SUNDAY SAUCE

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Sunday Sauce
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RUNNING TIME: 75 minutes

SYNOPSIS: Giancarlo has died. Anna and Emilia run to Tess's side to help her through this difficult time. But Tess is amazingly calm. Too calm for an Italian. Is the make-up of a family blood and bones? Pasta and opera? If you're Italian – it probably is.

The play was written to address the waste of "fine wine" actresses (over 40) that are too often absent on the stage these days.

CAST: 5f ***
TESS (f): 60's – who knows – 50's? maybe even 70; the matriarch and the oldest
ANNA (f) 40-60 (probably, maybe) the youngest sister, harbors a grudge against Emilia - adores TESS, 8-12 years younger than her sisters
EMILIA (f) (50's-70) – a little younger than TESS); lets go of nothing
ANGELA (f) (early- mid 30's*) Emilia's daughter; sure-footed even in deep emotion; may be just a wee bit like her mother - which she will deny; very fit.
CHIARA (f) (Late 20's to early 30's*) Anna's daughter; insecure about all – her intake of carbs, her role in the family, her need to not be her mother.

*Ages can be played with as long as the order makes sense. The daughters should be 20-25 years younger than their mothers. So depending on the age of the sisters – the daughters could easily be in their 40's. Even if the Sisters appear to be in their 70's – the lines about their age should remain the same. They have lied so long about their age – they have no idea how old they really are.

**When Italians first emigrated to the USA, they were listed as non-white. You can certainly play with the racial make-up of the cast.

***The characters make comments about their weight and the weight of others. This is a reflection of how they view themselves and not a physical trait to be followed.

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TIME: Early spring; late morning following Giancarlo's cremation

SETTING: TESS'S kitchen. They kitchen is well appointed and used. It is the center of the home. One exit leads to the dining room and living room. Another exit takes us to the front hallway and the bedrooms. And an upstage exit leads to a covered porch and the stairs to the basement.

MUSIC: The music referenced is in public domain on youtube. You are welcome to change it – but do keep it within the realm of opera.

ACT 1
SCENE 1: A spring weekend. 1 p.m.
SCENE 2: Same day, 4:30 p.m.
Optional Intermission
ACT 2
SCENE 3: Same day, 10 p.m.
SCENE 4: A few minutes after Scene 3 ends

SUNDAY SAUCE

AT RISE we are in TESS'S home. Verdi's "Pace, Pace" aria from *La Forza del Destino* is heard. We're in a lovely, well-used kitchen with all appliances and a small kitchen table and chairs. There are large, taped-up boxes piled everywhere. Some china and books and loose kitchenware are waiting to be boxed up. If a kitchen is hard to manage onstage, you could use the dining room.

The room has doors into an enclosed porch and the basement.

On the kitchen table is a CD player. TESS enters on a mission. She is well dressed and has a stethoscope around her neck. She carries a coat rack to the kitchen. She digs out a man's robe from the dishwasher and dresses the coatrack. She hears the aria and listens. She stops and breathes in the aroma of the robe. As the music plays, she holds the coat rack and sways to it. There's a short, sweet dance. – a waltz? A tango? She then takes out some men's slippers from the freezer and a man's golf hat from the oven and dresses the coat rack. She may have to tape the slippers on to a pair of pants but she is determined and does so. She retrieves a man's scarf from "somewhere" and puts the finishing touches on her coat-rack-person. TESS listens to the aria.

TESS

PAPA! Quiet!

(The aria may swell a little bit. TESS listens.)

Stop! Go find Gene. I don't need you right now.

(The aria fades away. TESS addresses her coatrack.)

TESS (cont'd)

Gene! I am ready. Remember your promise? You are coming, right? That "car" fire? That was not a good idea. I prefer to be cremated *after* I am dead. Better to let me have a heart attack. You can arrange that. After all, you were a cardiologist. The sauce is ready for your celebration. The house is boxed up. I've taken care of everything. Let's go to the porch. You always liked being there. We can talk there. It's more private.

(TESS turns on the CD player. A CD teaching Spanish blares throughout the house.

TESS exits with the coat rack onto the porch and closes the door as ANNA knocks on the door.)

ANNA

Tess! TESS!

(ANNA rushes in. She carries a small suitcase which she puts aside. She is well-dressed.)

ANNA

TESSSSS!

(TESS enters from the porch. They speak loudly – above the sound of the CD.)

ANNA (cont'd)

What's going on?

TESS

What?

ANNA

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THE KITCHEN?

TESS

Speak up, Anna! You always mumbled.

(ANNA turns off the CD Player.)

ANNA

What are you doing? Teaching the neighborhood to speak Spanish?

TESS

What?

ANNA

TESS! Turn on your hearing aid! What's with the CD?

(TESS adjusts her hearing aid.)

TESS

The boys found someone to help me. She doesn't speak English. They gave me the CD so I could speak to her.

ANNA
So, you turned the CD on and your hearing aid off?

TESS
It gave me a headache. You're early. Go away.

ANNA
I want to help you. Look at this place!

TESS
Va tutto bene! *(Translation: It's all good.)* I've been working for hours.

ANNA
To pack up your home?

TESS
I have my reasons.

ANNA
How are you?

TESS
I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?

ANNA
Because your husband was cremated this morning and then your car burned up! How did the brakes catch fire?

TESS
Who knows? My husband was cremated and he decided to take the car with him!

ANNA
Tess? The stethoscope?

TESS
I like to check if I'm still breathing.

(The aria "Pace, Pace" is again heard in the background. ANNA and TESS hear it.)

ANNA
Papa's here.

TESS
All day. I don't need Papa. I need Gene. Go, Papa. Look for Gene.

(The music fades out.)

TESS (cont'd)
I'm next. Gene's coming for me. Gene tried to grab me in the car by setting the brakes on fire but Gene, Junior thought he had to save me. I'll be joining Gene, Senior soon.

ANNA
Don't talk like that!

TESS
Anna, it's time to let your sister go. You're old enough to be on your own.

ANNA
I still need you.

TESS
For what? You have your family. You're eating well.

ANNA
What do you mean – eating well?

TESS
Nothing. It looks good on you.

ANNA
Are you saying I'm fat?

TESS
According to the fashion magazines, we're all fat.

ANNA
According to Weight Watchers, I am at my goal weight.

(A knock on the door is heard. The music fades.)

EMILIA
Tess? TESS! Are you in there?

TESS
M'Mona Mia! Can't a person be alone? COME IN, EMILIA!

(EMILIA enters.)

EMILIA
You shouldn't leave the door unlocked. You know how the neighborhood is.

TESS

So lock it.

EMILIA

Why couldn't you wait for me? I had to walk alone.

ANNA

I wanted a few minutes to myself. I wanted … quiet.

EMILIA

We could have walked together quietly. I can be quiet. It's safer in a group. – *M'Mona Mia! Were you robbed again?*

TESS

Of course not. This is the way I want it.

EMILIA

The dinner guests can't see this mess – I'll start/

TESS

DON'T.

EMILIA

There's no place for them to sit.

TESS

Good. Then they won't stay long.

EMILIA

I can't look at this/

TESS

/Don't touch a thing!

EMILIA

The china will get dirty!

TESS

I freed the plates from the stuffy cabinet. They'll thank me.

EMILIA

This is bone china – the good stuff. I'm putting them away.

TESS

Touch my china and I'll skin your bones!

EMILIA

Is that how you talk to your sister who is here to help? And I haven't forgotten about what you said to me last week. I'm only talking to you 'cause Gene died. *Mi dispiace, Gene! So sorry! So sorry!*

TESS

Emilia! Pull yourself together!

EMILIA

Such a good man! Gene! Poor Gene!

TESS

It's all right, Emilia! Get a hold of yourself!

(EMILIA breaks down and sobs.)

TESS (cont'd)

Emilia STOP! What's wrong with this? My husband died and I'm comforting my sister!

ANNA

Calm down! Tess doesn't need this today!

EMILIA

I'm showing respect!

TESS

Tell her she doesn't need to show so much respect. Peace and quiet – that's what I need. I probably won't get any until I'm dead – which if I'm lucky will be soon.

ANNA

Stop saying that!

TESS

I'm grieving. Nobody listens to a grieving widow! It's the same as being dead!

ANNA

Enough about being dead!

EMILIA

She's not the only one having a hard day.

TESS

Is Emilia speaking to me?

EMILIA

She should know that other people have hard days also.

TESS

Santo's been gone for ten years. Enough with your hard life!

EMILIA

It's not Santo. It's Kiki.

TESS

Mother Mary, who is Kiki?

ANNA

Her cat.

TESS

My Gene was cremated today and she's moaning about a cat?

EMILIA

Kiki – is waiting to die.

TESS

We're all waiting to die.

ANNA

Stop the death talk!

TESS

Wait. I thought Kiki died years ago.

EMILIA

That was Kiki One. Now I have Kiki Two. And Kiki Two is sick and is going to be put to sleep today. Angela picked him up yesterday.

TESS

I can't deal with dead cats. Can we not talk about dead cats?

EMILIA

Ask her how the car is.

ANNA

Ask her yourself.

EMILIA

She's not talking to me.

TESS

I'm talking. So be quiet.

(Pause.)

EMILIA

So … how's the car?

TESS

The front is burnt to a crisp.

EMILIA

You're lucky.

TESS

Gene and his car burned up today! How is that lucky?

EMILIA

You could have burned along with the brakes in the car!

TESS

Then I'd be with Gene. Dead. Happy.

EMILIA

And we'd be having a double funeral. And Tess, you should have buried Gene properly. Next to Mama. If you had burned with the car, I would have buried you.

TESS

If I had burned along with the car, I'd be nothing but ashes. How could you bury me?

ANNA

Would you all stop going on about being burnt?

TESS

Gene didn't want to be buried. I honored his wishes. Isn't that what you're supposed to do?

EMILIA

Mama would never approve.

(EMILIA starts to straighten up – putting away dishes, silverware, pots – she is a force of nature about cleaning and cannot keep still.)

TESS

Mama does not have a say in my husband's final wishes! She can take it up with him now. If they're in the same place. If atheists can be in heaven. *Stop putting things away!*

EMILIA
She didn't mean that, God! It's just the grief talking!

TESS
Leave my kitchen alone! Let's just get through today. Tomorrow, we can stop talking to each other and everything will be normal.

(A snippet of "Pace, Pace" is heard again. ALL listen.)

TESS (cont'd)
I told you to go away!

EMILIA
Don't yell at Papa.

ANNA
He's trying to comfort you.

TESS
He is supposed to be looking for Gene.

EMILIA
You're wearing his stethoscope.

TESS
I know. (Beat.) I'm waiting to stop breathing. I'm next.

EMILIA
No. I'm next. I was widowed early. It's a sign that I'll go first.

TESS
Gene wants me. He tried to get me by burning up the car. He'll find another way. I'm ready. See? I'm bringing him his stethoscope.

ANNA
You know… I could get hit by a bus tomorrow and be dead before all of you!

EMILIA
What do you know? Nothing!

ANNA

I know stuff!

TESS

I'm turning my hearing aid off.

ANNA

I'm sorry. We won't fight.

EMILIA

Who's fighting? Any more coffee?

TESS

It's there.

EMILIA

Where? Who can find anything?

TESS

Where it always is.

EMILIA

Biscotti?

TESS

Try the tin.

(EMILIA finds the biscotti.)

EMILIA

These are stale.

TESS

All biscotti are stale. They're baked twice to be stale. That's why you dunk them. Let me have one.

(EMILIA takes a box or plates off of a chair and gives them to ANNA to hold. She sits.)

ANNA

Don't get me full of dust! It's my designer outfit. I'm wearing it tonight.

EMILIA

So you brush the dust off! Where are the boys?

TESS

Golfing – in memory of their father.

EMILIA
When Santo died, my girls wouldn't leave my side. You shouldn't be alone.

TESS
Who's alone?.

EMILIA
Junior and Vince should be here.

TESS
They're boys. They don't smother you like girls do.

EMILIA
My girls don't smother me. Do your girls smother you, Anna?

ANNA
They don't come near me.

TESS
The boys were here all morning. That's enough. They're not much good in the kitchen.

ANNA
That's not true. Junior does his frittatas every holiday.

TESS
So, should we have a feast day in his honor because my eldest cracks a few eggs on Easter Sunday? That's not cooking. Cooking is every day. It's a slow simmer. It's Sunday sauce.

EMILIA
American boys don't cook. Not like their uncles – Dominic, God rest his soul –

(All bless themselves.)

EMILIA
- could make gravy. And he grew his own tomatoes – just like my Santo.

ANNA
And Franco made the best roasts.

EMILIA
God rest his soul -

(All bless themselves.)

EMILIA (cont'd)
Franco didn't cook.

ANNA
Did!

EMILIA
Not! You're wrong as usual.

ANNA
Right!

EMILIA
Wrong!

ANNA
Right!

TESS
Basta, you two! What are you, six-years old?

EMILIA
She started it! Tess, do you remember Franco cooking anything?

TESS
Who knows? That was years ago. Let our brothers rest in peace.

ANNA
They're all resting in peace.

EMILIA
That's because we do all the work. It keeps you alive.

TESS
So, who's the smart one? The one who constantly works? Or the ones resting in peace after never lifting a finger?

EMILIA
Mama and I did everything. Our brothers – they did nothing. Like you, Anna – you were the baby. Never had to do a thing.

ANNA
I admit it. I was spoiled. With you and Tess being so much older/

EMILIA

/Fa Nabla! *(Translation: Go to Naples!)* A few years! Two maybe!

ANNA

Ten! How old are you?

EMILIA

Fifty.

ANNA

I'm fifty and I'm the baby!

EMILIA

So maybe I'm fifty-one. Who can keep track?

TESS

If Emilia's fifty-one, then I'm fifty two.

ANNA

Does anyone know how old you are?

TESS

No.

ANNA

Did Gene?

TESS

We never discussed age. The marriage worked. Nothing else matters.

EMILIA

What's your suitcase doing here?

ANNA

The boys leave tonight. So I'll stay with Tess. In case she needs anything.

EMILIA

We're right up the block if she needs anything.

ANNA

I came here to be with Tess.

EMILIA

You've already gotten the sheets dirty at my house. Why stay in another bed and get more sheets dirty? It's a waste of energy.

ANNA

What do you care?

EMILIA

There will be wo separate people one block away from each other washing your dirty sheets after you leave! You should just sleep on one set!

ANNA

I'LL BRING YOUR SHEET'S DOWN HERE AND SLEEP ON THEM AND WASH THEM BEFORE I LEAVE!

TESS

The hearing aid is going off.

EMILIA

Don't be so stubborn!

ANNA

You're the one who's thick-in-the-head! Always obsessing over cleaning.

EMILIA

I got that trait from Mama! I lived with her. I watched her when she was seventy - scrubbing floors, beating rugs/

ANNA

/loco – never leaving your childhood home. Of course, we all set up house within four blocks of one another. That's crazy, too.

EMILIA

Someone had to stay and take care of things. I took care of Mama, Santo, my girls. And I didn't run away to that new state of yours – Michigan –

ANNA

Minnesota –

EMILIA

Same thing. That state that's so cold you wear lots of big sweaters and let yourself get fat!

ANNA

I'm not as chubby as you!

EMILIA

Look at these arms! I exercise. A soup can in each hand – I do my circles. And feel my calves/

ANNA

/No thank you/

EMILIA

/Feel them!

(ANNA reluctantly does so.)

EMILIA

That's from going up and down the stairs thirty times a day. I should be on those commercials for the calf-master.

ANNA

Thigh-master.

EMILIA

Same thing.

ANNA

Not!

EMILIA

Take it from me, Anna. You should use it. And it tones your butt. Which could use toning.

(ANNA squeezes EMILIA's calves and EMILIA grabs ANNA by the top of her suit.)

EMILIA

Runaway! Mama liked people staying put! Tess and I stayed put.

ANNA

Mama moved from Italy to America! How's that staying put?

EMILIA

Mama would not like that move you made. If Steven was Italian – he would have stayed!

ANNA

Don't go there, Emilia! Steven's a good man.

EMILIA

Yes – he's a good man who doesn't understand why you should stay next to blood. And your Tina – she didn't marry an Italian either!

ANNA

What does that have to do with anything? Both your girls married Italians and now Angela's divorced!

EMILIA

But she's divorced from an Italian man!

(EMILIA starts to put plates away.)

TESS

Emilia! Stop! Don't touch a thing or I'll cook you down to scrap and feed you to the dogs!

(TESS starts to exit.)

TESS (cont'd)

I'm going to rest my eyes. You two have given me a headache. Go back up the block and leave me in peace. And do not – DO NOT – go on the porch. If you go there - I will put a hex on you!

(TESS exits.)

ANNA

Go.

EMILIA

You heard her – she told you to go up the block.

ANNA

She was talking to you!

EMILIA

You!

(EMILIA makes a move to the back porch. ANNA blocks her.)

ANNA

What are you doing?

EMILIA

Don't you want to know what she has out there? Our sister is not in her right mind. She's wearing a stethoscope as a necklace! How can we help her if we don't know what's going on?

ANNA

If you take one step onto that porch – I'll – take you down! I don't bother with hexes! That can take days! I'll go for immediate results!

EMILIA

Basta! *(Translation: Enough!)* I'm worried about Tess. She's not acting normal.

ANNA

Her husband's dead. *That's* not normal for her.

EMILIA

It will be. You don't think so at first – but you get used to things. The house is always clean. I like that.

ANNA

You loved Santo! You tried to throw yourself into his grave!

EMILIA

And you should have let me!

ANNA

You'd be dead.

EMILIA

But I'd be with Santo! Although I never loved Santo more than after he passed. I'm going to check on the gravy. She added a lot of salt yesterday. Might need some vermouth to cut it.

ANNA

Do not touch her sauce!

EMILIA

I make the best you know. Everyone says my gravy is the best. I'm going to check on it –

ANNA

NO! You are not to touch her sauce!

EMILIA

She didn't skim it enough yesterday. Do you want to serve sauce that separates?

ANNA

That's her sauce to honor Gene. *You are not to go near it!*

EMILIA

What's the matter with you?

ANNA

I am protecting her sauce!

EMILIA

I'm helping her sauce!

ANNA

Do not go near her sauce!

(EMILIA grabs a knife from the counter.)

EMILIA

Out of my way –

ANNA

Are you threatening me with a knife?

EMILIA

I'll cut your heart out!

ANNA

You're going to murder me over sauce?

(ANNA also grabs a knife and brandishes it. TESS appears.)

TESS

What are you doing?

ANNA

I'm protecting your sauce!

TESS

If you kill each other, I'm not going to the funerals.

EMILIA

What?

TESS

If one of you dies today, there will be no funeral. I won't make sauce for either of you.

(The doorbell rings.)

TESS (cont'd)

I have to answer the door. If you kill each other - I won't visit either one of you in jail.

(TESS goes to answer the door. We hear greetings as ANGELA and CHIARA enter. CHIARA (ANNA'S daughter) has two bakery boxes. ANGELA (EMILIA'S daughter) carries a leg of lamb in roasting pan. They enter and stare at their mothers who are still wielding knives.)

TESS (cont'd)
Your mothers! Insano!

ANGELA
Ma! Are you nuts? Put the knife down.

EMILIA
I wasn't doing anything.

ANNA
She threatened to cut my heart out!

CHIARA
It looks like you're defending yourself just fine. No wonder I'm in therapy.

EMILIA
Anna? What kind of mother are you that your daughter needs therapy?

ANGELA
We're all in therapy, Ma. Except Aunt Tessie's boys. They're in denial.

(EMILIA and ANNA put their knives down to check out the food their daughters brought.)

EMILIA
What's all this? Tess has food. I came down and cooked with her all day yesterday. Anna brought nothing. But that's to be expected. Anna never thinks of others.

ANNA
I just got off an airplane! You wouldn't let me cook anything! You made me do the dishes all day!

ANGELA
Look at this! A leg of lamb. Isn't it gorgeous? It's the Sophia Loren of leg of lambs! It just needs ten minutes in the oven to warm it finish it off.

(EMILIA and TESS peek into the roaster.)

EMILIA

Look at the size of that thing!

TESS

Mutton!

ANGELA

It's not mutton. I went to the butcher and told him what I needed and he said this was the perfect size!

TESS and EMILIA

Mutton.

TESS

It's fine. You'll learn. The guests won't know it's mutton. They're in mourning.

ANGELA

It's not mutton!

CHIARA

Cannoli and cookies.

TESS

That's nice, dear. My Gene liked his tiramisu. But you didn't know. Since you moved to Montana.

CHIARA

Minnesota. And Uncle Gene's not here – and – well – it's hard to get real cannoli in Minnesota – they make them with whipped cream –

TESS

Whipped cream!

CHIARA

I know! That's why I wanted to buy some/

EMILIA

/So you could eat them!

CHIARA

Just one! The boys will like them.

TESS

If you say so. You look good, Chiara. Put on a little weight.

CHIARA

Not since last night! You saw me last night!

TESS

It's the clothes then – you looked better last night.

ANGELA

Ma! I have good news! It's Kiki!

EMILIA

My poor Kiki! She's resting comfortably in cat-heaven, right?

ANGELA

Actually, she's home. The technician read her x-ray wrong. She's right as rain. A little antibiotic and her infection will be cleared. There was no spot. I dropped her off on the way here. You can see her later.

EMILIA

But – I said good-bye. I took her around the house and let her look out of every window for the last time. We looked at her favorite tree where the birds nest. She meowed. We said good-bye to her favorite chair and her favorite pillow. She purred. I can't go through that again!

ANGELA

I thought you'd be happy she was alive! I thought you loved her.

EMILIA

I did love her! And then you took her away and I cried and I cleaned up all the fur which was everywhere. If I saw that little weasel technician, I'd throw some curses at him!

ANGELA

Do you want me to take Kiki home with me?

EMILIA

No! She'd pine away for me. I just think you should keep your promises. Where're the cookies?

TESS

Here. Have some.

EMILIA

No pignoli?

CHIARA

I got an assortment.

EMILIA
You have to watch the bakers. They sneak in a lot of the cheap ones and forget to give you the pignoli.

ANNA
I think it's nice you two brought food. Even if your aunts don't think so.

EMILIA
It's nice. Did I say it wasn't nice? I'm just trying to teach her how to order in a bakery. You never taught her.

TESS
The cookies are good. They're from Uncle Gene's favorite bakery. Could've used some biscotti. Emilia says mine are stale.

EMILIA
We should have some biscotti di cosuolo. For the guests from the old country.

CHIARA
We can run back to the bakery and get some!

TESS
No need. I made enough food. You don't have to buy anything.

ANGELA
I'll just make room in the fridge.

TESS
No! I'll – do all the arranging.

ANGELA
No big deal.

TESS
Stop! I like my fridge arranged a certain way. I don't want anyone in there.

ANGELA
Whoa! Have at it!

CHIARA
I think I need a cannoli. Laced with scotch.

ANGELA
Are you sure you have everything – antipasto, pasta, my lamb, Chiara's dessert, coffee – milk! You never have milk for the coffee!

TESS
Everybody drinks black coffee. Nobody likes American.

ANGELA
But we should have some just in case –

TESS
No one uses milk!

CHIARA
I do! I think I'll just run to the store and get some!

ANGELA
Good idea! I'll help.

CHIARA
I can carry a quart of milk by myself.

EMILIA
You two go together. The neighborhood is not so good now.

ANGELA
Be right back.

(ANGELA and CHIARA exit. TESS, EMILIA and ANNA just stare at one another.)

EMILIA
She always does that. Blows in and out and then she can say she visited her mother.

TESS
Did you see the size of that leg?

EMILIA
Mutton.

ANNA
It's nice – that they brought things.

TESS
We don't need it. If they're trying to be helpful – let them polish silver – set the table. They don't need to bring food. How long have they been coming to this house? When have they left hungry? Look at all this stuff! I can't find my stuff with all their stuff!

ANNA

Let me help.

TESS

Hold on. I'm looking for something. It got pushed in the back.

(TESS brings out a large covered bowl.)

TESS (cont'd)

Look! This is for us. I was going to have it tonight when I was alone – but you're my sisters. You won't tell.

ANNA

Tell? What do you have? Illegal substances?

TESS

You'll see. I'll get them in the oven – it will take the chill off. Peek!

EMILIA

Ohhhh! They're beautiful!

TESS

They're not the cheap, fatty ones you flaunted at me in the A&P.

EMILIA

Those were on sale!

TESS

I bought them to flavor the sauce – but after – I couldn't bear to throw them away. And I thought – I can do this now. Gene didn't like it – but he's not here to stop me. I'll make him so mad, he'll return to get me. Aren't they magnificent?

EMILIA

They're the best part of any Italian meal.

ANNA

Shall we?

TESS

Aspetta!

(They hear ANGELA and CHIARA returning.)

TESS (cont'd)

Mama in Heaven! What are they doing back?

EMILIA

Hide them!

TESS

I am!

ANNA

Behind the lamb.

(CHIARA and ANGELA enter. The three sisters shove the bowl in the fridge, slam the door and guard the fridge.)

ANGELA

Don't you look like three canary-eating cats! What's going on?

TESS

We're – just – rearranging. What are you doing back so soon?

ANGELA

We sat in the car and we thought –

CHIARA

We did leave rather abruptly –

ANGELA

And we came to help -

CHIARA

So what can we do?

EMILIA

Polish the silver!

TESS

And then set the table! And here – I have boxes – we're boxing up everything in the kitchen. The china goes to Anita, the tablecloth to Francesca – here – I have a list.

CHIARA

But – Aunt Tess – you'll still need this stuff.

TESS

No. I won't. Partire! *(Translation: Go!)*

ANGELA

Come on, Chiara. We came here to be indentured servants. We should have gotten that drink.

(CHIARA and ANGELA exit into the dining room.)

ANNA

That was close.

EMILIA

So when do we get our treat?

TESS

After dinner. When we're alone and no one can see us. Anna, take the bowl down to the basement fridge. Then we won't get caught. Hurry!

ANNA

I'm going, I'm going.

(ANNA retrieves the bowl and exits into the basement.)

EMILIA

What's next?

TESS

Time to slowly warm the sauce. Help me with the pot. It's heavy.

EMILIA

Should've had the girls do it.

TESS

Too risky.

EMILIA

Did you add a touch of nutmeg? You never remember to do that.

TESS

Nutmeg is for the Ragu not Bolognese!

EMILIA

It's for both!

TESS

It's my sauce for Gene. My sauce! Just help me get the pot on the stove.

(They lift the huge pot of sauce from the fridge and they hear "Pace, Pace." They place the pot on the counter and TESS moves forwards and listens.)

TESS (cont'd)
Gene? Are you here? Are you coming for me? Gene?

EMILIA
It's still Papa, Tess.

TESS
I know. What's Papa doing here? *He's been gone forty years!* Papa! Go find Gene. **Tell him to keep his promise! I'm ready.**

(Music crescendos as TESS looks for GENE as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

(AT RISE, sauce is simmering on the stove, the lasagna is in the oven and there may be some other food items around - a salad, bread. ANGELA and CHIARA are sipping wine, boxing up china and folding napkins.)

ANGELA
I remember this china. We had decades of eating off this china every Christmas and Easter. I wonder why she's giving it away.

CHIARA
Too many memories? Who knows?

ANGELA
Wasn't that nice of them to go to sleep? This is so peaceful.

CHIARA
The wine helps.

ANGELA
So kind of Uncle Gene to keep a wine cellar.

CHIARA
With any luck we can polish off the bottle before anyone arrives and no one will be the wiser.

ANGELA
That won't be a problem. When do you think I should put the lamb in?

CHIARA
The lasagna has another twenty minutes. Wait till then.

ANGELA
But if everyone has the lasagna first, they won't have room for the lamb. And it's expensive.

CHIARA
Then take out the lasagna and put in the lamb.

ANGELA
But if it cooks too long, it will be well-done and then no one will eat it!

CHIARA
Why are you asking me questions when you don't want my answers? You're just like them!

ANGELA
What do you mean "like them?" Like *my mother? I am NOT like my mother!*

CHIARA
Then stop acting like her!

ANGELA
Don't push my buttons! That's what your mother does.

CHIARA
Your mother is the champion button-pusher.

ANGELA
At least she's out there. Not passive aggressive like your mother.

CHIARA
Stop! Drink!

(They take a large gulp of wine.)

CHIARA (cont'd)
It is inevitable that we have some genetic traits from our mothers. The goal is to fight them! Fight to the last!

(They take another large gulp of wine.)

CHIARA (cont'd)
More?

ANGELA
Yes, please.

(CHIARA pours and they drink.)

ANGELA (cont'd)
Finished?

CHIARA
Almost.

ANGELA
Throw the rest in the sauce and dispose of the bottle.

(CHIARA goes to throw the rest in the sauce, thinks better of it and takes a last gulp from the bottle.)

CHIARA
I can't just stick it in the garbage. They'll see.

ANGELA
Put it in a brown bag and into the garage.

(CHIARA cover it with a paper bag and throws it in the garbage. ANGELA gets her leg of lamb from the fridge.)

ANGELA (cont'd)
What do you think? It's a thing of beauty, isn't it?

CHIARA
I – really wouldn't know. I don't eat lamb.

ANGELA
How can you not eat lamb? You're Italian. It's required.

CHIARA
I don't eat cute Disney animals. Bambi … baa …

ANGELA
It's not Bambi!

CHIARA

Lambchop.

ANGELA

Puppet!

CHIARA

But cute!

ANGELA

It seems prejudicial to only eat ugly animals.

CHIARA

What can I say? Animation and puppetry have affected my choice of food.

ANGELA

Do you eat cows?

CHIARA

Meatballs.

ANGELA

I like cows.

CHIARA

I am so pleased.

ANGELA

I mean – I like cows. I go to farms and heal sick cows and I eat meatballs, too.

CHIARA

Life's all about choices, Angela.

ANGELA

Are you saying I shouldn't eat cows because I like them?

CHIARA

I wouldn't eat an animal that I liked. But that's just me.

ANGELA

So you're saying I shouldn't eat cows!

CHIARA

Did you hear me say that? That's *your* mother speaking!

ANGELA

You're … implying that.

CHIARA

Don't read something into every word I say! I'm just talking.

ANGELA

Like *your* mother.

CHIARA

Don't/

ANGELA

/No! You don't. Don't criticize my meat! Especially now that you live in a state where everyone goes deer hunting. Like cave people – they hunt your Bambi.

CHIARA

They hunt Bambi everywhere. Even in New York!

ANGELA

I don't live in New York.

CHIARA

Oh I forgot – you live in *New Jersey.* There are no hunters in *New Jersey.*

CHIARA

Why are you attacking my adopted state?

ANGELA

Because you don't approve of my meat choices!

CHIARA

Where do you think that leg of lamb came from? Animals died to give you a freezer filled with meat!

ANGELA

BUT I DIDN'T KILL THEM!

CHIARA

BUT IF YOU DIDN'T BUY THEM THERE WOULD BE NO MARKET FOR THEM AND THEY WOULDN'T BE KILLED!

ANGELA

Shhhh! You'll wake the dead. Or our mothers. Which would be worse.

CHIARA
And the dinner would be pointless because Uncle Gene would be back from the dead telling us to stop shouting.

ANGELA
I don't know if you can wake someone who's been cremated. Food for thought.

CHIARA
Everything's food. Every Saint has a Feast Day. We eat. Then we gain weight and get criticized –

ANGELA
I don't gain weight.

CHIARA
No. You don't. You clearly are adopted.

ANGELA
Organic fruits and vegetables. Protein. No carbs.

CHIARA
How can you be Italian and not eat carbs? We grew up feasting on carbs. Stuffed carbs! Sauced carbs! Sauteed carbs! And that's just the pasta! Don't get me started on the risotto! We celebrate with carbs, we mourn with carbs, we are genetically programmed to be carbed to death! No wonder I resemble a stuffed manicotti!

ANGELA
/You clearly did not rebel enough. I long ago switched to meat and vegetables. Carbs only on Sundays. Try it. The weight will come off fast enough.

CHIARA
Are you saying I am fat? Please don't tell me I'm fat. Only I can say that. Don't sound like "them."

ANGELA
Don't go there …

(Pause)

ANGELA (cont'd)
Do you remember how you would never wear my clothes?

CHIARA
What?

ANGELA

My clothes that I outgrew. My mother would work her fingers to the bone cleaning and pressing and hemming my clothes to go to you. And when she gave them to you, you would say, "I can't wear those. They're too big."

CHIARA

Who remembers those things?

ANGELA

The shoe's on the other foot now, isn't it? Once you wouldn't wear my clothes because you thought I was too big and now you're bigger than me!

(CHIARA goes to the fridge.)

CHIARA

I don't think so!

ANGELA

Think so!

CHIARA

I need a cannoli. Before I say something that will prevent us from ever talking to each other again.

ANGELA

Is that what you do when you're mad? Eat?

CHIARA

Yes. And when I'm sad. And happy. And tired. And when my therapist is one thousand miles away.

ANGELA

Don't be so thin-skinned.

CHIARA

You sound like my mother! "You look nervous. *Stop being nervous!*"

ANGELA

We used to like each other. Remember when we spent every weekend together? Those four blocks between your home and my home were a lifeline back in the "olden days." (Beat.) You were nicer then.

CHIARA

That was before therapy. Where I am learning I don't have to please everyone.

ANGELA
I get criticized for going my own way. But still – that blood-thing runs pretty deep.

CHIARA
We'll always be united by blood. And food. We grew up in each other's homes. I am as much at home here as I am in my own kitchen. Decades of Christmas Day right here.

ANGELA
How many turkeys were given away?

CHIARA
What was with the turkey? How could we eat turkey after two hours of prosciutto, salami, provolone, and all that eggnog?

ANGELA
Spiked. Who serves kids spiked eggnog?

CHIARA
They did. They conspired to make us happy - or sleepy - on Christmas Day. And then after six hours of eating, the lasagna came out…

ANGELA
And there was the yearly fight about who made the best lasagna. And the meatballs and sausages….

CHIARA
And somewhere hidden in the kitchen – *the bones!*

ANGELA
I'd catch them in the kitchen gnawing on them while they cleaned up!

CHIARA
Our mothers are not far removed from the Clan of the Cave Bear!

ANGELA
And after a day of eating – out came the thirty-pound turkey. Why'd they cook a turkey every year?

CHIARA
Grandma. She wanted to have an American Christmas. It was the same with Thanksgiving. Remember the Thanksgiving ravioli? I don't think the Pilgrims had ravioli.

ANGELA
Endless holidays in this kitchen gorging ourselves. And then the menfolk would go on the porch to watch TV –

CHIARA
And fall asleep! We should do that. Why is the porch door closed?

ANGELA
Aunt Tess doesn't like to turn the heat on out there – too expensive.

CHIARA
Do you think she's all right? She's awfully calm. She's never calm. I thought she'd be wailing like your Mom did.

ANGELA
I know! And what's with the stethoscope?

CHIARA
She's acting like she's keeping it warm for Uncle Gene. And why are we boxing up her china?

ANGELA
It's not for us to say, is it? The decisions she's making are her grieving decisions.

CHIARA
What if she's not in her right mind? And regrets all this later? Aren't we supposed to help her through this?

ANGELA
I think you just listen.

CHIARA
Is that what you do?

ANGELA
It's what I try to do. At vet school, the teachers would tell us to listen to the animals – their vitals, their faces, their noises. Without the trappings of language, those signs were true.

CHIARA
It must be hard to figure out what they need without words.

ANGELA
Words can be used to throw you off track. You need to really listen and figure out what's true, what they're covering, what scares them. Mom didn't use a lot of words when Dad died. She scrubbed the floors and wailed. She dusted the furniture and cursed. But when she set the table and automatically set a place for my dad – she would go silent. And quietly put his dish away declaring how happy she was that she never had to make his

ANGELA

favorite liver and onion dinner again! But she makes his fish soup. Every Friday. Ten years later, I know if I visit on Friday, Mom will have fish soup on the menu. Maybe we're not the ones to give advice. We've never been they are.

CHIARA

I remember that soup. I sometimes visited on Fridays knowing I would get some.

ANGELA

I can make it for you. Everything's fresh by the shore. And there's a specialty organic farm nearby. The asparagus is up. Spend a few days with me.

CHIARA

Oh Angela – I'm sorry. I'm going to stay with Mario in the city tonight and then I leave.

ANGELA

Spend the night with me in Jersey instead. It's not that far – I'll take you to the airport tomorrow.

CHIARA

I'm sorry. I have plans for the morning. I just don't have the time to get all the way out to where you live.

ANGELA

If I had a dime for every time someone said, "all the way out to where you live," I could retire. Nobody thinks about driving to the end of Long Island to visit Sue – but cross state lines? M'Mona Mia! YOU'D THINK I LIVED IN TIMBUKTU!

(Tess enters.)

TESS

If anyone asks why I don't turn my hearing aid on, it's because everyone yells around here. How your mothers are napping through this, I'll never know!

CHIARA

Angela's mad because I won't go to Jersey to visit her place.

TESS

Why you moved to Jersey –

ANGELA

I live by the shore. It's pretty. You'd like it. If you ever came to visit.

TESS

But there's a bridge and a tunnel and all those tolls –

ANGELA

You pay tolls to go to the City!

TESS

No. I take the bus. They pay the tolls. Napkins look nice. A little fancy for my taste but you know best.

ANGELA

Aunt Tess – do you know how to give a compliment without it smacking the recipient in the face?

(EMILIA enters.)

EMILIA

Better get the lasagna out. People will be coming soon.

ANGELA

I'll get the lamb in!

TESS

It's fine, dear. You can make stew with it later.

ANGELA

I'm putting it in!

CHIARA

Baaaa……

ANGELA

Shut up!

EMILIA

What's with you two?

CHIARA

I have no idea. Baaaa…..

ANGELA

She doesn't eat lamb.

EMILIA

That's not lamb.

ANGELA

Ma, I really went all out …

CHIARA

It does smell good. Must be the rosemary.

ANGELA

It's been marinating for 24 hours. It will be delicious.

CHIARA

Maybe …. I'll try some.

ANGELA

Thanks.

(ANNA enters.)

ANNA

Why'd you let me sleep? My new suit is wrinkled! It's a designer one you know. I need to get things ready. The table…

CHIARA

Done. The table. The sauce. The lasagna. The wine's uncorked.

TESS

Oh! You found the wine! Good. Let's have a glass before everyone comes. Gene and I always had a cocktail before the guests arrived.

(CHIARA gets the wine and ANGELA gets the glasses. Wine is poured and glasses are held high.)

EMILIA

It's almost six. Where is everyone?

TESS

They'll be here. Relax.

EMILIA

Everything's ready.

TESS

Then we're ready too early. Salute! To my Gene!

ALL

To Gene!

("Pace, Pace" is again heard in the background.)

ANNA

Papa.

TESS

He keeps coming here.

EMILIA

You must need him.

TESS

I don't! I'm waiting for Gene. Papa! Go find Gene!

("Pace, Pace" fades out.)

ANGELA

Aunt Tess?

CHIARA

What's going on?

TESS

We're giving a toast – a toast to Gene! May he come soon.

EMILIA

May the guests come soon! Where is everyone? The lasagna will be overdone.

CHIARA

We'll keep the oven on low.

EMILIA

The time to eat is when the food is ready.

ANNA

No. The time to eat is when the guests are here.

EMILIA

The lasagna's ready now.

ANGELA

The lamb!

(ANGELA takes the lasagna out and puts the lamb in. EMILIA checks on the lasagna.)

EMILIA

It's ready! It should go on the table!

CHIARA

But nobody's at the table.

EMILIA

There are five of us here. We should eat!

ANNA

The guests are not here!

EMILIA

So, we teach them a lesson! You come late – you eat cold food. Next time, they won't come late!

TESS

Next time? What do you mean? Next time Gene dies? This dinner is to honor him. It's the last Sunday sauce I will ever make. We wait for the guests!

EMILIA

The cheese will turn brown! Rubbery! The lasagna will be garbage! I don't serve garbage!

ANNA

Then don't serve it! I will!

EMILIA

The lasagna's going to the table now! I don't put up with latecomers!

ANGELA

Ma! We can't eat it now! What'll we serve the guests?

EMILIA

They can have your mutton! That's what they deserve!

ANNA

We do what Tess wants! Tess?

(EMILIA grabs pot holders and goes for the lasagna.)

EMILIA (cont'd)

Don't stop me! If you try I'll throw this all over the kitchen. So the guests can see what happens when they're late!

CHIARA

Aunt Emilia! You don't mean it!

ANGELA
Like a dog with a bone! She means it all right!

(EMILIA takes the lasagna and goes to the garbage. TESS and ANNA try to stop her as the lasagna pours into the garbage – and maybe on TESS and ANNA.)

ANNA
My suit! My Italian designer shoes!

TESS
Mamaluka! You're a real mamaluka, Emilia!

(The doorbell rings.)

CHIARA
They're here!

(Everyone freezes in the kitchen. Quickly, ANNA runs out to get cleaned up.)

ANNA
Nobody can see me like this!

(TESS goes to answer the door. ANGELA and CHIARA down some wine as the lights fade to black. EMILIA is a bit pleased. She taught them a lesson.)

Optional Intermission

ACT 2

SCENE 3

AT RISE, dinner is over. Some clean dishes might be spied waiting to be put away. The lamb bone remains on a plate on the table or cabinet. The dishes and pots that were all over the kitchen have been boxed up and given to the dinner guests. CHIARA and ANGELA are finishing up. TESS, EMILIA, and ANNA emerge from the basement.

ANGELA

You three have been coming in and out of the basement all evening. What's down there?

TESS, EMILIA and ANNA

Nothing!

CHIARA

You're all acting a bit strange.

TESS

I've recently become widowed. I'm supposed to act strange.

CHIARA

You're supposed to be grieving. You just lost your husband.

TESS

I grieved for six months when Gene was dying. No sense doing the same thing all over again.

ANGELA

You're like sardines in a can. And not fighting. What's wrong?

TESS

What? A person can't spend some time with her sisters without being suspect?

CHIARA

Not you three. I have a mind to go downstairs myself!

TESS

NO!

CHIARA

Why not?

TESS

Because it's still my house and I said so.

CHIARA

Whoa! Touchy, touchy.

(The SISTERS look at each other. ANGELA breaks the moment.)

ANGELA

The lamb was a hit! Good thing I brought it.

TESS

Who knew that my crazy sister would throw out the lasagna!

ANNA

Good thing you had ravioli in the freezer!

TESS

Gene loved my ravioli more than my lasagna. I always have some. It worked out. I have a little sauce left over if anyone wants it.

ANNA

Keep it. It will be a quick meal for you later.

TESS

No. The days of sauce are over. I won't be around to use it up.

ANNA

Tess/

TESS

/Don't speak. (Beat.) It was nice Angela – the lamb. A little fatty but dressed well.

ANGELA

Thanks, Aunt Tess.

TESS

I'm tired. Talking to Joey was exhausting. He wouldn't shut up about Gene and how much he will miss him.

ANNA

Joey didn't come.

TESS

He didn't? Then who was that man I called "Joey" all night?

(TESS exits into dining room.)

ANNA

She shouldn't be alone.

(EMILIA sees the lamb bone.)

EMILIA

Save the bone.

(ANNA and EMILIA follow TESS into the dining room.)

ANGELA

I'm so glad the lamb was a hit. And nobody whispered, "mutton."

CHIARA

That goodness you brought it. Coupled with Aunt Tess's frozen ravioli, nobody knew the original dinner wound up in the garbage.

ANGELA

The sauce was amazing.

CHIARA

Bred-in-the-bone as they say. Her sauce is part of her. One of these days we have to get the recipe. Meanwhile, speaking of bones…. "Bye, bye Bambi. We knew you well."

(ANGELA dumps the lamb bone into the garbage.)

CHIARA

I think your mom wants the bone.

ANGELA

No bones about it. But if I know her, she'd be up to no good with it. It goes. Shall we join our mothers in the living room and finish off the cookies?

CHIARA

Aunt Tess is worrying me. She keeps talking as if she is going to die any moment now.

ANGELA

They do love their death marches. My mother's been saying the same thing for ten years. She's fit as a fiddle.

CHIARA

But they will be gone one day. All of them. I can't fathom a world without them. Their craziness is my normal. I may complain but in some ways – it nourishes me. Who will pick up the torch when they're gone?

ANGELA

Sue. She's bossy enough.

CHIARA

You. It has to be you. You've always been a leader. You'll be the one with the lasagna and the turkey and the lamb.

ANGELA

In New Jersey. No one will come to my feast in New Jersey.

CHIARA

You know our cousins. If you feed them, they will come.

ANGELA

My sauce will never rival Aunt Tess's.

CHIARA

It will if you get the recipe.

ANGELA

Who knows what's in the future? Let's figure out the present and right now, we have some cookies to finish.

CHIARA

You know those are laden with carbs.

ANGELA

Today is Uncle Gene's Feast Day. Carbs are allowed.

CHIARA

You made that up.

ANGELA

Not at all. You need to bone up on the Rules for Low-Carbohydrate living. Let's discuss it over biscotti.

(TESS enters.)

TESS

Your mothers are driving me loco with all their questions about what I am going to do next. Go sit with them.

(TESS exits into the basement. ANGELA and CHIARA head to the dining room as ANNA and EMILIA enter.)

ANGELA
We were just coming to join you.

EMILIA
We … need to check on something. We'll be back in a moment.

(ANGELA and CHIARA just look at each other.)

EMILIA (cont'd)
GO!

(ANGELA and CHIARA exit.
TESS peeks into the kitchen. SHE has a pot.)

TESS
Is the coast clear?

ANNA
They're in the dining room.

TESS
We have to get rid of them.

(TESS puts the pot in the fridge.)

EMILIA
How do we do that nicely?

ANNA
Since when do you try to do something nicely?

TESS
Don't start, you two! Or you will get nothing! Let's join them and gently nudge them out.

EMILIA
I'll just finish wiping things down.

TESS
Suit yourself.

(ANNA and TESS exit.)

(EMILIA wipes down a counter, dries it quickly with a paper towel and throws it away. She spies the lamb bone in the garbage. SHE retrieves it and wipes it down.)

EMILIA

Bellissima!

(EMILIA wraps the bone up in a kitchen towel. ANGELA enters. EMILIA hides the bone behind her back. She looks guilty as sin.)

ANGELA

There you are. Come join us. We're not going to stay much longer. Aunt Tess is making noises that it's past her bedtime. (Beat.) What are you hiding?

EMILIA

Nothing. A dish towel. I was wiping down the counters for Tess.

(The lamb bone falls out. THEY both go for it. ANGELA swipes it.)

ANGELA

I threw that out.

EMILIA

Which is wasteful. There are good uses for this bone. Kiki would love it. After all, she's had a stressful day.

ANGELA

Kiki's sharp teeth would splinter the bones and she really would die. Is that what you want?

EMILIA

She's been resurrected! NOW I HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF HER! !

ANGELA

NOT BY TRYING TO KILL HER!

(CHIARA enters.)

CHIARA

It's getting loud in here. Aunt Tess is about to turn her hearing aid off.

ANGELA
My mother wants to kill Kiki with a lamb bone!

EMILIA
I just want to give her a treat! She's alive – no thanks to you and I have to take care of her.

CHIARA
Way to go, Angela! How dare you save her cat?

ANGELA
Let's just say it seems to be a bone of contention between us.

EMILIA
I'm joining Tess. She shouldn't be alone.

CHIARA
My mother's with her.

EMILIA
Same thing.

ANGELA
You'd think she would be pleased that Kiki's fine. I couldn't please her when I was little. Why do I think I could please her now?

CHIARA
She talks you up all the time. Like you were a goddess. "My-daughter-the-cat-doctor-this and my-daughter-the-cat-doctor-that!"

ANGELA
But I never hear it from her.

CHIARA
And you never will. It's not in their nature. They believe that constant criticism makes you stronger. It just drove me into therapy.

ANGELA
My mother went into therapy – sort of.

CHIARA
I think you're in therapy or you're not. No "sort of" about it. Especially when you write the check.

ANGELA
She joined a support group after Dad died. That was a huge step for her.

CHIARA

Maybe Aunt Tess should do that. She hasn't seemed to be able to acknowledge that Uncle Gene won't be walking through the door when this is all over. She's the only one who didn't try to throw herself into the grave.

ANGELA

He was cremated. She didn't have the chance. This kitchen's like a crematorium. We should throw open some windows or doors.

CHIARA

I think she's on automatic. I worry what will happen when we all go away.

ANGELA

The boys will help her. It's hot in here! I'm going to cool down on the porch for a sec.

(ANGELA opens the door to the porch and steps out.)

CHIARA

Angela! Aunt Tess specifically said –

(ANGELA lets out a blood-curdling scream.)

CHIARA

ANGELA!

BLACKOUT

SCENE 4

(LIGHTS UP on ANGELA standing with "Coat Rack Gene." ANNA, EMILIA, TESS are peeking their heads through the doorway. CHIARA is frozen.)

ANGELA

Is this a joke?

(EMILIA enters and could kneel and sob by the coat rack. CHIARA and ANNA draw close. Only TESS will be calm as she goes over to the coat rack and strokes GENE'S robe.)

ANNA

Tess! What have you done?

EMILIA

Gene! Poor Gene! Tess – you're crazy!

TESS

Go! Everyone go!

ANNA

I can't leave you like this!

TESS

Like what?

ANNA

Dressing a coat rack to look like Gene! Giving everything away! *This is not normal!*

TESS

Normal! What's normal anymore? Normal was Sunday sauce. Normal was roasting neck bones early Sunday morning. Normal is simmering. Adjusting. Creating. Now – normal is waiting - for Gene to call me home.

ANNA

Don't speak like that!

TESS

Don't tell me how to speak! You two come into *my* home, criticize my kitchen, throw out my lasagna, fight over my sauce – the last Sunday sauce I will ever make for Gene, the last time I roast the neckbones for the sauce … The *last dinner I will make in this house… and then tell me how I should feel.*

ANNA

What?

TESS

I'm selling the house. Dead people don't need houses.

EMILIA

You can't! I need to have a sister down the block!

TESS

I can and I will! *Everyone – fa Nabla! Go!* Leave me to Gene. While I'm still here.

ANGELA

Aunt Tess. (Beat.) Tell me about the sauce. What do you mean by "roasting the bones?" I never roast bones for the sauce. Chiara, bring Uncle Gene here.

(TESS sits with ANGELA. CHIARA brings them "Coat Rack Gene.")

TESS

Every Sunday, I made a sauce. Sometimes a marinara, other times a ragu – but on cold Sundays, I'd roast some neck bones for the a Bolognese – it was Gene's favorite. He loved the earthiness the bones added.

ANNA

I fry them. With a bit of garlic.

TESS

That's good, too. But in the oven – they deepen. It's like the mountains of Grandma's Basilicata are outside your window. It's part remembrance, part nourishment and a healthy dose of sex.

EMILIA

Tess! The girls!

ANGELA

I was married, Ma. Remember?

CHIARA

And I … have heard about sex.

TESS

The bones – there's something primal in that process. After breaking up the tomatoes in the garlic and basil/

EMILIA

I like marjoram.

TESS

Marjoram's tricky. A little oregano, maybe? I prefer basil. Sometimes I deglaze the pan with wine, sometimes I add it after/

ANGELA

/Wait! Why do you deglaze the pan?

TESS

After the onions.

ANGELA

When did you start the onions?

TESS

What? You want a recipe? I don't have a recipe. Come and watch me make it. But be forewarned, there isn't a lot of time.

ANGELA

I'm taking you up on that. You're going to have to stick around a bit and make Sunday sauce at least one more time.

TESS

We'll see, But don't be like Gene – he tasted it all day. Half of it would be gone by supper time. I had to slap his hand down so we had enough for dinner! That sauce – it's like blood – it bound the family together. Towards the end, when Gene wasn't eating much, he had me make the sauce so he could breathe it in. It sustained him for weeks. Until it couldn't. Those early morning when I roasted the bones – they were the only times I felt Mama. Papa visits all the time/

CHIARA

/Wait. What?

TESS

It's true. Your Grandpa can't stay away but your Grandma never seemed to come near us. Unless I roasted bones. Then I could feel her move past me – just a small puff of air as she checked on all before she went away.

(In the background we quietly hear "Pace, Pace." TESS, ANNA and EMILIA hear it. ANGELA and CHIARA do not.)

ANNA

Papa!

EMILIA

He's here.

ANNA

I know.

TESS

Why is he back again? All day, I told him to go get Gene. Gene promised.

ANGELA

Promised what?

TESS

We discussed this for months! If there is an afterlife, he would not leave me alone but bring me with him. So, maybe there isn't anything after life. We're just stuck waiting.

ANNA

There has to be an "after." Because Papa comes whenever we need him.

CHIARA

Mom?

ANNA

Everything's fine, Chiara. Do you hear it?

CHIARA

Hear – what?

ANNA

"Pace, Pace." Listen

(And the cousins try to listen.)

ANGELA

I – don't – hear anything.

EMILIA

It started when Papa died.

CHIARA

What?

ANNA

The aria. We would hear it and know Papa was with us. Mama heard it, too.

CHIARA

You – all hear – opera?

TESS

We thought everyone did. Until we told people.

ANNA

Turns out not everyone does.

TESS

So we stopped telling people.

(The aria grows louder.)

ANGELA

That's – a little nuts.

TESS

Which is why we never told you. Listen.

(And again they do. ANGELA looks at CHIARA and CHIARA shakes her head "no." The aria fades out. The sisters are visibly moved.)

CHIARA

Is – it over?

EMILIA

Yes.

CHIARA

Weird.

TESS

It's a gift. I'm sorry you two didn't get it.

ANGELA

So … we're cleaned up – do you want me to –

(ANGELA goes to the coat rack.)

TESS

Don't touch him!

ANGELA

No. Of course not.

TESS

Now - it's time. Wait.

(TESS gets the bowl from the fridge.)

CHIARA

Do you need help?

TESS

NO! Just wait.

EMILIA

It is getting late.

ANNA

\It doesn't matter. We wait. For what Tess wants. With all the craziness today, we sometimes forget we are all here – for her.

EMILIA

I don't like the girls going home this late.

ANNA

We wait.

EMILIA

Things happen.

CHIARA

We'll … sleep up the block.

ANGELA

What?

CHIARA

You and me. A sleepover. We're overdue.

ANGELA

I'd like that.

EMILIA

Good. Kiki will have company. I'll sleep here.

(TESS takes out the pot of bones.)

TESS

I'm going to take the chill off of them.

(TESS puts the pot in the oven.)

ANGELA

What is that?

TESS

A rite of passage. You will do this with me. It will be the last thing you need to do for me. Before I go.

ANNA

Tess!

TESS

There're fewer bones in the pot. Somebody's been nibbling.

CHIARA

Bones?

EMILIA

I don't nibble.

ANNA

Just one. I only had one! I couldn't help myself! They're so meaty.

EMILIA

Me, too. Just one. What's the problem?

ANNA

How many did you have?

TESS

One.

EMILIA

You were up and down the stairs half a dozen times.

TESS

I was checking on them! I knew you two would nibble!

ANNA

I think they're ready.

TESS

I just put them in.

EMILIA

They're ready.

TESS

Aspetta!

EMILIA

What if I died in the next minute? I wouldn't get any!

TESS
You already had one! You'll get your share.

EMILIA
Let me check. We should have added the mutton bone.

ANGELA
Aha! Not for Kiki – for you! More bones for you!

EMILIA
They're ready.

TESS
Stay away from my bones! Gene didn't understand my love of the bones. I made his Pasta alla Norma and he was satisfied. I served him a Sicilian dish every month and then he'd be so content – he wouldn't nag about the bones.

EMILIA
That's what I did! Fish soup and piadini made with lard.

TESS
We're not allowed to cook with lard anymore. Such a shame.

EMILIA
I know! Gene stopped all of us from using lard.

TESS
So his only fault was being a cardiologist and trying to make us all heart-healthy.

ANGELA
How dare he?

TESS
We were raised in a home with pork. There wasn't much meat in Grandma's Basilicata but there was pork. Your Grandma could do anything with a little pork.

ANNA
Focaccia a Brazzudo.

(The three sisters sigh in contentment.)

EMILIA
That crispy pork crackling with lard, yes lard and oregano.

TESS

Orecchiette with tomato sauce and spicy salami. Mama always said American salami wasn't as good.

ANNA

But that was the only thing better in Italy than America – the salami.

ANGELA

So, you were raised on pork and lard. Did she sneak a vegetable in there?

TESS

Pupazella. They are these round, hot peppers in vinegar stuffed with anchovies and parsley.

(The three sisters sigh again.)

EMILIA

All cucina povera. Vegetables were all pickled to make them last.

CHIARA

You never discuss Grandma's early days in Basilicata.

TESS

Because she was a fierce, proud American. Once she passed the citizenship test, she took her papers everywhere "I'm an American now."

EMILIA

The bones!

TESS

They're ready. I can smell them.

ANNA

It's the best part of the meal. Nobody understands.

TESS

Get some plates. Let's do this properly.

ANNA

You gave away the plates.

TESS

Napkins then.

CHIARA

Are we going to … eat bones?

TESS

Yes. It's time. Nothing goes to waste here. Before you judge, you must have some. Then you will understand. And remember – that the last meal you had with Tess – were bones. *Mangia!*

CHIARA

I don't/

ANNA

/TASTE!

(Everyone has a bone. And everyone eats. And surprisingly, everyone enjoys it. They chew, gnaw, rip the meat off and are in carnivore heaven.)

ANGELA

Oh. Wow. These are surprisingly good. And no carbs.

EMILIA

This would be the only meat your Grandma would have for months at a time.

CHIARA

Our heritage stems from pork neck bones.

TESS

And Sunday sauce.

CHIARA

Sauce and bones. I wonder what my therapist will make of that.

ANGELA

Blood and bones. It all makes sense.

(As they eat, the "Ch'ella mi credo" aria from Puccini's *The Girl of the Golden West is heard.* Everyone hears it. Even the cousins. They stop "mid-chew.")

CHIARA

Angela?

ANGELA

Yes.

CHIARA

They put a hex on us.

ANGELA

It's the bones.

TESS

He's here. Finally.

(Pause as all listen.)

TESS (cont'd)

I will be leaving soon.

CHIARA

What – is he saying?

ANNA

"Let her believe. I am far away."

TESS

He's here. He's come for me. I love you, all! **Gene! Look! Bones! Your wife is eating the bones! What do you think? Come and stop me!**

(The aria builds.)

ANGELA

I think he got the message!

(The aria fades away.)

CHIARA

That was – different.

TESS

He's – gone.

ANNA

But – he came – as promised.

TESS

No! Not what he promised! He promised to take me!

(TESS gets a broom or a mop and she smacks the coat rack.)

TESS (cont'd)

Ingrate! *You promised! I put you through school! I cook your sauce. I brown the bones and what do you do? You leave me! You – just leave me!*

(TESS crumples into a ball. All is quiet. ANGELA gets the stethoscope and joins her. She kisses her on the cheek and puts the stethoscope there.)

TESS (cont'd)

Some doctor you are! You'll never find a heartbeat there.

ANGELA

On you, I find it everywhere,

TESS

I thought – if I made the bones – if I had a feast of bones, he wouldn't be able to stand it. He'd go so loco - he'd – walk into the kitchen – and I'd hear, "Tess! Why do you chew on bones? It makes you look like a cave-woman. I can't leave you alone for one minute! You need to be with me." And then he'd scoop me up and it would be over. My time would be done. But it's not. I'm here. Alone.

ANNA

We're here.

(ANNA makes a move to hug TESS.)

TESS

No. Not what I need right now. I decide what I need. You don't decide for me. Eat! You think I simmered those bones for six hours so they could go to the dogs? Finish them! When are you going to have bones like this again? Never. I am never making them again.

(The three sisters chew on their bones. Chimes are heard tolling midnight.)

ANNA

Midnight.

EMILIA

It's Sunday.

ANNA

The heavens are opening up.

TESS

- And I'm still here.

(All listen to the chimes as the lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY