Oh, la la

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Oh, là là!
A Comedy about the Nature of Existence.

If the world was perfect, it wouldn't be.
Yogi Berra

Scene i
At rise: BURRHEAD and DINAH are sitting on the porch. DINAH is shelling peas. BURRHEAD stands meditatively staring across the road. Summer evening.

BURRHEAD
Do you ever wonder what it’s all about? Why are we here? On this earth, I mean.

DINAH
Yeah, I think about it. About every other minute since Harry and I split up. My life is a never-ending existential crisis.

BURRHEAD
Now just what exactly does that word mean? Dadgumit, I wish I’d paid more attention in school. I bet you learned that in school.

DINAH
It means just what you’re talking about. Wondering why we are here. What we should be doing. [Turns to BURRHEAD, concerned] These matters can be mighty unpleasant to worry yourself about. I’d sure hate to see you fret yourself the way I do, little brother.

BURRHEAD
I didn’t know you were taking it that bad about Harry being gone. I mean, it was you who ordered him to leave, wasn’t it?

DINAH
That’s true and I was right to kick Harry out, but now that he’s gone, there’s a big hole in my life. He took up a lot of room, if you know what I mean.

BURRHEAD
Yeah, I know what you mean. [Pause.] Let me give you a hand with them peas. Give some of ‘em here. [He pulls up a chair and sits next to her.] You girls always look so peaceful sitting shelling peas.

DINAH
It’s not necessary, brother, really, it’s not. Cooking is not man’s work. [Pause.] But I’ll never say no.

BURRHEAD
Least I can do is help you out some. You being so kind to me and all. Agnes never would let me in the kitchen. She made me feel like the old bull in the china shop.
DINAH
Well, the kitchen might not be the man’s place in the house, but Bobbie and I will be grateful for any help you feel like offering, believe you me. Now that we’re both working. Here, grab hold of the pea pod like this. [Shows him what to do.] What brought this on anyway?

BURRHEAD
What on? Oh, yeah. I’ve been thinking about Aunt Ruth teaching Latin in the high school. Think about it. Now why on earth did she teach Latin? Living way out in the sticks and teaching Latin? Where did she even learn Latin in the first place?

DINAH
Granddaddy was kind of unusual. He insisted that his daughters get a good education, so he encouraged Aunt Ruth to learn Latin. Why, did you know that Granddaddy practically forced those girls to vote the minute women got the right? Way back in 1923? Did you know that? He wanted his daughters voting in the very first election that women could vote in.

BURRHEAD
Now why didn’t our Daddy taken after him? Why’d he have to be so . . . so . . . normal?

DINAH
I’m afraid you mean ordinary.

BURRHEAD
Yeah. Practical . . . always practical.

DINAH
I guess maybe because he was the only boy among all those sisters. [Pause] Did you know that all our aunts taught school at some time or other in their lives? And I’m talking some of ‘em even after they got married. [Thinks] Yep. Each and every one of ‘em. I guess Daddy didn’t know what to make of his very own sisters.

BURRHEAD
Two of ‘em never married, did they? The ones that taught all their lives?

DINAH
Ruth and Betty. No, they never even married.

BURRHEAD
That explains it.

DINAH
Explains what?

BURRHEAD
They didn’t have no husbands around to laugh at ‘em.
DINAH

[Pause.] Oh, I get it. You’re thinking of Agnes and what she’d have said if you’d up and one day announced you wanted to teach Latin! [Laughs] Yeah, you sure got a point there.

BURRHEAD

Shoot, Agnes don’t even know what Latin is. But you hit the nail on the head. One day I happened to mention that I might should have been a teacher and she about to died laughing. Right to my face!

DINAH

That was wrong of her. Honestly, that Agnes! A wife is supposed to encourage her husband. I can tell you this now that she’s left you, but I hated the way she was always at you about something or other. She never did let up on you.

BURRHEAD

I merely pointed out to her that my aunts were teachers, that it might just run in the family. . .

DINAH

And?

BURRHEAD

Made her laugh even more. ‘Course I never mentioned it again. [Pause.] Why did I marry Agnes? Or maybe the real puzzle is why did Agnes marry me.

DINAH

Oh, Burrhead. Well . . . you were in love. You were young and . . .

BURRHEAD

No, I’ve been giving it some thought since we split up. She never loved me.

DINAH

Oh, Burr . . .

BURRHEAD

. . . No, she really didn’t. She married me because she thought I was gonna be a real big shot down at the plant. It’s all my fault really. I let her think I had lots of ambition, I wanted to marry her so bad. Truth is, I don’t care about that job, I never have and I never will. It’s just a job. I can’t get all excited about [mimics Agnes’ voice, a pretentious voice, one that tries to impress]: “the manufacture of paper products.” Shoot. Ain’t nothing but cardboard boxes and paper plates. Picture it. Agnes left me because I wouldn’t get all excited about [imitates Agnes again]: “the manufacture of paper products.” Cardboard boxes is all it is. Paper cups, paper plates.
DINAH
Now, that can’t be the only reason you all divorced, can it?

BURRHEAD
She left me because she said I wasn’t going nowhere. Them’s her very words. She wanted to be married to a big shot. Truth is, I didn’t want to go where she wanted me to go. I can see that now.

DINAH
Makes sense, now that you mention it.

BURRHEAD
I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.

*Beat. They sit and finish shelling the peas. Brother and sister.*

I want to learn French. I always thought it would be nice to be French. If my aunt could teach Latin, then I can learn French.

DINAH
French! What?! *[Recover]* Goodness, Burrhead, you are having an existential crisis! *[Quickly]* But I think it’s a good crisis, not a bad crisis. Sometimes they’re good. Or so I have read.

BURRHEAD
You read about this stuff? I never knew that. Dinah, you are not only a loving sister, you are a true friend. You didn’t laugh at me and I appreciate that. I been laughed at for just a little bit too long now. And I appreciate you letting me live here in your house with you and Sister Bobbie after Agnes dumped me. And you know what else? This may come as a surprise. I’m glad Agnes dumped me. I like being a free man. I think it suits me.

Here’s your peas. I finished ‘em for you.

*He gets up and goes into the house. DINAH continues to sit, frankly astonished.*

*Fade to dim.*

*DINAH changes to reading a book on the same porch. BOBBIE joins her, knits.*

*Lights up on a conversation, as though they have been chatting for a while.*

BOBBIE
But what does he want to learn French for?

DINAH
I don’t rightly know. It came up kind of sudden like. Least he’s not wasting his time fretting over that woman.

BOBBIE
He can’t even speak proper English! He was always a middling student, you know that. How’s he ever gonna learn French?
DINAH
Well, I for one am not gonna discourage him. And don’t you go discouraging him, Sister. He’s put up with enough in the discouraging department. Let him try it. [Shudders] Imagine listening to Agnes ordering you around every day of your life for . . . how long was it? Seven years? Lord. She’s enough to make you want to go hang from the highest tree . . .

BOBBIE
Dinah! That’s not a very Christian thing to say!

DINAH
May not be Christian, but it’s true picture of what Agnes inspires in me!

BOBBIE
I just think it’s peculiar and, well, bothersome, that’s all. It just doesn’t sound like Burrhead.

DINAH
Maybe we don’t really know Brother Burr. He’s been doing a lot of thinking since he and Agnes split up.

BOBBIE
Too much thinking ain’t always a good thing. Not for a fella like him, anyway. What’s gonna happen if he can’t do it? He ain’t the sharpest tool in the toolbox.

DINAH
Sister, hush! Don’t you ever let on . . .

BOBBIE
I’d just hate to see him frustrate himself.

Enter BURRHEAD

BURRHEAD
Bobbie here thinks it’s a stupid idea, doesn’t she? I know you girls was talking about me. I can see it in your faces.

BOBBIE
No, not at all, brother! I think French a wonderful idea! I’m just curious about why, that’s all. I mean, it’s got nothing to do with your job or well, with nothing that I can see . . . .

BURRHEAD
Now you sounding like Agnes, Sister. Truth is, I don’t rightly know why. It’s just something I always wanted to do. Daddy said French wasn’t practical and wouldn’t let me take it in school. He made me take all them courses in mechanics and I did what he said. But I wanted to take French, even back then. Now Daddy’s gone, Agnes is gone. So what’s the reason not to? You
gotta do something in your life besides the old nine-to-five. You gotta do something to fill up the time.

BOBBIE
If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion, why can’t it be something useful? If you want to fill up time, you could help me and Wayne run the soup kitchen. We sure could use the help. We got that fund raiser coming up, too. It’s a big one.

BURRHEAD
Oh, uh, well, I . . . I don’t know, Bobbie. You and Wayne are doing good work, that’s for sure. I don’t know. I never thought about the soup kitchen, that’s true. I just want to learn French. That’s all. Maybe later on . . .

BOBBIE
I asked Sister and now I’ll ask you. What’s it for? Why is it worth doing? God gave us a short time here on this earth to do something with it.

DINAH
Oh, come on, Sister. There lots of things you can do with French.

Like what?

BOBBIE
Well, you can go to France.

DINAH
Go to France?! What for? When there’s so much work to be done here? The poor in our congregation need us! The poor are always with us! We got more than our share of the poor around here.

DINAH
Don’t we have some French people coming into the congregation now? What about that couple that’s just moved up here from New Orleans? Why, here’s an interesting fact. Did you know that they get slapped in school if they spoke French, one of them was telling me, and . . .

BURRHEAD
. . . Bobbie, you getting yourself all worked up. Why? All this time I’ve been living with you two here at Dinah’s and sitting around playing Go Fish in the evenings, you never said nothing about me working in the soup kitchen . . .

BOBBIE
That’s ‘cause it never even once occurred to me to ask you! Not you!
BURRHEAD
. . . but you wasn’t particularly bothered by it. You never said one word. So why are you so hot and bothered about it now?

BOBBIE
‘Cause frankly I never thought you were interested in doing anything but playing cards! You never said one word about wanting to do something with your time. Now all of a sudden, out of the blue, you’re all concerned about how you spend your time and what do you come up with? French! French! I don’t follow your reasoning, Brother! Do something useful. Be practical.

BURRHEAD
You don’t think I can do it, that’s why. You just like Daddy and Agnes. You all think I’m stupid! And you always have! Nothing but a stupid little brother who does what you tell him to do! It’s just like when we was kids and you dressed me up like I was some kind of baby doll! All my life . . .

DINAH
Oh, Bobbie, now look what you’ve started!

BOBBIE
That’s right. Take his side against me. I make a practical suggestion and you both turn against me. I’m gonna go see to dinner. Someone has to get things done around here.

BOBBIE flounces into the house.

BURRHEAD
She thinks I’m stupid and she always has. And she did dress me up like some doll baby!

DINAH
I know she did, honey, and she shouldn’t have. But she’s real worried about the soup kitchen.

BURRHEAD
She’s got Wayne to help her. What does she need me for?

DINAH
The soup kitchen didn’t raise enough money this year and she’s all upset about it. She sees the poor in the congregation who are hungry and it like to drive her crazy. They come to her and she’s fearful she can’t help them. She’s got all her hopes pinned on that big fundraiser. [Mutters to herself, trying to change the subject] They’re rich folks in that church, too, but do they help out? Oh, no! They’re perfectly content to let Bobbie do all the charity work. Then they go buy fancy new pews for their families so they can put their names on ‘em.

BURRHEAD
[Not listening] I should of known. I should have known. First Daddy, then Agnes, now Bobbie. Why? Why is it of such great importance to everybody what I do? Why am I always supposed
to “should be” doing something else? Always everybody else’s “something else.” And now she’s bringing God into it, for god’s sake.

DINAH
I don’t know, Brother. I don’t know. [Pause] It’s just that Bobbie worries herself sick about the poor... she’s grasping at straws. She just never saw your potential. [Pause.] Burr? Are you listening to me? Oh, lord.

Fade.
End of scene.
Scene ii.
*Kitchen in the same house. 5:30 in the afternoon. BURRHEAD is reading a newspaper which he puts aside when WAYNE knocks lightly at the backdoor and enters.*

WAYNE
Hey, Burrhead, what ‘cha know good?

BURRHEAD
Hey, Wayne. Nothing much.

WAYNE
Bobbie says you gonna start helping us out in the soup kitchen. That’s mighty fine of you. We sure can use the help, let me tell you that. Big, strong guy like you will come in real handy. Bobbie shouldn’t be lifting them big boxes of donations. ‘Course I don’t let her touch ‘em anymore, but believe you me, I’ll be glad for a helping hand.

BURRHEAD
Bobbie told you that? When did Bobbie tell you that?

WAYNE
Last night. She was mighty pleased. And proud of you.

BURRHEAD
There’s been a slight misunderstanding. It’s not that I don’t . . . uh, I greatly admire what you and Bobbie do but . . . well, that’s not exactly what I said.

WAYNE
Oh. *Pause* So you’re not gonna join us?

BURRHEAD
I’m going to learn French.

WAYNE
[Baffled] Uh, huh.

BURRHEAD
Yep.

WAYNE
What’s that got to do with the soup kitchen?

BURRHEAD

*Enter BOBBIE.*
BOBBIE
Hey, everybody. Wayne, are you and brother here having a chit-chat about the soup kitchen? I mentioned to him about you wanting to do something useful with your time, Burr. Wayne here thinks it would be a real good idea if you joined us. [Pause.] Burrhead, I can see it in your face. You haven’t changed your mind one whit. And it’s sinful what you’re doing. French! And they famous for their loose ways! Everybody knows that! Everybody but you, that is.

Enter DINAH

WAYNE
Would somebody kindly fill me in as to what’s going on around here?

BURRHEAD
I just want to learn French, that’s all, that’s all, that is all! I just want my life to be . . . well . . . bigger! I want to be a part of something bigger well, than my life at a cardboard box company!!!

BOBBIE
And just what do you mean by that?

BURRHEAD
I don’t know, Bobbie. Leave me alone, for god’s sake!

BOBBIE
BURRHEAD! Language!

BURRHEAD leaves the house in a huff.

BOBBIE
Burrhead wants to speak French that’s got nothing to do with anything! That’s all he can think of to do in his spare time, now that he’s divorced. The tragic departure of Agnes must be getting to him. [Pause] So there goes our extra help for the fundraiser, Wayne. There it goes, right out the window.

WAYNE
Well, Bobbie honey, we do have that new couple in the congregation now, and I think they speak French. Don’t they? Least I think it’s French. There may be some more coming. Anyway, I got an idea. I’ve been thinking that all we have to do is put up a notice in the church bulletin and we can get us a volunteer. Maybe two or three. We’ve never even tried that. I’ve been meaning to bring it up to you. [Pause] Honey, you getting yourself too worked up about the fund raiser. We got weeks to plan it. We’ll do the very best we can, that’s all we can do. We’ll be fine. And Dinah here has said she’ll help us.

DINAH
Of course I’m going to help. I suspect Burr will help too, if you ask him nicely.
BOBBIE
That’s not the point.

DINAH
What is the point, Sister?

BOBBIE
He’s done nothing in all his born days but play cards and now he wants his world to be bigger? What’s that supposed to mean? We’re not good enough for him now?

DINAH
It’s got nothing to do with us.

WAYNE
Personally, I never knew anybody who spoke French. Most everybody I ever knew can’t even manage English. Anyway, we can handle the fund raiser. Just think of it as the soup kitchen, but a little bigger. Hell, you did everything all by yourself before you met me and you did just fine. Oops, sorry about the swear.

BOBBIE
[Despairing] Oh, Wayne, you ever gonna stop swearing?

WAYNE
Of course I’ll stop swearing, honey. When I stop.

End of scene.
Scene iii
The next morning. At the breakfast table. DINAH and BOBBIE are having coffee. BURRHEAD enters, holding a phrasebook.

BURRHEAD
Bon jour! Comment allez-vous? [No response.] Now you supposed to say, “Très bien, merci, et vous?”

DINAH
Très bien, merci, and . . . what’s the next part?

Et vous?

DINAH
Et vous?

BURRHEAD

BOBBIE
Tell him I refuse to talk to him in French.

DINAH
Bobbie says she refuses to talk to you in French.

Ça va.

DINAH
What’s that mean?

BURRHEAD
It means that’s fine with me. Tell Bobbie that from now on, I would appreciate being greeted in French if only in the mornings. That way you all can help me learn. That is, if anyone around here cares to help me.

BOBBIE puts her breakfast dishes in the sink.

BOBBIE
I thank you for washing the dishes this morning, Dinah. I am very busy at the church with the fundraiser we got coming up. Good bye.

DINAH
Bye, Bobbie.
BURRHEAD

Au revoir, Bobbie.

BOBBIE leaves the house.

BURRHEAD

Bobbie can like it or lump it as far as I’m concerned.

DINAH

[Sighs] Ok, Burr, it looks like I have to step in to prevent World War III. Get you some coffee and sit down.

BURRHEAD

S’il vous plaît.

DINAH

Whatever you say. Now. You told me the other day, remember, that you was thinking of Daddy’s sisters. And somehow in a way that’s not entirely clear to me but it’s connected with your sudden desire to learn French.

BURRHEAD

It ain’t no sudden desire. I told you, Daddy wouldn’t let me take French in school.

DINAH

That’s right, Brother, sorry. I forgot. You did say that.

BURRHEAD

He said the likes of me wasn’t never going to go to France, so why bother. He said people like us don’t do things like that. Travel. Waste of time and money. And now with TV, you can see everything you want to see anyway.

DINAH

Sounds like Daddy, all right.

BURRHEAD

So I got to wondering why his sister, his very own sister Ruth, taught Latin. She never traveled. So why did she do it? And she taught them young ’uns in Sherrill’s Ford who wasn’t gonna to go nowhere neither. Why?

DINAH

I give up.

BURRHEAD

Aunt Ruth knew that the world is big. She just wanted to know more about it, that’s all. She wanted to know how other people thought. Well, so do I. And I want to know about other places besides this one. I want to be a part of something bigger than get up, got to work, go
home. I don’t know why Bobbie’s taking it so personally. I don’t hear her nagging you about the soup kitchen.

**DINAH**

She thinks I’m in deep mourning while I get used to Harry leaving. You know how she is on the subject of husbands and divorce. Anyway, I already told her I’d help her. I thought it might get her off your back.

**BURRHEAD**

Too bad it didn’t work.

**DINAH**

She’s just surprised by it all and, well, she does need help. You know how she cares about those poor of hers. She lives for them.

**BURRHEAD**

And for Wayne. Don’t forget she got a boyfriend now for the very first time in her whole life.

**DINAH**

And for Wayne. And it’s not the first time in her life. But before Wayne, she dedicated her life to the poor. Just look at what she does, brother. See it from her side. She knows every single one of them in the congregation, how many kids they have, even when their birthdays are. Lots of them lost their fathers in the war. It bothers her no end.

**BURRHEAD**

Now you making me feel guilty. Because she dedicates her life to saving the world, I got to?

**DINAH**

Maybe it’s her way of being part of something bigger than herself.

*Enter Wayne after a short knock on the screen door.*

**WAYNE**

You don’t really have to dedicate your life to nothing. Hey, folks. Thought I’d better stop over and see what’s brewing. Bobbie’s sure on edge.

**BURRHEAD**

Hey, Wayne. What ‘cha know good? Bobbie always was overwrought, even when we was little tykes. But you right, Wayne, and this is what I’m trying to say. Man, I sure didn’t think I’d have to fight so hard just to be able to say bon jour! Man! Anyway, we don’t have to dedicate ourselves to nothing just ‘cause somebody else tells us to. This I learned by living with Agnes. Why is it that what she thought was so great better than what I wanted to do? Why? Far as I can make out, we just have to live and do what we need to do to get by. And try not to hurt anybody. That’s why it don’t matter if I am a big shot at the plant –which I never will be and don’t even care to be—or if I learn French, or even if I teach Latin!
Latin?!

For example.

You might call some of ‘em lucky who are dedicated to things in life. But then again you might not. They lucky that they got passions or interests in life, like Bobbie here. But they unlucky, too, if they got such deep feelings like Bobbie has.

I’m not quite following you, Wayne. But please, come on in and have some coffee.

They’s no end to the pain of deep feelings such as Bobbie has. I’d like to see her detach herself a little. She can still do the work she wants to do. But when she sees a child dressed in rags whose daddy got killed in the war, it like to bust her heart in two. I try to help her, Lord knows I do. Life’s easier if you can detach yourself a little. For me, at least. I’m only speaking for myself. I did it. I was free. Still am, pretty much. Somebody’s gotta hang onto Bobbie and keep her from going off the deep end. Poor gal suffers so over every time somebody loses a job or gets sick. She just can’t stand it. [Pause] Hate to see it.

Bobbie’s been off the deep end all her life. [Pause.] Sorry, but she’s making me mad. She’s sounding just like Agnes! All my life . . .

[To WAYNE] Burr and I are having us a heart-to-heart. Can you spare some time to join us? You’re one of the family now anyway. And changing the subject for a few minutes if we can from Bobbie and Burr, I’d like to ask you something. Exactly how did you detach yourself from your feelings? [Pause] I might as well tell you. I’ve been struggling myself since I asked my husband to leave.

Long version or short version?

Sit yourself down. I’ll make us some more coffee.

That’s ok, I’ll get it, Burr.

No, I’m making the coffee. You sit and talk to Wayne. I can hear you.
WAYNE
Thank you, Burr. Well, you all know that I had my troubles with gambling and drinking. I was angry and seem like in a rage all the time. I didn’t see no point to nothing. My mother died young when I was sixteen, my father took off—well, the story was he was out of his mind with grief. [Pause] Huh. Guilt most likely ’cause he never did treat her none too good. So I made way alone, kind of helter skelter like but I did it. Years go by. Come to find out I got two half-brothers from one of my daddy’s. . . well, what’s the polite way to say it? Indiscretions? But anyway, I got me some family after all! And then didn’t I lose ‘em not a year later. My two baby brothers got it in the Korean War. Lucky the Chinese caught ‘em instead of the Koreans. They was only starved to death, not tortured. Poor fellas—they was so gung ho to fight the Commies. One of ‘em only lasted a month over there.

DINAH
Oh, Wayne, we had no idea . . .

WAYNE
Every family has its story. That’s what I try to tell Bobbie. After they died, I went to what the folks at AA, you know, Alcoholics Anonymous, well, they call it rock bottom. The loss of what I had just found was too much for me. The idea in AA is you’re supposed to hit rock bottom and then you supposed to start crawling your way back up because there’s nowhere else to go. That’s why it’s called Rock Bottom. But I just stayed there. When you got the kind of rage I had, you do anything to make it go away. You gamble a little, you take a drink. You do whatever it takes. I see some of that old me in Bobbie, she’s so desperate to save everybody’s life. But of course there’s a world of difference between what she does and what I was doing. She’s . . .

BURRHEAD
I thought gambling was supposed to be exciting. Everybody makes out like it’s fun. I thought that’s why we wasn’t supposed to do it.

WAYNE
Gambling is a fool’s paradise. You somehow think you the lucky one. You convinced that it’s you who is chosen to win. But think about it. Who’s doing the choosing? Who is sitting up there deciding that you are the one who’s gonna win? But that don’t occur to you. You so sure it’s gonna be you. Because it’s your turn, you think. It’s your damn turn for some good luck. What a joke it is. Puts me in mind of something a Russian fella told me once: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” [Laughs] ‘Course I never got lucky. Not too many do.

DINAH
But you don’t gamble any more. Or do you? If you don’t mind me asking.

WAYNE
No, I stopped. But all that rage had to go first. So one day I was sitting in a park feeling just about as bad as a man can feel, sitting on an old park bench, doing nothing but cursing myself, my father, the U.S. government, the Koreans, the Chinese, the Russians, and anybody else that came along, and I noticed a little dog, a little runt of a thing, playing in the grass and suddenly it hit me. That little dog playing in the grass was what mattered. Just being alive. That’s all it is.
A little brown dog playing in the green grass. That little dog and me was just a part of something huge, too big to imagine. The rest is what we make up to fill the time. We can fill it with wars or gambling or fuming and fury over what other people have made up to fill up their time. The worst happened, but it was over and they wasn’t nothing I could do about it. There wasn’t any system of fair or unfair. Things just happen. So I could live in my feelings or I could be like that little dog and move with the energy of life. I had nothing else to lose, so something just let go. What that little dog was doing was worth everything.

DINAH
I’m trying to take this in. So you mean you don’t care about what happens?

WAYNE
Sure, I care. But I also don’t care. I take things as just life happening. I can’t explain myself too good. I try not to have my way of seeing things keep me from seeing the vastness of life.

[Pause] You know what I’m saying already, Burrhead, in your own way.

BURRHEAD
I do?

WAYNE
I believe so, yeah. You tried to make your life what Agnes said it was supposed to be, ’cause you loved her. But you knew all along it wasn’t true.

DINAH
But your brothers dying?

WAYNE
There’s not a thing I can do about them dying. I can be eaten up with my rage or I can help my friend’s Korean wife learn English. Poor thing. She didn’t learn too good from me! They went back to Korea anyway.

DINAH
So you believe in helping people? Everything that Bobbie stands for?

WAYNE
Of course! I try my best to fix the damage other people cause by trying to cram their way of doing things down your throat. That’s what killed my brothers. I guess I oughta say helped them to get themselves killed. To be honest.

BURRHEAD
But Wayne, I mean, don’t you believe in heaven? You don’t work for the poor in hopes of a reward in heaven?

WAYNE
No. And I wouldn’t bribe God even if I was a believer.

[Pause.]
I’m trusting you folks not to let on to Bobbie. . . It’s the work she’s doing that’s important. . .

DINAH

. . . I won’t mention it.

BURRHEAD

She don’t need to know. But . . .

WAYNE

Bobbie’s feelings runs too deep. The world she’s created for herself is that she’s going to work for the poor, like no one I’ve ever seen, until she runs herself into the ground. But at least her reward’s here and not in heaven. Sometime the light that shines in her eyes when one of ‘em gets back on his feet . . . I just wish she could hold onto that light.

BURRHEAD

But I thought true love meant complete honesty and openness between two people and . . .

WAYNE

[Gently] Someone told you that, didn’t they? Who told you that? Agnes again? It’s what you think that’s important. [Pause] It’s not my way to let the woman I love know something about me that might just break her heart.

Beat.

BURRHEAD

Ok. I get it. [Pause] Did that little dog give you all them ideas?

WAYNE

I was in Korea, too. Before my Korean buddy was killed, we used to talk a lot.

Fadeout.

Scene iv

Two weeks later.

DINAH, BOBBIE, WAYNE are playing cards in the parlor.

WAYNE

Don’t see much of Burrhead these days. I been back for two days and ain’t seen hide nor hair of him. Bobbie, give me your seven of spades.

BOBBIE

I’d rather not discuss the matter. Go fish.
DINAH
Oh, Bobbie, hush. [To WAYNE] They ain’t speaking to each other. [Big sigh] It’s been right pleasant around here lately. You lucky you were away on that moving job. Burrhead won’t answer to nothing but Monsieur Harold, something like that. That’s what they call him in his French class. Bobbie here declares that she won’t talk to any Frenchman.

BOBBIE
How am I supposed to concentrate on the game?

WAYNE
Harold?

DINAH
That’s his real name. Give me your Jack of Hearts, Wayne.

WAYNE
[Realizing] ‘Course he has a name. [Shakes his head. Gives DINAH a card.] ‘Course he has a name.

BOBBIE
He’s wasting two, sometimes three evenings a week on them French classes.

WAYNE
He’s serious! Bobbie, I know you’ll all het up about the fund raiser but don’t you worry yourself so much about it. If it rains, we’ll just hold it indoors. [Pause] Mighten you just be taking out some of your worries and frustrations on your brother? Give me your Ace of Hearts, honey.

BOBBIE
When I think how much help we need . . . . Go fish. When I think how much help we need . . . .

Enter BURRHEAD with MADAME ETIENNE. He is wearing a beret.

BURRHEAD
Bon soir! Hey, everybody. I’d like you to meet Madame Etienne.

WAYNE
Well, how do you do? Or what should I say to her, Burrhead, I mean [mangles] Monsieur Harold?

BURRHEAD
It’s simple. You say, “Enchantè, Madame Etienne.”

MADAME ETIENNE
[Heavy French accent.] Enchantée. Monsieur Harold has told me so much about you!
DINAH
We are delighted to meet you. I’m sorry we can’t say it in French. But please, come in, sit down.

MADAME ETIENNE
Monsieur Harold is my best student. He is learning très rapide. I am impressed with his work and his effort!

BOBBIE
Burrhead’s the only one around here who speaks French. Please, sit yourself down. I’ll make some coffee.

MADAME ETIENNE
[Puzzled] Burrhead?

WAYNE
She means Monsieur Harold. Burrhead is his nickname.

MADAME ETIENNE
[Turns to BURRHEAD] Nickname of Burrhead? Comment ça veut dire . . .?

BURRHEAD
It’s a Southern custom . . . I’ll explain it to you later. I’ll make the coffee, Bobbie. Madame Etienne is particularly interested in talking to you.

BURRHEAD exits to the kitchen.

BOBBIE
Burr, a man’s place is not in the kitchen, especially when there’s company!

BURRHEAD
[Calls from kitchen]

Just stay put, Bobbie.

MADAME ETIENNE
Oui, Harold has told me about your wonderful soup kitchen! I am très, très intéressante. I have come to ask if I might help you. I would like to be of use to the poor.

BOBBIE
Why, why . . . uh . . .

MADAME ETIENNE
[Interrupting her] I find that I have free time and I have searched for something to volunteer. Monsieur Harold told me about what you do. J’admire, I admire you much! To help where help is so needed!
BOBBIE
Well, I, uh, . . . mer . . . mercy.

MADAME ETIENNE
[Interrupting again] And ce weekend, no? There is a . . . how-do-you-say . . . Monsieur Harold? Vous m’aidez, s’il vous plaît!

Burrhead
Returns with a tray, coffee pot, cups.
Madame Etienne would like to help you all this weekend with the fundraiser, Bobbie. Her English is perfect. But she’s not too sure what to do or what this fundraiser is all about, that’s why she can’t explain to you what she wants to do.

MADAME ETIENNE
I want very much to help les pauvres.

Burrhead
Can you find something for her and me to do?

Bobbie
Uh, well, you kind of caught me off guard here, brother! But of course I can find something. Wayne? I can’t think clearly . . . Wayne?

Wayne
Well, I can see Madame Etienne and Burr at the Bingo tables, sure as shooting. Burr, I mean [mumbles] Harold, can run the Bingo ball and maybe Madame Etienne can collect the winning cards and add ’em up. That would really help. If I don’t have to do that, Bobbie, I could be available and help you oversee the whole she-bang.

Bobbie
That would be a great relief.

MADAME ETIENNE
She-bang? Monsieur Harold, you will have to explain many new words to me.

Burrhead
Avec plaisir, Madame Etienne.

Bobbie
Madame Etienne, I just don’t know how to thank you properly.

MADAME ETIENNE
And I thank you for letting me take part in your so useful work.

Burrhead
And now, I’ll drive Madame Etienne to her home. We can settle all the details later.
They exit with many ‘au revoirs and à bientots’ and attempts at merci beaucoups.

DINAH
Well, Bobbie, they will be a great help to you.

BOBBIE
I just can’t believe it! Out of the blue! [Pause] I’ve been unfair to him.

DINAH
Well, I don’t think any of us expected this.

BOBBIE
But I didn’t even give him a chance. You two did. [Pause]
Still can’t understand half of what he says.

End of scene.

Scene iv

BURRHEAD, WAYNE, and DINAH sitting on the porch, shelling peas.
There is a little brown dog playing in the yard. They watch her.

DINAH
I just keep looking at that there little brown dog. What a sweet present. Just look at her run! Thank you, Wayne.

WAYNE
Bobbie was right puzzled about her ‘til I told her it was to get your mind off Harry.

BURRHEAD
Well, I for one am sure glad that fundraiser was a success. It got Bobbie’s mind off me.

WAYNE
You and Madame Etienne helping is what got her off you. That was kind of you, Burr.

BURRHEAD
Wasn’t my idea. Corinne insisted. But I have to admit, I enjoyed it. [Pause] Corinne hit it off with that couple from up from New Orleans so much so that now they gonna help with the soup kitchen. Bobbie got to see first hand that knowing French is useful after all. I got big points for that.

DINAH
Ah, so it’s “Corinne” now, is it?
Mais, oui!

WAYNE
Can we let ourselves be happy for you?

BURRHEAD
I’m taking it real slow. But the class is over next week and we’re having dinner together to celebrate. That’s a good sign. Ha! At least she doesn’t, uh, doesn’t object to me learning French!

They laugh together.

She’s got me translating some real tough stuff, though. Way over my head. I happened to mention what you said about “existential crisis” and, man, did that ever get her going. Should’ve kept my big mouth shut. She forgets I’m just a beginner! Should’ve paid more attention in school. [Sighs.] Well. Better get busy.

DINAH
She’s not giving you existentialism to read!

BURRHEAD
Well, it’s really watered down for my level, but I still don’t get it. That’s what I get for trying to impress her.

[BURRHEAD exits.]

DINAH
I just keep watching her. A little brown dog playing in the green grass.

WAYNE
That’s right. Just keep watching her. [Whistles] Come here, big girl. [Pantomimes calling the dog and watching as the dog comes running.] Here she comes, just a-running. Look. Look at her! Now she’s sitting here wagging her tail and watching us. Will you just look at that, now. She’s watching us. Will you look at that.

They watch the dog watching them as the lights slowly go down.

End of play or of Act II, whatever this thing decides to be.