

Curiosity Shop
A One Act Play

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CHARACTERS

HelenA woman in her twenties

Tim.A man in his twenties

Lady.A woman, forty-fifty

Man.A blue collar worker

SYNOPSIS

A Tea Room/Curio Shop
In a Large City
The Present

SCENE: A tea room and curio shop. The entrance to the shop is located stage right. A counter stands against the rear wall just left of center. A little behind it is a door to the area in back. It is hung with beads. There is a distinctly Bohemian air to the shop. Shelves are cluttered with “stuff.” There are several tables with brightly colored tablecloths.

HELEN stands on a stepladder arranging articles on a shelf on the stage left wall. TIM enters from the beaded entrance. He looks to be a bookish type with black rimmed glasses. He sees the woman and pauses. Very carefully, he removes his glasses and places them in his shirt pocket. From one of the shelves to the right of the counter he takes what looks to be a pistol. It should not look particularly real or not real. He stealthily exits through the main door of the shop. There is the sound of a bell tinkling as he leaves. Startled, HELEN looks up.

HELEN

Tim? Was that you? Tim, are you there?

(There is the sound of a gunshot from off stage. HELEN gets down and hurries toward the door. There is a frantic tinkling of bells now, and TIM re-enters, holding his chest, staggering in pain, finally falling at her feet.)

TIM

Dey got me, Maggie! I always knew it would happen sooner or later. My luck couldn't hold out forever.

HELEN

(Drops to her knees with exaggerated tenderness.)

Who was it, Lefty? Who was the dirty rats that done this to ya?

TIM

It was the big boys, Maggie. The Mob. I'm done for, baby, done for.

HELEN

Don't talk like that, Louie

TIM

Lefty.

HELEN

Oh. That's right. Sure. Lefty. I mean like you been real good to me, Lefty. Nobody ever treated me like you done.

TIM

I tried, baby.

HELEN

Bought me nice clothes. Took me to swell restaurants. You can't die now. You can't. I won't let you.

TIM

It's too late, Maggie. I'm goin' fast. But I'm gonna take care of you, baby. This ain't no kind of life for a classy dame like you. I'm gonna tell you where we stashed the dough from our last job, so's you can buy a little farm somewhere and settle down. Maybe you'll find some little jerk of a farmer who can give you a decent life. Not some bum like me what gets his brains blasted out.

HELEN

Brains?

TIM

Brains.

HELEN

Oh, Lefty. Don't say them things.

TIM

'Cause you been good, baby. You been real good to me.

HELEN

I tried, lover.

TIM

And now I'm gonna tell you where the loot is.

HELEN

Where?

TIM

Some other dames, they would have walked out on me years ago, but not you, Maggie. You was always true blue.

HELEN

Where's the money, Lefty? Where did you hide it?

TIM

I always knew that every time I got out of stir, my Maggie would be there waiting for me.
(Fit of coughing. HELEN pushes him back down on the floor and straddles his body.)

HELEN

Come on, baby. Where did you hide the money? Come on, and tell Maggie where it is.

TIM

Nobody would of ever found it in a million years. Best hideout I ever found.

HELEN

Where, lefty? Where?

TIM

(His body stiffens in pain.)
It . . . I . . . It's all over, Maggie. So long.
(His head falls back.)

HELEN

(Shaking the body.)
Where's the money? Come on you louse, spit it out. Where's the goddamned money, you rotten son of a bitch.
(She starts slapping his face from side to side.)

TIM

Jesus Christ, Helen! That hurts! Get off of me!

HELEN

(One last slap before getting up and dusting herself off.)
You deserved it, you creep. Do you realize what time it is? You're late.

TIM

I was tied up.

HELEN

You wish.

TIM

Well, I'm here now.

HELEN

And it's Thursday. You know I always go out on Thursdays.

TIM

So go.

HELEN

It's too late, and there's too much to do.

TIM

I'll help. Don't I always help?

HELEN

I know how *you* help.

TIM

Just tell me what to do. I love being told what to do.

HELEN

I know. (Pause.) all right. Here, put these menus around on the tables. Put the blue ones on the right side and the red ones on the left. See how I'm doing it?

TIM

Blue on the right. Red on the left. Yeah. Blue on the right. . .
(The entrance bell tinkles.)

HELEN

We've got a customer! Hurry; get out of here before they see you!

(He exits behind the beads. Enter a velvety, violet smelling old lady. She is wearing the kind of dress ordinarily seen only in coffins. HELEN rushes to greet her.)

May I help you Madame?

LADY

Yes. I hope so? Do you have greeting cards? I saw all the pretty things in the window display. I thought you might have greeting cards.

HELEN

You saw my display? You saw my display, and it made you want to come in? Do you know how gratifying that is? I do all the windows myself, and to have someone take notice like that? It makes all those years at the Institute worthwhile.

LADY

Well, uh, yes. You certainly have a touch. Do you have greeting cards?

HELEN

Handmade. (Pause.) I did them myself.

LADY

How nice. (Waits.) Uh, could I see them?

HELEN

(A little reluctantly)

Well, of course. (Pause.) What sort are you looking for?

LADY

Get well.

HELEN

Get well?

LADY

Yes.

HELEN

You want to give one of *my* handmade cards to a sick person?

LADY

Well, that is what I had in mind.

HELEN

Who?

LADY

Why—it's really not any of your business, is it?

HELEN

How can I help you choose exactly the right card if I don't know for whom it's intended. These are not simple things. We're not talking Hallmark here. We're talking handmade.

LADY

Well, it's . . . it's for my nephew.

HELEN

What's wrong with him?

LADY

He's having his tonsils out.

HELEN

Tonsils? How old a person are we talking about here?

LADY

He's . . . he's just a little by, but if you don't mind, I think I'll just be—

HELEN

A Child? You want to buy one of my cards for a sick child?

LADY

(Edging away from HELEN.)

Well, no actually. Now that you've put it that way, I think I've changed my mind.

HELEN

(Blocking her way.)

I'm sorry, but it would be out of the question! The whole issue of illness appalls me.

LADY

If you'd excuse me, I—

HELEN

It's the smell, you know. The smell of illness, medicine, vomit, and . . . worse!

LADY

I see. Now, if—

HELEN

And, of course, there's always the chance that once someone's gotten sick, they're just going to up and die on you—and there where are we?

LADY

You have an interesting way of looking at things; now please get out of my way!

HELEN

Interesting? That's all you can say? It's interesting? It's more than interesting: it's the crux of all existence. Look at the facts. Sick people tend to die. Admit it!

LADY

I'm very busy, really. I must be going?

HELEN

Where? Where are you going? To the hospital? I bet you're going to the hospital to visit your nephew.

LADY

Well, yes. Eventually that's where--

HELEN

Oh my dear, you mustn't think of such a thing. Don't you know what happens to people in hospitals? The number of diseases they can pick up? They don't want you to know the statistics—but my Aunt was a perfectly healthy woman, in the prime of her life. She went into the hospital for a simple check-up, picked up a liver infection, caught pneumonia and died. What do you think of that?

LADY

I think that was . . . too bad.

HELEN

Some might call it a tragedy.

LADY

Well, yes.

HELEN

Not me. She was a boring old bitch, and besides, she left me this shop. Why should I complain?

LADY

You're mad!

HELEN

Oh, just a little, maybe. What are you leaving your nephew, when you go? Stocks. Bonds? A nice little house in the country?

LADY

You know, I have half a mind to report you!

HELEN

To whom? The better business bureau?

LADY

You can't treat people this way! I came in here to purchase something from your shop, and—

HELEN

Well, you can't! I've thought it over, and there's nothing here I care to sell to you!

(TIM enters.)

Oh! Look! Here's my assistant. You can report him too!

TIM

Miz Phillips, there's a man out back, says he wants to see you about something real important. I told him you was busy, but he said you had to come real quick-like.

Something about he's got the stuff you ordered. I didn't like his looks, Miz Phillips. I didn't like 'em at all.

HELEN

You're not paid to like the looks of anyone, so just mind your own business. This woman has a complaint to make. Will you be a dear and take down all the details?
(She exits. The LADY starts edging her way toward the door.
TIM plants himself squarely in her path.)

TIM

May I help you?

LADY

I really have to be going.

TIM

You had a complaint.

LADY

Not really, now if you would--

TIM

Really or not really? Which do you mean? You don't "really" have to be doing anything. I mean like what's real and all, you know?

LADY

Young man, I have really had about all of this nonsense I intend to take.

TIM

But you just got here, didn't you. Come on. Surely you can take just a little bit more? And anyway, you came in here because you needed something, and I can help you. I'm much better at all this business stuff than Helen is. She tends to alienate people or didn't you notice?

LADY

Well, as a matter of—

TIM

But you must forgive her. She's had a very difficult life.

LADY

Look, you don't have anything in here that interests me.

TIM

(Coming on to her.)

We don't? What about me? Do you think I might have anything in here that would interest you? I'm a very interesting fellow.

LADY

I'm sure you are, but—

TIM

You'd be surprised. Do you like surprises?

LADY

I'd much rather know exactly what was going on. Is that woman all right?

TIM

Helen? She's mad as a hatter! (Pause.) Or a March hare. I don't know which would be a more appropriate comparison. Hmm. But of course I didn't catch on to all that for a while. During the interview she was as sane as you or I.

LADY

Well, she certainly comes across as a little—well, you know, not all the way there if you get my meaning.

TIM

Oh, I know just what you're talking about. Why, when I first came here, it was pure hell adjusting to Helen's little ways. I'm like you. I like to know what's going on. I like my t's crossed and my i's dotted. I like to have things all figured out. But Helen's changed all that for me now. In many ways I'm much freer than I used to be. I'm really very lucky that she decided to let me stay.

LADY

She "let you stay"?

TIM

Well, I was only here on trial at first. Helen is not a woman to accept things at surface value. She wants to try them out. She wants to see if they have what it takes.

LADY

And you had what it took?

TIM

Honey, I had tons of it, and see? Things have worked out just grand. It's clear that we have a good arrangement, and I can honestly say that I've enjoyed every minute of it—well, almost every minute of it. (Pause.) Some minutes of it. (Pause.) I wouldn't want to leave here now even if I could.

LADY

Can't you?

TIM

That's the part that's hard to take. I mean, just look at me. I'm a grown man. I have appetites. In the beginning I must admit that sometimes . . .now this is silly, I know, but just sometimes I would think that it would be so nice just to leave. You know. Walk out in the sunshine and watch the children playing in the park: the pretty little girls in their yellow dresses. Yes, I'd like that now and then.

LADY

Are you trying to tell me that you can't leave here?

TIM

I'm not trying to tell you, lady. I AM telling you.

LADY

You mean to say—

TIM

We are open 24 hours a day. You tell me what that means.

LADY

But—

TIM

I can sleep though. Hours at a time even.

LADY

(Again making for the door.)

That's very nice for you, I'm sure.

TIM

(Blocking her.)

But it would be nice just to walk out that door and see the light of day.

LADY

Then you should leave. You should just quit!

TIM

After all Helen's done for me? You think I should just walk out? What sort of person are you?

(Grabs her arm.)

LADY

Get your hands off me this instant, young man!