

*At rise: LOTTIE is found sitting at her kitchen table, downstage C., reading a book. Presently, a knock on a door is heard and LOTTIE immediately hurries offstage R. to answer it, calling out excitedly as she does so.*

LOTTIE

Olga, is that you?

*(LOTTIE exits. A moment later her voice is heard again, filled with exuberance.)*

LOTTIE

*(Off.)*

Olga! Oh, I can hardly believe my eyes. Well...come in, come in.

*(OLGA, her demeanor decidedly more reserved and detached, enters the kitchen, followed by LOTTIE.)*

LOTTIE

Oh, it's so good of you to come. To be honest, I...I wasn't sure if you would. Not after...well...everything.

OLGA

Well...I must admit I was rather surprised to get your call out of the blue like that, especially after all these years. But I suppose, under the circumstances, it's...understandable.

*(Beat.)*

How are you coping?

LOTTIE

*(Somewhat evasively.)*

Oh, I'm...I'm coping.

*(Beat.)*

Anyway, sit down – let me get a good look at you.

*(OLGA and LOTTIE sit at the kitchen table.)*

LOTTIE

My goodness, you haven't changed a bit. How long has it been? Ten years?

OLGA

Fifteen...and every one of them has taken its toll, so you can spare me the flattery, however well-intended.

LOTTIE

Has it really been that long?

OLGA

Yes, it has. The years soon fly by.

LOTTIE

I daresay they do.

*(Beat.)*

Though it rather depends on whether you're enjoying them or not, I suppose.

*(Pause.)*

OLGA

So when was the funeral?

LOTTIE

Oh, um...three weeks ago...more or less.

OLGA

Not that I'd have gone, but...well, it might have been nice to have been invited, all the same.

LOTTIE

I know, I'm sorry, I...well, the fact is I didn't invite anyone I knew. I didn't want them there.

OLGA

*Do* you still know anyone?

*(Beat.)*

LOTTIE

*(Awkwardly.)*

No...not really.

OLGA

Well, I'm sure it must've been difficult. I'm sure it *is* difficult.

LOTTIE

It is, yes, but...not in the way you're imagining.

OLGA

That sounds very cryptic.

LOTTIE

Can I...make you a cup of coffee or something?

OLGA

No, Lottie, I'm not staying long. In fact, I wasn't going to come at all, but you were so insistent when you called and...well, you'd just lost your husband. And in spite of all those years of silence from you, I suppose I still felt a mild obligation to come and offer my support and condolences – even if it is to someone who's now a relative stranger.

LOTTIE

Olga, I didn't ask you here for your support or your condolences. Frankly, I neither want nor need them.

OLGA

Oh...well if that's the case, I may as well leave right now.

*(OLGA stands and heads towards the door.)*

LOTTIE

*(Standing.)*

Oh, Olga, please!

OLGA

What a complete and utter waste of my time.

LOTTIE

Please don't go! I didn't mean it like that. Please let me explain.

*(OLGA stops, her back still facing LOTTIE.)*

LOTTIE

Just hear me out, won't you? And then you can...well, come to whatever conclusions you will.

*(OLGA slowly turns around and makes her way back to the table.)*

OLGA

*(Sighing as she sits.)*

Very well.

LOTTIE

Thank you.

*(Beat.)*

You see...the reason I asked you here today is because of Howard.

OLGA

Well, naturally.

LOTTIE

Yes, but...not because of his death, but because of his life...here, with me.

OLGA

What of it?

LOTTIE

*(Holding her head in her hands.)*

God, I wish this were easier. I've never told this to a single soul, you see? No one. I was always too...embarrassed...and weak. And now I hardly know where to begin.

OLGA

How about at the beginning?

LOTTIE

Yes, except...I'm not really sure when it began. It all just sort of crept up on me. You see, when Howard and I were first married everything was fine. We weren't exactly the romance of the century, but we were compatible in many ways. And I loved him. Or at least, I imagined I did.

OLGA

You seemed happy enough to me at the time, as far as I can recall.

LOTTIE

Yes, and I suppose I was...at the outset. But then, gradually, things began to change.

OLGA

How so?

LOTTIE

He started to become more...possessive of me. But not in any loving or protective way. It was more about dominating me...controlling me...controlling my entire life.

OLGA

*(With a sigh.)*

Oh, Lottie.

LOTTIE

It started off in small ways, subtle ways. And they bothered me, they really did, but I suppose I...just let them happen. But it wasn't long before it started to become more extreme. He began to regulate the times I was allowed outside of the house and the places I was allowed to go. Later, I was forbidden...

*(Beat.)*

I was forbidden to contact any of my friends and most of my family. I tried to resist at first. We'd have horrible heated arguments, but they always ended in the same way – either with a punch or the back of his hand.

OLGA

Oh God, Lottie.

LOTTIE

As time went on, he no longer needed the excuse of an argument – he'd just hit me whenever the mood took him. I became quite skilled at covering the bruises with makeup. Not that it mattered really, since I hardly ever saw anyone anyway.

OLGA

But...why didn't you tell someone? Why didn't you call me?

LOTTIE

Fear, Olga.

*(Beat.)*

Fear.

*(Beat.)*

Fear of him. Fear of the alternatives. What would I do? Where would I go? My entire existence was constrained by fear.

OLGA

But if only I'd known. I could've done something – I could've helped you.

LOTTIE

Only if I could've helped myself, Olga – and the truth is, I couldn't.

*(Beat.)*

LOTTIE (Cont'd.)

Anyway, eventually it got to the point where he forbade me to even speak to him. If I needed to communicate something, I was to write it down on a piece of paper. I had to keep a notepad and pen with me at all times.

OLGA

*(Almost spitting the words.)*

What a cruel, heartless bastard.

LOTTIE

*(With a slight hint of a smile.)*

No, Olga – he wasn't heartless. That was my salvation, you see?

OLGA

No, I don't see. Anyone who could do that to you – to anyone – is heartless by definition.

LOTTIE

Oh, he had a heart, Olga – just not a very healthy one.

OLGA

A diseased one, then – in more ways than one.

LOTTIE

To be sure. It ran in his family. But despite the risks and the fact that his own father had died from cardiac arrest, he never made the slightest attempt to live anything resembling a healthy lifestyle. He did just as he pleased, as with everything.

OLGA

So I assume that's what killed him?

LOTTIE

*(Cautiously.)*

Yes, but...there's a little more to it than that.

OLGA

Meaning?

LOTTIE

Meaning...meaning that I'm taking you into my confidence and telling you something that I shall never tell another living soul for as long as I live.

*(Beat.)*

I just hope I don't regret it.