

*NO SMOKING
IN
THE LADIES' ROOM*

by Marsha L. Grant © 1995

CAST

(7 females, 1 male)

BETH, age 45-55.

DOT, age 40-50

CHRIS, age 40-50.

PAMELA, age 55-65

DORIS, age 18-25

ELLIE, age 20-30

SUSAN, age 25-35

STORE MANAGER, a male age 25 or older

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Act I, Scene 1: the last week of August.

Act I, Scene 2: later that same day.

Intermission

Act II, Scene 1: two months later.

Act II, Scene 2: a week before Christmas.

Act II, Scene 3: two days later

The characters are fictional, but the problems and anecdotes revealed by the characters are factual--told by women who were separated from their husbands or recently divorced. Pamela's organization is pure fiction, but most of these women wished it were real. All action takes place in the ladies' restroom of a discount department store. The time is present. Running time approx 90 minutes.

ACT I, Scene 1

[Unit set--the ladies' room of a discount department store. There are two stalls along one wall. On the opposite side are a sink, mirror, and a utilitarian chair. There is an exit hall to the rest of the store. On the walls are a "No Smoking" sign, a working smoke detector, dispensers for paper towels, sanitary napkins, baby wipes, and condoms. At rise BETH enters, studies her face in the mirror and runs her hand through her hair. She looks washed out and tired.]

BETH: Hopeless! Simply hopeless! *(She scrounges in her purse for a comb and starts doing her hair. She struggles viciously with a tangle, then starts crying.)* What's the use. You're old and ugly, and there's nothing you can do about it. *(she stuffs her brush back in her purse and choking back sobs goes into a stall. CHRIS enters and checks for feet under the stall doors. She wears an outfit that displays her well-toned, athletic figure.)*

CHRIS: That you, Beth?

BETH: Yeah.

CHRIS: You okay?

BETH: Yeah.

CHRIS: You sure?

BETH: I'm sure, Chris.

CHRIS: You didn't look okay-- kind of green around the gills. Want a Pepto? I've got some pills in my purse.

BETH: No.

CHRIS: Ex-lax?

BETH: No.

CHRIS: Kaopectate?

BETH: No! Lay off, will you, Chris? I'll be out when I'm ready.

CHRIS: Just trying to help. *(goes to the mirror, puts on fresh lipstick, and combs her hair.)* Dot's waiting for us in the food court, stuffing her face, as usual. Poor girl, she's in bad shape. *(beat)* Are you sure you're all right?

BETH: I'm fine.

CHRIS: If you say so.

BETH: I say so.

CHRIS: I need to check the boy's department before we leave. Can't get my niece a birthday present without including something for her two brothers. You know kids. They'd feel left out. Maybe I should get them each a toy. What do you think? *(beat)* Beth? *(beat)* You still there? *(BETH comes out of the stall dabbing her eyes with a tissue, then blows her nose.)* You've been crying. What's the matter, girl?

BETH: Nothing.

CHRIS: Nothing, my foot. This is your best buddy, Christine, you're talking to. Come on. You can tell me.

BETH: This is hardly the place. Let's get out of here.

CHRIS: Here, hold this wet paper towel on your eyes for a couple of minutes. You don't want to go back out there all red and puffy.

BETH: Why not? This is as good as it gets.

CHRIS: Don't be silly. You're the best looking old broad I know. Come on. Tell me what's bothering you.

BETH: I can't. It's too horrible. *(bursts into sobs again)*

CHRIS: Nothing can be that bad... oh, my God! You had a mammogram last week, didn't you? They found something, didn't they? Now don't you worry. Most of those things are benign. But if it turns out to be the big "C", you'll get through it, I promise. Opt for reconstruction, and nobody will ever know. Look at mine. Can you tell which one's real and which one's fake? *(BETH shakes her head and starts wailing loudly)* Oh, Beth, I'm so sorry. Go ahead and cry. You're entitled. *(DORIS enters.)*

DORIS: Excuse me, ma'am. Is something wrong?

CHRIS: Nothing's wrong. Just leave us alone.

DORIS: Sorry. Thought I could help. *(crosses to sink)* Had to clean up a Gatorade some kid spilled in aisle three. What a sticky mess. Food's not supposed to leave the food court. There's a sign posted right where you go in,

but nobody pays attention to it. 'Specially kids. You'd think their folks'd keep an eye on 'em, what with kidnappers, drugs... an' the language! If one of mine smarted off like that, I'd smack 'em up against the wall. No wonder this country's in such bad shape. Kids runnin' wild, nobody takin' responsibility... (To CHRIS) Is your friend gonna be all right? (CHRIS waves her away) Maybe I should call 911. We're supposed to call if a customer gets hurt, or faints, or somethin'. The manager don't want nobody dyin' in his store.

CHRIS: Nobody's dying. So just go, will you please?

DORIS: I don't know... I'd get in trouble if somethin' happened and the manager found out I didn't call...

CHRIS: Don't worry. Nothing is going to happen. It's just a bad case of PMS.

DORIS: You sure? She don't look so good, ma'am. (BETH wails) I'd better get the manager. (exits)

CHRIS: I hate it when people call me that.

BETH: Call you what?

CHRIS: Ma'am. Makes me feel a hundred and five.

BETH: She was just being polite. Really, Chris! PMS?

CHRIS: What was I supposed to say? My best friend has a blob in her boob, and it might be cancer?

BETH: Chris, there's nothing the matter with my breasts. (she studies them in the mirror) Well, that's not entirely true. They look like they belong to an old brood bitch that's had too many litters.

CHRIS: A good plastic surgeon can perk them up. (BETH darts back into a stall) What now?

BETH: I gotta go. Do you mind?

CHRIS: You just went.

BETH: No, I was hiding. I didn't want someone to walk in and see me crying.

CHRIS: I wish you'd tell me what's wrong.

BETH: What does a new face cost these days?

CHRIS: I don't know. A small fortune, I expect. You might get a two-for-one price if you have your boobs lifted at the same time.

BETH: Good Lord, the graffiti in this stall makes me want to puke. Whatever happened to "John loves Mary?"

CHRIS: It's the age of enlightenment. Love is out, fornication is in. *(toilet flushes, BETH steps out of the stall adjusting her clothes)* Feeling better?

BETH: *(shakes her head and sinks to the floor crying)* I don't know what's the matter with me. I can't stop crying... I wish I were dead.

CHRIS: Come on. Let's go back to my house.

BETH: I can't go out there bawling like a baby. Everybody'll stare at me.

CHRIS: What do you think they'll do when fire rescue hauls you out on a stretcher?

BETH: Oh, help! Go after that girl, will you, Chris? Stop her before she calls the fire department. I'll be so humiliated...

CHRIS: All right. But you stay right here till I get back. Pull yourself together, and don't do anything foolish. *(exits)*

BETH: Like what? Suicide? *(rummages through her purse, then dumps the contents on the floor.)* Only two Tylenol, and not even a nail file. *(hic)* I need a drink of water. *(hic)* You'd think they'd have a paper cup dispenser in here. *(hic)* They dispense everything else... *(hic)* Tampax, baby wipes, condoms... *(hic)* just what I don't need anymore. *(sticks her face into the empty purse and takes two deep audible breaths. DOT enters. She's overweight, dressed in bulky sweats.)*

DOT: There you are. I was getting worried. Thought you might have fallen in. *(laughs--BETH reacts with a disgusted look)* Okay, it's a lousy line. What are you doing on the floor?

BETH: Having a nervous breakdown.

DOT: This is a far cry from La Parisian, but you don't have to get melodramatic about it. *(BETH starts putting everything back in her purse; DOT helps.)* If you're smart you'll sterilize all this stuff when you get home. You can get all sorts of nasty diseases from a restroom. They ought to be outlawed.

BETH: What? The diseases or the restroom? *(crosses to sink)*

DOT: Most definitely this restroom. Where's Chris? I thought she came in here to get you.

BETH: It's a long story. She'll be back in a minute.

DOT: Well, as long as I'm here... *(goes into a stall)*

BETH: Dot, can I ask you something personal?

DOT: Shoot. My life's an open book.

BETH: About Fred...

DOT: That chapter's closed. Second question?

BETH: I'm sorry, but I really need to know...

DOT: Don't get me started on that scumbag.

BETH: How did you find out? Did he call you, write a letter...?

DOT: Would you believe, he told me on Mother's Day. Great present, huh?

BETH: Yeah.

DOT: He'd been out of town all week at a sales convention, but he assured me he'd be home on Sunday. So the whole family could celebrate Mom's big day together. *(toilet flushes; exits the stall and crosses to the sink)*

BETH: And what happened?

DOT: He calls me around midnight on Saturday, drunker than a skunk, and says he's too sloshed to drive. I tell him to sleep it off and drive back in the morning when he's sober. The next day we're all waiting for Papa to show up-- one o'clock, two o'clock. . .we call the highway patrol, the hospitals. . .nothing. Then the phone rings.

BETH: That's when he told you?

DOT: Yep. Right in front of God and his children he tells me he's fallen madly in love with some bimbo cocktail waitress, and wants a divorce. Happy Mother's Day!

BETH: Definitely a scumbag.

DOT: Great timing, don't you think?

BETH: I think your scumbag should be hung by his gonads along side the scumbag I've been intimate with my entire adult life.

DOT: You mean George...?

BETH: He's been having an affair right under my nose for the past three months.

DOT: You never guessed?

BETH: No! Stupid me! The late nights, the business weekends out of town... anybody else would have suspected something. But not me. After twenty-eight years, it never crossed my mind.

DOT: Who is she?

BETH: A young insurance adjuster who started working in his office this summer.

DOT: How young?

BETH: Twenty, twenty-five... I don't know. We have grown children older than she is.

DOT: When did you find out?

BETH: Yesterday. I'm still in shock.

DOT: I know. It takes awhile before it sinks in.

BETH: Like a death in the family.

DOT: Yep. Only, the corpse is still walking around. Did he ask for a divorce?

BETH: No. He just said that he was really, truly in love for the first time in his life.

DOT: That was a low blow.

BETH: Made my day.

DOT: So, are you going to ride it out or what?

BETH: You mean, wait till the affair runs it's course, then take him back?

DOT: A lot of women do.

BETH: No, once the trust is gone, so's the marriage.

DOT: Want to talk to my lawyer?

BETH: I suppose so. I can't spend the rest of my life hiding out in the ladies' room. *(CHRIS enters followed by ELLIE.)*

CHRIS: Oh, here you are, Dot. I've been looking all over the store for you. Come on, you two. We've got to get out of here before all hell breaks loose.

BETH: Didn't you stop that girl?

CHRIS: She made a bee-line for the manager before I could catch her. The paramedics may be on their way as we speak. Come on, let's go!

ELLIE: Is somebody hurt?

BETH: They think I am.

ELLIE: What happened?

BETH: Nothing. It's all a mistake.

ELLIE: Okay, if you say so. *(goes into a stall)*

BETH: I say so. *(takes a pack of cigarettes & lighter out of her purse)*

DOT: What are you doing, Beth?

BETH: What does it look like?

CHRIS: I thought you quit?

BETH: I did.

DOT: You know they don't allow smoking in this store.

BETH: I'm sneaking a drag in the ladies' room. Just like we did in high school, remember? *(blows a puff of smoke into the air.)*

CHRIS: But they didn't have smoke detectors then. *(the alarm goes off--ELLIE runs out of the stall)* Come on. Let's get out of here... *(rushes the door only to be pushed back by the MANAGER with DORIS behind him)* Uh-oh. Too late.

MANAGER: *(shouting over the noise of the alarm)* Where's the fire? Where's the fire?

DOT: No fire. False alarm. *(BETH blows out a puff of smoke)*

MANAGER: *(to BETH)* Hey, put that out, lady! *(crosses to the alarm and disconnects it as BETH tosses her cigarette in the toilet and flushes it)* Smoking is not permitted anywhere in this store. Can't you read the signs?

BETH: Sorry. I didn't mean to cause such a fuss.

MANAGER: Don't let it happen again.

BETH: I said, I'm sorry.

MANAGER: Doris, here, came to get me because she thought someone was sick.

DORIS: *(points to Beth)* That one.

MANAGER: Are you all right, ma'am? Should I call the medics?

BETH: I'm fine, now. We were just leaving.

MANAGER: Oh, you don't have to go. *(escorts her to the chair)* Have a seat and rest awhile if you're tired. Then finish your shopping. We want to keep our customers happy. Just one thing, though...

BETH: Yes?

MANAGER: No smoking in the ladies room. We've had to crack down on that. You understand. Store policy. *(crosses to the door, then turns back)* Have a nice day. *(exits)*

BETH: I feel like I've been given detention by the principal.

ELLIE: *(laughing)* I know just how you feel.

BETH: You haven't a clue.

ELLIE: What was it? Pot?

BETH: Salems.

ELLIE: I gave 'em up in high school. Do a little coke now and then...

BETH: That stuff will kill you.

ELLIE: And Salems won't?

BETH: Do you mind...

ELLIE: *(shrugs)* Ditzzy old broad. *(exits)*

CHRIS: *(to Doris)* Don't you have something to do?

DORIS: Yeah... sure... I was just leaving. *(crosses to door)*

CHRIS: So are we. You ready, Beth?

BETH: Wait a minute, Doris. I need something to drink, preferably with ice.

DORIS: You can get a coke in the food court.

BETH: I'm too dehydrated to make it that far. If I give you some money, would you get it for me, please?

DORIS: You mean, bring it in here?

BETH: Yes, if you don't mind.

DORIS: It's not allowed. I'd get into trouble.

BETH: I don't see any signs.

CHRIS: You can't be serious, Beth.

DOT: I think I'd like a coke, too. *(hands Doris a five-dollar bill)* Would you mind? You can keep the change.

DORIS: Well... *(fingers the bill, turns to Beth)* Since you're not feeling so good, ma'am, but I'll have to sneak it past the manager.

CHRIS: This is crazy. It's only ten minutes to my house.

BETH: *(to Doris)* You're an enterprising young woman...

DORIS: Sure... serve the old goat right for pulling me off the register to clean up a gooey aisle. That's the job of the stock boys, but they're never around when you need 'em. Probably out back behind the dumpsters having a smoke... *(to BETH)* Sorry, ma'am, I didn't mean...

BETH: That's OK. I know what you meant.

CHRIS: I give up. Doris, put a closed-for-cleaning sign on the door, bring us a couple more chairs, and another coke. It looks like we're going to be here awhile.

DORIS: Let's see. That's three cokes with ice, two chairs, and one closed-for-cleaning sign. Be right back, ladies.

BLACKOUT

ACT I, Scene 2

[Two hours later. BETH and DOT are sitting in the two chairs that have been added. Disposable lunch plates and cups sit on the shelf below the mirror. At rise, BETH is holding a wet paper towel on her eyes and blindly reaching for a French fry on the plate that DOT holds out to her. CHRIS is using the third chair as an exercise bar doing deep knee bends and stretches.]

DOT: These are good. Let's order some more.

BETH: Poor Doris. She's been at our beck and call all afternoon.

DOT: She's a good sport. Chris, I wish you'd stop that.

BETH: But if she works on commission, we're keeping her from paying customers.

DOT: Then we'll have to make it up to her. Spend lots of money before we leave. Chris, you're giving me a headache.

BETH: What's the biggest ticket item in this store?

DOT: I don't know. Something electronic, I suppose.

BETH: That'll do.

DOT: What'll do?

BETH: You'll see. Chris, enough already!

CHRIS: I see you're feeling more like your old self, again.

BETH: No, but the crying jag is over. I've run out of tears.

DOT: The best remedy for depression is a full stomach.

CHRIS: You should know.

DOT: What's that supposed to mean?

CHRIS: You've been on an eating binge all summer.

DOT: Since Mother's Day, to be exact.

CHRIS: You're killing your cardio-vascular system, not to mention the increased risk for diabetes...

DOT: Thank you, Richard Simmons.

CHRIS: It wouldn't hurt you to start getting some exercise.

DOT: I get all the exercise I want.

BETH: (giggles) Yeah. (*pantomimes*) Lifting your fork from the plate to your mouth...back and forth, back and forth...

DOT: Oprah calls it emotional compensation.

BETH: I don't watch that show anymore.

DOT: Why not?

BETH: I hate it when somebody claims to be fifty and looks thirty-five. It's depressing.

DOT: A nip here, a tuck there. All you need is a good plastic surgeon and lots of money.

CHRIS: A healthy diet and exercise don't hurt, either.

DOT: Lay off, Chris. I just look at a piece of cake and gain 10 pounds.

CHRIS: No willpower, huh?

DOT: That axiom went out the door, along with 'until death do us part.'

CHRIS: Have you considered joining a support group?

DOT: Why would I do that?

CHRIS: I don't know. It's just a thought.

BETH: Did you?

CHRIS: Did I what?

BETH: Join a support group. When you and your ex got divorced.

CHRIS: Are you kidding? That was back in the dark ages. Broken marriages were swept under the rug and talked about in whispers, (*sotto voice*) like sex. (*Mimics her mother in a squeaky voice.*) "Oh, yes, my dear, Christine is managing quite well by herself, but we'll all be so relieved when her husband returns."

DOT: Did he?

CHRIS: Twice.

DOT: And?

CHRIS: And each time I tossed him out, again.

BETH: Why? Was he abusive?

CHRIS: Just verbally.

DOT: How?

CHRIS: His list of demeaning adjectives was legend, but only his exit line was printable.

BETH: Which was?

CHRIS: "You're a disgrace to the McNulty name."

DOT: What made it so special?

CHRIS: Old money, I guess. But we never saw any of it, and what little he made went to feed his habits, not his kids.

BETH: Drugs?

CHRIS: Wine and women. Eventually he OD'd on the former while engaged in sexual congress with the latter.

DOT: You mean, he died while he was...?

CHRIS: That's right. With his third or fourth wife. I forget which. Every two years he traded in for a younger model.

BETH: Sounds like *he* needed a tune up.

DOT: Definitely a new fuel pump. (*laughs, CHRIS reacts*) I'm sorry, Chris. I guess it's not so funny now.

CHRIS: Water under the bridge.

BETH: How come you never remarried?

CHRIS: Simple. I like my freedom.

BETH: Still, it must have been difficult for you, a single mother raising three boys.

CHRIS: We survived. Mostly on beans and rice. Let me tell you, those boys are the leanest, meanest, fighting machines that ever graced a college football field.

DOT: What will they do when they graduate? Run a health farm?

CHRIS: One wants to be a stock broker, one plans to take over my real estate agency, and one has already signed with a software company.

BETH: Hooray for single moms! I broke the news to my girls last night. Thought I'd get some sympathy and practical advice. After all, they're both single--again-- old hands at this divorce business. And would you believe, they blamed *me* for their father's desertion. Some comfort my daughters turned out to be. Lizzie says to me, "but Mother, you and Daddy are our pillars of support, our refuge in times of peril, our...

CHRIS: ...free room and board between husbands."

BETH: You got it. To them, a long-term relationship is anything over six weeks.

DOT: Want to hear another tale of woe?

CHRIS: Not particularly.

DOT: Then stuff your ears. About a month ago I decided to air out the camper. The last time it was used was back in April when Fred took a couple of his buddies on a fishing trip. You'll never guess what I found.

BETH: A dead fish?

DOT: Guess again.

BETH: The suspense is killing me.

DOT: A teeny, weenie, red-striped bikini.

BETH: One of the buddies brought his girlfriend?

DOT: No. Fred did.

BETH: Did you wave the evidence in front of his face?

DOT: Worse. I waited until he asked for the camper in the divorce settlement, then burned it to the ground.

BETH: You didn't?

DOT: Reduced to a pile of ash in the middle of the driveway.

BETH: That's arson.

DOT: It wasn't insured.

CHRIS: Speaking of money...

BETH: Whose money?

CHRIS: Yours. Beth, have you closed out your joint bank accounts and redeposited the money in your own name?

BETH: No. Am I supposed to?

CHRIS: Critical. I hope it's not too late.

BETH: He wouldn't dare...

CHRIS: You wanna bet?

BETH: Well, nobody has refused to take my plastic today.

CHRIS: All the same, you'd better stop by the bank on the way home.

DOT: And hire yourself a good lawyer.

BETH: Who have you got?

DOT: A sleazeball. You can do better.

BETH: I don't know what I'll be able to afford now. George and I talked about selling the house and buying a condo now that the girls are grown, maybe getting a time-share at the beach, making trips together...Oh... *(starts crying)*

CHRIS: Here. (*hands Beth a Kleenex*) It's like someone punched you in the gut, isn't it?

BETH: I can't go on like this, bursting into tears every time I think of what he's done, what a mess he's made of our lives. I won't blame you if you give up on me--poor Beth, just can't hold it together anymore.

CHRIS: Poor Beth, my patootie! Look girl, you *can* go on; you *will* survive.

BETH: I'm not as strong as you, Chris.

CHRIS: You will be--trust me.

BETH: How long?

CHRIS: How long for what?

BETH: How long does it take for the hurt and humiliation to fade?

CHRIS: Depends on the person.

DOT: Don't look at me. It's been three months and I'm still reeling.

CHRIS: The sooner you take back your own life, the better you'll feel.

BETH: I don't have a life--without George.

CHRIS: Oh, yes, you do. You just put it on hold 28 years ago.

BETH: All I ever wanted was to get married, have kids...

DOT: Bless the children. Without them I wouldn't have a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

CHRIS: Except to stuff your face.

DOT: Lay off, will you Chris.

BETH: I'll have to get a job now.

DOT: Me, too.

BETH: Like what?

DOT: Clerking at the five and dime, sacking groceries--it's all I'm qualified for.

BETH: I used to be a good typist--had a steno job in college.

CHRIS: If you two pool your salaries, you might afford a two-room walk-up. Why bother hiring an attorney if you're going to call it quits without a fight.

BETH: Thanks for the support, Chris. This is my first divorce.

DOT: Join the club.

CHRIS: Talk to a lawyer, Beth, before you make any decisions... will you?

BETH: Dot, when does yours become final?

DOT: Not for another six months. My attorney suggests I live a celibate life until then. As if any man would look at me...

BETH: Oh, Dot, that's not true.

CHRIS: Keep stuffing your face, and you'll be dead in six months.

DOT: Maybe that's what I want.

BETH: I don't believe you mean that. It's a lousy way to get revenge.

DOT: Is that what you want, Beth? Revenge?

BETH: *(emphatically)* No! *(beat)* Yes! I wish I had the guts of that girl who cut off her husband's penis. I'd hold a butcher knife to George's throat, remind him that the family jewels belong to me until death do us part, and tell him it's his choice.

DOT: Wish I'd thought of that.

CHRIS: Death or dismemberment! Isn't that a bit drastic?

BETH: Drastic times call for drastic measures. What do you say, Dot? Are you game?

DOT: You betcha. I'm just sorry it's too late for Chris. The three of us would make dynamite cellmates. *(DORIS enters)*

BETH: Hi, Doris. How goes it out there?

DORIS: Not so good. The manager wants to know when you're going to leave.

BETH: How late do you stay open?

DOT: I want some more of these delicious fries.

DORIS: I can't bring you any more food. Sorry.

BETH: Then I guess the party's over. Darn!

DORIS: There's a woman outside about to pee in her pants. Can I let her in?

BETH: Sure. *(DORIS crosses to the door)*

DORIS: It's okay, ma'am. *(PAMELA enters. She is an elegant woman dressed in a designer suit.)*

PAM: Closed for over two hours! It's unconscionable! I shall make a formal complaint to the manager...

DORIS: He already knows.

PAM: Then why hasn't he done something? *(DORIS shrugs as PAM goes into a stall)*

DORIS: I've got to get back on the floor.

BETH: Wait a minute, Doris. Does this store carry big, expensive, television sets?

DORIS: Yes, ma'am. We've got an entertainment unit with a DVD-VCR and forty-eight-inch screen.

BETH: Do you get a commission for ringing up the sale?

DORIS: Yes, ma'am.

BETH: *(hands her a credit card)* Here. I want to buy one.

DORIS: Really?

BETH: No... make that three of them. *(DOT & CHRIS look at her in surprise)* I like to do my Christmas shopping early.

DORIS: Yes, ma'am!

BETH: Just one more thing.

DORIS: Uh-huh?

BETH: Please don't call me ma'am.

DORIS: No, ma'am. I mean, *(looks at the card)* Mrs. Wilson. *(exits)*

DOT: You really are crazy, Beth. How are you going to pay for them?

BETH: I'm not. George is. The card's in his name.

CHRIS: Then let's max out his line of credit before he wises up.

DOT: Why didn't I think of that. *(toilet flushes, PAM steps out of the stall & crosses to wash her hands)*

PAM: It sounds to me like one of you is getting a divorce?

BETH: How did you guess?

PAM: I'm a veteran.

DOT: Recently?

PAM: Twenty-five years ago. I've had two husbands since then.

DOT: A three-time loser? Wow!

PAM: No, just the first time. I buried the subsequent two. *(shocked reaction)* Oh, they died of natural causes. I'm not that cold-blooded. Perhaps I should introduce myself. *(extends her hand to BETH)* I'm Pamela Stevens.

BETH: Elizabeth Wilson. *(shakes PAM'S hand)*

DOT: Dorothy Pembroke *(shakes PAM'S hand)*

CHRIS: Christine McNulty. *(PAM takes her hand and continues to hold it)*

PAM: Have we met before?

CHRIS: No, I don't think so.

PAM: Maybe in a former life. *(drops CHRIS'S' hand)* Which of you is getting the divorce?

BETH & DOT: I am.

PAM: Both of you. I see. *(turns to CHRIS)* What about you, Ms McNulty?

CHRIS: Chris. The sorry-excuse I had the misfortune to marry is past history. Now deceased. I buried him in a pauper's grave and used his life insurance to start a real estate agency.

PAM: Good for you. And I'm sure your experience is of valuable help to your friends. *(to BETH & DOT)* Have you given any thought to joining a support group?

BETH: Chris mentioned it.

PAM: And?

BETH: I don't want some psychiatrist digging into my subconscious. George is the one with the hang-up. I'm the victim, remember?

PAM: All the more reason you need a support group. *(hands them her card)* I'm the CEO of an organization whose sole purpose is to help victims such as yourselves. We provide all the traditional services, plus the latest in technology.

CHRIS: Don't tell me you sell victim abuse software?

PAM: Hardly.

BETH: A dating service?

PAM: Not in the usual sense.

DOT: A web page and chat room?

PAM: For subscribers only.

BETH: What does your group have to offer?

PAM: Revenge. *(they react)* Why does that surprise you? Surely you've given it some thought. It's the normal reaction during the early stages.

BETH: Well, we did mention something like that.

PAM: Too bad you can't smoke in here. I'd love a cigarette right now.

BETH: Go ahead and light up. I'll join you.

PAM: Won't we set off the alarm?

BETH: I already did. Somebody forgot to reconnect it.

PAM: Wonderful! Here, try one of mine. I have them specially blended.

BETH: Isn't that awfully expensive?

PAM: Not when you're a major stockholder in the company. A legacy from my third husband. *(BETH lights up)* Well, what do you think?

BETH: Not bad. A little stronger than my Salems.

PAM: I meant about joining my group.

BETH: I don't know. Does everyone sit around rehashing war stories and get pie-eyed on sherry?

PAM: Sometimes. But the main thrust is action. Our aim is to get you back out on the playing field as soon as possible.

BETH: You sound like Chris.

DOT: I don't want to play the field. I just want my old man back.

PAM: That can be arranged.

DOT: *(skeptical)* How?

PAM: That's the strength of our organization. We have over a two hundred years of combined experience and know-how.

BETH: Are they all divorcees?

PAM: Yes. Many came from abusive situations too horrible to contemplate.

CHRIS: And you helped them recover?

PAM: We have a 95% success rate.

BETH: That's too high to be believable.

PAM: We employ rather unorthodox methods.

DOT: I don't understand.

PAM: Once you've set your personal goal, we help you devise a plan to implement it.

CHRIS: Like what, for example?

PAM: Ms Pembroke, where is your husband most vulnerable?

DOT: That's easy. Fred thinks he's the super stud of the century.

BETH: Is he?

DOT: How would I know? He's the only guy I ever slept with.

PAM: So, you want to get revenge by knocking him down a peg or two--proving to him that he's not the machismo he thinks he is.

DOT: Something like that, yes.

PAM: Would you like to be the bait, or have someone--perhaps younger and more seductive--do it for you?

DOT: I'd love to be the one who puts him in his place, but look at me. Nobody is knocking down my door.

BETH: Well, if you did something with your hair...

DOT: Speak for yourself!

PAM: If you're merely interested in making him jealous, we can provide you with a list of discreet escorts, ranked according to dress and manners, preferences in cuisine and culture, and sexual satisfaction.

CHRIS: You have everything covered, don't you?

PAM: We try.

DOT: Thank you, but no thank you.

BETH: Oh, Dot, don't be so provincial. It might be fun.

DOT: Then you do it. I don't want to experiment. I just want the old stud back in my barn again.

CHRIS: *(to DOT)* Do you have a better idea?

DOT: No. What's it going to cost me?

PAM: Not a thing. We're underwritten by some very wealthy patrons.

DOT: I'll have to think about it. (*ELLIE enters*)

ELLIE: You guys still hanging in here? There's a homeless shelter two blocks down the street. (*enters stall*)

BETH: Very funny.

PAM: Ladies, our monthly business meeting is Friday night. Please join us. You'll enjoy meeting everyone. And if you're ready to proceed, we'll convene a committee to organize your campaign.

DOT: What about you, Beth?

BETH: George is trying to recapture his youth. There's no way I can look twenty-one again.

CHRIS: I thought you just wanted to get even, not get him back.

BETH: That's what I think I want.

PAM: Where is he most vulnerable?

BETH: I would say, his finances.

CHRIS: Sounds to me like it's his self-image.

BETH: Possibly. He has reached that time in life when men buy little red sports cars. Except that George is trying to buy a little red... you know...

PAM: Trophy wife.

BETH: Exactly. If he actually marries that child, he'll be bored stiff in six months. What could they possibly have in common, except insurance?

CHRIS: Men don't discuss third world economics as a prelude to sex. Wise up, Beth. He's not looking for mental stimulation.

BETH: I suppose you're right. But I think his biggest hang-up is money. Take away his financial security, and he'll fall apart.

PAM: With the right attorney, that's easy to accomplish. Our membership boasts some of the finest divorce lawyers in the state. When they're through with him, he'll wish he settled for the car. *(ELLIE exits the stall and goes to the sink)*

BETH: Can they fix it so I don't lose my standard of living?

PAM: That's a given. What precipitated the break-up? An affair?

BETH: How did you know?

PAM: It's the typical pattern. Would you like retribution for the mental anguish he's caused you?

BETH: Anything short of murder. *(beat)* But don't rule that out, either.

PAM: We discussed putting that item on the agenda, but our budget committee vetoed the proposal.

DOT: Why?

BETH: Don't be ridiculous, Dot. It would cost a fortune to hire a hit man?

PAM: Actually, the cost was not an issue. Our financial base is more than adequate. The problem it posed was how to categorize the expense.

ELLIE: *(giggles)* Laundry and dry cleaning.

CHRIS: Do you mind?

PAM: The IRS would never buy it.

CHRIS: Then why tell them?

PAM: Our records are an open book. We're a private, non-profit organization, receive government grants, and our donors can deduct their contributions.

BETH: Sounds like one hell of a charity. I can buy into the legal and moral support. But how do I enact retribution?

PAM: Your position is hardly unique. We keep an updated computer file of scenarios that have proved successful in the past. You can select from any number of options that range from chronic annoyance to total annihilation of the perpetrator's financial and private affairs.

BETH: You sure you're not a branch of the CIA?

PAM: No, but we do have a few of their former employees in our ranks. Their expertise has been quite helpful.

BETH: I don't know... What do you think, Chris?

ELLIE: Sounds like the biggest scam in history to me.

CHRIS: Who asked you?

BETH: It really does sound too good to be true. How do we know we can trust you, Mrs. Stevens?

PAM: No one is asking you for money, and no one will pressure you.

BETH: Well..

PAM: You won't regret it, I assure you. Now, it's been lovely talking with you, but I must be off. I have a full agenda today. Why don't you give it some thought, discuss it among yourselves, and if you're interested, I'll see you all Friday evening. *(to BETH)* Don't worry, dear. Go home and get a good night's sleep. You look like you need it. Bye now. *(exits)*

DOT: Is she for real?

BETH: I don't know. That support group sounds like something from The Godfather.

ELLIE: Take my advice, ladies, and don't bet the farm. You're apt to lose your girdle.

BETH: Lousy metaphor, but you do have a point. Are you married dear?

ELLIE: *(shows off her wedding band)* Two months, three days, and *(checks her watch)* 4 hours.

BETH: Congratulations. I hope you have a long happy life together.

DOT: But don't count on it.

CHRIS: Dot!

ELLIE: Oh, I'm sure we will. We've got everything planned. You know, money, kids...

CHRIS: A pre-nupt?

ELLIE: Oh, don't be silly. We're in love. Well, gotta run. Everything's on sale, and I've got a new apartment to furnish. *(exits)*

BETH: Oh, to be so young, so in love...

CHRIS: And so naive. Well, what do you say girlfriends? Are you game? Shall we check out Pamela's support group on Friday? I'll drive.

BETH: Might as well give it a try. If we don't like, we leave.

DOT: If we can. *(DORIS enters)*

DORIS: Just sign here, Mrs. Wilson. *(hands BETH the charge slip to sign)* The stock boy will help you get it to your car. *(Loud knock at the door)*

MANAGER: *(offstage)* Ladies, I hope you're decent because I'm coming in.

DORIS: Darn! He's going to kill me. I was supposed to get you all out of here a half hour ago.

BETH: Don't worry, Doris. I'll take care of your boss.

MANAGER: *(offstage)* This is your final warning. I'm coming in now. *(peeks around the door)*

BETH: I'm so glad you stopped in to say good bye. We were just leaving. I really was quite ill, but I'm all right now, thanks to Doris. You're so lucky to have her working for you. I bet she could get a sales position at any one of the better department stores. She's so considerate of the customers.

MANAGER: Yes, ma'am. Doris, why are those big TV cartons blocking the door?

BETH: Oh, those are the items I purchased. Doris rang them up for me. Wasn't that sweet of her?

MANAGER: It's not every day one of our customers buys three expensive entertainment units. Doris will probably win this month's sales bonus.

BETH: I hope so. She certainly deserves it.

MANAGER: I smell smoke. Ladies, you know our policy--no smoking anywhere on the premises. Now, who's been...

DOT: Not me. I quit years ago. Christine, have you...

CHRIS: Never touch them.

MANAGER: Then what's that smell?

BETH: Incense. It's a religious thing. You're not against freedom of religion, I hope?

MANAGER: *(confused)* No. No, of course not...

BETH: Then have a nice day. *(they file past him out the door)*

BLACKOUT

ACT II, Scene 1

[Two months later. DOT enters, sneaks a candy bar out of her pocket and frantically unwraps it. She starts to take a bite when CHRIS zooms in, grabs it out of her hand, and flushes it down the toilet.]

CHRIS: Dot, I'm ashamed of you. You've got to learn self-control.

DOT: I've lost ten pounds. That entitles me to a reward. You promised.

CHRIS: New clothes, not calories.

DOT: It's not the same thing.

CHRIS: I let you out of my sight five minutes, and you try to undo two months of my hard work.

DOT: Your hard work! I'm the one sweating and starving.

CHRIS: Remember your goal: slim and sexy in six months.

DOT: It'll never happen.

CHRIS: Not unless you follow your program.

DOT: Pamela's a tyrant. She must have studied campaign strategy under Mussolini.

CHRIS: If you don't like, you can leave.

DOT: Ha! That organization treats deserters like the foreign legion. If I quit, I'll never see another sunrise.

CHRIS: If you quit, you'll never wake up with Fred beside you.

DOT: I'm beginning to think he's not worth it.

CHRIS: Your choice.

DOT: Death or life after divorce. Some choice.

CHRIS: I survived.

DOT: Yes, but you were a kinder, gentler person in your salad days.

CHRIS: How would you know?

DOT: Starvation enhances the psyche.

CHRIS: Twelve hundred calories a day is not starving.

DOT: Tell that to my subconscious. All I dream about is food... juicy steaks marbled with fat; baked potatoes smothered in sour cream; big chunks of sour-dough bread slathered with rich, salted butter; pecan pie; three-layered chocolate cakes...

CHRIS: Stop it, Dot! You're obsessing. (enters stall)

DOT: ... blueberry pancakes dripping with maple syrup, eggs benedict; double cheeseburgers with ranch dressing on a sesame seed bun; a platter heaped with French fries...

CHRIS: Enough, already! You're here to help Beth, not fantasize about food. Do you know your lines?

DOT: Letter perfect. When's it going down?

CHRIS: Anytime now.

DOT: I hope it works.

CHRIS: It'll work.

DOT: What makes you so sure?

CHRIS: I'm not. But what does she have to lose?

DOT: George.

CHRIS: She doesn't want George. She just wants to sabotage his love life.

DOT: I thought she wanted to cripple his pocketbook.

CHRIS: That's a done deal. Her attorney wiped the floor with him. Beth gets the house, the car, their savings, and a monthly alimony check until the divorce is final, then half of all his future earnings, pensions, and investment returns. *(toilet flushes; she exits stall & goes to sink)* He'll have to consult his accountant before he can buy a roll of toilet paper.

DOT: *(laughs)* That should cramp his style. *(BETH enters)*

BETH: Good morning, ladies.

DOT: Beth, we've got to stop meeting like this.

BETH: The location is appropriate to the occasion, don't you think?

DOT: If you're gonna throw some B.S. around, this is the right place to do it. I hope we pull it off.

CHRIS: We'll know soon enough. Pamela and what's-her-name should be here any minute. *(crosses to hall to keep watch)*

BETH: Susan.

DOT: Who?

BETH: What's-her-name is Susan.

DOT: Oh! How did Pamela manage to become such good friends with Susan in such a short time?

BETH: Susan's an insurance adjuster, right?

DOT: Right.

BETH: Pamela decided one of her policies need adjusting.

DOT: But to get from there to here in the space of a few weeks?

CHRIS: We got from here to Pamela's in only a few days.

BETH: Our's is not to reason why...

DOT: ...just to do, or die. I know.

CHRIS: Beth, are you sure you want to stick around for this? It might get brutal.

BETH: I wouldn't miss it for the world.

CHRIS: Okay. It's your funeral.

BETH: No, it's George's... I hope.

CHRIS: Here they come. Quick, get into position.

[BETH gives a thumbs-up to her friends and darts into a stall. DOT & CHRIS position themselves in front of the mirror with combs and makeup. PAMELA enters with SUSAN who is dressed in a very short skirt & revealing top--tacky, tacky.]

PAMELA: *(looking under stall doors)* This one's empty. You go ahead, Susan.

SUSAN: But you said you were desperate.

PAMELA: False alarm. I can wait.

SUSAN: Okay, if you say so. *(enters the stall. PAM signals the actors to begin.)*

DOT: I can't believe it. Beth and George calling it quits after twenty-eight years? It's a crying shame.

CHRIS: Beth's a fool. She should have dumped the two-timer years ago. George has been carrying on behind her back their entire married life.

DOT: *(punctuated for Susan's benefit)* Their entire married life?

CHRIS: Their entire married life.

DOT: Maybe Beth took him for granted.

CHRIS: It wouldn't have made any difference. George would have had a liaison on the side, regardless. Male promiscuity is a rite of passage, but some men never outgrow it.

DOT: He told Beth that he's really, truly in love with this girl. That's why she gave him his walking papers.

CHRIS: Beth doesn't buy that anymore than we do. She's just putting a good face on it for the sake of their mutual friends. George will never be able to stick with one woman. It's not in his genes. His father and grandfather were both philanderers. And they both died from complications of a sexually transmitted disease. I bet you didn't know that.

DOT: No, I didn't. How awful! *(she covers her mouth to stifle a laugh)*

CHRIS: I predict that will be George's fate, too. Beth is doing the smart thing. Dumping him before he infects her with something. She has no idea how many women he's slept with.

DOT: Could be hundreds. She's smart to get out of the marriage while she's still healthy.

[Toilet flushes, SUSAN steps out of the stall and crosses to the sink. PAMELA steps in.]

DOT: I hope George's new girlfriend gets tested. Of course, it may already be too late.

CHRIS: Well, that's her problem. I wonder if she's willing to share George with his five grandchildren. He really dotes on them, you know. Spends every weekend taking them somewhere... the children's museum, the amusement park, the zoo...

SUSAN: Excuse me. I couldn't help overhearing. Are you talking about George and Beth Wilson?

DOT: Yes, we are. Do you know them?

SUSAN: Yes... well, I've only met Mrs. Wilson. I work in the same office as George, I mean, Mr. Wilson.

CHRIS: Then I guess you've heard they're getting a divorce.

SUSAN: I think I heard someone mention it.

DOT: After twenty-eight years. It just breaks your heart, doesn't it?

SUSAN: I never knew anybody that stayed married that long.

CHRIS: How about you?

SUSAN: How about me, what?

CHRIS: Ever been married?

SUSAN: Good gracious, no! Is it true he's always played around? George, I mean.

CHRIS: I wouldn't want to fuel office gossip, but yes, it's a known fact among his close friends.

SUSAN: And his wife didn't know about it until now?

DOT: Well, Beth is a little naive. She may have guessed, but her home and family have always been a priority. Classic case of denial. Some people are like that.

SUSAN: I wouldn't know. Most of my married girl friends have jobs... careers, actually.

CHRIS: Children, too?

SUSAN: Not until they're much older... thirty, or thirty-five, at least. Personally, I think procreation is highly over-rated.

DOT: Some people say the same thing about sex.

SUSAN: Why does Mrs. Wilson think her husband's been infected with an STD?

CHRIS: She told me that she wouldn't take him back under any circumstances. That says it all, don't you think?

SUSAN: Maybe she found someone else.

DOT: Out of the question. She would have told us if there was new man in her life.

SUSAN: That's not what George, I mean, Mr. Wilson, said.

DOT: Really? What did he say?

SUSAN: He said that his wife didn't understand him anymore, and that he suspected her attentions now lay elsewhere. Those were his exact words.

CHRIS: You're absolutely sure those were his exact words?

SUSAN: Positive. I was totally shocked when he told me. He's such a sweet and caring man. Everyone in the office just adores him.

DOT: Some, more than others.

CHRIS: Who else was privy to this startling revelation?

SUSAN: I really couldn't say. We work pretty close together...

DOT: How close?

SUSAN: Well, I just started the job this summer, and had a lot to learn. George, I mean, Mr. Wilson, has been teaching me the ropes. He's an expert on figures and forms.

DOT: I'll bet he is.

SUSAN: Claim forms, mostly. They can be pretty tricky, you know... what you put on this part, what goes on that part... how much for missing body parts...

CHRIS: Yeah, we know... parts is parts. Must be awfully depressing having to set a monetary value on human tragedy.

SUSAN: Oh, no! It's so gratifying when you can give someone a check that will rebuild a house, or replace a stolen car. George, I mean, Mr. Wilson, signs checks for hundreds of thousands of dollars...

DOT: Some of which now go to ex-wife.

SUSAN: That really galls me, you know?

DOT: Why? Don't you think she deserves something for all the years she stood by him, washed his clothes, cooked his meals, raised his children...

SUSAN: He told me that she only married him for his money.

BETH: *(in the stall)* Aaaaaaagh!

SUSAN: What was that?

DOT: What was what?

SUSAN: That "aaaaaaagh." Are you all right, Pamela?

PAM: I'm fine, Susan. Why is it these places are always out of paper?

SUSAN: I've got some tissues in my purse.

PAM: Thank you, but I came prepared.

CHRIS: *(sotto voice)* Must have been that poor old lady in the other stall. Constipation, no doubt. She's been in there ever since we got here.

SUSAN: She needs to eat more roughage.

CHRIS: Definitely. I can't say enough about the importance of developing good eating habits.

DOT: That's her favorite topic.

SUSAN: I know what you mean. The right diet and plenty of exercise are so vital to keeping up one's appearance. If a girl wants to succeed in the business world, she has to look her best.

DOT: Or sleep with the boss. *(SUSAN reacts)*

CHRIS: Take Beth, for example. It's a shame how she let herself go after she married George.

SUSAN: I thought she looked pretty good--for someone her age, that is.

CHRIS: Yes, but underneath all that paint and padding, she's a total wreck... varicose veins, arthritic joints, heart problems... I bet her cholesterol count is over 300. *(BETH'S horrified face appears above the stall; PAMELA shoves it down)*

SUSAN: I thought you said she was healthy?

DOT: Oh, she doesn't have anything contagious.

CHRIS: What Dot means is...

SUSAN: I know what she means. One hint of an STD, and with her other problems, she could go *(snaps her fingers)* just like that.

CHRIS: So true. *[toilet flushes and PAMELA steps out of the stall]*

PAMELA: Be with you in a minute, Susan. *(crosses to the sink to wash her hands)*

SUSAN: *(to DOT & CHRIS)* I'm so glad I ran into you today. It's been very enlightening.

DOT: I hope you don't repeat anything you've heard. Some things are better left unsaid.

SUSAN: I understand. She may be your close friend, but I think George, I mean, Mr. Wilson's wife is a cold-hearted bitch. I'm ready to go home now, Pamela.

PAMELA: What about that black lace teddy you wanted to purchase?

SUSAN: I've decided I don't need it after all. *(crosses to door)*

PAM: Too bad. It would really accentuate your figure... *(turns back to her co-conspirators and smiles)* for the right man, of course.

SUSAN: He never told me he had five grandchildren. *(exits followed by PAMELA)*

CHRIS: You can come out now, Beth.

BETH: *(storms out of the stall in a fury)* Did you hear what she called me? A cold-hearted bitch! Where does she get off calling me a bitch. "Looks pretty good for someone her age." Ha! She should live so long... I'll wring her skinny little neck...

CHRIS: Whoa, Beth! I warned you the scene might get nasty. *(BETH pulls a cigarette package out of her purse and Chris grabs it.)* Wait till we get to the car.

BETH: *(grabs them back)* Don't mess with me, Chris. I'm not liable for what I might do.

CHRIS: Well, don't take it out on us. We were just playing our parts.

BETH: Where was it written, "naive," or, "under all that paint and padding, a total wreck?"

CHRIS: So, I ad-libbed a little.

BETH: A little? You rewrote the script.

DOT: Were we convincing?

BETH: I bought it.

CHRIS: Let's hope Susan did.

DOT: Beth, I wish you'd seen her face when I mentioned sleeping with the boss. Even her mascara blanched.

BETH: I can't believe that lying scumbag said I married him for his money. When I walked down the aisle, we had less than a hundred dollars between us. We seriously considered robbing the collection plate to pay the minister.

DOT: And then he accuses you of playing around... Really!

BETH: He deserves to be castrated.

DOT: Susan might do it for you if George comes on to her again.

CHRIS: Especially if she believes that inspired fabrication about him having an STD. When word gets around his office...

DOT: His goose is cooked, for sure.

BETH: I hope he doesn't get fired.

CHRIS: Why should you care?

BETH: I don't want to kill the bird that lays the golden eggs. My financial future is at stake, too.

DOT: What now?

BETH: Wait and see, I guess. Why do I feel so let down all of a sudden?

CHRIS: Aftershock.

BETH: I thought I'd feel ecstatic.

DOT: You got your revenge.

BETH: Then why am I depressed?

CHRIS: It's a hollow victory.

BETH: I woke up in the middle of the night--my feet were cold--and I tried to tuck them into that warm spot behind George's knees. Then I remembered why he wasn't there and started bawling like a baby again.

DOT: Don't feel bad. I still sleep on my side of a king-size bed.

BETH: Chris, you're the voice of experience. How long does it take before we start thinking "me" and "mine," instead of "us" and "ours?"

CHRIS: I never had that problem. My salary paid the bills. Well, we did what we came here to do. Are you two ready to go?

DOT: The sooner the better. This place haunts my nightmares.

BETH: Dot, we need a change of scenery before we both drown in self-pity. Moving to Alaska is out of the question, but we can do something about our

mirror image. Let's make an appointment at the most expensive beauty spa in town and treat ourselves to a complete makeover.

DOT: That should do the trick, but I can't afford it. Do you know that Fred moved out of state so he wouldn't have to pay child support? My daughter's braces will have to come off because I can't keep up the payments.

CHRIS: Have you told Pamela?

DOT: No, I was too embarrassed.

BETH: Dot, that's what the support group is all about. They'll subsidize you until one of their investigators locates Fred, and the court moves to have his wages attached.

DOT: Okay, I'll mention it at the next meeting. Can't have a future Miss America going through life with crooked cusped. *(goes into a stall)*

CHRIS: Couldn't you have done that earlier?

DOT: When ya gotta go, ya gotta go. *(ELLIE enters)*

ELLIE: You all look familiar.

CHRIS: Two months ago. Remember? You called us gullible fools.

ELLIE: Oh, yeah. You guys join that weird club?

BETH: Yes, and I'm glad we did. As least I think I am.

ELLIE: You mean that stuck-up old broad was for real?

CHRIS: Eighteen carat all the way.

ELLIE: What did she do for you?

DOT: Put me on a starvation diet.

ELLIE: Oh, I see. One of those Jenny Craig things. What did it cost you?

BETH: I don't want to talk about it.

ELLIE: *(going into a stall laughing)* Yep, there's one born every day.

BLACKOUT

ACT II, Scene 2

[A week before Christmas. No change on the set except for some gold tinsel draped over the top of the mirror, and a cheap plastic wreath on the wall. Canned Christmas music plays in the background throughout the scene. DOT and BETH enter laughing, each carrying several packages. BETH wears a seasonal sweatshirt and slacks. DOT is thirty pounds slimmer, and dressed to kill. They drop their packages on the floor, and take turns at the mirror, doing hair and makeup repairs during the first part of the scene.]

BETH: I can't wait to see their faces when they open Grandma's gifts... clothes, clothes, and more clothes for the girls, and every walking, talking power ranger in the store for the boys.

DOT: You're really going overboard this year. George's alimony check must have been a big one.

BETH: Half of his Christmas bonus in addition to my regular monthly stipend. Plus, I traded in his BMW, and pocketed the change.

DOT: Who says that divorce doesn't pay?

BETH: You're in good spirits, and you look fantastic. I love the new dye and do.

DOT: Thanks. Doesn't look too brassy, does it?

BETH: Not a bit. Takes ten years off of you, lucky girl.

DOT: Considering what it cost, I was hoping for fifteen.

BETH: So, what's five years between friends? Was Fred surprised? *(DOT gives her a smug look)* I hope he dropped his teeth.

DOT: Nope. Just his pants.

BETH: You're kidding?

DOT: Would I kid about something like that?

BETH: I guess not. So...?

DOT: So, after the best meal I've had in four months, and Fred drooling all over me like a teenager in heat, I gave him a peck on the cheek, and bid him adieu.

BETH: You did what?

DOT: You heard me.

BETH: I don't believe it. You have Fred panting at the door in his skivvies, and you kiss him off. I don't understand you, Dot. Wasn't that what you wanted?

DOT: I thought I did.

BETH: What changed your mind.

DOT: I have options now. It's a heady feeling.

BETH: What happened?

DOT: Everything went according to plan. I made reservations at an outrageously expensive restaurant, and got no argument from Fred when I asked him to meet me there. That was a surprise.

BETH: Maybe his hot romance with Miss Bimbo had already freeze-dried.

DOT: It crossed my mind. Anyway, I was so nervous I got there early. Drove around the block three times before I decided to hell with a grand entrance... I had to go to the bathroom. Then, while I was waiting for him in the bar, this gorgeous hunk came on to me.

BETH: Great! Doesn't hurt to foster a little jealousy. Fred did catch the scene, didn't he?

DOT: Oh, yes. In fact, he was downright rude to that young man--something like, "keep your grubby paws off my wife."

BETH: Good! Then what happened?

DOT: When Fred left to check on our table I slipped that hunk my telephone number.

BETH: You didn't?

DOT: I most certainly did.

BETH: Just in case, huh?

DOT: No 'just in case' about it. I have every intention of going out with him if he calls.

BETH: What about poor Fred?

DOT: Poor Fred can go to hell in a hand basket, for all I care. It's time old Dottie started playing the field.

BETH: But your whole program was designed to get Fred back. Did he say something to turn you off?

DOT: He was charm personified-- a middle-aged, balding machismo trying to impress me with a line as old as dirt. It was pathetic. I wanted to kick myself for being so stupid. The agony I went through... he wasn't worth a second of it.

BETH: But look at you now. Slim, gorgeous, a new attitude...

DOT: And I'm going to make the most of it. Look out boys, Dottie's back in town.

BETH: Dot, you're riding a wave right now... feeling good about yourself... the unexpected attention... but it's all reactive. If that wave comes crashing down, you're liable to get hurt. I wouldn't brush Fred off so casually. What if that guy doesn't call?

DOT: There's always another night, another bar...

BETH: You're blowing my mind. This is so unlike you...

DOT: Unlike the old Dorothy, you mean. Along with the jazzy exterior I've gone to hell and back to acquire, a new Dorothy has emerged... one who likes herself for the first time in her life.

BETH: Then it was worth it. I just hope this isn't temporary euphoria. The letdown could be disastrous.

DOT: I've seen disastrous, close up and personal, and I'm not looking back. Thank the support group for that. A woman scorned is a woman who needs other women.

BETH: *(laughs)* A sorority of divorcees. Just like *The First Wives Club*. *(enters stall)*

DOT: Men have always had their exclusive little clubs, their bachelor quarters, their knights of the realm. They pat each other on the back, sympathize with some old coot whose wife ran off with the gardener, bolster each other's egos, and reinforce their collective belief that the world wouldn't survive twenty-four hours without their superior male leadership.

BETH: Women are guilty of the same thing, Dot. They're just not as well organized.

DOT: Give Pamela two more years.

BETH: I feel sorry for Fred.

DOT: Why? He had the best of both worlds, and wasn't smart enough to hang on to what was his.

BETH: Well, at least you aren't grubbing for pennies anymore.

DOT: Nope. Faced with a goon squad hired by the support group, Fred came through with everything I asked for. He's still counting his fingers to make sure they're all there.

BETH: The organization is efficient and thorough, as usual.

DOT: *(laughing)* The only thing I worry about now, is when the devil plans to claim my soul.

BETH: They probably have that covered, too. *(toilet flushes, she exits stall & crosses to sink)* You know, I think Fred and George need to start a support group.

DOT: *(rap style)* Better use it, or you'll lose it, wife has got you screwed.
Should have kept it, when you had it, alimony blues.

BETH: Dot and Fred are now kaput, as everybody knows,
But Dot's the rage, and it ain't her age, or her fancy clothes.

(They give each other a high five, then in unison) Yes!

[ELLIE enters wearing sunglasses and a scarf that hides her face. She removes her glasses and examines her face in the mirror. It is covered with bruises.]

DOT: Oh, my Lord! Who did that to you?

ELLIE: I tripped and fell down the stairs.

BETH: Sure you did. And I'm Santa Claus.

ELLIE: Well, it's the truth. Anyway, it's none of your business.

BETH: I just made it my business. Don't you remember us? I'm Beth, and this is my friend, Dot.

ELLIE: And I'm Ellie. Now that we've been formally introduced, how about doing whatever it is you came in to do and leave me in peace.

BETH: We'd like to help.

ELLIE: This ain't no AA meeting. And if you're looking for a pickup, you got the wrong restroom. I'm not into girls.

DOT: But obviously, some guy got to you. Nasty bruises. Have you seen a doctor?

ELLIE: They'll go away. Nothing's broken.

BETH: You sure?

ELLIE: I ought to know. This isn't the first time.

DOT: Then why...? Your husband or a boyfriend?

ELLIE: Husband. A boyfriend I would have kicked out.

BETH: Why not your husband?

ELLIE: Are you crazy?

DOT: No, but you are, if you put up with that kind of abuse.

ELLIE: It's none of your business. Anyway, how would you know?

DOT: I guess I don't, really. My ex didn't hit women-- just played around with them.

ELLIE: That, I could live with.

BETH: Have you sought counseling?

ELLIE: Are you kidding? He'd probably knock me upside the head again if I even mentioned it.

DOT: I'm sorry. By any chance are you pregnant?

ELLIE: No, thank God. And I don't plan to be.

BETH: That's smart of you. Abusers usually don't stop with just their wives.

ELLIE: Look, ladies, I appreciate your concern, but it's none of your business. I've got to go. *(BETH hands her a card)* What's this?

BETH: The support group we belong to. We can help. Really, we can. Please call us.

ELLIE: Oh, now I remember. Look, I don't need to lose weight, just get a new face.

BETH: The group is made up of women who have been abused, divorced...

ELLIE: Who said anything about a divorce?

DOT: It hasn't crossed your mind?

ELLIE: Why should it? I'm in love with the louse. And he's always sorry... brings me flowers, jewelry...

DOT: And that makes up for it?

ELLIE: Sure. Besides, he's a real stud. You should have it so good. See ya around. *(exits)*

DOT: And we thought we had problems. Do you think she'll call?

BETH: Let's pray she does, and soon. Her next trip may be to the morgue.

BLACKOUT

ACT II - Scene 3

[Two days later. BETH & DOT are waiting impatiently for their friends, several packages at their feet. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is playing in the background]

BETH: I told Chris and Pamela to meet us here at noon. They're late.

DOT: Why don't we wait for them in the food court?

BETH: Now, now, Dot. That would be tempting fate. Besides, there's something nostalgic about this place.

DOT: Yeah. The smell.

BETH: I wonder if Doris still works here.

DOT: Want me to check with the manager?

BETH: Don't you dare. In my worst dream, he's chasing me up and down the aisles with a thousand grocery carts in full pursuit, screaming, "no smoking in the ladies' room."

DOT: Now that you've quit for the twentieth time, you can put that nightmare to rest. Did you know that Chris sold her house and moved in with Pamela?

BETH: To their mutual benefit, I expect. Pamela foots the bills, and Chris keeps Pamela on her feet.

DOT: It's rumored we're going national.

BETH: No rumor. We just incorporated. This week, the U.S.-- next year, China!

DOT: So, what's the latest with George? Any new Susan's in his life?

BETH: Not likely. He's too busy trying to balance his checkbook.

DOT: What happened to the old Susan?

BETH: Transferred to the west coast where she's currently shackled up with one of the company's vice presidents.

DOT: How to succeed in business by bedding the boss. Make a great movie.

BETH: It's already been done.

DOT: Really? *(puts her hand on her stomach)* Hear that? My tummy wants it's noon feeding. Where's the rest of our gang?

BETH: *(pulls out her Christmas list)* Well, they'd better get here soon. I do my Christmas shopping the week before, and I'm already two days late. What do you buy an old maid aunt who's confined to a wheelchair, gums her food, and is blind and deaf?

DOT: Is this a riddle?

BETH: No, it's George's Aunt Bessie. *(DOT raises her eyebrows, and BETH nods)*

DOT & BETH: *(in unison)* Let George do it.

BETH: Right. *(crosses the name off her list with a flourish; CHRIS & PAM enter.)* It's about time. One more minute and I was going to strangle that damn reindeer.

PAM: Do forgive us. We were unavoidably detained. However, I think our surprise will be worth your wait.

BETH: What surprise?

PAM: Do you want to tell them, Chris, or shall I?

DOT: Tell us what?

BETH: I bet Chris discovered a new health food place she wants us to try.

CHRIS: Close. Pam and I just bought one.

DOT: You didn't?

CHRIS: We did.

BETH: Chris, I thought you were going to retire. Running a restaurant is an ambitious project.

CHRIS: No tougher than selling real estate. Anyway, I don't plan to stand behind a counter stuffing celery. It's a business venture.

PAM: We'll develop the prototype here, then open franchises in all the major markets.

BETH: Carrot salad and a wheat germ malt to go. I can dig that.

DOT: How did you get the financing?

PAM: My dear departed husbands supplied the capital. I will handle the administrative side, and Chris, the culinary know-how.

BETH: You mean Chris has made a convert out of you?

PAM: Not precisely. But we make a good team.

BETH: Dot, I think there's more to this than meets the eye.

DOT: What do you mean?

BETH: Their relationship. Well, I can't say I'm shocked, but surprised is an understatement. How long has it been going on?

CHRIS: What are you talking about?

BETH: I know I've led a sheltered life, but I should have guessed.

DOT: Look, you guys... you're making me paranoid. Would you let me in on the secret?

BETH: Pamela and Chris... Chris and Pamela... I don't have to spell it out for you, do I?

DOT: Oh, my God! You mean you two are...? Oh, that's disgusting! Chris, how could you?

CHRIS: Look, you guys. You're way off base if you're thinking what I think you're thinking. Pam and I are *not* lovers.

DOT: Then what do you call yourselves? Bosom buddies?

PAM: *(laughing)* Chris and I are business partners. That's all. Where did you get the idea....?

DOT: Beth started it. What exactly do you do?

PAM: The same thing we've always done.

DOT: *(suspiciously)* Like what?

PAM: Discuss investment strategy, marketing trends, organize campaigns, plot revenge, gossip....

DOT: *(puts her hands over her ears)* That's enough! I don't want to hear the dirty stuff.

BETH: I do.

DOT: Chris, you know this means we can't be friends anymore. I'd be afraid... well, you know... I'd have to watch myself whenever I'm around you...

CHRIS: Absolutely. *(she takes DOT'S hand)* I might try to seduce you. *(DOT jerks her hand back)*

DOT: *(growing hysterical)* How could I have been so blind? That support group... those women... And I trusted them with my most private secrets.

PAM: Calm down, Dot. We don't judge a member's lifestyle, but we do deal in reality. To the best of my knowledge, no one in the organization has ever admitted to being gay. If that were so, the research and development committee would have apprised the membership so that appropriate resources could be included in our agenda.

DOT: You make it sound so... normal. Well, my mother warned me about people like you. Daughters of the devil! Immoral! Perverts! I should have known...

CHRIS: Dot, think rationally for a moment. Think of all the women in your life that you've loved--your mother, your sisters, you're best friend in the third grade...

DOT: That's different.

CHRIS: How is it different?

DOT: I didn't want to have sex with them.

CHRIS: It has nothing to do with sex. For want of a better term, call it female bonding. Women have always leaned on each other, confided in each other....

BETH: ...don't tune you out when there's a ball game on TV.

PAM: It's perfectly natural and universal.

BETH: She's right, Dot. I've been reading too many novels lately.

DOT: Then you're not... ?

CHRIS: We're just good friends, like you and me and Beth.

DOT: Women without husbands, you mean.

PAM: Having a husband doesn't make you more or less of a woman.

DOT: Well, you know what people say?

BETH: What people, Dot?

DOT: Well, my mother, for one.

BETH: So would mine, if she were alive. Pity the poor divorcee. Must be something wrong with her if she let her husband get away. Well, I've got news for you, Dot. While you and I were sheltered in suburbs, our heads buried in dirty diapers, a revolution was going on. A woman no longer has to have a husband to be legitimate. Isn't that remarkable concept? She's an individual in her own right, and I, for one, plan to start building my future on that principle rather than expend all my time and energy pursuing husband number two. Anyway, George called last night.

CHRIS: Your George?

BETH: The same.

DOT: What did he want?

BETH: He asked me out.

DOT: Like a date?

BETH: To dinner and a movie.

CHRIS: Did you accept?

BETH: Yes, I did.

PAM: Are you sure this is what you want, Beth? He's probably feeling sorry for himself at the moment, but taking him back is no guarantee that he won't start playing around again.

BETH: I know that. I plan to take it one day at a time.

PAM: Good. Just don't get your hopes up too high. You've shed enough tears to reclaim Death Valley.

DOT: Pam, did you hear from that poor girl we told you about?

PAM: She called, but never showed up.

DOT: Do you think she will?

PAM: I hope so, before it's too late. Unfortunately, we have to face the fact that we can't help everybody who needs it. We do what we can.

BETH: Somehow, I feel responsible.

CHRIS: You can't force her.

DOT: Why does she stick with a guy who beats her up?

PAM: Lots of reasons--security, economics....

BETH: She says it's love.

PAM: It's more complicated than that.

DOT: I would have flattened his mug with a baseball bat.

CHRIS: Not everyone's like you, Dot. What do you say we go eat?

DOT: Good idea.

CHRIS: Our new health food restaurant?

DOT: If you pick up the check.

BETH: Pam, did you get that girl--what's her name--Ellie's phone number?

PAM: I have caller I.D. so it's logged on my palm pilot.

BETH: Then, I'm going to call her.

DOT: Now? Can't you wait until after we eat?

BETH: Until I know she's all right, I won't be able to swallow a bite of tofu.

CHRIS: Beth, you're the ultimate bleeding heart.

PAM: *(hands BETH her palm pilot)* Here. Scroll to I.D. records on the menu for the number.

BETH: Thanks. I'll go outside where the reception's better. *(exits)*

PAM: Ladies, may I suggest that our future rendezvous' take place in more pleasant environs?

DOT: What do you mean? This has all the comforts of home. *(goes into a stall)*

CHRIS: Yours, maybe. Couldn't you have waited? The restaurant's only five minutes from here.

DOT: Does it have a single's bar?

CHRIS: No. But I like the idea. What do you think, Pam?

PAM: It does have merit. Business prognosticators have indicated that health bars are rapidly replacing the cocktail lounge as the gathering place for young professionals. I think we should definitely consider it in our prototype.

DOT: Do you always talk like that?

PAM: Excuse me?

DOT: You sound like a college professor.

MANAGER: *(offstage)* Ladies? *(knock, knock)* Ladies, make yourselves presentable. I have to come in there.

CHRIS: Please tell me this is just a bad dream.

MANAGER: *(knock, knock)* Ladies? Are you presentable? I'm coming in. *(peeks around the doorway, surveys the room and enters)*

PAM: Good morning. Is there something we can do for you?

MANAGER: *(goes eyeball to eyeball with Chris)* Haven't I seen you before?

CHRIS: Frequently. I'm a regular customer.

MANAGER: Then you should know that bringing packages into the ladies' room is not allowed. Store policy. There's a sign posted right outside the door. *(points to the stack of parcels on the floor)* Now who do these belong to?

CHRIS: I haven't the foggiest. They were lying here on the floor when I came in.

MANAGER: The security camera caught somebody carrying packages into this restroom.

CHRIS: Not me. Maybe it was the lady on the potty.

MANAGER: What lady? *(DOT sticks her head over the stall door)*

DOT: Hi there! Looking for me?

MANAGER: *(very flustered)* I didn't know there was somebody still in there. I'd have waited until you were through... I mean finished... I mean presentable... if you'd said something.

DOT: How was I supposed to do that? Waddle to the door with my pants around my ankles trailing toilet paper?

MANAGER: Madam, please! This... uh... situation is... uh... uncomfortable for all of us, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't make it any more difficult...

PAM: For your information, there are laws to protect us from electronic surveillance in public restrooms. You'll be hearing from my attorney.

MANAGER: Put a cap on it, lady. The camera is outside the door where it picks you up entering and leaving the area. I have the legal right to demand a body search if I suspect someone is trying to conceal unpaid merchandize.

(CHRIS takes off her jacket and unwraps her skirt to reveal an exercise leotard)

MANAGER: What are you doing?

CHRIS: Go ahead and search. *(the MANAGER jumps back like he's been shot)* What's the matter? Don't you want to frisk me... make sure I'm not concealing any unpaid merchandize?

MANAGER: Members of the opposite sex do not conduct body searches. Store policy!

CHRIS: Too bad. It might be fun.

MANAGER: I'd have to call a female employee... and considering the disruption it would cause... especially now...with the store full of Christmas shoppers... I'll overlook this... a... incident... this time. Just put your clothes back on, pick up your packages, and leave... immediately!

[The MANAGER exits leaving the ladies in hysterics. DOT comes out of the stall; CHRIS dons her skirt and jacket as BETH enters]

CHRIS: "Lady, put your clothes back on..."

DOT: "Pick up your packages and get the hell out of here..."

BETH: I'm going to miss this place.

CHRIS: You're sick. Did you get a hold of Ellie?

BETH: No answer.

PAM: I'll alert our spousal abuse division, and they'll notify the home visitation committee.

BETH: Pam, if you ran the welfare department, domestic violence would be totally eradicated.

PAM: If not, I'd make it a capital crime. Ready, ladies? I'm starving.

DOT: You know, this place wouldn't look so bad if they painted it a brighter color, put a decorative border around the ceiling, and maybe some carpet...

PAMELA: *(takes cigarettes out of her purse)* Not even a hot tub with gold fittings would improve the decor of this restroom. *(starts to light up)*

CHRIS: Beth...quick! *(BETH grabs the cigarette & lighter as CHRIS runs to disconnect the smoke detector.)*

BETH: *(hands the cigarette & lighter back to PAM)* That was close.

CHRIS: I wish you'd give up those things.

PAM: My dear Christine... not even for you! *(DORIS stomps in, madder than a wet hornet)*

DORIS: *(mumbling to herself)* If I wasn't a lady, I'd sock it to him where the sun don't shine, the miserable S.O.B....

BETH: Doris! What's the matter?

DORIS: *(to BETH)* Oh, it's you... *(to CHRIS)* and you...

DOT: You remember us...

DORIS: Sure do. *(gestures to BETH)* Thanks to her I got my car paid off.

BETH: Did you and Mr. Scrooge have a fight?

DORIS: Who? Oh, you mean my boss. No, it's not him.

DOT: Then who was it?

DORIS: I can't tell you.

BETH: Why not?

DORIS: We're not allowed to talk about our personal problems in front of the customers. Store policy.

CHRIS: Screw store policy. If you're in some kind of trouble, we want to help.
(DORIS looks doubtful)

BETH: You came to our aid when we needed you.

DORIS: I don't know. If it gets back to you-know-who...

DOT: You can trust us, Doris.

DORIS: Promise not to say anything?

DOT: *(pus her hand on her heart)* Promise.

DORIS: Well... it's my boyfriend... works in sporting goods. We had big plans for the holidays. He was taking me home to meet his folks, so I figured he was serious. Even bought a new dress. I thought he was going to make it official... you know... an engagement ring?

CHRIS: And what happened?

DORIS: He just dumped me for the new girl in house wares... a blonde floozy with Winnebago's out to here *(gestures)*... and not a day over seventeen, if she's that old. I could kill that scumbag. I wish I was dead.

[BETH looks at her friends knowingly and they all crowd around DORIS.]

BETH: Oh Doris! Have we got a support group for you!

BLACKOUT

