

After Isabel

A Play in One Act

By Clyde Coreil

Characters

Vivian St. Amant

Virginia “Ginger” St. Amant

Geneveive

Setting for After Isabel

The parlor of the St. Amant family residence at 11 a.m.

The parlor of the old St. Amant family residence is like the house itself—a curious blend of gloom and sobriety on one hand and a delicate, almost ethereal sense of refinement on the other. Rich browns and a high ceiling contribute to an atmosphere of silence, a silence that makes itself felt between many of the lines in this play. A tall, wide, arched window is located in the upstage right rear wall. A strong but muted light streams through it and its thin curtain which, when open, reveals the leaves of well-trimmed bushes outside. The furnishings are of heavy wood construction and, although they have become antique, are in excellent condition. Finely bound volumes fill a bookcase in the rear wall center left. A fireplace is situated in the angle where the rear wall joins the left wall. A stage for marionettes is seen atop a small table located left center. A full-length mirror in a dark brown or black frame on casters is the only piece that does not quite fit into this room; even so, its incongruity comes from the nature of large mirrors and need not be brought to attention. It is located stage right near a door that opens onto the garden at the side of the house.

The St. Amant residence is located in Abita Springs, across Lake Fonchartrain from New Orleans. In the 1920's and 1930's, this small town became well known as a mineral springs resort. By the time of this play, however, it has faded into an obscurity alleviated somewhat by the social life of several wealthy families.

As the curtain rises, Virginia "Ginger" St. Amant and her sister Vivian have just returned from the funeral of their mother, Isabel. Vivian is downstage center unpinning her hat, and Ginger is gazing through the window upstage right. Both are dressed in black. Ginger is twenty-one years old; Vivian, twenty.

GINGER

What will happen to this house now?

VIVIAN

Nothing....Nothing changes, (turning toward Ginger) Not the house, (approaching Ginger and looking out the window) not those trees, not us.

GINGER

We won't have Isabel. How can things remain the same. How can anything be the same. (She begins to cry, then regains control of her emotions.)

VIVIAN

They won't change. Of that, I'm certain.

GINGER

There was always a stillness in here that returned after whatever we were doing...whatever Isabel was doing. She seemed to have intended it that way.

VIVIAN

Yes....And Daddy too. They would sit here, talking, reading quietly, entertaining after the theaters and restaurants when they'd bring their friends back across the lake.....And then they'd leave, and it would become quiet again.

GINGER

A glorious past...but what difference does it make now?

VIVIAN

It makes a difference.

GINGER

Yes...I suppose it does.

VIVIAN

But then...you left.

GINGER

Every day I wanted to come back. And every night.... I'm almost sure that every night I dreamed of thisthis room, that mirror. And yet...nothing ever happened in my dream. I would only see it. I would be here, standing. I would wait to see Isabel...sometimes, I would almost see a movement....but never anything.,...And then the morning and I would have to leave at 8:30 and run like crazy, working on sets, on classes, rehearsals, papers. It was like being in a whirlpool, like being caught in a whirlpool.

VIVIAN

Why didn't you come home?

GINGER

I couldn't. I wanted to. It made no sense to stay. I wanted to. But you understand very quickly that leaving is out of the question. I don't know why, exactly, but it is. Though it's never mentioned. They start and they never pause to question themselves; they just keep going faster and faster and it takes all of your energy just to hold on. I became so tight after a while that I...I almost couldn't do anything. I fell behind and it was harder and harder to go on. I finally reached a point...beyond which...(trails off)

VIVIAN

And what was beyond that point?

GINGER

I don't know...that night I could hardly move. There was absolutely nothing I could think of doing to alleviate...to change the way things were. So I went to a movie. It's silly, but that's all I could do just then. Walk to a movie, putting one foot in front of the other, keeping my head facing forward...even actually timing my breathing.

VIVIAN

What was the movie?

GINGER

I didn't care. A Bergman film. I still don't know what it was about. A painter, I believe. The only thing I remember is one scene...and in a way, I remember it because I don't know what happened.

VIVIAN

(lighting a cigarette) Tell me about it.

GINGER

Somehow, the painter's wife or girl friend seems to have died and he was in the room with her body...He lifted the sheet and studied her face for a long time and...then touched her....body. Then he looked up and saw a small group of people he had met earlier. They were watching him, almost smirking. As though they were being entertained. Then he looked at the young woman and she was sitting up...He was shocked, jolted. You could see in his face, see that... that veils had been torn away for him. Finally, he thanked them, thanked them formally for...what they had intentionally or unintentionally done for him.....(She alters mood.)...The next thing I knew, the house lights were on and the usher was calling me, asking if I was alright. I don't know what happened. I must have fallen asleep...It was three hours...Everything had changed. I wasn't out of my head with

anxiety...I wasn't even nervous...I had a cup of coffee at a restaurant and went to bed and slept. I dreamed of this room...It was then that I dreamed about this room for the first time. When I woke up next morning, it seemed perfectly natural that I go to school at 8:30 and come home at 11 that evening.

VIVIAN

Did you ever dream about me?

GINGER

(first looking at Vivian, then away) I remember very few of my dreams....but I don't see how I could not have dreamed of you.

VIVIAN

Did you dream of Isabel?

GINGER

Sometimes.

VIVIAN

Often?

GINGER

I'm not sure.

VIVIAN

Tell me...tell me about a dream...one with her in it.

GINGER

Not...not now.

VIVIAN

Please, we should talk about her. If not dreams, then something else.

GINGER

(after considering the matter for a while) I dreamed she was on stage, doing some part or other. Then she was sitting in the audience, but there was no audience. She was watching the stage, but there was no one on stage either. Then she wasn't there.

VIVIAN

(after a long silence) These last months were almost unbearable.

GINGER

I should have come home.

VIVIAN

You were at school.

GINGER

But I could have been with her.

VIVIAN

No. This way you can remember her as she was...before. It's good that in one of us...the memory of her is...as she was...before the end,

GINGER

I don't know...if I understand exactly what you mean.

VIVIAN

Did she write to you...within the last few months?

GINGER

Yes.

VIVIAN

Did she write about....anything about me?

GINGER
 Yes, but not very clearly....I didn't understand completely.

VIVIAN
 Do you have her letters here?

GINGER
 No. They're with my books.

VIVIAN
 When will they get here?

GINGER
 I'm not sure. I asked a friend to mail them when she had time.

VIVIAN
 (after a while) What did she say...about me?

GINGER
 (knitting brows) I don't remember...I didn't understand...When they arrive, I'll show them to you.

VIVIAN
 Are you going back...to finish up?

GINGER
 I don't know. Exams are done. I'll have to call the dean. What is it, Vivian?

VIVIAN
 Nothing. I wanted to know. That's all.

GINGER
 And you...Will you stay here?

VIVIAN
 I never thought there was any question.

GINGER
 Is this...enough? (gestures to room)

VIVIAN
 Quite the opposite.

GINGER
 Alone?

VIVIAN
 (turning to her, sharply) I thought you weren't going back.

GINGER
 Not back...probably. But...somewhere.

VIVIAN
 Where?

GINGER
 I don't know where exactly. I could teach...or act.

VIVIAN
 I wouldn't have thought you could live anywhere else again.

GINGER
 It's not that. Not that at all.

VIVIAN
 Then what is it?

GINGER
It just seems...that a person must do something.

VIVIAN
What have I been doing?

GINGER
We're different, Vivian.

VIVIAN
Are we?

GINGER
Yes...in a way.

VIVIAN
Are we different from Isabel?

GINGER
(somewhat puzzled) She was our mother. How could we be the same?

VIVIAN
I am Vivian. How could I be your sister?

GINGER
(a touch of sarcasm) I imagine that we're both like her in some ways.

VIVIAN
You don't know what she was like...in the end, I mean. Quite different from the way you knew her...How different I don't know.

GINGER
What are you saying, Vivian?

VIVIAN
In her letters....did she often write about death?

GINGER
No. Her letters were short. She referred to the end of her career. They were...melancholy.

VIVIAN
She said nothing of...ending her life early?

GINGER
(shocked) Vivian!

VIVIAN
It wasn't the rash decision that it seems.

GINGER
Decision?

VIVIAN
At first, she spoke of it only occasionally. Then every week. Every day. At the end, she was obsessed,...obsessed.

GINGER
Why didn't you write me?

VIVIAN
Isabel...Isabel made me swear.

GINGER
It's hard to believe that she would even consider that.

VIVIAN
Don't believe it then.

Vivian....Did she...?
 GINGER

I don't know.
 VIVIAN

Your telegram...you said it was a stroke.
 GINGER

That's what the doctor called it.
 VIVIAN

What do you mean by that tone of voice, "It's what the doctor called it"?
 GINGER

(slightly irritated) That...is...what...the...doctor...called....it.
 VIVIAN

Is it true? .Was she thinking.....
 GINGER

(interrupting) I don't know exactly why, but it does seem to have been the case. I don't see how she could have kept it from the letters.
 VIVIAN

She did.
 GINGER

Isabel was very disturbed these past few months.
 VIVIAN

What do you mean,"disturbed"?
 GINGER

She should have seen a doctor...a psychiatrist.
 VIVIAN

Did you tell her that?
 GINGER

I tried...but it was impossible.
 VIVIAN

Why do you say that?
 GINGER

She was obsessed, that's why.
 VIVIAN

About what?
 GINGER

Dying, I believe. She was afraid to die.
 VIVIAN

Was she sick....physically, I mean?
 GINGER

Not that I know of. And don't ask me why not. I'm not even certain it was dying she was afraid of. I'm not even certain she was afraid, She slowly became more and more preoccupied, then irritable. No, at first irritable, then hostile.
 VIVIAN

Hostile?
 GINGER

VIVIAN

That isn't the word. But then there is no word for it. (changing mood) You remember..
..how she had to spend a few hours every day... alone.

GINGER

Yes. In this room. Looking through that window. In front of that mirror, rehearsing.

VIVIAN

(unconvincingly) I think that not being on the stage might have been part of
the...problem.

GINGER

But that was her choice. She ...

VIVIAN

I know...about the parts...Every day, about the parts. There weren't any parts.

GINGER

I...I had suspected that. But I don't think it really made that big a difference. Her career,
the main part of her career was done. And she was very good in her time. Among the
best.

VIVIAN

She was sick...at the end.

GINGER

(somewhat accusingly) You said that before.

VIVIAN

(disregarding Ginger's comment) She began by neglecting herself. Her hair uncombed.
Before I had the nerve to mention it, she excused herself, saying she was rehearsing the
part of a woman going mad. She had a play about a woman going mad.

GINGER

Did you talk to Louie?

VIVIAN

I tried to. But Isabel had...abused him so much that he wouldn't listen. He said he was
very, very sorry but that with things as they were, he just couldn't. And indeed he
couldn't. He's not to be blamed.

GINGER

Abused Louie?

VIVIAN

Because of the parts...or lack of parts. At least probably because of that.

GINGER

What about the play...about the woman. Where did she get it?

VIVIAN

I...I'm not sure. I'm not sure that there was a play.

GINGER

But didn't you say....

VIVIAN

(interrupting) I said what she said. That she was rehearsing it. First it was her hair. Then
she began putting more and more makeup on. Until she was barely recognizable.
Sometimes she would be at the dresser for two, three hours. Her face slowly became
more and more...different from her real face. It would have frightened you if you had
seen it.

GINGER

And you did nothing.

VIVIAN

When it was really getting bad, after a month or so, I called Aunt Genevieve. I invited her to tea. She said that she was moving into a house in the French quarter, but I insisted that she come that very morning. I'm sure she thought I was crazy. But she came.

GINGER

What happened?

VIVIAN

When she arrived, Isabel simply took off her makeup, opened the door and acted herself, as she was before. Exactly as she was before.

GINGER

Did you get a chance to talk with Aunt Genevieve?

VIVIAN

What could I have said. That Isabel would rehearse that damned part for hours with the door locked...laughing, no not laughing, cackling, crying, totally ignoring me when I shouted through the door that it was time to stop, time to eat, time to sleep. Do you think she would have begun to believe me? I didn't sleep at all that night. Next morning...Isabel asked me...She had me sit down there (indicates same chair as before, when she was speaking of her father) and asked me....how long I had suspected her of becoming mad.

GINGER

What did you say?

VIVIAN

I denied that I had. Denied it vehemently. It was clear to me... she said nothing, but it was clear to me that I could not mention anything concerning Her condition to her or to anyone ever again because that would have been to...doubt her and if I...or you... had doubted her she could never have come to us again. And that... I just couldn't do that. We would have lost her.

GINGER

I feel very cold.

VIVIAN

It drove me crazy...watching her getting worse and worse and knowing all the while that she was aware of her own condition.

GINGER

What! Aware of her condition?...Are you certain?

VIVIAN

Positive. And as she became more and more deranged, she became more and more hostile. Aggressive. Mean, Incredibly mean and vicious....And she began to doubt me. Despite all my promises and oaths of loyalty. And not only me. She was suspicious of everything, of everyone. And just when enough...evidence was building for me to subtly indicate to her that her paranoia was just that, something would happen. I almost welcomed it because anything, no matter how small a nuance was like a billboard announcement. She was too clever for me.

GINGER

It's difficult for me to follow you. Something like what would happen?

VIVIAN

Like that play about the woman. She said she received it in the mail. She wouldn't let me read it. I started to once, but she snatched it from my hands. A terrible argument followed. Finally I convinced her to send it back to the playwright. In fact, I wrote a note explaining that Isabel couldn't use it. I had her sign it....The manuscript came back. "Address unknown" was stamped in violet ink across the manila envelope.

GINGER

My God! What did she do?

VIVIAN

She said that she had written it and that I should have minded my business. She came into this room, locked the door and immediately began rehearsing the lines again.

GINGER

Where is the play now?

VIVIAN

(after a long pause) One day, last winter, I heard loud shouts... shrieks coming from this room. It was like nothing before. I was really scared. I tried the door, but it was locked. I took the master key from behind the clock in the hall...and opened it. She....(Vivian trails off and walks to the window, draws the curtain with her hand.)

GINGER

What did you see, Vivian? (no answer) Please.

VIVIAN

(dreamlike, very soft) She was in front of the fireplace, hair uncombed, white greasepaint smeared across her face. She had moved the mirror to beside the fireplace and was looking into it with a terrible expression of pain on her face....she was feeding the pages of the play to the fire, slowly, page by page...watching herself scream....watering death.

GINGER

(trembling) My God! (takes her face in her hands then, still reacting) How...how could you see that and not try to get help for her, no matter what you had promised or sworn, no matter what would have happened.

VIVIAN

How could I stand it? How could I do nothing? What an unfeeling beast I was. Yes. I said that and so much more.

GINGER

What did she do when she saw you in the room?

VIVIAN

She didn't notice me for a long while. When she did, she dropped the rest of the pages into the fire and stared at me. And kept staring at me. I couldn't move. Finally, she walked very slowly, -with great dignity to the window and began removing her makeup. Then she told me to sit with her. I did. She said that if I loved her and truly cared for her, there was no other way for me than...to kill her when I saw that she was in fact no longer present. She said that whoever was occupying her body had no right to it and that I should protect her honor from that person just as I would from a thief, a killer.

GINGER

Vivian....did you.....What did you think? What did you say?

VIVIAN

I said nothing for a long while. Then I told her that I could not agree unless you agreed. I said I should write you. She said no that she would. She walked up to her room. When she came down, she gave me a sealed letter, addressed to you. I mailed it. Nine days later, a letter from you arrived.

GINGER

No, I received no letter like that. Never. My God. Nothing about that.

VIVIAN

I read your reply.

GINGER

(almost crying) You couldn't have...you couldn't have.

VIVIAN

It was very brief. It said something very much like, "If that's the way of ending it for you, then I agree."

GINGER

I remember that letter. Distinctly. But I was talking about...(stops)

VIVIAN

About what?

GINGER

She had referred to the stage in her last letter. She was referring to retiring, to never going back. She said that if she did not commit herself now...then (meaning at that time), she was afraid that she would accept parts that were beneath her. She was afraid that she would never again have the strength to break cleanly.

VIVIAN

She said nothing of that...that agreement...nothing of the horrible position she was putting me in?

GINGER

Nothing.

VIVIAN

Did she say anything about me?

GINGER

No...Yes. She vaguely suggested that I invite you to Pittsburgh for a visit, that apparently you were experiencing tension of some sort, but that she was coming to understand you better. Not much else.

VIVIAN

Not much else? What else?

GINGER

Nothing. Nothing else.

VIVIAN

You're lying.

GINGER

There was nothing else.

VIVIAN

Show me the letters, all of them.

GINGER

I told you. They aren't here.

VIVIAN

And if they were here, you wouldn't be able to find the ones in which she made her vague suggestions.

GINGER

You're wrong, Vivian.

VIVIAN

(closed in) Apparently I was experiencing tension, (opening up) Apparently I was pushed far past anything on this side of sanity. And there was no one here. Not Genevieve...Not you. I was frightened...scared....terrified. (She spits these last words out in an anger that approaches terror.)

GINGER

(looking directly at her, speaking after a long pause) Did you help her die?

VIVIAN

(laughing wildly; but when she speaks, her words are measured) Ha, ha, ha.....Your simplicity is...ridiculous. It wasn't in the least possible to think like that. (laughing again) Ha, ha. What a decision! Is red green or blue? Is up sideways or down.

GINGER

(angrily) Well, DID YOU?

VIVIAN

(like a snake, weaving around Ginger) North or south...spoon or fork....I or you

GINGER

(not sure of where the remarks are going) What?

VIVIAN

(narrowing her eyes) We or she...us or I...dirt or water..... in the center of the eye there is no color, no shape, no motion.... only blackness....(with intensity) Do you know what that blackness is....well, DO YOU?

GINGER

(unsteadily) No.

VIVIAN

It's the inside of the brain...the black brain, (going very close to Ginger, looking into her eyes) What do you see in the blackness of my brain?...WHAT DO YOU SEE?

GINGER

(shocked) Myself.

VIVIAN

(backing off, more calmly) Do you understand?(very calmly) Isabel did that to me when I...told her it was wrong to ask of anyone what she was asking of me.

GINGER

Vivian.....please stop.

VIVIAN

(ignoring Ginger's request) She became hostile...paranoiac... cunning. Masterfully cunning. Just now was nothing; I could remember it afterward. There were times when I didn't know what she was doing. It was all I could do to hold on.Once I came into this room, and she was waiting for me...there, (indicates table with puppet stage) I don't know how long she had been waiting, but she had her puppets on the stage and the

curtain was open. She told me to watch very carefully, Scarlotti was on the phonograph. So I pulled up a chair, sat down and watched. (Vivian pulls up a chair, sits down and fixes her eyes on the stage.) She told me to move closer and closer to the puppets, who were standing quietly. She kept talking slowly and rhythmically. She told me to watch the one on the right very, very closely. I did. At least I tried to. My eyelids became heavy and I wanted to shut them. Slowly, the puppet lay down. After a while, I looked at the other one. She was also lying down....I was terrified: I knew that I had to look up but I didn't want to.

VIVIAN

You're lying, Vivian. Stop it.

VIVIAN

I looked up and Isabel wasn't there, I turned around and in that corner...(points, begins to tremble) She had smeared the paint of the woman going mad across her face. Her hair was awful. And she was staring right at me. Not saying anything. Just staring. (Vivian begins to move backward toward the door. She stops.) Then she wiped her face with cold cream and kleenex, brushed back her hair... and, with great composure, she began speaking of...you.

GINGER

Of ME!

VIVIAN

Don't ask me what she said. Honestly, I don't know. When she stopped, she took out a sealed envelope and told me to open it after her funeral, when you and I were alone.

GINGER

Do you have it?

VIVIAN

She put it in that drawer (points to drawer). It's probably still there.

GINGER

Don't you know?

VIVIAN

Did she write you about it?

GINGER

No. Do you want to look...now?

VIVIAN

I don't see why not. (opens drawer, removes letter, hands it to Ginger)

GINGER

(turning letter over) It's open! The envelope is open.

VIVIAN

Hmmm. So it is. Now you begin to see. This is what it was like.

GINGER

Did you open it?

VIVIAN

No, I didn't open it. Did you?

GINGER

What do you mean? I didn't even know it was here.

VIVIAN

Yes, of course, if you didn't know it was here. There's nothing to talk about. But how can I be sure of that?...*(change in mood)* It's Isabel who opened it.

GINGER

How do you know? You said....

VIVIAN

(declining to discuss the matter further) Take out the letter and read it.

GINGER

I'm not sure I want to.

VIVIAN

Very well. I will. *(takes the letter from Ginger's hands)* Shall I begin?

GINGER

Maybe we should be seated.

VIVIAN

Yes. She would have insisted on it. *(They seat themselves.)* Anything else? *(shade of sarcasm)*

GINGER

(becoming impatient) No. For god's sake, read it.

VIVIAN

(reading) My Most Beloved Daughters, The disease that has afflicted members of our family for generations is now taking me. Perhaps you are already aware that it has manifested itself in my sister, your Aunt Genevieve. I say this so that you shall not trust her and to alert you to the possible occurrence of the condition in either or both of you. I request that each of you show the other the same respect you showed me....at least until recently. I have written a formal will dividing everything between you and ask that each of you make a will in turn, providing that your share does not go to the other upon your death. If there is any question of cause concerning my death, you should carefully observe one another to determine her possible involvement therein. In addition to eventually causing death by hemorrhage within the brain, the disease draws you into a world you had never dreamed of, into a cunning not to any particular end other than the exercise of cunning itself. Extreme pleasure of a sensual, almost sexual nature derives from this cunning. However, it alternates with an acute awareness of the order you are most definitely violating. Pity, Children, pity the afflicted. But watch out*(raising her head)* Isabel.

GINGER

(soberly) Nay I see the letter.

VIVIAN

(handing the letter to Ginger) Certainly.

GINGER

Did she write this.....when she was clear?

VIVIAN

I have no idea.

GINGER

Did she write it that day....when....

VIVIAN

(interrupting) I told you. I don't know. I don't know when the envelope was opened or by whom. She put it there (points to table) and I told you she put it there.

GINGER

What she says about Aunt Genevieve...I had never heard it. Neither had I heard anything about every generation of our family having that...disease.....Had you?

VIVIAN

Not that I recall.

GINGER

Did Aunt Genevieve come here....after that tea?

VIVIAN

Not that I know of. From time to time, Isabel would receive a letter from her. ...What did she say this morning?

GINGER

You were there.

VIVIAN

After I got in the car.

GINGER

She said she had to see us.

VIVIAN

When?

GINGER

This morning, I believe. I'm not sure...Vivian, do you know where the letters are?

VIVIAN

Isabel burned her letters after she read them. Most of them, at least.

GINGER

Most!Do you know where she kept those she didn't burn?

VIVIAN

Occasionally she put papers behind the mirror....in the wooden frame.

GINGER

(moving quickly to mirror, finding a letter) This...There's only one and it's from....Genevieve.

VIVIAN

Interesting.

GINGER

But it isn't open. It's here, but it isn't open!

VIVIAN

What's the date on the envelope?

GINGER

March 27..that's six weeks ago. Why isn't it open? (.Ginger is confused.)

VIVIAN

(amused) The trouble is...you let Isabel get to you...She was the ballerina of the western world.

GINGER

Should we open it?

VIVIAN

You're a goddamned fool, Ginger.

GINGER

It might help us...me find out what's happening.

VIVIAN

Why do you pretend...I thought that going oil to school in the cold north would have broken you of that.

GINGER

I'm sorry.....It's the way I am.

VIVIAN

Bullshit.

GINGER

Don't be that way....not now.

VIVIAN

If you want to open the letter, open it.

GINGER

(examining the envelope more carefully) I don't know...I.... (expressing fresh surprise) I think it's been steamed open. (shows the envelope to Vivian who only glances at it)

VIVIAN

Does that really surprise you?

GINGER

(slight aggression) Did...you open it?

VIVIAN

(seizing the letter and tearing open) Yes. (removes the folded paper without looking at it and hands it to Ginger) Bead it.

GINGER

Everything...every damn thing is a knot. I thought when I left....

VIVIAN

(interrupting) A sharp axe does wonders for knots.

GINGER

It destroys them.

VIVIAN

(looking away) What are you going to be when you grow up?

GINGER

Stop it.

VIVIAN

(turning quickly to Ginger) What are you going to be when you're dead?

GINGER

Vivian...What a horrible thing to say.

VIVIAN

What a horrible thing to do.

GINGER

What did I do?

VIVIAN

You said what a horrible thing to say.

GINGER

I don't want to...

VIVIAN

(interrupting) Where?

GINGER

What?

VIVIAN

Who?

GINGER

(realizing that, for the last few lines, Vivian has been claying as she did when they were children; pausing, slightly smiling) It's been so long....How old were we then? Ten....eleven? But... it's not fair now. ..e can't do those games again. Not now.

VIVIAN

Fair? Of course not. Who said it was? Ever.

GINGER

We aren't children anymore.

VIVIAN

We aren't what anymore?

GINGER

(weakly) Children.

VIVIAN

Who aren't children anymore?

GINGER

(trying to smile) You heard.

VIVIAN

Heard what?..... When?

GINGER

Please.

VIVIAN

(with increasing venom). Who said please? No one said please.

GINGER

Stop!

VIVIAN

So now it's please stop. Please stop what?

GINGER

Please stop, Vivian.

VIVIAN

Please stop, Vivian.

GINGER

Enough!

VIVIAN

Of what?

GINGER

Pretending.

VIVIAN

Stop pretending.

GINGER

Quit it, Vivian. Quit that.

VIVIAN

Why? Why should I? It's not your prerogative only, you know.

GINGER

When you've stopped, we can go on.

VIVIAN

You pretend that you didn't know Isabel was sick. You pretend that you didn't know Isabel and Louie had a falling out. You pretend that you didn't know Aunt Genevieve was looney. Look through your veil of innocence. Sweet Ginger, It's become full of holes.

GINGER

You...You've always been unnecessarily cruel.

VIVIAN

You've always been cruelly unnecessary.

GINGER

(seeking refuge) Let me read, will you?

VIVIAN

(before Ginger can look at letter) What was the play about?

GINGER

What play?

VIVIAN

The play about the woman going mad.

GINGER

What? How should I know?

VIVIAN

Didn't you write it?

GINGER

(expressing fear) My God!

VIVIAN

No need to call him down. A play's a play. Beside what business is it of the playwright if it pushes an old woman over the edge.

GINGER

How...How can you say that.

VIVIAN

No, no. Nothing personal. If Joe Shmuck writes a story about a Cajun Voodoo Queen and the prince of Russia reads it and goes bananas, who has the fucking right to come down on old Schmuck?

GINGER

You're pushing it too far, Vivian.

VIVIAN

You know what the return address was? Remember? Remember Johnny Pitan? Well do you?

GINGER

Yes.

VIVIAN

Yes indeed! Adolescent love. Adolescent hands in adolescent crotches.

GINGER

Johnny! Are you suggesting that Johnny Pitan wrote the play? Your humor is sick, Vivian.

VIVIAN

(spitting) Crotch.

GINGER

Vivian, this is too much. Far too much.

VIVIAN

You're too much, darling.

GINGER

(studies Vivian; a marked change in Ginger's face as she recognizes something) Did you agree?

VIVIAN

Are you going mad?

GINGER

Shut it, Vivian. You're a beast. A beast.

VIVIAN

Me? I didn't leave her. I endured that hell. Endured it! I was right here in this room. Without me, she was dead. I know that for a fact. Every day, I gave her that day. I rammed it down her throat. I made her eat it. Get fat on it. Try it sometimes, try it... and then call yourself a beast. See if it fits.

GINGER

Martyr. An honest-to-god martyr.

VIVIAN

See if it fits the tits.

GINGER

What else can I say?

VIVIAN

Are you getting angry? Are you?

GINGER

Disgusted is the word.

VIVIAN

That's it. Do you feel very disgusted with me?

GINGER

Right now, yes.

VIVIAN

Do you like it?

GINGER

What?

VIVIAN

Do you like to feel disgust? Do you like to hate? You do, don't you. You like to hate from that neat little room just off campus where you can close the door quietly and write your little letters, your little plays. Rehearse your rehearsal. Act your acts. Speak your speech trippingly.

GINGER

I didn't write that play. (Ginger waves Genevieve's letter which she has been holding.)

VIVIAN

I hope it's me and not you that is going crazy. Isabel was fascinating. You're a bloody bore....Read your letter before you tear it.

GINGER

You always were hard, Vivian. Now you're vicious. Incredibly vicious.

VIVIAN

Read the letter.

GINGER

(reading) "Isabel, How did you like the play. Love, Ginger." What is this?

VIVIAN

It goes nicely.

GINGER

Where did you get this?

VIVIAN

You got it...Behind the mirror.

GINGER

Did you exchange letters?

VIVIAN

Not I. Ask Genevieve where she got the letter. Maybe Isabel gave it to her.

GINGER

But....Who would write this?

VIVIAN

Maybe Isabel....maybe Genevieve.....maybe you.

GINGER

(angrily) OR YOU.

VIVIAN

NO. Not me.

GINGER

Why not?

VIVIAN

Okay. Maybe me. What's the difference?

GINGER

What do you mean, "What's the difference?"

VIVIAN

You tell me.

GINGER

I have.....(sudden deflation) What's the use.

VIVIAN

Precisely. (There is a knocking at the door.) Genevieve, I presume.

GINGER

Genevieve!

VIVIAN

Well, aren't you going to answer the door?

Ginger answers door. Genevieve enters, also dressed in black. No one sneaks for a few seconds.

GENEVIEVE

Maybe I should come back later.

GINGER

No....Please sit down. We're not quite ourselves.. .the funeral...

VIVIAN

These are the most difficult hours.

GENEVIEVE

Yes....(silence) Will you go back to school. Ginger?

GINGER

I don't think so. It would be mainly to pack. Some friends said they would do that for me.

VIVIAN

Would you like tea?

GENEVIEVE

I don't believe so, thank you, (silence) I....I would like you to do something for me.

GINGER

Certainly.

GENEVIEVE

Isabel and I were close...very close in...an unusual way. From time to time, we would correspond. Not often, but it meant a great deal to me...It was a very personal thing.

VIVIAN

Yes. Isabel was that way. She seemed to be able to....to perceive exactly where a person was. To draw them out...the most private part of a person.

GENEVIEVE

Yes. That's....that's why I'm here. I'm sure you will understand. If it's all the same with you, I would appreciate your letting me have the letters I sent to Isabel. I know it sounds strange. but..... (trails off)

VIVIAN

No, nothing of the sort. We understand perfectly. Isabel would have also. However, after reading her letters, she burned them....All of them.

GENEVIEVE

Are you sure?

VIVIAN

Positive.

GENEVIEVE

Perhaps you're mistaken. (She and Vivian stare at each other but say nothing.) Perhaps not. (another silence) Well, I must be going.

GINGER

Won't you have lunch with us?

GENEVIEVE

Thanks, but I have to get back to New Orleans. I'm seeing someone in an hour.

VIVIAN

Have a nice driveand thank you for dropping by.

GENEVIEVE

(more to Ginger than to Vivian) I'll write...from time to time.

GINGER

Yes. We should stay in touch.

Goodbye, (exits)

GENEVIEVE

GINGER

Why...did you say they had all been burned.

VIVIAN

She knew we had it.

GINGER

So.

VIVIAN

I wanted to close it. Isabel would have done likewise.

GINGER

Isabel....wasn't herself.

VIVIAN

How can a person stop being himself.

GINGER

I thought you might know.

VIVIAN

What would you say if I told you that Isabel had a lover during these past few months?

GINGER

Enough.

VIVIAN

And what would you say if I told you that father and I have...shall we say...known each other?

GINGER

At this point.....(long pause)...you can say what you choose.

VIVIAN

Now we're beginning to understand each other.

GINGER

This is not what we were.

VIVIAN

Things change....Isabel knew that very well.

GINGER

Isabel's dead.

VIVIAN

Precisely.

GINGER

(suddenly becoming slightly angry and confused) Why, Vivian?

VIVIAN

Because.....No matter what I say, you can always say why...and I can always say because....Children understand a simple "because". Then they can move on to other things.

GINGER

We aren't children.

VIVIAN

We're Isabel's children.

GINGER

Maybe we can move on to other things.

VIVIAN

Exactly. But what else is there to go on to?

GINGER

I can't stay here. I'll go mad.

VIVIAN

You'll go mad regardless.

GINGER

Will we never be free of Isabel?

VIVIAN

Why do you want to be free of her? You didn't even know her. She pushed me, yes, she pushed me until I thought the next step would be... the other side. But in spite of all that... (becoming emotional) no because of all that.....(Here Vivian becomes expansive and filled with a tenderness we haven't seen before. The change startles Ginger and draws her attention.) Magnificent.

GINGER

Magnificent?

VIVIAN

There's no other word....at least none that I know.....She always was a beautiful woman...not only in face, but in...the way she did things... the way she carried herself, the way she spoke...

GINGER

She was...the most articulate person I have ever known....I used to long...to hope that one day my thoughts, my feelings would be as disciplined...no, as ordered as hers.

VIVIAN

During the last few months....she didn't lose that. The opposite is true if anything is.....It was.... at times...as though she wanted to give me one last gift before she died...the gift of allowing me to witness her death, as though she were elaborating that death and I could take from it as much as I could understand....There were times when...(Vivian drifts off into a very delicate mood.

GINGER

When....

VIVIAN

(turns to share her mood with Ginger) When I became av.-are of a feeling past all words, so very tender, profound, filled with a kindness I had never...never thought possible, never even conceived of. Those times didn't come often, but when they came, it made all thought of leaving, all irritation, ail hate so small, so insignificant...so irrelevant. That...was the other side. I was so glad to be there, to be here, to know that I was her daughter, to know that I was sharing her...overwhelming love.....Once, I wept. And she took me in her arms...like a lover...a mother holding her daughter...not only here in this room, but everywhere, for all time. For one moment, she was the...mother, and I, the daughter. I understood what that means....I understood.

GINGER

(with tenderness and a shade of confusion) Vivian.

VIVIAN

On one such morning, I came through that door and she was standing there, near the window, holding the curtain to one side. (Here Vivian walks to window, holds curtain to one side.) She was bathed in sunlight. It seemed to radiate from her. When I walked to her, she reached for my hand...I gave it to her. (Ginger walks to Vivian, gives her hand.) After a while, she told me to watch the leaves of the bushes near the window, to watch them carefully. Then she remarked on how the sun gave so steadily of its light and warmth to anything that would accept it....to every rock, every grain of sand, every living creature....She let my hand go and touched her breast...and said...."This is the supreme gift a woman can give. (Vivian places Ginger's hand on her, Vivian's, breast. They stay in this position, each fixed on the eyes of the other for several moments. Then they part slightly. Vivian's expression does not change, but Ginger shows that she has just experienced a profound emotional perception.)

VIVIAN

Do you understand?

GINGER

Yes...(embraces Vivian, kisses her on the lips) Yes. It's been so long, Vivian, so long since I've been out there. I need to be here. This is my house...(They part. Ginger slowly walks around room.) My room....our room...isn't it?

VIVIAN

Yes.

GINGER

(pausing of mirror) Isabel is in every inch of this room. But nowhere more than in this. (She touches mirror gently.) Did she keep on using it...during these months?

VIVIAN

Yes...More, I believe, than ever before. She would stand there for hours, watching herself....Rehearsing.

GINGER

(slowly starting motion in her right arm, looking into mirror, speaking slowly) I had a teacher who made us practice every day...two students would face one another and pretend that one of them was real and one, the reflection of the real. The reflection followed the real. (Ginger begins slight abstract motion in her left arm, turns toward Vivian and walks to her, both arms moving very slightly.)

VIVIAN

(when Ginger is before her) Are you real...or the reflection?

GINGER

After you start, it changes...so quickly and so often that neither of us will know after a while. Try it....I will go slowly. It isn't difficult. (Ginger expands her movements very slowly but keeps them at the same pace. Vivian begins to follow.) Yes. You learn quickly. (Ginger extends her fingertips to Vivian's face; Vivian does the same to her. When they touch, they stop for a few seconds and then resume.)

VIVIAN

Don't leave again.

GINGER

You see how quickly you reversed things.

They stop moving but continue staring into each other's eyes.

VIVIAN

If....if I become like Isabel was (She begins to tremble.)...take me out...of the mirror...Please...(Ginger stares at her.) Please... I won't be able to ask you again...

GINGER

(turning away sharply) That can never happen. You can never become like that.

VIVIAN

I can....and you...can. We both know that.

GINGER

No. Let's try to forget that. She was sick when....she wrote that.

VIVIAN

She wasn't sick.

GINGER

Let's not argue again. It's foolish.

VIVIAN

Then agree to do it. If it's foolishness, nothing will come of it. If it's not...then I will need it...need it more than I need myself...I'm not as strong as Isabel. I couldn't bear it.

GINGER

Vivian...don't ask me to do that,

VIVIAN

I shouldn't. I know that. But I am.

GINGER

But....(realizing that by refusing, she is simply prolonging a painful conversation)....Allright. (A long silence follows. Ginger moves back to mirror, stares at it, motionless.) Once the teacher told us to think of an emotional experience and try to convey it to the follower through only the movement, the rhythm of the movement. When the follower caught on to the rhythm, he would begin leading, he would become real.... (a silence, during which Ginger raises her arms slightly) And after a while, the leader would bring her arras down gracefully and say (bringing her arms down), "Would you like a cup of tea?" (As Singer says this, she turns to Vivian.) And both students would sit on the floor and enact an informal tea ceremony....no cups, no tea...only the motions....and the conversation in the ceremony had to be in the mood, the rhythm of what had gone before.

VIVIAN

What emotional experiences did you think of?

GINGER

I thought of....loneliness....

VIVIAN

(interrupting) That's not surprising.

GINGER

I thought of....

VIVIAN

(interrupting again) Johnny Pitan.

GINGER

(irritated) No, you thought of Johnny Pitan...and of Jane Herter and of Elizabeth Domirnigue.

VIVIAN

(remaining cool) Did your follower get the rhythm?

GINGER

Yes.

VIVIAN

(changing subject after moments of silence) ...Which of us do you think will inherit the house?

GINGER

(almost shocked at question) What difference does it make?

VIVIAN

Would you like to have it?

GINGER

I've never thought of it in terms of owning it....It doesn't seem something you or I could ever own.

VIVIAN

Who, then? Aunt Genevieve?

GINGER

I guess it will belong to both of us.

VIVIAN

That's quite unlikely.

GINGER

Why?

VIVIAN

Because it wouldn't be like her.

GINGER

She said she had divided everything...in her...will.

VIVIAN

Yes, everything.. But you could get the theaters and I could get the house.....or vice versa.

GINGER

Whatever she decided is fine with me.

VIVIAN

Is it now? Do you care no more than that for this house, this room, that chair, that mirror?

GINGER

(touching chair, moving slowly) They....they've become part of me. (suddenly) Vivian....would you ask me to leave if...the house goes to you?

VIVIAN

Would you want to?

GINGER

(confused) If...if you wanted me to, I would have no choice, no matter who owned it.

VIVIAN

If you owned it, you could ask me to leave.

GINGER

I would never do that.

VIVIAN

Never? What about if your doubts begin to multiply?

GINGER

Doubts?

VIVIAN

About mother's ...death....about me.

GINGER

Can't we forget that?

VIVIAN

As a matter of fact, we can't. ...and we haven't...at least I haven't.

GINGER

Exactly what do you think?

VIVIAN

Do we have to get into....particulars again?

GINGER

You brought it up.

VIVIAN

Don't try to tell me that you had already forgotten. Did Isabel mean that little to you?

GINGER

Alright, then. I hadn't forgotten.

VIVIAN

But you pretended to have forgotten. Like you pretended to have forgotten everything else. You always have, you know. Pretended. Pretended not to pretend. You've made quite an art of it.

GINGER

(rather viciously) Can't you ever shut up?

VIVIAN

Will that help? You can't pretend if there's no one there, can you. Well, can you? Do you pretend when you're tucked in that cozy little room near campus?

GINGER

I try to get by. That's all. To get by.

VIVIAN

And if someone gets hurt? No sweat off your lovely brow. You're just pretending...The princess...remember the princess? Come on now, do you?

GINGER

Yes, I remember the princess.

VIVIAN

You should. You were always the princess in a white dress. I could be the wicked aunt or the crotchety grandmother or even the handsome knight. But you wouldn't ever change. Never.

GINGER

We were children...I was only a child.

VIVIAN

Yes, of course. And now you're grown up and it's all different. Do you have a husband lurking in your closet? Do you cook dinner for him every night and tell him about hard days at school? Who else is in that closet, little sister? A band of children eating their porridge while young mother stumbles off to a movie like a zombie?

GINGER

(breaking down) You're cruel, Vivian.....So cruel.

VIVIAN

And what else is in that closet? A magic typewriter maybe? One that drops the capital letters? A little old quaint machine that belongs in a museum, that pats its letters one by one on small, perfumed stationery...to mother and sister Vivian....and when the full moon dances out the closet, a poem...no, a novel... well, not quite.....A play, yes, a play. What is more exquisitely distant than a nice play...about a woman going mad. The perfect answer for inadequacy...Hmm...that might be a title. Has a certain ring to it...or how about...Do unto mothers...no, that's a bit corny...

GINGER

(interrupting but calmly) Do you really think I wrote that play?

VIVIAN

Something kept pushing Isabel....rushing, pushing. Whoever did write the play seemed to know exactly, precisely the direction of her madness...and it pushed her over the edge. (changing tone to one of pleasant conversation) Maybe it was Genevieve. It was probably Genevieve. Yes, definitely....She's looney, you know. Isabel said so.

GINGER

Vivian, stop.

VIVIAN

Wouldn't it be funny if Isabel left the house to her? She'd have both of us out of here pronto if she knew in how low regard we hold her.

GINGER

Where is Isabel's will? Does Mr. Tolmon have it?

VIVIAN

No.

GINGER

(somewhat surprised) Where then? Do you know?

VIVIAN

She gave it to me.

GINGER

To you? (viciously) You're lying, Vivian. Lying!

VIVIAN

Would you like to see it?

GINGER

I hope you rot in hell, Vivian.

VIVIAN

Do you think we should read it now?

GINGER

No!

VIVIAN

When?

GINGER

Let's call Mr. Tolmon...he can open it and authenticate it or whatever is the word.

VIVIAN

I don't see what difference that would make...it isn't sealed.

GINGER

What?

VIVIAN

Or signed, for that matter.

GINGER

That's absurd. Isabel knew about those things.

VIVIAN

It is in her handwriting.

GINGER

(focusing on Vivian) Have you read it?

VIVIAN

No. I saw Isabel fold it and put it in the envelope. That's all.

GINGER

Why didn't she sign it?....How do you know she didn't sign it?

VIVIAN

I don't. But then you didn't know Isabel. I did.

GINGER

If she didn't sign it, everything will be divided equally, won't it.

VIVIAN

Then you could throw me out.

GINGER

(angrily) I could have you committed.

VIVIAN

What do you think I meant?

GINGER

(somewhat shocked) I didn'tmean it. I lost my temper.

VIVIAN

Whenever you think the time is right, there's a small vial in the medicine cabinet. Without an autopsy, it looks just like a heart attack....or a stroke.

GINGER

I said I didn't mean it. You keep pushing me

VIVIAN

Isabel bought it for a rat that had moved into the walls. All night long, it pattered about, gnawing things, sucking beams... making love. I think that's why Isabel would never let me poison it. Isabel would be the one to appreciate the grotesqueness of rats making love in the walls....Isabel as she became, that is.

GINGER

Not the Isabel I knew.

VIVIAN

Definitely not.

GINGER

I'm leaving tomorrow.

VIVIAN

(after staring at Ginger for several seconds) Will you desert me now that you are convinced I'm mad? (Vivian musses her hair and gets a mad look in her eye.) We have many delicious days before the girl goes completely out of it....As many as you wish.... Maybe even months, years...sweet decades....Could you really leave? Have you no sense of duty, to Isabel at least?

GINGER

I have no choice.

VIVIAN

But then are you sure? Think how it would be to wake up one morning in a glorious girls' college in Utah and look into the mirror and find your face chalk white with tears painted in red fingernail polish on your cheeks. You want an image of loneliness, an emotional experience, so to speak? You think it's not possible? Not probable? Look in the mirror right now. (pulling Ginger to the mirror) Look! Look in the eyes... in

GINGER

(not looking) No,

VIVIAN

Why not?

GINGER

(almost terrified) Because....I'm afraid.

VIVIAN

Can you thin of leaving? I couldn't let you. (becoming tender) I couldn't let you go through that...Don't you see? They'd throw you into a hospital and I wouldn't be able to get you out no matter how much I cried, no matter how lonely I became...I have no one but you...I can't imagine living here, alone. With all these things to remind me of how

empty my life is without Isabel...without you....The seasons coming, going:. The leaves turning green, turning brown....falling, falling. (Vivian touches Ginger's cheek.) I love you, Ginger. I know you like no woman....no man will ever know you. I know that you are part of Isabel and that Isabel is part of you...Am I not the same for you?

GINGER

(totally surrendering) Yes...yes...(breaks down and cries)

VIVIAN

(embracing Ginger, who drops her head on Vivian's shoulder) Go ahead and cry. Later, we'll open the curtain wide (referring to window curtain) and sit down and have a long, quiet tea (Vivian gently pulls Ginger away and looks into her eyes.) Would you like a cup of tea?

CURTAIN