

THE ACTORS' DELICATESSEN

A Play

by

Murray Mednick and Priscilla Cohen

CHARACTERS: MAGGIE, 35 }
 MENDEL, 43 } Vaudevillians

ACT I

(The Scene: MAGGIE'S and MENDEL'S dressing room. They are preparing for their act as "Itzl and Tiebele," comic Jewish figures - he the henpecked student of Torah, she the shrewish wife. They dress themselves and apply makeup, and from time to time rehearse bits of their routine, or "turn". It is 1948.)

MAGGIE: Mendel?

MENDEL: What?

MAGGIE: How do people know what to do?

MENDEL: They learn about it.

MAGGIE: How?

MENDEL: From administrators and teachers. Adults.

MAGGIE: They know a lot of things!

MENDEL: You're right. They do. They know a lot. (PAUSE)

MAGGIE: How do they know all that? How do all of those people know all of that. They know about inquisitive testing and economic longitude and political. They know about squaring a T on a long, about plumbing and building and buying and selling and cars and poverty and babies and wars and stars and plants and books and letters and numbers and planets and making little things that belong inside bigger things that all go together to make the big thing the biggest thing. How do people know all that stuff?

MENDEL: It's miraculous.

MAGGIE: How do they put it all inside their heads? Do they cram it? Where do they put it? Open up one of those heads and what would be in there? Look what happens! I cannot groove to any of these people. What is the problem? What are the tasks?

MENDEL: (As Itzl) Why did God create the Goyim?

MAGGIE: (As Tiebele) Somebody has to buy retail! What is the key to a Polish joke?

MENDEL: (Smiles but says nothing)

MAGGIE: Timing! (Screaming) ITZL!!!

MENDEL: (Cringes and leaps to his feet)

MAGGIE: DIVE! DIVE!

MENDEL: (Whistles and lunges forward as if diving out of an airplane)

MAGGIE: You were low.

MENDEL: Low?

MAGGIE: Low. Again. (They repeat the move. MENDEL sits. A pause) When did I learn it? I remember coming home from the hospital. I was wrapped in a blanket and my Mom stepped out of a red convertible carriage. The sun was shining. It was May 16th, 1914. I was two days old. Louis Levenson came out of his back door, walked across his yard, came into our driveway and lifted the blanket up. He looked into my face.

MENDEL: Did you know it was Louis Levenson then?

MAGGIE: Yes!

MENDEL: How did you know that Louis Levenson was Louis Levenson?

MAGGIE: I just knew. I always knew.

MENDEL: It's an eternal Louis Levenson, a priori.

MAGGIE: It's true! He was always Louis Levenson. May he rest in peace. He is no longer with us.

MENDEL: Who else was there?

MAGGIE: My father. He was smoking a cigarette. He was so debonair. He looked a lot like Paul Muni, I thought, at the time.

MENDEL: How could you have known Paul Muni at that time?

MAGGIE: From all the pictures. And my brother was there. He was sitting in a puddle and crying. He didn't want me to be there. And since then it's been just about the same. What happens, Mendel? How did I get from there to here? There's something about a memory. If the memory was a real experience, there's no distance between a memory and right now. You were there, then you're here.

MENDEL: (Becomes "Itzl")

ITZL: (Pointing Above) Angels! Angels!

TIEBELE: Itzl! It's not the Angels! It's the Air Force!

ITZL: (Cringing) Which Air Force?

TIEBELE: (In distressed disbelief) OI!

MENDEL: (After a beat) One day there'll be a Jewish Air Force.

MAGGIE: And then what?

MENDEL: And then we'll be like the Goyim.

MAGGIE: Is that good or bad?

MENDEL: It's not good and it's not bad. (Pause)

MAGGIE: I saw these two people today. They were walking down the street. A man about thirty-five, with his mother on his arm. And the thing that struck me about these two people was that nothing was changed. They were the same two people they were thirty years ago. The only difference is, now HE'S bigger.

MENDEL: It's true. I feel the same Mendel I ever was. I've been the same Mendel since childhood and before.

MAGGIE: So who a person is never changes, Mendel. So what does a person do for all their life?

MENDEL: They work. They worry about the future, they worry about the past. They're under a lot of pressure. They have fortunes and misfortunes. And then they disappear.

MAGGIE: Then what keeps them going? What keeps them going?

MENDEL: Don't forget the little kindnesses. (SHE thinks)

MAGGIE: Tell me a story, Mendel. I am being overwhelmed by my very own thoughts.

MENDEL: All right, Maggie. Once, when I was a boy, I knew a wonderful Rabbi. He was very old and wise. He was tall and thin, and his voice was gentle, but he had eyes like an eagle. This was a man who was much revered. And one day, my mother led me by the hand into his office. The great Rabbi smiled and offered me a chocolate. I put the chocolate in my mouth and sat down. He started to speak to me, and I couldn't eat the chocolate. So I took the chocolate, which was wet, out of my mouth, and put it in my pocket. I was wearing a white shirt. As we spoke, the chocolate was melting in my pocket. Not once did he look at my pocket. (PAUSE) Did you like that story?

MAGGIE: Yes. I liked that little story. I feel a little better.

MENDEL: Good. (PAUSE)

MAGGIE: Mendel, I'm looking around, and everybody is in their life, but I'm not in mine.

MENDEL: If you're not in your life, then where are you?

MAGGIE: I'm right here.

MENDEL: I see what you mean. I'm not sure, but I think this is what you mean. Do you mean...? For instance, I always think that my true fate is to be doing something else that I'm not doing. But maybe my fate is what I'm doing.

MAGGIE: Yes, Mendel!

MENDEL: Could that be accurate?

MAGGIE: Yes!

MENDEL: But what makes me do the things that I do? (PAUSE)

MAGGIE: You know, Mendel, I didn't drop out of my mother's womb, I somersaulted. (PAUSE. They become "Itzl and Tiebele".)

ITZL: I saw Nina's kid today!

TIEBELE: What's her name?

ITZL: Sasha Bella!

TIEBELE: So what's she like?

ITZL: She's very serious! She's like a Rebbitzin!

TIEBELE: She's not even two days old!

ITZL: I know! Thirty-five years she's been studying Torah up in Heaven! Then they sent her down here!

TIEBELE: What for?

ITZL: To make an investigation!

MAGGIE: You mean she has a personal destination so soon?

MENDEL: No, it's more like a job. (A BEAT as they nod to each other)

MAGGIE: For as long as I could remember I used to think, if I concentrated hard enough, I could become another person. Truly be another person. Part of me would stay me and the other part would float inside another person's body. The part that stayed me would remain, just in case I wanted to get back.

MENDEL: Well, who would you want to be? Would you still be a woman?

MAGGIE: I'd like to be my friend Colette, for instance. She's tall, she's very tall. And she has long legs. And she smiles a lot. I would like to know what she is smiling about. She always looks like she feels good. Is this possible?

MENDEL: How would I know this, Maggie?

MAGGIE: But Mendel, is the world the same for her? How do I know we're both seeing the same thing? It's enough to make you a little paranoid. What do we have in common? It's like everyone has their life. There are things to do things that must get done. There are joys, jokes, for

MAGGIE: (Cont'd) instances. How do people tell jokes? And where did they learn all that information? What makes them stay home?

MENDEL: Obviously, they have families. Otherwise, who would they be? You have to have people who care about you on a regular basis, and call you by your name.

MAGGIE: You want to have a family? You make a family, you have someone who cares about you on a regular basis. And then you give the family a name.

MENDEL: So what's the problem?

MAGGIE: What problem?

MENDEL: No problem.

MAGGIE: I don't know how to get back there.

MENDEL: Where?

MAGGIE: Home.

MENDEL: Where WAS that? (She doesn't answer) Yeah, I told you how I would go over to Marty Ottenheimer's house and hang around until they invited me to dinner.

MAGGIE: Whatever happened to Marty Ottenheimer?

MENDEL: He went to Temple University. He's a philosopher now, don't you know, a real person.

MAGGIE: A PHD?

MENDEL: Certainly.

MAGGIE: Is it your name who informs you who you are?

MENDEL: Well, if Louis Levenson was Louis Levenson since the dawn of creation....

MAGGIE: Oh, my God. Maggie.

MENDEL: Mendel. (PAUSE)

MAGGIE: How's this? Itzl flies up to heaven. There, under the celestial opening, he meets up with the big Rabbi. They're both dangling. They're discussing life, and Itzl is trying to eat a cocolate.

MENDEL: I'm always thinking about the little Rabbis. Their backs are bent from bending. Their voices are light from singing. Their faces are kind from suffering. Their eyes are bad from studying the books. And they sway from side to side and go like this: (GESTURING) "You'll get over it. You'll get over it."

MAGGIE: (Has sneaked behind him, and now smacks him over the head with a huge "turkey leg".)

TIEBELE: See, a yarmulke is not a helmet!

MENDEL: (As she moves to hit him again, angrily grabs her arm and throws her back. A BEAT.)

MAGGIE: (Contrite) A couple goes to Florida for a vacation. It's Friday night. The wife, Ruth, says to her husband, "Irving, go to the store and get me a chicken for the Sabbath. Make sure it's kosher." He goes to the store. No kosher chickens. So he goes around the corner and he buys a live chicken. On his way home he decides to go to a movie. So he tries to buy a ticket, but the lady says, "No pets allowed." So he goes around

MAGGIE: (Cont'd) the corner and he stuffs the chicken in his pants. He goes back, he buys a ticket, he sits down. The chicken can't breathe, so Irving unzips his pants. Two old ladies are sitting in front of him. One turns to the other: "Becky, give a look." "Vats to look?, you seen one you seen 'em all." "Yeah, but this one is eating my popcorn."

MENDEL: (Chuckling) I heard that one.

MAGGIE: Where'd you hear it?

MENDEL: I don't remember, but I heard it.

MAGGIE: I know, your friend Harry, the slippery one, the joke thief.

MENDEL: (Angrily) Don't aggravate me about Harry! I've had it, Maggie, that's it. I'm tired. I'm tired of Itzl. I'm tired of getting hit over the head. Enough. Enough of the cities, the theatres, the halls. I never know who I am or where my life is.

MAGGIE: This is where you are, Mendel, always. On the stage. Right here. We have traveled many continents. We are known for our antics world-wide.

MENDEL: But I've left myself all in pieces. Everytime I talk about this, you don't listen, you fly off. (PAUSE) It's time to study, it's time to get serious. Enough of the one one-night stands.

MAGGIE: (Sarcastic) Yes, you are reknowned for a ladies' man.

MENDEL: That's not an easy life. (Blows his nose)

MAGGIE: You've had the same cold for nine years, Mendel.

MENDEL: Okay, I'll go where it's warm and...I'll only study Torah.

MAGGIE: Just what do you think you'll accomplish?

MENDEL: One thing. One life. A job to study Torah. I wake up and I know what I should be doing. Learning. That is the purpose of the Jew on earth. I don't know anything, Maggie. Maybe timing, a little bit. They say all knowledge is in the Torah, all truth. I'll find out in a warm climate. What is a Jewish man? He complains about his ailments, but he wants to know the truth.

MAGGIE: Jewish men and me, a very old story. It's a little like medicine. I was told I'd feel better....I used to eat dirt in the garden on Jane Road. And somehow I contracted a case of worms, and I had to take this black cherry syrup. As a matter of fact, everybody in my family had to take it. It smelled great, but the after taste - Phew! It's supposed to be good for you, but somehow it doesn't work.

MENDEL: Don't be hard.

MAGGIE: I'm hard and I have a hard edge, that's how you see me. Jewish men. I'm going to make a general statement. They want you to be young and beautiful and intelligent. They want you to be strong and weak, plus maternal capabilities. (PAUSE) Did you get the letter from your mother?

MENDEL: Yes. (SIGH) Same letter. (With ITZL'S voice) "Dear Mendel, I'm so happy you wrote to me and sent me the money it makes me so happy as you know how it is with me It's a big help to me Please don't get mad when I tell you I have to go to a party for the Senior Citizens it is a very nice thing for me I get lonely but I can go to the B'nai Brith party for the Senior Citizens and I would like to have a nice dress to wear but where would I get the money? You know how it is with me and if you could send me some money for a nice dress to wear to the Senior Citizens it would make me so happy Love Mother."

MAGGIE: I was on my way over here and I found myself talking to myself.

MENDEL: What were you saying?

MAGGIE: It must be that this phenomenon of calisthenics is the best cure for mental illness.

MENDEL: You could have a point there, Maggie.

MAGGIE: All of a sudden, life could be so overwhelming, so huge, that I feel as if I can't find my way. I'm old. Already I'm old. I woke up this morning and I knew this to be true.

MENDEL: It's not true.

MAGGIE: I'm not who I think I am.

MENDEL: That's possibly true.

MAGGIE: There is this way that I think I'm supposed to be. This particular Maggie, she's a real doll. She lives in the center of it all, inside her own life. She can get many things done, things in the world. She can fix things, and talk smart back fast at some guy making a pass, if she wants to. She floats through the world, her life, other people's lives, leaving her colors behind her. Not to make too much of a good thing, but she's rather a doll. And this Maggie, she has no fear. Imagine that, no fear. (PAUSE) Are you afraid, Mendel?

MENDEL: Yes.

MAGGIE: I was thinking of an area - you're talking of leaving the act - when a person such as myself, for instance, finds themselves in a situation where suddenly after many years finds themselves in a new situation, who will be there? I'm talking tough. Who will it be by my side?

MENDEL: It could be an American act. The daily life of a family, the trials and tribulations. Maybe he's a worker, an ordinary man.

MAGGIE: And she? She's an American?

MENDEL: Yes, but not born here.

MAGGIE: Oh, she's an American wife. (PAUSE) So what's the joke?

MENDEL: Machines. She has problems with the new machines.

MAGGIE: And him?

MENDEL: Him? He has problems with his boss.

MAGGIE: So he goes off to work, and she's planning a big surprise, it's a new machine, a wash and drier, the delivery boy brings it up - and the money, it's not there - he's spent the money!

MENDEL: No, that's Itzl.

MAGGIE: Who would it be? (PAUSE) I remember that time in South Fallsburgh, New York. It was a Labor Day weekend, there was a big monsoon. Nobody could make it up to the Catskills because Route 17 was washed out. The only people we had in front of us were the seasoned veterans from Second Avenue. It was 1940. Who knew what was coming? With the wars, the political, the catastrophe. And here we are, very small, Itzl and Tiebele. One false move and we get eaten by silence. It was the left front face double twist. And I'm waiting, you're right behind me, and suddenly I have a moment, I realize I'm in the wrong moment. And there you were with Itzl's dance and the bow and the tip of the hat. (PAUSE) If Itzl goes, then who will be there on my left?

MENDEL: Itzl. Nobody knows who Itzl is anymore. Or Tiebele. The people who would know are going fast. We're pretending that the world of Itzl and Tiebele is still alive. All my life I been pretending.

MAGGIE: So that's what you do. You pretend and you do it good.

MENDEL: Do I?

MAGGIE: You're the best. The top of the profession. I'm not the only one who says so.

MENDEL: I'm not tough. I wish I could stand in front of a person and not have to pretend to be tough.

MAGGIE: There's tough and there's tough.

MENDEL: I wasn't lying when I said I was afraid. One false move and we get eaten by silence. I'm terrified we'll be attacked by the audience and my body is stiff as a board.

MAGGIE: One would never, ever notice. You have that certain....Sol says there could be a script. The legitimate stage, a musical comedy. The story would be, we're in the old country, it's a small village, a milkman has five daughters --

MENDEL: I just want to give it up, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Then you'll die, Mendel.

MENDEL: I want to bend my back in prayer and keep to the rear. I don't want to be up in the front of anything. The lights, the audience....What would it be like to actually pray? And not for a joke?

MAGGIE: You can't make prayer with old men and old breath and old books. This is as high and as holy as you're gonna get.

MENDEL: All right. So I'll play cards. I'll go swimming twice a day. I'll get healthy. Maybe I'll write articles. Itzl and Tiebele and the golden years of vaudeville. (Improvises a song:)

I'll go to a place in the sun,
Where all the soubrettes are young,
Where the company of midgets
Is happy and sane
And no freak-acts are spoiling the fun --

MAGGIE: Why not just take a vacation, Mendel? I'll pay for it.

MENDEL: Save your money, Maggie. (PAUSE)

MAGGIE: You know, the Altmans just got back from a week trip to Lake George, in Monticello, New York.

MENDEL: That's not near Monticello.

MAGGIE: As a matter of fact, they're not doing so well.

MENDEL: Oh?

MAGGIE: A mid-life crisis. Wanderlust.

MENDEL: She or him?

MAGGIE: Her.

MENDEL: Ruthie?

MAGGIE: She met a fellow. He's younger than her and he's a Winston with three numbers.

MENDEL: A Winston the third?

MAGGIE: You heard about June?

MENDEL: Who?

MAGGIE: Remember, Mendel, the tall shiksa couple at the Palladium? Very successful. Belle just told me, they broke up. He's doing a solo turn now, and she's going to the theatre night after night. She sits in the front row center, and she's making faces. (THEY LAUGH)

MENDEL: The poor man. (PAUSE) Let's do the rent. (They become ITZL and TIEBELE)

TIEBELE: (Screaming) ITZL!!

ITZL: What?

TIEBELE: The money! What have you done with the money? (HE CRINGES) What are you thinking, Manna from Heaven?! Who 's gonna pay the rent?!

ITZL: I bought books.

TIEBELE: Books!

ITZL: Books.

TIEBELE: Books! And did you eat all the halvah?!

MAGGIE: (After a beat) I'm thrown for a loop. I'm diminished by half of me. How can I do it?

MENDEL: Maggie, you can hold your own. We're talking tough here. Don't forget, in this business people rejoice in the misfortunes of others. Your bad luck could bring happiness to your friends and associates.

MAGGIE: Do I do that? Talk dirty on people?

MENDEL: (Unconvincing) No, Maggie. You don't do that.

MAGGIE: No, I don't. (PAUSE) Sometimes. (PAUSE) It's the competition. (PAUSE) It's tough. (PAUSE) And what's happening to the business? (HE SHRUGS) I just had a terrible thought. What if forever I am deluding myself of the truth? I have a vision, a way to make my life better, I think it can work, and five years from now, if I'm lucky, I get there, I get to the next moment and I have not changed, nothing has happened, I have moved not forward. I am always slipping backwards, or more precisely to the point, I am like a salmon swimming upstream. (PAUSE) A salmon often makes it. (PAUSE) I suppose this is an optimistic thought.

MENDEL: Maggie, you were already a star when I met you.

MAGGIE: Oh. (PAUSE) Just tell me one thing.

MENDEL: Certainly.

MAGGIE: What have you done with all your money?

MENDEL: What money? There is no money.

MAGGIE: Don't tell me you sent it all to your mother?

MENDEL: I'm not telling you anything.

MAGGIE: Don't worry, I know. Stocks and bonds, the world of high financial. (SIGH) Me, I don't have the wherewithal. (HE SCOFFS) I'll make you a business proposition, a deal. Sol can make one last tour, transcontinental. The greatest cities in style, London, France, Toledo, Vienna, Amsterdam, New York, Los Angeles...

MENDEL: There's a good idea for you, Maggie, the West Coast.

MAGGIE: You'll come?

MENDEL: No. I told you, no more touring. I want to wake up in my own bed and look out of the window and see the ocean. I'll have my own books. I'll have a desk. I'll give up my fear. And maybe....

MAGGIE: What?

MENDEL: I'll make a family.

MAGGIE: Mendel, I get fixated on things too. I grab onto things to make myself feel like a person. A person knows how to do things, like planting, sewing, cooking. A person can stand in their kitchen, scalloping a radish and talk to their guests at the same time. Imagine a platter filled with sculpted fruits and vegetables, hot sauce dips, homemade warm bread, camembert cheese, good wine and French cigarettes. I'm lounging, I'm discussing important topics like political, and I'm pausing to take a carrot from the mouth. (PAUSE) But I am no longer a romantic.

MENDEL: Me neither, Maggie.

VOICE OFF: Itzl and Tiebebe - Five minutes!

MENDEL: (Rising to finish putting on his costume) I never told you about my first wife, Amy. Speaking of romance. I thought at that time - well, I wasn't thinking at that time. Really, I was sexually in love. I gave not thought to the impossibility of out life together. Here was a girl from a rich Jewish family in the lingerie business on Fifth Avenue, and here was I, a poor fool with dreams of becoming an artistic performer. But my only performance was as a waiter in Mayhew's Country Kitchen on Lower Broadway. I was so stunned with the magnitude of my mistake that it paralyzed me. I didn't know how I could accomplish being the person I should have been. What was my shock when I discover she is making it with a Puerto Rican, my friend Richie from the Annex Bar on Avenue B. The next thing I know, I'm standing on the street with a suitcase in my hand. Suddenly I have no wife, no home, no property....

MAGGIE: You hated that life and now you hate this life. This is a typical Mendel. It's not a bad life.

MENDEL: It's a life.

MAGGIE: Who are you gonna make a family with?

MENDEL: I don't know. It's a question.

MAGGIE: There's no lady in the dreamy cozy little beach cottage in Florida. All these years in all your talking, there never was.

MENDEL: No. But there is a nice Jewish girl in my dreams. (HE PUTS ON A MULTICOLORED YARMULKE with ear-locks attached.)

MAGGIE: A real person?

MENDEL: God willing. And without an accent.

MAGGIE: Oh.

MENDEL: Not a greenhorn.

MAGGIE: Oh.

MENDEL: Born here.

MAGGIE: Oh.

MENDEL: Youthful.

MAGGIE: Oh. (They become Itzl and Tiebele. Itzl covers his head as Tiebele moans and yells:)

TIEBELE: The baker's daughter! How could you?
She's fifteen! That's illegal!

ITZL: (Innocently) She likes me. I'm teaching
her...

TIEBELE: Teaching her?! Teaching her?!
Teaching her WHAT?!

MENDEL: (Smiles mischievously)

MAGGIE: Mendel - Amy - you never told me about her.

MENDEL: Maggie, we got two minutes.

MAGGIE: I know we got two minutes! (A BEAT. SHE PUTS ON TIEBELE'S HAT)
"To be master of myself every moment, every step, every movement."

MENDEL: Who said that?

MAGGIE: You said that.

MENDEL: I said that?

MAGGIE: February 4th, 1941.

MENDEL: Where was that?

MAGGIE: That was Scranton, New Jersey.

MENDEL: Pennsylvania.

MAGGIE: It was Pennsylvania, and we were drinking. And I remember Saratoga
Springs, August 40th, 1946.

MENDEL: 40th, did you say 40th?

MAGGIE: August 30th, 1946. You and I and the piano player got drunk that
evening. Itzl and Tiebele the follow-up act for Dizzy Leadlace and the band.

MENDEL: It was Utica, and the Stevie Rogers band.

MAGGIE: It was a convention of orthodontists and their wives. I looked up and four hundred wives are coming towards us. And it was you they were after. Large and looming. Huge breasts, massive bodies, muslin moo-moos. The hair colors! How were we gonna get away? You were sitting there staring at your drink and smiling, completely surrounded. And then gently you got to your feet and did Itzl's dance. So precise and impeccable. The little smile. And the whole room froze like a picture. Itzl dancing on his own little island of happiness. To me, this was the art of the highest. To make happiness and laughter at noone's expense but my own.

MENDEL: It was the art of Buster Keaton. There was my inspiration. It happened one night at The Actors' Delicatessen. This was a hang-out for the old greats of the Yiddish theatre - the actors, the comedians, the clowns, the dramatists. There they would gather late, after the shows, for food and drink, for gossip, for company. These men, if they hadn't been comedians in America, they would have been Rabbis in the old country.... I was going around, picking up the dirty dishes, the glasses....I could listen to the talking, look into the faces....Suddenly the music and the laughter stopped and the lights went out. Then a beautiful human face appeared on a wall of the delicatessen. It was Keaton. What a face! Sad but brave. Willing to see the worst. And every look of his eyes, every step, every movement - precise, impeccable...

VOICE OFF: Itzl and Tiebele - you're on!

MAGGIE: Ready?

MENDEL: Ready?

MAGGIE: Ready?

MENDEL: Let's go.

(MUSIC. ITZL AND TIEBELE STEP "ONSTAGE", TAKE A POSTURE. THUNDEROUS CHEERING AND APPLAUSE. BLACKOUT.)

ACT II

(Same scene, 45 minutes later. Re-enter MAGGIE and MENDEL from their performance as ITZL and TIEBELE. MENDEL lingers at the door to accept compliments, greet admirers, ETC.)

MENDEL: Thank you!...You're so kind!...Thank you!...Who knows what the future will bring?...

MAGGIE: Mendel.

MENDEL: Thanks again!...Yeah, I will be going to Hialeah! I'm leaving tomorrow!...You're a friend of Harry's?...

MAGGIE: Mendel.

MENDEL: (To MAGGIE) What?

MAGGIE: Close the door.

MENDEL: What's the matter with you? These are very nice people over here --

MAGGIE: Close the door, Mendel.

MENDEL: (To his admirers) Good-bye!...Must change!...Until next time!... Well, that's an interesting proposition, Miss, but no, tied up this evening...Good night! (Closes the door)

MAGGIE: How many, Mendel?

MENDEL: How many? It was a full house!

MAGGIE: I'm in shock. I'm maladjusted.

MENDEL: (Taking off the yarmulke) You were terrific, Maggie! As usual!

MAGGIE: Amy.

MENDEL: Amy?

MAGGIE: Wife number one, a new face, a new name. Is she tall? Is she pretty?

MENDEL: Maggie, I have not seen her in twenty years!

MAGGIE: Tell me.

MENDEL: She was tall, but she's probably shrunk by now! (Laughs)

MAGGIE: How could you?, a Puerto Rican!

MENDEL: A what?

MAGGIE: Secrets. Secret lives. How do you know who a person is? When you're here with me, I know what you're doing.

MENDEL: Naturally. (Lighting a cigar) So, what'd you think, Maggie? A pretty good show, huh?

MAGGIE: Passable.

MENDEL: Passable? Only passable for you?

MAGGIE: Full house.

MENDEL: Sure! (Takes off Itzl's jacket and shirt)

MAGGIE: A good audience. Sherry Glickman's neice was there. She had a good time. Did you see her?

MENDEL: She was there? I did not see her.

MAGGIE: Third row center. You didn't see her?

MENDEL: No. Who was she with?

MAGGIE: Abe Kaufman's son.

MENDEL: Oh, yeah, him. I did not see him.

MAGGIE: Did you know Abe died?

MENDEL: Died?

MAGGIE: Certainly, he died. Last week. Keeled over on the green. He was playing golf.

MENDEL: Good old Abe, keeled over on the green. Vanished now from the face of the earth.

MAGGIE: Mendel.

MENDEL: Yes, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Something I don't understand.

MENDEL: Good.

MAGGIE: Are you a comedian or are you a student?

MENDEL: I'm both. It's not so simple and it's not so easy to talk. I'm always falling on one side or the other. Which one is me?

MAGGIE: They're both you.

MENDEL: Neither one is me.

MAGGIE: Then who?

MENDEL: I don't know.

MAGGIE: Nor are you Rabbinical.

MENDEL: That I know.

MAGGIE: Trust me. I know who you are. You're a man with many sides. Not so unusual, Mendel. A man has sides. It takes time to understand how a man can be both holy and not, an artiste and an ordinary fellow who has....(She searches)

MENDEL: Shortcomings?

MAGGIE: Desires.

MENDEL: (Starting to remove his make-up) It's in the blood. My father was a famous romantic in his time. My mother was his second wife. Later I heard he married five more times.

MAGGIE: That's not a romantic, that's a gigolo. What happened to number one?

MENDEL: She died in Canada, in a blizzard, giving birth to my brother, Gilbert. My father saved the baby and he brought it to Brooklyn, and there he courted my mother.

MAGGIE: Did he know her?

MENDEL: Yes, from the home village, Tomashbele, which was near Odessa, which is in the Ukraine, which is in the Soviet Union.

MAGGIE: What happened to him?

MENDEL: The day of my Bar Mitzvah he walked away.

MAGGIE: On that day you became a man.

MENDEL: Yeah, his job with me was finished. Some job, eh? (Laughs)

MAGGIE: You ever hear from him?

MENDEL: No, but today I got a phone call from my mother. I forgot to tell you.

MAGGIE: A phone call?

MENDEL: Yes. The first phone call in nine years.

MAGGIE: Well, you have no number. One minute you're in Chicago, the next in California, the next...you're in Amy. (PAUSE) So you heard her voice?

MENDEL: Amy's?

MAGGIE: No, your mother's.

MENDEL: Yes, she called.

MAGGIE: How was it?

MENDEL: It was a shock. My mother's voice. Same voice. A voice from childhood and before. You know why she called? She was afraid I got washed up in a tornado. To her, Chicago is very small, about the size of a dot.

MAGGIE: Did you talk to Gilbert?

MENDEL: Yeah, for one split second. He said, "Hello, Mendel," and that was that. He gave the phone back to my mother. It was all he could tolerate. He's shy, like me. (Smiles)

MAGGIE: I'd like to meet him.

MENDEL: Are you kidding? He would hide in the bathroom.

MAGGIE: At least he stays home.

MENDEL: (Gleefully) So Abe Kaufman died. That must have come as a shock to him. The sonofabitch thought he'd never die.

MAGGIE: (Indicating a bouquet of red roses) Mendel, the flowers.

MENDEL: I saw them.

MAGGIE: Which one is it? I know, it's the redhead in the balcony, the one with the bosom. This is the third time already. What's her name?

MENDEL: Melissa.

MAGGIE: Melissa. It would be real easy to have a relationship with someone like that.

MENDEL: I do have a relationship with someone like that.

MAGGIE: Oh. (PAUSE) Tonight?

MENDEL: Sure. We'll have some supper, we'll go down to the South Side, hear some music, we'll meet Harry and his friends. Then later we'll probably go up to her place. She has a nice little place up on the lake -

MAGGIE: There should be a logic to living.

MENDEL: Why?

MAGGIE: It's very mathematical, cause and effect. If I do A then B should happen.

MENDEL: Maggie, have you not reached the top of your profession?

MAGGIE: But I don't understand how life works. Things are always falling apart.

MENDEL: And always coming together again. The world has to go on living.

MAGGIE: It's true, Mendel. That's what they say. (PAUSE) So, you're gonna leave? You'll end up like Abe with a sunstroke. I know what you're doing, Mendel. I read about this. It would be Freud, the fear of success.

MENDEL: What, are you kidding me?

MAGGIE: I'm not kidding. It's this life that keeps you alive. You thrive on it. Look at you, how high you are. This is Itzl's blood running through you now. And you're gonna leave? Where are you gonna go? We are this close to the top. It's a new world coming. There could be a reincarnation of Itzl and Tiebele, right into the television set. We could be like George and Gracie. You are afraid.

MENDEL: Maybe you're right. (PAUSE)

MAGGIE: Tell me something, Mendel. The Actors' Delicatessen. Is it true?

MENDEL: Certainly, it's true.

MAGGIE: It's a real place?

MENDEL: Sure it's a real place. It's in Woodridge, New York, up in the Borsht Circuit. We went by it more than once.

MAGGIE: And Keaton?

MENDEL: Keaton. I'm embarrassed to put myself in such company. What an effort it takes, Maggie, to achieve something in this life.

MAGGIE: You work hard, you do good.

MENDEL: I was never afraid of work.

MAGGIE: Then what?

MENDEL: Don't push me. Look at Jolson, the big shot! Who is he? What's his life? A professional celebrity, his manager is his only friend on earth, and I'm not so sure about him!

MAGGIE: He's got stuff.

MENDEL: Stuff! You know what stuff is? It's calculated hysteria!

MAGGIE: You'll always be Mendel. You'll never be Jolson.

MENDEL: Why would I want to be Jolson?

MAGGIE: You'll always be Mendel.

MENDEL: He spoiled them. He gives everything to them, they don't have to work for it. He makes love to them. The audiences, they're well-fed now and they expect more, everything you have, including your honor, and they pay cheap.

MAGGIE: Not so cheap. They work hard, all their lives, and they come here to forget about it. Jolson, he just gives them what they deserve.

MENDEL: How much I admire the old-timers, what they had to put up with, coming to a new land, and with nothing but a song and dance and a joke. And if they failed? (A BEAT) I got an idea for the act.

MAGGIE: What act?

MENDEL: What do you mean, what act?

MAGGIE: Big ideas you don't have.

MENDEL: All right, so I won't tell you.

MAGGIE: Tell me. You're leaving, so tell me.

MENDEL: Now that I think about it, it's not such a hot idea.

MAGGIE: Either tell me, or don't tell me.

MENDEL: All right, I'll tell you. Itzl hears of a store where they sell holiness. It's a top secret store.

MAGGIE: Where's the store?

MENDEL: It's in Florida. He learns about it from a waiter. He thinks it'll save him a lot of work if he can go there. Naturally, it's a trick. But Itzl starts saving his money. Tiebele's money. Naturally, Tiebele soon suspects something. So what does she do? (PAUSE. MAGGIE doesn't respond.) Great. That'll work.

MAGGIE: Let's start with Keaton.

MENDEL: Again?

MAGGIE: His face.

MENDEL: Yes?

MAGGIE: On the wall of a delicatessen?

MENDEL: No. I made it up, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Why?

MENDEL: To tell you a story.

MAGGIE: And the delicatessen?

MENDEL: The delicatessen is true. I remember that Donald Schwartz, the owner's son, would play the piano. I worked there as a second job. Days I was a busboy at the Avon Lodge. I was working twenty hours a day. I must 've smelled like a kosher kitchen. At the Avon Lodge, the busboy would carry two stations - fifty or sixty people at a time. And these were great festivals of Jewish eating. First the prune juice -

MAGGIE: The prune juice has to be first -

MENDEL: Then the herring or the chopped liver with a cracker stuck in it, then the soup, two kinds plus the consomme, then a choice between seven main dishes, always including chicken, boiled or roasted, then maybe London broil, roast beef, Salisbury steak -

MAGGIE: And flanken?

MENDEL: Flanken always, plus side dishes of every description - kishke, kugel, tzimis, potato pancakes, dumplings. People trying this or that. And it wasn't enough that nobody would miss a course, but each one has to have a taste of what the other one is having. So, she's over here eating flanken, and over there, on the other side of the table, she's eating roast chicken. The person eating the chicken is looking at the flanken and the one eating the flanken is looking at the chicken. And who do they ask? Not the waiter, that would be embarrassing. They ask me, the busboy, "Mendel, please, get me a little taste chicken, just a taste, not the whole thing - don't rush but make sure it's hot." So picture the busboy - he's racing in and out of the kitchen - for tastes, for side dishes, he's picking up the dirty dishes, he's keeping water on the table, bread on the table - his two waiters are yelling at him, the headwaiter is yelling at him, the chef is yelling at him, the assistant chef is yelling at him, the cook is yelling at him, the assistant cook is yelling at him, the saladman is yelling at him, the assistant saladman is yelling at him, and the dishwasher is yelling at him! To this day I have nightmares about it! You can never keep up! And then, suddenly, they're all gone, like one person - they're going to the show. And you look at what they've left. And you have to clean up and set up for the next meal. And you won't sleep that night because tomorrow, inevitably, holds three more meals in store! (PAUSE) How did I get started on this?

MAGGIE: The Actors' Delicatessen.

MENDEL: Right. We had a customer at the Avon Lodge, a famous comedian, he was the King of Jewish eating.

MAGGIE: Sid -

MENDEL: We won't mention any names. But he was such an eater that he had to have a room and a waiter and a busboy all to himself. He was ashamed to let other people see him eating. Naturally, that was the job we all wanted. One person, it was like heaven, and he could tip as good as fifty or sixty people. Anyway, we became friends, and it was him who introduced me to the Actors' Delicatessen.

MAGGIE: And Amy?

MENDEL: This was before I met Amy.

MAGGIE: So there was a real Amy, and there's a before Amy and an after Amy?

MENDEL: Certainly.

MAGGIE: And a real wedding?

MENDEL: Sure.

MAGGIE: With a Rabbi?

MENDEL: (Pouring drinks) We had a Rabbi with a full calendar. The best. It was in the Hotel Pierre.

MAGGIE: Manhattan?

MENDEL: Manhattan. (They drink)

MAGGIE: So who was there?

MENDEL: First, all her relatives, which numbered in the thousands.

MAGGIE: Not the thousands. Go on.

MENDEL: Then all my relatives, which numbered my mother and my brother, neither of whom could talk to anybody there, and an aunt from New Jersey who owned a gas station and whom I'd never seen before. We embarrassed the hosts. (GOES behind a screen to finish changing)

MAGGIE: Don't belittle yourself, Mendel. How could you embarrass them?

MENDEL: We were poor, and psychologically...

MAGGIE: Maladjusted?

MENDEL: Damaged. My brother -

MAGGIE: Gilbert -

MENDEL: You must see the picture. It's the Hotel Pierrre, the height of affluence. Millionaires there were by the dozen, the 'four hundreds', as my mother would put it, the elite. And there were we, the inappropriate, who could not even speak, who had no notion of what to wear or how to act.

MAGGIE: How old were you?

MENDEL: I was twenty-three years old, but I had my pride. And at the same time I was frightened and ashamed.

MAGGIE: Of what?

MENDEL: I knew it was a big lie, even then. One hundred per cent inappropriate.

MAGGIE: Who represented Amy?

MENDEL: Her father, along with a league of garment center Big Shots. The world of success, the world of sofas and carpets and nice furniture and maids.

MAGGIE: This is very usual for you to feel inappropriate on these occasions. This is a typical -

MENDEL: I knew I could not be a member of that society. I had never owned a sofa in my life. (Chuckles)

MAGGIE: Mendel.

MENDEL: So the smashing of the glass is over, the mazel tovs are over, the gifts are piling up. I'm watching my mother and my brother sitting in fear, and I'm drinking champagne copiously. I'm beginning to feel like a spectator at a comedy. Somebody just got married, and it's me. (Coming back out) Then her father comes over to me. "Listen," he says, "I want you to know, there should be no surprises or misunderstandings - I am not a rich man. I am a Communist, and I felt I should give away my money." I look up at him. "Please," I says, "don't take this personally, but can we call the whole thing off now? I refuse to be associated with Communists."

MAGGIE: Is that true?

MENDEL: No. I didn't say anything, but I started to giggle. And then the giggling turned into hysterical laughter, and I couldn't stop laughing.

MAGGIE: What was the chagrin -?

MENDEL: Of my new in-laws? It was great. I should point out that in one special way, ours was the more powerful intention. Mine and Amy's.

MAGGIE: Why?

MENDEL: Because we had the sincere attraction of youth on our side. I have in mind here a photograph - it was of a kiss. (PAUSE) But that was not enough.

MAGGIE: What about the kiss?

MENDEL: It was authentic.

MAGGIE: It was real?

MENDEL: Yes. And all around us - a big Jewish wedding celebration was going on. MY wedding. I could not stop laughing.

MAGGIE: Mendel, on that day your laughter made a choice.

MENDEL: Maggie, don't give me credit. I was only laughing, and was an embarrassment to all. (PAUSE) However, on that day, maybe Itzl's dance was born. On that day, or long before.

MAGGIE: Which is exactly why you chose to do what you did.

MENDEL: What did I do?

MAGGIE: Itzl's dance.

MENDEL: Oh.

MAGGIE: You had a suite that night?

MENDEL: In the Hotel Pierre. Such reactions it broght forth from me, Maggie, I could not begin to tell you....

MAGGIE: Sometimes I think, Mendel, that we were born with our whole life already planned, and that certain things we know, we just know. There are things we want, and things we get, and things we can't have. There's always someone standing to your right, looking to his left. But maybe, somehow, we all get taken care of.

MENDEL: Maggie, that makes a lot of sense to me, and well put.

MAGGIE: Oh.

MENDEL: It reminds me of the little Rabbis. I mean, from Itzl's angle....

MAGGIE: Yes?

MENDEL: Well, I think he really loves them. But it's not in his power to live that life.

MAGGIE: But he pays homage to them. In his own way. And they know.

MENDEL: That's what I was going to say, Maggie. Actually, I was going to say, Itzl and Tiebebe tell the truth about something, but it's not the whole truth.

MAGGIE: You're right, Mendel. It's not the whole truth. I'll tell you something. Sometimes I too am afraid to walk out on that stage, to be that shrew and night after night. All those faces seeing Tiebebe screaming. And what's underneath? It's Maggie. She would like to make a family with somebody on a regular basis, a real life, with friends and intellectual...pursuits. Books. But who can see? It's part of the truth, but not the completion. (LONG BEAT)

MENDEL: A guy goes into a delicatessen. The owner is behind the counter. "What can I do for you?" "I'd like an elephant sandwich, please." Just a minute," the owner says, "I'll see if I have it." He goes in the back, comes out. "Sorry, no elephant sandwiches." "Why not? You don't have it?" "No, we got it. I just don't want to start a new elephant for one sandwich." (Laughs)

MAGGIE: I heard that one.

MENDEL: Where 'd you hear it?

MAGGIE: From you, Mendel.

MENDEL: Oh.

MAGGIE: (Checks the time, turns on the radio. They listen to Itzl and Tiebele doing a brief commercial for kosher soap, then she turns it off.) I told you Sol called.

MENDEL: Yeah. What'd he want?

MAGGIE: Top billing. We get top billing for the transcontinental tour. Plus -

MENDEL: Top billing? What's wrong with second?

MAGGIE: We shouldn't get second. We should get top. Nine years!

MENDEL: Who said there's gonna be a tour?

MAGGIE: You're trying to kill me, Mendel. Go to Florida.

MENDEL: I will.

MAGGIE: Sol also said I could do a single turn if I want at the Palace Theatre. I'm ready.

MENDEL: Who would get second?

MAGGIE: When I'm on top?

MENDEL: No. Itzl and Tiebele.

MAGGIE: The Cohens.

MENDEL: My God! The Cohens! That incest act? It's enough to make you retire. Who is still paying to see that act? They should have put it to bed years ago!

MAGGIE: Ah, they still got stuff.

MENDEL: Stuff!

MAGGIE: You're damn right. They can pull it in like Eddie Cantor.

MENDEL: Cantor. That would be good.

MAGGIE: Good for what?

MENDEL: He's a good man.

MAGGIE: A good man is hard to find. I've been looking for nine years.

MENDEL: Don't give up. You might bump into something.

MAGGIE: Not in this room.

MENDEL: You know what you should do? You should get together with Georgie Jessel and do the phony testimonials.

MAGGIE: Your colors are showing.

MENDEL: MY colors are showing? And what about you?

MAGGIE: ME!

MENDEL: Yeah!

MAGGIE: Nine years I'm in front of you, Mendel, with my whole self! And you have never once seen me as a woman!

MENDEL: (Quietly) Maggie, you can't manufacture a thing like that. It wouldn't be authentic.

MAGGIE: Is this how you see me? A large and looming female, a shrew?

MENDEL: No.

MAGGIE: Only I can give you the confidence.

MENDEL: And only you can take it away. (A BEAT)

MAGGIE: I try very hard to control myself. I have watched you disintegrate over a beautiful woman more than once these past nine years. Do not forget Blossom Seely. Your great seduction scene in the foyer at Grossinger's. It would be December 30th, 1943.

MENDEL: Blossom Seely....

MAGGIE: How you shrank into oblivion.

MENDEL: I couldn't help it.

MAGGIE: I know. (PAUSE) So I have come to put these things into perspective, as Mendel's appreciation for the beautiful things in this world. (A BEAT)

MENDEL: Maggie, wouldn't you like to take some time off? Travel, without the pressure, see your friends? Spend some time maybe in Philadelphia....

MAGGIE: Are you referring to Dr. Paul?

MENDEL: Why not?

MAGGIE: He's not my type.

MENDEL: He's a very nice man, he cares for you, and he makes a good living.

MAGGIE: Philadelphia can't hold all of me. I'm a woman, and one who loves to be treated so, with all the good things, and in more than one city. I'm a performer. I want to travel with tip billing. I want people to know my name. When I walk into a room, Mendel, they say, "There's Maggie Ross, she's the top."

MENDEL: Well....(Puts on his tie)

MAGGIE: You heard about Miltie? Television's whirling dervish! The City of Detroit's water levels are dropping between nine and nine o five on Tuesday nights. They're waiting to go to the bathroom until his show is over.

MENDEL: My God. Miltie. It's dangerous.

MAGGIE: The figures are pouring in. He's selling televisions. Sixteen thousand sets jumped to a hundred-ninety thousand in one year - think of it!

MENDEL: I'm thinking of it.

MAGGIE: Tell me your thoughts.

MENDEL: Don't push me, Maggie.

MAGGIE: Excuse me. In the beginning we give our best friends a little prodding because we want them to stand very tall. And before we know it, we are squeezing too hard. Human beings we are, Mendel, not so tough, but we put up the big front to protect, until finally we have floated very far away from the person we were born into.

MENDEL: How do we know who we're born into?

MAGGIE: We don't. (PAUSE) I'm on a boat and it's rocking and everyone is there, Mendel, so many people, so many faces. I think I know all of them. I'm three years old and I'm lying down in the middle of the big boat and they're all getting sick with something they don't know. It's the rocking, what a strange sensation, to be thrown up and down by the water. I go to sleep and I wake up. "We have nothing to fear," I shouted, "we will have a home." I've got it all mixed up, Mendel.

MENDEL: It's all right. (PUTS ON HIS SUIT-COAT)

MAGGIE: You remind me of my father. And my father reminds me of my Grandmother. Red-headed Roni, the rage of Manhattan. She knew everybody on the Southeast tip of the island, and they all knew her. She had something to say about everything, and she was a real political. She read three newspapers a day - the New York Times, the Post, and The Daily News. And she could play the horses.

MENDEL: And she would win.

MAGGIE: In the morning she'd get dressed to the nines - mink coat, red hair piled high, nylon stockings, a silk garter. And Joe would say, "Vere you goink?" "To buy a pocketbook." Out she'd go, up Fifth Avenue, over to 34th, right into Macy's. She would browse for five minutes, just in case Joe was following her, then out she'd go to hail a cabbie, and off to the races.

MENDEL: Tell me something - she handicapped by herself?

MAGGIE: Sure. And she always came home with a bundle. Joe was at work and she'd stuff that bundle underneath the mattress with all the other bundles. "You can't trust the bank." And I don't blame her. The years added up and so did the money.

MENDEL: (About to leave) Well, Maggie - is the kid gonna take care of the luggage?

MAGGIE: So what does a person do for all their life, Mendel?

MENDEL: They learn about it.

MAGGIE: The years passed and her beauty faded and she was an old lady with a painted face. Joe just shriveled up.

MENDEL: (Getting his hat) Maggie, I gotta go. The kid is taking care of our things?

MAGGIE: Certainly.

MENDEL: Good night, then.

MAGGIE: Have a good night.

MENDEL: (Pausing) Oh, you're gonna see Sol? Tell him that I'll do a final tour.

MAGGIE: A final tour?

MENDEL: The last one.

MAGGIE: The last one?

MENDEL: That's what I said.

MAGGIE: That's what you said. Is that what you mean? Be in New York a week from Tuesday. We'll have two days.

MENDEL: I'll be there. I have an appointment at the track in Hialeah and then I'm taking the train up the coast, and -

MAGGIE: And don't forget your passport.

MENDEL: I won't forget.

MAGGIE: And bring underwear.

MENDEL: I'll bring it. What's gonna be the first stop after New York City?

MAGGIE: London.

MENDEL: Good. London. I miss that town.

MAGGIE: We'll work out the turn with Itzl dangling in heaven.

MENDEL: Okay. How about the one with the top secret holiness store in Florida?

MAGGIE: No good.

MENDEL: Why not? We haven't tried it?

MAGGIE: Trust me, it stinks.

MENDEL: I like that one. (CLOWNING) I like that one! (JUMPING UP AND DOWN) I LIKE THAT ONE!

MAGGIE: (Laughing) Get da hell outa here.

MENDEL: (Turns, trips himself, waves, exits.)

MUSIC. DIM OUT ON MAGGIE, WHO SMILES

THE END

6/3/83