

Early evening. CARL is standing in the middle of the room. MARY enters from the bedroom, carrying her shoes. She is getting dressed, will put on the shoes, belt, scarf, etc. during the scene.

MARY: Gabby scares me. I don't know if she scares me or if she's freaking out and imagining it: someone keeps following her.

CARL: Man or woman?

MARY: Oh, she's a very sweet girl. You should indulge her sometimes. She's scared.

CARL: I just asked if it was a man or woman. [CARL crosses to MARY to zip her dress.]

MARY: A man but not like that. Oldish, very distinguished, she thought. Very unlike a rapist. [CARL has slipped his arms around her.] Is your watch right? I've got to split. Hat, gloves, purse, shoes, what?

CARL: Keys, list . . .

MARY: What list?

CARL: Did you have a list?

MARY: No list.

CARL: Umbrella?

MARY: It wouldn't dare. Purse, scarf, shoes, gloves, keys, no list . . . [CARL crosses to the closet and gets MARY's coat.]

CARL: I thought it was a party for someone's birth . . . MARY [crosses to the desk.]: Right! Right . . . present!

Thank God, that's all I'd need. [MARY takes it from the desk, putting it into her purse. CARL follows to the desk.] Present. Keys in purse. Pencil for bridge scores . . . Anyone else we'd make it during the week, but Sue works. If you'd let me know you weren't going in today. Now, you're not going to forget to pick up Ellie at five-forty. She hates walking home carrying her ballet slippers.

CARL: Check.

MARY: She loves the class; she just doesn't like the school. Take her night bag, drop her at Bunny's,

SERENADING LOUIE

by Lanford Wilson

Serenading Louie was first performed at the Washington Theater Club in Washington, D.C. The play was reworked and subsequently performed by the Circle Repertory Company. A very successful revival was produced by Second Stage at the Public Theater in New York City.

The crises of being in your thirties—the careers on hold, the suffocating blandness of suburbia, the marriages that fall short of their expectations, the yearning for youth, for emotional connection—is the subject matter of *Serenading Louie*. The play is a portrait of two couples: Alex and Gabby, and Carl and Mary. Carl is a former athlete, a man who sits on his anger, who is willing to let things slide. For example, he cannot confront his wife, Mary, about the affair she is having with his accountant. He secretly hopes it will burn out, and Mary will come back to him. The following scene is a marvelous exercise in subtext—exploring the meaning beneath the words being spoken. Carl has stayed home from work, so he's there as Mary is dressing for her rendezvous with their accountant. Mary, of course, doesn't let on where she's going. What's more, Carl doesn't let on he knows about the whole affair. What the characters say, floating on top of what they want to say, mean to say, but avoid saying, makes the scene both poignant and funny.

I've got her PJ's and all her paraphernalia already in it.

CARL: I know, I know.

MARY: And you'll remember to turn off the oven when the bell rings.

CARL [*in a thicker mood than she*]: I'll not forget.

MARY: Chicken pot pie; it's no good burned. You're going to forget, aren't you?

CARL [*smiling*]: No, no, what's to forget. The bell rings, turn off the oven.

MARY: There's bologna and cheese in the fridge if you forget. It should be time by now.

CARL: You're going to pick up Sue?

MARY: Sue and Alice; I'm late, you're right. [MARY *crosses to the front door.*]

CARL [*frowning, reluctantly*]: Honey, I'd like to . . . [CARL *halts, looking at her. She looks to him. All movement and sound are arrested for a count of fifteen.*]

MARY: [A rapid, overlapping exchange now] What, doll?

CARL: Talk, you know.

MARY: I know . . . we will. Nothing's wrong is there? [MARY *crosses to the living room.*]

CARL: No, no.

MARY: With that Atlanta business?

CARL: No, no.

MARY [*still lightly*]: What is it?

CARL: No, no, it's nothing.

MARY: We're running all over, we're never home together, I know . . .

CARL: It's nothing, Mary, I just get . . . edgy . . . it'll pass.

MARY [*She crosses to CARL, maneuvering him to the sofa.*]: I know, baby. It'll pass. [She sits, smiling.] Sit a second.

CARL: It's OK, no, it'll . . . [She pulls him down to sit beside her, relaxes.]

CARL: No, I never know when I'm going to be here; even Ellie, with her new schedule . . .

MARY: Oh, but she loves it . . .

CARL: No, no, I think it's great. She's a little lady . . . a little goddess.

MARY: I don't think Ellie would respond well to being worshipped. I know I wouldn't.

CARL: Sure you do.

MARY: Do you like the shadow puppet?

CARL: Yeah. He's cute; it's cute.

MARY: A little fierce, but I thought he was amusing. He's about a thousand years old . . . well, old in any case, they said. He's parchment.

CARL: They had puppet shows back then? And we think we're so advanced.

MARY: I wouldn't think they'd be much like ours. I mean it's not Punch and Judy. I think it's more closely related to religious stories, like for children, but not just . . .

CARL: Bible school.

MARY: Well, it wouldn't be "Bible." Their equivalent . . . "Bhagavad-Gita Illustrated" or whatever. . . . *Bible school?* Did you do that?

CARL [*laughing*]: No, I don't think I managed . . . that was summertime, would have interfered with softball practice, but Sunday School . . . I went to that every Sunday, bright and early. Well, nine o'clock.

MARY: I can't imagine. What did you do?

CARL: What did . . .

MARY: What was it like? Did you like it?

CARL: Oh, yeah . . . I liked . . . Well, there wasn't any question of not liking . . . it was this thing you did. We, ah . . . what was it . . . ? We all had these . . . our own . . . like pulp-paper quarterlies—thin little magazines that we were taught from—with orange and black illustrations of young Jesus, aged eleven, in the temple astonishing the . . .

MARY: Whoever. Right . . .

CARL: And we were taught by the judge's daughter or his son or some such, and they were seventeen,

probably, and knew all the psalms by heart. Especially the twenty-third. "Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me . . ." [*He sighs. MARY is polite attention personified.*] Oh, God . . . and uh . . . when it was someone's birthday . . . their ninth or tenth, we sang: "Ebert's had a birthday, we're so glad. Let us see how many he has had." [*MARY, charmed, has been laughing at this.*]

MARY: Oh, that's wonderful. Ebert?

CARL: Well, I just picked Ebert at random, there were some pretty incredible names. We had a boy named Dillard and twin girls called Ima Daisy and Ura Pansy . . .

MARY: Ura Pansy . . . no . . . nobody would saddle a kid with . . .

CARL: Swear to God. Ima Daisy and Ura Pansy Maggard. That kinda ruins it, doesn't it?

MARY: How can you remember that? How do you remember that tune?

CARL: How do you forget it? I learned it before "Happy Birthday to You." And Ebert had brought pennies and he dropped them into his round cardboard Quaker Oats box with that very severe Quaker in this flat hat . . . and the pennies hit the bottom and bounced like dropping on a drum. Or it might have been—that's funny—a milk bottle with tin foil over the cap—I remember them both—and in that case they jingled around in the glass. [*Bear*] I can hear them both. Anyway, as Ebert . . .

MARY: [*laughing*]: Ebert.

CARL: Well, or Dillard. We sang, "How old are you?" and Dillard dropped his pennies and we all counted. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Up to eight or nine, or sometimes very dramatically, "Ten!" and we all . . . you know, the boys . . . watched those

nine years go into the bottle and longed to be twenty-one and have a draft card . . .

MARY: I can't imagine . . .

CARL: Or at least sixteen and have our driver's license, and my Aunt Grace used to say, "Don't wish your life away." Then when the teacher, the mayor's daughter, or sheriff's son, had a birthday, he played too and . . .

MARY: Of course.

CARL: . . . and that was an Event that lasted forever because he had to drop eighteen drumming pennies into that—

MARY: Or the other . . . the milk bottle.

CARL: Right. And it seemed to last half the Sunday School period.

MARY: I'm sure.

CARL: That was an Event . . . kids came from the other classrooms to watch. Everything was an Event then. The smallest thing that happened was an Event.

MARY: Of course.

CARL: And we don't have those anymore. Why is that? What's happened? [*He slides from his mood, back closer to his first one.*]

MARY [*still quizzical*]: What?

CARL: I don't know. That wars and deaths, birthdays, Easter, even Christmas. Nothing gets to me like that now. [*A slight pause*] Things go by and nothing reaches us, does it? Nothing's an Event anymore.

MARY: Ummm. [*Pause. She jingles the keys.*]

CARL [*more or less coming out of it for her benefit*]: You've got to go.

MARY: Oh, I know. [*Getting up*] Now, I'm not going to tell you about the pie again—if it burns, there's bologna and cheese.

CARL: Turn off the oven; pick up Ellie at five-forty. Take her overnight bag . . . Drop her at Bunny's.

MARY: You'll be all right. Can we go out tomorrow

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night? Would you like that? I think I would. Just us?

CARL: Great. Saturday night . . .

MARY: Dinner and maybe a movie . . . I'd like that . . . we can call Betty to stay with Ellen. OK? I'd love that.

CARL: It's a deal.

MARY: OK, now, I've got to run. If the girls call, tell them I've left. [*She kisses him on the top of the head.*] OK?

CARL: OK. Right.

MARY [*opening the door*]: Bye-bye, sweetheart.

CARL: Bye-bye. [*MARY leaves. CARL crosses to the sofa, his smile fades, he looks down to the floor with a worried look; after a count of ten, he looks up to the audience with a sense of urgency. The buzzer sounds in the kitchen, offstage. CARL turns his head to the sound.*]