

Murder Inn

A Murder Mystery Comedy in two acts.
by
Howard Volland & Keith McGregor

Murder Inn is set in New England, at the Barnsley Inn, a dilapidated eighteenth century inn, which is supposedly haunted by Marco, a knife-throwing poltergeist. A group of tourists, on a tour—Ghosts and Ghouls of New England—is forced, by a storm, to make an unscheduled stop at the Barnsley. What looks to be an unpleasant and uncomfortable detour soon turns into a night of mayhem and madness as knives begin to pop up...in the most unexpected places. As the storm builds and the body count rises, the survivors try to figure out who done it. And even more important—who's likely to have it done to them next?

Murder Inn is a one-set, two-act comedy with a cast of twelve (4m-8f). It has a running time of approximately two hours plus intermission.

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The Cast

In order of appearance:

Jake Talbot—(Mid to late 20's) Son of the owner of the Barnsley Inn. A sturdy, no-nonsense young man; he wears jeans, a flannel work shirt, and work boots.

***Martha Talbot**—(In her 50's) Owner of the Barnsley; cantankerous, short and plump with gray hair. She wears a housedress with apron, slippers, and a worn cardigan sweater.

***Agnes Tate**—"Middle Aged (40-50+)" Meddlesome, antagonistic, sarcastic, inconsiderate. Everyone's murder victim of choice. Dressed expensively, but not in the best of taste.

Carolyn Pickett—(In her 20's) Niece and traveling companion for Agnes; attractive, unassuming, and smartly dressed in slacks, blouse, and jacket.

Ellen Halsey—(Late 20's to early 30's) The tour guide, attractive and professional.

***Muriel Lampmann**—"Middle Aged (40-50+)" Petite and...ethereal. A true believer in the occult. An airhead of sorts, but very sweet. Travelling alone.

***Patricia Simpson**—"Middle Aged (40-50+)" Reserved, nervous, always tense. Travelling alone.

Todd Currier—(In his 20's) Congenial, intelligent and well dressed in a casual way. He's traveling with his father.

***Lawrence Currier**—(Mid to late 50's) A college professor on sabbatical, doing research for a book. Widowed in the last couple of years. Distinguished and intellectual.

***Grace Sharp**—(60+) A retired school teacher; she's petite and "fluffy," and she looks helpless, which is by no means the case. Traveling with her longtime friend, Doris Brooks.

***Doris Brooks**—(60+) Retired nurse practitioner. Matter of fact and sarcastic. Traveling with Grace.

Donald Schultz—(In his 40's) The van driver. Physically either heavy or very thin. Morose.

*Note: All the characters with an asterisk—Martha, Agnes, Muriel, Patricia, Lawrence, Grace, and Doris—have a good bit of flexibility as to age, as long as they work as a group. Grace and Doris are older and wiser. Lawrence is distinguished...and he is of an age that Muriel, Patricia and Agnes would find attractive, especially since he is available. He also has to be old enough to be Todd's father; and Martha has to be old enough to have a son Jake's age—or if you want to take her older, she could be Jake's grandmother with minimal script changes.

Set Description

The play takes place in the sitting room of the Barnsley Inn, a dilapidated eighteenth century inn somewhere in New England. The furnishings are old, worn and stained. The plaster is cracked and has patches that are discolored and flaking. In the center of the upstage wall a wide arch opens to the main hall of the inn. The hallway is raised a couple of steps above the floor of the room—two steps go up to this doorway.

To stage right of this opening, along the back wall is a small bar, with a couple of stools. There is room behind the bar for someone to work. A “No-Smoking” sign hangs behind the bar. Stage left of the hall doors, against the back wall, is a roll-top desk and straight backed chair.

On the stage left wall of the room, there is a fireplace with a raised hearth—the hearth serves as a sitting spot on several occasions. There is a fire burning in the fireplace and a screen in front of the opening. On the upstage end of the hearth there is a pile of firewood. A set of fireplace tools stands downstage of the opening. Upstage of the fireplace a swinging door goes off to the dining room.

A furniture grouping in front of the fireplace includes a sofa, a coffee table, and an armchair. The sofa faces front with the coffee table in front of it. The armchair is near centerstage and angled facing downstage left to make a grouping with the sofa.

Upstage in the stage right wall, a set of French doors open onto the porch. Sheer curtains, hung on the doors themselves, screen the view outside. Drapes hang from either side of the opening. On this side of the stage there is a card table and four chairs.

At the beginning of the play the furniture is draped with old sheets—the room has been closed up for a number of weeks. There are cobwebs on the chandeliers, the paintings, in the corners, wherever they would be appropriate. A large carving knife has been stuck into the top log of the stack on the hearth.



The photograph is from the production by Off The Wall Theater in Monroe, Washington. It was designed by one of the playwrights.

Murder Inn

Act I Scene 1

(The scene is the sitting room of the Barnsley Inn—see the set description. It is a late afternoon in early November. When the lights come up no one is on stage. **Jake Talbot enters** through the dining room door with his mother, **Martha Talbot**, hot on his heels. Jake is a sturdy young man in his 20s. He wears jeans, work boots, and a flannel shirt. Martha is 50ish. She wears a house dress with an apron, slippers, and a worn cardigan. Jake moves around the room, opening drapes, removing dust covers, getting the room ready for guests. Martha follows him, talking a mile a minute.)

MARTHA

I ask you—Who's the owner here? Me! And I say they can't stay. You never should'a told them they could. We're shut! What'll I feed 'em? Who's gonna' make all them beds? Not me—I tell you that! You gonna' do it? Or maybe you expect Him to? And what about Him?

(Jake has moved to the fireplace to check the fire. She finally realizes he has not been paying any attention to her.)

Jake Talbot—are you listening to me? Jake!

JAKE

(Kneeling at the fireplace.)

What is it, Ma?

MARTHA

They can't stay.

(Jake notices a carving knife stuck in one of the logs beside the fire. He casually pulls it free and lays it on the mantle.)

JAKE

They got to. The road's flooded in one direction and blocked by mudslides t'other. Ain't no place else to stay.

AGNES

(Offstage, at the front door)

Hello? Hello? Is anyone here?

JAKE

Ah, they're here.

(He hands Martha the armload of furniture covers, grins at her, kisses her on the forehead, and exits upstage.)

MARTHA

(Calling after him in a loud whisper)

Jake! Jake! (An exasperated sigh) This is gonna' be a nightmare.

(Martha exits toward the dining room. An instant later **Agnes Tate enters** from the hall. She is middle-aged, dressed expensively but not in the best of taste. She has a raincoat draped over her shoulders. She looks around. She is not impressed.)

AGNES

She can't be serious! Carolyn! Carolyn!

(**Carolyn Pickett enters** . In her twenties, attractive, and smartly dressed, Carolyn is Agnes' niece and traveling companion.)

CAROLYN

Right here, Aunt Agnes.

AGNES

You must tell Miss Halsey that we cannot possibly stay in this...this establishment.

(**Ellen Halsey appears** in the opening. Ellen is tour guide for this group. She is attractive, cheerful, and professional. She carries a clipboard and a copy of the guide book, "Ghosts and Ghouls of New England." She pauses, looking at the space. She is not impressed, but she is trying to cover—make the best of the situation. She calls off to the others.)

ELLEN

If everyone will join us in the parlor, we'll assign rooms so we can all settle in.

(Carolyn wanders, looking at the room. The others begin to find their way into the room, in groups of one or two. First in are **Muriel Lampmann** and **Patricia Simpson**, two ladies who are each traveling solo. Both are middle-aged. Patricia is high-strung, nervous. She crosses to the fireplace, looking around. She picks up the carving knife from the mantel, looks at it in surprise and puts it back. She pulls out her cell phone, checking for a signal; and she is obviously annoyed when she can't get one. After a moment she moves to Ellen, obviously wanting to ask a question.)

AGNES

Miss Halsey—you don't actually intend for us to spend the night in this... this...

CAROLYN

Oh, it's not that bad. It has a kind of rustic charm.

AGNES

So do the La Brea Tar Pits, but I wouldn't spend the night there!

(As the conversation continues, **Todd Currier** and his father, **Professor Lawrence Currier**, enter and move toward the bar. Todd sits on a bar stool. He is in his 20s, dressed casually, but in good taste. Lawrence is in his 50s—a distinguished, educated gentleman. He is dressed more formally in tweeds with a tie. He carries a hard-bound book.)

ELLEN

Oh, Agnes, you have such a wonderful sense of humor.

(Opening up the conversation to include the others and thereby to escape having to deal with Agnes one on one.)

I hope the rest of you will take this little inconvenience...

AGNES

“Little inconvenience?!”

ELLEN

(Maintaining control of the situation, she continues.)

...with the same good humor that Agnes is showing. It could be worse.

AGNES

I'd like to know how.

(**Grace Sharp and Doris Brooks appear** in the opening. Both are in their 60s. Grace should appear rather helpless, but we discover that she is anything but. She carries a purse, a travel bag and a camera case, all of which are horribly overstuffed. She is overloaded and immediately drops much of her load onto the floor. Grace always wears a dress, while Doris is always in slacks. Doris is taller and larger than Grace and has a no-nonsense air about her. She carries a small, efficient-looking bag.)

GRACE

Oh, this is delightful!

DORIS

(Not believing what she heard)

What is?

GRACE

This place. It's just what I was hoping for.

DORIS

Grace Sharp! Are you out of your ever-loving mind? This place? It's...it's...
(She's at a loss for words)

GRACE

It's creepy, eerie...scary—exactly what you'd expect from a haunted inn. I mean, no offense, Ellen, but those first two stops? Ghostly inns? They were more like Holiday Inns. This? It's perfect.

ELLEN

(Surprised and relieved by Grace's enthusiasm)

Well...a stay at the Barnsley IS a rare treat. It's always closed this time of year—

AGNES

(Interjecting) Closed? It should be condemned.

ELLEN

(Ignoring Agnes' interruption.)

...because that's when the manifestation is most active.

MURIEL

Really?

ELLEN

If you'll look on page one-hundred-twelve of your handbook, Ghosts and Ghouls of New England, you'll see that the Barnsley is said to have an intriguing poltergeist. Very fond of knives.

MURIEL

Oh, wonderful!

(Muriel, and several other guests take out their copies of a small paperback. Martha enters from the dining room.)

ELLEN

Now—everyone's on the second floor. Keys are in the doors.

(Looking at her notes.)

Let's see—Patricia, why don't you take room number one? And Muriel, number two.

(Muriel starts for the hallway.)

PATRICIA

(Sounding upset and holding up her cell phone.)

Are there telephones in the rooms? I need to make an important call and my cell phone doesn't seem to work here.

(Ellen looks at her clipboard to check.)

MARTHA

That's right. None of 'em do. You can use the phone in the office, back by the front door. That's the only phone we got.

(Everyone is startled by her voice—they didn't notice her come in. Patricia seems particularly startled. Some of the others pull out their cell phones to check for reception, looking a bit annoyed. Muriel continues on out the hallway.)

PATRICIA

It's a very important, private call.

MARTHA

Then shut the door.

(Patricia starts out again, but pauses when Ellen mentions Lawrence.)

ELLEN

Lawrence, you and Todd can have number four.

TODD
What happened to number three?

MARTHA
That's His room.

DORIS
"His" room?

MARTHA
Sleep in there and you'll be chopped liver by mornin'.

TODD
(He's is finding the whole situation fairly funny.)
Okay, fine. No need to share.

MARTHA
Dinner's at six.
(She exits to the dining room.)

LAWRENCE
(Obviously quoting, hamming it up, as he starts out.)
"From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties and things that go bump in the night, Good Lord, deliver us!"

PATRICIA
Who wrote that one?

LAWRENCE
It's an old Scots prayer.
(Lawrence and Patricia exit toward the stairs.)

ELLEN
Doris and Grace, why don't you take... number five.

DORIS
No ghoulies and ghosties, I hope.

ELLEN
Matching Queen Anne singles with a view of the valley.

GRACE
Sounds lovely.
(Grace moves to collect her things.)

ELLEN
Oh, Grace, wait a moment, please. I...need a favor.

GRACE
Certainly. (To Doris) Doris? Would you mind taking this stuff on up?

DORIS

(Sarcastic) Do I look like a pack mule? Don't answer that! Just load me up.

(Grace loads her down and Doris exits as the scene continues.)

ELLEN

Agnes, you and Carolyn shall have the room next to the bathroom... number...

AGNES

NEXT to the bathroom?! I never share a bath!

(Jake appears in the hallway, coming from stage right.)

ELLEN

I'm sorry; there are no private suites at the Barnsley.

AGNES

Then you must make other arrangements. My contract guarantees double accommodations with a full, private bath.

JAKE

Then you can sleep in the barn.

(He continues down the hallway, exiting stage left.)

AGNES

The barn!?

ELLEN

(Looking hurriedly at her information.)

Jake must mean the, uh, "Honeymoon Cottage." It does have its own bath. (reading)
"The cottage is reached by following the covered walkway outside the French doors."

(She quickly crosses and opens one of the French doors.)

Ah, here we are.

AGNES

(Moving to the French doors.)

Humph! Don't think you've heard the end of this, Ellen. I am staying here under protest.

(Pausing in the opening. A command, not an invitation.)

Carolyn, are you coming?

CAROLYN

I'll be right there.

(Agnes goes out the French doors. Ellen closes them.)

I must apologize for my aunt. Tact has never been one of her strong suits.

ELLEN

I've seen worse. But this is my last year with Tyburn Tours. I want a nice, relaxed, low stress job—maybe teaching drivers' ed.

(Carolyn and Grace chuckle at Ellen's joke.)

Grace, I was wondering if you would help me with...something.

GRACE

Of course.

(Ellen and Grace exit up center. Todd and Carolyn are left on stage. Carolyn doesn't particularly want to join her aunt yet. Todd looks around the space and then comments....)

TODD

...So...What is there to do...when you're stuck in a dreary inn with a bunch of boring old fuddy-duddies?

CAROLYN

(Smiling) Who are you calling a "boring old fuddy-duddy"?—your Dad or my Aunt?

TODD

Either. Both. To tell the truth, all of 'em...except you, of course.

CAROLYN

What'd you expect on this kind of tour?

TODD

About what we got. I only came along to keep Dad company. This tour's the first thing he's shown an interest in since Mom died. He's always been fascinated by the paranormal, so when—

(Donald Schultz enters from the hall. He's the van driver. Middle-aged, Donald is dressed in slacks, a white shirt, and a pullover knit vest. He enters noisily, loaded down with Agnes' matched luggage.)

DONALD

(Mumbling to himself.)

Oh boy. You'd think—

(Sees Todd and Carolyn.)

Pardon me. Your aunt—is she going to want ALL her bags?

CAROLYN

Afraid so, Donald.

DONALD

Oh boy.

(He exits awkwardly through the French Doors.)

TODD

(Dryly.) Your aunt packs lightly...for someone on a world tour.

CAROLYN

She doesn't pack at all. She tells me what to pack for her.

TODD

Don't take this wrong, but... (a chuckle) she is a character.

CAROLYN

She can be. I just hope she doesn't go on a tear.

TODD

A tear?

CAROLYN

When she gets bored she can be...incredible. And there's nothing I...or anyone else can do to stop her.

TODD

Why do you put up with it?

CAROLYN

She's all the family I have. My parents died when I was twelve. Since then I've lived with Aunt Agnes, even when I went to college. She's been so generous. I owe her so much.

TODD

What about what you owe yourself? Husband. Family. A life of your own.

CAROLYN

I'm not an old maid yet.

TODD

Do you believe any of this ghosts and goblins stuff?

CAROLYN

Not really. You?

TODD

No way. What about your aunt?

CAROLYN

Definitely not. But it's the hot topic with her friends. This tour will give her plenty to talk about all winter.

DONALD

(Entering from the French Doors. To Carolyn.)

Pardon me, but your aunt said to tell you she needs you.

(He heads for the hallway exit, up center.)

CAROLYN

Thanks. (To Todd) Sorry. Duty calls.

(She heads toward the French doors.)

TODD

Suppose I should go up and unpack, too.

(Carolyn exits, closing the French door behind her. Jake enters from the dining room carrying an ice bucket, heading behind the bar.)

DONALD

Not yet. Afraid your bags are still on the bus. I've got to finish with...
 (gestures with his head toward the French Doors)
 ...her ladyship first.

(Donald exits through the hallway.)

JAKE

(As he moves behind the bar.)
 You want'a drink? Compliments of Tyburn Tours.

TODD

Sure. How 'bout a bourbon and seven?

(As Jake begins making the drink, Martha enters from the dining room.)

MARTHA

Jake, you seen me big meat cleaver?

JAKE

Nope. There's a carving knife on the mantle.

(Martha crosses to the mantle, talking as she goes, and picks up the carving knife. Meanwhile Grace and Doris appear in the hall entrance.)

MARTHA

It's gone. It's His favorite and I hid it, like I do all the knives, but He finds 'em. He always does. And then what happens? With all these noisy folks, Shish-kee-bob?

TODD

On a meat cleaver? Hardly. (He chuckles)

MARTHA

(Turning on Todd, brandishing the knife, gesturing with it.)
 Go ahead and laugh, young man. But I tell you this. He'll have the last laugh. Not you.
 (Doris and Grace step into the room. Jake notices them.)

JAKE

Ah, good evening ladies.

MARTHA

You folks ought'a find some other place to stay. It ain't safe here this time of year.
 (She exits through the dining room door.)

JAKE

(Jumping in to change the conversation.)
 Something from the bar? Miss Halsey said, long as you're stuck here, the drinks are on Tyburn Tours.

GRACE

(As they move into the room.)

Your mother seems VERY upset.

JAKE

She's just trying to scare you.

(Jake gives Todd his drink when it's ready.)

DORIS

She's doing an excellent job.

JAKE

Oh, don't mind her.

DORIS

It's not her I mind. It's all this stuff about the flying knives.

JAKE

We haven't lost anybody at the Barnsley yet.

DORIS

Yet?

GRACE

Oh, Doris, don't be silly.

DORIS

Me? Silly? Wouldn't think of it.

(Donald enters from the hallway with more of Agnes' luggage. He works his way clumsily over to the French Doors and out.)

GRACE

(To Jake.) You were saying something about...beverages?

JAKE

Yep. Got a first rate dry sherry.

DORIS

Sherry? Yecchk! Scotch rocks. (Jake begins to mix her drink.) If I'm sleeping with knife-tossing ghosts, I want to be prepared. (Turning back to Grace.) How I ever let you talk me into this...

GRACE

(Sitting on the sofa)

Last year you dragged me through every microbrewery in the state of Washington—and you know I can't stand beer. Ghostly Inns of New England is educational, with lots of history—and it's non-fattening.

DORIS

But New England? In November?

GRACE

It's your own fault. You were too cheap to go during high season.

DORIS

(Jake hands Doris, who is standing near the bar, her drink.)

Thank you.

(Doris takes her drink and crosses left, behind the sofa.)

High season was Halloween! That was last week. I didn't see why I should pay an extra eight hundred bucks to go one week earlier.

(Agnes enters through the French doors, followed by Carolyn. Donald brings up the rear. He closes the door and goes out through the hallway.)

GRACE

I believe I will have a glass of the sherry, please, Jake.

AGNES

Make that three, Mister...?

JAKE

Call me Jake. Three sherries, comin' up.

(As the scene continues, Agnes crosses to join the other women. She sits in the center chair. Carolyn stops near Todd at the bar. When the sherries are ready, she takes two from the bar and serves Agnes and Grace and then returns to the bar for hers. She sits on a bar stool beside Todd.)

AGNES

I hope your accommodations are better than ours. They've put us in the barn! Me—sleeping with the horses!

DORIS

(Under her breath, almost.)

Poor horses.

JAKE

Ain't been horses in there since World War Two. Kept some pigs there a while back. But we done it over real nice. It's our Honeymoon Cottage now.

(Agnes reacts as Muriel enters from the hall carrying a Ouija Board. She has changed into something soft, flowing, and eccentric. She moves to the card table, talking as she goes.)

MURIEL

Isn't the atmosphere of this place just charged with...with eerie resonance. It's thrilling. I brought down my Ouija Board. Thought we might attempt contact before dinner.

DORIS

With who?

GRACE

With whom?

DORIS

(To Grace, aggravated)

Excuse me! (Back to Muriel) With "whom?" Princess Leia?

TODD

Given this place, more likely Jabba-the-Hutt.

MURIEL

And what's everyone drinking? I might have a sherry, if that's what you're all having.

DORIS

(Holding up her glass, to show that sherry isn't the only option.)

Some of us are getting in the SPIRIT of things. Ellen's paying.

MURIEL

Oh, then I might be tempted with a small martini.

DORIS

Thought you might.

MURIEL

Tanqueray?

JAKE

All we got's Gordon's.

MURIEL

Oh, drat. In that case, use lots of Vermouth.

(She starts to light a cigarette.)

JAKE

(Jake begins mixing a pitcher of martinis.)

Sorry—no smokin' inside. Fire marshal says the place is a fire trap. Wouldn't want ya'll endin' up crispy critters. You can smoke on the porch. But be careful.

(Muriel starts out the French doors.)

DORIS

(Grabbing her purse). Wait up, Muriel. I'll join you in smoker's Siberia.

(Doris and Muriel leave through the French doors.)

CAROLYN

So, ...Jake, tell us about this knife-throwing poltergeist of yours.

JAKE

Ain't nothing to tell.

AGNES

You mean this place isn't actually haunted?

JAKE

Maybe it is; Maybe it ain't. Now, Ma, she'd swear it is. She's always pullin' knives out'a walls and such this time of year. How the knives get there is another question. Could be him--could be her.

(He pours up Muriel's martini & adds an olive.)

Now, if you'll excuse me.

(He takes Muriel's martini and exits out the French doors.)

AGNES

So here we are—Trapped in a haunted inn that may or may not be haunted. It is, however, cold as a morgue and in desperate need of major repairs. Are we having fun yet?

CAROLYN

It's not that bad.

AGNES

Well it certainly isn't what I paid for.

CAROLYN

Give it a chance. You may be surprised.

PATRICIA

(Entering from the hallway, arm and arm with Lawrence.)

Professor Currier....

LAWRENCE

(He is obviously quoting.)

"Oh, call it by some better name." (Then chuckling) Call me Lawrence. "Professor Currier" reminds me of work.

PATRICIA

Sorry, I can't help it. You're so...knowledgeable. All these quotes. How do you remember them all?

(Jake comes back in and returns behind the bar.)

LAWRENCE

As long as I've been teaching?—something had to sink in.

PATRICIA

I recognize that one. Romeo and Juliet?

LAWRENCE:

No, that's, "Then call it by some OTHER name. A rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." I said, "Oh, call it by some BETTER name" and it continues "... for friendship sounds too cold." That's Thomas Moore.

PATRICIA

(Moving closer to Lawrence.)

You know, I just loved the way you read *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* that first night at the Longfellow Inn.

AGNES

Yes, "Lawrence;" it was truly enchanting. It sent chills up and down my spine. I hope you'll read something for us again tonight. Liven up this dreary place.

(Patricia reacts coldly to Agnes' complimenting of Lawrence.)

JAKE

Anything to drink? Compliments of Tyburn Tours.

PATRICIA

Oh, Profe... Lawrence. I'd love a dry martini.

JAKE

Just made a fresh pitcher.

LAWRENCE

I'll have one too.

JAKE

Comin' up.

(Donald enters from the hall with the last of Agnes' & Carolyn's luggage. He starts toward the French doors. Ellen follows him into the room.)

ELLEN

I believe that's the last of Ms. Tate's luggage.

DONALD

(He pauses, turning back to Ellen.)

Boy, I sure hope so.

CAROLYN

It is. Thank you so much. Can I...get you something to drink?

(Donald looks back to Ellen. She nods her approval. He immediately is in a better mood as he turns to Jake.)

DONALD

Got anything back there as plebian as a beer?

JAKE

Don't know what you mean by "plebeeran," but I got Bud.

DONALD

Just what the doctor ordered.

(Jake grabs a bottle of beer from behind the bar as Donald shifts the luggage to free up a hand. He takes the beer and takes a healthy swig. Then he raises the bottle in a toast to the assembled company, crosses, and exits through the French Doors. As he goes out, Ellen moves up center where she can be seen by everyone in the room.)

ELLEN

Please. Everyone. If I could have your attention.

(Carolyn opens the French doors and signals for Muriel and Doris to return, which they do.)

I called the state police. They think it may take up to forty-eight hours before they can reopen the road.

(Groans and reactions from the guests.)

So it could be worse.

AGNES

You keep saying that.

ELLEN

(Ellen ignores Agnes.)

I'm sure we're all very grateful that Jake and Martha have agreed to take us in on such short notice.

(A disgruntled hurrumph from Agnes, which Ellen tries to ignore.)

Under the circumstances, we'll just have to make the best of things. I have a few ideas to keep us entertained.

(She glances surreptitiously at Grace, who nods slightly--no one notices.)

To begin, I'll ask Lawrence to read you a little about the Barnsley from an article on little-known haunted inns of New England.

(She hands the journal to Lawrence; the appropriate page is marked.)

I've marked the spot.

(Lawrence crosses to Ellen and takes the journal. He opens it, clears his throat, and prepares to read. Ellen crosses to the bar. To Jake, quietly)

Gin and tonic.

(As Lawrence begins, Jake places the two martinis on the bar and starts on Ellen's drink. Patricia crosses and collects the two martinis. She moves back toward Lawrence, holding his drink for him as he begins. When she sips her martini she makes a face—too much vermouth! Soon after Lawrence begins, Martha enters quietly from the dining room.)

LAWRENCE

"We conclude our list with the Barnsley, an unassuming inn only four hours from Boston but in a different world. Hidden away in its isolated valley, it has long been known locally as Murder Inn."

(Reactions all around, but the only discernable one is Agnes.)

AGNES

“Murder Inn?” If this is your idea of a joke, Ellen, I’m not laughing.

LAWRENCE

“The main part of the inn dates back to 1742 and has been expanded and remodeled a number of times. Architecturally, it is, unfortunately, a shambles and bears little resemblance to its original colonial charm.”

AGNES

You can say that again.

(Lawrence looks at Agnes then resumes reading. Ellen takes her drink and exits quietly through the French Doors.)

LAWRENCE

“Reportedly the inn is haunted by the ghost of Marco, a gypsy who was the first husband of Ramona Ashe. As the story goes, Marco discovered his wife, Ramona, and the inn’s proprietor, Thomas Ashe, in a compromising situation in room number three. He allegedly threw several knives at the couple, but missed each time.”

DORIS

Must have been nearsighted.

MURIEL

We could ask him on my Ouija Board.

AGNES

Oh by all means, do.

LAWRENCE

Ahem! “In the ensuing fight, Marco fell down the stairs and was killed. The ghost is said to have a penchant for knives, which appear mysteriously throughout the inn only during November—the month when the gypsy band was encamped at Barnsley. Martha Talbot—a direct descendent of Ramona and Thomas Ashe—keeps the room locked and has allowed no one inside for years. However, many have claimed to feel an eerie presence, regardless of the time of year, as they pass the room’s door.”

MURIEL

Oh, yes. Yes. I felt it when I’ve walked by.

AGNES

Nonsense. Those were your bunions.

(Muriel bristles, but doesn’t get a chance to answer.)

MARTHA

Bunions! My buttercups!

LAWRENCE

(Hamming it up.) “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.”

MARTHA

What are you talking 'bout? It ain't dreams you gotta worry about. It's knives.

GRACE

(Can't resist)

Actually it's Edgar Allen Poe's The Raven.

MARTHA

What's he know about it?

LAWRENCE

Probably more than most.

MARTHA

Humph!

MURIEL

Well, isn't this all so fascinating. I must try to contact Marco with my Ouija Board. Would someone join me? I need a partner.

(She looks for volunteers. No one is interested. Finally Grace agrees.)

GRACE

Sounds like fun.

MURIEL

No, it's serious—very serious. You must be open to accept the...vibrations of the ether, or it won't work.

GRACE

I'll do my best.

(They go to the table and sit with Grace facing the dining room door. Muriel sits with her back toward it. They quietly set up the Ouija Board. As they get situated, Todd crosses to the French doors and looks out.)

TODD

The rain's stopped. Anyone up for a walk? Carolyn?

CAROLYN

Will you need me, Aunt Agnes?

AGNES

What I need is a helicopter to Bermuda. No such luck.

TODD

(Checking his watch)

We've got half-an-hour before dinner.

AGNES

I wonder what culinary delights we should expect this evening?

MARTHA

We wasn't expectin' guests. Best I could do was meat and mashers.
(Martha exits through the dining room door.)

AGNES

"Meat and mashers?"...I don't believe I'll dress for dinner.

MURIEL

(Softly to the Ouija Board).

Is Marco here?

AGNES

(Rising and starting out.)

I think I'll lie down for a few minutes, before..."dinner."

(Agnes exits through the French doors. Jake turns to Todd.)

JAKE

I wouldn't go over the bridge at the creek. It'll prob'ly flood there 'fore much longer.

TODD

So we'll be cut off from the village, too?

JAKE

Usually are when it floods like this. But it doesn't stay up too long. Here, ya better take this flashlight. It's almost dark.

CAROLYN

(She takes the flashlight that Jake pulls from behind the bar.)

Thank you.

(Carolyn and Todd exit.)

LAWRENCE

You don't happen to have another flashlight handy, do you Jake? Some fresh air sounds good.

(He puts the journal down on the coffee table.)

JAKE

Got plenty in the office. Power's touchy this time of year. Surprised we still got it. I'll go get ya' one.

(He goes out through the hallway.)

DORIS

Oh, this gets better and better. Now we'll have a nearsighted ghost throwing knives in the dark. I can't wait to get into my jammies.

MURIEL

(Softly to the Ouija Board). Are you happy?

PATRICIA

Pro...I mean Lawrence, could I go with you. I'd love to get out, as long as I'm not alone.

LAWRENCE

I'd welcome the company.

(He extends his arm and they cross to the hallway doors and exit. Doris walks over to the bridge table and stands on the upstage side.)

DORIS

(Sarcastically.) Talk to Elvis yet?

GRACE

Go away.

MURIEL

(In a stage whisper.)

He's speaking to us.

DORIS

(With some surprise.)

He is?

GRACE

Marco, not Elvis. Don't be ridiculous.

DORIS

Of the people in this room, I am not the one being ridiculous.

(Donald enters from the hall. He reaches behind the bar for a fresh beer.)

DONALD

If you ladies don't mind, I'm gonna' prop my feet up in front of the fire and see if I can dry them out.

GRACE

Certainly. Make yourself comfortable.

(Donald crosses stage left and takes the desk chair and moves it down to the upstage side of the fireplace, beside the offstage end of the sofa. Then he settles into the chair and puts his feet upon the hearth. He sips his beer and stares at the fire. The conversation at the table continues.)

MURIEL

(In another whisper.)

He is terribly unhappy.

DORIS

Who?

GRACE

Marco, Doris. We are communicating with Marco.

DORIS

How can you tell?

(Muriel takes her fingers off the planchette and answers in a normal, and obviously exasperated voice.)

MURIEL

I asked him.

DORIS

Right.

(Grace also removes her fingers from the planchette.)

MURIEL

Haven't you ever used a Ouija Board before?

DORIS

Not on your life. I can look foolish enough without props. So how do you ask... whoever or whatever.

MURIEL

See—the board has all the letters of the alphabet, numbers, and a Yes and a No. We lightly touch our fingers to the planchette...

(She holds up the planchette for Doris' to see.)

...ask our questions, and the planchette moves of its own accord to the answer, spelling it out if necessary.

DORIS

You mean you think Marco is controlling that thing?

MURIEL

That's how it works.

DORIS

Give me a break! You're just pushing it around the board.

MURIEL

(Outraged.) We are not! We barely touch the planchette. We certainly don't push it around. Do we, Grace?

GRACE

(With a bit of a smile.)

Certainly not consciously.

MURIEL

Well I don't push it around period.

DORIS

Show me. Ask Marco if he plans to stick a knife in any of us?

MURIEL

I don't think—

DORIS

Ask him. Or are you afraid to?

MURIEL

Certainly not, but it's hardly a suitable—

DORIS

Then ask him. It's something we all want to know, anyway.

MURIEL

(Reluctantly, Grace and Muriel resume using the planchette.)

Marco, do you plan to... to...stick a knife in any us now staying at the inn?

(The planchette moves to "yes." Muriel gives a little shriek.)

Yes, he says yes!

(Forgetting herself.)

Who Marco, who do you plan to kill?

(The planchette begins to move. It spells out D-O-N with Doris reading the letters as the planchette points to them.)

DORIS

D...O...N...

(After the "O" Doris would react, but she'd relax with the "N".)

MURIEL

It's Donald! The Ouija says it's Donald!

(The women look toward Donald. Apparently he has dozed off. His beer is sitting on the floor beside him, his arms are crossed and his head is resting on his chest, with his hat pulled down over his eyes.)

DORIS

(Sotto voce, to keep Donald from hearing.)

Really? Somehow he doesn't seem too concerned.

MURIEL

The Ouija tells the truth! But it doesn't have to happen.

(She rises and crosses toward Donald.)

Donald, I'm sure we can find a way to appease Marco. He wouldn't really do such a thing. He is just so lonely that he is calling out for attention.

(Donald doesn't move.)

Donald. ...Donald? ...Donald!

(Her voice rises with each repetition. The third time, she awakens him. He jerks awake, startled.)

DONALD

Huh!? What!? What is it?

MURIEL

(Embarrassed.) Oh, I'm sorry. I thought...

DONALD

Huh? What?

DORIS

Muriel's Ouija board just told her you're slated to be Marco's first victim.

DONALD

Oh boy, that just makes my day.

MURIEL

You scared me to death. I thought...I thought you were dead.

DONALD

Nope—just dead on my feet. Soon as we eat I'm hittin' the sack.

(Ellen enters from the hallway. When the scene shifts away from him, Donald goes back to the same position he was in before.)

ELLEN

Well, how are things in here?

DORIS

Just deadly. Marco tells us, via the Ouija Board, that Donald's first for a knife in the back.

MURIEL

I'm so upset. I didn't mean to...

GRACE

I don't think Donald's too worried. Looks like he's dropped off again, already.

ELLEN

Not surprised. That man can go to sleep faster than anyone I've ever seen.

DORIS

Hardly the best qualification for a bus driver.

ELLEN

Oh, not on the road. But once he's done for the day... And he goes deep. Sleeps like Rip Van Winkle.

MURIEL

So we noticed.

(Voices are heard from the hallway. Lawrence and Patricia enter.)

ELLEN

Back so soon?

LAWRENCE

“Loud roar’d the dreadful thunder, the rain a deluge showr’d.” Well, there wasn’t any thunder, but it did start to rain again, so we came back.

PATRICIA

Lovely quote. (Tentatively) Shakespeare?

LAWRENCE

Andrew Cherry.

PATRICIA

But it was beautiful outside—until the rain started. Lawrence is such wonderful company. (Patricia takes Lawrence’s arm and they move to the fireplace and stand with their backs to the fire.)

AGNES

(Making a grand entrance through the French doors.)

Well, I’ve had my Pepto Bismol. Bring on dinner.

(As the scene continues, Agnes crosses to stand on the other side of Lawrence. Patricia bristles at this presumption, but Lawrence is comfortable with the dual companions. About here we begin to hear distant thunder, which builds to the end of the scene.)

DORIS

I don’t think Pepto will do much for a knife in the gut.

AGNES

Whatever do you mean?

DORIS

According to the Ouija Board, Marco’s on the move. Who’s for fricassee of tourist? Fillet of tour guide? Bus driver en-brochette? Supposedly that last item is already on the menu.

GRACE

(Amused, but critical of Doris’ manners.)

Doris! That’s in the worst possible taste.

AGNES

(Never missing an opportunity to criticize.)

Totally in keeping with the rest of this disastrous tour.

(Everyone tries to ignore Agnes’ dig. After a pause, Grace jumps in.)

GRACE

Ellen. I want you to know that I am having a wonderful time on our little adventure.

AGNES

Thank you, Pollyanna.

GRACE

This tour is turning out to be even more exciting than I hoped. Isn't it, Doris?

DORIS

(Supporting her friend, but having a hard time doing it.)

...Whatever you say.

GRACE

We all realize the flood isn't your fault.

AGNES

(Quite loudly.)

However, lack of planning is!

ELLEN

(Ignoring Agnes)

Thank you. This delay is a bit frustrating, but...

AGNES

(Interrupting, tired of being ignored. She moves to face Ellen directly.)

Frustrating! Ellen, if you had the least shred of competence, we wouldn't be stuck in this nightmare of an inn! Ever hear of contingency planning? The minute we get out of here, I intend to leave this tour and I expect Tyburn Tours to refund every nickel of my money. And then some!

(Agnes walks to the French doors and stares out, her back to the room. We begin to see some lightning as the storm intensity builds. After a silence Todd appears in the hallway. Carolyn walks past the opening, going toward the downstairs bathroom. Todd comes into the room, brushing the water out of his hair. He puts the flashlight down on the bar.)

TODD

Ah, great walk, till the rains hit. And Jake's right—the road's flooded at the creek.

AGNES

(Sarcastically) Another delightful touch to Ellen's UN-planned little adventure.

CAROLYN

(Offstage, Carolyn calls loudly. It is almost, but not quite a scream.)

Todd! Todd!!

(Everyone reacts, but before they can go to her rescue Carolyn rushes into the room and into Todd's arms. Jake appears in the hallway opening. Martha enters from the dining room.)

There's a knife stuck in the bathroom door! It's huge. I walked right into it.

PATRICIA

Oh my God.

(Jake disappears in the direction of the bathroom.)

TODD

(Soothingly.) Just someone having a little joke, that's all. It wasn't meant for you. Anyone could have discovered it.

AGNES

But it wasn't anyone, it was MY niece. Grace, you may feel that levitating knives are part and parcel with fine tour management. I do not! This is another example of Ellen's total incompetence—getting us cooped up with a murderous lunatic!

(Jake returns with a big carving knife. Martha crosses to him and takes it.)

MARTHA

I figured He wouldn't wait too long.

(She turns and faces the guests, gesturing with the knife.)

He is not happy about this; not happy at all. I warn you—This won't be the last knife flyin' tonight. If you insist on stayin', you'd best be ready—ready for a night you won't forget.

(There is a flash of lightning outside the window, followed almost immediately by a huge peal of thunder. The power fails and the lights go out. There are several vocal reactions when it does. **Note**--be ready for the audience to think this is the end of the scene--keep the vocal reactions going until the audience quiets down and Martha can be heard. While the stage is dark, Donald places another, even larger kitchen knife under his upstage arm to look like he's been stabbed in the chest.)

MARTHA (CONT'D)

(Casual, off-handed, aggravated.)

Oh blast it! Jake, get that generator goin'. These folks are 'fraid of the dark. But it ain't the dark that's gonna' to get 'em!

(After a couple of moments—long enough for Donald to get set—Todd recovers his flashlight from the bar and turns it on. He moves the beam around—it is important that it doesn't shine on Donald until the appropriate time.)

JAKE

I'll call the power company, then I'll crank up the generator.

(Jake exits, through the hallway.)

MARTHA

Here, le'me have that.

(She grabs Todd's flashlight and goes to the bar. She pulls a battery lantern from behind the bar and turns it on. It casts eerie shadows. Nobody notices Donald.)

ELLEN

Everyone, just relax. Jake'll have the lights back on before you know it.

(Carolyn and Todd move to the bar. Agnes remains by the window. Doris joins Muriel and Grace at the bridge table.)

MARTHA

You folks are gonna' have to fend for yourselves. I need to go check on me kitchen.
(She exits, passing behind Donald, without shining the flashlight on him.)

LAWRENCE

Here, let's sit down.
(Lawrence guides Patricia to the sofa and seats her, not too far from Donald, though their focus is back toward the bar and the lantern.)

PATRICIA

(Her voice is quiet, she is close to hysteria.)
Are there any of those martinis left?

LAWRENCE

(He crosses toward the bar.)
"Quickly, bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever."
(For everyone, but mainly Patricia.)
And that was Aristophenes.
(Jake enters from the hallway, with several flashlights.)

JAKE

No dice on callin' the power company. 'Fraid we lost the phone too.
(Patricia reacts. The situation is really getting to her.)
Here's some more flashlights.
(He puts several flashlights on the bar. Todd takes one, turns it on and shines it around the room, avoiding Donald.)
I'll get the generator goin'.
(He exits through the hallway.)

LAWRENCE

(Behind the bar.)
One martini coming up, Patricia. Anyone else?

TODD

Count me in. Carolyn?

CAROLYN

No, no. I'm fine.

LAWRENCE

Donald? Another beer?
(There's no response. Muriel pipes up.)

MURIEL

He's asleep again.

LAWRENCE

How could anyone sleep through...?

MURIEL

Ellen said he's a very sound sleeper.

LAWRENCE

(Chuckling) "Preserve me from unseasonable and immoderate sleep." Samuel Johnson. It's almost dinner time. Patricia, perhaps you better wake him up.

(Patricia, leans over to tap Donald on the arm.)

PATRICIA

Donald? Donald?

(She shakes him and he falls over to the side and forward. His upper body lands on the edge of the sofa—his head almost in Patricia's lap. At the same time, Todd shifts his flashlight to focus on him. The knife is clearly visible. If anyone noticed, it is obviously stuck between his arm and his body—but no one on stage notices that. Patricia reaction is not a scream, but rather the quiet voice of hysterical overload; she can barely breathe.)

Oh my god! There's a knife! He's...he's been stabbed!

(Everyone reacts. Patricia the most excessively.)

Blackout.

End of ACT I Scene 1

Act I Scene 2

(One hour later. Glasses etc. have been cleared away. The Ouija Board is still on the bridge table, but it has a large carving knife sticking straight up from the board. The writing table chair has been returned to its proper place. Patricia comes in from the dining room. She is upset. Through the open door can be heard the sounds of dinner winding down. Voices, the serving of coffee, etc. Patricia looks back toward the dining room, then moves into the room. She sees the knife stuck in the Ouija board, then approaches the table cautiously. Grace enters, carrying a mug of coffee. Doris is behind her, also with a mug.)

GRACE

Patricia?

(Patricia reacts, startled.)

Are you all right? They didn't mean anything. It was just friendly teasing.

PATRICIA

Friendly? I don't think so. If you'll excuse me, I have medication that must be taken immediately after dinner.

(She goes through the hallway and out.)

DORIS

(Once Patricia's gone.)

She's in a foul mood.

GRACE

It was unfortunate—her discovering the...body.

DORIS

Her reaction was a bit much. (Chuckling.) Especially when the..."corpse" started to move. She must have thought it was Night of the Living Dead.

GRACE

(Chuckling with Doris.)

Still, Agnes was merciless at dinner. She would not let it go.

DORIS

That woman has a mean streak a mile wide

(Agnes enters. She has a glass of red wine, and apparently had several with dinner. She is talking to someone in the dining room.)

AGNES

It's beyond me why anyone would want to dilute decent Burgundy with coffee.

(Turning to address Doris and Grace.)

Especially after that disastrous dinner. And those chairs—straight out of the Spanish Inquisition. My back will never recover.

DORIS

(Escaping) You'll have to excuse me. I want to catch a smoke before the inquest.
(Agnes toasts Doris with her wine glass. Doris looks at Grace, indicating her surprise and amusement, then returns Agnes' toast, using her mug.)

Well...Tah-tah.

(She exits, snickering.)

GRACE

Now, Agnes, be fair. Dinner was delicious.

AGNES

(Sarcastic) What was it?

GRACE

Pot roast.

AGNES

I knew that! I meant the mashed up orange stuff?

GRACE

The mashers? Parsnips, potatoes, and carrots—roasted, and then pureed with herbs and spices. I intend to beg, borrow, or steal the recipe before we leave.

AGNES

I only want to know where they got this delightful little Burgundy.

GRACE

Didn't you hear? Martha makes it herself.

AGNES

A woman of...unusual talents.

(She notices the knife stuck in the Ouiji board.)

I see Marco paid a visit during dinner. I'm afraid Muriel won't appreciate the placement.

(Muriel appears in the doorway, with a mug of coffee. She has added a matching shawl to her ensemble.)

Speak of the devil. Muriel...

(Agnes gestures at the board. Muriel rushes over to look.)

Apparently our resident poltergeist paid a visit, and you missed him. Or should I say he missed you?

MURIEL

Oh my, it looks as though Marco is not happy with us—not happy at all.

(Muriel carefully pulls the knife out and rubs the spot where the knife was stuck. While the women are focused on the table, Martha enters from the dining room with a coffee pot, heading for the bar. The others don't notice her.)

AGNES

Right through the "M"...for Muriel.

GRACE

It could just as easily signify Martha, or Marco.

AGNES

Or murder... or mashers. Perhaps Marco finds them as distasteful as I do.

(Martha, who has put the coffee pot on the bar, crosses down to the women. When she speaks, she startles them.)

MARTHA

(To Agnes) More likely you—if you keep on joking about Him that way.

(Jake appears in the hallway, as Martha takes the knife from Muriel.)

Giv' me that knife. I swear. No respect. None of you got no respect for what you don't want to understand. I've warned you. He's warned you. If you know what's good for you, you'll get out...while you still can.

(Jake crosses down and takes Martha by the shoulders, guiding her forcefully back toward the dining room door.)

JAKE

Ma, quit playin' with the knives, and scarin' the guests. They'll think you're serious.

(Martha pulls away from him, and turns on him, gesturing with the knife for emphasis. Ellen comes in from the dining room with a mug of coffee in time to see most of this.)

MARTHA

What makes you think I ain't? I told you—no guests this time o' year. He don't like 'em. I don't like 'em. Now get 'em out of here while they can still get!

(Martha exits, in a huff. Jake follows her. Agnes focuses on Ellen and raises her glass in a gesture of toast. Ellen turns back to the dining room.)

ELLEN

If everyone will join us, we'll get started.

(She moves to the upstage center of the room. To Grace.)

Where's Patricia?

(As the scene continues, Carolyn and Todd come in, followed by Lawrence. They're talking among themselves quietly. Carolyn and Lawrence have mugs of coffee. Todd has a glass of the burgundy. Lawrence crosses to the bar and sits on a stool. Todd and Carolyn move to the sofa and sit—with Carolyn to the center.)

GRACE

Upstairs, taking her medication.

ELLEN

Is she all right?

GRACE

Upset, but I think she'll be fine.

ELLEN

I hope so. And Doris?

GRACE

Outside, destroying her lungs. I'll call her.

(Grace crosses to the French doors and exits. Agnes joins Lawrence at the bar and Muriel sits at the bridge table—Muriel fiddles with her Ouija Board.)

ELLEN

If everyone will get comfortable, we'll...

(She is interrupted by Patricia, who appears in the hallway opening.)

Patricia, thank you for joining us.

(Ellen gestures for Patricia to join Muriel at the table. Instead, she crosses all the way down left and sits on the hearth of the fireplace.)

As soon as Doris and Grace come in, we'll begin.

TODD

Where's the corpse?

ELLEN

In the kitchen.

TODD

(Facetiously) Uh-oh. What's for breakfast?

(That gets chuckles from Muriel, Ellen, Lawrence, and Carolyn. Patricia and Agnes are not amused. Grace and Doris return. They join Muriel at the card table.)

CAROLYN

(Teasing.) Behave! This is a solemn occasion.

ELLEN

Now, if everyone's ready?

(She waits for their attention.)

Lawrence has agreed to preside over our murder investigation.

LAWRENCE

"Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long." Merchant of Venice.

(A nod toward Patricia, who ignores him.)

So, why don't we start by reviewing what we know?—which isn't much.

(A pause, while everyone focuses on him.)

Donald was murdered during the blackout caused by the power failure. The knife was one from the inn. It appears that any one of us could have killed him. Unfortunately, we have no idea who might have had a motive.

TODD

It's obvious?

(With a dramatic tone.)

Marco done it. Did it. (Lighter) But how do you execute a ghost?

DORIS

Ghostbusters?

(Chuckles from the friendly group, but not the others.)

LAWRENCE

Exorcism. But is Marco our only suspect?

CAROLYN

What about Martha?

AGNES

Yeah, she's a fruitcake if I ever saw one.

CAROLYN

I meant...she's not happy to have us here.

TODD

Maybe she stabbed the first person she could find. Figured it would scare us off.

CAROLYN

And the murder would be blamed on Marco, reinforcing the legend of Murder Inn.

LAWRENCE

You know, this is incredible—a wonderful setup for a murder. I may have to steal it.

AGNES

Steal it?

LAWRENCE

I'm working on a book—a mystery thriller with aspects of the paranormal. This trip is part of my research And this is a perfect setup. A group of strangers, trapped by a flood at a haunted inn. The power goes out...

DORIS

Sounds like Laurel and Hardy to me.

LAWRENCE

Perhaps, but with all of us running around in the dark—no alibis—any one of us could commit murder, and it would be very difficult to prove.

DORIS

(To Grace, for everyone's benefit.)

Remind me to pile every stick of furniture against our door tonight.

CAROLYN

So how do we solve Donald's murder?

LAWRENCE

We need means, motive, and opportunity.

DORIS

Let's see... The means was still sticking out of him. That's one. Opportunity?—any one of us could have done it when the lights went out. No help there. That leaves...motive.

TODD

(Facetiously) How about jealousy? Could there be a jealous lover among us?

AGNES

Which very conveniently lets out you and your father, and Jake.

GRACE

It lets some of the rest of us off as well. We're far too old for Donald.

AGNES

I hope you're not including me in that "old" group.

DORIS

Of course not. We wouldn't dream of including you with us...would we, Grace?

ELLEN

(Jumping in to keep things from getting off track.)

All right, jealousy is one possibility. What else?

LAWRENCE

What about greed? Could Donald have been blackmailing one of us?

MURIEL

What could he possibly know? He only met us three days ago.

LAWRENCE

Are you certain of that fact?

MURIEL

Why, no, but...

LAWRENCE

And even so, he could have found out something.

ELLEN

How?

TODD

He could have overheard a conversation, or a telephone call.

(Patricia squirms in her seat and looks uncomfortable.)

GRACE

And once he had the information...blackmail is the easiest crime in the world.

DORIS

Speaking from experience, are we?

CAROLYN

So any one of us could have had reason to kill Donald.

LAWRENCE

Including Jake and Martha. Which puts us right back where we started.

AGNES

Ellen, don't you think this has gone long enough? Some of us have better things to do, like... counting the cracks in the plaster.

DORIS

(Rising, moving more center stage, hamming it up.)

She's trying to divert us, which means she must have done it. I remember now. I heard Agnes last night. Late. Arguing in the garden. You know how her voice carries. She must have been arguing with Donald.

MURIEL

That's right. I heard her, too. Voice like a foghorn. I went to look. I could see it was Donald she was arguing with.

AGNES

(Agnes bristles at the foghorn reference, but is otherwise enjoying being the center of attention.)

In the dark?

MURIEL

It was a full moon.

AGNES

Which is why we're stuck here in a flood. It was pouring.

MURIEL

Well...it must have...I mean. The light must have come from somewhere. I saw him. Patricia saw him too, didn't you?

AGNES

Yes Patricia, do tell us why you were in the garden, in the rain, so late. With someone, perhaps? Perhaps you were with Donald. Maybe it was your voice that Muriel heard. You do have something to hide, don't you?.

PATRICIA

(Stiffly) I don't know what you're talking about.

AGNES

Shall I refresh your memory?

PATRICIA

Ellen, I think...

ELLEN

(Quickly, to rescue an obviously upset Patricia.)
Why don't we...uh...ask Donald...who he was talking to?

(Ellen crosses to the dining room and gestures to Donald.)

TODD

Great idea. Crank up the old Ouija Board.

(Everyone reacts laughing or chuckling, except for Muriel, who is not amused and Patricia, who sits tensely on the edge of her seat.)

MURIEL

I will not have my Ouija Board used for fun and games.

GRACE

(Trying to calm Muriel, sympathetic to her feelings.)
Sorry, Muriel. This has been a trying day. We're letting off a little steam. Nothing meant by it.

(Donald enters from the dining room.)

AGNES

Ah, the corpse appears. Perhaps it will bleed at the sight of her. Lawrence, I'm sure you have the perfect quote.

LAWRENCE

...Richard the Third. "For 'tis thy presence that exhales this blood, from cold and empty veins, where no blood dwells."

AGNES

(Dryly.) I knew you'd have one. Donald, go stand next to Patricia and bleed on her so she'll confess. Otherwise I'll have to tell what I know.

(Agnes stares at Patricia. Donald looks to Ellen for guidance. Patricia looks from Agnes to Ellen—obviously Patricia is ready to jump up and flee the room. Grace takes in the situation and stands up, moving centerstage. She hams it up—melodrama mode—to break the tension in the room.)

GRACE

Keep Donald away from me. Keep him away. I'll confess. I did it. Yes, He was my poor, dead brother's son. We had no other family—he was my only relative—the heir to our great family fortune...once I was gone. But he wanted it now. I told him I intended to leave it to my good friend, Doris. He threatened me—told me I'd never finish this trip alive. It was self defense. I was only protecting myself.

(As she reaches the end of this "confession," Grace breaks down, into phony sobbing. Doris moves to comfort her. Most of the others are laughing and smiling at the joke, except, of course, Patricia and Agnes.)

ELLEN

Let's have a big round of applause for Grace and Donald, for doing such a great job on our little murder mystery.

(Every one applauds except the honorees, and Patricia. Agnes claps slowly, about three times. Doris takes the opportunity to return to her seat at the table. Grace remains standing beside Ellen.)

Tomorrow—coffee will be served in here anytime after seven and breakfast will be at eight.

TODD

What's on the menu? Donald and dumplings?

ELLEN

Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be delicious. (Chuckles.) Thank you all for being such good sports.

DONALD

(To the group in general yawning widely.)

Well, if nobody needs me, I'm gonna' hit the hay.

(He starts out, exiting up center.)

CAROLYN

Good night.

(A chorus of "Good night," "See you in the morning," "Sleep tight," etc. as he goes out. The group breaks up into smaller groupings. Todd and Carolyn are cozy on the sofa—enjoying the fire. Ellen has a few words with Grace and then grabs her clipboard from the desk and moves to sit in the chair center stage to make some notes. Focus shifts to Lawrence who moves over to Muriel and Doris at the card table.)

LAWRENCE

Mind if I join you?

DORIS

You play bridge?

LAWRENCE

(He takes a seat.)

Actually, I'd like to ask Muriel about her Ouija Board. For my book.

AGNES

(Jumping into the conversation uninvited.)

Yes, your book. You must tell us all about it.

(Agnes moves to stand behind Lawrence, to his right.)

LAWRENCE

Afraid that's bad luck.

AGNES

(Wheedling.) Oh, come on, don't be superstitious.

PATRICIA

(She rises and crosses to Lawrence, coming to his defense. She moves to a position behind him, on his left side.)

Agnes, if he doesn't want to talk about his book, you shouldn't badger him.

AGNES

Badger? Moi?

(Agnes puts a hand on Lawrence's shoulder, possessively. Patricia, not to be pushed away, places her hand on his other shoulder. A bit of a turf war develops, with Lawrence as the turf.)

LAWRENCE

(He continues, trying to ignore what's going on above him.)

Ah...Muriel, I'd really like to know more about the Ouija board—the history—the theory behind it.

MURIEL

(Warming to his attention, oblivious to what's going on.)

Certainly. They come from ancient Egypt, and are used to communicate with...the beyond. I've always found the Ouija board very truthful when approached with a serious and open mind.

(She gives the others a look.)

Although, given the aura of cynicism in this room, perhaps we should move into the dining room.

(She rises and collects her Ouija board. Lawrence welcomes the opportunity to rise and interrupt Agnes and Patricia's shenanigans.)

PATRICIA

I'd love to try it, too.

MURIEL

(Brusquely.) Sorry, only two can share the Ouija.

PATRICIA

Then I'll watch.

MURIEL

(Starting out) I'm afraid not. It...impedes the free flow of communication with the beyond. If you'll excuse us.

LAWRENCE

Patricia, why don't you go first? I can wait.

(Both ladies obviously bristle at the suggestion.)

PATRICIA

That's all right. Maybe I can find a game of bridge.

(Muriel heads for the dining room. She pauses at the doorway. Lawrence follows her and they go out. Patricia watches them go.)

DORIS

Did I hear someone say “bridge?” Have a seat.

(Doris indicates the seat Muriel vacated. Patricia is not enthusiastic, but she goes with it, sitting down.)

We need a fourth. Ellen...

(Ellen looks up, but Agnes quickly jumps in.)

AGNES

Count me in! Penny a point, or should we make it more?

GRACE

We don't play for money.

AGNES

What's the point then? Oh well, nothing else to do.

(Ellen, obviously relieved, goes back to her book.)

GRACE

I saw cards...

(Grace gets the cards and a pad and pencil. She crosses and sits in the empty chair. It is Agnes and Doris against Grace and Patricia. Patricia is seated with her back to the French doors and Agnes is upstage of the table. The cards are cut and Doris deals.)

PATRICIA

(Petulantly) What's so fascinating about a stupid Ouija Board?

AGNES

I suspect it's the owner who Lawrence finds fascinating.

PATRICIA

What do you mean?

AGNES

Oh, don't be so naive. Muriel's been making eyes at him since the tour began, just like you. Lawrence has gotten bored with you, so now he's ready to dabble with Muriel for a while. Don't worry, he'll probably drift back into your net in a day or two....if I don't decide to do a little fishing myself.

GRACE

Agnes, sometimes you are too much.

AGNES

(She seems to take it as a compliment.)

Am I? No one's fooling anyone. On this tour we have three mature, but attractive women—some more so than others (she preens a bit)—all eligible. There's only one eligible mature male, so a bit of a cat fight is to be expected. Relieves the boredom.

(Patricia looks up, shocked.)

DORIS

(Pointedly.) I pass.

AGNES

Don't look so shocked, Patricia. You're as hard-nosed about it as I am.

PATRICIA

I am not! I am very sensitive. I feel things more intensely than most people. Certainly more than you do.

AGNES

(Laughs.) Thank you, Patricia. That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me on this rotten tour so far. By the way, it's your bid.

PATRICIA

(Annoyed.) Pass.

AGNES

One club. Oh, Doris, I do use a short club.

GRACE

Pass

DORIS

One spade.

PATRICIA

Pass.

AGNES

Three spades.

GRACE

Pass

DORIS

Four spades.

PATRICIA

Pass.

AGNES

Pass

GRACE

Pass

(With the bidding complete, Patricia leads and Agnes lays down her hand as dummy.)

DORIS

(Annoyed.) Good grief, Agnes, what were you bidding on? There's no way.

AGNES

Good practice for you. Besides we're not playing for money.

(Agnes raises her glass to drink, but it's empty.)

Um, I need a bit more.

(She rises and starts out to the dining room. Doris takes the first trick and then spends some time studying her hand before leading from the dummy. Patricia watches Agnes go out. Todd gets up and put a log on the fire.)

TODD

So Ellen, what's on the agenda for tomorrow?

ELLEN

(Watching Agnes leave the room.)

I'm waiting to see how we survive tonight.

TODD

Maybe we should have a scavenger hunt and see if we can lose Agnes in the woods.

(To Carolyn)

Sorry.

CAROLYN

(Carolyn looks about to make sure Agnes is out.)

Ellen, you need to know—when Aunt Agnes is bored, she can be downright malicious. There is...

(The dining room door opens. Ellen holds up her hand to silence Carolyn.. Agnes enters, pausing at the door and peeping back.)

AGNES

(With perverse delight.)

They are so cute!

PATRICIA

Who?

(Agnes closes the door, crosses to the card table and sits.)

AGNES

(Laying it on thick.)

Lawrence, and Muriel. Sitting there knee to knee. Just like two little lovebirds. They've totally forgotten the Ouija Board. Holding hands...

(Patricia becomes increasingly agitated as this progresses.)

DORIS

Patricia, your play.

PATRICIA

Oh. Sorry.

(She throws out a card without really looking at her hand.)

DORIS

Are you sure you're out of trump?

PATRICIA

(Distracted.) What? Trump. No. What's trump? Oh, spades. Sorry.

(She takes back her card and plays another. At that moment, Martha comes through the dining room door. As she comes through the door, we hear laughter through the doorway, and possibly Muriel saying something like, "Oh Lawrence". Martha moves to the bar and goes to work, cleaning up. Patricia reacts to the laughter. She puts down her hand, rises, and walks over to the dining room door. Everyone watches her, Agnes with obvious delight. When she reaches the door, she quietly pushes it open.)

AGNES

(In a voice loud enough to carry to the dining room.)

Patricia, leave Muriel and Lawrence alone. They're adults.

PATRICIA

(She turns, embarrassed, and moves away from the door.)

I don't.... I don't know what.... Really, Agnes.... How can you....?

AGNES

(With pure enjoyment.)

Because you are absolutely Kelly green with jealousy. Now that you've made a complete fool of yourself, come back and finish your hand. The rest of us want to play bridge, not Loves Labor Lost.

(Smiling sweetly. Lawrence and Muriel enter and pause in the doorway.)

And that, Patricia, is also Shakespeare.

(Then to Lawrence and Muriel.)

Oh, and if you two want to, uh, whatever... Why don't you find a less public place where you won't upset the other guests.

(Ellen starts to rise, but seems unsure of what to do.)

PATRICIA

(Trying to control herself, she turns to Martha, and in a strained voice.)

Martha...is there any possibility that the phone is working yet?

MARTHA

(Not even looking up from her cleaning)

Nope—just checked.

AGNES

Poor, poor Patricia. What is she going to do? Stuck in a decaying dump...dumped by her man, with no one to hold her hand...not even her analyst.

(Patricia glares at Agnes, trying to decide how to respond.
Lawrence, steps forward and puts a hand on Patricia's shoulder.)

LAWRENCE

(Gently.) Patricia...

PATRICIA

Keep your filthy paws off me you old leech! (To Ellen) Ellen, you better get me out of here first thing tomorrow or I swear I will make it my business to see that you're fired, and then I'll sue you and your damned Tyburn Tours for every nickel you've got! I will not be treated this way! I will not!!!

AGNES

Really, Patricia; hysterics at your age? No wonder you had a breakdown.

PATRICIA

Shut up! Shut up you vicious, evil woman. I told you that in confidence.

AGNES

So I forgot.

(Patricia fumes for a second, but can think of nothing to say, so she turns and storms out toward her room. There is an awkward silence.)

GRACE

Agnes, that was cruel.

AGNES

(A sip from her wine glass.)

Carolyn, you'll have to come play for Miss Neuroses. I believe spades are trump.

(Carolyn rises with a sigh and starts for the table.)

DORIS

I think I prefer Marco, knives and all.

(Patricia storms back in with a big carving knife, brandishing it. She stops in the hall opening. Everyone freezes. She looks around and sees Martha.)

PATRICIA

Keep your bloody knives out of my way. I almost tripped over this one on the stairs.

(She storms out the hallway doors again, keeping the knife.)

MARTHA

(Calling after her.)

He'll put his knives wherever He likes! He's been here lot longer 'n you. By god, she rents a room and she thinks she owns the place!

MARTHA (CONT'D)

(She turns to take in the whole group.)

You people are somethin' else. I n'er seen such goings on since ol' Mabel Marnsley mislaid her glasses. Served the guests the lye soap she was a makin'. Thought it was cream o' wheat!

(She exits to the dining room.)

DORIS

Think I'll stick to fruit for breakfast.

ELLEN

(Rising.) I better go see what I can do for Patricia.

LAWRENCE

If it were me, I'd give her a little time to cool down.

(Accepting his advice, Ellen settles back into her chair.)

DORIS

You don't suppose Jake has a big, strong muzzle. (Looking at Agnes.) We certainly could use one.

GRACE

Agnes, why are you so vicious to Patricia? What has she ever done to you?

AGNES

I have absolutely no idea what you mean. (To Ellen.)_Ellen, you are without doubt the most incompetent tour guide I've ever had the misfortune to encounter. You can't even maintain the slightest decorum among your charges. I've had enough. I'm going to bed.

(She exits through the French doors. There is a silence.)

CAROLYN

I'm sorry, everyone. I'm so sorry.

TODD

It's not your fault.

ELLEN

If I survive this trip, I may go on the women's professional boxing circuit. At least they let you hit back!

DORIS

And I thought this was going to be such a boring stop.

(As things continue, Todd quietly exits out the hallway.)

ELLEN

(Gives a little laugh.)

I suppose if it weren't my job, it might all be funny. And this is only the third day of a two-week tour.

LAWRENCE

It may not be that bad. They both said they wanted to leave.

DORIS

Never happen. Those two have simply retired to their respective corners to rest up for the next round.

MURIEL

You make them sound simply wicked. I've had nice conversations with both of them.

DORIS

That was just to soften you up. You'd better watch your step, Muriel. Unless I miss my guess, you'll be in the ring with them tomorrow.

MURIEL

Me? What have I done?

DORIS

You've got the ball and appear to be in scoring position.

MURIEL

What?

DORIS

Lawrence. He's the prize, and you've got him. Patricia was spitting nails when you two left the room. Agnes was less obvious, but she's in the game, if only to keep you and Patricia from winning. This is no simple love triangle, my dear—you've got yourself a big, fat, messy quadrangle.

LAWRENCE

Ahem.

DORIS

Yes, Lawrence.

LAWRENCE

Wanted to make sure you knew I was still in the room.

DORIS

(With a chuckle.) We do.

LAWRENCE

Well, just in case you really want to say something personal—something I might feel uncomfortable hearing—I think I'll slip off to my room for a moment.

GRACE

Don't go, Lawrence. Doris prefers to talk behind people's backs in front of them.

LAWRENCE

I need my journal. There's too much good stuff happening. Got to make some notes.
(He exits through the hallway.)

DORIS

Now we've done it. We'll all end up in his book.

MURIEL

All I was doing was showing Lawrence how to work my Ouija Board.

DORIS

And Agnes was playing peacemaker...with a machete.
(Martha comes in from the dining room, upset.)

MARTHA

(Talking fast.) Who's that fool conjurin' board belong to? I want it out o' me dinin' room right now. Thing attracts knives like a magnet. There's three stickin' out o' it; probably more on the way. Whose is it?

MURIEL

(Getting up.) Sorry. I'll get it right now. Sorry.
(She goes into the dining room.)

MARTHA

You people ain't got no sense. Playin' with the beyond as if it was some kind o' party game. The way I'm losin' knives, I ain't goin' to be able to dice the potatoes for breakfast. You'll have to have cream 'o wheat.
(Martha goes back out to the dining room.)

DORIS

I think she's putting us on, but I'm not sure.

ELLEN

I'm just glad I have Jake to deal with.

DORIS

He is a cutie, isn't he?
(Ellen is embarrassed.)

GRACE

Doris! Behave yourself.

DORIS

If I were twenty years younger...

GRACE

You'd still be old enough to be his mother.

LAWRENCE

(Entering from the hallway.)
Is it safe for me to come back yet?

GRACE

You never needed to leave.

LAWRENCE

Oh yes I did.

(He holds up his journal and pen for everyone to see.)

DORIS

(Looks at her watch.)

Good grief. How can it feel so late and still be so early?

ELLEN

Time is different in this part of the country.

LAWRENCE

Sure seems to be. Did Muriel go up to bed already?

DORIS

Martha's making her clean up her toys.

(She nods toward the dining room.)

LAWRENCE

(Goes to the dining room doorway and looks in.)

She's not here.

GRACE

What did you think of it? The Ouija Board.

LAWRENCE

(A bit uncomfortable.) Oh, interesting, quite interesting.

DORIS

What did you ask it?

LAWRENCE

Muriel was still explaining it all when the ruckus started.

DORIS

Is that what she was doing?

GRACE

What about all these knives, Lawrence?

LAWRENCE

Some fixation of Martha's. That's what Jake seems to think.

DORIS

Ellen, you're the tour guide. Do you believe any of this supernatural stuff?

(Todd returns, unobtrusively, from the hallway.)

ELLEN

Not really. Tyburn Tours wants their guides to respect those who do, but the tours seem to work best if the guides have a strong dose of skepticism.

DORIS

And what does your skepticism say about all the flying knives?

ELLEN

No one has actually seen them thrown; they just appear. Martha could easily do that. Although I have to admit, walking past room three does give me the willies.

GRACE

Me too. I'm glad it's not between our room and the bath.

ELLEN

(A new subject.) Do you suppose Patricia has had time to calm down yet?

LAWRENCE

Would you like me to go up and see?

ELLEN

(Rising) Thanks, but I should do it; part of my job.
(She exits through the hallway door.)

GRACE

Doris, I've been thinking. If we're going to survive this trip, we need to neutralize Agnes.

DORIS

I like the muzzle idea.

TODD

Or Marco might loan us a knife. (To Carolyn) Sorry.

GRACE

What if we present a common front? If everyone just ignores Agnes instead of rising to her bait.

CAROLYN

She's very difficult to ignore—she takes it as a challenge.

LAWRENCE

We need some way to keep her occupied.

DORIS

(Looking meaningfully at Lawrence, then at Grace.)
Grace, are you thinking what I'm thinking?

GRACE

I think so.

(Both Doris and Grace turn to Lawrence with big smiles.)

LAWRENCE

(Alarmed.) I don't think I like what I think you're thinking.

GRACE

Then don't think about it. Just do it. Whatever it takes to keep Agnes entertained. Afterwards, we'll pass the hat and take you out to dinner and give you a big medal for valor in combat.

LAWRENCE

If I survive.

DORIS

If you don't we'll do it anyway, posthumously.

GRACE

Just think of it as a game.

DORIS

Trivial pursuit.

LAWRENCE

My sanity is no trivial pursuit.

TODD

Come on, Dad. Where's your spirit of adventure?

LAWRENCE

No way am I going to pay court to Agnes.

GRACE

I take it that's your final word on the matter?

LAWRENCE

Definitely.

DORIS

Well, we tried.

TODD

You'd don't suppose she'd go for Donald?

DORIS

Agnes and Donald? That's a picture.

(She laughs. The others join her. Ellen enters from the hallway. Her hands are clasped and she looks totally shocked. Lawrence stops laughing abruptly when he sees Ellen.)

LAWRENCE

What's wrong?

(The others stop laughing as soon as they see Ellen or hear the tone in Lawrence's voice.)

ELLEN

(In a strained voice.)

It's Patricia. She's been stabbed.

DORIS

(Thinking it's another game.)

Oh please, let's not do this again.

ELLEN

There's blood everywhere.

(Her voice edges toward hysteria. She opens her hands and we see blood on her palms.)

She's dead! Dead!

(Blackout)

End of ACT I