

## ONE DAMN THING

### *The Place*

The upstairs bedroom and exterior grounds of Steepletop, the home of Edna St. Vincent Millay, in Austerlitz, New York.

### *The Time*

The play opens at 11:30 p.m. on October 18, 1950.

### *The Characters*

#### ACTOR #1

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY (“VINCENT”) – childhood to late 50s; a successful poet, playwright and seductress.

#### ACTOR #2

MAMMY HUSH-CHILE – Ageless; a large and motherly antebellum “house servant.”

MRS. HERSCHILD – 50s; a wealthy society woman and Cora Millay’s employer.

#### ACTOR #3

PAULINE – Early 20s; Vincent’s maid. Caring, loyal and annoyingly optimistic.

ELAINE RALLI – Late teens; athlete, cheerleader and Vincent’s first lover.

GLADYS BROWN FICKE – 23; Arthur Ficke’s wife.

INEZ MILHOLLAND – 30; women’s suffrage leader and Gene Boissevain’s first wife.

#### ACTOR #4

ARTHUR FICKE – 40s; Vincent’s best friend, a handsome and brilliant poet-lawyer.

JOHN PEALE BISHOP – 28; managing editor of *Vanity Fair*.

GEORGE DILLON – early 20s; Southern poet and Vincent’s lover.

#### ACTOR #5

CORA MILLAY – 30s to mid-60s; Vincent’s mother. A nurse and hairpiece weaver with a slight Irish brogue.

EDITH WYNNE MATTHISON – late 40s; successful stage actress, Vincent’s mentor and former lover.

#### ACTOR #6

MR. HOOLEY – 40s; British poetry editor and Vincent’s lover.

HENRY MILLAY – 30s to 40s; Vincent’s down-on-his-luck father.

EDMUND “BUNNY” WILSON – 25; literary critic.

GENE BOISSEVAIN – Early 40s to late 60s; Vincent’s husband. A wealthy Dutch immigrant and East Indies importer.

*NOTE: The character of Vincent and most others who populate this play are based on actual lives and loves found in numerous biographies and historical documents. But the words of these characters are generally works of fancy; poetic license has been taken.*

## *The Setting*

Most prominent onstage is Vincent's second-story bedroom ... musty, dank and in need of a good airing. There are three visible doors leading to other rooms in the house. The centermost door leads to the hallway and stairs; with the door open, we can see the stair's banister and top landing. Another door leads to a brightly tiled bathroom and the third door opens on the book-lined walls of Vincent's library. At rise, all doors are open to the areas beyond.

The furnishings consist of a mahogany bed (its linens in disarray), a tall chest of drawers, a velvet divan with an ornately carved frame, an overstuffed armchair, a small writing desk (with telephone), and several tables of various sizes stacked with books, papers and drinking glasses that are empty and not. There is also a large trunk filled with more of Vincent's books, writings, sheet music, photographs and other memorabilia.

Scattered throughout the bedroom is a phonograph, a large bust of Sappho, an etching of Percy Shelley, stacks of 78-rpm record albums, a few framed photographs, and lobby cards from Millay's play *Aria da Capo* and the opera *The King's Henchman*.

The walls of the bedroom extend out from its center and then dissolve -- the effect should be that these barriers are insufficient to contain Vincent's life -- and its contents spill out into the exterior gardens and grounds of Steepletop. Here pine trees are in abundance, and perhaps a few even intrude into the confines of Vincent's bedroom.

Also in these exterior areas are a few benches and small statues of nymphs and fauns. We see the border of an unkempt rose garden and, in the distance, a small cabin of unpainted boards with a gabled roof.

*"Sippin' Cider Through a Straw"* words and music by Mack David and Larry Shay.

## ONE DAMN THING

### ACT 1

*The stage is empty. All is quiet.*

*After a moment, we hear the faint but recognizable footfalls of slippers on bare wood. Then, through the open bedroom door, we see a shadow cast along the far wall as someone slowly climbs the stairs from the floor below. The shadow looms larger with each successive and deliberate step.*

*As the figure crests the top of the stairs, we see it is a woman, late 50s, wearing a magnificent silk dressing gown with gold lamé slippers. This is VINCENT. Her auburn hair, once flaming red, has lost its luster and is now dull and disheveled, piled atop her head. She carries herself as would a long deposed monarch, and there is a great and haunting fragility.*

*VINCENT holds a small notebook and pencil in one hand, a glass of pale wine in the other. As she rounds the stair banister to enter the bedroom, VINCENT appears to be either somewhat exhausted or slightly drugged. Or both.*

*She stops just inside the bedroom door, collapsing hard against the frame, and surveys the room through half-lidded eyes.*

VINCENT (*overly enunciating each word*): Bed ... room. Divan ... room. Divine ... room. Trunk ... room. (*sips her wine*) Drunk room.

*VINCENT slowly crosses the stage to the phonograph.*

*She powers it on, sets the stylus arm in motion, then sits in the armchair. Somewhere from the door to here she has lost the wine glass.*

*Mendelssohn blares suddenly, startlingly, from the phonograph. VINCENT opens her notebook to a specific page and stares intently, pencil poised. A long moment.*

VINCENT: Mammy? (no response) Mammy?! (nothing)  
MAMMY?!

MAMMY (*from the library*): Yes'm, Mizz Vincent?

VINCENT: MAMMY!

MAMMY (*a little louder*): Just a moment, Mizz Vincent!

VINCENT: WHAT?!

MAMMY (*louder still*): I'll be there in just— Lawd Almighty!

*A moment, then MAMMY HUSH-CHILE appears through the door to the library.*

*She is a large African woman, and everything about her suggests 1800s antebellum house servant. Yards and yards of fabric make up her voluminous petticoats and overskirts, on top of which is a large white sacking apron. A bandanna hides most of her hair.*

*MAMMY carries three or four drinking glasses of various sizes and contents. She crosses to the phonograph with determination and, juggling the glasses, switches it off.*

*Turning to VINCENT, MAMMY has the attitude of one who expects – and welcomes – confrontation.*

MAMMY: These here spirits glasses belongs to you, I figure.

VINCENT (*pause*): Mammy, I've asked you not to touch my phonograph.

MAMMY: And *I* done asked *you* not to be screamin' with your phon'graph so loud as to wake the dead! Most 'specially when I done be wearin' myself out pickin' up all this here evidence.

MAMMY (*Cont.*): If'n you don't care about how folks talks about you, I does. And I ain't a-gonna stand by and have ev'rybody sayin' how you ain't nuthin' but a no-count done lost her mind drunk—

VINCENT: —Which I am.

MAMMY: Which you is.

*VINCENT and MAMMY stare at each other fiercely, combatively, and then both start to laugh.*

VINCENT: Sit down, Mammy.

*MAMMY deposits the drinking glasses on any nearby available surface and starts for the divan.*

MAMMY: What you be hollerin' for, anyway?

VINCENT (*referring to her notebook*): I'm stuck. The words were flowing earlier, but now they've stopped.

MAMMY (*moving aside another glass before she can sit*): You most likely done drown 'em.

VINCENT: Don't start. I promised a Thanksgiving Day poem to *The Post* and I've lost my way.

MAMMY (*reclining, her feet up*): Thanksgivin' ain't for weeks and weeks.

VINCENT: But they need it now. That's how publishing works ... there's a long lead time. It's why Christmas poems are written before Labor Day.

MAMMY: Don' make much sense. How you know in August what you gone be feelin' in December?

VINCENT: Fortunately, every Christmas is usually just like the one before.

MAMMY: But not Thanksgivin'?

VINCENT: Not *this* Thanksgiving.

MAMMY: Seem like last year been harder.

VINCENT: Oh, it was. But I expected miserable holidays and was prepared for them. I'm just out of sorts. I had a glass of wine—

MAMMY (*also looking around*): —You sho'nuf did.

VINCENT: —just a moment ago. (*spotting her glass*) There it is. My favorite Chablis.

*MAMMY looks at VINCENT, who points. They both stare at the wine glass.*

MAMMY: Oh, yes. I sees it.

VINCENT: Must have left it there when I put on the Mendelssohn.

MAMMY: That a fact?

*Silence, neither woman willing to budge.*

*Finally, VINCENT looks down and notices a half-empty glass beside her chair. She picks it up and takes a sip.*

VINCENT: Although I am equally fond of gin.

*She takes another, longer sip.*

*Then, from the base of the stairs, we hear a new voice.*

PAULINE (*offstage*): Miss Millay? You up there?

VINCENT (*raising her voice to be heard*): Yes, Pauline ... in my bedroom.

PAULINE (*closer, as she takes a few steps up the stairs*): I was going to start for home, if that's okay. Unless you'll be needing anything more tonight.

*MAMMY shakes her head emphatically. Amused, VINCENT shouts to PAULINE.*

VINCENT: No. I'll be fine. Thank you.

PAULINE (*now halfway up the stairs*): You're sure, Miss Millay?

VINCENT: Quite sure. I'll see you in the morning.

PAULINE (*still offstage*): All right, then. You have a good night.

*The sound of PAULINE retreating down the stairs. MAMMY makes a "good riddance" gesture.*

VINCENT (*loudly, her eyes fixed on MAMMY*): On second thought, Pauline ... if you wouldn't mind ...

*Brisk footsteps as PAULINE hurries up the stairs.*

PAULINE (*close*): Of course, Miss Millay. Anything.

*And now PAULINE is up the stairs and at the open bedroom door, but does not enter. She is in her early 20s and very attractive. She does not wear a maid's uniform, but rather a simple dress and shoes.*

VINCENT: I hate to ask, but can you retrieve my pills from the bathroom? They're next to the—

PAULINE (*entering the bedroom*): —I know where they are, ma'am. I'll be happy to get them for you.

*PAULINE disappears into the bathroom.*

PAULINE (*from the bathroom*): Would you like a glass of water, Miss Millay ... for the pills?

VINCENT: No, I'm fine.

*VINCENT "toasts" MAMMY with her gin glass.*

*MAMMY stands with disgust and circles around to peer in the bathroom. PAULINE reappears and brings three prescription bottles to VINCENT, completely ignoring MAMMY.*

PAULINE: I wasn't sure which pills you meant, so I—

VINCENT: —That's fine. You can leave them with me.

PAULINE: Um, okay. (*she does*) I wish you'd let me open a few windows.

VINCENT: I'd catch my death!

PAULINE: No, not now, Miss Millay ... during the day when there's a crisp breeze blowing through the pines.

*PAULINE has found a tray and begun collecting drinking glasses. As she darts about the room, MAMMY is constantly on the move to stay out from underfoot, eventually deciding to sit on the bed's edge.*

PAULINE: It's a lovely smell. Wouldn't you like that?

VINCENT: What I'd like is to finish this poem.

PAULINE: Still giving you trouble, is it? Don't worry, it'll come to you, I'm sure. I love Thanksgiving. I'll just make up your bed before I go.

VINCENT: Oh, don't bother, Pauline. I'll just mess it up again.

PAULINE: It's no bother, Miss Millay.

*She begins to pull at the blankets and bedspread, but there is resistance from the corner where MAMMY sits. PAULINE gives a final strong tug, and MAMMY is uprooted.*

PAULINE (*as she makes the bed*): You talk about your lovely smells ... I remember Thanksgiving when I was a little girl and my mother was in the kitchen days before, cooking and baking for hours on end.

*Watching PAULINE carefully, MAMMY now decides that PAULINE'S bed-making skills are lacking and follows behind her, giving one more tuck here, another pillow fluff there.*

*As PAULINE and MAMMY work, VINCENT surreptitiously downs a selection of the prescription pills, each swallow followed by a gin chaser.*

PAULINE: Candied yams, cranberry apple muffins, quince bread pudding, mincemeat pie, and a truly marvelous maple mashed butternut squash. With pecans!

VINCENT: No turkey?

PAULINE: Apple sage roasted.

VINCENT: Very descriptive. Perhaps *you* should write the Thanksgiving poem.

PAULINE (*laughing*): Oh! Miss Millay! Me write a poem for *The Saturday Evening Post*? I wouldn't dream of it!

VINCENT: What a loss.

PAULINE (*giving the bed one final tug*): There. That'll be much more comfy when you're ready. (*looking at her watch*) Goodness, it's late. (*she retrieves the tray of glasses*) Are you thinking of retiring soon?

VINCENT: Thinking of it.

PAULINE: Well, good night, then. (*she starts out*) I'll be here bright and early in the morning ... if you're still worrying on the poem. Not that I could be much help. You're the poet! (*at the door*) You want this left open?

VINCENT: Please.

PAULINE: Good night, Miss Millay.

VINCENT: Good night, Pauline.

*PAULINE disappears down the stairs. MAMMY walks up behind VINCENT'S chair.*

MAMMY: Sweet potatoes, collards with ham hocks, Creole cornbread stuff—

VINCENT: —Stop. She's very sweet. And respectful.

MAMMY: And worships you.

VINCENT: You think?

MAMMY: She better. You ain't keepin' her 'round for her domestic know-how.

VINCENT (*laughing softly*): Yes, I suppose you're right.

MAMMY (*a moment, as she studies the Sappho bust*): I seen you takes them pills. Don't fib to me.

VINCENT: What would be the point? It's only pills, Mammy.

MAMMY: And whiskey.

VINCENT: Gin. Just a nightcap.

MAMMY (*turning to VINCENT, derisively*): A nightcap! How you gonna write?

VINCENT: My writing prowess is not influenced by booze or pills. They neither beckon nor spurn the muse. This I discovered long ago.

MAMMY: What do ... beckon the muse?

VINCENT: You did once.

MAMMY (*dismissive*): Pah! You outgrew your Mammy long ago. Don't never see you hardly at all no more. And you done forgot ev'rythin' I ever taught you.

VINCENT: I forget *nothing*! I remember every thing I ever did, every word I ever said, every place I was ever in, every face I ever saw. My mind is a picture gallery. I remember everything.

MAMMY: Exceptin' how to write.

VINCENT: Oh, don't be an idiot, Mammy! Of course I remember *how* to write. But it's not a skill I can turn on as easily as a spigot. And I'm not so simple-minded that you can goad me into it.

MAMMY: Well, *somebody* gots to kick you in the ass now'days.

VINCENT: But tonight, it's not going to be you.

*VINCENT walks deliberately to the large trunk and throws open the lid. She turns and faces MAMMY, who stands unmoving, arms crossed.*

MAMMY: I ain't a-goin'.

VINCENT: Yes ... yes, you are. I'll work after you leave.

MAMMY: Let me stay. I help ya. *(after thinking hard)* Send *this* to the *Post* ...

*So what if I've been paid to spin  
A poem about Thanksgivin' Day?  
I'd rather swill my Fleischmann's Gin.  
Signed, Edna St. Vincent Millay.*

VINCENT: Everybody's a poet tonight except me. Time for you to go, Mammy Hush-Chile.

MAMMY *(a moment, then goes to the trunk)*: I'm a-goin', but you'll done wish you kept me 'round. Mammy's the only friend you got left.

VINCENT: Maybe so, but I'll know where to find you.

*MAMMY hikes her skirts and petticoats before stepping into the trunk as VINCENT holds the lid. MAMMY starts nestling down inside. Many grunts and groans.*

MAMMY: Lawd Almighty!

*Once MAMMY is safely inside, VINCENT gently lowers the lid of the trunk.*

*She then picks up her gin glass and, finding it nearly empty, refreshes her drink from a nearby bottle. VINCENT sips. Then she turns abruptly, crosses to the trunk and throws open the lid.*

*MAMMY is gone, but VINCENT does not seem surprised. She moves a few books, shoeboxes and old blankets before retrieving a small, old, black leather diary. VINCENT closes the trunk lid and sits with her drink, the diary and the pencil in the armchair. She opens the diary, thumbs to the first blank page, and writes.*

VINCENT: October 18th. Mammy Hush-Chile, why do you make me get so cross with you? Do you want to remain forever tucked between the bed sheets and my old manuscripts? That would be more than I can bear. I need you, my wise old Mammy, these days more than ever I think. But I won't have you telling me what to do. I know I must write. I know I *must* write.

*VINCENT stops and sets the diary aside.*

*She sits a moment, staring blankly ahead, before taking a few more pills. Then she stands, unsteadily, and goes to the writing desk. She picks up the telephone receiver and dials.*

VINCENT (*after a moment, excitedly*): Hello? George? George, is that you, darling? ... What? ... Of course I know what time it is. Why do you ask? ... Yes ... Yes, I understand. I'm not mentally defective. You've made your point. Is George there? ... George Dillon ... Really? Oh, well then, I *do* apologize.

*VINCENT hangs up and opens a desk drawer. She removes a small address book and searches for a number. She finds it.*

VINCENT: Understandable mistake.

*Referring to the address book, she dials again and waits.*

VINCENT: George? It's Vincent, darling, how are you? ... Now don't *you* start in ... Some wrong number I got out of bed before I called you. 2245, not 2254 ... It's *Vincent*, my darling boy. Did I wake you, too? Don't people stay up after Jack Benny anymore?

*VINCENT discovers that she has left her gin glass at the armchair and walks with the phone to retrieve it.*

VINCENT: Talk to me, George. We so rarely talk anymore ... Oh, *I* don't know. Tell me about your *life*, I guess. Are you writing?

*VINCENT takes her glass and the phone to the divan, where she sits.*

VINCENT: Uh-huh ... Is that so? ... How wonderful for you ... (*she sips*) I know what— ... I understand that— ... Exactly, George, I had the same thought as I wrote that poem for *The Post* ... *The Saturday Evening Post* ... Yes, they're paying me an embarrassingly obscene commission to work up a little Thanksgiving Day poem. (*she sips*) Well, no, not yet, but that's because they pay upon publication. It's the *Post*, George, not *The Peducah Gazette* ... Oh, of course I did, days ago ... No, you'll just have to wait and read it like everyone else ... Don't say that, George. It's ugly ... Because I *told* you I finished it ... Let's change the subject. Do you ever think about Paris? ... Well, *I* do. Those were grand times. (*laughs*) I swear, entire days went by that you never let me out of bed ... George? Hello?