

HERMIONE: (*Aside.*) Oh here we go—I hate it when my aunt resorts to rhymes! She'll hear no reason, brook no logic, set her mind in stone—

STICKLE:

Attempt no disputation, girl. By Jesu, cease to groan!  
God's providence has chosen you a husband in good time  
To lift you from your sink of vice, your swamp of moral slime,  
And with all pious pity place you properly beside  
An ardent, wealthy Christian man to be his blushing bride.

HERMIONE: Oh aunt, I beg you, cease this cadence. I can stand no more.

STICKLE: Then do as I instruct you, or I'll cast you from my door!

HERMIONE: He's old, he's fat, he's lecherous, he drinks, he uses snuff!

STICKLE: The choice is yours: Submit or you'll be destitute!

HERMIONE: Enough! (*Aside.*) Egad, this heptometrical prosody has rankled all my brain. (*Aloud.*) I'll do your will; I'll marry him.

STICKLE: Oh, my darling girl—Come, let me clasp thee to my breast. (*Aside.*) I wouldn't trust a word she says; this harlot's always lying. (*Aloud.*) On Easter day thou wilt be Lady Lustforth. I hope you shall conform yourself to all that will require.

HERMIONE: I will, for as in everything, obedience is king.

STICKLE: (*Aside.*) Obedience my foot! But I will fadge some method to ensure the bond is set. (*Aloud.*) Be jocund, child. This alliance will provide you comfort and security. Your dead mother would be pleased. Now I must go discuss the banns with our good Reverend Puke. I'm sure he'll have a word or two of guidance for thine ear. I shall return forthwith, dear girl. Ah, praised be Jesu. Praise the king.

## MISS WITHERSPOON

BY CHRISTOPHER DURANG

### CHARACTERS

VERONICA (mid-40s to late 50s), a smart but worried woman, whose nickname is *Miss Witherspoon*; MARYAMMA (any age), an intelligent, graceful spirit guide in the netherworld

### SCENE

*Bardo, the netherworld where dead people await their reincarnation*

### TIME

*The present*

*Chronically depressed for most of her life, VERONICA committed suicide and is now doomed, ironically, to reincarnation—a fate SHE refuses to accept.*

VERONICA: I'm back, I'm back, hooray, hooray!

(MARYAMMA comes rushing in, angry.)

MARYAMMA: What did you just do?

VERONICA: I'm back!

MARYAMMA: Did you just commit suicide at two weeks old???

VERONICA: It wasn't my fault. You sent me where there was a vicious dog.

MARYAMMA: Yes, but you chose. . . . Oh forget it, that was a wasted lifetime. And that poor couple are going to suffer and have guilt, and try to make it up with the next child, who's going to be spoiled and will take no responsibility for anything and then will get drunk at age sixteen and drive a car without a license and kill two people—you see what you've done?

VERONICA: I didn't do it. If that's how they behave, that how they behave, it's not my fault.

MARYAMMA: Your aura is worse than before.

VERONICA: Look, I was thinking. I don't want Saint Peter. I want to go to the Jewish heaven which is like general anesthesia. Can you arrange that please?

MARYAMMA: This isn't a spa.

VERONICA: Not only do I not like life on earth, I realize I don't like to be conscious. I don't want to be here talking to you. I would consider it a wonderful favor if you could arrange for me to be put under.

MARYAMMA: The general anesthesia afterlife is just what happens to the people who don't believe in the afterlife. And you can't just choose the Jewish heaven. Plus I sort of misspoke. It's not only Jewish people. It's also people like Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus. You know, people who don't believe in an afterlife.

VERONICA: I want blankness, I want nothing.

MARYAMMA: Between grief and nothing, I'd choose grief, William Faulkner wrote. Later Jean-Paul Belmondo took the same quote in the movie *Breathless* and said, "I'd choose nothing."

VERONICA: (*Brief pause.*) Why are you telling me this?

MARYAMMA: What you said just made me think of it, that's all. You're choosing nothing. It's a negative choice, nothing. People who go to a restaurant and order nothing, don't eat. Their bodies don't get nourishment. Nothing is as nothing does.

VERONICA: I don't remember those lines in *Breathless*.

MARYAMMA: Oh, you saw the film?

VERONICA: I didn't see the Godard version. I saw the Richard Gere remake on HBO one night.

MARYAMMA: I hate when they make remakes of classic films. It's terrible. It's like when someone says a beautiful sentence, and then some jerk later comes and says, "Let me paraphrase that for you."

VERONICA: Yes, Rex always hated remakes too. Gosh, even saying his name makes me angry. Is there a hell and can you check if he's there?

MARYAMMA: What do you have against Rex Harrison?

VERONICA: I told you, I was married to him. And he wasn't very nice.

MARYAMMA: I explained before, you were married to the soul of Rex Harrison but not when he was Rex Harrison. He had similarities, but he was a coal miner in eighteen seventy-six. In your last life you kept recognizing him when you'd see the actor Rex Harrison, but you were actually recognizing your husband from eighteen seventy-six, not the person who won the Oscar for *My Fair Lady*.

VERONICA: What are you talking about? I remember going to the Oscars with Rex Harrison.

MARYAMMA: You're blurring memories, dreams, and fantasies. It's partially that brown tweed aura of yours—thoughts get stuck in it.

VERONICA: I thought you said we could remember our past lives up here.

MARYAMMA: I did. But people are all on different levels of development, and because of your continuing negative choices, your level of development is fairly messed up.

VERONICA: You're very critical, and you're not very encouraging. I'd like you to go away now, and if I can't be under general anesthesia, then I'd just like to sit and stare and try to think nothing for a while.

(*VERONICA sits in her chair, hoping to end the conversation and to zone out for a while.*)

MARYAMMA: Well, two years have gone by since we started this conversation....

VERONICA: What?

MARYAMMA: So it's time for you to reincarnate again.

VERONICA: It can't be. I just got here.

MARYAMMA: Good-bye.

(*MARYAMMA exits.*)

(*Whooshing sounds again. VERONICA is suddenly in that same place in her chair—air whooshing up at her hair, the light from below, sounds of rushing through the air, being sucked downward. Once again her legs are being pulled by some force, back down to earth. Lights dim or almost go black on VERONICA.*)