

Simply Divided

A Comedy in Two Acts

By Jeffrey Lovett

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Simply Divided

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All inquiries concerning performance rights should be directed to:

Jeff Lovett
644 Hall Road
Cairo, GA 39828
Telephone: 229-221-1030
Email: jeff@wgra.net

Cast of Characters

- Sissy Mae Owner of Simply Delicious Diner
- D'Ellen The town's "Cougar"
- Ray A regular customer at the diner
- Trish Ann A part-time tennis coach
- Charity A free-lance hair stylist
- Gabe The town's most eligible bachelor
- Sarah Beth Sissy Mae's daughter
- Carlotta A young widow
- Earl Sissy Mae's husband
- Announcer

REGARDING THE SET

This play consists of one setting: *The Simply Delicious Diner*. The script mentions the placement of a dining counter and three small tables, with chairs, placed around the set but the number of tables and chairs may be adjusted for your needs and available space. There are three entry doors used during the production: one exterior door downstage left and two doors leading offstage right to the kitchen and the restroom. The set has been kept purposely simple for easy construction and easy adaptability to a wide variety of performance spaces. No set design drawings have been supplied with the script in order for individual theatre companies to use their own imagination and resources to create the diner's interior.

ACT I

Scene 1

The scene opens with the interior of Simply Delicious, the last diner still open in the small town of Simply, Alabama. The town has been slowly dying ever since Toyota opened a new truck plant in neighboring Mobile and the majority of the male population has moved away seeking high paying automotive jobs. Simply Delicious is a quaint little restaurant that specializes in authentic Southern Cooking and is owned and operated by Sissy Mae Montgomery. The diner is decorated with Sissy Mae's collection of 'southern' art and shows her fondness for chickens. The walls feature pictures of chickens, framed needle point tapestries of roosters and hens, plus various other memorabilia like old Coca-Cola signs, rusty farm implements and a small collection of collectible plates which are for 'show' and not to be used by the patrons. There is a dining counter situated in the upstage right corner and behind it is a set of swinging double doors up stage right that exit into the kitchen. There are two round bar stools on the left side of the bar. On the counter near the kitchen door is a coffee maker, a small dusty cash register and radio. On the wall, above these two machines, are three signs. One advertises the diner's specialties including their 'Bottomless Cup of Coffee' and "Fried Chicken that Would Make the Colonel Come Back From the Dead" which features a drawing of KFC's Colonel Sanders walking with his arms outstretched and looking like a zombie. There's also a sign above the cash register that says "No Third Party Checks!" in bold letters. Sissy Mae doesn't trust the cash register to make the correct change so never uses it. Instead, she chooses to make change with the cash she carries around in her apron pockets. There are two-three small round tables in the diner, depending on the size of the set. Down stage of the counter is a door which exits to the restroom. There is a small sign hanging on the door that says "Chicks & Chucks" showing a rooster and a hen standing outside of an outhouse

and indicating that the restroom is unisex. The left wall features a large picture window looking out onto a street scene which shows a hardware store across the street that is boarded up and empty and a book store with a large "Going Out of Business" sign plastered across its front window. There is an exterior door down stage of this window with a sign that says 'Come Back and Bring Your Hungry Friends!' The door has a small bell mounted on the wall above it that rings cheerfully when a customer comes into the diner, an occurrence that does not happen as often as it used to. There are two prominent fixtures hanging from the walls of the diner. One is a large sign that says "Today's Special" with a dry erase board underneath which hangs on the back wall just center of the dining counter. Another is a large dart board which is mounted on the wall between the counter and the bathroom door. Affixed to the center of the dart board is a piece of paper featuring the Toyota logo which has several darts stuck in it. There is a small box of extra darts on the corner of the counter for patrons to show displeasure with the company.

When the curtain opens, the radio is playing a Hank Williams song. We hear a couple of pots bang around in the kitchen, then Sissy Mae enters through the kitchen door, singing along with the radio. She is carrying a coffee pot full of fresh water which she pours into the coffee maker. After she turns it on, she exits from behind the diner counter and approaches the "Today's Special" board and writes down the day's specialty, Fried Chicken Livers. As she finishes writing the special, the song on the radio comes to a close and the announcer from the local AM radio station comes over the speaker.

ANNOUNCER. You're listening to WSP, AM 720, Simply Radio. That was the late, great Hank Williams.. who died in the back seat of a Cadillac... not some damn Toyota!
 Sissy Mae. Hell, yeah!

SISSY MAE continues to write on the board, adding the words 'with grits' then marks it out and writes 'with cheese grits' and a price of \$5.99. As she writes, the announcer continues to speak on the radio.

ANNOUNCER. Well, folks. It's time for the daily Population Report for Simply, Alabama... brought to you by Joe's Moving and Storage. Remember, when you got to go, go with Joe. Okay, here's the new figures from Blanche over at the Chamber of Commerce. And if you're listening, Blanche, tell Joe Earl I'm leaving the station at five to go cat fishing and if he wants to go with me, to bring his own stink bait. Okay, folks... here's the tally. The population of Simply, as of this morning, was 2,783 women...

SISSY MAE turns to look at the radio, dramatically crossing her fingers.

ANNOUNCER. ..and 214 men. Looks like we lost three more to the truck plant last night. Sorry about that ladies.

At this news, SISSY MAE curses the radio, then grabs a dart from the box on the counter and throws it towards the Toyota logo.

SISSY MAE. Damn you, Toyota!

SISSY MAE continues to curse TOYOTA as she goes back behind the counter, turns off the radio and exits back into the kitchen. There's the sound of more pots banging in the kitchen as the door opens and D'ELLEN CHAMBERS enters. She is the town's "cougar" and is dressed in a stylish skirt and blouse, both of which were intended for younger women. She looks around the diner when she enters, smiling to see that she is alone, then crosses straight to the "Specials Board" and using the eraser hanging beside it from on a string, erases "Fried Chicken Livers" and replaces it with "T-Bone Steak." She steps back to admire her work, smiles and then takes a seat at the table that is right of center and begins digging through her large purse, looking for something. SISSY MAE enters from the kitchen, carrying a tray with salt and pepper shakers.

When she sees D'ELLEN, she puts down the tray and looks over the "Specials Board" and then at D'ELLEN angrily.

SISSY MAE. Dammit, D'Ellen. You've got to stop doing that or I'm going to go broke!

D'ELLEN chuckles to herself as SISSY MAE crosses over and changes the "Specials Board" back to say "Fried Chicken Livers"

SISSY MAE. Last week, I had to sell two steak dinners to these out of town tourists who sat right there and called everybody they knew back in Atlanta and told them that you could buy Delmonico steak dinners in Southern Alabama for \$4.99...

D'ELLEN. Yeah, but I bet not many of them come with collard greens and corn bread.

She gets another laugh out of this and she continues to dig through her purse.

SISSY MAE. Did you hear the count this morning?

D'ELLEN. Yep. Three more of our eligible breeding stock packed up their underwear and went off to make Japanese trucks. Thank God, I'm no longer in the market for a husband.

SISSY MAE. I would think four ex ones would have about satisfied your appetite by now.

D'ELLEN. Honey, I'll always have the appetite. Unfortunately, Simply can't quite deliver the kind of quality I'm looking for. I'm more of a 'prime rib' kind of gal. *(points towards menu board)* And all we got around here is fried chicken livers.

SISSY MAE pulls out an order pad from her apron and walks over to D'ELLEN.

SISSY MAE. Well, Miss Prime Rib.. what'll it be today?

D'ELLEN. I believe I'll start with a nice glass of wine. Maybe a '67 Chateau Margaux..

SISSY MAE. Huh... How about some coffee?

D'ELLEN. Perfect!

SISSY MAE exits as D'ELLEN digs through her bag some more. SISSY MAE calls from the kitchen.

SISSY MAE. So, how long has it been now?

D'ELLEN. Nine months and fourteen days. I've just about gotten the Marlboro smell out of my last Vera Wang skirt.

SISSY MAE returns with a cup of coffee and hands it to D'ELLEN.

SISSY MAE. Well, I'm proud of you. My Earl has been trying to quit for years but just can't seem to last longer than a day without an unfiltered Camel between his teeth.

SISSY MAE crosses to the counter, picks up the tray and starts placing the salt shakers on the tables. When she's finished, she uses a rag to start wiping the counter.

D'ELLEN. You hear much from him lately?

SISSY MAE. Every now and then he'll call. But ever since he found that apartment to sublet up in Mobile, he doesn't come home on weekends like he used to. Those damn Toyota people stole my customers... then they stole my husband.

D'ELLEN. Well, at least you got a husband and he has a job. Larry lost his job at the brokerage firm four months ago...

SISSY MAE. Now, is that number one or number three?

D'ELLEN. Three. I was getting four thousand a month in alimony before he lost his job, then the checks went down to thirty five hundred and this last one was for only three grand. I'm thinking about driving up there to Birmingham and seeing if old Larry really did lose his job or is just trying to stick it to me.

SISSY MAE. Well, at least you got somebody sending you something. Earl says it takes all he makes at the Toyota plant for him to live on, with his apartment and having to support Sarah Beth while she's going to college.

D'ELLEN. How's she liking it?

SISSY MAE. Pretty good, I guess. She's working part time at this little restaurant downtown. She says they sell something called a panini. You ever heard of one of them?

D'ELLEN. They're grilled Italian sandwiches.

SISSY MAE. Yeah, well, Sarah Beth says I should get me one of those panini grill things and start putting them on the menu.

D'ELLEN. I bet they'd go great with collards and corn bread.

SISSY MAE. Very funny!

SISSY MAE reaches under the counter and pulls out an old wind-up clock. She shakes it and then looks over at D'ELLEN.

SISSY MAE. You know what time it is?

D'ELLEN looks at her watch.

D'ELLEN. Let's see what the Rolex I bought with Larry's money says. 11:03.

SISSY MAE. Oh, my God. Quick, help me get ready for Ray.

She grabs a plastic bottle of ketchup from under the counter and runs out and sets it on the table in front of D'ELLEN.

D'ELLEN. You still letting that freak eat in here, Sissy Mae?

SISSY MAE. He's about the only regular I got left, D'Ellen. Now, get up. You know that's his chair.

SISSY MAE helps D'ELLEN get out of the chair. She grabs her purse and heads back to the bar stool under the "Specials Board" as SISSY MAE quickly rearranges the table, putting the salt and pepper shaker in

the center and the ketchup bottle to their left. She looks at it and then puts the ketchup on the other side.

SISSY MAE. I can't ever remember. Ketchup on the right or on the left?

D'ELLEN. How about putting out a bottle of French's mustard. That'll make old Ray wet his pants.

SISSY MAE. Hush, D'Ellen. You know how he is.

D'ELLEN. Yeah, I know how he is. I used to date the freak in high school. He'd spend twenty minutes trying to close the door to my house the right number of times. The whole time I dated him, I never saw the beginning of one single movie.

SISSY MAE. What's the time? Exactly?

D'ELLEN. 11:04:47....

SISSY MAE. Okay.. here we go.

*They both look anxiously towards the door as
SISSY MAE counts down from ten.*

SISSY MAE. 10.. 9..8...7..6...5...4...3...2...1..

D'ELLEN. Blastoff!

At this precise moment, the door opens and in comes RAY, dressed in a neat pair of slacks and a flannel shirt. RAY suffers from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and enters the diner at exactly 11:05 every day using a strict series of repetitive actions. After he enters, he turns to close the door. He opens and closes it three times in rapid succession.

D'ELLEN. Come on, Ray. We're gonna' miss the movie.

RAY turns to look at D'ELLEN and disgustedly exits back outside. SISSY MAE puts her hands on her hips and glares at D'ELLEN.

D'ELLEN. God, this is fun!

SISSY MAE. D'Ellen!

D'ELLEN. Don't worry.. he'll be back.

As if RAY heard her, the door opens again and he re-enters, turning around and closing the door three times rapidly. He then reaches up and rings the bell with his hand, and then counts his steps out loud as he crosses to the seat where D'ELLEN was sitting just a moment ago.

RAY. One, two, three, four, five, six... (NOTE: depending on the size of your stage, this number will vary, but it always has to be the same when RAY enters the room)

When RAY reaches the table, he pulls a small bottle of spray disinfectant from his pocket and sprays the seat of the chair and wipes it with his handkerchief.

D'ELLEN. That's right, Ray. Spray it good. I've been married four times. No telling how many germs there are still sticking to my ass.

RAY makes a disgusted face, sprays and wipes the seat some more and then reluctantly sits in the chair. He reaches forward and switches the ketchup bottle to the other side of the salt/pepper shakers.

SISSY MAE. Sorry, Ray. I can never remember that part.

SISSY MAE steps up to his table with her order pad.

SISSY MAE. We got a real nice Fried Chicken Liver Special today, Ray. Comes with cheese grits.

RAY. Just the usual, please, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. Coming right up.

She exits, leaving RAY and D'ELLEN alone in the diner. RAY pulls out a small tape measure from his shirt pocket and begins to measure the distance between the objects on the table, readjusting them to make sure they are in the correct positions on the table. D'ELLEN watches this whole episode with a smirk while she reaches into her purse, pulls out a

small bottle of whiskey and adds a shot to her coffee. She watches RAY some more, then digs through her purse. Finally, she turns the purse upside down and dumps about ten packs of cigarettes onto the counter, opens one pack and puts an unlit cigarette in her mouth. RAY recognizes the sound without turning to look at her.

RAY. Don't you light that cigarette, D'Ellen Chambers. You know it makes me cough 'til my nose bleeds.

D'ELLEN. I quit smoking for your information, Ray. Nine months ago.

RAY turns slightly and sees all the cigarette packs on the counter.

RAY. Well, if you quit nine months ago, then why are you carrying around a carton of Marlboro's in your purse?

D'ELLEN. Because that's the way I'm doing it, Ray. I made a pact with myself. I can buy as many cigarettes as I want, but just no lighters or matches.

RAY. That ain't quitting, D'Ellen. That's hoping that you won't ever come across an open flame.

D'ELLEN. Yeah, at least I'm trying, Ray. When was the last time you tried to walk across a room without counting your steps?

RAY. As I recall, it was the night we broke up. I distinctly remember 'skipping' across the room then.

D'ELLEN scowls at him as Sissy Mae enters from the kitchen carrying RAY's food on a tray. He has ordered his usual lunch- a grilled cheese sandwich with only one slice of bread on the bottom and a glass of lemonade in a red plastic Solo cup.

SISSY MAE. Here you go, Ray. Grilled cheese with no bread on top.

She sets it down and RAY immediately moves it around several times until it is perfectly lined up behind the salt shaker. Sissy Mae turns to go back into the kitchen and RAY holds up his hand to stop her.

RAY. Sissy Mae?

She turns, expecting this and pulls out her order pad.

SISSY MAE. Yes, Ray?

RAY. I would like to add a side of toast to my order. Pumpernickel, toasted light with no butter.

SISSY MAE. Coming right up, Ray. *(she exits)*

D'ELLEN. Why don't you just order both pieces of bread at the same time, Ray?

RAY. Why don't you go buy a lighter, D'Ellen?

D'ELLEN. I told you, I quit smoking!

RAY. No, you didn't. You just quit buying lighters.

D'ELLEN sticks out her tongue at RAY and pulls a deep drag on her unlighted cigarette and sticks it back in the pack angrily. RAY continues to arrange his plate in the center of the table. SISSY MAE enters carrying a small plate with a piece of toast. She walks over and sets it on the table beside the half sandwich. RAY clears his throat and SISSY MAE jumps, grabs the plate and moves it to other side of the sandwich.

SISSY MAE. Sorry. Anything else?

RAY. When was the last time you cleaned the bathroom?

SISSY MAE. This morning.

RAY. With Comet?

SISSY MAE. Yep. With Comet.

RAY. Okay, if you'll excuse me.

SISSY MAE steps back and RAY pushes back his chair and stands. He taps the table three times with the knuckles of his right hand, pats his head three times, then turns and counts his steps to the bathroom door. When he reaches the door, he pulls out the small can of disinfectant, sprays the knob and then exits into the bathroom.

D'ELLEN. What a freak show. He has gotten a lot worse since high school. Did I ever tell you about the time Ray tried to take my bra off in the backseat of his Daddy's Olds 88?

SISSY MAE turns and heads for the kitchen.

SISSY MAE. No, D'Ellen, you never did.

D'ELLEN. He had to unsnap and re-snap the clasp three times before he finally got it unbuckled. Then it hung on my sweater and he had to do it all over again. In two years of dating, Ray never got past first base. Not because he didn't want to. He just couldn't figure out how to do it without having a nervous breakdown.

SISSY MAE. Just leave him in peace, D'Ellen, and let the man eat his lunch. I'm going to go start the grease for the livers.

SISSY MAE exits into the kitchen. When D'ELLEN is alone, she looks around and then gets up, crosses to the table and rearranges the plates and condiments on RAY's table, then sits back down. After a moment, the door to the bathroom opens and RAY enters. He stops, turns and closes the door three times in rapid succession, then counts the steps back to his seat, once again pulling out his disinfectant and spraying the chair before sitting. After he settles into the chair, he looks at the table and sees that everything has been moved. He yells out in anguish and hastily puts everything back in its proper place while D'ELLEN chuckles and digs through her bag again, looking for a lighter. RAY takes a deep breath, adds the single piece of toast to the top of his sandwich and slowly begins to eat. The door opens and in walks TRISH ANN BLACKWOOD, a beautiful young woman who was a standout tennis player at the local high school and then attended Ole' Miss on a tennis scholarship. She had intended to become a professional tennis player after college, but had to return to Simply to care for her ailing grandfather, a wealthy gentleman she calls PIPPY who owns a string of hotels and liquor stores along the Alabama coast. PIPPY wasn't supposed to last long, but it's been twelve years and TRISH ANN is still in Simply where she teaches tennis part-time at the local high school.

She is wearing the same outfit she always wears: a short white tennis skirt, tight blouse and white tennis shoes. (NOTE: Make sure the tennis skirt has 'built in' shorts- you'll see why later) Under one arm is a tennis racket, which TRISH ANN carries with her everywhere. After entering, she closes the door and begins to walk towards the counter.

TRISH ANN. Hey, Ray.

RAY. Did you forget something, Trish Ann?

TRISH ANN. Oh, sorry.

She turns back towards to the door, raises her tennis racket and uses it to ring the bell. This is another one of Ray's OCD rituals.

RAY. Thanks.

TRISH ANN. No problem, Ray. How's the sandwich? Did Sissy Mae toast it light enough for you today?

RAY. Soft and chewy.

TRISH ANN steps up to the counter and sees D'ELLEN who is once again searching through her bag for a lighter.

D'ELLEN. Why do you coddle him, Trish Ann? All it does is encourage him to keep up with that stupid fake feeble act.

TRISH ANN. Who, Ray? I think he's sweet. And besides, it's not an act. It's called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I took a psychology course at Ole' Miss and learned all about it. Ray is what my professor called a Compulsive Orderer. He has to do things the exact same way every time. He can't help it.

RAY. *(over his shoulder)* That's right, I can't help it, you old bat.

At this comment, D'ELLEN takes a pack of cigarettes from her purse and throws it at RAY, hitting him in the back of the head.

TRISH ANN. I see you're still trying to quit smoking by carrying around ten pounds of cigarettes in your purse. And you think Ray's weird?

D'ELLEN. Yeah, and what would your college professor call me? They have a word for my disorder?

TRISH ANN. Yeah.. it's called Pathetic.

RAY laughs at this with a mouth full of cheese sandwich as SISSY MAE comes through the kitchen. She's carrying a large pan of some type of food which she's stirring with a large spoon.

SISSY MAE. Morning, Trish Ann.

TRISH ANN. Hey, Sissy.

SISSY MAE. How's Pippy today?

TRISH ANN. Pretty good. His gout is bothering him pretty bad this morning.

SISSY MAE. Tell him to drink some cherry juice. That's what my grand pappy used to do to bring his down. The usual?

TRISH ANN. Yeah. But Pippy said no dark meat. Gives him the winds.

SISSY MAE. Okay, white meat it is.

She turns to go back into the kitchen.

TRISH ANN. *(calling after her)* And he said to make sure you put the gravy in a little cup instead of all over the potatoes. He likes to drink that separate.

D'ELLEN. Pippy drinks gravy?

TRISH ANN. He's worth six million dollars, D'Ellen. He can bathe in it if he wants to.

D'ELLEN. *(she puts an unlit cigarette in her mouth, then turns towards TRISH ANN)* When are you going to get out of this 'hicksville' town, Trish Ann and do something with your life? You've been back here, what, ten years now?

TRISH ANN. Twelve. You know I can't leave Pippy. He could go any day.

D'ELLEN. Pippy ain't going nowhere. The only reason he told you that crap about being on his death bed was because he couldn't keep a house keeper after your Granny passed. Beau Blackwood is gonna' outlive us all.

TRISH ANN. My boyfriend, Bart, has been begging me to move up to Birmingham. Said there's a big tennis community up there and I could play in some tournaments and maybe get a national ranking.

D'ELLEN. Trish Ann, I think your days of having a national ranking are about passed, don't you?

TRISH ANN. No, I do not! And who are you to talk about having dreams, D'Ellen? What have you ever dreamed of doing with your life besides cashing alimony checks from the four fools you talked into marrying you.

D'ELLEN. Three.

SISSY MAE walks with a carry-out box for TRISH ANN to take to PIPPY. She tries to get into the conversation.

SISSY MAE. Three? Three what?

D'ELLEN. My three ex-husbands.

SISSY MAE. I thought you had four ex-husbands.

D'ELLEN. I did, until Carl died last month.

TRISH ANN. Which one was that? Number one or two?

D'ELLEN. Number two. Caught cancer.

RAY. *(over his shoulder)* You can't catch cancer.

D'ELLEN. Oh, yeah? Then why do you spray every door knob with Clorox before you touch it, Ray?

RAY sticks out his tongue at her. SISSY MAE sets the food down on the counter and goes over to D'ELLEN and comforts her.

SISSY MAE. I'm so sorry, D'Ellen. Why didn't you say something?

D'ELLEN. Say what? *(she gets up and crosses away, obviously upset at the mention of CARL's name)* That my gravy train had sprung a leak and I had to cut up my Neiman-Marcus card? Y'all would have just laughed at me. Anyway, I hated the old buzzard.

TRISH ANN. You shouldn't hold malice against the dead, D'Ellen. I'm sure that whatever Carl did to you that made you divorce him can now be forgiven with his passing.

TRISH ANN hands SISSY MAE some money and she reaches into her apron pockets to make change while D'ELLEN talks.

SISSY MAE. Yeah, why did you divorce that one?

D'ELLEN. It was his own damn fault!

RAY. I'm sure it was. You are such a joy to live with.

D'ELLEN. Shut up, Ray.

SISSY MAE. Was it his cold feet?

D'ELLEN. No, that was Roger.

TRISH ANN looks at SISSY MAE, questioning.

SISSY MAE. Number four.

D'ELLEN. I liked Roger pretty good. But he had some kind of circulation problem and the coldest feet you ever saw. And every night, without fail, he would put them right in the small of my back.

TRISH ANN. So, what was Carl's offense?

D'ELLEN. I don't want to say.

TRISH ANN. Ah, come on. It can't possibly be worse than cold feet in the back.

SISSY MAE. Bad breath? Fallen arches?

RAY. He got new glasses and could see what he married?

SISSY MAE and TRISH ANN snicker at this a little. D'ELLEN turns, suddenly angry at being made fun of.

D'ELLEN. He couldn't pronounce my name. Wouldn't even try.

SISSY MAE. You divorced him because he couldn't pronounce your name correctly? Well, that is much worse than cold feet.

D'ELLEN. Oh, he could pronounce it, alright. He just wouldn't. He used to call me Dellen. My name is D'Ellen. D apostrophe E-L-L-E-N. My Mama named me after this actress who used to be on the *Days of Our Lives*. Said she thought it was the prettiest name she ever heard. I told Carl that my name was *not* Dellen, but that's what he insisted on calling me. Used to laugh and say I was trying to act all 'uppity' by putting punctuation in my name. So, after nine years of hearing my name mispronounced, on purpose, I divorced him.

SISSY MAE. Sounds like just cause to me.

D'ELLEN. Took him to the cleaners in court, too. Got his house, his boat and two of his best coon dogs. And on the tenth of every month, one big fat alimony check.

SISSY MAE. Served him right.

D'ELLEN. But Carl wouldn't let it go. Oh, no. The old buzzard continued to rub my nose in it. Every month, he would purposefully leave the apostrophe out when he wrote my name on the check, just to spite me.

TRISH ANN. (*mockingly*) Well, that does it. He deserved to die!

D'ELLEN. Well, I don't know about that. But, if God had just struck him mute, I would have been fine with that.

The door opens and CHARITY COLLINS walks in, carrying a wig on a foam head in one hand and a cell phone in the other. CHARITY is a free-lance hairstylist who does people's hair in their homes while her husband, HAROLD, travels as a long-haul trucker. She is wearing a gaudy smock and has a large bag slung over her should which she uses to carry all of her hairstyling equipment. Her hair is bleached pure white. CHARITY considers herself to be a beauty expert and trendsetter in the small town of Simply and has a different hair style or color every day. As she comes through the door, she's talking on her cell phone. When she sees RAY at the table, she closes the door and obediently

reaches up and uses the mannequin's wig to ring the bell above the door which makes RAY smile.

CHARITY. I know, Roz. I'm hurrying just as fast as I can, but how was I supposed to know that they would have Clara's funeral so quick? I'm working on her wig right now and have to have it over there by two for the viewing. Yes, Roz, I'm doing a wig for a dead woman, so what? Doylene says her Mama wants to be buried looking like Tammy Wynette and her hair is way too thin to tease. So, were going to have to go with a wig. Okay, I'm at the diner getting some coffee. I'll run this thing by the funeral parlor and be over there in an hour. Yes, you'll have plenty of time to get a seat on the front row, with the family. Okay, you go ahead and shave your neck and pluck those chin whiskers and that will save us at least a half an hour. Okay, bye.

She shuts her phone, puts it in the pocket of the smock and sets the wig head down on the table near the door.

CHARITY. I guess y'all heard, Clara Bartlett dropped dead in the sugar aisle at Piggly Wiggly yesterday.

RAY. Sad.

CHARITY. Hey, Ray. How's the sandwich today?

RAY. Soft and chewy.

SISSY MAE. Yeah, we heard. Took out the entire shelf of Dixie Crystal Sugar and a Twinkies display. What a mess!

CHARITY. Diabetes. I told her the last time I was over there working on her hair that she had to stop eating Dunkin' Donuts, but the old girl wouldn't listen to me. And now look. Laid up in an oak casket over at the Merkel Brothers Mortuary with sugar all over her face and hair too thin to tease.

SISSY MAE. Coffee?

CHARITY. Yeah. Extra black.

CHARITY sits down at the table and begins to style the wig with a large comb and pick she pulls from her bag.

CHARITY. You know, her son works up at the Toyota plant and even though he asked twice, they won't let him off for the funeral.

TRISH ANN takes one of the darts from the box on the counter and throws it towards the dart board.

TRISH ANN. Bastards!

CHARITY. Well, at least with her passing, there's more men to go around for the women of Simply.

D'ELLEN. Like we had a lot of competition from Clara. She was what? Eighty three?

TRISH ANN. ...and half blind?

CHARITY. Yeah, but she was scrappy and some men like that. Don't they, Ray?

RAY. I know I sure do.

D'ELLEN shakes her head at this remark as SISSY MAE enters with CHARITY's coffee and takes it to the table.

SISSY MAE. I wish you wouldn't do your comb-outs in here, Charity. Last week, Roy from down at the bank found a blond hair in his Chicken Fried Steak and got so mad, he nearly called in my loan.

CHARITY. This one don't shed. It's made from dog hair. Feel it.

SISSY MAE reaches out and touches the wig lightly.

SISSY MAE. Soft.

CHARITY. Golden retriever. Clara's gonna' love it.

CHARITY barks at SISSY MAE, frightening her. While D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN chuckle, she walks over to RAY's table.

SISSY MAE. Another one, Ray?

RAY. No, thank you. Just the ticket.

SISSY MAE hands him the ticket and RAY pulls out a few crisp dollars from his shirt pocket and hands them to her. They are wrapped in plastic.

SISSY MAE. You always give me the cleanest money in town, Ray.
RAY. That's 'cause I have it dry-cleaned. Kills the germs.

RAY stands and counts his steps as he crosses toward the door. He sprays it with his bottle, opens and shuts the door three times, pulls it wide opened, then turns to the ladies and waves goodbye.

RAY. See you tomorrow, Sissy Mae. Trish Ann. Charity.

RAY pauses as he looks over at D'ELLEN and then exits as he purposefully pronounces her name incorrectly.

RAY. See you later, Dellen.

RAY reaches up and rings the bell with his hand, then exits, laughing. D'ELLEN jumps off her stool and starts to chase after him but is restrained by SISSY MAE. Just as the door is closing, a young man enters the diner. He stands in the open doorway for moment, consults a sheet of paper in his hand, looks back out towards the street and turns to enter the diner. GABRIEL HILL (GABE) is tall and very handsome and the women immediately swoon at his sight. As he enters the room, he holds out a piece of paper and looks confused.

GABE. Excuse me, ladies. I was wondering if any of you might know where I could find... *(looks at the paper)*... 216 Braxton Bragg Street? I'm a little lost.

The women are speechless for a second, then D'ELLEN gets off her stool and crosses over to him.

D'ELLEN. Did you say Bragg?

GABE. Yes. Braxton Bragg. Odd name for a street, don't you think?

D'ELLEN. Not in Simply. All of our streets are named for dead Confederate Generals.

TRISH ANN. One of the smart ideas of the Daughters of the Confederacy a few years ago. Thought it would bring in more tourist dollars.

SISSY MAE. Which it didn't.

*SISSY MAE crosses over to GABE and looks at the paper.
She points off stage right.*

SISSY MAE. General Braxton Bragg. Fought in the Battle of Shiloh. Had some damn bushy eyebrows. Let's see... well, you keep heading down this way, and at the railroad tracks, you turn right onto General Joseph Wheeler Drive... then..

TRISH ANN. No, that's the long way. (*pointing*) Go back to the IGA and turn left onto John B. Gordon, then left onto William Barksdale Lane.. should be the second house on the right.

From the table where she is teasing the wig, CHARITY speaks up.

CHARITY. But, he ain't there.

GABE. Who? William Barksdale?

CHARITY. Clarence Polk. That his house, 'cept he don't live there no more. Moved up to Mobile and got him a job putting the airbag warning stickers on the dashboards of Toyota trucks. So, if you've come to visit 'ole Clarence, you'll need to head up to Mobile.

At the mention of the word 'Toyota', SISSY MAE grabs a dart from the box and throws it at the dartboard.

SISSY MAE. I hate Toyota! Clarence Polk was one of my best customers!

GABE. Well, I'm not here to visit Clarence. I just bought his house.

At the mention of this, SISSY MAE, D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN all gather around GABE excitedly. CHARITY stays in her seat and continues to tease the hair on the wig. She's happily married.

D'ELLEN. Oh, really?

GABE. Yes, ma'am. Closed on it yesterday.

TRISH ANN. You're moving to Simply?

GABE. Yes, ma'am. I'm the new English teacher over at the high school. I start on Monday.

SISSY MAE. Well, welcome to our little town. *(she extends her hand to GABE)* I'm Sissy Mae Montgomery. I own this diner and I'm...

D'ELLEN interrupts her, pushing SISSY MAE's hand away and taking GABE's arm.

D'ELLEN. ... married. What about you?

GABE. Ma'am?

D'ELLEN. Married?

GABE. Oh, no ma'am. Not yet. I guess I'll be turning Mr. Polk's old place into a swinging bachelor pad.

CHARITY. You might want to clean the carpets first. Clarence had this thing for stray cats.

All the women look at GABE with delight. D'ELLEN extends her hand to GABE. She still has the unlit cigarette between her lips.

D'ELLEN. And my name's not ma'am. It's D'Ellen Chambers. Miss D'Eellen Chambers.

GABE. Well, nice to meet you, Dellen..

Everyone winces as GABE mispronounces D'ELLEN's name. She grimaces, then recovers.

D'ELLEN. D'Ellen.. with an apostrophe. I'm sure you know how to use one of those, since you're an English teacher and all. *(she uses her cigarette to indicate the punctuation mark in the air)*

GABE. Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry. Here. Let me get that for you.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a lighter which he holds up to D'ELLEN. Sissy Mae and Trish Ann both yell "NO!" at the same time, startling Gabe. Sissy Mae pulls D'ELLEN away as Trish Ann turns the stunned man around and extends her hand out to him.

TRISH ANN. My name is Trish Ann Blackwood. I work at the high school, too.

GABE. Let me guess? Math teacher?

TRISH ANN. Nope. Tennis coach. Part time.

GABE. Wow, we have a tennis team?

TRISH ANN. All Region last year in mixed doubles.

D'ELLEN. *(turning Gabe back around to face her)* And you are?

GABE. Oh, I'm sorry. Gabriel Hill. But everybody just calls me Gabe.

D'ELLEN. Gabe. I like that. Sounds masculine.

SISSY MAE. Like something out of the Bible.

TRISH ANN. Or one of those romance novels with Fabio on the cover.

GABE. Well, I'm not any of those things. Just a lowly English teacher, I'm afraid.

SISSY MAE. Well, I think you're just what this little town needs, Gabriel Hill. A breath of fresh air.

D'ELLEN makes an exaggerated show of smelling Gabe sensuously, which makes him a little uncomfortable.

D'ELLEN. Yes.

SISSY MAE. So, how about some of my famous fried chicken livers and cheese grits? First meal is always on the house.

GABE. No, ma'am. I've got to find my new house and meet the movers so I can get settled in. Maybe some other time.

SISSY MAE. Well, I'm here every day except Sunday, 11 til 3.

D'ELLEN. Me, too.

TRISH ANN. And so am I..

GABE looks around at the fawning women who are trying to 'out-smile' the other.

GABE. Well, I just might stop by tomorrow for lunch. After I've had some time to get settled a little. It was a pleasure meeting you all.

D'ELLEN. The pleasure is all mine.. I mean, ours.

GABE. Okay.. well, I better be going. Now tell me again how to get to Mr. Polk's.. I mean, my house.

SISSY MAE. Head that way and at the railroad tracks take a right on General Joseph Wheeler Drive..

D'ELLEN. No, it's faster if you circle around on Wade Hampton Boulevard, past the old fertilizer plant.

TRISH ANN. Don't listen to them. The fastest way is to head back the way you came, left on John B. Gordon and then take General Barksdale... but if you go past a mailbox that's painted to look like a fish, you've gone too far...

GABE. Okay. I'm sure I'll find it. Thank you, ladies. See you tomorrow.

GABE starts to exit. After he passes CHARITY's table, he turns and compliments the wig.

GABE. Nice wig.

CHARITY. It's Golden Retriever. Got to have it on the head of this old dead lady in an hour.

GABE. Oh... okay... ah... bye...

GABE exits and there's stunned silence as the ladies just look at each other for a moment. After a beat, D'ELLEN runs over and grabs her purse, stuffs the cigarette packs back into them and heads for the door.

SISSY MAE. Where you going, D'Ellen? You haven't even ordered your lunch yet.

D'ELLEN. Don't have time. I've got to go shopping. Did he say noon tomorrow?

CHARITY. He didn't say.

D'ELLEN. Oh. Well, I guess I might pop in tomorrow sometime, Sissy. You know, just to check on you.

SISSY MAE. Okay, but keep your hands off my Specials Board.

D'ELLEN waves to them and exits in a hurry. CHARITY and SISSY MAE look at TRISH ANN. There's a short beat, then TRISH ANN grabs the food box off the counter and heads for the door.

TRISH ANN. Well, I've got to get this chicken over to Pippy before he tries to cook his own lunch. Nearly burned down the house the last time he did that.

She starts to head for the door and SISSY MAE calls out to her.

SISSY MAE. You going shopping, too?

CHARITY. With those legs, I don't think she's going to need to.

TRISH ANN pulls her skirt down her thighs a little embarrassed at how short it is and then exits with a quick 'bye' leaving the other two women alone in the diner. After a second, SISSY MAE walks over and pulls the darts from the dartboard and puts them back in the box, a small indication that maybe there is some hope left for their town.

SISSY MAE. Sure am glad the two of us are so happily married.

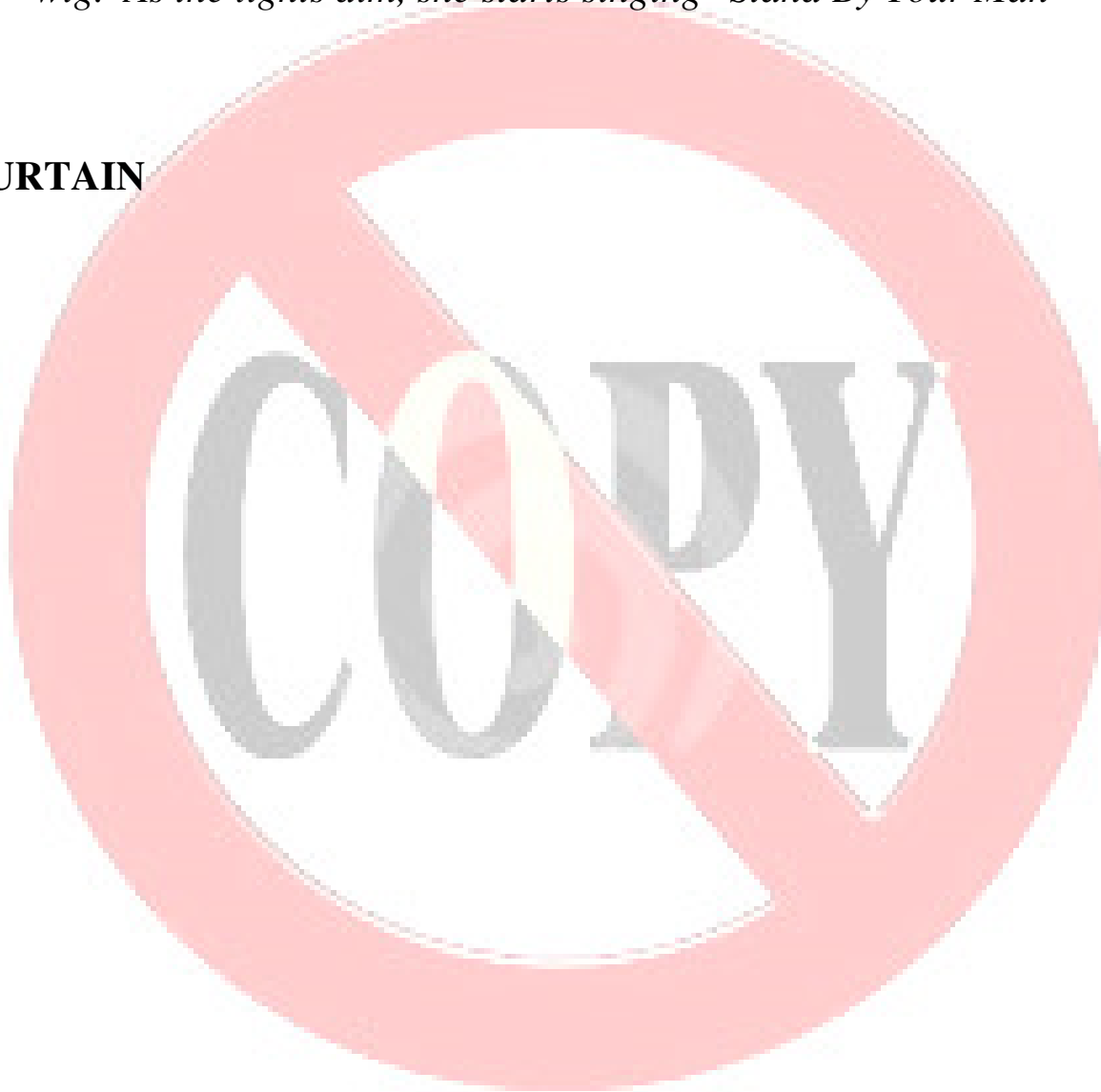
CHARITY. Yep, me too. And the longer Harold stays on the road behind the wheel of that rig, the more happily married I'll be.

SISSY MAE. *(pointing towards CHARITY's coffee cup)* How about another cup?

CHARITY. Better make it to go. I gotta' get this wig over on Clara's head while she still looks like Tammy Wynette instead of Tammy Fay Baker.

SISSY MAE exits into the kitchen as CHARITY continues to tease the wig. As the lights dim, she starts singing "Stand By Your Man"

CURTAIN



ACT 1

Scene 2

It's the next morning at Simply Delicious. Nothing has changed, except the "Specials Board" now lists Meatloaf w/Gravy as the daily special.

When the curtain opens, RAY is seated at his usual place, eating his cheese sandwich and drinking from his red Solo cup. Pacing behind him impatiently is D'ELLEN. She is dressed even more provocatively than the day before and is yelling at RAY as the curtain opens.

D'ELLEN. Hurry up, Ray. He'll be here any minute.

RAY. *(with a mouth full of sandwich)* Who?

D'ELLEN. None of your business, that's who. You've just got to be finished with that stupid cheese sandwich before he gets here, that's all you need to know.

RAY. The bread's kinda' dry.

D'ELLEN. Too bad.

RAY. And I need some more lemonade.

D'ELLEN. Oh, for goodness sake.

She gets up, snatches the cup and runs into the kitchen. After a few seconds, she returns with a blue Solo cup and puts it on the table beside RAY's plate.

RAY. I can't drink that!

D'ELLEN. Why not? It's lemonade, like you wanted.

RAY. It's blue.

D'ELLEN. *(lifting the cup and looking in it)* No, it's not. It's yellow!

RAY. The cup! The cup is blue. I can only drink lemonade from a red cup!

D'ELLEN. Good Lord, Ray. What difference does it make? Red or blue, it's still lemonade.

RAY. I don't drink out of blue. Only red!

RAY defiantly crosses his arms and leans back, indicating that he will go no further in finishing his meal until the cup is replaced.

D'ELLEN. You are so weird!

D'ELLEN runs back into the kitchen and returns with a red Solo which she slams down next to RAY's plate.

D'ELLEN. Okay, here's your stupid red cup. Now drink it and get out!

RAY looks into the cup and sniffs it.

RAY. You didn't put poison in it, did you?

D'ELLEN. I'm in too big of a hurry. Just drink it, you freak.

RAY. Why do you hate me so much, D'Ellen?

D'ELLEN. *(sitting back on her stool behind him and looking through her purse and pulling a pack of cigarettes, putting one between her lips)* I don't hate you, Ray. You just get on my nerves sometimes.

RAY. Yes, you do, D'Ellen. Ever since what happened in the backseat of my Daddy's car, you've hated me. I've told you over and over again, I tried. I really did. I just.. I just couldn't..

D'ELLEN. Couldn't what, Ray? Take advantage of me? *(This is an old wound and she bursts from the bar stool, nearly in tears)* You were the first boy that I ever let touch me, Ray. The first one I ever let take me in the back of a car. I practically threw myself at you, Ray and what did you do?

RAY. Well...

D'ELLEN. Nothing! That's what you did. All you could do was count the number of times you could unsnap and snap back my bra. 1-2-3 off... 1-2-3 on. I can only imagine what it would have been like if we had ever actually gotten around to going all the way. You would have probably counted all the way through that, too.

RAY. I tried. I didn't know I was OCD or anything back then. My Mama said I got my head stuck in the toilet when I was little and ever since then, I haven't been right.

D'ELLEN. Do you know that you are the reason I got married... *and divorced..* four times, Ray?

RAY. Me? Why is that my fault?

D'ELLEN. Because I never felt like I was really and truly a desirable woman because of you. Every time a man touched me, I would think... huh, I wonder if he's counting how many wrinkles are on my face... or mentally trying to line up my teeth like a set of Popsicle sticks!

RAY. I'm sorry. I think I'm better now. I bet if you were to come over here right now, I could get that bra off just fine, D'Ellen.

D'ELLEN. *(screaming)* It's too late, Ray! My self esteem is gone forever, thanks to you! Now, finish your cheese sandwich and your stupid red lemonade and get out of here before I start doing a little counting of my own. *(she grabs a handful of darts from the box on the counter)* Like how many of these darts I can stick into your head!

RAY, now scared, quickly eats his sandwich as TRISH ANN rushes in. She's dressed in a freshly pressed tennis outfit which shows a lot of 'leg' and is hastily putting on makeup as she runs through the door. Seeing RAY, she turns back with a sigh and bangs the bell above the door loudly with her tennis racket. She then proceeds to head to the counter where she pulls out a mirror from her purse and puts on eye makeup.

TRISH ANN. Is he here yet?

RAY. *(through a mouthful of food)* Who?

D'ELLEN. Someone who didn't steal my innocence, Ray. Now, finish that sandwich!

She glares at him and RAY takes the last bite of his sandwich, then finishes his drink in one quick gulp. He stands, reaches into his pocket and hands a couple of plastic wrapped bills to D'ELLEN.

RAY. Where's my change?

D'ELLEN. How would you like for me to change your face?

Without waiting for his change, RAY turns and runs for the door, counting his steps. He opens and closes it three times, very rapidly, all the time looking over his shoulder to make sure D'ELLEN isn't about to throw a dart into his back. He reaches up and rings the bell quickly, then exits and slams the door.

TRISH ANN. What was that all about?

D'ELLEN. Nothing. Just me and Ray reminiscing about old times.

TRISH ANN. *(looking around)* Where's Sissy Mae?

D'ELLEN. She had to go down to the IGA so she could get some of those special Italian bread crumbs for the meatloaf. Says she wants to make it extra special today.

TRISH ANN. Well, that's not fair.

D'ELLEN. What do you mean, not fair?

TRISH ANN. She's married, D'Ellen!

D'ELLEN. And you've got a boyfriend in Birmingham, Trish Ann. That's not fair either. I've got nobody!

TRISH ANN. You seriously think Gabe is going to be interested in you? Didn't you go to your prom with like.. I don't know.. Lyndon Johnson?

D'ELLEN. Tennis tramp!

TRISH ANN. Gold digger!

Just as the two women start to sling insults at each other, SISSY MAE comes through the front door with a bag of groceries. She crosses and puts them on the counter.

SISSY MAE. Well, they were out of bread crumbs, but they did have a buy one, get one free special on Hunt's Spaghetti Sauce, so we'll have to make a little menu change.

She goes over to the "Specials Board", erases it and writes 'Spaghetti with Meatballs.' She steps back, pleased with the results.

SISSY MAE. There. That ought to impress Mr. Gabe, the Englishman.

*SISSY MAE grabs the grocery sack from the counter
and heads into the kitchen.*

TRISH ANN. English teacher!

D'ELLEN. What did they say about him at the high school today?

*TRISH ANN continues to put on her makeup as D'ELLEN walks over to
the "Specials Board" where she erases the word "Meatballs" and
replaces it with "Steak"*

TRISH ANN. I don't know. One of the kids in my mixed doubles class got a nose bleed and I didn't get a chance to go to the office to find out. That's why I was late. I had to go home and change clothes. That Watkins boy sure knows how to spew!

D'ELLEN. Nobody knows where he came from or anything?

TRISH ANN. All I heard was one of the girls in the locker room saying that she rode by his house last night and saw him sitting on the phone porch, smoking a cigar.

D'ELLEN. He smokes?

TRISH ANN. I guess so.

D'ELLEN. Oh, no. He can't smoke. I'll never be able to quit if he smokes.

*She takes the cigarette from her mouth, crumples it up and throws it
behind the counter just as SISSY MAE comes back in, carrying some
utensils in a pan.*

SISSY MAE. Hey, try to hit the trash can, D'Ellen.

TRISH ANN. She's a little distraught. Gabe apparently smokes.

SISSY MAE. That's okay, just as long as he doesn't own a lighter.

D'ELLEN. How am I supposed to quit smoking if Gabe smokes?

SISSY MAE. You really thing he's going to be interested in you, D'Ellen? You could be his....

D'ELLEN glares at her and SISSY MAE changes her words.

SISSY MAE. ...his big sister.

D'ELLEN. I need him, Sissy.

SISSY MAE. I thought you said you didn't need no man?

D'ELLEN. And I thought I didn't... but ever since Carl died, there's just been this... void.. in my life.

TRISH ANN. You mean, a void in your checking account.

D'ELLEN. Besides.. all of you guys have someone. You're married, Charity's got Harold and Trish Ann has that boyfriend up in Birmingham. I don't have anyone. And I have... you know... *needs*.

SISSY MAE. Hey, I have needs, too. And Earl sure ain't satisfying them way up there in Mobile. But that don't mean I have to jump on the first thing that comes through those doors like a dog in heat. When Gabe gets here today, let's try to act civilized, okay?

The door opens and CHARITY enters, dragging a haggard looking young woman behind her. CHARITY has chosen to color her hair red for the day and has her big bag of equipment slung over her shoulder. The woman trailing behind her is dressed in a pair of pajamas and an open house coat. She is wearing one unlaced work boot on her right foot. Her makeup is smeared, her hair wildly disheveled and it is obvious that she had been on a crying jag for several days. CHARITY directs her to one of the chairs at the table by the door, and puts her bag down in the other chair.

CHARITY. Just have a seat right here, Carlotta. Let me get some coffee and I'll get started on your comb out.

CHARITY crosses to the counter and orders a coffee from SISSY MAE, 'extra black.'

SISSY MAE. What is she doing here, Charity? I told you that you couldn't do any more hairstyling in my diner. The customers complain too much.

The other two women are looking curiously at CARLOTTA who has begun to cry softly into her napkin.

CHARITY. I'll be finished before the lunch rush, don't worry. And Carlotta has real thick hair so it will stay right up there on her head.

All the women watch her for a moment and then talk in hushed tones about the poor woman.

TRISH ANN. Who *is* she?

CHARITY. Carlotta Murkerson. She lives in that green single wide over there on General J.E.B. Stuart Road.

D'ELLEN. The one with the white tires by the driveway?

CHARITY. The very one.

SISSY MAE. What's she doing in my diner getting her hair done?

CHARITY. I told her about Gabe.

D'ELLEN. What did you go and do that for? Ain't she married?

CHARITY. Used to be. Her husband was one of the first ones to get him a job at the Toyota plant. Got killed last month when a forklift lost its brakes.

TRISH ANN. Poor thing.

SISSY MAE pulls a dart from the box and throws it at the dart board.

SISSY MAE. Murderers!

She turns and goes into the kitchen to get CHARITY's coffee.

CHARITY. Well, I saw her walking down the road this morning in nothing but a nightgown and that one shoe and just felt so sorry for her.

I figured I'd bring her in here, do up her hair a little and see what this Gabe fellow thinks. She's still pretty young and has all her teeth.

CARLOTTA blows her nose loudly into her napkin and then calls to CHARITY.

CARLOTTA. You think my little Joey, Jr. will learn to call him Daddy. He's not but three.

CHARITY. I'm sure that he will, honey. He's pretty young and his Daddy was gone so much these past three years, Joey Jr. probably couldn't have picked him out of a lineup anyway.

At this insensitive comment, CARLOTTA breaks out into a fresh burst of tears.

TRISH ANN. Charity! That's mean.

CHARITY. Listen. Pickings around this town are pretty slim and unless Carlotta learns to go ahead and bury her dead husband, put on some Maybelline and bait her hook, little Joey, Jr. won't ever have anybody to call Daddy.

SISSY MAE comes back in from the kitchen carrying a cup of coffee which she sets down on the counter in front of CHARITY.

CHARITY. She ain't got nobody.

D'ELLEN. Neither do I.

CHARITY. Yeah, but you've had four husbands and she's only had one. And the one she had just got flattened by a forklift, so I figure that kind of moves her to the front of the line, D'Ellen.

TRISH ANN. It's probably the Christian thing to do.

CHARITY. *(raising her hands in a fake evangelical fervor)* Praise Jesus!

CHARITY picks up her coffee and crosses over to the table where CARLOTTA is now using a fork to pick her teeth while looking at her reflection in the shiny surface of a butter knife.

CHARITY. Put that down, Carlotta. Them's for the paying customers.

CARLOTTA puts down the utensils quickly and mumbles that she's sorry.

CHARITY. Alright, let's see what we can do with your hair.

CHARITY opens her bag, pulls out her pick and quickly goes to work on CARLOTTA's hair. As if on cue, the door opens and in walks GABE. D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN quickly run over and grab him by each arm, leading him across the room.

D'ELLEN. Oh, Gabe. So nice of you to drop by again. Here, come sit by me.

TRISH ANN. I guess you found your house okay, huh?

GABE. Yes, just where you said it would be.

CHARITY. Smelled like cat pee, didn't it?

GABE ignores the comment and sits down at the table in the same chair vacated by RAY. SISSY MAE comes over and removes the dirty dishes.

SISSY MAE. I'm sorry, let me get these out of your way, Gabe. So, what can I get you? Like I said, the first meal is on the house.

GABE. What's the special?

SISSY MAE. *(she points to the board)* Well, today we have spaghetti and... *(she stops when she sees the change D'ELLEN made)*

D'ELLEN. .. and steak.

GABE. Spaghetti and steak?

D'ELLEN. T-bone.

GABE. Sounds unusual. I'll try it. Medium rare.

D'ELLEN. *(to SISSY MAE)* Medium rare, please.

D'ELLEN looks up at SISSY MAE and smiles, knowing that she's tricked her friend into giving away another expensive cut of meat. With a heavy sigh, SISSY MAE turns and heads into the kitchen. Over at the next table, CARLOTTA lets out a quick yelp as CHARITY pulls on her hair roughly.

CARLOTTA. Ow, Miss Charity. That hurts!

CHARITY. Don't you ever use shampoo?

CARLOTTA. Can't afford it since Joey died. He didn't have no life insurance.

CHARITY. A real shame.

D'ELLEN. So, Gabe. How do you like our little town so far?

GABE. Oh, it's very quaint. Like living in a Civil War Museum or something.

TRISH ANN. Yeah, the ladies from the Daughters of the Confederacy got a little carried away. I think their last president, Annette Murray, must have had a hyperactive thyroid or something. During her year in charge, she must have ordered up fifty new Confederate General statues and nearly three hundred Confederate Battle Flags and put them up all over town. If General Sherman were alive today, he'd say 'screw Atlanta' and march his troops straight for Simply, Alabama.

GABE. Well, I think it's very charming. I'm sure that I'm going to love it here. Everyone is very friendly and polite.

TRISH ANN. We do our best to make people happy in Simply.

CHARITY speaks up between her punishments to CARLOTTA.

CHARITY. Especially the widows.

GABE. I beg your pardon?

CHARITY. I'm just saying that there just ain't nothing more eager to please than a Southern widow. After a woman lives with a man for a few years and gets used to feeling his body next to her every night, well it just does something to her when he's suddenly snatched away. There's

a cold place in her bed that needs to be filled and she'll do just about anything... and I mean anything..

She looks over at CARLOTTA who, as if on cue, opens her house coat wide to reveal her chest to GABE, crying softly while she does it.

CHARITY. ...to fill it up again, if you know what I mean.

TRISH ANN. Oh, my God, Charity. That sounded just like something Danielle Steel would write.

CHARITY. By the way, Gabe. *(She helps CARLOTTA up and they walk over to GABE)* Have you had the pleasure of meeting my friend, Carlotta?

GABE politely stands and extends his hand to CARLOTTA.

GABE. No, I have not. My name is Gabriel Hill, but everyone calls me just Gabe.

CARLOTTA looks at him, turns to CHARITY who urges her to smile, then blurts out.

CARLOTTA. I've got all my own teeth.

CARLOTTA flashes an unusually large smile. GABE is taken aback by this statement and is not sure how to respond.

GABE. What a coincidence. Ah.. so do I.

D'ELLEN. *(from the table)* Tell him about the cold spot in your bed, Carlotta.

CARLOTTA is now embarrassed and looks at CHARITY, then bursts into fresh tears.

CARLOTTA. I can't do this. I just can't do this. I've still got food from Joey's funeral in my Frigidaire. *(She turns and bolts out the door, crying.)*

GABE. Did I say something wrong?

CHARITY. No. Carlotta's just a little emotional. People get that way when they stop grooming themselves properly.

SISSY MAE enters from the kitchen with GABE's food and he turns and returns to his seat.

SISSY MAE. Here you go. Spaghetti and Steak. My specialty.

D'ELLEN admires the plate after SISSY MAE sets it on the table.

D'ELLEN. Looks very tasty. You should serve this every day.

SISSY MAE. *(through clenched teeth)* You're paying me back.

GABE picks up his utensils and cuts into the steak.

GABE. It does look good. Thank you.

As he lifts the fork to his mouth, he is aware that everyone is watching him. Self consciously, he takes a bite and smiles big to show how much he enjoys the food.

SISSY MAE. I like to see a man with a healthy appetite.

D'ELLEN. Yeah. *(beginning to get excited)* Chew it slow, sugar.

GABE looks towards D'ELLEN at this remark and then cuts another piece of meat.

SISSY MAE. So, tell us a little about yourself, Gabe. We don't often get new faces in town. Especially ones that have to be shaved.

TRISH ANN. Except for D'Ellen.

D'ELLEN glares at TRISH ANN from the insult. GABE wipes his mouth with his napkin and begins to tell them about himself.

GABE. Well, I was born in Memphis, Tennessee.

D'ELLEN. How exciting. Did you ever meet Elvis? I saw him in concert one time in Vegas.

GABE. Well, unfortunately, I was just a baby when Elvis died. But I did drive by Graceland one time.

D'ELLEN: *(realizing her gaff)* Oh...

TRISH ANN and CHARITY snicker.

GABE. *(continuing his story)* I played football in high school.

SISSY MAE. Quarterback?

GABE. How'd you know?

D'ELLEN. Bet a big, handsome guy like you dated the head cheerleader, didn't you?

GABE. Well, she wasn't really my type. And besides, she kinda' dated the 'whole football team' if you know what I mean.

D'ELLEN. Sounds like your high school days, Trish Ann.

GABE. Anyway, after high school, I went to Vanderbilt on a football scholarship. All my life, I've loved children so I decided to major in education with a minor in musical theater. Do you have any children, Miss Dellen?

GABE forgets and mispronounces her name. The other women laugh, but D'ELLEN she just smiles and shakes her head.

D'ELLEN. No, I'm afraid I don't.

GABE. Grandchildren?

The women laugh again as D'ELLEN fights to stay calm.

D'ELLEN. I think it's kinda' hard to have grandchildren without having children first. Don't you think, Gabe?

GABE laughs at this mistake and D'ELLEN joins him. TRISH ANN and SISSY MAE continue to snicker.

GABE. Oh... I guess you're right. Sorry.

D'ELLEN. That's alright. I'm still a young woman yet. So, who knows... maybe if I met someone close to my age...

TRISH ANN. Like Bob Barker?

D'ELLEN glares at TRISH ANN. In an effort to diffuse the tension, SISSY MAE speaks up.

SISSY MAE. I've got a daughter. She's in college. Wants to be a lawyer, I think.

GABE. Well, good for her.

SISSY MAE. Lives with her Daddy... I am married you know. *(she holds out her hand to show GABE her wedding ring)* He works at the Toyota plant in Mobile. I guess you can call it work. He just sits on his butt all day and sticks on that little handle that lets down the tailgate of them Toyota trucks. Makes \$36 an hour, plus medical and dental.

GABE. You must be proud of them both.

SISSY MAE. Yeah, I am. I am one of the few folks around here that still has their family intact. I'm lucky.

CHARITY speaks from her table.

CHARITY. My husband, Harold, is a truck driver. Long haul. Me and Sissy Mae have got a lot in common.

SISSY MAE. Except I don't bring my customers into your house and cook all over the place.

CHARITY. Carlotta ain't got nobody, Sissy Mae. Have some compassion, why don't you.

GABE. Well, I am sure that your husband's miss you both terribly. *(He takes another bite of his meal.)*

D'ELLEN. So, you didn't leave someone 'special' back in Memphis?

GABE. Just my mother and father. They're addicted to the barbecue and won't leave.

D'ELLEN. You know, I make great barbecue. Learned from my thir... I mean, my first husband. What do you say you come over to my house this evening and I'll whip us up some for supper. Show you some real Southern hospitality. Simply Style.

GABE has finished his meal and wipes his mouth.

GABE. That's sounds wonderful, Miss Dellen.

D'ELLEN. That's Dee-Ellen, dear.

GABE. Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss D'Ellen. I appreciate the invite, but I've still got a lot of unpacking to do if I'm going to be ready for my first class Monday. So, if you'll excuse me, I'll have to take a rain check for another time.

D'ELLEN. Well, my door is always open for you. Any time of the day... or night.

The other women roll their eyes at this obvious come-on.

GABE. I'll keep that in mind. *(standing)* Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to see if I can find my house again and finish unpacking.

CHARITY. Just follow the cat smell.

GABE. Thank you so much for the nice lunch, Sissy Mae. I'm sure that this is going to be my favorite restaurant in all of Simply.

SISSY MAE. Well, unless you particularly like bad Mexican food, this is the ONLY restaurant in Simply.

GABE. Then, my favorite it is. Have a good afternoon, ladies.

GABE exits, leaving the women all sitting in silence. Finally, CHARITY speaks up.

CHARITY. Y'all should be ashamed of yourselves. At least Carlotta had the decency to show the man her teeth and bad hair. Y'all are doing everything you can to hide yours.

D'ELLEN. We're just trying to be hospitable. It's obvious that the poor man is lonely.

TRISH ANN. Did you see the size of his hands?

SISSY MAE. Huh?

She starts to clean up GABE's dishes and TRISH ANN gets up to help her.

TRISH ANN. His hands. They were huge.

SISSY MAE. So?

SISSY MAE takes the dirty dishes and starts towards the kitchen. TRISH ANN follows her.

TRISH ANN. So, Bart has really small hands. And he gets them manicured every single week.

SISSY MAE. Men get manicures?

TRISH ANN. Bart does.

SISSY MAE and TRISH ANN exit into the kitchen. There's a temporary silence as D'ELLEN sits at her table, fidgeting with the utensils. CHARITY puts her foot up in the chair vacated by CARLOTTA and starts filing her toenails. After a moment, she speaks to D'ELLEN.

CHARITY. You know, I used to be a lot like you, D'Ellen.

D'ELLEN. What do you mean, 'like me?'

CHARITY. Oh, I used to chase anything on two legs.

D'ELLEN. I do not chase men, Charity.

CHARITY. Oh, sure. And that's why you have four ex-husbands.

D'ELLEN. Three. Carl's dead, so technically, he's not really an ex anymore.

CHARITY. Honey, him being dead just makes him extra ex 'cause you'll never be able to patch things up between the two of you. Don't you see what you're doing?

D'ELLEN. What *am* I doing, Charity? And, you know, if you're so smart and worldly, why do you spend every day doing hair in stranger's bathrooms? And putting wigs on dead people?

CHARITY. Nothing wrong with that. Shows that I am well adjusted and confident in who I am. You see, D'Ellen, that's just my point.

Unlike you, I don't need to have a man just so I can feel like a woman.

D'ELLEN. No, all you need is a bottle of hair dye.

CHARITY is about to deliver a snappy comeback when the door bursts open and in walks SARAH BETH, the daughter of Sissy Mae. She's dressed in jeans and a college sweatshirt and dragging a large wheeled suitcase behind her, which she struggles to get through the door. Before either of the women in the room can say a word, SARAH BETH looks around and asks for her mother.

SARAH BETH. Where's my mama?

D'ELLEN gets up and goes to SARAH BETH.

D'ELLEN. Sarah Beth. Honey, what are you doing here?

SARAH BETH. I need to talk to my mama. Where is she?

D'ELLEN turns and heads for the kitchen.

D'ELLEN. I'll go get her, honey. Just calm down.

SARAH BETH looks around the room and sees CHARITY at the table.

CHARITY. Hey, Sarah Beth.

SARAH BETH. Hey, Charity. Nice hair.

CHARITY. You like it? I mixed the colors myself. I call it Autumn Surprise. (*she emphasizes 'surprise' by jabbing her hands at SARAH BETH, then reaches into her bag and pulls out a bottle*) Come on over here and I can do yours just like it in a jiffy.

SARAH BETH. Maybe later. Right now, I need to talk to my Mama.

At the moment, SISSY MAE comes through the kitchen doors, wiping her hands on her apron and looking worried. She and SARAH BETH meet halfway.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth. What's the matter, honey? Are you okay? Is it your Daddy? Was he run over by a forklift?

SARAH BETH. (*hugging her mother tightly*) I ain't going back there, Mama. I don't care what you say, I ain't.

SISSY MAE. Going back where, honey?

SARAH BETH. (*pulling away*) Back to live with Daddy.

SISSY MAE. What happened?

CHARITY. Did he hit you? (*she pulls out her cell phone*) 'Cause if he did, my Harold will be passing through Mobile on I-10 on Thursday and all I got to do is call him and he'll be glad to take a little detour to whoop some ass.

SARAH BETH. No, he didn't hit me. It's worse than that?

D'ELLEN. Take away your credit cards?

SARAH BETH. No... worse.

D'ELLEN. (*to TRISH ANN*) What's worse than that?

SARAH BETH can no longer hold it in.

SARAH BETH. He's cheating on you, Mama.

They are all in shock for a moment, then SISSY MAE laughs nervously.

SISSY MAE. No, he's not. Your Daddy would never do that to me. I'm sure you've just made a mistake.

SARAH BETH. No mistake. I caught them. I was supposed to work a late shift at the restaurant, but things were slow and they sent me home early. I knew Daddy had been working some double shifts at the plant and might be sleeping, so I snuck in real quiet... and caught them.

TRISH ANN. Caught 'them'?

SARAH BETH. Daddy and his girlfriend.

SISSY MAE. No. I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding.

SARAH BETH. They were doing it on my bed, Mama. Right on top of the quilt Granny Johnson made for me. You know, the one with the little horses?

SISSY MAE. The Unicorn Quilt?

She puts her hands on her hips, seemingly more offended that her mother's quilt has been soiled that the fact that her husband has been cheating.

SARAH BETH. Yes, the stupid Unicorn Quilt. I heard noises coming from in there and thought we might have burglars or something, so I threw open the door and flipped on the light switch and there they were. Naked. And she was on top.

CHARITY. Harold likes it that way, too.

TRISH ANN. Gross!

D'ELLEN. We don't need to know that, Charity.

SARAH BETH. Daddy yelled. Tried to cover himself and fell right off the bed in a big, nasty, naked heap. *(she points to her crotch)* I saw his... 'thingy', Mama.

SISSY MAE reacts to this horrible idea, crying no.

SARAH BETH. The tramp was so scared, she ran right out the front door of the apartment butt naked. *(she starts to cry)*

SISSY MAE. Honey, it's okay. I'm sure there is a logical explanation for it.

D'ELLEN. Really? Well, I sure would like to hear it.

SARAH BETH. I said, "Daddy, what in the hell are you doing with that woman?" and he started to cry. Lying there on the floor like a big, 'ole naked baby. After then he wiped his snot on the quilt..

SISSY MAE is mortified at this.

SISSY MAE. He wiped his nose on my Mama's quilt?

SARAH BETH. Yes, right on one of those pretty little pink Unicorns. After he wipes his nose and got a hold of himself, he spilled the whole story. Said that him and this woman met at the plant. She puts on the wiper blades or something. Said he didn't mean for it to happen, it just did.

SISSY MAE. Earl wiped his nose on Granny Johnson's prize unicorn quilt? She won third place at the Simply County Fair with that quilt!

SARAH BETH. Mama, are you hearing what I'm saying? Daddy's leaving you. Says he's been wanting to do it for months. He thought you might get the picture when he stopped coming home on the weekends.

At this news, SISSY MAE sits at the table, dejected. TRISH ANN and D'ELLEN gather around to comfort her.

CHARITY. Harold's a slob, but at least he comes home a couple times a year.

TRISH ANN. Shut up, Charity. This ain't about you.

SISSY MAE. He's leaving me?

SARAH BETH. Yes, Mama. He's leaving you. For a woman with a tattoo of a butterfly right on her butt. I saw it.

SISSY MAE finally understands and begins to tear up. She suddenly jumps up, kicks over her chair and running to the dart board, rips the Toyota logo off of it and begins to tear the sheet to shreds while cursing the plant. She then grabs the dart board off the wall and starts banging it against the lunch counter.

SISSY MAE. Damn Toyota Trucks. Ruined my life. Ruined my Mama's prized quilt! She won third place with that quilt! Third place!!!

D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN run to her and try to calm her down. SISSY MAE brandishes the dart board as a weapon towards them.

TRISH ANN. It's okay, Sissy Mae.

D'ELLEN. Yes, honey. Let go of the dart board before you put your eye out.

SISSY MAE. I believed him when he said that his boss was giving him some extra work on the weekends and he needed to stay in Mobile. Apparently the only extra work he was getting was from Madame Butterfly.

D'ELLEN. It will be okay, Sissy Mae.

TRISH ANN. Yeah, everything's going to be okay.

As TRISH ANN and D'ELLEN approach her, SISSY MAE swings the damaged dart board widely in their direction, warning them to stay away.

SISSY MAE. No, it's not. I've lost my husband. I've lost my figure from eating left over fried chicken all day. All I've got is this lousy little diner in a dying little Alabama hick town where there's more dead Confederate soldiers on the streets than real people.

D'ELLEN snatches the dart board away from SISSY MAE, who immediately runs over to the cash register, pops out the drawer and indicates that it's empty.

SISSY MAE. Look at this cash register. Empty!

D'ELLEN. Honey, you keep your money in your apron.

SISSY MAE remembers this, reaches in and pulls out the plastic wrapped money from RAY.

SISSY MAE. Oh, that's right. My only real paying customer is some nut job who makes me get on my hands and knees every morning and scrub the toilet with Comet just so he'll come in here and spend \$2.99 on a stinking cheese sandwich. I don't have anything.

SARAH BETH slowly slides down onto the floor next to the counter and cries.

SARAH BETH. That's not true. You've got me.

SISSY MAE. Oh, I know, Sarah Beth. I didn't mean it like that.

SARAH BETH. No. I mean, you've *got* me. Literally. I told Daddy that I couldn't live in the same apartment with someone who's going to 'do it' on my bed every night. Especially after seeing his...

SISSY MAE puts her hand over SARAH BETH's mouth to keep her from saying the word again. SARAH BETH moves it away to talk.

SARAH BETH. So, I'm moving back to Simply. I didn't want to be a lawyer anyway. What I really love is helping you around the diner. I only got that restaurant job in Mobile hoping that it would help me not miss you so much. But, that... and the fact that I saw my father naked... well... it didn't. So, I'm moving back home. If that's okay with you?

SISSY MAE. Of course it is, baby.

SARAH BETH. And I'll need a job.

SISSY MAE. Ah.. okay.

TRISH ANN. (*crossing to them*) It's going to be great. The two of you working together, side by side. Hey, you could even change the name of the diner.

CHARITY. Yeah.... maybe call it the Unicorn Cafe.

D'ELLEN. Shut up, Charity. I think it's great, too. Everything is going to be okay. (*She puts her arm around SISSY MAE*) Welcome to the Ex Wives Club, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. (*wipes the tears from her face*) Ex Wives Club?

D'ELLEN. I'll be the President and you can be the Secretary/Treasurer. We can have our meetings right here in the diner.

SISSY MAE. Divorced. Broke. And living in a town where all the men are either over seventy or made of granite.

D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN cross to her and hug her.

TRISH ANN. It's going to be okay, Sissy Mae. You'll see.

D'ELLEN. Yeah.

SISSY MAE. No, it's not.

D'ELLEN. Alright... I'll let you be the president of the Ex Wives Club, if you want. It's your diner.

SISSY MAE looks at her friends and they all start to laugh. Then her face turns serious and determined.

SISSY MAE. You know. Maybe this is the best thing that could happen to me.

D'ELLEN. What?

SISSY MAE. Yeah. Me and Earl haven't been happy in years.

SARAH BETH. You haven't?

SISSY MAE crosses to her daughter.

SISSY MAE. It wasn't your fault, honey. We just grew apart. Maybe this is for the best. We can both start over fresh. Earl with the Butterfly Girl.. and me with...

SARAH BETH. With?

SISSY MAE. I don't know... someone young and energetic. Someone who will make *me* feel young again. I'll get me a treadmill, lose some weight. Maybe learn the sixty four positions of the Karma Sutra.

SISSY MAE runs her hands through her hair as CHARITY does some slow squats behind her.

CHARITY. Better stretch real good first.

SARAH BETH. Y'all are gross!

SISSY MAE hugs SARAH BETH, crosses and grabs her luggage which she begins to drag into the kitchen.

SISSY MAE. It's a new day for both of us, Sarah Beth. Now, come on. Let's get you settled in. See what they taught you up there in the big city.

SISSY MAE exits into the kitchen with SARAH BETH close behind.

SARAH BETH. I've already been thinking... and I've got some great ideas for this place.

The three women in the room look at each other for a moment, then TRISH ANN and D'ELLEN sit at the table and sigh. D'ELLEN pulls a cigarette from her purse and puts it in her mouth.

CHARITY. Looks like y'all are going to have some fresh competition for the fine new school teacher's attention.

TRISH ANN. Sarah Beth?

CHARITY chuckles.

CHARITY. No... Sissy Mae.

TRISH ANN And D'ELLEN look at each other.

D'ELLEN. Got a lighter?

CURTAIN

Intermission

Act 2

Scene 1

Its three days later at the Simply Delicious Diner, which has changed dramatically since the arrival of SARAH BETH. There are new curtains on the window and white, linen table clothes on each of the tables. Most of the 'country' memorabilia and pictures have been removed from the walls, replaced by modern, abstract paintings and photos of famous international landmarks, like the Eiffel Tower and The Leaning Tower of Pisa. The "Specials Board" is blank, but still hanging on the wall, along with the dartboard, upon which is affixed the piece of paper with the Toyota logo that has been reassembled and taped back to together. As the curtain opens, two sounds can be heard. One is the brewing coffee pot on the counter and the other is the small radio, tuned to the same country station as before. The last bars of an old song are fading away and the announcer can be heard.

ANNOUNCER. That's was the First Lady of Country Music, Miss Tammy Wynette, on WSP, AM 720, Simply Radio. Well, it's time for the daily Population Report, courtesy of Blanche over at the Chamber of Commerce. By the way, Blanche, if you're listening, tell Joe Earl if he don't come get those catfish out of the cooler in the back of my truck, I'm gonna' eat them after I get off of work. Well, folks, we lost our sponsor of the Population Report. Looks like Joe from Joe's Moving and Storage has decided to close his business and move up to Mobile and take a job at the Toyota plant. So, if you got to go... well, I guess you'll have to call somebody else besides Joe. Okay, here's the figures, folks... looks like we actually got us a net gain today. Joe's left, but Sissy Mae Montgomery's daughter, Sarah Beth, has come home and is working at the diner with her Mama. And, with the arrival of that new teacher at the high school, that means.... let's see.. 2784 women and... still 214 men to keep them happy. Sorry, ladies. And speaking of that new English teacher, we've had several calls on the WSP Request Line

today wanting to dedicate songs to Mr. Hill. Let's see... Dondie Burks from the Health Department wants to let Mr. Hill know that she's had all her shots and would like to dedicate the Bellamy Brother's song, "If I Said You Had a Beautiful Body, Would You Hold It Against Me" to him. She also sent a picture of herself... guess she forgot this was radio... by the way, Dondie.. you might want to get that mole checked. And here's one from Erma Jean Bentley who says she listens to AM 720 while delivering mail up there in the north part of the county all day... Thanks, Erma Jean. She says to tell Gabe that it's been three years since a man has seen her naked and for him to give her a call if he wants to take a look. *(clears his throat)* Okay.. well, here you go, Erma Jean.. *(The music begins to play)* And, welcome to Simply, Mr. Hill... hope you're taking your vitamins, 'cause it looks like you're going to need 'em..

As the song lyrics to the song begin to play, SARAH BETH comes out from the kitchen, wearing a bright apron with a large "S" on the front and snappy, matching beret on her head. She hums along with the song as she goes over and writes "Ham Panini" on the board and, after a moment of thinking, writes the price of \$14.99 underneath. Just as she finishes, SISSY MAE emerges from the kitchen, wearing a matching apron and tall chef's hats, which she has perched precariously on top of her large hairdo. She turns off the radio and fidgets with the hat as she faces her daughter.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth, do I have to wear this hat?

SARAH BETH. It's not a hat, Mama. It's called a toque. *(pronounced 'tock')*. All the best chefs wear them. It makes us look international.

SISSY MAE. How come I can't wear the same hat as you?

SARAH BETH. Because you're the head chef, Mama. I'm just the Sous Chef..

SISSY MAE. Sue what?

SARAH BETH. Just pull it down a little and it'll stay on.

SISSY MAE uses her fist to squash the hat onto her hair just as she sees the special on the board.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth! \$14.99? Are you out of your mind?

SARAH BETH. Nobody serves an entree for less than fifteen dollars in Mobile, Mama.

SISSY MAE. This ain't Mobile, Sarah Beth. It's Simply, Alabama and folks are not going to pay \$14.99 for a ham sandwich.

SARAH BETH. It's not a sandwich. It's a panini!

SISSY MAE pulls on her hat and goes over to the Specials Board and erases the "1" from the price, making the special \$4.99.

SISSY MAE. Well, I don't care what you call it, we're selling it for \$4.99...

SARAH BETH. But, Mama! How are you ever going to get rich selling lunch for under \$5?

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth, if I wanted to get rich, I wouldn't be running this diner. I'd be working at the Toyota plant, along side of your sorry cheating Daddy.

SISSY MAE goes behind the counter and grabs a tray of salt & pepper shakers, which she hands to SARAH BETH, who begins to put them around on the tables. SISSY MAE begins to polish utensils.

SARAH BETH. He called me, you know.

SISSY MAE. Who?

SARAH BETH. Daddy. Said for me to tell you that he's real sorry that you had to find out this way.

SISSY MAE. Yeah? And what did you have to say to that?

SARAH BETH. I told him that you weren't interested in taking him back. And since I've seen him naked, I can understand why.

SISSY MAE. *(laughs)* That's my girl. We don't need men to make us complete. Just each other.

SARAH BETH. Yeah, I guess that's true... *(there's a pause as the two women work)* But, I sure would like to feel a man's hands on me.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth Montgomery!

SARAH BETH. I'm twenty one years old, Mama. I have...

SISSY MAE. *(holds up a steak knife and stops SARAH BETH)*.. if you say the word 'needs' I will take this steak knife and drive it through my heart.

SARAH BETH. I'm not a little girl anymore, Mama. I dated lots of men up in Mobile. And we did.. stuff.

SISSY MAE. What kind of 'stuff'?

SARAH BETH. You know... the stuff you and Daddy used to do before he moved to Mobile.

SISSY MAE. And started doing his stuff with Madam Butterfly...

SARAH BETH. I love the way it felt when all those men would hold me. When they kissed me. When they...

SISSY MAE. Hush that. If you're going to work here, you're going to have to learn how to control your... urges.

SARAH BETH. Yeah? *(she comes to the counter)* And what about you, Mama? Don't you want to be held in a man's arms again? Feel his lips on yours? Have him touch your... *(she points towards her mother's lap)*

SISSY MAE. *(using her hand to cover her crotch)* No, I do not want him touching my... my... *(she can't say it)* And even if I did, I've got other things on my mind that are a lot more important. Like keeping my chili from burning. Run in there and give it a good stir, honey.

SARAH BETH. Yes, ma'am.

SARAH BETH exits into the kitchen. SISSY MAE makes sure that she's gone, then takes off the chef's hat and sets it on the counter. She pulls out her cell phone and speed dials a number.

SISSY MAE. *(into the phone)* Okay, come on in. She's in the kitchen.

The door to the diner opens and in steps CHARITY carrying her large bag of supplies. She has replaced her red hair with a curly brunette

wig. Setting the bag down at the nearest table, she waves for SISSY MAE to come have a seat.

CHARITY. Alright, come on and let's get started.

CHARITY puts a plastic smock around SISSY MAE's neck and begins to pull her hair up with a pick, examining the roots.

SISSY MAE. Now, all I want is for you to get rid of the gray, Charity. I don't want no fancy Autumn Sunrise color or nothing.

CHARITY. Autumn Surprise. And it wouldn't look good on you anyway. Your eyes are too close together.

SISSY MAE. What?

CHARITY. I'm just saying, it takes a special woman to pull off Autumn Surprise.

SISSY MAE. Just get rid of the gray. And do it quick before Sarah Beth comes in here and catches us.

CHARITY pulls a bottle from her bag and uses it to act like she's applying some type of hair coloring to the roots of SISSY MAE's hair.

CHARITY. Why do you want to change your hair color anyway, Sissy Mae? It looks fine just the way it is. And I don't say that to many of my clients.

SISSY MAE. I want to look younger.

CHARITY. Younger than who?

SISSY MAE. Younger than.. well, than me.

CHARITY. Why?

SISSY MAE. You've seen Sarah Beth since she got back from Mobile.

CHARITY. Yeah, so?

SISSY MAE. Well.. those two years away at college really... changed her.

CHARITY. Oh, I see. Sarah Beth left here your little girl and came back a grown woman. And that makes you feel old.

SISSY MAE. Have you seen her skin? Tighter than a snare drum. And her hair. It's... it's...

CHARITY. Not gray.

SISSY MAE. No. It's not.

CHARITY. You should be happy that she's turned into such a beautiful woman.

SISSY MAE. I am, Charity. It's just that... well, people used to come in here to see me. They used to talk about how I made them feel so good. How my smile always cheered them up. And now... well, all they talk about is how young and beautiful Sarah Beth is.

CHARITY. And by people, you mean... Gabriel Hill?

SISSY MAE. He's the only eligible man in Simply, Charity. All the other ones have moved to Mobile.

CHARITY. That's not true. What about Owen Osgood?

SISSY MAE. Owen from the BP station?

CHARITY. Yes, he seems like a nice guy. Always comes out of that little glass booth and cleans my windshield when I stop by there to get gas. And he ain't married.

SISSY MAE. Owen has a wooden leg, Charity.

CHARITY. So? Nothing wrong with that. As long as you treat your house for termites, you ought to be okay.

SISSY MAE. I need me a... whole man. A man that will make me feel like a woman again.

CHARITY. Owen could do that standing on one leg.

SISSY MAE. I need a man that's young and virile. Someone who can re-ignite the fire deep in my bosom that Earl allowed to go out.

CHARITY. Have you been reading Trish Ann's slutty romance novels? Deep in your bosom?

SISSY MAE. I want Gabe, Charity. I need him! At first, I thought I wasn't interested, but every time he comes in here and I see the way he eats his meatloaf or his chicken livers.... how his lips close around a spoonful of mashed potatoes and gravy... how he licks his lips after eating a slice of my cherry pie....

CHARITY. Dang, Sissy Mae. Sounds like you're more hungry than horny!

SISSY MAE. I've got to have him, Charity. Maybe just one time. Maybe more. I don't know, but I've got to have him. So, you've got to do whatever it takes to get me in the game.

CHARITY. You want me to do something to Sarah Beth? Maybe color her hair green?

SISSY MAE. No! If Gabe chooses me, I want it to be fair and square.

CHARITY. I've got this acid stuff that makes your hair fall out. I could spill some on Sarah Beth... make it look like an accident.

SISSY MAE. Let's just start with touching up the gray and see how that goes first before you start throwing acid on my daughter's head, what do you say?

CHARITY. Okay, but I think you're going to need a little more help than just covering up the gray, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. Let me worry about that. Are you finished?

CHARITY. Have a look.

CHARITY pulls a mirror from her bag and hands it to SISSY MAE.

CHARITY. What do you think?

SISSY MAE. Much better. What do I owe you?

CHARITY. How about a cup of coffee? Extra black.

SISSY MAE stands up, takes off the smock just as SARAH BETH enters the room carrying a ladle. She quickly hides the smock behind her back.

SISSY MAE. Oh, hey, Sarah Beth. Where have you been?

SARAH BETH. *(holding up the ladle, puzzled)* Stirring your chili, remember? Hey, Charity. What can I get you?

CHARITY. How about a cup of your Mama's famous coffee. Extra black.

SARAH BETH. One cup of Joe.. extra muddy.. coming up.

SARAH BETH walks over to the coffee maker and pours a cup of coffee as SISSY MAE quickly hands the mirror and smock back to CHARITY who stuffs it in her bag. SISSY MAE smooths her apron as SARAH

BETH walks over with the coffee. After handing the cup to CHARITY, she suddenly stops and looks at her mother.

SARAH BETH. Mom! Your hair?!

SISSY MAE reaches up and adjusts her hair, afraid that she's been found out.

SISSY MAE. What about it?

SARAH BETH. You're not supposed to be able to see it. That's what the chef's hat is for, remember? Wearing it gives our customers the feeling that they are dining in a fine restaurant. And that means we can raise our prices. *(she grabs the hat from the counter and puts it on SISSY MAE's head)* You've got to wear it!

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth....

SARAH BETH. Wear it!

SISSY MAE puts the hat back on her head as SARAH BETH turns to go back into the kitchen. SISSY MAE turns to CHARITY and sighs.

CHARITY. I've got the acid in my bag... what do you say?

The door suddenly opens and in walks TRISH ANN, dressed in her tennis whites and talking on a cell phone.

TRISH ANN. No, Bart. It's not you. It's me. Okay, it is a little you. You could have moved down here if you really wanted me. Yes, we would have had to live with Pippy, but he has a big house. And who knows, he might have even let you take over running his hotels and maybe even the liquor stores. Well, what do you want, Bart? Obviously it's not me. Is there someone else? Maybe. Maybe there is someone else. But since you aren't here, you'll never know, now will you? Yes, Bart. This is what I want. Okay. Goodbye.

TRISH ANN hangs up her cell phone and then turns to SISSY MAE and CHARITY and smiles meekly.

SISSY MAE. What was that?

TRISH ANN. That was me breaking up with Bart.

SISSY MAE. Breaking up with Bart? But you've been dating him... what, twelve years?

TRISH ANN. Thirteen. It was never going to work out anyway. He refuses to leave Birmingham. And it looks like Pippy is going to live forever.

CHARITY. Thirteen years. Wow!

TRISH ANN. That's okay. It means that now I'm free. Free to pursue another 'doubles partner', if you know what I mean. Someone tall and handsome and who lives here in Simply.

CHARITY. Owen from the BP station?

TRISH ANN. I don't know him. No, I was thinking of someone who's young and virile.. someone who can reignite the fire deep in my...

CHARITY. I know... in your bosom. Good God.

TRISH ANN. Someone like Gabe.

SISSY MAE. Sorry. He's taken.

TRISH ANN. He's taken? Taken by who?

SISSY MAE. Well.. nobody yet. But I'm sure he already has someone special picked out.

From the kitchen, SARAH BETH calls out to her mother.

SARAH BETH. Mama, I was thinking of inviting Gabe over to the diner one night this week for a romantic dinner. You know, just the two of us. With candles and wine. *(she comes into the room)*

SISSY MAE. Honey, you only met him one time.. for five minutes when you poured him a cup of coffee to go.

SARAH BETH. And during the five minutes, I think we really connected. *(waves at TRISH ANN)* Hey, Trish Ann. *(turns back to her mother)* You think you could make us that spaghetti and steak thing again? He said he liked that. What about Tuesday night?

TRISH ANN. You cater private dinners?

SISSY MAE. Well... I guess.

TRISH ANN pulls a wad of bills from the pocket of her skirt and tries to hand them to SISSY MAE.

TRISH ANN. Then I'd like to book the diner for me and Gabe on Monday night. And I'd like steak, too. And wine.

SARAH BETH. Hey! I asked first.

SISSY MAE. I can't take your money, Trish Ann.

TRISH ANN. Is it not enough? I'll go home and get Pippy's checkbook. He's loaded.

SISSY MAE. No.. it's just that...

SARAH BETH. It's just that I asked first.

TRISH ANN. How much do you want, Sissy Mae? Just tell me.

SISSY MAE doesn't know what to do and turns to CHARITY.

SISSY MAE. Charity?

CHARITY. A thousand dollars sounds reasonable to me.

The door opens and in walks D'ELLEN, puffing on an unlit cigarette.

TRISH ANN. A thousand dollars?

D'ELLEN. A thousand dollars for what?

CHARITY. Trish Ann wants to book the diner for a private dinner with Gabe.. complete with candles and wine. Sissy Mae is going to cater it and wear her new chef hat.

D'ELLEN. What happened to Bart?

TRISH ANN. We broke up. *(to SISSY MAE)* How much, Sissy Mae?

SISSY MAE. I... don't....

TRISH ANN. You've already said one thousand dollars.

SISSY MAE. I didn't say that.. Charity did.

D'ELLEN. *(pulling the checkbook from her purse)* I'll give you two thousand!

SISSY MAE. Two thousand dollars... for dinner?

SARAH BETH. Mama! No!

TRISH ANN. Twenty five hundred!

D'ELLEN. Three thousand! *(reaching into her purse)* I've got Roger's alimony check right here. I'll just sign it over to you.

TRISH ANN. No third party checks, D'Ellen. That's Sissy Mae's policy. Look at the sign.

TRISH ANN points to the sign listing "No Third Party Checks" posted on the wall above the cash register. D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN start to argue loudly about who has the most money, until SISSY MAE bellows.

SISSY MAE. Stop it!

SARAH BETH turns away from her mother and starts to cry.

SISSY MAE. Just stop it! You all should be ashamed of yourselves. Trying to buy Gabe like he was a piece of meat or something. Sarah Beth, I am not catering a private dinner for you and Gabe. And I'm not doing it for you Trish Ann. Or for you either, D'Ellen. It's time that we all stopped arguing like a bunch of children and let Gabe choose which one of us he wants.

D'ELLEN. What do you mean, us?

SISSY MAE. I mean, all of us. Gabe can decide for himself which one of us he wants. Me included.

TRISH ANN. You? But you're...

SISSY MAE. I'm what, Trish Ann? Old? Worn out? *(pulls off her hat)* I may not look like much, but hiding underneath this apron is the body of a real woman. And believe me, I know how to use it to please a man.

SARAH BETH. Mama! God!

D'ELLEN looks at SISSY MAE's hair.

D'ELLEN. Sissy Mae Montgomery! Did you do something to your hair?

SISSY MAE. Yes, D'Ellen. I colored it. And that's not all I'm going to do. When I close the diner this afternoon, I'm going down to the Happy Fingers Nail Salon and getting me a manicure, pedicure and quite possibly a Brazilian wax.

CHARITY. You go, girl!

SISSY MAE. And then I'm coming back here and calling Mr. Gabriel Hill on the phone and inviting him over for a special brunch tomorrow. When he gets here, we're all going to be waiting for him. And before he leaves, Gabe is going to choose which one of us he wants. And it just might be me.

All the women look at each other for a moment, then SARAH BETH breaks the silence.

SARAH BETH. Mama.. do you even know what a Brazilian wax is?

SISSY MAE. No... I guess I don't.

SARAH BETH approaches her mother and whispers in her ear. SISSY MAE steps back, shocked.

SISSY MAE. All of it?

SARAH BETH. Like a baby.

SISSY MAE. Oh. *(she thinks about it for a second)* Well, that's okay. I'm doing it anyway.

CHARITY. That's pretty hard core. Ladies, Sissy Mae has set the bar.

D'ELLEN. What time do you want us to be here?

SISSY MAE. 10:30. And we're not leaving until Gabe makes his choice.

TRISH ANN. It's going to be me. Look at these legs.

TRISH ANN pulls up her skirt a little and shows off her shapely legs.

D'ELLEN. Honey, I got four different men to ask me to marry them. And I didn't have to use my legs a single time to do it.

SISSY MAE. Use whatever you got, ladies. But I'll be here, freshly painted, plucked, waxed and ready for war.

SISSY MAE pulls off her apron and throws it and her hat on the counter. As she crosses, she calls back to SARAH BETH.

SISSY MAE. I'm taking the rest of the day off, Sarah Beth. You're in charge.

She exits through the front door. D'ELLEN turns to CHARITY and holds out her check.

D'ELLEN. I need you to fix me up, Charity. I'm talking total body makeover- head to toe.

CHARITY. It's gonna' cost ya'.

D'ELLEN. Take a third party check?

CHARITY gets up, walks over to D'ELLEN and snatches the check away from her, holds it up to the light and examines it.

CHARITY. We'll stop by the bank on the way to your place. Come on.

CHARITY exits. D'ELLEN smiles at TRISH ANN and then follows.

D'ELLEN. See you losers tomorrow.

TRISH ANN. *(calling after D'Ellen)* You better hope Charity has a time machine in her bag, because that's what you're going to need to take Gabe away from me you old bat! See ya' tomorrow, Sarah Beth.

TRISH ANN exits through the door, leaving SARAH BETH standing alone in the diner. After a moment, she pulls out her cell phone and dials a number.

SARAH BETH. Hey, Daddy. It's me, Sarah Beth. I know you're sorry. Stop telling me that. And stop crying. Listen, the reason I'm calling is to

tell you that Mama wants you back. Yes, I'm sure. She told me that she will do anything to get you back. No, not that! That's disgusting, Daddy. She asked me to call you and see if you could meet her at the diner tomorrow. She's planning a special brunch for just the two of you. Be here about eleven, okay? And bring her something nice. Okay, bye.

SARAH BETH smiles and closes her phone. Then talks to herself.

SARAH BETH. Let the games begin.

She chuckles as she exits into the kitchen.

CURTAIN



COPY

ACT 2

Scene 2

It's the next morning at the Simply Delicious Diner. Nothing has changed, except there is a sign in the window that says "Closed For The Day", that can be seen when the door is opened. SARAH BETH is standing behind the counter, polishing silverware. She is dressed in a slinky cocktail dress, complete with large, dangling earrings. Instead of country music, a soft classical song can be heard coming from the radio. After a moment, there can be heard the clanging of pots and pans from the kitchen and then a cry of pain. SISSY MAE comes into the dining room, holding her hand which she has obviously just burned on the stove. She is wearing her usual apron and the large chef's hat on her head.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth, hand me the first aid kit from under the counter over there. I burned myself on that old broken down stove.

SARAH BETH ignores her mother and continues to polish the silverware.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth, did you hear me?

SARAH BEST continues to ignore her mother, so SISSY MAE walks up to her and yells into her ear.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth!

SARAH BETH drops the fork she's polishing to the floor and puts her hand over her ear.

SARAH BETH. What?

SISSY MAE. I said hand me the...

SARAH BETH. *(she reaches under counter, pulls out first aid kit and slams it down on the counter top)..* the first aid kit. I heard you.

SARAH BETH goes back to polishing the utensils.

SISSY MAE. Then why did you ignore me?

SARAH BETH. You don't know, Mama?

SISSY MAE. No, Sarah Beth. I don't know.

SARAH BETH turns and puts her hands on her hips, suddenly angry.

SARAH BETH. You're trying to steal my boyfriend!

SISSY MAE. Your boyfriend?

SARAH BETH. Gabe!

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth, Gabe is not your boyfriend. Honey, you've only met him once and all you did then was pour him a cup of coffee.

SARAH BETH. Yeah, well... I think we really connected. Anyway, Gabe might would be my boyfriend if my middle aged Mama wasn't trying to sink her claws into him. Or Trish Ann. Oh, God forbid, old worn out D'Ellen Chambers. She's got four ex-husbands! She doesn't need Gabe.

SISSY MAE. Three. Carl is dead.

SARAH BETH. I don't care if they're all dead. She's had her chance with men and now it's my turn.

SISSY MAE comes up and tries to hug SARAH BETH, who pulls away from her.

SARAH BETH. And so have you!

SISSY MAE. What?

SARAH BETH. You had Daddy. You could have kept him around if you really tried.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth, he's having an affair with a woman who sticks wiper blades on Toyota trucks all day. You saw her and him... *naked* for God's sake.

SARAH BETH. I know, and it was horrible. But he deserves another chance, Mama. I'm sure that he would take you back if you asked him to. And then I could have Gabe.

SISSY MAE. I don't want him back, Sarah Beth. *(she walks into the dining area, letting her imagine run free)* I want a man who's romantic. A man who brings me flowers and candy. Someone who will write me love letters and buy me dirty lingerie.

SARAH BETH. Okay.. but just not Gabe!

SISSY MAE. Then who, Sarah Beth? He's the last man standing in this town. At least the last one standing on two real legs. And after all I've been through, I think I deserve someone who will treat me like a real woman again.

SARAH BETH. But Gabe is so...

SISSY MAE. Young?

SARAH BETH. Well.... yeah.

SISSY MAE. And I'm so old?

SARAH BETH. I didn't say that.

SISSY MAE crosses back behind the counter on her way to the kitchen.

SISSY MAE. Well, Sarah Beth. I might have a few scratches and dents on the outside, but just like that stubborn old stove back there, I've still got a hot fire burning on the inside.

SISSY MAE exits into the kitchen as SARAH BETH yells after her. She doesn't notice that CHARITY has come into the diner with her big bag over her shoulder. On this day, she's gone back to being a blond.

SARAH BETH. So do I, Mama! My fire is hot! Red hot! No, white hot! And it's not burning inside some broken down old body. It's blazing, Mama. Blazing hot.. and fiery... and..

CHARITY clears her throat loudly and SARAH BETH, realizing that someone has come into the diner, turns around.

CHARITY. Do I need to call the Fire Department?

SARAH BETH. My Mama's trying to steal the only man in town for herself, Charity. Someone who's half her age. It's disgusting.

CHARITY. Now, Sarah Beth. Your Mama's just lonely. We all are.

SARAH BETH. But you're married, Charity. You have someone.

CHARITY. Honey, I love my husband. I do. But Harold's on the road hauling chickens one week and nuclear waste the next. I hardly ever see him. *(She pulls out a mirror and fidgets with her blond hair)* You know that last year, he spent the night in our bed a total of twelve times. I counted. Just twelve times. That's not nearly enough to keep me.. well, shall we say, satisfied. So, I know how your Mama feels.

SARAH BETH. Well, she's going to get another chance.

CHARITY. What do you mean, another chance?

SARAH BETH. *(she looks around toward the kitchen, then whispers to CHARITY)* I called him.

CHARITY. Who?

SARAH BETH. My Daddy. Told him that Mama wants him back real bad.

CHARITY. Now, why did you go and do that for? Your Mama's trying to move on. Start a new life.

SARAH BETH. 'Cause she ain't done with her old life yet, Charity. I know she still loves Daddy. She still has his picture hanging on the wall behind the stove. It's covered in about three inches of chicken grease, but if she really hated Daddy, she wouldn't keep looking at him while she cooked all day.

CHARITY. Well, all I can say is I hope you know what you're doing. I've helped your Mama out in the kitchen before and let me just tell you, she's mighty good with a knife.

SARAH BETH. It'll be okay. I just need you to help me get Gabe's attention away from Trish Ann and her short skirts. And Miss D'Ellen and, well.... her money.

CHARITY. Well, you do have one thing neither of them two have got.

SARAH BETH. Really? What?

CHARITY. Great hair. Turn around here and let me help you spice it up a little.

As CHARITY works, there's a sound from outside and we see TRISH ANN and D'ELLEN come into view, arguing with each other in front of the window. TRISH ANN suddenly reaches up and pulls at D'ELLEN's hair which comes off in her hand, revealing her head covered with a wig cap. D'ELLEN screams and tries to grab it back, but TRISH ANN turns and runs into the diner, waving the wig over her head.

D'ELLEN. Give it back, Trish Ann!

TRISH ANN. Hey, Charity. I got some more hair for one of your dead clients.

D'ELLEN. Give it to me!

SARAH BETH. I didn't know you had fake hair, Miss D'Ellen.

D'ELLEN. It's not fake. It's real hair. Just not mine.

TRISH ANN. *(sniffing the hairpiece)* Let me guess. German shepherd? No, Pit Bull!

D'ELLEN chases TRISH ANN around the diner, trying to get her hair back.

D'ELLEN. Give it back before Gabe gets here.

TRISH ANN. What's the matter? Afraid that he might see that you're not the spring chicken you claim to be?

D'ELLEN. Give it to me!

*D'ELLEN manages to snag the hair from TRISH ANN and she quickly plops it back onto her head where it lays like a bad rug.
She turns to CHARITY.*

D'ELLEN. Charity? Help!

CHARITY. Have a seat. I'm just about done with Sarah Beth.

D'ELLEN sits at the other table and dumps several packs of cigarettes from her purse while she waits. She digs in her purse, desperately looking for a lighter.

TRISH ANN. Why don't you just go out and buy a lighter, D'Ellen? It's only a matter of time before something around you catches on fire and your whole plan goes up in smoke.

D'ELLEN. I have given up smoking, Trish Ann! Just like you should give up that stupid idea that one day you'll play professional tennis. Look at you. Dressing in tennis clothes every day, your ass hanging out. Trying to convince everybody that you're Serena Williams or something.

TRISH ANN. I am going to be a pro. Just as soon as Pippy dies.

D'ELLEN. No, you're not!

TRISH ANN. Yes, I am!

SISSY MAE comes out of the kitchen at the noise of TRISH ANN and D'ELLEN continue to argue. She has changed from her apron into a bright red low-cut cocktail dress and tried to pull her hair up.

SISSY MAE. What's all the fuss about out here?

D'ELLEN. Trish Ann was saying how she wishes Pippy would go ahead and die so she can play at Wimbledon.

TRISH ANN. I was not!

SISSY MAE. That's not very nice, Trish Ann.

D'ELLEN. Selfishness is so unattractive.

SISSY MAE. Kind of like your hair?

CHARITY. Alright, ladies. Everyone back to their corners. *(to SARAH BETH)* Okay, Sarah Beth. That looks much better.

SARAH BETH gets up and blows a 'raspberry' at her mother.

SARAH BETH. Charity says I've got nice hair, Mama. And it's young!

CHARITY. Next.

D'ELLEN walks over and sits in the chair just vacated by SARAH BETH and CHARITY begins to work on getting her wig back in place.

CHARITY. Now, let's see what we can do with you, D'Ellen.

SARAH BETH crosses to her mother.

SARAH BETH. Where's your chef's hat, Mama?

SISSY MAE. It doesn't go very well with this dress, honey. *(pushing up her dress)* Or my cleavage.

SARAH BETH huffs in disgust and storms into the kitchen.

TRISH ANN. Where's Gabe?

SISSY MAE. He said he would be here around 10:45.

CHARITY. And he didn't question you about why he was being summoned to attend a meeting of the Desperate Women of Simply Society?

SISSY MAE. I didn't tell him everybody would be here.

D'ELLEN. He thinks it's just going to be you?

SISSY MAE. Well.. maybe.

TRISH ANN. *(walking behind the counter and helping herself to a cup of coffee)* Then, I'll be surprised if he shows up at all.

SISSY MAE. And what is that supposed to mean, Trish Ann?

D'ELLEN. It means that you're too old for him, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. And what does that make you, D'Ellen? If I'm not mistaken, you graduated the year before me at Simply High?

CHARITY. *(looking at D'ELLEN and counting on her fingers)* Wow.. that makes you both...

D'ELLEN. Shut up and fix my hair.

SISSY MAE. I've got just as much chance with Gabe as you do,

D'Ellen. Or you, Trish Ann with your slutty short skirts.

TRISH ANN. I'll have you know this is what all tennis pros wear, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. *(turning to TRISH ANN)* You're not a tennis pro, Trish Ann. You're never going to *be* a tennis pro. And the sooner you realize that, the happier you'll be.

TRISH ANN. *(pouting)* Well, if that's how you feel, Sissy Mae, maybe I should stop coming by here for Pippy's lunch every day and go to the El Taco instead.

SISSY MAE. Go to the El Taco. I'm sure Pippy would love a goat burrito just as much as my fried chicken.

CHARITY. I thought Sissy Mae's chicken gave him the winds?

TRISH ANN. Just the dark meat.

CHARITY finishes D'ELLEN's hair and then uses her comb and mirror to adjust her own hair. D'ELLEN reaches into her bag and pulls out a \$10 bill and hands it to her.

D'ELLEN. Here you go, Charity.

CHARITY. Why, thank you, D'Ellen.

D'ELLEN. No problem. I enjoy being generous. That's why men like me so much.

TRISH ANN. Because you pay them,

D'ELLEN. Very funny. Where's he going to sit?

SISSY MAE. Who?

D'ELLEN. Gabe.

SISSY MAE. I don't know. I guess right there.

She indicates a chair at the table near the door. D'ELLEN and TRISH ANN look at each other from across the room and then dash to the table, fighting over the one of the chairs at the table.

D'ELLEN. I was here first!

TRISH ANN. Let it go, grandma!

SISSY MAE. *(rushing over and hitting them with dishrag)* Hey, don't break my furniture. Those chairs are expensive.

D'ELLEN. I've got the money.

SISSY MAE shakes her head in dismay then turns to CHARITY as TRISH ANN and D'ELLEN continue to fight over the chair.

SISSY MAE. How about a little tune up, Charity? Since you got out your comb.

CHARITY. I thought you said no hair dressing in your diner?

SISSY MAE. Free coffee for a month?

CHARITY. Sold. Assume the position.

SISSY MAE sits in the chair and CHARITY goes to work on her hair. TRISH ANN relinquishes the chair to D'ELLEN, who smiles and sits. TRISH ANN pulls a chair from the back table, sets it beside the chair intended for GABE and sits. The two women glare at each other, then D'ELLEN scoots her chair closer to GABE's. In response, TRISH ANN scoots her chair closer. They continue to do this, banging their chairs together and scooting towards the center, across GABE's chair until both women are pressed shoulder to shoulder. SARAH BETH comes in and watches the women as they wrangle for space.

SISSY MAE. That looks comfortable. But you might have to use a little grease to get Gabe in that seat.

SARAH BETH. Miss D'Ellen. Can I ask you a question?

D'ELLEN. Yes, dear.

TRISH ANN. Like what it was like to go to the Senior Prom with John the Baptist?

D'ELLEN bumps TRISH ANN with her shoulder and TRISH ANN bumps her back, nearly knocking the older woman out of her chair.

SARAH BETH. No.. I was wondering. If one of your ex-husbands was to come to you and tell you he was sorry, would you take him back? (*she looks over to CHARITY as if asking for help*)

CHARITY. Yeah, D'Ellen.. would you?

D'ELLEN. Which one?

CHARITY. The one with the cold feet?

D'ELLEN. Roger?

SARAH BETH. Yeah, what about him? I mean, if he came to you and really said he was sorry and that he would never, ever... ever do.... what did he do?

D'ELLEN. Used to put his cold feet right in my back.

SARAH BETH. Yeah.. if he said he would never do that ever again. Would you take him back?

D'ELLEN. I don't know.

CHARITY pauses her hair styling for a moment.

CHARITY. You know, I think that if you hold onto to unforgiveness, you can never be truly happy. Y'all remember when Clyde Barlow passed?

D'ELLEN. Passed? He had a heart attack while he was sleeping with a hooker over at the Motel 6 on Route 39. That ain't exactly what most folks would call 'passed'.

CHARITY. What a scandal!

SISSY MAE. Yeah, what about him?

CHARITY. Well, the Merkel Brothers called me in try to cover up those carpet burns on his face where that skank drug him out into the hallway, after she stole his wallet.

TRISH ANN. Your life is so glamorous.

SISSY MAE. What does that have to do with Roger's cold feet?

CHARITY. Well, while I was working on him, his wife.... what was her name?

TRISH ANN. Betty Jean...

CHARITY. Yeah, she came into the funeral home to see Clyde and when I turned my back to get my heavy duty foundation.. that burn was deep.. well, Betty Jean somehow crawled up into the casket right on top of Clyde.

D'ELLEN. She crawled up in the casket?

CHARITY. Yep. I tried to get her out of there 'cause she was messing up his lip gloss something bad. She kept blubbering about how she knew

Clyde didn't mean it. That she knew all he was doing in that hotel room with that poor young girl was sharing the Gospel with her.

TRISH ANN. He was a Gideon, you know.

CHARITY. Betty Jean said she couldn't let the Merkel Brothers put him in the ground until Clyde knew she forgave him.

SISSY MAE. Well, not me. There are just some things a woman can't forget.... or forgive.

SARAH BETH. Well, maybe Betty Jean realized that everyone has moments of weakness, Mama.

D'ELLEN suddenly answers the original question.

D'ELLEN. I'd do it.

TRISH ANN. What? Crawl into the casket with a dead guy?

D'ELLEN. Forgive Roger. If he said he was really sorry and promised to wear socks, really thick hunting socks, then I might take him back. I liked Roger. He wore really nice after shave.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth. What is this all about?

SARAH BETH. Nothing, Mama. It just occurred to me that two people who really loved each other should do everything they can to stay together. Don't you think so, Charity?

CHARITY. Oh, yeah. Forgiveness is beautiful... and liberating. Just ask Betty Jean Barlow. After she crawled out of that casket, she got her stomach stapled and lost 135 pounds. Last I heard she moved to Vegas and became a showgirl.

D'ELLEN. Yeah, well what if old Clyde had refused to pronounce Betty Jean's name right? You think she would have crawled up in that casket with him if he had spent seven years calling her Betty Joan?

TRISH ANN. Would you get over it, D'Ellen? So he couldn't pronounce your name right. So what? He's dead.

D'ELLEN. Oh, Carl could pronounce my name alright. He just refused to. And *that* is unforgivable.

The door to the diner opens and in walks RAY. As the women watch, he goes through his ritual of opening and closing the door three times.

D'ELLEN. Oh, sweet Lord.

SISSY MAE gets up and walks over behind him and when RAY opens the door the final time, she gently pushes him back outside.

SISSY MAE. Sorry, Ray. Didn't you read the sign? We're closed today for a private party.

RAY. But it's 11:05.

SISSY MAE. I know it is, Ray. But we're closed.

RAY comes back into the doorway and points to all the women.

RAY. But what are they doing here if you're closed.

D'ELLEN. Sissy Mae isn't closing the Simply Delicious to everyone, Ray. Just you.

RAY. What? *(to SISSY MAE)* You're banning me from the diner?

SISSY MAE. No, Ray.

D'ELLEN. Yep, she's implementing a strict new, 'No Freaks' policy, Ray. Sorry.

RAY. But, Sissy Mae? It's 11:05. From 11:05 'til 11:43, I'm at the Simply Delicious Diner. Every day. Where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do until 11:43?

RAY looks as if he's about to cry. SISSY MAE is not sure what to do. She looks at RAY, standing in the doorway and looking pitiful and then back at D'ELLEN and the other women. Finally, CHARITY speaks.

CHARITY. Ah, come on, Sissy Mae. Let him in.

TRISH ANN. Yeah.

SISSY MAE. But...

TRISH ANN. What if Ray leaves here and decides to go on a shooting spree because you denied him his cheese sandwich.

CHARITY. It could happen.

SISSY MAE. You wouldn't do that, would you, Ray? Go out and kill people just because you didn't get your sandwich, would you?

RAY. *(playing along)* I don't know, Sissy Mae. Maybe. I am very unstable, you know.

SISSY MAE looks at the girls again.

D'ELLEN. Kick him out, Sissy Mae. *(to RAY)* Go ahead, Ray. Go on a shooting spree. But I'm betting that by the time you loaded and unloaded your gun three times, the cops would probably have time to take it away from you.

SISSY MAE. Okay, come on in, Ray. But, remember, this is a private brunch and you're not part of it. Okay?

RAY. Okay.

SISSY MAE steps out of the way and RAY enters the diner, closing the door three times and then opening and slamming it one more time. He rings the bell and then walks over and sprays his normal seat with disinfectant before sitting down. Everyone just looks at him for a moment and then RAY turns to SISSY MAE.

RAY. Well. Aren't you going to take my order?

SISSY MAE begins to cross towards the kitchen with a heavy sigh.

SISSY MAE. Okay. One grilled cheese sandwich, coming right up.

She turns to go towards the kitchen and RAY holds up his hand and stops her, and points at the 'Specials Board' which still lists Ham Panini as the special.

RAY. Actually. Today, I think I would like to try the special.

SISSY MAE, and everyone else, looks at RAY with surprise.

SISSY MAE. What?

D'ELLEN. You're not ordering a stupid cheese sandwich with just one slice of bread? You always order that, Ray.

RAY. Well, you know, D'Ellen. I've been thinking about what you said the other day and maybe you're right about me. Maybe I do need to learn to try new things. Change up my routine a little. Not freak out just because everything isn't exactly right.

D'ELLEN. Oh, really?

She stands up, goes to RAY's table and picks up the plastic ketchup bottle and tosses it over the counter towards the kitchen. RAY watches this with horror and screams.

RAY. NO!!

SARAH BETH. I got it, Mr. Ray.

SARAH BETH runs behind the counter, gets the bottle, then runs back and puts it back on the table where it was. RAY, visibly relieved, moves it around until it is back in the exact spot on the table. D'ELLEN stands and watches the episode with her arms crossed, then sits down with a chuckle.

D'ELLEN. Yep, you've changed alright.

RAY. Well, at least I'm trying, D'Ellen. That's more than I can say about you and your purse full of cigarettes. *(to Sissy Mae)* The special, please.

SISSY MAE. Ham panini?

RAY. Yeah. What exactly is that anyway?

SARAH BETH. It's an Italian grilled sandwich.

RAY. Huh. Kinda' like a grilled cheese?

SISSY MAE. Yeah. With ham instead of cheese.

RAY. Sounds good. I'll take it. One ham panini.

SISSY MAE begins to exit to the kitchen and RAY stops her again.

RAY. But hold the ham. And only one piece of bread on the bottom. With cheese.

SISSY MAE. And lemonade?

RAY. Yes. Red cup, please.

SISSY MAE shakes her head and exits to the kitchen. As she does, the door opens and in walks GABE. RAY watches him closely as he closes the door. Noticing this, CHARITY speaks to GABE in a low voice.

CHARITY. Ring the bell.

GABE. What?

CHARITY. Ring the bell. With your fingers.

GABE. *(confused)* Huh?

TRISH ANN. Just do it, okay?

GABE. Okay.

He reaches up and taps the bell with his hands. RAY is visibly relieved, sighing heavily. GABE then turns to the ladies in the room.

GABE. Good morning, ladies. Is Sissy Mae here?

D'ELLEN. Nope. She doesn't work here anymore. Sold the place to me.

SARAH BETH. No, she didn't.

D'ELLEN gets up and goes over to GABE.

D'ELLEN. Yep, decided to leave town and become a nun. She's married to Jesus now.

CHARITY snickers at this while SARAH BETH and TRISH ANN look shocked.

GABE. But she invited me to brunch.

D'ELLEN. Sorry. She got the call from God quite suddenly. Sold all her worldly possessions and decided to become a Born Again Virgin.

SARAH BETH. Miss D'Ellen!

D'ELLEN. Okay, that's not true. She died last night. One of the Confederate statues fell on her.

GABE. What?

CHARITY. She's in the kitchen, Gabe.

RAY. Getting my panini. I'm trying something new. It's a big step for me.

GABE walks over and extends his hand to RAY who looks at it curiously.

GABE. Hi, I don't believe we've met. I'm Gabriel Hill. I'm the new English teacher at the High School.

RAY peers at the outstretched hand, then pulls out his disinfectant bottle, sprays GABE's hand and shakes it nervously.

RAY. I'm Ray.

D'ELLEN. *(pulling GABE away as he wipes his hand on his shirt)* Pay no attention to him, Gabe. Ray is the town loony. Every Southern town has one. Here, come have a seat beside me.

CHARITY. Don't listen to her, Ray. There's nothing wrong with you.

RAY. Thank you, Charity.

CHARITY. Well, except for that door slamming thing. But that's all.

RAY. Thank you.

SISSY MAE walks back into the room holding a tray with RAY's food.

SISSY MAE. Here you go, Ray. One ham panini. Hold the ham. Add cheese and only one slice of bread. Pretty hard to do that in a panini grill!

SISSY MAE looks and sees GABE. She drops the tray on the counter and rushes over to him.

RAY. Hey! My sandwich!

SARAH BETH rushes over and serves RAY's lunch.

SARAH BETH. Sorry, Mr. Ray. And it's a panini.. not a sandwich.

SISSY MAE smoothes her dress and hair as she approaches GABE with a big smile.

SISSY MAE. How nice of you to come to brunch, Gabe.

GABE. Sorry I was late. I got lost again. All those Generals are real confusing.

SISSY MAE. Oh, no problem. That's quite okay.

TRISH ANN. *(Leaning in close to GABE)* We didn't mind waiting.

D'ELLEN. *(leaning into GABE)* Patience is a virtue.

GABE. Yes, it is. *(a little uncomfortable)* So, I didn't know that... ah, everyone.. would be here.

SISSY MAE. Well, I just invited you here because....

SARAH BETH. *(stepping forward and interrupting her mother)* Because she just wanted everyone here so she could give us her blessing.

SISSY MAE. My what?

SARAH BETH. Yeah. My mother is so thoughtful. She saw that since you and I are the only young people left in Simply, that naturally, we would probably start dating. Maybe even move in together and she wanted to let you know that it was okay with her.

GABE. *(looking at SARAH BETH confused)* Move in together? Who are you again?

SISSY MAE. Gabe, this is my daughter, Sarah Beth. She poured your coffee the other day.

TRISH ANN. She's a lesbian.

SARAH BETH. I am not.

D'ELLEN. You'll have to excuse Sarah Beth. She just got out of prison. Stabbed her husband.

SARAH BETH. I did not.

TRISH ANN. Her and Ray are lovers.

At this, RAY spews a mouthful of lemonade with surprise.

RAY. What?

GABE. I'm sorry, am I missing something here?

SISSY MAE. Gabe, Sarah Beth is my daughter. She just moved back home from Mobile. She is not a lesbian and did not stab her husband.

SARAH BETH. *(holding out her hand so GABE can see that it doesn't have a ring)* I am not married.

D'ELLEN. Well, obviously. *(to GABE)* I'd divorce anybody who stabbed me.

TRISH ANN. Or mispronounced your name.

D'ELLEN makes a face at TRISH ANN who sticks out her tongue in response.

GABE. Okay. Well, it's nice to meet you.. ah, again. And thank you for inviting me to the... ah, the party, I guess, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. Don't worry. I'm closing early today. So we can spend some time alone. Just the two of us. *(she stands behind GABE and runs her hands through his hair)* Intimate time.

SARAH BETH. Stop that, Mama. You're embarrassing me.

RAY. *(calling from his table)* I would like to place another order please, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE stops touching GABE and walks reluctantly over to RAY.

SISSY MAE. What is it, Ray?

RAY. I would like another piece of bread to go on the top of my panini, please. Pumpernickel.

D'ELLEN. I thought you said you were changing, Ray?

RAY. Okay.. okay.. whole wheat.

SISSY MAE. *(sighing heavily)* One slice of whole wheat.. coming up.

RAY. Toasted.. *(he calls after SISSY MAE)* ...lightly.

SISSY MAE. Excuse me a moment, Gabe. I'll be right back.

SISSY MAE exits and SARAH BETH follows her into the kitchen. The two can be heard arguing behind the closed door.

SARAH BETH. Why did you tell him I'm a lesbian?

SISSY MAE. I didn't. Trish Ann did. But if you want to have a girlfriend, that's okay with me.

SARAH BETH. I don't want a girlfriend. I want Gabe!

TRISH ANN reaches out and takes GABE's arm, stroking it sensuously.

TRISH ANN. Did you know that I'm going to be a professional tennis player very soon.

GABE. Oh really?

TRISH ANN. Yes. Before you know it, you'll be able to turn on ESPN and I'll be right there.

D'ELLEN chuckles at this.

TRISH ANN. What's so funny, D'Ellen?

D'ELLEN. I'm just trying to imagine you trying to hold your own against one of those seventeen year old Russian girls. The hardest person you've played in the last decade is Betsy Collins. *(to GABE)* Her husband's the president of Simply Bank & Trust and pays for her to have private lessons over in Gulfport twice a month. She'd have a really wicked serve if she'd go down a couple cup sizes on her breast implants.

CHARITY. She's got real nice hair. I've never had to shave her neck. Not once.

The door opens and in walks EARL, the husband of SISSY MAE. He is dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt and a greasy John Deere baseball cap. He's carrying a small bouquet of flowers in one hand and a box of cheap chocolates in the other. After he closes the door, he turns to D'ELLEN.

EARL. Where's Sissy Mae?

D'ELLEN. Earl? Is that you?

EARL. Yes, it's me, D'Ellen. Now, where's my wife?

CHARITY. Ring the bell, Earl.

EARL. What?

TRISH ANN & CHARITY. Ring the bell!

EARL. Why?

CHARITY. Just ring it!

EARL reaches up with the box of chocolates and rings the bell and then turns back to D'ELLEN.

EARL. Now, where is Sissy Mae?

D'ELLEN. You've got some nerve coming back here, Earl.

TRISH ANN turns to GABE.

TRISH ANN. That's Earl. Sissy Mae's husband.

GABE. Sissy Mae's husband? I thought he lived in Mobile?

D'ELLEN. He does. That's where he's been cheating on Sissy Mae.

Haven't you, Earl?

EARL. That is between me and my wife, D'Ellen.

D'ELLEN. I hear it's between you and some slut that has a butterfly tattoo.

EARL. That's all just a big misunderstanding.

CHARITY. You're here to say you're sorry. Aren't you, Earl? To make things right between you and Sissy Mae.

EARL. Yes, I am, Charity. I made a mistake, okay?

At this point, SISSY MAE comes through the door carrying the plate with RAY's piece of toast. SARAH BETH is right behind her.

CHARITY. Don't tell me. (pointing to SISSY MAE) Tell her.

SISSY MAE. Earl? What are you doing here? *(she drops the plate with the toast onto the counter which visibly upsets RAY who for the next few pages begins to point at the plate and whine that he needs his bread)*

EARL. Sissy Mae... baby..

SISSY MAE. You have some nerve coming back here.

D'ELLEN. Told you.

SARAH BETH. He wants you back, Mama.

CHARITY. He's here to apologize.

SISSY MAE. He what?

EARL crosses towards SISSY MAE and tries to hand her the flowers and chocolates.

EARL. I am so sorry, Sissy Mae. I don't know what I was thinking.

D'ELLEN. I do. You were thinking what's the worst thing I could possibly do to Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. ... and you did it, Earl. Right on my mama's unicorn quilt. Did that third place ribbon mean nothing to you?

EARL. I was so lonely up there, all by myself.

SISSY MAE. All by yourself? What about Sarah Beth? She was there and she saw you, Earl.

TRISH ANN. *(to GABE)* She saw her Daddy naked. His 'thingy', too. *(she points to Gabe's crotch)*

SISSY MAE. And what about me? I've been here all alone, running this diner all by myself. And I haven't been cheating on you.

D'ELLEN. She could have, though. With Owen Osgood. He wants her.

EARL. You slept with Peg Leg Owen?

SISSY MAE. No, Earl. I haven't been sleeping with anyone. Not that men don't want me, because they do. Don't they, Gabe?

GABE. I.. I guess so.

RAY. Where's my order, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. Keep your pants on, Ray.

D'ELLEN. You should have told that to Earl, Sissy Mae.

SISSY MAE. You know, Earl, not only did you cheat on me, that was bad enough, but then you wiped your snot on my Mama's prized quilt. Third place, Earl. Third place!

EARL. I'm sorry, baby.

SISSY MAE. Oh, don't apologize to me. Apologize to our daughter. She saw you naked, Earl. Naked! She'll probably have to have therapy.

D'ELLEN. Shock treatments, I'm sure.

EARL. I'm so sorry, Sissy Mae. And you, too, Sarah Beth. *(he reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out two envelopes and holds them out)* I wrote you both a letter saying how sorry I am.

RAY. Sissy Mae! My order?

SISSY MAE pushes past EARL, picks the plate up from the counter and 'throws' it at RAY who promptly puts the piece of bread on top of his panini and begins to eat. EARL follows her and again tries to give her the flowers and chocolates.

EARL. I know I did a terrible thing, Sissy Mae. I'm weak.

D'ELLEN. And stupid...

EARL. And stupid.

TRISH ANN. And selfish.

EARL. Would y'all butt out of this. I know. I'm weak and stupid and selfish. All of those things. But I'll do anything to get you back, Sugar.

SISSY MAE. Did you put him up to this, Sarah Beth?

SARAH BETH looks at CHARITY who just shrugs.

CHARITY. I didn't say a word.

SISSY MAE. Sarah Beth?

SARAH BETH. Yes, I called him, Mama. I told him that you wanted him back. And you do, Mama. *(she walks over to SISSY MAE and EARL)* You just told me that you wanted someone who would bring you flowers. *(she takes the flowers from EARL and hands them to SISSY MAE)* Well, here's your flowers. And candy? *(she takes the chocolates and hands them to her mother)* Well, there's your candy. Someone who would write you romantic letters. *(she takes the letter from EARL's pocket and hands it to her mother)* Well, here's your letter. Daddy is the man you've been dreaming about, Mama. Don't you see that?

SISSY MAE looks at all the things that SARAH BETH handed her, then at EARL.

SISSY MAE. All I see is someone who brought me some cheap flowers and even cheaper candy. *(she holds the box out for SARAH BETH to see)* Look at that 50% off Wal-Mart sticker, Sarah Beth. Your Daddy couldn't even buy me candy at full retail. *(to EARL)* No, as far as I'm concerned, you can take your dead flowers, your sale candy and your love letters and head back to Mobile, Earl.

EARL. I can't.

SISSY MAE. Yes, you can. Just get in your truck and drive north. I'm sure your little harlot is up there waiting for you.

EARL. No, I can't, Sissy Mae. I quit my job at the plant.

SISSY MAE. You what?

EARL. I quit. I'm moving back here to Simply.

She turns and walks back towards the kitchen, opening the box and eating a one of the pieces of chocolate on the way.

SISSY MAE. No, you're not!

EARL. But, baby. *(following her)* I've changed. I really have.

SISSY MAE. Well, change back. Then go back.

She goes into the kitchen and EARL follows her.

EARL. But, baby... sugar dumpling.. honey pie...

SARAH BETH. *(to GABE)* I'm sorry you had to see that. But I think that both of my parents would be really pleased if we started dating.

GABE. I hardly know you.

SARAH BETH. That's why people date, silly. Let me go fetch you some coffee, Gabe. How do you take it?

GABE. Ah.. black...

CHARITY. I'd like a cup, too. Extra black for me. And your mama said it's on the house.

SARAH BETH goes behind the counter to get the coffee.

TRISH ANN. Did you know that D'Ellen has been married four times?

GABE. What?

TRISH ANN. Yep, four times. And her second husband just died of mysterious causes. *(leaning in to whisper loudly)* You might want to be careful. I think she's one of those Black Widow killers.

GABE. *(to D'ELLEN)* Four times?

D'ELLEN. Trish Ann lives with an eighty three year old man. They're lovers.

TRISH ANN. He's my grandfather!

D'ELLEN. Now, that's just sick. Don't you think so, Gabe?

TRISH ANN. Why, you...

TRISH ANN reaches out and pulls off D'ELLEN's wig. She laughs maniacally, then runs across the diner with the wig held high in her hand. D'ELLEN immediately chases her.

D'ELLEN. Give me back my hair!

CHARITY. Now things are starting to get good.

SARAH BETH. Stop it, Trish Ann. Miss D'Ellen.

TRISH ANN runs around the table where GABE is sitting, trips on one of the chairs and falls to the floor. D'ELLEN jumps on top of her and they start to fight.

D'ELLEN. Give me my hair back, you bitch!

TRISH ANN. Not until you say Gabe is mine.

D'ELLEN. You're going to have to fight me for him.

CHARITY. *(now standing up to see the brawl better)* Put her in a headlock, Trish Ann!

SARAH BETH. Y'all stop it. You're going to break something.

CHARITY. Yeah, be careful. Her old bones are mighty brittle.

The two women roll over and bump into RAY just as he takes a swallow of his drink, causing him to spill it on his panini.

RAY. Hey, you made me spill lemonade on my cheese sandwich.

RAY uses his napkin to dry his sandwich and plate.

SARAH BETH. It's a panini, Ray. A panini!

CHARITY starts to really get into the fight. She gets down on the floor beside the two women like a referee.

CHARITY. Kick her ass, D'Ellen!

TRISH ANN. Hey, I thought you were rooting for me?

CHARITY. Sorry... bite her on the leg, Trish Ann.

In an effort to keep the wig away from D'ELLEN, TRISH ANN manages to throw it towards RAY where it lands right on top of his sandwich. He jumps up and screams.

RAY. There's a hair in my sandwich! Sissy Mae!

Total mayhem breaks out as RAY continues to shout that there is a hair in his sandwich, SARAH BETH screams that it's a panini, not a sandwich and CHARITY continues to watch the fight and yell encouragements. In response to the noise, SISSY MAE bursts into the room with EARL close behind.

SISSY MAE. What is going on in here?

EARL. I won't ever do it again, Sissy Mae. I promise!

CHARITY. Gouge her eyes out, Trish Ann!

RAY. There's a hair in my cheese sandwich.

SARAH BETH. It's not a sandwich, it's a panini!

TRISH ANN. I am not letting you steal Gabe away from me, you old bag.

D'ELLEN. You're going to have to fight harder than that if you think you can take him from me.

Suddenly, GABE stands up and shouts.

GABE. Stop it! Stop it!

The noise, shouting and fighting continues. GABE raises his arms and shouts even louder.

GABE. I'm gay!

At this announcement, the room suddenly gets quiet. D'ELLEN has TRISH ANN pinned to the floor like a wrestler and is the first to speak.

D'ELLEN. I'm sorry. What did you say?

GABE. I said I'm gay.

TRISH ANN. Gay?

GABE. Yes, Trish Ann. Gay.

D'ELLEN. As in.. you like boys. That kind of gay?

GABE. Yes, D'Ellen. That kind of gay. I thought everybody knew.

TRISH ANN. How were we supposed to know that?

RAY. I did.

D'ELLEN. Shut up, Ray!

GABE. I live alone? Never had a girlfriend? I minored in musical theater, for God's sake.

Everyone mumbles and looks at each other as if the statement makes sense. CHARITY voices the general sentiment.

CHARITY. Well, that is gay.

GABE. Don't you two feel ridiculous, rolling around on the floor, fighting over a gay man. *(to the other ladies)* Don't you all feel ridiculous?

The two women look at each other, and then break apart and sit up.

TRISH ANN. It's her fault. *(to SISSY MAE)* She started it.

D'ELLEN. You took my hair, Trish Ann.

SISSY MAE. You don't look gay.

GABE. What does that mean?

SISSY MAE. Well.. I.. ah..

D'ELLEN. It means that we don't have a lot of gay people in South Alabama and she's never seen one.

GABE. Sorry. Next time, I'll wear a big sign around my neck that says, 'Hi, I'm Gabe. And I'm gay.'

SARAH BETH. Well, if he's gay, then that means you and Daddy can get back together now.

SISSY MAE. I cannot believe you called him, Sarah Beth.

EARL. I didn't come back because Sarah Beth called me, Sissy Mae. I quit my job a week ago.. I've just been trying to get up enough nerve to come home.

SISSY MAE. Why, Earl? Why would you want to come back to some dinky little town that's still living a hundred and fifty years in the past. Or to a chubby wife who smells like chicken grease.

EARL. Because I can be happy anywhere, Sissy Mae, as long as I'm with you. I love you, baby. Always have.. always will.

SISSY MAE. Oh, Earl.

They embrace suddenly.

GABE. Ah. Isn't that sweet. Makes me miss my boyfriend.

D'ELLEN. You've got a boyfriend?

GABE. In Atlanta.

TRISH ANN. (*CHARITY helps get up and TRISH ANN straightens her clothes and hair*) Well, that figures. The only eligible man in town.. and he has a boyfriend.

D'ELLEN. Uh... he's too old for me anyway. (*she turns to RAY and extends a hand*) Help me up, Ray.

RAY puts down his sandwich, stands and helps D'ELLEN off the floor. He stands there awkwardly for a moment.

RAY. Why don't you sit with me, D'Ellen?

D'ELLEN. Really?

RAY. Yes. I told you that I've changed.

D'ELLEN. A panini? And then being polite to me? Maybe you have changed.

RAY uses his fork to spear D'ELLEN's wig, then hands it to her.

RAY. Here's your hair.

D'ELLEN. Thanks..

RAY. But, I don't think you really need it, D'Ellen. You've always been beautiful to me just the way you are.

D'ELLEN. *(she blushes a little, then pulls off her skull cap and straightens her real hair)* Why, thank you, Ray.

TRISH ANN walks over to apologize to D'ELLEN, and the two hug.

TRISH ANN. I'm sorry, D'Ellen. I didn't mean to snatch your hair off.

D'ELLEN. Me, too, Trish Ann. And I didn't mean that part about you never being a professional tennis player. Who knows, maybe one day.

TRISH ANN turns and walks back to her chair. RAY pulls out a chair for D'ELLEN and she sits. He then bashfully puts his arm around her.

TRISH ANN. No, you're right. Those days are behind me. *(she sits)* I just have to face the fact that I'll probably never leave Simply. And that Pippy will probably never die.

CHARITY. There's always Owen down at the gas station. I bet he'd make a great doubles partner for you. He can really hop on that one leg.

From behind the counter, SISSY MAE and EARL break their embrace long enough for her to announce that the party is over.

SISSY MAE. Well, seeing as my husband has decided to come home... and stay home, I'm closing early today. Earl and I are going back to the house and he's going to show me some of the things that Madam Butterfly taught him.

EARL. Why do y'all keep calling her that? (*SISSY MAE whispers in his ear*) Oh, really? I never saw her from that angle.

SARAH BETH. Gross, Dad.

SISSY MAE. Sorry, Gabe, but the brunch is going to have to end before the main course, I'm afraid. Me and Earl are going home for a little dessert. (*they hug*) You're in charge, Sarah Beth.

They exit through the kitchen, then SISSY MAE turns back, takes a dart from the box and tosses it at the dart board.

SISSY MAE. Take that, Toyota! I got my man back!

TRISH ANN. So, this Owen fellow. Is he good looking, Charity?

CHARITY. Better than D'Ellen's first three husbands combined. Come on, let's head back to your place, I'll fix your hair up real pretty and we'll run over there and get our oil changed.

SISSY MAE and EARL go into kitchen. TRISH ANN and GABE cross towards the door. As they pass, TRISH ANN stops and hugs GABE.

TRISH ANN. Gabe, I don't care if you are gay. We're just glad to have you in Simply.

They pass behind GABE towards the door. CHARITY leans down to GABE as she passes him.

CHARITY. I knew it all along.

TRISH ANN. You did not.

CHARITY reaches down and ruffles GABE's hair.

CHARITY. Look at this hair. Straight men do not have hair that looks this good. *(she bends down a little closer to examine GABE's hair)* But you might want to make an appointment with me for a hot oil treatment. You got some split ends going on.

SARAH BETH. *(sounding like her mother)* No hot oil in my diner!

GABE. I'll call you.

TRISH ANN and CHARITY exit through the door, still arguing about who knew first that GABE was gay. RAY and D'ELLEN continue to sit together closely and make intimate small talk. RAY even feeds her little pieces of his sandwich. SARAH BETH walks over to GABE and crosses her arms. She's a little disappointed to find out the he is gay.

SARAH BETH. So... gay, huh?

GABE. Yep.. afraid so.

SARAH BETH. Huh.... so, listen. I hear that gay people can really cook.

GABE. No better than anybody else.

SARAH BETH. Whatever. I watch the Food Network and every one of them guys are gay. Anyway, I've been trying to class up this place a little with some French food. You think you might could show me how to make a soufflé?

GABE gets up and follows SARAH BETH towards the kitchen.

GABE. I told you. I can't cook any better than you can.

SARAH BETH. Yeah, right. When we get finished with the soufflé, maybe you can help me redecorate the diner. You people are good at that too, aren't you?

GABE. You people? Have you even met a gay person, Sarah Beth?

SARAH BETH. Just you.

GABE. *(laughs)* Well, I'm afraid you've got a lot to learn. *(he sighs, then stops and looks back towards D'ELLEN)* Go find me an apron and one of those 'funny' hats, and I'll be right there.

SARAH BETH. I think you and I are going to wind up being friends, Gabe.

She exits into the kitchen and GABE approaches D'ELLEN.

GABE. I almost forgot... *(He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small, silver cigarette lighter)* I saw this cigarette lighter in the store and just had to get it for you, Miss D'Ellen. It has your initial on it.

GABE hands the lighter to D'ELLEN who takes it, looks at it then looks at RAY.

D'ELLEN. No thanks, Gabe. If Ray can change, so can I. I'm quitting cigarettes.... *(she hands him back the lighter)*...and lighters.. for good.

GABE smiles, then exits into the kitchen. RAY and D'ELLEN are the only two left in the diner. D'ELLEN leans over close to RAY and holds his arm.

D'ELLEN. Looks like we're all alone, Ray.

RAY. Yep. Just like back in high school. Except there's a lot more room in here than there was in the back seat of my Daddy's car.

D'ELLEN. I was thinking. Why don't we try again.

RAY. Try what?

D'ELLEN. You know. You trying to unsnap my bra.

RAY. *(looks around)* In the diner?

D'ELLEN. No. Over at my house.

D'ELLEN gets up to leave, but RAY hesitates.

RAY. Ah.... D'Ellen? You're not wearing one of those lunchroom lady bras with like forty hooks in the back, are you?

D'ELLEN. Nope, Ray. *(she points to the center of her chest)* This one connects in the front... with Velcro.

RAY swallows loudly, then gets up from his chair.

RAY. Thank, God!

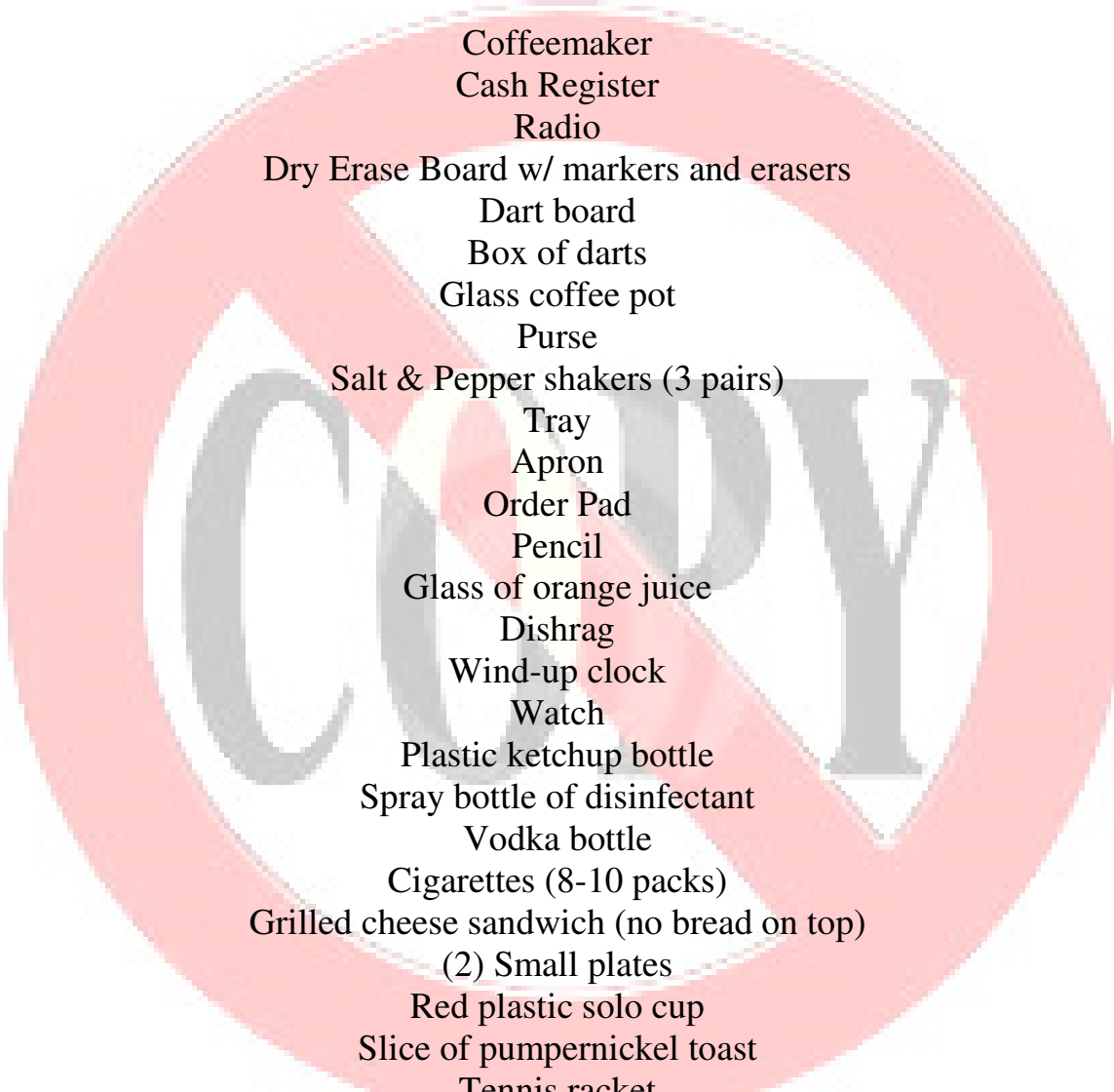
D'ELLEN goes out the door and then turns back and beckons RAY and closes door behind her. RAY starts to count as he crosses towards the door, then sees D'ELLEN watching him through the window, so he stops counting. She smiles. He approaches the door and pulls out his spray bottle and points it towards knob, then changes his mind and opens the door with his hand. He starts to slam and count, but stops himself and opens the door all the way, passing through it. After a second, RAY reappears in the doorway and reaches up and rings the bell. Then closes the door and leaves.

CURTAIN

THE END

WORKING PROP LIST

Act One, Scene One



Coffeemaker
 Cash Register
 Radio
 Dry Erase Board w/ markers and erasers
 Dart board
 Box of darts
 Glass coffee pot
 Purse
 Salt & Pepper shakers (3 pairs)
 Tray
 Apron
 Order Pad
 Pencil
 Glass of orange juice
 Dishrag
 Wind-up clock
 Watch
 Plastic ketchup bottle
 Spray bottle of disinfectant
 Vodka bottle
 Cigarettes (8-10 packs)
 Grilled cheese sandwich (no bread on top)
 (2) Small plates
 Red plastic solo cup
 Slice of pumpernickel toast
 Tennis racket
 Pot and ladle
 Carryout box
 Fake money
 Long wig on foam head
 Large bag with Charity's hair supplies
 Cell phone
 Coffee cup

Money wrapped in plastic
 Sheet of paper
 Lighter

Act One, Scene Two

Blue Solo cup
 Red Solo cup
 Cigarettes
 Makeup mirror
 Eye Makeup
 Paper grocery bag
 Pan full of silverware
 Napkins
 Coffee cup
 Tray with Steak Dinner
 Comb
 Mirror
 Lipstick
 Wheeled suitcase
 Plastic bottle of hair dye
 Cellphone
 Money wrapped in plastic

Act Two, Scene One

(2) Aprons with "S" on front
 Beret
 Chef's hat
 Tray with salt & pepper shakers (3 pair)
 (3) Cellphones
 Charity's hair bag and supplies
 Plastic Smock
 Plastic hair dye bottle
 Mirror
 Ladle

Coffee cup
Fake money
Cigarette
Checkbook

Act Two, Scene Two

First Aid Kit
Silverware
Napkins
Charity's bag of hair products
D'Ellen's wig
Skull cap
Purse
Cigarettes
(4) Coffee cups
Fake money
Order pad
Plastic ketchup bottle
Spray bottle of disinfectant
Tray with sandwich
Bouquet of flowers
Box of chocolates
Plate with toast
(2) Envelopes
Box of darts
Cigarette lighter

Synopsis of
Simply Divided

A Comedy in Two Acts

By: Jeff Lovett

Ever since the Toyota truck plant opened in Mobile, the men of Simply, Alabama have been packing up and moving away by the hundreds. No one is more alarmed by this trend than the women who spend their days at the Simply Delicious Diner. Owner Sissy Mae Montgomery struggles to keep the doors of the diner open as the town dies around her. She counts on the daily support and camaraderie of her friends, D'Ellen Chambers, the four times divorced town 'cougar'; Trish Ann Blackwood, a one-time tennis star who has moved back to Simply to care for her ailing grandfather; and Charity Collins, a freelance hairstylist who carries an entire beauty salon in her huge hand bag. The four friends spend much of their time in the diner complaining about their failed love lives, past and present, and how the quaint little town of Simply, where all the streets are named for Confederate Generals, will be able to survive without good 'breeding stock.' One day, a handsome young stranger named Gabe wanders into the diner and announces that he is the new teacher at the high school. Desperate for affection, the four women begin to compete for his attention. In the midst of the battle, Sissy Mae's marriage breaks up and her grown daughter returns to work at the diner, becoming her biggest competitor for Gabe's affection.

Set entirely in the diner, *Simply Divided* is the story of how easily friendships can be torn apart by loneliness and jealousy. With plenty of verbal jousting, surprising plot twists and a sprinkling of quirky supporting characters, *Simply Divided* feels like spending an evening with old friends. Just old friends that want to kill each other.

Length: 120 minutes

Genre: Comedy

Cast Requirements:

6 Females

3 Males

Set Requirements:

Single Set

NOTES

