—Tony's friend.
WILMA—Wes's wife.

The play takes place in Tony's study, somewhat set apart from the rest of his house. It is a comfortable room, possibly wood-paneled, with a desk, a couch, several chairs, plenty of books in bookcases, and good prints on the wall. Among these might be a picture of Monticello, a portrait of Hawthorne, a profile of Fitzgerald. There is also a television cabinet, possibly a stereo, and a VCR. One door upstage opens onto a hallway leading to the rest of the downstairs area.

THE PERFECT PARTY

ACT I

AT RISE: Tony and Lois enter from the hall. Tony is a good-looking, middle-aged man, dressed in a tuxedo. Lois is also good-looking and wears an elegant black dress.

LOIS. I understand you plan to make this a perfect party.
TONY. I certainly plan to try. (He goes to a bar, which has been set up on top of his desk, and begins pouring her a Perrier.)
LOIS. No, no. I'm serious. You announced it as such. You sent out invitations. I brought mine along. (She produces an elegant invitation from her purse. It might be decorated with the logo from the program.) "Come," you say here, "to a perfect party."
TONY. Did I write that?
LOIS. I believe you did. Unless someone is sending out invitations under your name.
TONY. No, no. I'll admit it. I wrote it. It's just that hearing it read aloud, on the eve of battle, so to speak, makes me a little nervous.
LOIS. I should imagine.
TONY. Washington before Yorktown.
LOIS. Yes.
TONY. Custer, before the Little Big Horn.
LOIS. Now, now.
TONY. Well, there are bound to be doubts.
LOIS. But you're still committed, aren't you? You still plan to give it a go?
TONY. Oh yes. Absolutely. All the way.
LOIS. Good. Otherwise I'm wasting my time. And possibly yours. (He brings her her drink.)
TONY. Are you sure you won't have something stronger than Perrier?
LOIS. No, no. I have to keep a clear head. I have to decide whether to write you up.

TONY. I see.

LOIS. Besides, I happen to represent a major New York newspaper. It would be against the very grain of my profession if I drank on the job.

TONY. I understand.

LOIS. You, of course, should feel free to indulge.

TONY. I thought I might.

LOIS. After all, you must feel very much on the line. I mean, a perfect party.

TONY. At least I can start with a perfect martini. (He returns to the bar to mix his own drink.)

LOIS. A martini? That takes considerable courage.

TONY. I'm hoping it will give me considerably more.

LOIS. I notice you've made the party Black Tie.

TONY. Well I think people look and act their best in evening clothes.

LOIS. I tend to agree. Possibly because I'm a naturalist at heart—with a special fondness for the panda and the penguin.

TONY. Ah.

LOIS. (Walking around.) I want to know about this room.

TONY. This is my study.

LOIS. That tells me very little.

TONY. Ah well, then I'll tell you more. When my wife and I first bought this house, we called this room the den, possibly because we'd hibernate in here after dinner, like two contented bears, to engage in post-prandial love-play. Naturally, children arrived, and this became known as the family room. Our several cubs would barge in here at all times of the day or night, spilling food, tripping over toys, to gather around the cold, unblinking eye of what I call the Cyclops. (He opens a cabinet, displays a television screen, closes it deftly.) Finally, when my wife went to work, and my children left home, I moved my books in here, and turned it totally into my study.

LOIS. (Sitting on the couch, taking notes from time to time.) All that says a great deal about American marriage, and the diminishing role of the male within it.

TONY. I may be diminished, but I'm still indispensable. Here's where I pay a good part of the bills. And here's where I prepare courses on American history and literature, which I teach at a local university.

LOIS. Hence your earlier references to American battles.

TONY. Exactly. (Indicates books in bookcase.) And these are some of the authors I teach: Hawthorne, James, Fitzgerald, Cheever, Updike . . .

LOIS. Of course. I've already noticed some of their themes and rhythms, even in your casual discourse.

TONY. Yes, but I have other strings to my bow. Note over here I also have the complete works of Oscar Wilde, bound in leather.

LOIS. Oscar Wilde?

TONY. I inherited him from my grandmother.

LOIS. The source is immaterial. I'd be careful of Wilde. He's not American, and tends to undermine everything that is.

TONY. Nonetheless, here's where I keep him. And here's where we can talk, without being disturbed by the preparations for this evening's party which are taking place, as it were, offstage.

LOIS. And I suppose here's where you wrote the invitations.

TONY. That's right.

LOIS. Including the one which found its way to my newspaper.

TONY. Yes.

LOIS. Did you send it yourself, or did some public relations person slip it into the mail?

TONY. I sent it myself.

LOIS. May I ask why?

TONY. I thought it was news.

LOIS. That, of course, depends on what you tell me. For example, what gave you the idea for this party, and what do you hope to achieve by giving it? Remember while you're talking that I come from New York, which is a hectic, fast-paced city and makes us easily bored with unnecessary exposition.

TONY. A perfect party. Well, I think everyone in the world secretly wants to give one. It's at the heart of the social impulse. The caveman calling his fellow tribesman to the fire, the astrophysicist cupping his electronic ear to space—we all have this yearning to connect in some ultimate way with our fellow man.

LOIS. Or woman?

TONY. Of course. Sorry.

LOIS. Then would you define a perfect party?
TONY. A perfect party has a perfect shape. It starts, it builds, it crests, it explodes, and when it finally subsides, everyone involved—he who gives it, she who attends—is bathed in the pleasant afterglow of sweet remembrance.

LOIS. You make it sound vaguely sexual.

TONY. Do I? I hope I don't offend.

LOIS. No, no. I like sex, coming as I do from New York. But now I must ask you what we call colloquially the Passover question: namely, why now? Why is this night different from all other nights?

TONY. Well, I'm not getting any younger. I hear the clock ticking away. I've lived a complicated life in a complicated country, and I feel the compulsion to pull it all together in some sort of pattern, some sort of shape, just once, at least for an evening, before I die.

LOIS. Hmm. That's very touching ... You're a persuasive man. Persuasive and charming ... Much of what you say has a strange appeal. Sometimes I have the feeling that you're slightly naive, but that could simply come from the fact that you don't live in New York. Occasionally, also, you seem a little ornate, but I put that down to the unnecessary influence of Oscar Wilde.

TONY. So will you write me up?

LOIS. That now depends on your guest list.

TONY. Ah. Well. I happen to have one right here. (He produces a lovely, elegantly tooled leather folder.)

LOIS. (Taking it.) What a charming way to display your guests. I almost said perfect, but I didn't. (She opens it.) And what helpful headings. School chums. College pals. Navy buddies. Academic colleagues. (To Tony.) There's an awful lot of male bonding going on here, sir.

TONY. Read on. The women come in later with a vengeance.

LOIS. (Reading.) Old girls. Young students. Recreational companions. Sexual partners. Couldn't some of these categories be combined?

TONY. Good idea.

LOIS. (Reading on.) Family members ... I'm glad to see you've squeezed your family in here somewhere.

TONY. They're an important part of my life.

LOIS. I always worry about those poor old mothers, sitting alone in the corner with their knees apart.

TONY. My mother keeps her knees together.

LOIS. I'm glad to hear it. (She returns to the folder.) Let's see what else. "Miscellaneous"? What's this "miscellaneous"?

TONY. Oh those are just people who don't fall into any particular category. People I've met and clicked with over the years. For example, there's a waiter from Buffalo, New York.

LOIS. How sweet. Which reminds me: did you get a chance to do any kind of ethnic or demographic breakdown on this guest list?

TONY. Well I avoided quotas. I don't believe in those. But I can say that I tried to include a full spectrum of racial and regional diversity. There are also several people coming whose sexual orientation is hardly conventional, and I've asked a smattering of mentally and physically handicapped. I've also taken the liberty of inviting two registered Republicans, just to leaven the lump.

LOIS. (Closing the folder.) I'm impressed.

TONY. Thank you.

LOIS. Extremely impressed.

TONY. Thank you very much.

LOIS. (Putting the folder.) What you've got here seems to be a kind of microcosm for America itself, in the waning years of the twentieth century.

TONY. Exactly.

LOIS. So if it works, if the party succeeds, it will mean that America itself, as a social and political experiment, will have succeeded.

TONY. That's it.

LOIS. So you and I are not just sitting around talking about a party, are we? There's a good deal more at stake tonight than that. What we're talking about, really, is whether this nation, or any other nation so constituted, can long endure.

TONY. Right!

LOIS. (Getting up; enthusiastically.) Goddamn it, I'm going to put that in the paper, if I can improve the phrasing.

TONY. That must mean you've decided to write me up.

LOIS. I've decided more than that. I've decided to review you.

TONY. Review me? Do you mean that?

LOIS. Absolutely. Tomorrow morning, your party will receive a full-length review, possibly with a picture, in a major New York newspaper!
TONY. Fantastic! That's what I was hoping for.
LOIS. Well first, of course, I had to size you up.
TONY. I was terrified you might just settle for an announce-
ment. Like a wedding. Or a funeral.
LOIS. No, no. We are running for the roses now. (She folds up
her notebook and tosses it down on the coffee table.) I'm not even going
to take any more notes. That might be distracting to you and to
your guests. From here on in, I'm simply going to sit back and
judge, coolly and dispassionately, with the interests of several
million readers at heart. (Pause.)
TONY. I wish you'd let me spike that Perrier with a little splash
of white wine.
LOIS. I've already told you, sir: there are ethics in my profes-
sion which make that an immediate no-no.
TONY. At least call me Tony.
LOIS. I'm not even sure I should do that.
TONY. Oh come on. This is a party.
LOIS. All right, then. Tony.
TONY. And I may call you... what?
LOIS. Lois.
TONY. Lois. A lovely name, Lois.
LOIS. You may compliment my name, Tony, you may tempt
me with alcohol, but I assure you right now I cannot be bought.
TONY. I see. (Lois looks at her watch.)
LOIS. Now we've only a little more time before your guests ar-
rive. I want to tell you something important. Something which
probably no critic has ever before told the person about to be
criticized.
TONY. Go on.
LOIS. When your invitation announcing a perfect party came
across my desk at Arts and Leisure, something happened to me.
I mean, physically. The hair on the back of my neck stood up,
and my whole body began to shake violently.
TONY. Why, Lois?
LOIS. Because I suddenly thought: here might be the chance to
write a perfect review!
TONY. Ah.
LOIS. Immediately, I ran into my editor's office. I pounded his
desk, like some slob sister out of an old movie. I said, "Look,
buster! Here's some guy out in the provinces planning a perfect
party! Lemme at him!"
TONY. And he did.
LOIS. He did and he didn't. He said he'd print the review if it
were any good. But I had to write it on spec. And I had to pay
my own transportation here and back. For economic reasons, I
took Peoples Express.
TONY. I appreciate the sacrifice.
LOIS. It was worth it. To get here. Because after I write this re-
view, and see it printed, and hear it celebrated in the world at
large, as God is my witness, I'll never fly Peoples again!
TONY. You're an ambitious woman, Lois.
LOIS. I am, Tony, but so are you. We are both onto something
big tonight. Here you are, about to recreate the multiplicity of
America under your own roof. And here I am, about to review
that attempt for a major New York newspaper. Oh look, my
friend, we were born to meet, you and I. We are dependent on
each other. We are locked together in a profound embrace, like
Ahab and the whale.
TONY. Couldn't you just relax and enjoy the evening?
LOIS. I could not. If I did, people would be giving parties from
here to Hawaii, and calling them perfect, when they might not
be at all.
TONY. But what's wrong with that?
LOIS. There have to be standards in this world, Tony, and
naturally I'd like to be the one who sets them.
TONY. Oh God, that means we've got to be perfectly wonder-
ful tonight, don't we?
LOIS. That, or perfectly terrible. Either way, it will make for a
perfect review. (There is a knocking on the door.) Meanwhile,
someone wants to come in, and frankly I'm rather glad, since our
rhetoric was becoming a little inflated.
TONY. (Calling toward door.) Come in. (The door opens. Sally
enters in a lovely evening dress, carrying a tray of hors d'oeuvres.)
SALLY. I was getting bored hanging around in the hall, fussing
with flowers, coping with caterers.
TONY. (Going to greet her.) Enter my wife Sally, powdered and
perfumed from her bath! Gosh, Sally, you look just about as
lovely as a woman of your age and general configuration can
possibly look. (*He kisses her.*) Darling, this is Lois, who has come all the way from New York to check us out, and write us up. SALLY. And possibly to put us down, am I right, Lois? LOIS. Not unless you hurt, confuse, or bore me, Sally. (*They shake hands.*) SALLY. I'll try to do none of those things. I do hope, however, that somewhere along the line, I'll get a chance to express my true feelings.

TONY. Uh-oh. LOIS. Your true feelings? Do you mean to say, Sally, that your true feelings are not in tune with this party, and you are actually, in this day and age, trying to cover them up? SALLY. I'll say no more, though you'll notice how difficult it is for me to maintain eye contact.

TONY. Uh-oh. LOIS. (*Looking from one to the other.*) It's against both my personal and professional ethics to intervene between a husband and wife. (*Pause.*) Unless I sense a story. I sense one now. How do you feel about this party, Sally. Be frank.

SALLY. (*Passing the hors d'oeuvres.*) I feel this is a perfect party, and we are perfectly in accord. Have some hors d'oeuvres. LOIS. I still sense trouble at the top of the evening. It may well affect my review.

TONY. (*Quickly.*) The party wouldn't be perfect, Sally, if you didn't feel free to express an opinion.

SALLY. Then I don't like it very much.

TONY. Sally, my love—

SALLY. In fact I hate it. I hate the salmon mousse they're preparing in the kitchen. I hate the Chivas Regal being set up in the hall. I hate this goddamn dress which I bought on sale, at Lord and Taylors, out at that stupid, boring, fucking Mall! TONY. It's a beautiful dress, Sally, and you look lovely in it.

SALLY. It stinks. I hate it. You could feed a number of hungry people with what I paid for it. You could buy a respectable portion of a cat-scanner. You could reclaim several acres of wetlands with what I coughed up for this goddamn dress.

TONY. Civilization is expensive, Sally. I've told you that on a number of occasions.

SALLY. Then civilization is horseshit, if this is what it leads to. TONY. Gosh, Sally. Wow. Gee whiz. I have to say I wasn't quite prepared for such strong feelings. Upstairs, in our bedroom, when you were putting on your earrings, I do remember hearing vague murmurings of discontent. But I didn't expect this explosion of distaste. It startles me, darling. And puzzles me as well. LOIS. Perhaps I'm to blame here. I've known people to exaggerate their performances in front of critics. Maybe I'll go and review the mousse. (*She starts to leave.*) TONY. No, no. Please.

SALLY. Yes. Please stay. You give me a vague sense of sisterhood at a time when I need it most.

TONY. It couldn't be a perfect party, Lois, if you only reviewed the food.

SALLY. Shit! There's that expression again. "A perfect party!" What if it isn't perfect, Tony? What if two of your buddy-pals get into a boring argument about batting averages? What if someone spills a drink, or loses his teeth, or puts a cigarette out in a dessert plate?

LOIS. What if someone even smokes, for that matter?

SALLY. Exactly, Lois. Or what if someone, totally accidentally, farts?

TONY. Good Lord.

SALLY. What if that happens? Does that mean the party is no longer perfect, Tony? Does Lois here go back to New York and tell the world we produced a disaster?

LOIS. Oh well let's cross that bridge when we come to it.

TONY. I'm sure that Lois will leave some margin for error.

LOIS. Not really. I might if I were from Boston or Saint Louis, but since I'm from New York, I'm compelled to be brutal.

SALLY. (*To Tony.*) You see? We're setting ourselves up here! I may not be a la-de-da college professor, but I know hubris when I see it. When people start wandering around the house talking about perfect parties, and inviting New York newspapers to write them up, then I get a primitive Sophoclean shudder. We are challenging the gods here tonight, Tony, and I don't like it one iota!

TONY. (*To Lois.*) Sally majored in Classy Civ at Vassar.

SALLY. Yes, but I got my Master's in Social Responsibility at a Community College.

TONY. Have a drink, Sally.

SALLY. I don't want a drink.
LOIS. He's always trying to persuade people to have drinks.
TONY. I'm simply trying to be a good host.
SALLY. Or else you're trying to drown a serious disagreement
in a pool of alcohol.
TONY. I like to think—
SALLY. All right, Tony! I will have a drink. I've decided to have
. . . (She thinks.) . . . a Box Car.
TONY. A—Box Car?
SALLY. It's a drink which emerged during the Depression.
TONY. I'm not sure I know what's in a Box Car.
SALLY. You don't? And you're a perfect host?
TONY. I'm not sure I have the ingredients immediately available.
SALLY. (Casually) Oh well, then, this isn't a perfect party.
TONY. (Grinly) I'll make you a Box Car, Sally. There's a copy
of the Joy of Cooking in the kitchen, and it has a complete section
devoted to exotic beverages. I'll make you a Box Car, Sally,
and you can be damn sure it will be a perfect one! (He goes out,
slamming the door. Pause.)
SALLY. (To Lois.) That was a ploy.
LOIS. I figured as much.
SALLY. To get him out of the room.
LOIS. Yes, I picked up on that.
SALLY. I don't really want a Box Car at all. (Gets up and goes to
the bar.) What I really want is a tad of white wine, and I hope
you'll join me, Lois.
LOIS. I shouldn't. But since you're a woman, I will.
SALLY. (At bar.) Then you agree with what I said about a sense
of sisterhood, Lois.
LOIS. I certainly do. I resonated as soon as you walked in this
room.
SALLY. I've simply got to talk to someone of the same sex
about what I've been going through, recently, on this perfect
party business.
LOIS. Feel free to talk. I'll consider it strictly off the record. If I
write it up, I'll attribute it to unnamed sources.
SALLY. (Bringing down the drinks.) Well it's been hell, frankly.
That man has become obsessed with parties, particularly perfect
ones.

LOIS. He certainly seems to have an idée fixe, doesn't he?
SALLY. It's appalling. Ever since the children began leaving
home, it's as if he were trying to reconstitute the family. On a
large and general scale. With himself once again in control.
LOIS. How awful. You must feel as if you're living right in the
middle of a bad translation of Molière.
SALLY. I do. It pervades our life. Whenever we go out, when-
ever we have people in, he has these huge expectations that the
evening will click into place like some smooth, well-oiled ma-
chine. When it doesn't happen—of course it doesn't—he is
profoundly disappointed. He sits on the edge of the bed, in his
pajamas, holding his head and groaning.
LOIS. When he should be making love to you.
SALLY. Exactly! Oh it's a mess, Lois. Our marriage is teeter-
ing on the brink.
LOIS. Now, now. Think positively.
SALLY. I'm trying to, Lois. But there's so much at stake here.
Do you realize that he's quit his job because of this party.
LOIS. What?
SALLY. He has quit his job. He had a perfectly good job teach-
ing American studies at a reputable university. The salary was
insulting, but the fringe benefits made up for it.
LOIS. Did he have tenure?
SALLY. He most certainly did. And he was considered an ex-
cellent teacher. At least until recently.
LOIS. What happened recently?
SALLY. He tried to turn every class into a perfect class. The
students rebelled, of course, and switched into Abnormal Psy-
chology. That's when he quit, so he could turn his total atten-
tion to this party.
LOIS. But how does he expect to live, when the party's over?
SALLY. He expects to become a consultant.
LOIS. A consultant?
SALLY. On parties! That's why he brought you into the pic-
ture. He desperately wants a review. Because he desperately
wants to become a celebrity.
LOIS. But that's what I want to be! And there's only room for a
few of us at the top.
SALLY. I can't help it. That's what he wants. He says he comes
from what was once the ruling class and if he can no longer lead this nation toward a more perfect union, he can at least show it how to entertain!

LOIS. Yes, but a consultant!
SALLY. I know. He sees himself travelling around the country giving lectures and seminars and workshops on parties in America, and how to give them. The other night he dreamed he was on the Merv Griffin Show.

LOIS. Oh no.
SALLY. That's what he dreamed.
LOIS. But that's outrageous! Merv is very choosy about his guests.
SALLY. You know that, I know that, Merv knows that, but Tony doesn't know it. He even thinks he might host a show of his own some day. On nationwide TV.

LOIS. No.
SALLY. Or at least co-host.
LOIS. I'm stunned.
SALLY. I'm telling you, the man is obsessed. Did he show you his guest list?

LOIS. Yes he did, and I must say it was impressively democratic.
SALLY. I'm talking about his secret guest list.

LOIS. His secret guest list?
SALLY. He has a secret list of people whom he's asked to this party, and who he hopes will suddenly show up.

LOIS. Who's on it?
SALLY. Oh, God. Let me think. Abba Eban's on it.

LOIS. Abba Eban?
SALLY. Abba Eban is on that list. He thinks Abba Eban would be an addition to any party.

LOIS. Well, of course he would be, but...
SALLY. Ginger Rogers is also on the list.

LOIS. Ginger's on it?
SALLY. Absolutely. He's even bought a record of old dance tunes. If she shows up, he plans to roll back the rug, and spin her around the floor, to the tune of Follow the Fleet.

LOIS. That is sheer...
SALLY. Hubris is the word. I've already used it.
LOIS. You poor soul. Living with that.
SALLY. I'm all right. Think of him. Living constantly in the gap between how he wishes people would behave, and how they actually do. And trying to bridge that gap with this party, this evening.

LOIS. Sally: I can't tell you how much I appreciate your telling me these things. Women do connect in ways which are far beyond the world of men. I think we've proved that in the discussion we've had just now.

SALLY. Then I wonder if I might ask you a small favor.
LOIS. Name it.
SALLY. Give him a good review.
LOIS. What?
SALLY. Oh I'm not talking about a rave. You don't have to do that. Just compliment him on the basic idea. Mention a few good moments. Give him enough quotes so that he can show his clippings around.

LOIS. I can't do that, Sally.
SALLY. Of course you can.
LOIS. Sally, I can't. If I did that, if I let my affection for you influence my response, it would open the door to the most shoddy enterprises.

SALLY. But his future depends on what you say here.

LOIS. So does mine, dear heart. Don't think for one minute I'm not on the line here, too. My editor has his eye on this one. If I'm good, then he might promote me to White House functions and Hollywood galas. But if I fake it, if I strike one false note, then I might find myself a permanent stringer, doomed to cover church suppers and bowling tournaments in areas beyond even a commuting distance from New York.

SALLY. But think about Tony and me.
LOIS. Excuse me, Sally, but these days I find it hard to think about anyone but myself. We live in a narcissistic age, and it's foolish not to take advantage of it.
SALLY. But if you pan us, what will we do financially with Tony out of a job? We've got a kid still in college, and our VCR needs serious repairing.
LOIS. I can't help that, Sally. I've said all along that I must call this evening as I see it, and the Devil take the hindmost, even if the hindmost is your husband.
SALLY. (Grinch.) Then there's only one thing left for me to do.
LOIS. What's that?
SALLY. I'm not sure, but I'm hoping it will occur to me any
minute. *Tony enters, carrying a strange looking, dark brown drink,
garnished with a limp radish, on a silver tray.*
TONY. One Box Car, coming up. *He hands it to Sally.*
SALLY. *Eyesing it.* What's in it?
TONY. I doubt if you'd want to know. Let me simply say that,
like this evening, I hope the whole is greater than the sum of its
parts. *Sally looks at it, sips it.* As for you, Lois, I'm delighted to
see you with a wine glass in your hand. It indicates that you're
taking a more participatory position.
LOIS. *Wryly.* Not at all. This happens to be a cool, dry, disengaged Chablis, with a slighty skeptical bouquet.
SALLY. *Suddenly putting down her glass.* Uh-oh.
TONY. What?
SALLY. This drink.
TONY. What about it?
SALLY. It doesn't agree with me at all. You'll have to call off
the party.
TONY. Oh no.
SALLY. I'm serious. I feel perfectly awful. I've got a headache,
and heartburn, and a mild case of psoriasis.
TONY. *Going to her.* Darling . . .
SALLY. *Getting up.* No, it's getting worse. Don't touch me. I've
got to go right to bed. Here's what you better do. Post a sign on
the door, saying that the party's cancelled. Pay off the caterers,
and get a reasonable rakeoff for what we didn't consume. Call
Lois a cab. Tell the university you were just teasing when you
quit. Then scramble some eggs, and bring them up to me on a
tray, and maybe I'll feel well enough to sit up and have a nice
game of Trivial Pursuit. Go on, honey. Get started. *She is almost out the door.*
TONY. Sally.
SALLY. What, for God's sake?
TONY. I don't believe you're sick at all.
SALLY. What do you mean? I'm about to upchuck all over the
door.
TONY. I don't believe that, Sally. And I don't think Lois be-
lieves it.
LOIS. I most certainly do not.
SALLY. *Whirling on Lois.* Some sisterhood.

LOIS. I'm sorry, Sally. It's an implausible development, and I'd
have to review it as such.
SALLY. Couldn't we all just go to the movies, or something?
LOIS. The movies are out of my bailiwick, Sally. Somebody
else is assigned to review those.
SALLY. So I'm caught, aren't I?
TONY. I'm afraid you are, love.
SALLY. There's a moment in the Iliad . . .
TONY. *Quickly to Lois.* Sally was Cum Laude at Vassar . . .
SALLY. There's a moment in the Iliad when Andromache joins
Hector on the walls of Troy, right before he goes to his death at
the hands of the Greeks. She says she hates what he's about to
do, but she'll stand by him to the end while he does it. *She takes
Tony's arm and defiantly faces Lois.* This reminds me of that mo-
ment.
LOIS. I appreciate your loyalty, though I question your analogy.
*(A door bell rings, far offstage.*) But that must be your first guests,
thank God. Much as I like you both, I'm interested in seeing a
few new faces.
TONY. *Looking at his watch.* It's still a little early for guests.
Unless it's the Murchisons, who always arrive early and eat up
all the Brie.
SALLY. I told the Murchisons to be late, for exactly that reason.
*(The offstage door bell rings again.)*
LOIS. Maybe you should answer the door.
TONY. Since I'm paying a catering company a great deal of
money to do exactly that, I'm hoping I won't have to.
LOIS. I like the suspense. I find it charming. *She sits down.
TONY. *Quickly.* I know who it is! It's our great friends, Wes
and Wilma Wellman, who live down the street. They've realized
the importance of the occasion, and have come over early to
help us out.
SALLY. Exactly. Whenever we've been in a crisis situation—
when my grandmother died or the dishwasher broke down—the
Wellmans rushed right over to be by our side. *(The door bell rings
once again.)*
TONY. *(Opening the study door.)* Yes. Now I hear their gentle
voices murmuring in the front hall.
WILMA'S VOICE. *(From offstage, loudly.)* Yoo hoo!
TONY. *(Calling out.)* In the study, friends! *(To Lois.)* What is a
party without true friends at your side? And what better friends could a man have than this stalwart and attractive couple? *(He looks out down the hall.*) Good gravy, it's Wes and Wilma, all right, but I'm not sure they're dressed for the occasion. *(Wes and Wilma enter awkwardly in old bathrobes. Wilma wears a bandana around her hair.)*

SALLY. You do look a little informal, dear friends.

WES. *(Anxiously.)* Tony, old pal, we had to rush over and tell you immediately.

TONY. Tell me what, old friends?

WILMA. We can't come to your party.

TONY. Can't come?

WES. Can't come.

TONY. But you answered affirmatively. I put your names in the yes column. I gave the count to the caterer.

WILMA. Things have come up, Tony.

WES. Personal things. Talk to you later. *(He grabs Wilma and starts out.)*

TONY. Wait, wait, wait! At least say hello to Lois.

WES. Hello, Lois.

WILMA. Hello, Lois.

LOIS. Hello, Wes and Wilma.

WILMA. *(Taking Wes's arm.*) Come on, Wes.

WES. *(Staring at Lois.*) Hold it. I know this woman somewhere.

LOIS. I've slept with a number of men, but I don't think you were one of them.

WES. *(Moving toward her.*) No, this was prior to puberty . . . *(He thinks.*) Kindergarten. *(He remembers.*) P.S. 101. Brooklyn.

LOIS. You seem to have touched on my educational beginnings, though I like to think I've grown beyond them.

TONY. *(Hastily.)* I'm sure you have, Lois.

WES. You were a strange little girl. You sent out bitter, vindictive Valentines to the whole class. And when it came time for the school play—the Teddy Bear's Picnic, I think it was—you sat on the sidelines and loudly complained about the lighting. TONY. Lois is a critic, Wes. How good to hear that her talents emerged at such an early age.

WILMA. I'm finding it difficult to contribute to the conversation, because I went to private school in the suburbs of Cleveland.

TONY. That's all right, Wilma. Lois is here from New York to write up the party.

LOIS. I am indeed. And I'm already impatient with these sentimental reminiscences. What we were, or did, when we were young is of interest only to our parents and our psychiatrists. What interests me is why you two have arrived embarrassingly early and strangely undressed. This is the time when most people are still in the shower, or poking around in their clothes closets, deciding what to wear and who to be.

WES. That's exactly where we were, five minutes ago.

LOIS. In the shower? Or in the closet?

WILMA. *(Taking Wes's arm.*) In the shower, actually. Both of us. Celebrating the physical side of our marriage.

WES. That's not the point, honey. We have to go.

TONY. No, wait! Why can't you come to my party?

WILMA. It's a family obligation, Tony. Our daughter Debbie is giving a dance recital, and we feel we should be there.

TONY. Isn't that rather sudden?

WILMA. It is, Tony. But Debbie dances very much on impulse.

WES. And after Debbie dances, I have a political obligation.

TONY. Another one of those meetings on Israel?

WES. I like to think, Tony, that it's a meeting on the welfare of the entire free world.

TONY. Hey. *(With a side-glance at Lois.*) This is somewhat disappointing, friends.

WES. It's a question of priorities, Tony.

WILMA. Maybe we'll drop by for dessert. *(They are almost out the door.)*

TONY. Wait! *(They stop.*) Wilma: I don't believe Debbie is dancing tonight. And I'll tell you why. Because tonight she attends that top-secret weight-loss clinic in the cellar of the Congregational Church.

SALLY. That's true, Wilma. You told us that just yesterday. WILMA. She could do her dancing there.

TONY. No, she couldn't, Wilma. It would disturb the class. And as for you, Wes, I don't think you have a meeting on Israel. This is Saturday night, after all, and there's a specific injunction in
Leviticus which says, "Speak not of Zion on nights when the gentiles give parties."

WES. Is that true?

SALLY. He taught the Bible, Wes.

LOIS. It's a wonderful book.

TONY. Wes, Wilma, you obviously made up these inept excuses on the way over. There must be a far more profound reason why you feel you can't come. (They look at each other.)

WES. (Finally.) There is, Tony.

WILMA. There really is.

TONY. Then out with it, friends.

WILMA. Well... (She sits on the couch.)

WES. It's too much for us, buddy. This perfect party. (He sits beside her.)

WILMA. The pressure...

WES. The sense of being so totally on the line...

WILMA. And now to be judged...

WES. By a New Yorker... (He holds his head.)

WILMA. Oh, Tony, it's tough enough going to any party these days, let alone a perfect one.

WES. So we thought we'd go to the movies instead.

SALLY. It's interesting how people keep turning toward the movies.

LOIS. They are looking like a rather attractive alternative.

WILMA. At least you don't have to make so much effort at the movies.

WES. Except with Meryl Streep.

WILMA. You can never tell what accent she's doing.

SALLY. If she ruins one more book for me.

WES. Is she in *The Color Purple*?

TONY. Now wait! Hold on! Wes! Wilma! What is this? You guys are supposed to be the mainstay of the evening!

WES. Maybe that's the trouble, Tony. Maybe you're putting too much on us.

WILMA. That's exactly it. You expect too much of your friends, Tony. I've sensed it for some time. Last week, when we were playing bridge, I heard this great groan of disappointment every time I lost a trick.

WES. And she wasn't even your partner.

WILMA. Or when we eat out together, and I order the chicken,

I'm aware of your eyes on me, Tony. You make me think I should have ordered the veal.

SALLY. This has the ring of truth.

WES. We're just simple suburban people, Tony. All right, maybe I'm a urologist with a prestigious appointment at a major medical school...

WILMA. And maybe I'm a speech therapist in the local school system, with strong side interest in ceramics...

WES. But still, we're just an ordinary middle-class couple, Tony. And glad to be so.

TONY. No, goddammit! I don't accept that! You guys are easily capable of giving the suburbs a good name!

WES. Oh, hey...

TONY. I'm serious. In some ways, you stand for the full flowering of the American dream.

WILMA. Oh now...

TONY. (Sitting on the arm of the couch.) You do! Your rich ethnic roots, your pleasant home throbbing with the hum of working appliances, your weedless lawn with its well-placed shrubs, your over-educated children—well hell, you folks embody the best of that particular lifestyle, that's all.

WES. Go easy.

TONY. How can I go easy when I feel so strongly on the subject. Support me on this one, Sally.

SALLY. It's true, Wes and Wilma. He may sound fatuous, but he really admires you both.

LOIS. Yes, but do they belong at this party? They feel they don't, and I tend to agree with them.

TONY. No, no. They're fine people. You wait: They'll rise to the occasion as they always have. Won't you, Wes? Wilma?

WILMA. I'm not sure we can, Tony. We're too nervous.

WES. Tell him what we did this afternoon, we were so nervous.

WILMA. We went to our family therapist this afternoon.

WES. With the kids...

WILMA. Except for Debbie.

WES. And we shared with him our concerns about this party.

WILMA. And you know what he said, Tony? He said that our anxiety was based on the fact that, deep down, Wes and I are desperate to be a big hit.

WES. That's what he said. He said that Wilma and I have secret
fantasies of being the life of this party.
WILMA. And the kids agreed!
TONY. But then here's your chance, guys! Make your move!
WES. No, Tony, no. The spotlight's too much on us.
WILMA. Our very eagerness to succeed has incapacitated us.
TONY. Then rise above it, folks. You've done it before. What
about the DeVitas' Christmas party? That was straight hardball,
you and came through then.
WES. That's true. We did. (To Wilma.) Particularly you, honey.
WILMA. Oh stop.
TONY. No, it's true. You guys were spectacular at the DeVitas'.
I watched you working the crowd.
WILMA. Will the DeVitas be here? That might help. (To Lois.)
I always do well around the DeVitas.
TONY. No, the DeVitas will not be here, Wilma, and I'll tell
you why. Rose DeVita loses concentration on every subject she
touches. She becomes difficult to follow, and when she's been
drinking, well nigh impossible.
SALLY. Tony thought of inviting Monty DeVita without her.
TONY. Yes I did. I seriously thought of that. Because Monty
can focus. The trouble is, lately he focuses too much. He seems
to be only interested in the Dallas Cowboys, and who cares about
them?
WES. I do.
TONY. Well I don't, Wes. So the DeVitas are out. (Pause; with
regret.) Betty and Dick Washburn are out, too.
WILMA. I know. They called me. They're very upset.
TONY. I can't help that. Betty Washburn talks about nothing
but Dick, and Dick doesn't talk at all. I told Betty on the phone
—I called her specially—and said, "Broaden your range, Betty.
Or at least broaden Dick." She said she'd try.
WILMA. Still, it's so cruel, cutting people out that way.
TONY. Well if it will make you feel any better, Wilma, I told
both the Washburns and the DeVitas they could come to the
party if they just stayed in the bedroom and watched TV and
didn't try to participate in any of the dialogue.
SALLY. It's true. He did that.
TONY. But they all thought it over and decided to stay home.

WILMA. Everything you say just makes me feel the pressure
all the more.
WES. She's sensitive on these things, Tony. So am I.
TONY. Which is another good reason why I want you guys
here! You bring with you a sensitivity which comes from five
thousand years of Jewish anxiety. (A stunned moment.)
WILMA. Jewish? You invited us because we were Jewish?
WES. I have a problem with that, Tony.
LOIS. So do I!
SALLY. Yes, Tony! Honestly! (They all begin to protest noisily.)
TONY. (Shouting them down.) All I meant was . . . (They quiet
down.) All I meant was that Wes and Wilma are like the cellos in
a Verdi ensemble. They provide a lovely, consistent, melancholy
sound under the lighter, more eccentric melodies sung by some
of our superficial guests. (To Wes and Wilma.) The very fact that
you came over here just now, in obvious disarray, to express
your concern, says something about your Jewish sense of social
responsibility. (The protesting begins again. All talk simultaneously.)
SALLY. Worse and worse.
WES. Now I'm feeling vaguely stereotyped.
WILMA. Yes, I'm still having trouble with that, Tony.
LOIS. I'm particularly sensitive, coming as I do from New
York . . .
TONY. (Shouting them down.) All right, all right! Skip it! But
can I count on you two tonight? Will you both go home, and
change into what I'm sure are particularly fashionable clothes,
since you must obviously have relatives in the garment industry.
(The loudest protests yet.) Sorry! Really! I'm flailing around here
simply because I don't want my cello section to walk out on me
right before the opera begins! Now what say, folks? Are you
with me or not?
WES. Excuse me, Tony. This calls for consultation. (Wes takes
Wilma v. to consult. Tony, Sally and Lois watch them.)
TONY. (To Lois.) If they leave, I'm lost.
LOIS. I'm afraid that's true. The Jewish middle class is primarily
responsible for keeping culture alive in this country.
TONY. I agree. (Finally.)
WES. (Coming d. with Wilma.) All right, Tony. We'll make a
deal with you, because we're old and good friends.
TONY. Name your terms, Wes and Wilma.
WES. We'll come to the party if we don't feel we have to be perfect all the time.
WILMA. That's right, Tony. We want to be able to dare to fail.
WES. Our grandparents didn't come to this country from the shetls of eastern Europe in order to feel pressured at a party.
TONY. Now there it is. Take it or leave it.
WILMA. Oh good!
SALLY. Thank God. (They all embrace.)
TONY. And I'll even up you one! Once the party gets going, you both should feel free to explore your own Jewishness even in front of our shallowest Protestant friends.
WES. That's great, Tony! I've always wanted to do that!
SALLY. It's getting close to that time, folks.
WILMA. Let's cut through by the Millworth's hot tub. (They start out.)
TONY. Oh, but wait . . .
SALLY. (Frustratedly) Let them get dressed, Tony!
TONY. I just have two quick points to add to our deal.
WES. Uh oh.
TONY. No, seriously, Wilma: when you get going out there, when the party is in full swing, try not to talk about your children.
WILMA. I love my children!
TONY. I know you do, Wilma, and so do I. But people who don't have any find it difficult to contribute to the conversation. And those who do, immediately want to talk about their own.
WILMA. I hate it when they do that. It's so boring.
TONY. Then don't give them the chance, Wilma. And, Wes . . .
WES. (Suspiciously.) Here it comes.
TONY. I have to ask you not to bring up Israel.
WES. What?
TONY. I'm asking you that as a favor, Wes.
WES. I feel strongly about Israel.
TONY. I know you do, Wes, and I'm impressed by your commitment. But I'm asking you not to talk about it tonight.
WES. You didn't invite any Palestinians, did you?
TONY. Yes I did, Wes! (General uproar, once again.) But they sent their regrets. Along with a very nice wedge of goat's milk cheese.
WES. O.K., I'll avoid Israel.
TONY. Good. Now get going. Both of you.
WILMA. Can we grab a shrimp or two on the way out?
TONY. You can, if you brush your teeth afterwards. Now so long.
SALLY. (Joining them.) I'll see you to the door. And then continue to fuss reluctantly with food and flowers. (Sally, Wes, and Wilma go out. Pause.)
TONY. (To Lois.) That handles that.
LOIS. Yes . . .
TONY. (Raising his glass.) And the ship sails on.
LOIS. Yes.
TONY. I must say you stayed strangely in the background during that little confrontation, Lois.
LOIS. Did I?
TONY. I mean, you participated. But only occasionally. And your lines didn't have much energy or bite.
LOIS. My lines are not at issue here, Tony. I'm more concerned about yours.
TONY. Is something bothering you?
LOIS. Yes, Tony. There is.
TONY. Then let me have it. Now. We've only got a few minutes before the party begins, and I want to absorb it, integrate it, and act on it, if I can, before I greet my guests.
LOIS. Tony . . . (Pause.) Tony, I think I've already said how much I admire what you're trying to do here. A perfect party.
There's something big about that, and, as we've said, something quintessentially American. Only in these United States could such a notion arise. It smacks of Whitman, and Gatsby, and Citizen Kane.
TONY. Thank you, Lois.
LOIS. No, I mean it. There's something huge and grandiose about it, yes, and tragic, too. To think that one man, in his own home, would try to crystallize the hopes and dreams of an entire nation . . .
TONY. (Looking at her suspiciously.) Somewhere in your thick syntax, Lois, I'm beginning to sense a "but," waiting to pounce . . . (He passes her the hors d'oeuvres.)
LOIS. But . . . But, Tony. (She takes an hors d'oeuvre.) Mmmm, this is good. But . . . Tony, I'm going to have to pass on this party.
TONY. Pass?
TONY. Walk?
LOIS. After I finish my wine, Tony, and possibly one more of those delicious hors d’oeuvres . . . (Tony passes her the tray. She takes it, holds it on her lap, and eats as she talks.) . . . Thank you, my friend . . . I’m going to get up and walk out that door and not come back.
TONY. Now wait a minute.
LOIS. (During mouthfuls of hors d’oeuvres.) I don’t intend to write up this party, Tony. I don’t intend to mention it in a casual column, nor will I refer to it in subsequent reportage. I’ve had a pleasant half hour or so conferring with you and your lovely wife, and meeting your suburban friends, but I’m afraid that’s as far as it goes.
TONY. But you decided to review us.
LOIS. I’ve changed my mind.
TONY. But if you don’t, that would mean that this whole evening would pass unheralded, unjudged, and uncommemorated.
LOIS. Yes.
TONY. But then the world would little note, nor long remember, what we do here.
LOIS. That’s right. Yes.
TONY. But don’t you realize this is the first major cultural contribution a Protestant has made to this country since Cole Porter wrote ‘Kiss Me Kate’?
LOIS. I’m sorry, Tony.
TONY. But what’s happened? Why leave us now?
LOIS. Let me try to explain it, to myself as well as to you. (She thinks.) For some time now, Tony, I’ve had the sense that there’s something vital missing here tonight.
TONY. Something vital?
LOIS. (She begins to circle around the room.) Something . . . fundamental. At first, I thought it was simply a question of language. I mean, we’ve all been very talky around here. Very literary, and all that. And what I thought I missed was the natural vulgarity and rich rhythms of the contemporary American vernacular.
TONY. I’m not going to wander around saying “fuck” and “shit” at my own party!
LOIS. Of course you’re not, Tony, and I don’t blame you. It’s not our stilted language that’s getting me down. The source of my unhappiness lies elsewhere. (Pause.) Now how do I put this? (She sees the light.) There’s no sense of danger at this party.
TONY. Danger?
LOIS. Danger. Every good party has, underneath it, a fundamental sense of danger. And this party has none.
TONY. But I’ll have to go back to teaching if it doesn’t work.
LOIS. That’s frightening, Tony, but it’s not frightening enough. If you want this party reviewed, then it’s got to be much scarier. Think, for example, of the great parties of history: the revels of Nero during the burning of Rome. The soirées at Versailles under the lengthening shadow of the guillotine. The last frantic dance on the deck of the Titanic. Those were dangerous parties, and I’m afraid this can’t equal them.
TONY. You’re asking for too much, Lois.
LOIS. Maybe I am, but so are you. Oh look, my friend, we’re very much alike, you and I. We are born perfectionists. I have struggled out of the polyglot mire of a Brooklyn kindergarten toward the cool, clear vision of some social ideal. You, on the other hand, carry with you the memory of a civilized past gleaned from your corrupt and decadent ancestors. I am moving up. You are moving down. We have gravitated toward one another all our lives, like two lost planets in search of a sun. There’s a tremendous magnetism between us, and if you weren’t happily married, I think I’d initiate an affair with you immediately. But there’s no danger here, Tony. None. Even a simple birthday party is infused with the sadness of passing time. A wedding is fraught with the perils of sex. A funeral throb with the ache of lost things. Behind the best human gathering is a sense of its own precariousness. We should dance on the edge of the abyss. And that’s what I don’t sense here, Tony. What is the threat? Where is the pain? It’s all cozy and comfortable and polite. In fact, it’s so polite, Tony, that you’ve let me make much too long a speech without interrupting me. It’s symptomatic of the whole problem.
TONY. I’ll interrupt you now!
LOIS. Yes, but you don’t like doing it. You’re a nice man with a pretty wife, and from all reports, several fine children. You were born with money, and you married more of it, and you’ve lived easily all your life. The gods have been good to you, Tony,
and it shows. There's an aura of smug self-congratulation which pervades this house, coupled with the insidious influence of Oscar Wilde. But there's no danger here, so it isn't a perfect party, and I feel no need to review it. (She holds out her hand.) Thank you at least for a pleasant preliminary. I hope things go reasonably well, and everyone has a perfectly adequate time. (She slaps him patronizingly on the back and starts for the door.)

TONY. Wait! I could add danger.

LOIS. (At the door.) How?

TONY. Well I mean I could invite someone else at the last minute. Some Neo-Nazi. Some escaped convict.

LOIS. No, Tony . . .

TONY. I could have a small nuclear device ticking away in the cellar . . .

LOIS. Tony, please.

TONY. Why not?

LOIS. I would seem dragged in, and I'd have to say as much, when I reviewed it. (She is almost out the door.)

TONY. No, wait! Please! Really! (He thinks quickly.) What about my brother? (Lois stops and turns.)

LOIS. Your brother?

TONY. My twin brother. I've invited him.

LOIS. What's his name?

TONY. Tod.

LOIS. Tod?

TONY. Tod. Though his nickname is Toad.

LOIS. Either way, that's German for . . .

TONY. Death. (Lois comes back into the room.)

LOIS. Is he . . . dangerous?

TONY. He's a killer.

LOIS. A murderer?

TONY. No. But he kills things.

LOIS. Cats? Hamsters? Things of that ilk?

TONY. No, he kills something else. He kills moments. He destroys moods. He annihilates atmospheres. (Lois sits on the arm of the couch.)

LOIS. Tell me more.

TONY. I'll try. I'm the older, by half an hour. According to my mother, I was a perfect baby, and slid smilingly into the world. She was in the recovery room, celebrating my birthday with my father—raising a glass of champagne, sending a telegram to Yale, all that—when suddenly she gave a shriek and spilled her champagne. Out came Tod, who kicked and screamed and totally ruined the party.

LOIS. Your poor mother.

TONY. I know. It was as if, even then, even at his birth, Tod was a kind of afterthought, a kind of instinctive counterargument or contradiction, emerging from the same source.

LOIS. Do you look alike, you and Tod?

TONY. Almost exactly. He, of course, wears a mustache, while I, as you may have noticed, don't. After his birth, he struggled so much against his mother's embrace that she inadvertently dropped him. The infant broke his right leg, which was improperly reset, because he irritated the doctor. The result is that he has a pronounced limp, which gives him a certain Byronic appeal, but makes him a consistently disappointing tennis partner.

LOIS. How sad.

TONY. Yes. He was such an unhappy child that my mother sent him to Sunny Italy for Junior High School. He returned with a book on the Borgias and the permanent speech patterns of a Neapolitan pickpocket.

LOIS. Any other distinguishing characteristics?

TONY. Just one.

LOIS. And what is that?

TONY. He has— (He stops.) Never mind. It's not important. The point is that my brother is, or can be, an ultimately destructive human being. He is in constant competition with me, and everyone else. He has hacked his way through life's dark wood leaving a long, bloody spoor of victims behind him. He has been married at least four times, and divorced only twice. He was expelled from the Teamsters Union, and reprimanded by the C.I.A. His conversation is designed to make you thoroughly uncomfortable and even while he's doing it, you feel he's glancing over your shoulder, seeking out someone else to irritate even more. In short, he is probably the most dangerous person I have ever known, and already I'm having second thoughts about inviting him to this party.

LOIS. You said there was another characteristic which distinguished Tod from you.

TONY. Oh well. It's not important really.
LOIS. Tell me. It might prove to be helpful, later on.
TONY. I thought you were leaving.
LOIS. Frankly, now I'm on the fence. The notion of twins has always had a primitive appeal. It might just work at a party. I'm also intrigued by the mustache and the limp, and the Italian connection is unsettling. So tell me: what else does he have that you don't?
TONY. Well, to put it frankly, Lois, he has a considerably larger penis. (Long pause.)
LOIS. I've decided to stay at this party.
TONY. You have?
LOIS. Yes. I've decided that the party may have some potential.
TONY. I'm delighted! I hope you won't be disappointed.
LOIS. That remains to be seen. (The sound of a party begins to be heard offstage.)
TONY. People are beginning to arrive. I should go greet my guests.
LOIS. (Taking his arm.) I'll join you. To look them over. And to see if your brother Tod is among them.
TONY. He might not come.
LOIS. Why not?
TONY. Simply because I invited him.
LOIS. What if you called him and told him to stay away?
TONY. Then he'd show up immediately.
LOIS. Go make that call. I'm eager to meet this man. (She goes out. He follows, after looking back into the room with an expression of both relief and dismay.)

END OF ACT I

ACT II

AT RISE: The study is empty. The door to the hall is open. Sounds of the party waft in. It doesn't seem to be going very well. Then Wes and Wilma enter. They are now dressed for the party: Wes wears a tuxedo, Wilma a long dress.

WES. What do you think you're doing out there?
WILMA. Me?
WES. Just what do you think you're doing?
WILMA. I am carrying on a series of decent conversations.
WES. Bullshit!
WILMA. I am keeping the party afloat!
WES. Double bullshit!
WILMA. I am partying like mad!
WES. That's not partying you're doing out there! That's crap!
WES. That's bullshit! You are shitting all over the floor out there! (He goes to shut the door.)
WILMA. Where? Name a time!
WES. When you were talking with that man by the bar.
WILMA. I was good with that man.
WES. You were lousy with that man, Wilma! You were totally irresponsible!
WILMA. He was telling me about his dog.
WES. And what did you tell him?
WILMA. I told him about our cat.
WES. Jesus, Wilma.
WILMA. Well, I had to say something.
WES. What do we do with our cat is a private matter!
WILMA. Well I couldn't talk about our children.
WES. And then you shifted the subject to urban renewal.
WILMA. What's wrong with that?
WES. It was a lousy transition, Wilma, and you know it. It was fake, and false, and you could hear the gears grinding all over the room!
WILMA. Well I got bored with animals.
WES. That's not the point. You don't just suddenly slam a conversation into reverse! Jesus! It was pathetic. The poor guy practically dropped his drink. (He gets a cube of ice from the bar, puts it in a towel, and holds it to his head.)
WILMA. Well I don't see you lighting any fires out there tonight.
WES. I'm doing O.K.
WILMA. You are walking through it.
WES. I'm doing fine.
WILMA. You are a zombie. You are phoning it in. I saw you slouching on the couch with that man from Rhode Island.
WES. What's wrong with him?
WILMA. Nothing, except that he ravaged his own cleaning woman.
WES. He didn't rape her, Wilma.
WILMA. He most certainly did. She's out there right now, by the vegetable dip, confirming the incident.
WES. Well he and I didn't discuss that.
WILMA. I'll bet you didn't.
WES. We didn't. I was advising him on his hernia.
WILMA. Bore me some more, Wes.
WES. Better me on the hernia, than you on the cat!
WILMA. Listen, I may have been crude out there. I may have forced a transition or two. But at least I was reaching out towards other people and other subjects. I didn't retreat, and commandeer the couch, and indulge in a lot of macho chest-thumping and groin-scratching with a ruptured rapist from Rhode Island! (Wes grabs her and begins to twist her arm. Sally enters hurriedly, closing the door behind her.)
SALLY. You're fighting, aren't you? (Wes and Wilma separate quickly.)
WILMA. Oh no, not really.
WES. We were just kind of sparring around, Sally.
SALLY. Oh God, this party. It doesn't seem to be gelling at all. Everywhere I go, middle-class married couples are bickering irrationally over trivial issues. Our younger friends have gone upstairs slamming the door to the guest room, where they smoke dope and listen to loud, shrieking songs, with lyrics which are virtually incomprehensible. To avoid the din, the older folks have congealed in a gloomy corner, where they reminisce about Lawrence Welk and accuse each other of having Alzheimer's disease. Our Black and Hispanic friends, once so full of life, are huddled in sullen groups, discussing social inequities in a vaguely revolutionary tone. The gays and born-agains eye the goings-on with some contempt, depressed with our condition and their own. Even the caterers are losing interest. The bartender plies his trade with cynical abandon, confusing gin with vodka, spilling the bourbon, and stinting on the ice. The miserable maids prowl around the room, offering stale hors d'oeuvres and then snatching them away, before you've even had a chance to grab one. From off in the kitchen come sounds of an angry clatter, and unnecessary breakage, which, I am sure, we will be overcharged for later. (By now, she has collapsed on the couch in despair.)
WES. It sounds like an image of America itself.
SALLY. Whatever it is, it is hardly a party, much less a perfect one. And to make things worse, I can't find Tony anywhere. I'm terrified he's doing something desperate.
WILMA. I think I saw him going into the bathroom.
WES. You're not supposed to notice things like that at a party.
WILMA. (Privately, to Wes) Well I did! (Then to Sally.) I also noticed that he had him with a small tin of black shoe polish.
SALLY. Black shoe polish? Then he is desperate. Tony hates to shine his shoes, particularly at a party.
WILMA. I wish Wes here would shine his occasionally.
WES. (Threateningly) I don't know about my shoes, Wilma, but I know something of yours that needs a little blacking!
SALLY. Wes! Wilma! Please! You see what's happening? Now you're talking about wife abuse, which I've always felt was basically counterproductive.
WES. You're right, Sally. I apologize. For both of us.
WILMA. (Indignantly) I can goddam well apologize for myself!
SALLY. Now stop! We promised Tony we'd help make the evening a success, and here we are contributing to the disaster. Look at us, arguing in here, while that strange critic pokes around from room to room, like a dental hygienist in a ceaseless search for cavities. Oh I give up. I really do. The hell with it all. It just confirms what I've told Tony all along: there's no possibility for a civilized social life in America beyond the comforts of a few friends and the ghastly confines of the family.
WES. (Joining her on the couch) Come on, Sally. We can do better.
WILMA. (Sitting on her other side) Yes, Sally. Please. Let's try again.
WES. Don't be discouraged, Sally. Listen. Most parties hit a snag during the course of the evening. We learned about it in medical school. It's called hitting the wall. Or going into the
tunnel. It happens even in Europe. The best thing we can do is drink plenty of liquids and ride out the pain.

SALLY. I wish I could believe that, Wes.

WILMA. No, it's good reliable advice, Sally. But perhaps I can add something, gleaned from my experience as a semi-professional potter. Let me say that a party is like a pot in process. It can't be pushed or prodded or poked. (Sally blinks.)

WES. You're spitting a little, Wilma.

WILMA. That's because I feel passionate on the subject. (Wes hands Sally a handkerchief. Sally wipes her face.) What we've got to do now, Sally, is nurse this party. Caress it. Stroke it into shape. These are particularly feminine virtues, Wes, but you're welcome to watch.

SALLY. But what about Tony? This whole damn thing was his idea, and why should we bother, if he isn't even there?

WES. Maybe he is, and you just haven't seen him, Sally. It's a poor party indeed when husbands and wives hover around each other. For example, I plan to ditch Wilma as soon as I leave this room.

WILMA. It's true, Sally. He will. And I accept that. Men are like children at parties. They like to wander off, but they always scamper back for reassurance at the breast.

SALLY. (Getting to her feet with a sigh.) I'll try to believe that. Come on. Let's give it another go.

WES. Do you think we should all do a few stretch exercises first?

SALLY. (Going to the door.) No, no. Come on. There are times when you've simply got to go on faith in human nature. (She opens the door. Lois, who has been eavesdropping, tumbles in.) Oh hi, Lois.

WILMA. Hi, Lois.

WES. Hi, Lois.

SALLY. Did you hear what we were saying, Lois?

LOIS. Of course not. Did you say anything important?

SALLY. Yes, actually. We were all just saying what a wonderful party this is.

WES. That's right. We were all just congratulating ourselves on how well things were going.

LOIS. Well none of that came through. I did happen to hear, however, someone compare a critic to a dental hygienist.

SALLY. Oh dear.

LOIS. I'd be careful of cracks like that, people. There will always be critics, and you're lucky enough to get a good one.

SALLY. Well all I know is I'm having a wonderful time!

WILMA. So am I. Aren't you, Lois? Aren't you having fun?

LOIS. I never comment till it's over. A responsible judge should always weigh all the evidence, good and bad, before imposing the death sentence.

SALLY. Oh dear. Maybe we'd better rejoin the party. Come, come, dear friends. Let's enjoy ourselves even more before the party ends. (Sally herds Wes and Wilma out as the party sounds come up. Lois remains onstage. She takes a compact out of her purse, and begins to comb her hair, using the mirror to glance behind her. After a moment, Tod comes in. He wears a tuxedo, and looks just like Tony, except that he has a black mustache, slicked-back hair and a pronounced limp. Lois watches him in the mirror as he closes the study door behind him. The party sounds die out.)

TOD. (Speaking throughout in a corny Italian accent.) You Lois? Lois. I try to be, at least during daylight hours.

TOD. How about at night?

LOIS. Oh well, then I'm the Queen of Rumania. (Tod comes farther into the room; he drags his foot behind him in an exaggerated limp. He might sing Italian words seductively "Spaghetti... Spumone... "Sonagli..." etc. Finally:)

TOD. Would you like to see my cock?

LOIS. I beg your pardon?

TOD. I said I've been drinking since seven o'clock.

LOIS. I hope you're still in control of all your faculties.

TOD. Goddamn right, you stupid mother.

LOIS. What?

TOD. I said I thought I might have another. (He limps to the bar.) May I mix you one?

LOIS. I don't think so, thank you.

TOD. It would do you good, you silly snitch.

LOIS. Excuse me?

TOD. I can easily mix you up a special batch.

LOIS. No thank you. No. Thank you.

TOD. (Beginning to circle around her.) Tell me about yourself, Lois.

LOIS. Where do I begin?

TOD. Do you like to fuck?

LOIS. Only when I laugh.
TOD. You're making it hard for me.
LOIS. Don't hold it against me.
TOD. You're turning me on. I have a weakness for repressed women.
LOIS. What makes you think I'm repressed?
TOD. I can tell. You're all bottled up.
LOIS. You think so?
TOD. Oh yes. Luckily, I like to open bottles. Particularly with my teeth.
LOIS. You're wasting your time.
TOD. Am I?
LOIS. Oh yes. I'm much more at home with the twist-off top. (Tod sits down beside her on the couch.)
TOD. You've got all the right answers, don't you, Lois?
LOIS. That's because I'm on to you. I know all about you.
TOD. What do you know? Be specific. Be concrete. (He adjusts his stiff leg.)
LOIS. I know, for example, that you've been out there wandering around from person to person, group to group, sowing seeds of dissension. I know you're here to systematically destroy your own brother's party.
TOD. Well you're wrong on that, Lois. I'm here to salvage it.
LOIS. Ha, ha. That's a good one. Ha, ha, ha. How, pray tell?
TOD. By giving you such a fucking good time in bed, Lois, that you'll stagger bowlegged back to your word processor and write an out-and-out rave!
LOIS. Ha, ha. And how do you propose to get me into that bed, Tod?
TOD. Well, first of course, I plan to give you a good, stiff drink. (He gets up and goes to the bar again.)
LOIS. I don't want a drink, Tod. I believe I've already indicated as much.
TOD. You'll want one, Lois, after you see what I'm making. (He begins mixing a concoction in a silver cocktail shaker.)
LOIS. Does it have a local habitation and a name?
TOD. I call it a Cardinal Sin.
LOIS. Then I won't like it. I have strong reservations about the Catholic hierarchy, coming as I do from New York.
TOD. I think you'll love this one, Lois. I think you'll lap it up. (He works on the drink.)

LOIS. Suppose I take a sip of this drink. Suppose I even chug-a-lug it. What happens next?
TOD. Well, of course, by then I'd be sitting beside you. And what I'd do is put my arm around you, and slowly caress your left breast until your nipple was firm and erect.
LOIS. But I wouldn't allow that, Tod. I'd take your hand and remove it with my own.
TOD. You wouldn't be able to, Lois. Both your hands would be thoroughly preoccupied.
LOIS. Preoccupied?
TOD. Yes. One would be holding the Cardinal Sin.
LOIS. All right. I'll grant that. But the other?
TOD. The other would be perched, like a frightened bird, on my throbbing loins.
LOIS. Hmm.
TOD. You see. You get the picture? (He continues to concoct the drink.)
LOIS. I'm afraid I don't, Tod. I mean here we are in the middle of a party. People are bursting through that door every other minute.
TOD. That's why I'd maneuver you immediately to the master bedroom, under the pretext of showing you pictures of children and dogs.
LOIS. But still, people would come in and out. Visiting the bathroom. Combing their hair. Getting their coats, if the party continues to degenerate.
TOD. We'd solve that problem with Vaseline.
LOIS. Vaseline? Don't be foolish. Vaseline solves many problems, but not that one.
TOD. We'll put it on the doorknob, Lois, rendering it virtually unturnable. (He moves toward her again.)
LOIS. You have an answer for everything, don't you?
TOD. I believe I do. Yes.
LOIS. Well I'm still not sure I'd like such a situation, with people banging on the door and rattling the doorknob. I think I'd be distracted.
TOD. (Sitting behind her, on the back of the couch.) You wouldn't hear a thing, Lois. And I'll tell you why. Because by that time you would be writhing naked on the bed, among the furs and Burburys, emitting a series of wild exuberant love cries, ending
in a veritable Vesuvian eruption of delight. People will be running for cover, Lois. You'll be scattering red hot lava over a relatively large area. And then, while you're still smouldering, maybe smoking occasionally but temporarily inactive, I'm going to take you into the bathroom, and give you a bath, and anoint your erogenous zones with Oil of Olay. And then dial your editor in New York, and hand you the telephone, and you're going to say into that phone, "Truly this was a perfect party, and I'm mighty glad I came." (Pause.)

LOIS. You think I can be bought, don't you?
TOD. Yes I do.

LOIS. Know what I think, Tod?
TOD. No. What do you think, Lois?
LOIS. I think you've said those things hoping I'll be shocked. I think you want me to reject that drink, repulse your advances, and run from this room. I think you want me to pan this poor party in no uncertain terms.

TOD. You think that?
LOIS. Yes I do. But it won't happen, Tod. Bring me that drink immediately. (He hobbles back to the bar to get the drink. He might sing a few more Italian words as he goes. He brings the drink; it is a weird, bubbling, bright red potion, emitting smoke. She takes it, looks at it, and smiles.) A Cardinal Sin, eh?

TOD. That's what it's called in *The Story of O*, Lois.

LOIS. Down the hatch, with a one-two-three. (She slugs it down, then slams the glass on the coffee table.) There. I intend to take you on and top you, Tod, point by point, game by game. The bets aren't in yet, and the match isn't over. (She stands up.) So show me that master bedroom. Let's strip for action, and commence firing. And when everything's said and done, I want you to know that I still intend to assess this evening with a clear, unjaundiced eye! (He grasps her and kisses her. Immediately, Sally opens the door and comes in.)

SALLY. Ah, Tony! Here you are! (Tod breaks away from the kiss and looks at her.) Oh. Excuse me. I thought you were my husband, Tony.

TOD. No. I'm Tod. His twin brother.
SALLY. I see. I'm terribly sorry. (She goes out.)

TOD. (To Lois.) Goddammit, but you're a tough nut to crack, Lois.

LOIS. If there are any nuts to be cracked around here, Tod, let them be yours. (She goes out grinning. Tony looks after her nervously, finishes the rest of the Cardinal Sin from the cocktail shaker. Then he starts off after her, remembers to limp, and almost catches his leg in the door as he leaves. A moment. Then Wes leads Wilma into the room. He closes the door behind him, looks at her, and then kisses her.)

WILMA. What was that for?

WES. You know.

WILMA. I'm afraid I don't.

WES. You were fantastic out there!

WILMA. Really?

WES. You were terrific.

WILMA. Well thanks.

WES. You turned the whole thing around.

WILMA. Well I made an effort. I'll say that.

WES. Effort? You were flying out there! You went into orbit out there! What got into you?

WILMA. I don't know, Wes. The vibrations changed, or something. I just got on a roll.

WES. Roll? You were spinning! No one got near you.

WILMA. You got near me, Wes.

WES. Oh well .

WILMA. No, I'm serious. When that woman fell asleep in the corner? Who helped me slap her awake and get her going?

WES. Yeah well .

WILMA. I mean it. And when that older man tried to sneak out and go home, who threw a body-block on him in the front hall?

WES. Well it was fun. I'll say that.

WILMA. (Hugging him.) What a party! I can't wait to take this experience home and share it with our children.

WES. Shh! (They break apart and look toward the door.)

WILMA. (Whispering.) If we present it right, if we don't intrude on their private space or personal time, I think they might enjoy hearing about it.

WES. Yes, but I've got another idea.

WILMA. What?

WES. I want to sneak home and get our cat.

WILMA. Get our cat?

WES. Get it. Bring it here. And display it.

WILMA. Display it?
WES. To the group at large.
WILMA. You love that cat, don't you, Wes?
WES. Yes, I do.
WILMA. You're extremely attached to that animal.
WES. Yes, I am. Shall I get it?
WILMA. (Holding him, gently.) I'm going to say no on that, Wes. And I'll tell you why. It might serve as a conversation piece for two or three minutes. But then people will drift away. Or the cat will.
WES. I suppose you're right.
WILMA. After all, it can't talk.
WES. Thank God.
WILMA. Exactly. (Both laugh. The door opens. Sally comes in. The party sounds come up. She closes the door quickly behind her and leans against it, breathlessly.)
SALLY. The party's beginning to crest!
WILMA. That's just what we were saying!
SALLY. It's amazing. Everything is suddenly coming together.
It's as if somewhere someone had pulled a switch, and a huge gravitational force had come into play. It's like the beginning of civilization itself, if I remember my courses at Vassar correctly.
First, there was this man, I don't even remember who he was, who sat down at the piano, and started idly fiddling with the keys. Then others began to gather around. A chord was sounded. A tune emerged. Someone began to sing. And then, as if out of nowhere, people produced other musical instruments. Harps... xylophones... Moog Synthesizers... And now!—Well, let's listen, and see how far they've come: (She opens the door. From off-stage we hear the huge sounds of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—full orchestra and chorus—singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."* A rich romantic light and an exotic fog spill into the study as the three stagger back, amazed.)
VOICES.
... His Truth is marching on!
Glory, Glory Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory Hallelujah!
Glory, Glory Hallelujah!

*See Special Note on copyright page.

His Truth is marching on!
(Sally, Wes and Wilma pick up glasses, trays, ice-buckets, as symbols, triangles and drums. They march around the room, ending in a wild display of sympathetic enthusiasm. Finally, Sally closes the door and the sounds stop.)
SALLY. See?
WILMA. (Wet-eyed, hugging her.) It's a good party, Sally.
WES. A very good party indeed.
SALLY. Or rather we should say it was a good party.
WES. You mean it's over?
SALLY. It will be. I doubt if we can top that. I'd better go out and say goodbye.
WILMA. Did you ever find Tony?
SALLY. No, but I imagine he was in the chorus. He's got an excellent baritone if he stays with the main melody. (She opens the door and heads out into the light, closing the door behind her.)
WES. Should we leave, too? Shall I get our coats?
WILMA. I imagine Tony wants us to stick around for a post-mortem.
WES. That's right. What's a party without a postmortem. It should be a gas. (Leads her to couch.) Come on. Let's relax. (They sit down side by side.) There's nothing like a good party to bring you together. (They settle back, romantically.)
WILMA. Mmm. This is lovely.
WES. Mmm hmmm. (He thinks.) Out there, when we were going strong, do you think we needed a little cutting?
WILMA. Cutting?
WES. Just a snip or two. Here and there. For example, when I was talking about the function of the urethra.
WILMA. You were lovely on the urethra. You were lyrical.
WES. Still, I might tighten it up for the next party.
WILMA. Well try. See how it floats. You can always go back.
WES. Actually, you might give a little thought to that joke about your mother.
WILMA. I'm not going to change a word of that, Wes.
WES. Just think about it.
WILMA. I'm not going to lose that laugh, Wes! I'm serious!
WES. O.K., O.K.
WILMA. Honestly. You can ruin something by tinkering with it.
WES. O.K., O.K. (The door opens. Lois comes in, looking somewhat disheveled. Sounds of the party offstage indicate people are beginning to say goodbye. Lois closes the door behind her.) Oh. Hi Lois.

WILMA. Hi Lois. (Lois has the visible traces of black mustache on her upper lip.)

LOIS. I'm looking for my purse.

WILMA. We thought you had left long ago.

LOIS. No. Actually, I've been... upstairs.

WES. Upstairs?

LOIS. Yes. The party took a strange turn in that direction, and I felt it was my duty as a critic to follow the thread. (She sits down gingerly.) Some of my colleagues, of course, have been known to leave in the middle, or rush rudely out at the end, without even saying goodbye. I don't do that, even if I have a deadline. I stick it out, to the bitter end. (She powders her nose, sees the mustache, tries to figure it out, can't, powders over it.)

WES. The bitter end? I hope that doesn't reflect your opinion of the party.

LOIS. Not necessarily. The bitter end may simply mean the end of a rope, or cable, that is wound around a bit, or post.

WILMA. Yes, but it may also mean a painful, or disastrous, conclusion.

LOIS. (Getting up, holding out her hand.) Either way, goodnight. Nice to meet you both... You were interesting minor characters... Goodnight... Goodnight. (She stands for the door. Tony comes in.)

TONY. You're leaving, Lois? (Lois reins back with a little shriek.) What's the matter?

LOIS. (Regaining her composure.) I thought for a moment you were someone else.

TONY. You may have momentarily confused me with my twin brother.

LOIS. That must be it.

TONY. Then you met him?

LOIS. Oh yes. We... met.

WILMA. I didn't know you had a twin, Tony.

TONY. I don't broadcast it. Nobody likes to be duplicated.

LOIS. Is he still here, by the way?

TONY. No, Lois, he's gone. I saw him skulking down the back stairs, and slinking off into the night, his tail between his legs.

LOIS. Let's hope that so-called tail remains there. Frankly, Tony, I don't want to meet him again. I feel that he and I exhausted every possible topic of conversation. (She holds out her hand.) And now I must say goodbye. As you know, I have a deadline to meet.

TONY. (Shaking hands.) I won't ask you to say ahead of time what you'll write about us.

LOIS. No. That would be a violation of some meaningless taboo.

TONY. I'll see you to the door, though.

LOIS. That won't be necessary. I'm sure Sally is out there, giving wet, warm kisses to the last of your guests. Goodbye, Tony. (Grimly.) And if you see that brother of yours, ask him to read my review. (She goes out. Pause.)

WES. (Looking after her.) Something's gotten into that woman. (Tony looks at him nervously.)

TONY. You're right, Wes, and I'm worried.

WILMA. Why? It was a spectacular party!

TONY. You know that, I know that. But does she?

WILMA. What makes you think she doesn't?

TONY. I don't know. There's something wrong. I can feel it in my bones. (Sally comes in.)

SALLY. There. That's the last of our guests.

TONY. Did Lois say anything on the way out?

SALLY. Nothing. She just put her head down and went through the line like a fullback.

TONY. Could you tell anything from her expression?

SALLY. Nothing. She seemed particularly enigmatic. Her brow was furrowed... .

TONY. Oh God!

SALLY. But on the other hand, playing about her lips was a Mona Lisa smile.

WILMA. See, Tony? You just can't tell!

SALLY. Oh. She did say one thing, though.

EVERYONE ELSE. WHAT?

SALLY. She said that she had been invited to give a capsule edition of her review over local television at eleven twenty-seven tonight.

WES. (Looking at his watch.) It's almost eleven twenty-seven now.

WILMA. Do you still have a TV in your study, Tony?
TONY. Actually, I do. I use it for watching Masterpiece Theatre.
SALLY. He uses it for watching Talk Shows, and wishing he
could run one.
TONY. Used to, Sally. Yesterday. When I was young.
WILMA. Let's turn it on! (She crosses to the TV cabinet, opens it,
turns on TV.)
TONY. Oh God! She'll say it was terrible! She'll say the food was
bad, and the drinks were worse, and the company impossible!
SALLY. Sssh. (They all watch the screen intently.)
TV. (Voiceover...) And now Lois Lumkin, our guest entert-
tainment critic from New York, will tell us where she's been and
what she thought of it. (The lights come up on Lois's actual face,
framed in the TV.)
LOIS. (Brightly.) Thanks, Bruce... Tonight's party causes me
to feel emotions as mixed as its guest list. The basic idea—that
someone would set out to give a perfect party—is farfetched but
engaging. (Everyone reacts enthusiastically.) The execution is some-
thing else again. It spatters where it should sparkle, and fizzes
where it should dazzle. (Everyone looks glum.) Perhaps I'll elaborate
on these thoughts tomorrow in a major New York newspaper.
Meanwhile, let me simply assign it a Seven...
SALLY. Seven's not bad...
LOIS. On a scale of Seventeen...
TONY. Oh Good Lord...
LOIS. And I had serious reservations about the lighting.
TONY. The lighting?
TV ANNOUNCER'S VOICE. Seen one party, seen 'em all,
right, Lois? (Lois laughs charmingly.)
SALLY. Turn that thing off. (Tony slams shut the cabinet cutting off
Lois in mid-laugh. Pause.)
TONY. Shit.
SALLY. I'm sorry, sweetie.
TONY. The lighting.
WES. What does she know, anyhow?
WILMA. Yes. What difference does it make?
TONY. (Pacing around the room.) Difference? What difference
does it make? That woman is going to sit down and write an
article which will appear in New York, and here, and in Upper
Volta, for Chrissake, saying that I put on a lousy show!
SALLY. Not lousy, sweetheart. Just so-so.

TONY. That broad is going to go on National Public Radio,
which is beamed by satellite into the farthest reaches of the
Soviet Union, and announce that she's just been to one hell of a
crummy party.
SALLY. Not crummy, love. Just disappointing.
TONY. That bitch is going to hang out in various two-star
New York restaurants — —
SALLY. Now stop it, Tony. You're exaggerating.
WILMA. Still, isn't it a shame that one woman should have
such a far-reaching effect?
SALLY. She said, "Perhaps." She might not even review it.
TONY. Worse and worse! Love me, hate me, but don't ignore
me! Fuck, piss, shit! (He sinks into a chair. Pause.)
WILMA. I think we'd better go. I'm uncomfortable with such
explicit language, even though I recognize its therapeutic value.
WES. Actually, I get a kick out of language like that. But I'll
leave too, for the sake of our marriage. (Embraces Tony.) So
long, Tony. If I could sum up the party in one word, I'd say it
was interesting.
TONY. Thanks a bunch, Wes.
WILMA. (Kissing Tony.) No really. It was. We learned several
things about parties we didn't know.
WES. And several things we didn't need to know.
TONY. Get out of here, guys!
SALLY. I'll show you to the door.
WES. Don't bother, Sally. You both should have deep personal
tings to say to each other at a humiliating time like this.
WILMA. Yes, but don't say them. Just go to each other, look in
each other's eyes, and hold each other, tightly, for a long, long
time. And let the tears come, people. Let the — (Everyone shouts
her down with groans.)
TONY. Please leave, Wilma!
WES. (At the door.) Come to think of it, Tony, the lighting was
bad. I meant to mention it myself.
TONY. Scram! (Wes and Wilma go. Sally starts to clean up. Pause.
Tony looks at her.) My mother liked it. (Sally says nothing.) No kid-
ning. She said it was a lot of fun. (Still nothing from Sally.) It's almost
as if Lois had attended an entirely different party. Didn't she
hear the singing? Jesus, what kind of a country do we live in,
where one person calls the critical shots? It's cultural fascism,
that's what it is! It's Nazi Germany! In Moscow, they have twenty critics, and nobody pays any attention to any of them. (Nothing.)

Well. Back to the classroom. Probably at the high school level. If I'm lucky. Teaching nothing but courses on decline and decay. Spending the rest of my days searching the puffy, narcotized eyes of my students for some faint, dim light of recognition. Knowing all along that all they know is that I couldn't even give a decent party. (Still nothing from Sally as she cleans up. He glances at her again.) It will affect you, too, of course. I imagine you'll lose your job at the hospital once they hear about this. You'll have to retool. Take up high tech state-of-the-art software. Sell chips and bits and disks and bytes in some vast suburban shopping center, where you're the only salesperson within an area of three square miles. (Sally dumps the guest list into the wastebasket. He winces.) Go on. Say it.

SALLY. Say what?

TONY. I'm a simple, shallow, smart-assed shit, and I deserve all this.

SALLY. I won't say that.

TONY. I'm a trivial-minded twit, and I had it coming.

SALLY. I won't even say that.

TONY. Then what are you going to say? Simply goodbye? Will you leave me?

SALLY. I might.

TONY. Knew it.

SALLY. It all depends on how you answer a question, Tony.

TONY. Don't tell me. Let me guess: why am I so fucking hung up on parties?

SALLY. That's not the question. My question is the oldest question in the world. It was first asked in the Bible, Genesis, Chapter Four, Verse Nine.

TONY. Wow, Sally. You've got almost total recall from Sunday School.

SALLY. My question is what God asks Cain. Namely, where is thy brother? (Pause.)

TONY. Would you repeat the question?

SALLY. I don't think I need to, Tony. (Pause.)

TONY. My brother, eh.

SALLY. Your brother.

TONY. Well, as I told the others, I believe he may have slinked — or slunk— anyway, I believe he has sidled off into the night.

SALLY. I don't believe that, Tony.

TONY. You don't believe it?

SALLY. I think he's still here.

TONY. (Crossing to the door.) Where? In the cellar? Cultivating toadstools?

SALLY. I think he's right in this room.

TONY. My twin brother? Tod? (Looking around the room.)

SALLY. I don't believe you have a twin brother, Tony.

TONY. But you saw him. You walked right into this room when he was kissing Lois!

SALLY. How do you know that, if you weren't there, Tony?

(Pause.)

TONY. Uh oh.

SALLY. You made up this brother, Tony, in a desperate attempt to retrieve this party. You painted a cheery mustache, with Kiwi shoe polish, on your upper lip. You cultivated a grotesque limp and a ludicrous accent. You didn't even bother to change your costume. You simply pretended to be this so-called twin brother. (Pause.)

TONY. How do you know I'm not my twin brother pretending to be me?

SALLY. That is a question only Pirandello could answer. Meanwhile, I'll ask another.

TONY. One is enough.

SALLY. This is simply a corollary to the first. Namely: did you or did you not copulate with that critic?

TONY. I . . .

SALLY. Yes or no.

TONY. I copulated.

SALLY. Thought so. You left your guests, you went upstairs, you put Vaseline on the doorknob, which was an old trick we used when the children were younger, and then you proceeded to have sexual relations with a woman who writes for the Arts and Leisure section of one of the finest newspapers in the entire free world.

TONY. That's all true.

SALLY. Jesus, Tony! How hungry you must have been for succasa!

TONY. I was. And I suppose it's no excuse to say that all Ameri-
TONY. I never looked at things that way before.
SALLY. Well look at them that way now. Because what we're really talking about is sexual, social, cultural, and political imperialism, on a large and general scale.
TONY. Good Lord.
SALLY. And it doesn't work, Tony. It doesn't work in the bedroom, and it doesn't work outside. That's why Lois walked out of here so bitterly disappointed. And why our embassies are being attacked all over the world. And why the Yankees can't seem to win the pennant.
TONY. So in other words, all I've done tonight is take American idealism, and reveal it for the dark, destructive dream it really is.
SALLY. I'm afraid that's the long and the short of it, darling.
TONY. What a grim vision, Sally. You've opened up an abyss.
It seems that a party is just a power trip.
SALLY. At least your kind of party is, my love.
TONY. Oh God it's true! So what happens now? Will you leave me?
SALLY. I've thought of that.
TONY. Go off with some angry emissary from the Third World?
SALLY. I've thought of that, too.
TONY. Live in a newly-emerging democracy with a quasi-Marxist orientation? Experiment with alternative theatre and ambivalent sexuality? Give up partnering, and parenting, and hostessing, all the days of your life?
SALLY. I've thought of all these possibilities, and rejected them out of hand.
TONY. But then where do we go from here? What happens to us? What happens to me?
SALLY. Sweetheart—
TONY. (Getting up, coming d.) No, I'm serious now. What happens to me? I know what I am now. A fifty-year-old fool, all burdened down with eighteenth century ideals, nineteenth century impulses, and twentieth century despair. I've betrayed my wife, embarrassed my family, and irritated the critics! Oh I'm a hopeless case. If I were Lois, I'd pan me unmercifully. What do I do with the rest of my life? My children are gone, my teaching's behind me, my wife patronizes me unbearably.
SALLY. Tony...
TONY. No, really. I'm totally hung up. I'm a man without illusions, which means I'm no man at all. What happens to me now? (A doorbell rings offstage.)
SALLY. There's your answer.
TONY. A doorbell ringing late at night?
SALLY. That's it.
TONY. I doubt very much that it will dispel my current mood of despair. It's probably the children, all deciding to go to graduate school. Or else the I.R.S. disallowing me to deduct this party.
SALLY. Don't be cynical, Tony. It's just your friends, back for another try.
TONY. Another try?
SALLY. I told people, as they left, to take a short nap and then come back, after we'd had a chance to talk. This time, I said, it will be my party, and I'll be running it on totally different terms.
TONY. What terms?
SALLY. There will be no attempt to make this party perfect. There will be no shaping or judging or interrupting unless someone gets physically violent or is obviously misinformed. You will simply go among your friends and take them for what they are. There won't even be a caterer. Everyone is bringing over various ethnic dishes, and has promised to help clean up afterwards. (Tony crosses to door, opens it, looks out. We hear the sounds of noisy chatter and rock music: "Burning Down the House" by the Talking Heads.*)

* See Special Note on copyright page.

THE END
NOTE TO THE DIRECTOR

We learned in rehearsal that this play, despite its absurd situation and exaggerated diction, works best when the actors play their intentions realistically and straightforwardly. To comment on the characters or to impose a distorted angle on the production is simply to add to what the language already does. The actors should be encouraged at every opportunity to play their objectives seriously, to listen carefully to the concerns of others on stage, and to stay within the realm of the real.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

The hors d'oeuvres consumed by Lois toward the end of Act I probably should be small slices of banana placed accessibly on the tray. These are easily swallowed and digested, and the actress should have no trouble wolfing down a large number of them.

The “Cardinal Sin” is best concocted by pouring cranberry juice, or some other red beverage, into a glass containing a chunk of dry ice. The ice is held in a perforated metal tea-leaf container, and should be introduced onto the set at the last minute; otherwise it will dissipate and prove ineffective. In our production, it was slipped to Tod through a hole in the flat by his desk.

The music before each act should be witty and elegant, without falling into the stereotypical Mozart or Haydn. Jean-Pierre Rampal playing jazz, for example, might give the right effect.

The toy dog referred to in the property list barked and nodded, activated and de-activated by sudden sound. It provided some additional laughs when the party is celebrated in Act II, and during the curtain calls.