



**Sample Pages from
Free - Version 2**

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FREE
(VERSION 2)

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Lindsay Price



Free – Version 2

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Characters

Jack

Jill

Mrs. Steel

Bonnie

Betty

Becky

Mayor

Mrs. Brown

Stranger

Townspople: Man 1, 2, 3 & Woman 1, 2, 3, 4

2 Guards (non-speaking)

Smaller Cast

Jack

Jill

Mrs. Steel

Mayor

Betty

Mrs. Brown

Stranger

Townspople: Man 1, 2 & Woman 1, 2, 3

Notes

This is the same play as *Free – Version 1* with one small change: almost all of the male roles have been converted to female roles.

There is also an Appendix to help you convert this large cast (17) into a smaller cast (12).

SCENE I

The scene is a hillside on the outskirts of a small town. At centre stage there is a huge picnic laid out — piles of food and drink, numerous baskets filled to the brim. It should look beautiful and instantly appetizing. There is a large sign propped up against one of the baskets, which says FREE FOOD.

There are a number of bushes, plants and greenery scattered around the stage. There is a large bush downstage right. There should be enough space on the right side of the bush for a scene to be played there and tall enough to block the view of the food. There is also a cluster of bushes upstage.

JILL enters the space on the right side of the downstage bush. She DOES NOT see the food. She has been running and throws her arms into the air.

JILL: I win!

She does a little victory dance. She then turns to see that no one is behind her. She looks offstage.

JILL: Jack? Come on, it's not that steep. Use your arms. I didn't say use your fingers, I said use your arms.

JACK crawls on stage, wheezing.

JILL: Took you long enough.

JACK: I'm not a runner, you know. *(he collapses onto the floor)*

JILL: Victorious again!

JACK: Oxygen. O2. Air! *(he frantically gulps in air)*

JILL: Don't gulp like that. You have to breathe normally.

JACK: What do you think I'm trying to do? Stop grinning at me.

JILL: Don't you like my "winning" smile?

JACK: *(still wheezing)* You had a head start.

JILL: I had no such thing. *(she starts to tickle JACK)*

JACK: Don't do that! My lungs already feel like they're going to explode.

JILL: I won fair and square and you're just mad 'cause I beat you. Again.

JACK: You're such a sore winner.

JILL: You're just sore.

JACK: (*he groans*) Did I mention I'm not a runner?

JILL: It's good for you.

JACK: So are Brussels sprouts.

JILL: Yeck.

JACK: Brussels sprouts are very good for you.

JILL: There's a huge difference. Running is good for you and it's fun.

JACK: Fun? Having my lungs come out my nose is fun?

JILL: Brussels sprouts are good for you and they taste like crap.

JACK: Nice mouth.

JILL: That's what you get for hanging out with girls from the wrong side of town.

JACK: It's a risk I'm willing to take.

JILL: A risk? Oooh I'm a risk he's willing to take. La-di-da.

JACK: Come on.

JILL: Mr. Jenkins, sir, I'm so honoured to be in your stuck up snotty presence!

JACK: I'm not stuck up.

JILL: You used to be. Uptight too. Really tight.

JACK: I am not uptight.

JILL: Huh! (*she pushes him over*) Catch me if you can!

JILL runs around the bush and is immediately stopped by the sight of the food.

JACK: No more running! Can't we jog? Or saunter? How about a casual meander?

JACK rounds the bush and is also stopped by the food.

JACK: Wow!

JILL: Uh huh.

JACK: Someone is in the mood for a mighty big chow down.

JILL: I've never seen so much food.

JACK: Me neither.

They both take a huge sniff.

BOTH: Wow.

They are both in a euphoric, mesmerized state.

JILL: I dreamt about going on a picnic last night. My stomach has been growling like crazy all morning.

They both take a huge sniff.

JILL: It smells so good.

They both take a huge sniff.

JACK: Potato salad.

JILL: Strawberries.

JACK: Ham sandwiches.

JILL: Chocolate cake...

They both take a huge sniff.

JACK: ...with whipped cream.

JILL: (*Her eyes are closed. She is in food euphoria.*) You can't take whipped cream on a picnic. It'll spoil.

JACK: Does that smell spoiled to you?

JILL: Do you remember when we were younger, going on those church picnics and we had to eat tuna fish sandwiches with no mayonnaise 'cause mayo goes bad in the sun?

JACK: And the sandwiches were so dry.

JILL: They just sat in your mouth.

They both take a huge sniff. Then the moment is over.

JACK: Who do you think it's for?

JILL: No one from our town.

JACK: Why not?

JILL: Do you know anyone who could afford to buy all this stuff?

JACK: I guess not.

JILL: Besides, if someone had gone into the grocery store and bought this much food we'd have known about it.

JACK: You can't even sneeze in your own bathroom without someone finding out.

JILL: So who's it for then? And what's it doing on the hill? And why did they leave it here?

JACK: *(Holding his head)* Too...Many...Questions...Can't...Process...Information. *(He drops to the ground)*

JILL: Idiot.

JACK: What are you asking me for anyway? Am I wearing a sign that says "Knower of all knowledge concerning abandoned picnics?"

JILL: Usually the sign says " Please look after this boy. He has trouble spelling his own name and often forgets what country he's in."

During JILL's lines, JACK gets up and starts to chase her. JACK chases JILL around the picnic. They circle the stage and end up right in front of the sign, which stops them again.

JILL: What's that supposed to mean?

JACK: Free food.

JILL: I know what it says. But what does it mean?

JACK: I think, and I'm only taking a wild stab at this, but I think it means the food is free.

JILL: I know that!

JACK: I thought the scholarship meant you were the smart one.

JILL: But why is it free? And free for who?

JACK: For us.

JILL: Why us?

JACK: We found it.

JILL: That's too easy.

JACK: The chocolate cake is calling you.

JILL: It is not.

JACK: (*in another voice*) Eat me...

JILL: We come across an abandoned picnic...

JACK: Eat me...

JILL: ...and a sign and all of a sudden the food is ours? It's weird.

JACK: Eat me...

JILL: It's not right.

JACK: Why not?

JILL: There's so much here. It's not just picnic food. There's dry goods and canned veggies and fruit.

JACK: So?

JILL: So what?

JACK: So what do you want to do?

JILL: I don't know.

JACK: The sign says free.

JILL: Nothing is free.

JACK: So, we don't take it. We can walk away and pretend we never saw it.

JILL: But what if it goes bad? Then we're being wasteful.

JACK: So you don't want us to eat it?

JILL: No.

JACK: And you don't want to leave it?

JILL: No.

JACK: So... we'll give it away.

JILL: Yeah...

JACK: Would that appeal to your guilt-ridden sensibilities?

JILL: We'll take it down to the church. Set up a food bank!

JACK: Why?

JILL: We'll give it to the town. What a great idea!

JACK: Thank you. Thank you very much. I think I deserve at least a sandwich for my staggering intelligence.

JILL slaps his hand away.

JILL: Let's start with the baskets.

She goes to touch one of the baskets. MRS. STEEL leaps out from behind the cluster of bushes upstage left. She has a branch in one hand, which she waves at JACK and JILL.

MRS. STEEL: Get away from there!!

JILL: (*speaking at the same time as JACK*) Ahhh!

JACK: What the...?

MRS. STEEL runs downstage to stand between JACK & JILL and the food.

MRS. STEEL: Don't you touch anything! It's mine.

JILL: Mrs. Steel!

JACK: We weren't doing anything.

MRS. STEEL: It's all mine, every crumb. So just stay away. Turn my back for five seconds. Five seconds! I knew in my soul something was up and I raced back up here. (*Gesturing to the food*) This is mine. Turn around and be on your way cause there's nothing here for you.

JACK: The sign says free.

MRS. STEEL: It's free till it's found and I have officially found it.

JILL: Says who?

MRS. STEEL: Finders, keepers. Losers, weepers.

JACK: Finders what?

MRS. STEEL: Rules are rules.

JILL: That's not a rule, Mrs. Steel. It's a kid's rhyme.

MRS. STEEL: Call it what you like. But this food is mine.

JACK: What are you going to do with it?

JILL: You can't keep it all to yourself.

MRS. STEEL: Aren't you the polite one. Always thinking the best in others. "Selfish Mrs. Steel." This food is not for me, it's for my family.

JILL: If you don't let anyone else have some then you are being selfish.

MRS. STEEL: It's for MY family. I've been praying for a miracle for a long time and I won't have the likes of you try and take it away.

JACK: Mrs. Steel, we're not trying to take anything away from you, but you have to be reasonable...

MRS. STEEL: REASONABLE! Mr. Man. Too big for his britches. Never had to scrounge a day in his life and he wants to lecture me about being reasonable.

JACK: Why don't we stop yelling at each other and talk for a moment.

As JACK tries to step forward to "talk," MRS. STEEL whips him with her branch.

JACK: Hey!

JILL: Jack!

MRS. STEEL: I told you to stay away and I meant it.

JILL: You can't beat us off with sticks.

JACK: There are lots of families who have been praying for miracles.

JILL: People who are worse off.

MRS. STEEL: People like you, Jill?

JILL: I never said...

MRS. STEEL: You think you're worse off than me? You look pretty content Jill, seems to me that you're attached to a pretty big meal ticket.

JILL: I am not going out with Jack because...

MRS. STEEL: You should keep your big mouth shut about being in need. Me – with seven kids to feed and a husband with no job because your boyfriend's mother, the high and mighty Mayor for the good of the people, she decides to close down the factory. The only place in town to make a decent wage and she closed it.

JACK: It wasn't her fault. The company was bought out, it had nothing to do with my mom.

MRS. STEEL: My husband worked there for twenty years. And for what? Nothing. So don't tell me about being worse off.

JILL: My dad lost his job too. So did my brother.

MRS. STEEL: Then I guess you should have gotten up earlier this morning. (*Gesturing to the food*) This here is first come, first served, and that was me. It's not free any longer. Get out of my sight.

JACK: Come on Jill.

JILL: No. I'm not going to let her.

MRS. STEEL: (*holding up her branch*) Get out of here!

JACK: Come on.

JILL: We can't let her...

JACK: Would you like to step into my office over here?

JACK guides JILL to the stage right side of the downstage bush. They keep their voices low to make sure that MRS. STEEL doesn't overhear them.

JILL: What are you doing?

JACK: Just hold on a second.

JILL: I am not going to walk away...

JACK: Hold on! How is she going to get the food off the hill?

JILL: (*getting it*) How is she...

JACK: She's left it once and I'll bet you anything she's not going to do it again.

JILL: Her family doesn't know, or they'd be here.

JACK: She's only one person.

JILL: At some point, if she wants to get the stuff home, she's going to have to get help.

JACK: Or take what she can carry...

JILL: ...which won't be much, leaving the majority...

JACK: ...for the town.

JILL: So what do we do?

JACK: Wait her out, I guess.

JILL: What about your mom? She'd know how to handle Mrs. Steel.

JACK: I don't know, Mrs. Steel's pretty vicious with that stick.

JILL: She won't be a match for your mom and the council. Isn't there a meeting going on this afternoon? I'll go and we'll be back in no time.

JACK: Maybe I should go.

JILL: Someone has to stay and keep an eye on her. Besides, who's the runner? You'd collapse before you're halfway there. (*She hugs JACK*) I'll be back in a flash.

JACK: No. I should go. It would be better if I explained this to my mom.

JILL: OK. Try not to hyperventilate.

JACK: You're so funny. Watch out for the stick.

JACK exits. JILL tries to peer through the bush at MRS. STEEL.

MRS. STEEL: I know you're there.

JILL freezes, trying to decide whether to stay behind the bush or come out.

MRS. STEEL: The bush isn't that dense. I can see you.

JILL comes out from behind the bush.

JILL: Hi.

MRS. STEEL: Where is he going?

JILL: He's – um – had to go back to town.

MRS. STEEL: Gone to get his mother no doubt. His mommy. Our highly esteemed mayor. You know the only reason she's in office is because she bribed her way in. Money goes a long way.

JILL: I think she's a great mayor.

MRS. STEEL: Oh you do. What is it her husband does? Paints rubber ducks for a living?

JILL: He's a cabinetmaker. He's an artist.

MRS. STEEL: An artist, well, I guess we know who wears the pants in the family. It must be nice for you Jill, that boyfriend of yours must be easy to manipulate.

JILL: It's not like that. We have a relationship.

MRS. STEEL: What are you doing here?

JILL: Nothing.

MRS. STEEL: So why don't you go?

JILL: I like the view. But I'll go if you really want me to.

MRS. STEEL: I knew I should have stayed. I could have headed you off, you never would have known this was here. This never would have happened. (*JILL doesn't answer*) Well. Let her come. Let her and her goons come, let them all come. Let them try to lay one finger on me, I'll take them all, I'll...

MRS. STEEL pauses. She knows she would not win. She throws down the branch and falls to her knees. She is not talking to JILL.

MRS. STEEL: It's my miracle. This is mine. All week I've been smelling food that isn't there. I have had cravings for fresh fruit and corn bread — food I haven't eaten in years. I woke up this morning knowing it was here. I could smell it all the way up the hill and when I saw... I know I haven't been good. I know I've drifted away, it's been so hard lately. But when I saw...don't let them take it away from me. Please. Please.

She opens her eyes to see JILL staring at her. She gets up off her knees, turns away, wipes her eyes and turns to face JILL.

MRS. STEEL: I'll give you whatever you want. Just please go get my husband and the boys. Please. Come on, Jill. It'll take five minutes and... Don't turn your back on me! We're made of the same stuff, Jill Walker. We belong on the same side. What do you want? Money?

JILL: I'm not taking your money.

MRS. STEEL: You want your share. How about that? You get my husband and I'll give you a basket.

JILL: Mrs. Steel.

MRS. STEEL: However much you can carry.

JILL: No.

MRS. STEEL: Half. I'll give you half, I'll give you...

JILL: Stop it! Stop. We're gonna wait for the Mayor. And then we're gonna to divide the food fair and square.

MRS. STEEL: Divide it up.

JILL: That's right.

MRS. STEEL: Share and share alike. That's your boyfriend talking. Rich people are always into sharing. They always have a secret stash hidden away in reserve. So, of course they can share all over the place.

JILL: He's not like that.

MRS. STEEL: What are you doing with him? He's not your type. Doesn't he usually date prom queens? Cheerleaders? Pillars of the community?

JILL: I like him.

MRS. STEEL: You're the next charity case for the Jenkins clan. Clean up the girl from the wrong side of the tracks.

JILL: I am not a charity case.

MRS. STEEL: Community service.

JILL: You don't know...

MRS. STEEL: His parents probably put him up to it.

JILL: It's not like that! OK? *(She goes to leave)*

MRS. STEEL: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You know me. Rhoda Steel. Run-at-the-mouth-Rhoda. You don't have to go anywhere. Stay and talk to me. How's your mother?

JILL: She's fine.

MRS. STEEL: Is she still not feeling well?

JILL: She's alright. Mark sent her a real nice card. Could you thank him for me?

MRS. STEEL: You should thank him yourself.

JILL: Yeah, well...

MRS. STEEL: Whatever happened between you and my Mark?

JILL: Nothing.

MRS. STEEL: I used to really enjoy your visits on Sunday afternoon.

JILL: It just didn't work out.

MRS. STEEL: Is he not good enough for you?

JILL: Of course he is. We just didn't click.

MRS. STEEL: He was nuts about you. Crazy. At least you had the decency to break up with him proper before going out in public with Master Jack Jenkins.

JILL: Me going out with Jack had nothing to do with Mark. It was completely different, it was... it doesn't matter.

MRS. STEEL: Not to you.

There is a moment where JILL and MRS. STEEL look at each other. MRS. STEEL breaks away and turns to stare at the food. She looks up.

MRS. STEEL: If you want to punish me, so be it. But I won't go down without a fight.

MRS. STEEL starts to fill her pockets with food.

JILL: What are you doing?

MRS. STEEL: When the Mayor and her goons start swarming around here, there isn't going to be a crumb left for the likes of me. I'm not waiting for my "fair share."

JILL: You can't do that.

MRS. STEEL: DON'T YOU TOUCH ME! You just stay back. If you knew what was good for you, you'd grab what you could. When was the last time your mother had food like this?

JILL: I don't know.

MRS. STEEL: Don't turn your back on your own, Jill. I know you think he's in love with you, but trust me, you're no catch.

By now MRS. STEEL has filled her pockets. She grabs two full baskets and exits. JILL stares at the piles of food. She starts to peek in the baskets.

JILL: There sure is a lot here. It looks like there's enough for everyone, more than enough.

She hunkers down and stares at the food. She reaches out a hand, just to touch one of the baskets. Suddenly, she wrenches her hand back and tries to move as far away from the food as she can.

JILL: Jill, Jill! What are you doing? You just spent five minutes giving grief to Mrs. Steel and as soon as her back it turned you're ready to do the same thing! My stomach is killing me. *(She stops and stares at the food again)* Maybe she's right. My mom could use a good meal. *(She walks to the side of the stage, looking for JACK)* No sign of Jack. *(She turns back to look at the food.)* No one is going to miss one basket. *(She goes to take a basket and stops)* No, no, no. Everyone should get a fair share. But still...it's not for me. If it's for my mother, it can't be bad, right? Right.

She picks up a basket and starts to lug it off stage.
BETTY, BONNIE, and BECKY enter.

SCENE IA

NOTE: For a small cast version of the following scene, see APPENDIX.

GIRLS: Hi Jill!

JILL drops the basket and backs away from it.

JILL: What? Who's there?

BETTY: Don't have a fit, Jill. It's only us.

JILL: What are you doing up here?

BONNIE: We always hike on the weekends.

BECKY: Keeps us in shape.

GIRLS: Uh huh.

JILL: Well, I won't stop you. Happy Hiking!

The GIRLS take in a deep breath.

GIRLS: We also smelled something...

BETTY: ...heavenly.

BECKY: Something...

BONNIE: ...made our mouths water.

GIRLS: We never go this way but...

They take in a deep sniff, open their eyes and notice the picnic.

BONNIE: Hey!

BETTY: Wow!

GIRLS: Look at all this food.

BECKY: Fruit salad.

BONNIE: Peanut butter cookies.

BETTY: Hoagies.

GIRLS: It smells so beautiful.

JILL: Don't touch it!

GIRLS: Oh!

BECKY: No need to be rude.

BETTY: We wouldn't dream of touching your picnic.

BECKY: Even though there is enough here to feed an army.

BONNIE: We wouldn't dream of taking anything.

BETTY: Not even a grape.

BECKY: Not even a watermelon seed.

JILL: It's not mine.

GIRLS: Oh?

JILL: It's for the town.

GIRLS: Oh...

JILL: We're gonna set up a food bank. Give a little bit to everyone.

BONNIE: If it's for the town, how come you were sneaking off with a basket?

JILL: I wasn't.

BETTY: Where's your better half?

GIRLS: Jack and Jill went up the hill.

BECKY: And who knows what they do there...

BONNIE: We saw him go dashing by.

JILL: He's gone to get his mom. She's gonna take care of distributing...

BETTY: (*coming across the sign*) Hey girls, look at this.

BONNIE: What does it say?

JILL: Don't you have anything better to do?

BECKY: Free food.

BETTY: Free food?

GIRLS: (*to JILL*) Not yours.

JILL: I never said it was mine. I just said it was going to be for the town.
Jack's going to be back any moment.

BETTY: So we could take some if we wanted to and you couldn't stop us.

JILL: It's for the town.

BONNIE: I'm from the town and my family could really use some of this!

BECKY: And mine!

BETTY: And mine!

JILL: And they'll get some. Everyone is going to get a share.

GIRLS: Yeah, but how much?!

BONNIE: How much exactly?

JILL: I don't know.

GIRLS: One basket?

JILL: I don't know.

GIRLS: Two? Three?

JILL: You're just going to have to wait.

BETTY: Come on girls.

They start towards the baskets. JILL tries to hold them back.

JILL: Wait!

BECKY: What are you gonna do, Jill?

BONNIE: How are you gonna stop us?

JILL: Why can't you just wait?

BETTY: What would your better half say if we told him we saw you sneaking off with a basket?

JILL: I wasn't sneaking off.

BONNIE: But you were.

JILL: I was going to, but I changed my mind.

BECKY: Don't get us wrong, we don't really give two hoots what you do, Jill Warner.

BONNIE: But if you want to play fair, play fair.

BETTY: If you want to play another way...

JILL: Alright. Take one basket.

BONNIE: Each.

JILL: Between the three of you.

BECKY: Alright.

BETTY: Becky!

BECKY: Don't worry girls. *(She picks up a basket.)* Pleasure doing business with you, Jill.

BONNIE & BETTY: Bye Jill!

The GIRLS leave.

JILL: There go the three largest mouths in the entire county. By the time they get down the hill, half the town will be barging up here. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. We should just call it off and let people fend for themselves. Maybe I should take a basket, and be back before Jack gets here. Maybe...

She pauses for a moment. Then grabs a basket and exits.

SCENE 2

NOTE: See APPENDIX for the smaller cast version.

The lights crossfade to a spotlight downstage where the MAYOR is standing.

MAYOR: Now the first thing I want to say is “Thank-you” to whoever laid this bounteous feast before us. I know times have been hard for you. I know these past few years have been a struggle and it is an honour and a privilege to be standing here today, able to distribute this gift to the people of my town. Now we want to be fair. After a lengthy discussion, the town council has decided every family will fill out one of these forms. A representative from each family will fill one out giving a detailed description of their situation and then the council will divide the food according to need.

At the end of the speech, the lights crossfade back to the hillside. The food is now cordoned off and there are two guards who continually patrol the area keeping a CROWD of people away from it. JACK and JILL are there as well, but separate from the CROWD.

As the lights come up, the MAYOR should move so that she is addressing the CROWD instead of the audience.

MAN 1: That’s not fair!

WOMAN 1: Why should some of us get less?

WOMAN 2: Some of us deserve more!

WOMAN 3: What do you mean deserve?

WOMAN 4: My kids are twice as skinny as yours.

MAN 1: I’m not filling out nothing!

MAN 3: (to MAYOR) Who are you to tell us that one family needs more and another family needs less?

There is a murmur of reaction from the CROWD.

MAN 2: (to the CROWD) I say, if the food is free, what are we waiting for?

There is a murmur of reaction from the CROWD.

MAN 2: I say every man for themselves!!

There is a roar through the CROWD and some people begin to push forward. They are kept back by the guards.

MAYOR: Now, now, if you people are going to push, I'm going to have to make this a restricted area.

There is a groan from the CROWD. The following voices should all overlap each other.

MAN 1: Barbecue.

WOMAN 1: Pasta salad.

WOMAN 2: Corn on the cob.

WOMAN 3: Apple pie.

MAN 2: Potato chips.

WOMAN 4: Watermelon.

MAN 3: Strawberry tarts.

MAN 1: Peaches.

WOMAN 1: Ice cream.

WOMAN 2: Fried chicken.

WOMAN 3: Fresh bread.

MAN 2: Coleslaw.

CROWD: (*starts to chant*) Free Food! Free Food! Free Food!

A roar runs through the CROWD as they begin to argue among themselves what should be done with the food. MRS. BROWN pushes her way to the front of the CROWD.

MRS. BROWN: Please! Please, stop arguing! The longer we fight about this, the longer the food sits there. I don't know who among us deserves more than anyone else. I don't know which family needs more than the next, I don't know why this is happening, I... I'll take anything I can get. I don't want to lose out because we couldn't stop arguing. Can't we just fill out our forms and leave it at that?

WOMAN 1: Who decides who gets what?

MAYOR: Once all the forms come in, an arbitrator will read them and...

MAN 2: What in tarnation is an albatross?

MAYOR: Arbitrator. A referee.

WOMAN 3: Who's going to be this arbitrator?

MAYOR: I am, of course.

There is a rumble as some people like this and some don't.

MRS. STEEL: No offense, but your family and my family don't exactly get along. You might decide that you don't like me enough to give me any.

WOMAN 4: You shouldn't get any!

MRS. STEEL: Who said that?

WOMAN 4: Your kids can't keep a secret Mrs. Steel.

MRS. STEEL: You don't know what you're talking about. You keep your mouth shut or I'll shut it for you.

WOMAN 4: Just you try it!

MAYOR: People, People. As arbitrator I would behave in the most objective manner.

MAN 1: How do we know?

WOMAN 1: What if Mrs. Steel is right? What if you play favourites?

WOMAN 3: If this ain't gonna be fair, I'm not filling out anything!

MAN 2: I say every man for themselves!

Another roar runs through the CROWD. Some argue, and others try to stop the arguing.

JILL: This is crazy!

JACK: They're never going to be able to work this out.

JILL: I wish we never found it!

JACK: Too late now.

JILL: My stomach is growling like crazy!

A piercing whistle stops everyone in their tracks. A voice is heard at the back of the CROWD.

STRANGER: I'll be your arbitrator.

MAYOR: Who said that?

The sea of people parts and the STRANGER comes forward.

STRANGER: I did.

MAYOR: And who are you?

STRANGER: I'm a traveller.

WOMAN 1: Travelling where?

STRANGER: Around. Across the country. Anywhere the road takes me.

MRS. STEEL: How touching.

STRANGER: I was just passing by when I heard yelling coming from the top of the hill.

WOMAN 3: Don't concern yourself.

MAN 2: Yeah. Mind your own business.

STRANGER: Sounds like you have a problem. I just thought that as a stranger I could offer an objective point of view.

MRS. BROWN: It might be a good idea...

MRS. STEEL: We don't need an outsider butting into our lives.

WOMAN 1: That's right.

WOMAN 3: You just keep on passing by.

STRANGER: I'm just trying to help.

MRS. STEEL: We don't need it!

MAN 1: What if you want in on the deal?

WOMAN 1: That's right!

MAN 1: What if your help comes with a price?

WOMAN 2: Maybe you try to make off with as much as you can handle.

WOMAN 3: That pack of yours looks pretty light.

WOMAN 4: Too light if you ask me.

MAN 3: She's here to steal what's ours!

MAN 2: Get her!

They start to advance on the STRANGER. MRS. BROWN throws herself in front of her.

MRS. BROWN: NO! You will not do this Stop it! Stop! (*The CROWD is quieted*) We are not a lynch mob. We do not attack strangers because we assume they mean to do us harm by the weight of their backpack. We are civilized people and we will act accordingly.

The CROWD grumbles.

MRS. BROWN: Back off I tell you!

The CROWD backs away.

MAYOR: Thank you Mrs. Brown.

STRANGER: Yes thank you.

MRS. BROWN: Now. I think we need some help and I want to hear what the young lady has to say. Please go on.

STRANGER: I don't want your food. What can I do to convince you of that?

MRS. STEEL: I can't think of anything.

MRS. BROWN: Mrs. Steel, please!

STRANGER: What if I were to sign a contract?

MAN 3: A contract is just a piece of paper.

WOMAN 3: Paper is easily ripped and torn.

WOMAN 4: Tear the contract and we're no better off than when we started.

STRANGER: What about something a little more concrete?

WOMAN 1: That's right. Something concrete!

STRANGER: What about my life?

There is a murmur among the CROWD.

JILL: What's that supposed to mean?

JACK: I don't know.

STRANGER: I'm serious. My life is on the table.

MAYOR: It's out of the question.

STRANGER: Is that concrete enough for you?

MRS. BROWN: We're not going to murder over this!

STRANGER: I wouldn't want you to. All I was thinking about was this:
If I cheat you in any way, you can have my life to deal with as you please. You can put me in jail. You can put me to work. I'll do anything for as long as you like and I won't complain. I have no family, no one will miss me, no one is expecting me anywhere. It'll be part of the deal.

MAYOR: It still seems...

MRS. BROWN: I don't like it.

WOMAN 3: I do!

MAN 1: Shows seriousness!

MAN 2: This gal ain't gonna fool around.

WOMAN 1: A woman doesn't risk her life carelessly.

MRS. STEEL: Mrs. Brown is right. We need an outsider.

WOMAN 2: Someone who doesn't know us.

WOMAN 1: It's a great idea!

MAN 1: Where are those forms?

JACK: (to JILL) What do you think?

JILL: I don't know. It sounds weird.

There is a flurry as people get the forms.

MAYOR: Here you are, here you are. No shoving please. There's plenty for everyone. Now, why don't you take these to your homes and to your families and...

MAN 3: No way. I'm filling out my form right here, right now.

WOMAN 4: That's right. I want mine on the top of the pile.

WOMAN 2: Who's got a pencil?

MAYOR: Alright then. Before you all get started I have an announcement to make. I just wanted to tell all of you that these past two years have been a very trying time for me as a mayor. I know it has not been easy for you. I know there has been hardship and I am ashamed that I have not been able to do anything to correct this. So I just want to say, in front of the people in my town, that my family will not be filling out a form. We will concede our share so that a little more can go to all of you.

There is a round of applause.

JILL: Did you know she was going to say that?

JACK: Not at all. I can't believe it.

JILL: Your mom is amazing.

STRANGER: That is very generous of you Mayor.

MAYOR: It is the least I can do.

MAN 2: Shut up, I'm trying to think!

SCENE 2A

*The lights dim into five spotlights for WOMAN 1
WOMAN 2, WOMAN 3, MAN 1, MAN 2*

ALL: In your own words, please describe your present situation.
Well...

WOMAN 1: Times have been rough since the factory closed. I feel like I've been backed into a corner.

MAN 1: There aren't any jobs here but there's no money to move my family anywhere else.

WOMAN 2: We can't take the risk...

WOMAN 3: So we sit and wait for better days...

MAN 2: And to be honest...

ALL: To be honest about my situation...

There is a pause as they consider what they will write.

MAN 1: I have been out of work for two years.

WOMAN 1: My husband's been out of work for three years.

MAN 2: A huge pile of machinery fell on me five years ago. I haven't been able to work since.

WOMAN 2: He hasn't been able to work.

WOMAN 3: I'm all alone with my three children.

WOMAN 1: I've got four children.

MAN 1: Seven children.

MAN 2: Twelve children.

ALL: All under the age of ten. (*They scratch that out*) Eight. (*They scratch that out*) Three.

WOMAN 3: It's a mad house.

MAN 1: Jobs are scarce these days.

WOMAN 2: There's nothing in these parts.

MAN 2: Nobody's hiring.

WOMAN 1: My house is falling apart.

WOMAN 3: I need a new roof.

MAN 1: I need a new floor.

WOMAN 2: I need a new everything.

MAN 2: I have seventeen children. My wife left me, I haven't worked in over ten years, and I only have one leg due to a tragic boyhood accident.

WOMAN 1: I only have one leg and one arm.

WOMAN 3: I have no legs and a chemical imbalance.

MAN 1: I have no legs and no arms. I am a stump. And I live on the second floor. I have to climb stairs.

ALL: Surely you can see I need more than my fair share. Please help.

SCENE 2B

*The lights change as they continue to write furiously.
The MAYOR calls out to JACK.*

MAYOR: Jack, can I have a word with you?

JACK: Sure.

The MAYOR pulls JACK aside. They are facing downstage, away from the people.

JACK: Mom, I can't believe you did that. I think it's really great, I mean...

MAYOR: Let's move over here away from the crowd.

JACK: Um, sure. What's up?

MAYOR: I want you to take this form and fill it out. Quickly, Jack, fold it up. We don't want people to see.

JACK takes the form. From the other side of the stage, JILL observes this.

JACK: But you said...

MAYOR: That was for the town. Look, I only became the mayor by the skin of my teeth. I need the people on my side. I don't know where this food came from, but I'm certainly not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I'm going to take advantage of this any way I can.

JACK: Won't you look a little silly carrying a basket when you've just said...

MAYOR: Never you mind. It will all be managed quite nicely. All you have to do is fill out the form. Make sure you do it in secret and don't tell anyone – especially Jill. We wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea, right? Jack?

JACK: Yes.

MAYOR: Good.

The MAYOR walks away. JACK stands off to the side thinking to himself. On the opposite side of the stage, MRS. STEEL approaches JILL.

MRS. STEEL: Don't you want your form?

JILL: Thanks.

MRS. STEEL: Where's the rest of your family?

JILL: Looking after my mom.

MRS. STEEL: Did you follow through with that idea we talked about yesterday?

JILL: Um...

MRS. STEEL: I hope you did. All your mother needs is a decent meal, just like the ones my sons got last night.

JILL: (*loudly*) What are you doing here anyway?

MRS. STEEL: Lower your voice. Ha, ha, ha, you're such a kidder, Jill. (*She pulls her to the side*) And keep your opinions to yourself. I do whatever I have to for my family. You remember that the next time you open your mouth. Now take your form and fill it out. Alright?

JILL doesn't answer. MRS. STEEL walks away and hands her form in to the MAYOR. During the following, everyone who has been filling out forms finishes up and hands in their forms as well.

JILL walks over to JACK.

JILL: Hey.

JACK: Hey.

JACK: What did Mrs. Steel want?

JILL: Huh? Nothing. What did your Mom want?

JACK: My Mom? Oh, nothing. Are you going to fill out a form?

JILL: Yeah.

JACK: Oh. Good.

MAYOR: That's it, everyone. Hand those forms in. Right over here. Now I'll just take them back to my office and put them in alphabetical order and...

There is a general cry of dismay from the CROWD.

MAN 1: Back to your office??

WOMAN 2: I don't believe it.

WOMAN 3: What is she talking about?

STRANGER: That won't be necessary.

MAYOR: People, people. We want this process to be organized.

MRS. STEEL: You want to read our forms!!

There is a general cry of agreement.

STRANGER: It seems to me that everyone wants this decided as soon as possible. It might be better if I were to take the forms and read them right away.

MAYOR: Well, of course. Why don't you come down the hill and...

STRANGER: I think I'll sit here.

MAYOR: Here?

STRANGER: The view is beautiful.

MAYOR: It'll be dark soon.

STRANGER: I have a flashlight.

MAYOR: It gets cold at night.

STRANGER: I have a sweater.

MAN 2: What's the matter Mayor?

MAYOR: Nothing of course. Why don't we leave Ms... uh, our new friend in peace and quiet to...

STRANGER: I don't mind if people stay.

MAYOR: You don't?

STRANGER: As long as they're not reading over my shoulder.

MAYOR: Yes. Ah ha. Well, there you have it then. Read away!

As people start to settle, MAYOR comes downstage to where JACK and JILL are standing.

MAYOR: Hello, Jill. How are you?

JILL: I'm...

MAYOR: Good, good. I need to steal Jack for a moment.

She pulls JACK to the side so that no one can hear their conversation.

MAYOR: Have you filled out that form yet?

JACK: Look, Mom, I wanted to talk to you about...

MAYOR: There's a change in plans.

JACK: Mom!

MAYOR: Sometime tonight I want you to get into a conversation with the girl and slip the form into the pile without her knowing alright? Show off some of your legendary charm and she'll never know what hit her. (JACK does not respond) Alright?

JACK: I don't want to.

MAYOR: I didn't ask if you wanted to. I'm telling you to do it. Understand?

MAYOR walks away.

WOMAN 3: Let's hunker down everyone. It could be a long night.

SCENE 2C

The next is a series of tableaux to show the waiting CROWD. They should look like snapshots. The blackouts between each picture should be as short as possible.

1. *Lights up. Everyone is actively staring at the STRANGER. Lights down.*
2. *Lights up. Some people are watching, other people are looking bored, other people are entertaining themselves with cards or games. The STRANGER is still reading. Lights down.*
3. *Lights up. Everyone is getting tired. The STRANGER is still reading. Lights down.*
4. *Lights up. Everyone is asleep. The STRANGER is still reading.*

SCENE 3

NOTE: An alternate SCENE THREE is included with this script in the APPENDIX.

The moon rises on the scene. It's the middle of the night. The STRANGER is sitting upstage with a flashlight, facing away from the group. Everyone is asleep. The guards stand at their corners.

Everyone is dreaming of the food.

CROWD: (dreamy voices) Free Food. Freeeeeeee Foood.

A spotlight comes up downstage on BETTY. She is crawling very slowly towards the food.

BETTY: If I move real slow, no one will notice. Just an inch at a time and no one will see me. I'm nothing but a shadow. The smell is killing me. My family went through that basket in no time. Pack of vultures, they hardly left any for me. All I want is a little something extra. Just a bit, just a smidge so my stomach will stop hurting so much. Slowly, slowly. Nothing to see here, just a shadow in the grass, not a hand reaching for... Shhhhhh. I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry. I just don't want to be hungry anymore. Is that so wrong?

A spotlight comes up on MRS. BROWN.

MRS. BROWN: I won't do it. I won't do it. It's not right. How can I? I was the one who said we should do it fairly. I was the one who fought to do the right thing. But it smells so good. I can't think straight. I can't think about anything except eating. What would it hurt if I took one package – one sandwich, one little thing – something small? I'm sure no one would even notice. No one would even realise that it was missing. If I took one little thing... NO. I won't do it. I can't do it. It's wrong. It's wrong.

A spotlight comes up on MRS. STEEL.

MRS. STEEL: I know it's wrong. I know it. But sometimes you have to do the wrong thing. Sometimes the wrong thing is the best decision to make. My boy was so happy this morning. He smiled at me for the first time in months. And we laughed last night as a family. We talked as a family. We were together as a family and it felt so good. I have to take more. I miss being a family so much. I want to be happy again. And if it means doing the wrong thing then that's what it takes.

All three women begin speaking as they each reach for some food.

ALL: *(in a whisper)* And if I move so slowly, so slowly, no one will know that I'm here. All I have to do is move so slowly. An inch at a time, so slow. It's just a shadow on the grass, just a breeze by your ear, not a hand reaching for... nothing to see. Nothing to see. It's just a shadow. Just a whisper. Nothing more.

By now, all three have a hand on some food. The lights black out.

The CROWD stirs and turns in their sleep. They are still dreaming.

CROWD: *(dreamy voice)* Free Food. Freeeeee Fooodood.

SCENE 3A

The lights change to focus on JACK and JILL. They are sitting downstage with their back to the picnic, looking up into the night.

JACK: You should try and get some sleep.

JILL: I can't.

JACK: Me neither.

JILL: It's the smell of the food. My stomach is growling like crazy.

JACK: I can't believe this is happening.

JILL: I feel like I've been waiting forever.

JACK: It hasn't even been twenty-four hours.

JILL: If you had told me last night that I'd be sitting on the hill right now...

JACK: What were you doing last night? At this exact time.

JILL: I was trying to get my little brother to go to sleep. I was thinking about you. What were you doing?

JACK: Going through university course books.

JILL: Oh.

JACK: I can't believe we're going away in a couple of weeks.

JILL: Yeah.

JACK: It doesn't seem real. It's been planned for so long but now we're finally getting out of this place...

JILL: Yeah. Um, Jack, I wanted to talk to you about that.

JACK: What?

JILL: I've been doing some thinking...This doesn't really seem like the best time to do this.

JACK: What is it?

JILL: I'm not going.

JACK: What?

JILL: I can't leave my mom.

JACK: This is a joke, right?

JILL: I can't do it. I'm the only one bringing in any money. What's going to happen to my family if I leave?

JACK: And how much money do you think you'll make working as a waitress? You have a scholarship, a ticket out of this place. Leave while you can. If you don't, you'll never leave, don't you see?

JILL: Maybe I don't want to leave.

JACK: How can you say that?

JILL: What is so wrong with here?

JACK: Aside from the fact that it's a hick town in the middle of nowhere? It's a dying town filled with deadbeats who can't get jobs, just look at your dad.

JILL: What about my dad?

JACK: When was the last time he looked for a job? It's been two years, since the factory closed.

JILL: There hasn't exactly been anything for him to look for.

JACK: Well maybe if he got off the couch once and awhile. Maybe if he applied himself.

JILL: You have no idea what's going on at my house.

JACK: Come on. Every time I'm over there he's watching TV – day and night. You're always complaining about him.

JILL: That's different.

JACK: Why?

JILL: Cause he's my dad! Not yours. You can't talk about him like that OK?

JACK: If you shout you'll wake everyone up.

JILL: You haven't changed a bit.

At that, JILL gets up and exits. JACK sits for a moment in shock, then he too stands. He starts to exit but stops when he sees the STRANGER stand up and stretch. When the STRANGER stands, everyone semi-rises from the ground to see what she is going to do. They reach towards her as she stretches out her

arms. When the STRANGER returns to her seat, the CROWD sinks back to the ground with a sigh.

CROWD: *(in a dreamy voice)* Freeeee Fooooooooood.

SCENE 3B

JACK approaches the STRANGER. During their conversation the lights will begin to change as the sun begins to rise.

JACK: Am I bothering you?

STRANGER: Not a bit.

JACK: It must be tough going through all those forms.

STRANGER: I don't mind.

JACK: Really?

STRANGER: I like learning about people. You might say it's my hobby.

JACK: Is that why you travel around?

STRANGER: Absolutely. Of course, I find the more I travel, the more towns I see, people are more or less the same.

JACK: I haven't been to too many places. I'd like to though.

STRANGER: You should. Travelling is the best teacher in the world.

JACK: It must be so exciting – a new town every day, new things to see. Where were you last night?

STRANGER: Lorelei. Do you like living here?

JACK: In Promisestown? It's alright. A good place to leave I guess. I mean, it's OK. The people are nice.

STRANGE: You believe that?

JACK: Sure. There are some good folks here. Decent. Hard working.

STRANGER: You believe the people in your town are basically good.

JACK: Sure I do.

By now the lights should reflect the dawn.

JACK: Look at that.

STRANGER: I love watching the sunrise.

JACK: Me too. Jill and I... (*His hand goes to his pocket and pulls out the form.*)

STRANGER: Jill and I what?

JACK: Nothing. (*He crumples the form*) I'm sorry, I shouldn't be disturbing you. You probably want to get back to reading.

STRANGER: Oh it's alright. I already know what they say.

SCENE 3C

NOTE: For a smaller cast version of this scene see the APPENDIX.

It is now dawn. There is a noise off stage.

MRS. STEEL: Dr. Collins! Dr. Collins! Is Dr. Collins up here?

The CROWD starts to stir

MAN 1: Who's making all that racket?

WOMAN 3: What time is it?

MAN 3: It's so cold.

WOMAN 4: Where am I?

MAN 2: What's going on?

MRS. STEEL enters. She is frantic.

MRS. STEEL: Is Dr. Collins up here? It's my youngest. He's awfully sick.

WOMAN 2: From too much eating?

MRS. STEEL: Please, I've never seen him like this before. He can't keep anything down. Where is he?

Another voice is heard offstage.

JILL: Dr. Collins! Dr. Collins! (*She enters*) Has any seen Dr. Collins? My mom won't wake up. She's very pale and...

Another noise from offstage.

BONNIE: Help! Help us!

The MAYOR enters with BONNIE, BETTY and BECKY. They are supporting BETTY who can hardly stand. She looks very ill.



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