

(SAMPLE)

THE RELUCTANT HEN

A play in two acts

By Craig Houk



© 2021 by Craig Houk
1711 11th Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
617-515-1838
hok1969@gmail.com

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Set in Clark County Idaho 1952-1953. Pete Anderson, a working-class schmuck, and his wife, Peggy Lynn, a beautician, struggle to conceive, so Pete risks everything to have a child.

Characters

PETE ANDERSON Male, Late 20s/Early 30s

NANCY JO ANDERSON Female, Late 50s/Early 60s

PEGGY LYNN KENNEY-ANDERSON Female, Late 20s/Early 30s

SANDRA MILLER Female, Late 20s/Early 30s

Time

1952 – 1953.

Setting

Clark County, Idaho.

Scene Breakdown

1-1	Aug 1953	Early Morning	The Farmhouse
1-2	Oct 1952	Morning	The Farmhouse
1-3	Oct 1952	Mid-Morning	Murdock's Feed Supply
1-4	Oct 1952	Early Evening	The Farmhouse

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(1953. August. Morning. The farmhouse. We see Pete who is asleep in a chair, his feet up on an ottoman. An episode of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet or perhaps Sky King is playing on the television. We settle on this vignette for a moment. We hear a bicycle bell off. A few seconds pass before a rolled-up newspaper lands on the porch or knocks against the screen door. Pete stirs. At last, Nancy Jo appears in the kitchen archway. She lights a cigarette and begins to smoke it. She watches the program for a minute. A kitchen timer goes off. Nancy returns to the kitchen. We hear her in there. Sounds of an oven door opening, pans, and dishes clattering. She's plating breakfast. In due course, she reappears with a tray in hand, cigarette pressed between her lips. She crosses to Pete and hovers over him. She then pushes his legs off the ottoman with her foot. He wakes up.)

PETE: Huh. What're you doing? What the hell's matter with you?

NANCY JO: Breakfast. *(She places the tray on the ottoman.)* Creamed chipped beef over biscuits.

PETE: Shit on a shingle.

NANCY JO: Yep.

PETE: Looks good.

NANCY JO: You want some coffee?

PETE: Sure.

NANCY JO: Be right back.

(She returns to the kitchen. Pete yawns, stretches, rubs his eyes, and then digs in. He occasionally glances at the television. Nancy Jo returns with two coffees. She sets one on the tray or on a small table near Pete.)

PETE: Thanks.

(And with that cigarette still pressed between her lips, Nancy Jo takes her coffee and sits in another chair. She grabs an ashtray from nearby. She drinks and smokes, occasionally tapping ashes into the ashtray.)

PETE: You're not gonna eat?

NANCY JO: I'm watching my figure.

(This was a joke, but neither laughs. They sit quietly for a while, watching the program.)

NANCY JO: Paper boy come yet?

PETE: I think so. Thought I heard something on the porch.

(Nancy Jo rises and exits onto the porch to retrieve the paper. She returns to the chair, settles in again and begins to read the paper. Pete continues to eat and to watch the program. We settle on this vignette for a moment.)

NANCY JO: Have you heard from Peggy Lynn?

PETE: Hm?

NANCY JO: Peggy Lynn. Have you heard from her?

PETE: Yeah. I talked to her on Friday.

NANCY JO: And?

PETE: And what?

NANCY JO: Well, she's been gone almost two weeks now.

PETE: So?

NANCY JO: So, is everything okay?

PETE: What do you mean, is everything okay? 'Course, everything's okay. Everything's fine.

NANCY JO: She was only supposed to be gone a week.

PETE: Jesus. Jack just got back from Korea. Peggy Lynn wanted to spend a little extra time with her brother is all. She hasn't seen him in a while. You know, what with the war and all.

NANCY JO: All right. I mean, you could've told me sooner. Otherwise, how would I know? And honestly, I could do without the sarcasm.

(Beat. Pete backs down.)

PETE: She'll be home in a couple of days.

(They sit quietly. Nancy Jo begins pulling lightly at her hair to examine it.)

NANCY JO: I am long overdue for a shampoo and set.

PETE: *(Not hostile, just irritated.)* Oh, so that's what this is about. You need to get your hair done.

NANCY JO: No.

PETE: I'm getting the third degree about my wife's whereabouts because what? Because your roots are coming in?

NANCY JO: All right, now that's enough, Pete. I was not giving you the third degree. I just asked a simple question. You're the one who's making an issue of it.

PETE: She'll be back to the salon on Wednesday. I'm sure she'll be able to squeeze you in.

NANCY JO: Well, that'd be nice. Though that's not why I was asking after her.

(The fuse on the television blows. They are both startled.)

PETE: Dammit!

NANCY JO: *(Overlapping.)* Oh, for the love of...!

(We hear an infant crying off.)

PETE: You mind checking on your grandbaby?

(Pete crosses to the television. Nancy Jo takes a long drag on her cigarette and then puts it out in the ashtray. She rises from her chair.)

PETE: This house needs all new electric.

NANCY JO: And who do you suppose is gonna pay for it?

(She exits into a hallway to check on the baby.)

PETE: Whole place is gonna burn to the ground one day.

(He inspects the television, not that it'll do any good.)

NANCY JO: *(Off.)* Is it busted?

PETE: Well, yeah, it's busted. Probably a capacitor.

NANCY JO: *(Off.)* I'll give Jimmy a call. See if he can come over and fix it.

(Pete grabs the tray from the ottoman and exits into the kitchen. We hear him in there, putting dishes into the sink, maybe rinsing them. The baby continues to cry. Nancy Jo enters from the hallway and crosses to the kitchen archway.)

NANCY JO: I can't get her to settle down.

PETE: *(Off.)* She's probably hungry. I'll take care of it.

NANCY JO: I don't understand why your wife won't breast feed that child. I breast fed you and you hardly ever fussed or blubbered.

PETE: *(Off.)* I don't wanna talk about it.

NANCY JO: All I'm saying is that baby'd be a lot happier and heathier if she had some of her mother's milk.

PETE: *(Entering from the kitchen with a bottle.)* So, why don't you take it up with Peggy Lynn when she gets back then? Hunh? See how that works out for you.

NANCY JO: Not on your life.

PETE: And since you're all of a sudden so concerned about my daughter's wellbeing, maybe you could cut back a little on those cigarettes. What do you think?

NANCY JO: Maybe I will.

PETE: All right then.

(Pete exits into the hallway. A beat. Nancy Jo calls after him.)

NANCY JO: I'm gonna go sit on the porch before it gets too hot.

(She grabs her coffee and exits onto the porch. She sits and lights a cigarette. The baby continues to cry but settles down quickly. A moment passes before we hear an old pickup passing by, honking its horn. Nancy Jo looks up, puts her hand over her brow to block the sun. She recognizes the driver and then calls off.)

NANCY JO: Oh, hey, Millie! *(Nancy Jo smiles and waves. Her smile turns to a frown as the pickup drives off.)* Well, that little bastard.

(During the previous, Pete enters from the hallway, baby in tow. He exits onto the porch.)

PETE: Who was that?

NANCY JO: Millicent Brown. Driving by in her rusted-out pickup. Her son was playing around in the back of it. Can you believe he gave me the middle finger? Devil's spawn. I was half hoping he'd fall out and break his neck.

PETE: Oh, he's just a kid. No harm in it. *(Beat.)* So, you gonna call Jimmy about that television set or not?

NANCY JO: Darn it. I knew I was forgetting something. I'll call him right now.

(Pete stays on the porch as Nancy Jo goes back into the house. She moves to the phone and reaches for it. It rings. She's a little startled. She answers it.)

NANCY JO: Hello...? Well, I'll be, I was just about to call you... Well, yeah. Our TV is on the fritz again, so I was hoping your husband might come over and take a look at it. Pete says it's something to do with the, uh...

PETE: *(Calling into the house.)* Capacitor.

NANCY JO: Capacitor, whatever the heck that is... Are you sure...? Well, that'd be wonderful. Anytime tomorrow morning is fine, I'll be here... Thank you, Emma. And you'll thank Jimmy for me, won't you...? What's that...? Oh, that's right. You called me. I nearly forgot. So, what's the scuttlebutt...? Mm hm... What...? Oh, come on now, Emma, that can't be true. Are you sure you heard right...? Oh my God... Oh my God, well that's awful. Do they know who it is...? I see... Well, if you hear anything more, please give me a call, okay...? Thanks again. I'll keep an eye out for Jimmy tomorrow morning... Bye, Emma.

(She replaces the receiver. Pete has settled in with the baby on the porch. Nancy collects herself before meeting him out there. She lights a cigarette and smokes. We settle on this vignette for a moment.)

NANCY JO: I'm telling you right now, if that television can't be fixed, then we're gonna have to go without for a while.

PETE: All right, well there's no need to exaggerate. Things aren't as bad as you're making them out to be.

NANCY JO: Aren't they?

PETE: No.

(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO: We never had to worry about money when your father was alive.

PETE: *(Overlapping.)* Don't you ever get tired of reminding me of what a disappointment I've been?

NANCY JO: *(Overlapping.)* All I'm saying is that your father took very good care of this house. And the farm. And you and me. And I... Well, I just miss him is all. I didn't mean anything else by it.

(They sit quietly.)

PETE: I'll start back at the lumber camp next Sunday.

NANCY JO: Oh. Okay. Well, that's good to hear. Though I expect Peggy Lynn won't like you being gone overnight, especially now with the baby.

PETE: I'll stay over only when I have to. Not much I can do about it, though, what with the long days. And it's not like I enjoy sharing a bunkhouse with a bunch of filthy men.

NANCY JO: And you're sure you're ready to get back to work?

PETE: Well, it's either that or fiddle around here and listen to you complain about how destitute we are.

NANCY JO: I was talking about your arm. Cast's been off only a few days now.

PETE: Right. Well, it's fine now. I mean, it was just a fracture. Shit, Bucky Turner took the brunt of it. He's still laid up with a broken leg, a busted head, and a half dozen cracked ribs. He's lucky that log didn't kill him.

NANCY JO: Bucky'll bounce back. He always does.

(Nancy Jo continues to smoke. Pete manages the baby.)

NANCY JO: You don't want to know what Emma told me?

PETE: I'm not interested in gossip.

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(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO: They found a body.

PETE: A body? What do you mean, a body?

NANCY JO: A young woman. Up on Scott Peak.

PETE: That's awful.

NANCY JO: A hiker found her buried in a shallow grave under some branches and rocks.

PETE: Oh, jeez. Well, I'm sorry to hear. Any idea who?

NANCY JO: Not yet. Emma said she'd call if she finds out anything more.

PETE: Well, that's just terrible.

(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO: I don't understand why anyone would do such a thing.

PETE: There's no use in dwelling on it.

NANCY JO: A young woman was murdered, Pete.

PETE: You don't know what happened up there. So, don't go jumping to conclusions. It may've been an accident.

NANCY JO: Someone took the time to cover her up.

PETE: I understand that. Except what? You gonna worry yourself sick over something you know nothing about?

(They sit quietly.)

NANCY JO: So close to home.

PETE: Enough. Now listen, why don't you find something else to do. Take your mind off it. You can start by putting little Frances here back in her crib.

NANCY JO: She'll just start crying again as soon as you hand her over.

PETE: No, she won't. Here now. *(Nancy puts her cigarette down as Pete hands the baby over.)* Take her slow. *(Nancy takes the baby.)* Careful.

NANCY JO: I think I know how to hold a baby, Pete. I only dropped you once. Maybe twice.

PETE: Shhhhhh.

NANCY JO: All right, all right. Let's go, Frannie. Grandma's got you.

(Nancy Jo exits into the house with the baby and then disappears down the hallway. Pete watches them go. A moment passes before Pete retrieves Nancy Jo's still lit cigarette. He brings it to his lips and inhales deeply.)

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 2

(1952. October. Morning. The farmhouse. The stage is empty and eerily quiet. Suddenly, Peggy Lynn enters from the hallway.)

PEGGY LYNN: Pete! Pete, we gotta get going! *(She retrieves a coat from a hook on the wall or from a coat rack.)* Come on Pete! Let's go! I don't wanna be late! Pete!

(During the previous, we hear someone enter off, by way of the kitchen. Perhaps we hear a door close. Nancy Jo appears. She is dressed for Fall.)

NANCY JO: Good God, Peggy Lynn. Do you honestly have to be that loud? I heard you all the way out to the chicken coop.

PEGGY LYNN: *(Putting on her coat.)* Well, I'm sorry, but Verla Claire Baker is first up in my chair this morning, and she's asking for the works. I've got back-to-back appointments all day, and if I don't get started on time, I won't be able to keep up.

NANCY JO: Well, Verla's got about as much hair on her chin as she does on her head.

PEGGY LYNN: Exactly. So, I think you know damn well what I'm up against today.

NANCY JO: All right, well calm down. Pete's outside with the car. He's just waiting on you.

PEGGY LYNN: *(She checks her hair and makeup in a mirror.)* Oh. Okay. Well, I didn't know.

NANCY JO: How would you since he evidently didn't tell you.

PEGGY LYNN: He's very sweet sometimes. *(She retrieves a large tote bag.)*

NANCY JO: Well, he does take good care of you.

PEGGY LYNN: I never said otherwise. *(She tilts forward slightly, suddenly nauseous.)*

NANCY JO: You okay?

PEGGY LYNN: Yeah, no I'm fine. My, uh... my stomach's a little unsettled is all.

NANCY JO: Oh, well that's no good. Here, let me get you some Alka-Seltzer. *(Nancy Jo starts off.)*

PEGGY LYNN: No, don't worry about it. It'll pass.

NANCY JO: You sure?

PEGGY LYNN: Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay. In any case, there isn't time. *(She tilts forward again.)* No. No, I'm gonna be sick. *(She drops the tote bag and exits hurriedly through the hallway.)*

NANCY JO: Oh, for... *(Following and calling after her.)* Peggy Lynn, you had better not make a mess in there! Do you hear me? Pull your hair back and put your head inside the bowl!

(Nancy Jo shakes her head and removes a pack of cigarettes from her coat pocket. She takes off her coat and hangs it up. She then sits in a chair, lights a cigarette, and begins to smoke it. Pete appears outside, also dressed for Fall. He heads up the steps and onto the front porch and makes his way into the house.)

PETE: What's going on? Where's Peggy Lynn?

NANCY JO: She's in the toilet.

PETE: Still? We gotta get going.

NANCY JO: She's throwing up.

PETE: Throwing up? What're you talking about?

NANCY JO: What do you mean, what am I...? Her tummy was upset, so she's in the bathroom throwing up. I don't know how I can say it more plainly.

PETE: Well, she was fine earlier. *(He starts for the hallway.)* Peggy Lynn...!

NANCY JO: Leave her alone.

PETE: I was just gonna check on her.

NANCY JO: Oh, now come on, Pete. You can't be that stupid.

PETE: What? What'd I do now?

NANCY JO: The only thing you're any good at. Knocking her up.

(A moment.)

PETE: You better not be messing with me.

NANCY JO: *(Exasperated.)* To what end? Honestly, sometimes...

PETE: How far along do you think she is?

NANCY JO: Not sure exactly. Though I do know she's been trying to keep it from us for at least a couple of weeks now.

PETE: Can't say I blame her.

NANCY JO: I suppose not.

(Nancy Jo smokes. Pete is lost in thought.)

NANCY JO: Pete...

PETE: Yeah?

NANCY JO: Don't get your hopes up.

(Peggy Lynn appears from the hallway. She looks rough. An awkward moment as the three of them stare at one another.)

PEGGY LYNN: Yeah, no I'm fine. Thank you for asking.

PETE: *(He moves to Peggy Lynn.)* I'm sorry, baby...

PEGGY LYNN: Probably best you keep your distance.

(Pete backs off.)

PETE: How about I get you some water, huh?

PEGGY LYNN: That'd be wonderful. Thank you, sweetheart.

PETE: You got it.

(He exits into the kitchen.)

PEGGY LYNN: *(Calling after him.)* With ice! Lots of ice! Mostly ice! You know what? Just forget the water and bring me a cup of ice!

PETE *(Off.)* Coming right up!

(We will hear Pete in the kitchen getting a cup of ice for Peggy Lynn.)

PEGGY LYNN: *(She moves to Nancy Jo.)* So, uh... listen, Nancy Jo...

NANCY JO: Mm hm.

PEGGY LYNN: Right, um... So, in case you haven't figured it out yet, I'm pregnant.

NANCY JO: You don't say.

PEGGY LYNN: Again.

NANCY JO: I've lost count.

PEGGY LYNN: And as always, I greatly appreciate your disdain. Ever so useful in situations like these.

NANCY JO: Glad I could be of assistance.

(Nancy Jo blows a puff of smoke into the air.)

PEGGY LYNN: You do understand that it's not my fault.

NANCY JO: Maybe not. But the rest of us are paying the price for your bad luck.

(This stings, but Peggy Lynn pushes through.)

PEGGY LYNN: I assume Pete knows.

NANCY JO: He does, though you can rest assured he wasn't able to sort it out on his own.

(Pete enters with a cup of ice. He hands it to Peggy Lynn.)

PETE: Here you go, baby.

PEGGY LYNN: *(She takes the cup from Pete.)* Thank you. Now look, we really gotta get going.

PETE: Peggy Lynn...

PEGGY LYNN: *(She retrieves her tote bag.)* I know what you're gonna say and I'm sorry but it's not up for discussion. There are more than a few ladies lined up today just waiting for me to make them beautiful, and I don't wanna disappoint any of them. That, and we need the money. *(She checks herself in the mirror.)* Ack. I'll have to fix my face in the car.

NANCY JO: *(Rising out of her chair.)* I'll call Connie and let her know you're running late.

PEGGY LYNN: Well, knock me over with a feather.

NANCY JO: A simple "thank you" would suffice.

(With her tote bag and cup of ice, Peggy Lynn exits out the door and down the front steps. Pete starts to follow. Nancy Jo heads for the phone.)

NANCY JO: Oh, and hey, Pete...

PETE: Yeah.

NANCY JO: I need you to pick up some chicken feed while you're out.

PETE: All right.

NANCY JO: We did pretty good this week. Almost four dozen.

PETE: That's good to hear.

NANCY JO: Oh, and listen. I don't want you going to Patterson's Feed Supply anymore. I don't like their mix. I know it's a little further, but I hear that new place, Murdock's, is much better. And cheaper.

PEGGY LYNN *(Off.)* Pete!

PETE: I gotta go.

NANCY JO: Well, go on then.

(Pete exits out the door and down the front steps. Nancy Jo picks up the receiver and dials.)

NANCY JO: Hi, Connie...? Yeah, hi, this is Nancy Jo Anderson calling... Well, I'm doing just fine, thanks for asking. And how have you been...? Oh, well that's good to hear... So, listen. Peggy Lynn is running a little bit late this morning... I know, I know, and she is fully aware, but listen, it's not her fault... No, no, everything's okay. It's just that my lower back seized up this morning and I had to ask Peggy Lynn to clean out the henhouse and bring the eggs in... Well,

isn't that the truth... Yeah, she's a hard worker, that one. I don't know what I'd do without her... *(Nancy Jo rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue.)* Yeah, well I am sorry. I guess you'll have to keep Verla entertained until Peggy Lynn gets there. Maybe toss a ball and see if she'll go fetch it... *(Nancy Jo laughs.)* Well, she and Pete left about five minutes ago, and I expect he's driving like a lunatic, so they'll be there before you know it... Okay then... All right, well you have a wonderful day... Mm hm... Bye. *(Nancy Jo replaces the receiver. She takes a long drag off her cigarette and then exits into the kitchen.)*

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 3

(1952. October. Later that same day. Outside of Murdock's Feed Supply. Sandra Miller appears. She removes a pair of work gloves and uses them to beat the dust off herself. Pete arrives behind her.)

PETE: Excuse me, Miss...

SANDRA: *(Turning to Pete.)* Listen, I don't mean to be rude, but I don't like to be referred to as "Miss." Now of course, I allow Mr. Murdock to address me that way, but only because he's my employer. So, I'd be grateful if you'd just call me Sandra.

PETE: *(Taken aback.)* Well, shit. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry. Sandra. And you can call me Pete if you like.

SANDRA: Okay. *(An awkward beat.)* So, is there something else I can help you with, Pete?

PETE: Uh, yeah. No. I mean, no, I don't need anything else. It's just that... Look, I feel real stupid about this, and I don't know exactly how to put it, but, uh...

SANDRA: Well, let's not beat about the bush, Pete. I gotta get back to work.

PETE: Understood.

SANDRA: So, what is it?

PETE: Right. I, uh...I guess I just wanted to say I appreciated you helping me load that chicken feed onto my truck.

SANDRA: Oh. Okay. Well, it was my pleasure. And it's also my job.

PETE: Exactly. And that's uh... and that's what I wanted to, um...

SANDRA: Have I made you uncomfortable?

PETE: What? No. No, 'course not.

SANDRA: I only ask because I'm thinking that maybe you're having a hard time dealing with the fact that a woman helped you carry four fifty-pound bags of feed to your automobile.

PETE: Oh, now come on...

SANDRA: Look, it's fine, I'm not offended. And besides, I've gotten used to it.

PETE: Is that right?

SANDRA: I mean, the only man I've come across who hasn't taken issue with it is Casper Ferguson.

PETE: Oh, well I know Casper. Little guy, mostly keeps to himself, never been married. If you know what I'm saying.

SANDRA: He's a sweet, old man. And he appreciates that women have more to offer than just sitting around each other's kitchens drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and gossiping until it's time to get dinner on the table. If you know what I'm saying.

PETE: I suppose I do.

SANDRA: Mr. Murdock's son usually helps the customers with their packages. But since he's off to school and since business has picked up a bit, I offered to pitch in until they hire someone else; someone not of the female persuasion. Otherwise, I generally just run the cash register. So, there's no need to fret, Pete. The men are still in charge.

(Beat.)

PETE: You are something else.

SANDRA: So, I've been told. *(Beat.)* Now, listen. I really gotta go. *(She starts off.)*

PETE: You from around here?

SANDRA: Born and raised. *(She continues off.)*

PETE: *(Following her a bit.)* Hey, hang on a second.

(She stops and turns to him.)

SANDRA: You're gonna get me fired, Pete.

(Beat.)

PETE: Is it proper for a man to give a woman cash for helping him out?

SANDRA: I suppose it depends on what she's been helping him out with.

PETE: What? *(Beat.)* Oh God, no. No. No, that's not what I meant at all.

SANDRA: *(She chuckles.)* You're making this easy for me. *(She extends her hand, palm up.)* So, how much do you got?

PETE: Oh. Yeah, 'course. *(He pulls a wallet out of his back pocket as he moves toward her.)* Oh, damn. The smallest I have is a five.

SANDRA: Oh, that's okay. I was just kidding around anyway.

PETE: No. No, it's fine. Take it. *(He offers her the money.)*

SANDRA: I am not gonna take your money. And anyway, it's way too much.

PETE: Come on.

SANDRA: That's very generous. So, thank you but no thank you.

PETE: I'm happy to do it.

(An impasse. Pete then puts the money back in his wallet and tucks it into his back pocket. An awkward beat.)

SANDRA: You interested in joining me this evening? Over at Pengilly Saloon? You can use that five to buy me a drink.

PETE: Oh, uh...

SANDRA: Now, before you answer, I can see that you're married. *(She points to his wedding band.)* So don't go reading anything into it. It's just... Well, you seem like a respectable guy and, well, if you're free, I'd be happy to have the company. And anyway, they don't much appreciate it when the ladies show up without a chaperon.

PETE: Hey look, I am flattered, but...

SANDRA: Didn't I just tell you not to read anything into it.

PETE: Yeah, you did, but...

SANDRA: You know, it is possible for a man and a woman to go out for a drink and to not end up in bed together afterwards.

PETE: I think it's a little more complicated than that, don't you?

(Beat.)

SANDRA: All right. Well, I'll be there either way. Maybe I'll ask Casper to go with me; I expect he'll be able to keep his hands to himself. *(Beat.)* So, listen, I'm just gonna...

PETE: Yeah, no, 'course. That cash register isn't gonna run itself.

SANDRA: No, it is not.

PETE: It was nice to meet you, Sandra.

SANDRA: Likewise, Pete.

(She extends her hand. He takes it and they shake.)

PETE: And I guess I'll see you next time I need some chicken feed.

SANDRA: Well, unless your chickens are gonna go through two hundred pounds of it in a month, there won't be a next time.

PETE: What are you saying?

SANDRA: I'm saying I won't be here.

PETE: I don't understand.

SANDRA: I'm moving away.

PETE: You're moving? Where're you going?

SANDRA: *(She chuckles.)* Wouldn't you like to know. *(She exits.)*

(End of Scene.)

SCENE 4

(1952. October. Early evening, same day as the previous scene. The farmhouse. The stage is empty for a moment. Pete appears carrying two bags of chicken feed. He dumps them on the ground near the porch. As he heads back off, Peggy Lynn appears carrying her tote bag. She is exhausted from the day as she heads up the steps and onto the front porch. She then makes her way into the house. As she enters, Nancy Jo appears from the hallway. She is dressed neatly, hair primped, makeup on, and putting on a clip-on earring.)

NANCY JO: Well, finally.

PEGGY LYNN: Finally, what?

NANCY JO: I'm gonna be late for card club.

PEGGY LYNN: Oh. Right. That's tonight. Sorry. It's been a very long day, Nancy Jo.

NANCY JO: Where's Pete?

PEGGY LYNN: He's getting the chicken feed outta the car.

(Peggy Lynn takes off her coat and settles into a chair as Nancy Jo goes out onto the porch and calls off.)

NANCY JO: Pete!

PETE: *(Off.)* Yeah?

NANCY JO: Get a move on! I need you to drive me to card club!

PETE: *(Off.)* Oh, jeez. All right, well keep your pants on! I'll be right there!

NANCY JO: You can just leave the bags here on the porch for now; take them to the shed when you get back from dropping me off!

PETE: *(Off.)* You got it, boss lady!

NANCY JO: And I'll need you to pick me up right at eleven. That's about the time Evelyn gets especially drunk and extra mean. She can't stand losing to me, and she always does. *(She goes back into the house and checks herself in the mirror.)* What's he been up to?

PEGGY LYNN: Who? Pete?

NANCY JO: Who else?

PEGGY LYNN: I don't know what you mean.

NANCY JO: I sent him out this morning to run one errand and he's been gone all day.

PEGGY LYNN: Oh. Well, he and Bucky found some daywork. At least that's what he told me.

NANCY JO: Oh yeah? Doing what?

PEGGY LYNN: I don't know exactly. Just said he made some money today.

NANCY JO: Oh. All right. Well, how am I supposed to know these things if no one tells me?

PEGGY LYNN: I just found out myself on the ride home.

(During the previous, we see Pete carry the other two bags up onto the porch and set them down. He then retrieves the two he left on the ground and places them on the porch as well. He pulls the truck key from his pocket as he enters the house. He offers the key to Nancy Jo.)

PETE: Here.

NANCY JO: And what am I supposed to do with that?

PETE: Drive yourself.

NANCY JO: What? I don't have time for this foolishness. Let's go.

(Nancy Jo pushes past him and heads to the front door.)

PETE: I'm not kidding. You can drive yourself. I'm tired and I'm in a mood. And I'm hoping to be dead asleep by eleven.

PEGGY LYNN: Oh, now come on Pete...

PETE: You stay out of it, Peggy Lynn.

PEGGY LYNN: *(Rising out of the chair.)* I'll take you, Nancy Jo.

PETE: No. You're gonna stay here. We have some things that we need to talk about.

PEGGY LYNN: You're not the only one who's tired, Pete. So maybe I don't feel like talking.

PETE: You don't have a choice in the matter.

PEGGY LYNN: What has gotten into you?

PETE: *(Not hostile.)* Keep your mouth shut. *(Peggy Lynn is bewildered. To Nancy Jo.)* Now, you take this key and get the hell outta here. You remember how to drive an automobile, don't you?

(Beat.)

NANCY JO: *(A little taken aback.)* I do. And all right. If you insist. *(She takes the key.)* If you two are hungry, there's a casserole in the fridge. Just set the oven to three fifty. *(On her way out the door.)* I hope I don't perish in some terrible accident.

PETE: *(Calling after Nancy Jo.)* You trying to cheer me up?

NANCY JO: *(Quietly.)* Well, I never. *(She heads down the porch steps and disappears off.)*

(In the house, silence. At length...)

PEGGY LYNN: I'll turn on the oven and then I'm gonna take a shower. Can you put the casserole in?

PETE: Just... Peggy Lynn, just... Hang on a second. Please.

(Pete searches for the words, but before he can say anything...)

PEGGY LYNN: What do you want from me, Pete? Huh? Because it doesn't really matter what I do, we both know this is just gonna turn out the same way it always does. So, what then? You want me to take an extended break from the salon again? You want me to risk losing some of my regular customers? Maybe I oughtta just sit around this house, perfectly still, and do exactly what's expected of me. Hm? And what is it I'm expected to do, Pete? I mean because no one really seems to know, now do they. I got Doctor Wheeler telling me I should take up smoking; maybe it'll calm me down. Doctor Bowman tells me a little vodka in my orange juice might stop me from going into labor too soon. Stay in bed all day. Don't read any books; it'll cause too much excitement. Don't argue with your husband - we know you like that one, don't you, Pete? Oh, and my favorite. No matter what, don't reach above your head because there's a damn good chance that the cord might be wrapped around that baby's neck. I mean, is that what you want, Peggy Lynn? You want to strangle your unborn child to death? *(She is nearly in tears.)* Because each time you get me pregnant, Pete, I gotta live through that same nightmare. Don't you understand? It doesn't matter what I do, my body is gonna keep failing me.