

AN AMERICAN CENTURY

The Characters

ALICE – 80ish

HARRY – 50ish, her son

LENA – 50ish, his wife

BIP – 30ish, their daughter

JOHNNY – 30ish

THE GIRL – 13ish

MARTIN – 150ish

THADDEUS – 20ish, a ghost

The Setting

Most prominent onstage is a magnificent 14-foot English Victorian mahogany dining table. The table runs nearly parallel to the front of the stage, but at just enough of an angle so that one leg noticeably overhangs the edge of the stage. There are matching mahogany chairs, but just five, that are placed at the ends and upstage length of the table; these are moved around throughout the play. In one corner of the stage is a pile of seven more of the same matching chairs, but these are broken beyond repair.

There is no other furniture onstage.

The upstage wall is covered floor to ceiling with framed photographs and portraits, some dating back hundreds of years, depicting individuals, couples, families and clans.

There are two entrances, one left and one right.

Music plays (very softly, except when not) throughout the play on an offstage piano. Sometimes songs in their entirety and sometimes seamlessly connecting segues. The music is from different time periods, always American.

MUSIC USE NOTE

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Piano: “DEAR HEART” [1919]

ALICE, 80ish, is underneath the table, waxing one of its legs. She wears a 1940s full bib apron over a faded house dress. Her hair is pulled back into a tight bun, although it has become a bit disheveled as a result of her endless task.

She sits on the floor with a can of paste wax and a large swatch of white cotton fabric, meticulously rubbing the wax into the rich wood, one small area at a time.

Seated in a chair at the opposite end of the table is HARRY, 50ish. His full concentration is on a large bowl from which he carefully — so as not to spill a single drop — brings to his mouth spoonfuls of hot soup, blowing on it twice before devouring with an extended slurp.

HARRY is dressed, head to toe, in a filthy, grey rabbit suit. There are no “clothing” pieces, just the matted and soiled fur, and the headpiece is not a full mask but rather a hood with two floppy ears. One ear hangs by only a few determined threads. HARRY wears no makeup to connect his unshaven face to the costume that frames it.

There is a long wordless passage of time, with the only sounds the slurping of soup and the offstage piano.

Finally ...

ALICE: How’s your soup?

Silence, save for slurping.

ALICE: Harry, dear? You enjoying the soup? (*no response*)
Harry! Soup!

HARRY (*between spoonfuls*): S'all right.

A long moment. More slurping.

ALICE: Sounds to *me* like you're enjoying it. (*pause*) Enjoying it fine. (*pause*) Which bowl did you pick? (*pause*) Hmmm? Harry, what color is your bowl?

HARRY ignores the question for a moment, then leans to one side to examine the bowl before sitting upright once more.

A few more slurps.

HARRY: Red.

ALICE (*visibly annoyed*): Do *not* tell me that. Do *not* tell me you're eating—

HARRY: —Blue, Ma. It's the blue bowl.

The bowl is red.

ALICE: Blue? Then why on earth did you say red? Are you purposely trying to aggravate me? You know good and well—

HARRY: —Yellow. (*pause*) Green.

ALICE: Shush, you!

HARRY: Brown.

ALICE: I don't care.

HARRY: Pink polkee-dots.

ALICE: I told you, now ... I don't *care!* (*a moment*) And it's polka-dots, not polkee-dots. And we don't *own* a pink polka-dots bowl, anyhow.

Silence.

ALICE: Are you really eating from the red bowl?

HARRY: No.

ALICE: Bless you, Son.

HARRY lifts the red bowl to his lips and slurps the remaining soup, at least that which doesn't trickle down his chin. He wipes his mouth with the back of one rabbit paw.

A long moment.

HARRY: I was upstairs—

ALICE begins to hum very loudly along with the music.

HARRY (*raising his voice*): I said ... I was upstairs, perched on the side of the bed, dribbling out the last few drops of my morning *wank*, when I caught smell of the soup. Hopped out of bed and scurried down to the kitchen. Split pea with ham. And carrots! Popped open the cupboard to grab me a bowl and the red one's right there, front and center, staring me down. NOW HEAR THIS: As I am well aware of the house rules regarding the red bowl, I quickly reached for the blue bowl. My favorite color, blue. Contrasts nicely with the pea soup, in my opinion. And the chips along the rim of the bowl add character. Not like the unblemished *red* bowl. Now *that's* a bowl could use a few nicks. Give it some goddamn differentia! (*muttering*) Stupid red bowl.

Piano: "ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH" [1946]

With the new song, ALICE stops humming.

ALICE: Then you've got the blue.

HARRY: Yep.

ALICE: You ate your soup from the blue bowl.

HARRY: That's right.

ALICE: It's in front of you now.

HARRY: That's what I *said*, Ma.

ALICE turns to look at HARRY'S fur-covered legs. She stares at him for a long time.

HARRY sits, frozen, anticipating her next question.

After a long pause, ALICE turns away from HARRY and resumes her waxing. HARRY senses this and relaxes. He then stands and exits stage left with his empty red bowl.

Piano: "WHEN YOU'RE SMILING" [1929]

Alone onstage, ALICE continues to work.

After a few moments we hear another voice, singing the lyrics of "When You're Smiling." LENA, 50ish, enters stage right singing — no, performing — the song. She is dressed in a white button-up long-sleeved blouse and black tights. LENA should have stopped wearing any color tights 75 pounds ago. Her hair is tied up with a scarf.

As LENA sings, she moves her arms somewhat erratically, frequently reaching skyward and striking dramatic poses. Her voice is better than serviceable, and she sings with passion, conviction and plenty of angst.

LENA (singing):

*... But when you're crying,
You bring on the rain.
So stop your sighing,
Be happy again.
Keep on smiling,
When you're smiling,
The whole world smiles with you.
If you suddenly find out you've been deceived,
don't get peeved.
If your husband bluntly tells you you're too stout,
don't you pout.
And for Heaven's sakes, retain a calm demeanor,
when a cop walks up and hands you a subpoena.
If the groom should take a powder while you're
marching down the aisle,
Don't weep and moan because he's flown,
just face the world and smile.*

LENA (*Cont., singing*):

*'Cause when you're crying,
Don't you know,
That your makeup starts to run?
And your eyes get red and scrappy.

Forget your troubles,
Have yourself a little fun.
Have a ball, Forget it all.

Forget your troubles,
Come on get happy!
Keep on smiling,
'Cause when you're smiling,
The whole world smiles with you!*

When LENA completes the song, she reaches out to touch the heavens.

LENA: I love you, Mama.

Piano: "OVER THE RAINBOW" [1938]

ALICE: That was very nice, Lena.

LENA: Thank you, Mother Bernard. Has Harry been downstairs?

As if on cue, HARRY enters from stage left, stabbing with a fork at pickles in a jar.

LENA: Is that your breakfast?

HARRY (*extremely indignant*): No.

ALICE: Harry ate *soup* for breakfast.

LENA: HARRY!

HARRY: MOTHER!

ALICE: *WHAT?*

LENA: That soup was for our *lunch*. You *know* that!

HARRY: A huge *pot*. I just had one itty-bitty bowl.

LENA: There's just enough for us, your mother, Bip, and the boy.

HARRY: The boy never eats nothin'! I ate *his* portion.

LENA: Did you at least wash your bowl and put it away?

HARRY: Of course.

ALICE: Harry tried to get my goat, Lena, by tellin' me that he ate from the *red* bowl.

LENA: Even Harry knows better than that.

LENA turns and exits stage left.

After awhile ...

HARRY: Didn't know Bip's fella would be coming to lunch. He gives me the heebie-jeebies.

ALICE: You're too critical. Always were.

Piano: "MAPLE LEAF RAG" [1900]

LENA enters from stage left holding a clean, but dripping, red bowl that's been recently washed.

She holds it out to HARRY, who panics and gestures for her to keep quiet. They mouth a silent extended exchange of obscenities. ALICE is blissfully unaware.

Finally, HARRY executes one last grand obscene gesture and LENA exits stage left.

Piano: "SATISFACTION" [1965]

HARRY thinks a moment.

HARRY: Hey, Ma. Could you use some help there?

ALICE: Don't need your help. Martin's coming over.

HARRY (*annoyed*): Oh, Mother. *Why?*

ALICE: Now you just shush about Martin. He's a good man.

HARRY: Who can tell? He never says two words together. And he's no help to you, that's for damn sure.

HARRY pokes around in the jar with his fork to stab the last remaining pickle.

ALICE: You don't know. You don't know *nuthin'*.

HARRY: He's not going to be here for lunch, is he?

ALICE: Maybe. So what if he is?

HARRY: Well, Lena's not expecting him, so you're in for a tongue lashing from her.

ALICE: Lena don't scare me none.

HARRY: And then there's the fact that nobody here can stand watching him eat. He makes such a God-awful mess.

ALICE: He can eat down here with me.

HARRY: Fine. We'll lay down a plastic tarp.

ALICE: Har-dee-har-har. You don't want to share your lunch with *nobody*.

HARRY (*finishing off the last pickle*): That's right.

ALICE: You'd be perfectly happy if Lena permitted you to eat that entire pot of soup all by your lonesome.

HARRY: I'd be delighted.

ALICE: As the rest of your family and friends starve.

HARRY: Ain't a-one of you is gonna starve missing just one lunch.

ALICE: Did you eat all them pickles in that jar?

HARRY: Nope.

He did.

ALICE: You sure?

HARRY: Yep.

ALICE: How many's left?

HARRY: One.

ALICE: Good. 'Cause I'm saving that for Martin.

HARRY: Good. 'Cause I ate 'em all. There ain't none left.

ALICE: You ate all them pickles?

HARRY: Weren't that many.

ALICE: One? You couldn't leave just one pickle for someone else?

HARRY: Who leaves just one pickle?

ALICE: Considerate sons, that's who.

HARRY: Don't talk to me about consideration. I got *plenty* of consideration. I'm *lousy* with it.

ALICE: Ha! You don't know the *meaning* of the word.

HARRY: I know the meaning of *lots* of things.

ALICE: You know the meaning of *nuthin'*.

Silence.

ALICE: Nuthin'.

LENA enters from stage left, polishing a dented silver soup tureen.

LENA: Harry, go get Bip.

HARRY: Where's she at?

LENA: The White House. Where do you *think* she's at?
Watching programs in her room. I need her to set the table.

HARRY: I'll go, but she gets very angry with me when I interrupt one of her programs. She starts throwing around all kinds of crazy accusations.

LENA: You've got an excuse for everything. Hop to it.

LENA exits stage left.

HARRY: If the boy was here, I could send *him* upstairs to fetch her. He'd like *that*, I bet.

ALICE: He ain't a *boy*, Harry. He's the same age as Bip.

HARRY: And she ain't a *girl*? We're all the time referring to her as "the girl," or "the kid."

ALICE: She's an adult, just the same. They *both* are.

Piano: "GEORGIA ON MY MIND" [1930]

HARRY: I wish people'd call *me* "the kid." I really do.
Practically every day that's what I wish for.

HARRY exits stage right with the empty pickle jar and fork.

ALICE speaks to HARRY, unaware he is no longer there. She continues to wax the table leg.

ALICE: Harry, you didn't know your Great Uncle Finley. He passed just a year or two after you were born. Up until his dying day, everyone called him "Kid." Seventy-nine years old, people never called him "Finley," just "Kid." He didn't seem to mind none, but sometimes townspeople thought it peculiar. And speaking of *pickles*, like we were, he was manager of the largest pickle plant south of the Mason-Dixon. When my mama told me that, I figured she meant pickles grew on plants poppin' up from the ground and he was in charge of tending the biggest of 'em. I mean, that makes sense to a five-year-old, right? Course, I learned later on what she really meant and actually got to see the entire operation when our family went for a visit in '42. Uncle Finley's pickle plant took up a full city block and they put up a lot more than just pickles. They pickled anything that could stand picklin'.

ALICE (*Cont.*): Cucumbers, naturally, but also pickled onions, pickled cauliflower and pickled carrots. Pickled turnips, pickled mushrooms, pickled olives, pickled peppers and pickled celery. (*pause*) Pickled herring, pickled pig's feet, pickled pig's ears, pickled eggs. (*pause*) Chicken eggs, quail eggs, goose eggs, pheasant eggs, duck eggs, brown eggs.

ALICE stops waxing for a moment and remembers.

ALICE: A few years after our visit, a night watchman was making his rounds in the plant and somehow fell into one of the big vats of brine used for picklin'. They found him in there face down the next morning. That hit Uncle Finley real hard, one of his workers dying that way, so Uncle Finley set up a trust-fund type of thing for that night watchman's family. Paid their rent and all their bills every month. Sent two of the kids to college, but that was long after Uncle Finley died. That family's still being taken care of by that trust, far as I know. That's just how Uncle Finley was. (*she starts waxing again*) The kid.

Piano: "CLOSE TO YOU" [1963]

From off right we hear a rapidly approaching argument.

BIP (*offstage*): I'm going! Don't push! And stay six feet behind me!

ALICE (*to a non-present HARRY*): Here comes Bip.

BIP, 30ish, enters from stage right. She is wearing a very short baby doll negligee with very brief ruffled panties and marabou slippers.

BIP shows no self-consciousness in front of her family wearing this sexy outfit that shows so much of her not unattractive body.

HARRY follows close at BIP'S heels, gnawing on a half-eaten caramel apple in one hand, and trying to steer BIP with the other.

BIP: Mother just doesn't want me doing anything I wanna do. She's such a baby.

HARRY: It won't hurt you to give her a hand. It'll make her happy.