

THE EVENING HOUR

A Play

Aram Saroyan

CHARACTERS

Charlie Benetia--fifties/sixties

Lily Benetia--early twenties

Nick Benetia--early twenties

Stella Real--thirties

Audrey Scorbin--twenties

Jean Paul--twenties

Nick Benetia--fifties

Reporter--twenties/thirties

Natatie Benetia--late forties

Celeste Benetia--twenties

Laura Spokes--thirties

ACT ONE

The set is a one bedroom suite at Whitelands House, an apartment building on the Kings Road in the Chelsea district of London. Stage right is a large living room area with a sofa against the far wall, another sofa downstage and a table between the two at which Nick will eventually work at his typewriter. Stage left is the bedroom area, and a double bed on which Charlie will lie reading. There is a small table or desk with a typewriter set on it. In between the bedroom and the living room is a small pullman kitchen. On the far wall at the left of the living room is the front door. At the front of the stage there might be an indication of large windows in both the living room and the bedroom.

Scene One

It is before noon on a summer day in 1966.

Charlie Benetia, an American writer in his late fifties/early sixties, still possessed of a virile presence, but with a nurturing almost maternal side as well, is lying on his bed in the bedroom reading a Faber & Faber edition of one of his own early collections of stories, The Light Fantastic. He has just laughed at a passage when there is a knock on the front door followed by the doorbell. Charlie is dressed in a colorful oversize tee shirt that isn't tucked in and a pair of slacks, and is barefoot. He lays down the book, and stands up and goes to the front door.

CHARLIE: Who is it?

LILY: (from the other side of the door) It's me, Papa.

Charlie opens the door. Lily Benetia, Charlie's daughter, is an attractive American woman who is just twenty and dressed in the latest mini-skirt style of Mod London. She is festooned with packages including an oversize wrapped poster.

LILY (cont.): I'm sorry. I couldn't get my key out.

CHARLIE: Where have you been, dandelion?

LILY (excited): I went to the Indica Book Shop, Papa. You know, where John met Yoko?

(as she arranges her purchases in the living room)

Did you ever hear how they met; it's so sweet--

CHARLIE (smiling, indulgent): No, I didn't, and I want to, but before you tell me, I'm going to start heating up a little dolma. We can have it with English yogurt.

LILY (stopped by this): English yogurt?

CHARLIE: Fresh from the Chelsea Safeway. Got it this morning before you were awake...

LILY: Gosh. I don't know why I sleep so much--maybe because I'm scared about Nick coming here. Do they know how to do it?

CHARLIE: Do what, tumbleweed?

LILY: Make yogurt. Is it any good?

CHARLIE: Well, you know, yogurt is yogurt. Is it as good as I make it in San Francisco, no. But it's yogurt. There's only so much that can go wrong.

(as he goes into the kitchen and puts dolmas into the oven)

I'll tell you what--I'll heat up some dolma for me and you can have some if you like.

LILY: Great. Anyway, I went to the Indica Book Shop and they have a ton of Nick's concrete poetry including this poster. Wait till you see it.

(Charlie comes back into the living room and Lily unveils the one-word poem "eyeye" in red in the center of the white poster)

Dah-da!

CHARLIE: Dada is right. What's that supposed to mean?

LILY: It's very avant-garde, I guess. It's a poem.

CHARLIE: Yeah, I know all about it. Nick explained to me that the written word is obsolete. Is there something a little Freudian about the son of a writer declaring that the printed word is dead?

LILY: He's competing with you. I know.

CHARLIE: Competition, I'm not sure I'd mind. Maybe it would make me nervous, but I'd be proud of him too. This way, though, he's declared the whole game is over. I'm a has been. Well, just for the record, I was a has been before he came along to tell me I was.

LILY: You are not, Papa. Everybody in New York, and here in London too, worships you.

CHARLIE: Honey, these are old people you've been talking to. Now, how did John meet Yoko?

LILY: (warming to the story) Well, she had a show of her paintings and drawings, and I guess her writing too, at the Indica, which has a gallery space. Paul McCartney is a part owner so John came to the opening, and one of the pieces was high up on the wall with a ladder leaned against the wall so you could climb up to look at it. So John climbs up the ladder, and looks into this little box up there that has this eye-hole in it, and he puts his eye up to it, and inside the box is just the word "yes."

CHARLIE: Did Nick write that one too?

LILY: (smiling) I don't know. But John said that if it had said "no" or "fuck you" or something, he never would have fallen in love with her.

CHARLIE: (bemused) That's very moving.

LILY: Anyway, I got a ton of Nick's stuff there, so he must be very Mod or very Rocker or something.

CHARLIE: Nick is a nice boy. I mean that genuinely; I'm glad he's not one of these poseurs of machismo...

LILY: What, like Hemingway or somebody?

CHARLIE: Well, Ernest would certainly qualify: like most of them, an over-sensitive wounded boy in the middle of the strapping bully.

LILY: You beat him up once, didn't you, Papa?

CHARLIE: Did I beat Hemingway up? No, darling, your father's no fighter. He wrote meanly about me when I first came on the scene, and I wrote him an amused, conciliatory letter. "You may be tougher than I am, but I'm a faster runner," I said. And he wrote back with a copy of his new novel, Across the River and into the Trees, a very bad book by the way, inscribed "To Charlie Benetia from his Turkish press agent, Ernest Hemingway."

LILY: That's sweet, Papa.

CHARLIE: Well, he could be sweet. When he was in his teens, he found his father, who was a doctor, after he'd hung himself. Ernest was the one who found him. And that kind of thing can hurt a man badly.

LILY: And then he ended up killing himself, too.

CHARLIE: Yes, he did, because he was slipping, thought he was no longer the king of the big literary jungle, and couldn't bear not to be number one. Well, I had a moment or two myself a little later and it's over now, and I'm not going to put a shot gun in my mouth...

LILY: I'll kill you if you do, Papa!

CHARLIE: Honey, it's dolmas for both of us. Yes siree, what do I care if I'm not a big shot anymore. I'm not going to gamble like I used to, I'm not going to be crazy about the crazy girls anymore, I'm just going to take it easy, and enjoy spending a little time with my beautiful daughter.

LILY: I love you, Papa, but don't let Nick be mean to me, okay? What crazy girls?

CHARLIE: It's a deal, sweetheart. Now, I know you understand this deeply, but let me say it to you just in case it's slipped your mind...

LILY: Oh, Papa!--oh, remind me I need to tell you something...What slipped my mind?

CHARLIE: (soberly) You and Nick are great friends, and always have been, even aside from the fact that you're brother and sister. Don't let that get forgotten in a moment of him being rude to you or you being rude to him. I've watched you two from birth and you're each other's best friend and don't ever forget it.

LILY: If you say so, but frankly I don't know what's gotten into him lately. He's so--demogogic.

CHARLIE: Well, he might be wanting to be one of the hep cats or the hip boys or whatever it is these days.

LILY: Hippies. He's a hippie, I think. Oh, this is what I wanted to tell you. Stella Real is dying to meet you. She worships you, ever since she read The Light Fantastic when she was sixteen.

CHARLIE: And I was only a little older than that when I wrote it. And it holds up pretty well; I was re-reading it for the first time in thirty years when you arrived just now. Stella Real...

LILY: (nodding) The movie star...

CHARLIE: I don't think I know who she is...

LILY: Oh my God, Papa. You will when you see her. She's gorgeous.

CHARLIE: Well, that's wonderful, darling, and I look forward to meeting Mrs. Real.

LILY: Miss. She's not married. She was going with this screen writer, Jeremy Oven, but he couldn't handle her career.

CHARLIE: Well, I can understand and sympathize with that. These girls may genuinely believe they want a husband, a home, and children, but their real marriage is to all that machinery and money that takes their sex--and whatever personal qualities go along with it--and makes hundreds and thousands and if they're lucky millions of people fall in love with them. A writer is going to have a hard time keeping up with that, competing with it,

and then is bound to get sad or angry or frustrated and that's when the going gets rough. Marilyn was like that. A pretty girl whose underwear wasn't always terribly clean.

LILY: Oh my God, Papa, stop talking like that!

CHARLIE: I'm sorry, dandelion, you're Papa's just gotten a little older and, I suppose, fussier...

Charlie goes into the kitchen and brings out some dolmas and sets them and two plates on the living room table.

LILY: You keep saying you're old. You're not old...really. (pause) Is that what happened with you and Mama?

CHARLIE: Well, in a way it was, although your mother never became a movie star or even, after we were married, acted very much. But she loved to talk on the telephone...

LILY: Oh, my God, I've got to phone Jean Paul...

CHARLIE: Alright, now try one of these dolmas and then you can call Jean Paul and decide on your plans.

Lily sits down at the table and tries a dolma.

LILY: Umm. This is good.

CHARLIE: Of course it's good. Your mother could make it once upon a time, too, although I suppose she's forgotten.

LILY: I want you to teach me, Papa.

CHARLIE: Well, I certainly will, Grass-hopper, when you have a little time. I'll let you know the next time I make them.

LILY: Perfect. I'm going to phone Jean Paul. I'm really late and I know he's waiting.

She gets up from the table.

CHARLIE: Go ahead and do that. We don't want that boy getting upset.

Lights go down.

Scene Two

Late afternoon of the same day. Charlie sits at the desk in his room typing. The living room shows evidence of Nick's arrival, including a typewriter in its case on the table. The "eyeye" poster leans against the wall supported by the top of the sofa. The doorbell rings and Charlie pauses in his typing, pulls the sheet up in the carriage and studies it for a moment before going to the door.

CHARLIE: (opening the door and seeing Nick) I'll get you a key in the morning.

Nick is a good looking young man with a certain erratic strain, a poet of the sixties.

NICK: Great. I went over to this bookshop...

CHARLIE: Where John met Yoko...

The two have come into the living room.

NICK: That's right, actually. How did you know?

CHARLIE: (indicating poster) Where do you think Lily bought it?

NICK: I know but I didn't realized she knew about it...

CHARLIE: Now, sit down. Get comfortable. I've still got some dolmas, or we can go down the street and eat some of that great bad English food.

Nick takes in his father and laughs.

NICK: It's great to see you, Pop. Jesus, it's so different here. The different light.

CHARLIE: The English light, the London light, is very different from the light in New York. But even more than that, the faces are so different. Even with all the hair these days, you see the English skin, the high complexions everybody has...

Nick sits down on the sofa while Charlie has taken a chair at the table. There's a bottle of brandy on the table.

...Would you like something to drink?

NICK: Thanks, no. Actually, Pop, I feel a little awkward about this but I might as well be honest about it. I just scored a little grass.

CHARLIE: Grass? Oh, marijuana.

NICK: Yeah. I hope that's okay.

CHARLIE: Of course it's okay. I don't know that I can say I'm pleased about it, but I want you to feel free to go along as you have been without worrying about me.

NICK: I really appreciate it, Pop. Actually, if it's okay, I wouldn't mind smoking a little of it to see if it's any good. Would you like to try it?

CHARLIE: That's alright. You go ahead, and I'll have a little of this brandy here.

Nick rolls a joint and lights up and Charlie pours himself a drink and sips it.

NICK: (toking up, then releasing some smoke) I never know what to expect. The stuff varies wildly. This is from a guy named Pete the Rat that Miles at the Indica introduced me to.

CHARLIE: (sipping his brandy) Sure. Each man has his own poisons.

NICK: Well, it helps me to relax, Pop, and actually I do quite a bit of writing with it. I guess it's sort of my generation's alcohol.

CHARLIE: (twinkling) It seems to improve your personality.

NICK: (heedless, but getting it) It's interesting right now what's going on. And it's over here, too. There's a whole group of people that don't need to be introduced. I don't know what it is...

CHARLIE: Well, you know, in the thirties, which was my day, you had something like that, too, but it was based on being poor.

NICK: Right. The Depression. Somebody told me that you were to the Depression years what Fitzgerald had been to the Twenties.

CHARLIE: Well, that's very nice. Who was that person?

NICK: His name is Jamie--or James--Stark. He's a poet and he's on a Fulbright over here. He teaches at the University of Essex. I've got to phone him.

CHARLIE: He's not an Englishman.

NICK: No, American. And a freak, as we call ourselves. His letters suggest a steady level of derangement, and then he writes these impeccable reviews for quarterlies that practically have an English accent.

CHARLIE: Well, you have to make sure all that junk doesn't hinder your work.

NICK: See, I don't know exactly what that means because if it's about making a product of a certain kind, maybe that's just feeding the machine that's bombing Hanoi. You know? It's like everything gets turned quickly into a product, and actually, this guy Jamie explained to me how war was perfect for capitalism because the demand for products--for bullets, bombs, or men--is endless. And it's a one-time use product--it self-destructs--and you're also trimming the lower orders of the population so these rich and super-rich stay at the top.

CHARLIE: I assume your draft status is...

NICK: I'm 4-F on a psychiatric recommendation. I got a letter from a shrink, which frankly was fairly accurate about my inability to cope very well with authority structures, and then they had this wonderful white haired old man at the draft board, a staff psychiatrist who was like New York's gift

to its maladjusted. He said to me: "Would you like to go into the army?" And I said, "No"--not looking at him, because somebody told me that was a point in favor of being wacko. And he said, "What is it, fear?" And I said, "No--I just don't think I could make it in the army." And he says, "Well--I don't think we should force you." In my book that guy deserves to be decorated.

CHARLIE: All that is fine. I like the sixties, the hippies, whatever you call yourselves. I like James Stark just fine. But don't forget you're just a man--a young man right now, but believe it or not, that doesn't last forever--and you won't be able to change everything in your one season, your own youth. Now what happened with that girl you were seeing? Karen.

NICK: I don't know--it wasn't working. If you want to know the truth, I could see myself getting a house somewhere, having a kid maybe, and losing--whatever this is--and going to work for Newsweek or more likely in advertising, which I'd probably be good at. And to be honest, I'm too young.

CHARLIE: Fine. Be young. God knows I was long enough. But a one-word poem doesn't make a career--or, I imagine, a living.

NICK: Well, yeah, I know. But it does make a splash. It's show business. And it's interesting. The way I look at it, it's like advertising but there's no product except a different way of looking at words. Like the literary side of pop art, although the literary critics will all be a couple of decades getting that. I'd love to get a word, a single word, up on a billboard.

CHARLIE: What word would that be?

NICK: Maybe the word "and"--or maybe the word "the." Or the word "though"--actually I like that one. It's like a psychological state with no content. Wouldn't that be something?

CHARLIE: What's your opinion of this grass?

NICK: This stuff? Jesus, you're right. This stuff is dynamite.

CHARLIE: I figured as much. So you broke up with Karen?

NICK: In so many words, yeah.

CHARLIE: What was it that went wrong, if you don't mind a well-known failure in the relationship department asking.

NICK: Sure. It was tension. We were both too tense with each other.

Charlie stands up and looks out the window.

CHARLIE: Well, I understand that.

Lights go down.

Scene Three

Later. Charlie in his room on his bed, reading. Nick in the living room unpacking and, in passing, looking at a sheet of typing paper with a one-word poem on it.

Lily enters with JEAN PAUL and AUDREY SCORBY. Jean Paul is a handsome young man who rarely speaks. Audrey Scorby is a beautiful self-possessed young woman.

LILY: (coming in, calling) It's me. And Jean Paul. And Audrey. Everybody decent? Hi, Nick.

NICK: (looking up from the one-word poem) Hi. How's it going, Jean Paul.

JEAN PAUL: (shaking hands with Nick) Good.

LILY: (to Nick) And this is my friend Audrey, Nick. She likes your poetry.

NICK: (trying to be cool in front of this beauty) No kidding. What have you read?

AUDREY: I have your book Works, and I saw your poems in Art and Literature.

NICK: (surprised) Are you a writer?

AUDREY: Actually, I'm in advertising.

NICK: I love advertising. I was telling my Dad...

LILY: (interrupting) Is Pop here, Nick?

NICK: Yeah, he's in his room.

LILY: I invited Stella Real over to meet him. She's this huge fan of his.

NICK: The one who's in "Gunboat."

LILY: Umm-hmm.

NICK: Whoa--with the wet tee-shirt...

LILY: (quietly) He's got to get out of himself, Nick. He's a handsome, vital man and he's living like this nanny or something.

NICK: Who's nanny?

LILY: Ours. I guess.

NICK: (smiling at Audrey) Uh-oh. So---advertising...

AUDREY: Uh-hunh. (Indicating Lily...)

NICK: (to Lily) Are you going to tell him? He's in his room...

LILY: What do you think?

NICK: I don't know. I don't know Pop, to be honest.

LILY: (conspiratorily) I feel for him, Nicky. There's something wrong. He knows it and I know it. Stella is a really nice woman, you know, but he wants some hausfrau--or something.

NICK: No, he doesn't. I don't think. The thing is, he may not want anything.

LILY: I think that's bullshit.

NICK: Why, exactly?

LILY: Because he's not a saint and not a monk. He went gambling one night and showed up here in the morning after I'd gotten up and he was practically fermented.

AUDREY: Is he an alcoholic?

LILY: No! He's got more self-control than...

NICK: Ho Chi Minh.

AUDREY: What's that supposed to mean?

NICK: (smiling at her, mock professorially) Well...the rigor of the Vietnamese contrasted with...you know.

AUDREY: (to Nick) Do you like the Yardbirds?

NICK: Sure, Jeff Beck.

AUDREY: I've got two passes at the Glee Club.

NICK: Is that an invitation? Great.

AUDREY: I have something I want to discuss with you.

NICK: Literary question?

AUDREY: No, advertising.

LILY: Maybe Jean Paul and I will come...

AUDREY: Definitely. I've only got two passes but maybe I can pull some strings...

The doorbell rings.

CHARLIE: (calling from his room) What the hell's going on here? It's Grand Central Station suddenly...

LILY: Hi, Pop. I think it's my friend Stella, that I mentioned.

CHARLIE: What the hell kind of name is Stella Real? It's a press agent's idea of theatricality.

LILY: Shut up, please. I'm about to open the door.

CHARLIE: Yeah, okay. It's a party. The sixties. Unfortunately I'm damn near in my own sixties--like the century.

LILY: Please be quiet. Thank you. (to herself) Nobody cares...(opening the door) Stella.

STELLA: Hi, darling.

STELLA REAL is, in her mid-thirties, a movie star cum sex symbol who plays down her own glamour.

LILY: Come on in. I want you to meet my brother, Nick.

Nick moves to shake hands with Stella.

NICK: Nice to meet you.

STELLA: I love your poetry.

NICK: Well, thank you. (as an afterthought) Really? I love your--acting.

STELLA: (with relaxed candor) That's alright, you all. I'm aware I'm semi-ridiculous, but I'm putting a whole slew of nieces and nephews through preparatory schools.

LILY: And you know Jean Paul and Audrey...Nick, were you being rude just now?

STELLA: Not at all...

NICK: I hope not. I am a fan...I'm wondering about the prep schools, though. Preping for what?

LILY: Uh, Nick--college?

AUDREY: God, you know, the most interesting part of the sixties really isn't political, which you know since you're part of it.

NICK: (wryly) I'm just trying to keep my hand in...

CHARLIE comes out in his tee-shirt and pants bare foot.

LILY: Papa, this is Stella.

STELLA: It's a real honor.

CHARLIE: Well, it's an honor for me. Now, where are you from? Not New York.

STELLA: Not the city. Upstate. Rochester.

CHARLIE: How does a beautiful girl from Rochester become involved with old horrible Hollywood. You're Catholic, right?

STELLA: Yes.

CHARLIE: How did I know that?

STELLA: Italian Irish Catholic.

LILY: Listen, you guys. Let's all go to the Glee Club. Pop, I want you to hear some of our generation's music.

CHARLIE: (suddenly pleased) Well, I've got to get cleaned up. I don't want to disgrace my family in the middle of a social revolution.

LILY: You look distinguished, doesn't he? Even without any preparation. It's just you.

CHARLIE: Alright, now. You all can have a drink or something else, I suppose, while I freshen up...Or am I going to be in the way?

LILY: Are you serious?

NICK: Yeah, Pop, I want you to check this out.

CHARLIE: Alright, give me a minute.

He goes back to his room to get dressed. (Note: The bedroom has a separate bathroom.)

LILY (to Nick) Thanks. He needs a new set of friends.

NICK: He has no friends. It's not a new set. (to Audrey) So...

AUDREY: (smiling) So what?

Lights go down.

Scene Four

Night. Nick and Audrey mostly naked under a make-shift arrangement on the sofa in the living room dark. Nick reaches up and switches on the light.

NICK: I guess I...

AUDREY: You're fine. I'm not really...

NICK: What? Exactly?

AUDREY: Into it...I guess.

NICK: This is nerve-wracking. Any minute someone could step in here...What about your place?

AUDREY: I'm living with someone.

NICK: Man or woman?

AUDREY: I told you. Todd.

NICK: I didn't think you were living with him. You just said he was your boss.

AUDREY: Well, it's both. Anyway, it's no big deal.

NICK: For him or for you?

AUDREY: Well, he does the same thing.

NICK: Really. It's mod London.

Nick gets up out of the sofa, puts on pants and goes to the window.

NICK: It's so good to get out of New York.

AUDREY: Why is that?

NICK: Oh, I guess it's just to get away from your own local life, you know. To see some other colors.

AUDREY: Can we talk about the Ford campaign.

NICK: You just want my inspired ideas for your goddam advertising career. You don't care about me.

AUDREY: And you're in love with me?

NICK: My problem is I hold myself back because I'm like an extreme romantic and it's not a functional mode of being.

AUDREY: But it's attractive not to be functional.

NICK: Not to me.

AUDREY: Poor baby.

NICK: Baby yourself. The energy isn't in advertising if it's really advertising--don't you see that?

AUDREY: Look, I'm English. We don't believe in changing the world overnight.

NICK: Don't tell the Beatles.

AUDREY: The Beatles are millionaires, four poor boys from Liverpool.

NICK: Let's get it straight. You think this is some sort of fad? You can't give yourself up to what looks like it might not provide a life of comfort? I mean who cares.

AUDREY: That's why we love Americans. You're like the revolutionary arm of our consciouness.

NICK: No, the Beatles are. Lily's got this record player here.

Goes to record player, takes out record, puts it on turn-table as he talks:

NICK: Okay, this is the Brill Building in New York. Songmeisters in the late 50s, early 60s. Gerry Goffin and Carole King. All I'm saying is, forget everything about it but the energy, okay? The energy is the fab four out of Liverpool.

AUDREY: Not too loud. It's after midnight.

NICK: It's okay. The walls are like solid, thick--English. Listen. "Mr. Postman."

He puts the needle down onto the record. They listen for a while. He turns it down.

NICK: That's--not advertising. It's pure joy.

AUDREY: Advertising is--or could be--a more impure kind. Anyway, what's your point? You don't even want to make love.

NICK: I thought that was you. You're really beautiful, by the way.

AUDREY: And you're not casual. In case you think you are.

NICK: Okay...I don't remember saying or thinking I was. Anything but. Did you go to school?

AUDREY: The London School of Economics.

NICK: Of course.

AUDREY: And then Rockwell School of Design. You?

NICK: I went to several colleges and then dropped out.

AUDREY: Oh, a dropout.

NICK: Well...It was okay. I actually learned things, read books--while I was there. I just didn't get anywhere near the piece of paper they give you when you graduate.

AUDREY: I'm sure there's some sort of very important reason. It's so funny, Americans have no sense of history...except it's like every move you make is part of some major historical pivot.

NICK: Not me. But maybe where we're at right now. 1966.

AUDREY: Why'd you drop out?

NICK: It was, all three times, a way out the door into...a larger world. There's this idea that American schools don't really teach your thinking part. It's like kind of interesting indoctrination, almost subliminal, so you end up...just going along.

AUDREY: College is just an excuse to be a scholar.

NICK: Well, I'm sure I was wrong. But it's too late.

AUDREY: Think Ford.

NICK: I like that. "Think Ford."

AUDREY: Really.

NICK: That's excellent. Think Ford. I can see it. Lots of different color Fords and that's the line, under, above, or just over the image.

AUDREY: Think Ford.

NICK: You're talented.

AUDREY: I didn't mean it as a slogan.

NICK: I know but it works.

Audrey sits forward on the sofa, gathering a sheet around her. Lights go down.

Scene Five

Before dawn. Nick is crashed on the living room sofa. Charlie comes in with Stella, both more than tipsy.

CHARLIE: Shsh. He's asleep.

STELLA: Okay.

They kiss just inside the door. The kiss goes on and on.

CHARLIE: (breaking away) Let's go in here.

He leads her into the bedroom and switches on the light.

STELLA: Don't.

He switches it back off.

CHARLIE: Alright, now, just because you're here doesn't mean you have to do...anything.

STELLA: You mean like fuck you.

CHARLIE: No! I mean yes. You don't have to do that.

Stella sits down on the bed.

STELLA: You don't terribly like women, do you?

CHARLIE: God, where did you come up with that?

STELLA: I don't mean you're queer. I just meant liking them, liking to be with...talk with...them.

CHARLIE: There's no gender distinction as far as that goes--men or women. Children I generally like--but young ones. My own kids are way beyond the pale. I get fed up with myself once or twice a day and take myself out for a long walk to lose myself in the streets...

STELLA: In London.

CHARLIE: Of course. It's beautiful here. Better than almost all of New York. But harder to get that New York momentum going.

STELLA: Well, that's nice.

CHARLIE: It can become nice. I've healed myself over and over again by changing the vista.

STELLA: And women.

CHARLIE: Why would a woman put up with it. I'm crude, as crude as the next man, maybe worse. I see the beautiful ripe thing and want to devour it. Or did--until yesterday--and may want to again today. And when I've done that, I want to take another walk. It's not subtle genetic engineering.

STELLA: But you're interesting. Always something going on upstairs. It's a little wearying, after a while, hanging out with these God-like lemon drops.

CHARLIE: I love actors, ever since Walter Huston did my second play, "Red Light Green Light," in New York on the eve of the war. But Walter wasn't typical, of course.

STELLA: Nobody is, are they? The good actors are watchers, though, not thinkers. Or they think when they watch--behavior. Or it makes an impression on them. An impression-thought.

CHARLIE: Poor lady in a linguistic traffic jam.

STELLA: You're making fun of me.

CHARLIE: Not in the least. The idea that you like my style does great things for my general outlook, but you don't know me. I'm--I'll confess this to you if you promise not to share it widely. Don't discuss it with Lily, for instance. By the way, what's a big girl like you doing with a little girl like Lily?

STELLA: Lily's actually sort of phenomenal. She tells everybody but you what's going on. And we all believe her and count on her. With her Daddy, though, she seems kind of tongue-tied.

CHARLIE: Well, I've told her a million times talking on the telephone isn't a career, although her mother seems to have made out alright.

STELLA: She worships Joan, of course, too, but girls fight with their mothers. But they just want love from their Daddys.

CHARLIE: Well, I suppose that puts me in the picture--for my age alone--with certain "girls."

STELLA: And don't forget being a writer. Big cache there.

CHARLIE: But I was going to tell you. A little point of pride. Being the world famous, sought after man that I was--and remain in four or five households here and there to this day. Occasionally someone wonderful decides I'm the person to save them from this otherwise terrifying world with its unpredictable race of men and women. Someone, say, as beautiful as you, or almost. I've been proud of myself for mostly politely stepping to the side, because I won't do that person much good and I know it. I learned that in my sad marriage to Lily and Nick's mother.

STELLA: (sardonically) Oh, I'm so proud of you. Listen, you know if I'm smitten enough to spend an evening with you that doesn't mean I'm going to hang on you. Really.

CHARLIE: Well, that's the other terrible part. I've been assembled wrong. I should relish that you're a free agent, and go and come as you wish, but

instead I'm thinking a woman has to stand by her husband, or in the kitchen. Make a lovely home.

STELLA: Oh, God. I'm seriously never going to find someone.

CHARLIE: Oh, you will. A good prosperous man of some sort without the late immigrant hangups. Anyway, nice to know you.

STELLA: Well, yes. So you want to make love?

CHARLIE: (taken aback slightly) Sure, but we'll go slowly. I'm in a new phase of my life...

Charlie has sat down and they've begun to make love.

...you have to go easy...

STELLA: Women like it that way, silly...

CHARLIE: That's right, isn't it?

STELLA: What time is it?

Charlie stops.

CHARLIE: What time is it--?

STELLA: Yes. Sorry. Do you know?

CHARLIE: Yes, I know. (checking his watch) It's, exactly, three forty two.

STELLA: Oh, my God. I due at the Warners lot in three hours.

Scene Six

Later. Dawn light in the rooms. Stella leaves quietly, both Nick and Charlie asleep. However, when the front door shuts, Nick wakes up and sits up on the sofa. He goes to the window in his shorts, looks out for a moment, and then goes to his typewriter and sits down at it, rolls a sheet of paper to the exact center of the page and types, slowly, seven letters, which he looks at

and then laughs. Pulls page out and inserts another one in the same way and types another word and looks at it.

Lily comes in quietly and moves through the living room until she sees Nick and jumps.

LILY: Oh, my God. You're up. What are you doing?

NICK: Nothing.

LILY: What--writing?

NICK: Where were you?

LILY: With Jean Paul.

NICK: Hot date, hunh?

LILY: Oh, I don't know. He's like semi-autistic or something.

NICK: Definitely the strong and silent type.

LILY: Silent, yeah. Also incredibly rich.

NICK: Good...I guess.

LILY: Yeah. So--you and Audrey? How did that go?

NICK: She's as smart as a button.

LILY: What's that supposed to mean?

NICK: I don't know. Do you want some grass?

LILY: What--right now? No, I don't.

NICK: Okay. I guess I'm not going to write right now.

LILY: You're really insulting Pop. I hope you know that.

NICK: How?

LILY: How? In other words you write one-word poems and it's supposed to make him happy?

NICK: It doesn't have anything to do with him, although it does--but he's a kind of ancestor. The world has changed tremendously.

LILY: He's a writer. He sweats bullets trying to get book done, or a story or a play, and you come in on this cloud of glory with one word.

NICK: It's not like I'm rich, but I did win an award.

LILY: We heard about it. And then they cut the arts budget millions of dollars because of your stupid word so black people can't finish their novels. You're a real little shit, Nick.

NICK: (laughing) God, will you stop? I didn't apply for the award. I didn't ask for it. They just gave it to me. And it wasn't very much money. \$500. Enough to buy a desk.

LILY: You don't need a desk.

NICK: Well, I bought one, and then spilled ink on it. This guy left a bottle of ink opened on it under some papers. And I spilled it cleaning up...

LILY: It serves you right. One word isn't worth \$500.

NICK: You haven't heard what word it is yet. By the way, I think this may be helping Pop's career. A guy at The Guardian wants to do an interview with both of us.

LILY: Right, and you can say Pop's stories are from another, a previous age.

NICK: Look, Pop is like Duke Ellington, okay. Or better make that Louis Armstrong. He's a classic. Permanent. And I'm trying to be John Cage and Albert Ayler.

LILY: What's the word?

NICK: (singing from "Bye Bye Birdie") "Hummingbird. Have you heard about Hugo and Kim?"

LILY: Your one-word prize winner.

NICK: Oh. Oxygen.

LILY: Oxygen?

NICK: Yes. It appeared in the middle of an otherwise blank page in The Chicago Review's Concrete Poetry issue and it was given an award.

LILY: What's it supposed to mean?

NICK: A whole lot of stuff actually. It takes off from advertising like I was trying to say to Audrey...

LILY: Yeah, okay. Don't start rapping to me about it. It's just insulting to him. I'm actually a little worried about him.

NICK: Fine. But I'm not insulting him. I don't know what I'm doing, but at least it's something. If the sixties hadn't come along I'd still be fidgeting in his shadow. "Are you the son of Charlie Benetia?"--you know? God, I hate that.

LILY: So now they can ask you if you wrote "oxygen"--?

NICK: Isn't it great? It's free. You can read it in one second so you don't need to buy it. And you've also memorized it. It's like a...

LILY: Virus.

NICK: I like that.

LILY: It's also...uh, boring as hell.

NICK: Well, so is Warhol.

LILY: Oh, God, Nick, you're not really into him, are you?

NICK: Have you ever seen one of his films?

LILY: Have you?

NICK: Yes. I saw "Kiss" on a little TV monitor at a party in New York.

LILY: And?

NICK: It's just this loop of Gerard Malanga and Baby Jane Holzer kissing -
-it never ends. It's in black and white. And it's beautiful.

LILY: You know, I used to be proud of you. Now I just don't know who
you are. Is that what the sixties is about?

NICK: The sixties is about being happy, I think.

LILY: Pop's...sort of moping around, you know. I mean it's sweet. But he's
a dynamic man, still in his prime. It's like he's lost it, you know?

NICK: I don't think he cares, for one thing. He's hanging out with us. I
think it's great. You need to worry about your own life.

LILY: I have no life. Jean Paul has a problem with speech.

NICK: He probably loves you because you take care of it for both of you.

LILY: Very funny. I'm bored. We went to a party and I met David
Hemmings. He's making a movie with Antonioni.

NICK: Great.

LILY: I'm going to bed.

NICK: Okay. I may do a little writing.

LILY: A little writing. Right.

Nick starts to smoke a joint. Lily sets up the far sofa for herself and
goes into the bathroom off the kitchen. Lights go down.

End of Act One

