

Howmeowner's Blues

A Short Comedy by Albert Fried-Cassorla

Version 2

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SETTING

This play takes place in and about an old Victorian home that has been decaying for some years. At Stage Right, the house's front door and a bit of the front yard are visible. A pull-chain near the front door attaches to a bell that rings inside the house.

The interior of the house consists of one very long central living room and an anteroom just near the front door. The back of the house, at Stage Left, has a back door that opens onto an unseen backyard and outhouse. A door near the end of the living room leads down towards the basement. A staircase in the living room leads to a second floor, which is suggested by a staircase and a small section of second story landing. The landing is made of plasterboard and is pre-scored so that it will break easily. The back door has a window, and sun gleams through.

The living room was once grand. Now it features threadbare furniture, some of it covered by sheets, old portrait paintings, tables, chairs, and sofas. Broken lath shows through on the walls here and there.

CHARACTERS

Helen Midthassel-Kazarnowicz - mother, wife, homebuyer, working person; sweet, but jaded

Hubert (Hubie) Midthassel- - father, husband. homebuyer, working Kazarnowicz person; played with boundless energy and cheer

Hermione - their twin daughter, age 6

Gingold - their twin son, age 6

Portia Portico - a cunning Realtor, who exudes false charm; her voice rises and falls in a singsong quality

Ted Tedesco - house inspector hired by the couple; he has a dense, guttural Brooklyn accent but manages to speak some complex lines; uneducated, he has great pride in his profession and talents

SCENE

Late on a Saturday morning. Portico and the Midthassel-Kazarnowicz family are gathering at the house's front door, outside.

(GINGOLD tugs at HUBIE's trousers while Mrs. PORTICO fumbles for the correct front door key. She speaks with great enthusiasm.)

PORTICO

I'm so glad that you two are people of vision .. because that's what it takes. That's definitely what it takes.

GINGOLD

Could I ring the bell? Could I ring the bell, please?

(HERMIONE tugs at HUBIE's other leg.)

HERMIONE

Me first! Me first, Dad!

HUBIE

Now Gingold did ask first, Hermione.

HERMIONE

Waah! Waah!

(HELEN raises an arm, as if to swat HERMIONE.)

HELEN

Shah!

(HERMIONE shuts up. HUBIE picks up GINGOLD.)

PORTICO (sing-song)

As the Bible says, "Where there is no vision, the people shall perish." Hm-hm! Some of my favorite scripture. Now I know it's here somewhere.

(GINGOLD rings the bell-cord, and the bell sounds.)

HELEN

Hubie, the Lord helps those who help themselves. And I think we're helping ourselves into a serious malfeasance of judgment.

HUBIE

Aw Helen, yu know that malfeasance is in the eye of the of the malfeasor.

GINGOLD

Listen how loud I can ring it, Ma!

(HELEN holds her temples as GINGOLD rings bell incessantly.)

HELEN

My temples. Oh, my temples.

(Unseen in the darkened house, the bell crashes to the floor.)

PORTICO

Yes, it's only five blocks to the nearest synagogue. Ah, here's the key at last. And don't worry about that old bell.

(PORTICO opens the door and turns on a light. HERMIONE and GINGOLD rush in.)

HERMIONE

I don't believe it!

GINGOLD

A haunted house!

PORTICO

Ha! Ha! Ha! The only haunting here is the ghost of your old rent payments.

HERMIONE and GINGOLD

Yahhh! Yippee!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD leap onto some curtains near a window and swing wildly. They soon start climbing up them. The curtains are reinforced with built-in ropes for support.)

HUBIE

That's right. Right now, we pay a thousand-fifty a month . . .and for what?!

HELEN

For a two-bedroom in Society Hill, that's what. Near civilization.

HUBIE

Near boutiques we can't afford -- yet.

HELEN

Near the Philadelphia Orchestra.

HELEN

Which is all subscribed out for the next three years, dear.

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD let go and come crashing down, sending the curtains flying on top of them. Then they use the curtains as ghost costumes, covering themselves and parading around making "oooo" sounds until they bump into things. When they bump, they laugh riotously.)

PORTICO

Such darling little imps -- uh -- angels! Now if it's music you two want, when you move here you'll be near more than you can shake a baton at. You've got the Lower Brogenberg Marching Band's concert season in the park. That's FREE. And although I don't know your financial situation, I'm sure you'll have more disposable income once you're in this house.

HUBIE

We know how to dispose it, all right. Say, uh, that reminds me -- where's your john around here?

(PORTICO escorts the group to the back door, then points HUBIE towards the outhouse, which is outside on the back porch.)

PORTICO

The outhouse is straight ahead, and the pump's on the right.

HELEN

My god!...Well, I suppose we should be thankful the pump works.

PORTICO

Not exactly.

HELEN

Why not?

PORTICO

The vandals stole the handle. But that'll come to an end once this house is lived in. Besides, good basic plumbing costs pennies these days, what with inexpensive PVC pipes. And I'm sure Mr. Midthassel-Kazarnowicz is very handy, isn't he?

(HUBIE is embarrassed, shuffles.)

HELEN

Well, let me put it this way -- the last time he tried to unstop our toilet, three apartments below us needed new ceilings.

(Exit HUBIE to the outhouse. HERMIONE follows to get a peek at it and soon returns, ecstatic.)

HERMIONE (to GINGOLD)

You won't believe the great clubhouse Dad's hiding in!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD rush outside to check it out. Their voices are heard from offstage.)

GINGOLD

Wow!

HERMIONE

This is really decent!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD rush back into the house. HERMIONE brandishes a broken wooden old toilet seat, joined together with hinges.)

HERMIONE (to HELEN)

Look at this horse-holder I found. Mom! Where do the reins attach?

GINGOLD

That clubhouse is great, Mom! There's even a dark hole in the floor where we can hide secret messages!

(HERMIONE holds the seat sideways.)

HERMIONE

And look, it's "C" for cat!

(HERMIONE puts her face in the middle of the seat and giggles. GINGOLD grabs the seat and holds it, open side up.)

GINGOLD

No it isn't -- it's a "U" for underwear!

(HERMIONE retrieves the seat and continues this game.)

HERMIONE

No. it's a "C" for carrot!

(This conversation continues as background dialog. HERMIONE and

GINGOLD repeat their last lines.
substituting these words at the
end of each:

HERMIONE GINGOLD

carpet upset
canoe ulterior
Cardin understanding
cafe au lait undertaker
California umpire
champagne ultimate
caviar unlikely
catamaran umbilical cord
camisole understudy
camembert unctuous

(As in, "No, it's 'C' for carpet.")

HELEN

Mrs. Portico, may I take this moment to set something straight?

PORTICO

Of course, my dear! There's no need to suffer in the dark -- isolation is worse than bad insulation, I always say. Ha! Ha!

HELEN

Yes... Well, you see, this house is sort of Hubert's idea. And he's a wonderful man. I've never regretted having married him, not for an instant. However, he is sometimes, uh...easily taken.

PORTICO (stunned)

Taken?! Certainly I've never even presumed to flirt with a man, a married man no less, and one of my customers -- not it's--

HELEN (upset)

No, no! He's easily taken by ideas, don't you see? By enthusiasms whose consequences he doesn't understand, by passions for impractical, unrealizable dreams that lead to--to--to--

PORTICO

To places like this?

(HELEN embraces PORTICO, who is nonplused and soon takes her distance.)

HELEN (overjoyed)

Yes! I'm so glad you sympathize!

PORTICO

My dear Mrs. Midthassel-Kazarnowicz, how well I understand your dilemma. I too was once an ignorant boob when it came to real estate. But you'll make progress, just as I did.

HELEN

What!? Lord give me strength. Lord give me an account balance.

PORTICO (smiling)

But don't worry your beautifully coifed head over matters in which you're an utter and total ignoramus.

HELEN (furious)

I beg your PARDON!!

—
PORTICO (still smiling)

I understand one hundred percent! And believe me, your first true step will be towards self-knowledge.

(PORTICO steps over to a cobweb-covered mirror and looks into it.)

You've got to look at yourself in the mirror and say, "Helen, you're a big blamed fool when it comes to points and parcels, so you might as well keep your stupid face out of the negotiations and be happy about it."

HELEN

Exactly how long have you had your real estate license?

(HUBIE returns from the outhouse and takes the toilet seat away from the kids.)

HERMIONE and GINGOLD

Aw, Dad!

GINGOLD

Unfairzies! You said you liked educational toys. Unfairzies!

HUBIE (exasperated)

Go!...Go play in the basement if you want. But be careful.

(The kids look at each other in amazement. As they say the next line, they crouch and rise, culminating in an elaborate hand-clap/tap-in routine, followed by a leap.)

HERMIONE and GINGOLD

Awwwwwwwwww --ssssssSOME!!

(The kids head downstairs via a door off the living room. PORTICO turns on the basement lights. HELEN holds her own head. HUBIE shows immense satisfaction.)

PORTICO (sighing grandly)

Ahh, there's such a life of adventure ahead in this house for your beautiful family. How I must envy you!

HELEN

Then you buy the place!... That is, if they grant mortgages to felons these days.

HUBIE

Helen, I think you owe Mrs. Portico a bit more consideration than that. Let's not forget that she's showing us this house at my request.

HELEN (slightly contrite)

That's true.

HUBIE

And no one forced her to lay down those timbers for us over that sinkhole on the walkway.

HELEN

Yes.

HUBIE

And no one had to prod her to pick up that dead mongoose in the yard, spray it, and bag it.

PORTICO

I was only too happy -- even if you decide not to buy the house.

HELEN

True again.

HUBIE

She did it because she has heart.

PORTICO

I do so care about you and wish to see you happy...here.

(HELEN lights a cigarette.)

HELEN

You're right. I misperceived her generosity...Now pardon me, while I take an anxiety break.

(HELEN retreats to from the group and gives them her back. Abruptly, she screams.)

YAAHHH!!

(HELEN lights a cigarette.)

HUBIE (to PORTICO)

She's just about over it now...

PORTICO

Let me show you around a bit, until your house inspector arrives.

(PORTICO walks over to a portrait and removes it from the wall, exposing a fuse box.)

Here's your electrical service -- a full 20 amps, suitable for most needs.

HELEN

I bet it could easily handle two nightlights and an RM radio.

PORTICO

Ha, ha, ha. Even an electric chain saw, my dear.

(HUBIE squints at the fuse box and comes closer to it.)

HUBIE

So I guess those are fuses, not circuit breakers. And what's that... in that hole?

(PORTICO shines a flashlight on the hole.)

Oh, a penny,

PORTICO

Indeed. And, hm -- isn't that a 1944 double-dye obverse? It's hard to tell. I've heard they're worth up to two hundred thousand dollars these days. And you know? -- it yours with the house.

HELEN

Good! Let's take it and buy a mansion in Martinique.

(HUBIE angles closer to the fusebox.)

HUBIE

Looks like a 1937 to me.

(HUBIE picks up a table knife and approaches the fusebox quickly. PORTICO karate-chops his hand, sending the knife to the floor.)

PORTICO

Ha-YAH...I don't think you'd like a toasted arm, Mr. Midthassel Kazarnowicz. (sing-song voiced) I see you've a bit more to learn about home ownership. All in good time...All in good time.

(PORTICO steps over to the kitchen sink.)

Here you have your --

(Muffled shouts are heard from HERMIONE and GINGOLD below.)

HERMIONE and GINGOLD

Mom! Mom! Dad! Dad!

HELEN (dryly)

Hubert, please rescue your children. They're being consumed by giant water leeches.

(HUBIE bolts downstairs, shouting.)

HUBIE

Don't worry! I'm coming!

(HUBIE's voice from downstairs.)

Where the hell ARE you!

HERMIONE and GINGOLD

We're over here! Cone quick! This stuff's getting high!

HUBIE

What stuff?

HERMIONE

Do ya haveta ask a thousand questions, Dad? Get us out of this stuff!

HUBIE

I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue and -- ouch!

GINGOLD

Even when we're dying?

HUBIE

Especially then. Oof! Christ, what is this stuff? Here, hold onto me.

(HUBIE ascends the steps and emerges, carrying a child on each arm. All are blackened by coal dust.)

HUBIE

God, what won't those kids get into, given half a chance.

GINGOLD

Mom, what a fantastic sandpile we have down there! All we need is a little more light.

HERMIONE

Yeah, it's neat and -- scaaarrrr-eee!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD giggle and run to the backyard)

PORTICO

That's just some leftover coal dust from the days before the Behemoth.

HELEN

What is the Behemoth and what does it like to eat?

HUBIE

Oh. I guess that's the quaint old oil furnace with those big, funny asbestos-covered arms sticking out like it's going to graaaaab somebody!

(HUBIE pretends to grab HELEN, who backs off with fright.)

Ah-hah! Ah-hah!

HELEN

Don't you dare touch my Pierre Cardin jumpsuit. Not until after your fourth shower. (smiling maliciously) And just what do you plan to do with the oil furnace - - donate it to the Home for Quaint Old Behemoths?

HUBIE

Sharp!... Nope. Encase it. Wrap it in plastic. Vacuum-seal the baby, and that's that.

(HUBIE rubs his hands together, as if washing himself of the subject.)

We won't need it once we've got the biomass converter going full blast.

(The doorbell rings, and HUBIE shows in TEDESCO.)

HUBIE

Ah, Mr. Tedesco! Pardon my appearance. I've been, uh, cleaning the hibachi. Come on in! Hope you didn't have any trouble finding the place.

TEDESCO

Nah! Just like you said -- past the three broken porches on the left, around the oil slick and just across from the red abandoned car.

HUBIE (pointing and smiling)

With the "I Can At Cancun" bumper-sticker!

TEDESCO

Right.

HUBIE

See? Didn't I tell you the people around here have class? Mr. Tedesco, this is Mrs. Portico, our Realtor.

PORTICO

How do you do?

TEDESCO

Pretty good right now -- my busy season's good for a grand a week.

HUBIE

And of course, you've met my wife, Helen.

TEDESCO

And where are the little angels, might I axe?

HUBIE

Oh, they're out in the yard being kids.

(PORTICO peeks out the back window, gasps, and blanches, holding a hand to her mouth. Then she camouflages her reaction with a pasted smile.)

PORTICO

I see they're already playing Shopping Cart Smash-Up! (crashing sound) Whoops! Ha, ha! That was a doozie! Such imagination, so precocious and smart.. But then, look at their parents.

(HUBIE shuffles and smiles.

HELEN gives a look that could kill.)

Now, Mr. Tedesco, where would you like to commence your examination?

TEDESCO

Woodwork. A house gotta have legs. (pulls up his belt) Kinda like people, if you'll pardon the anachronism.

(TEDESCO inspects some woodwork, feeling at boards and trim, high and low, finds disagreeable evidence of bugs.)

PORTICO

They used nothing but solid oaken beams back in '95 when this little palace was built.

TEDESCO

Well, the palace's got a few-a what we in da trade call your Uninvited Guests.

PORTICO (hopefully)

Ants?

TEDESCO

Nope. Basic hole-in-the-house household termites. You know -- Nature's Coal miners. The place is shot through with `en. Here, check out the little buggers.

(TEDESCO breaks off a chunk of woodwork with his hand and puts it under PORTICO's nose. PORTICO backs off in fright and disgust.)

TEDESCO

Used to be your basic death warrant. But nowadays, we can lick almost anything that crawls, flies or skitters. I also fumigate, by the by. From what I see, I'll be knockin' off bugs here for a few weeks.

HUBIE

A few weeks? Why don't you use one of those bombs that takes care of everything in one day?

TEDESCO

Like we say in the--

HUBIE

In the trade, I know, I know.

TEDESCO (mildly insulted)

Well, I may not be a high-tech software professional like you, Mr. Big-Hassle-Kazarnoberg, but I do have a trade, and I do have my pride!

(HUBIE holds two fingers to the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes, feeling sorry and exasperated.)

HUBIE

Yes, I didn't mean.. I'm sorry.

TEDESCO

It's okay...

(TEDESCO goes to his supply box and pulls out bottles and cans to match the needs he recites.)

Like I said, ya need one treatment for ya termites. One for your carpenter bees. One for your silverfish, another for your conventional waterbugs 'n roaches, one for your centipedes. And then we get into your phylum arachnid. You got--

HELEN (storming away)

Please! I don't want to hear another word about bugs. And I may not want to hear any more about this house -- or insect park, or whatever it is.

(The back door comes crashing open as HERMIONE and GINGOLD enter, with

GINGOLD inside a shopping cart and
HERMIONE pushing it at breakneck speed.)

HERMIONE and GINGOLD
Paaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!

(HERMIONE stops the cart abruptly, sending
GINGOLD flying onto a sofa. He lifts his head up
with great joy. TEDESCO, who has been watching,
resumes inspecting.)

GINGOLD
This place is great!

HERMIONE (to HELEN)
Yeah! Could you buy it for us?

HELEN
Sure -- as soon as Mr. Tedesco can napalm it for us. Now that's a good old Philadelphia tradition. (with a
semi-deranged laugh) Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!

HUBIE
Helen, do you see what your ill humor has spawned?

HELEN
And why shouldn't our children learn about napalm, if we plan to move here? Don't you want them to help
when we tidy up the backyard?

GINGOLD (clapping his hands)
Hermione! I've got a great idea! Let's go out back and push barrels into the sinkhole!

HERMIONE
Yeah! Then we can take turns hittin' `em with those gasoline cans! Come on!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD gleefully rush
out through the back door.)

PORTICO (sing-song)
Don't fret about the twins -- I'll keep them out of harm's way, while you two ponder one of life's major
decisions.

(PORTICO heads towards the back door and registers
shock at what she sees the twins doing.)

Not on the derrick, children! Not on the derrick!

(PORTICO exits in a run, with tiny mincing steps.)

TEDESCO
I'll be examining your exterior flashings -- major and minor -- for carbonic acid corrosion.

HELEN
Yes, do check all those flashers, large and small.

HUBIE
Thanks, Mr. Tedesco.

(TEDESCO heads towards the back door carrying his supply box, then registers alarm at what he sees.)

TEDESCO

Hey! Stay offa those joist-beam overhangs!

(Exit TEDESCO. His voice is heard from outside.)

They're of dubious integrity!

(A creaking, cracking noise is heard, followed by a loud crash. HUBIE and HELEN hold their heads. PORTICO speaks sing-song from offstage.)

PORTICO

Just some minor scratch-es!

(HUBIE rests his arms on his hips and gazes around the place with satisfaction.)

HUBIE

Yup. This place could really be something.

HELEN

A toxic waste dump?

HUBIE

Oh, it'll take some work and'll cost a few shekels.

(HELEN approaches HUBIE.)

HELEN

Hubie, tell me why. Why?

HUBIE

You really want to know?

HELEN

Of course I want to know. Why should we take our precious savings and put it into a wrecked house in a questionable neighborhood?

(HELEN paces, rubbing her forehead.)

HUBIE

An up and coming neighborhood.

HELEN

Honestly now, darling! Have you taken a serious look at the work involved? There're a few million repairs needed. And we won't be able to contract out all of it.

(HUBIE paces and puffs with exasperation and doubt.)

HUBIE

Well, sweetheart. To be honest with you -- and I've always been honest with you...

(HELEN hugs HUBIE from the side.)

HELEN

I know you have.

HUBIE (troubled)

To be honest, I don't know sometimes... have these...doubts.

HELEN

Don't you see? We can nourish then together.

HUBIE (spooked)

There's a voice I hear in the back of my head at the oddest times -- like when I'm shaving. (in a hissing whisper) "Hubert! If you buy this house, you're a stupid ass!"

(HELEN is thrilled. But HUBIE's mood switches to jollity.)

But soon after like if I read a juicy real estate article -- my head fills with dreams! DREAMS of floor sanders... (makes a whirring sound)... and shop-vacs (makes a vacuum sound) whipping this great old house into a genuine Renaissance! Don't you see it, cupcake?

(HELEN sits, HUBIE parades and struts.)

HELEN

Hubie, did I miss an issue of Philadelphia Magazine? Is this the smart thing to do these days? I don't know -- is Lower Brogenberg the next South Street?

HUBIE

Helen, once we have this baby in shape, our lifestyle'll be incredible. The mortgage is only two-eighteen a month! The money we'll save'll make all the difference. Think of it -- membership in the Philadelphia Cricket Club, box seats at the symphony and opera, Givenchy dresses for you -- five or six at a time!

HELEN

Givenchy?

HUBIE

Oh-ho! And that's not the half of it -- there's a lot in it for all of us...You know how much you like quail eggs and lobster tails?

(HELEN nods.)

Well, with the money we're gonna save on rent, you'll be eating them so often, you'll retch!!

HELEN (smiling, still doubtful)

That's nice.

HUBIE

And that magenta Lanborghini you fell in love with at that Cherry Hill showroom?

(HELEN nods.)

We'll take delivery in April,

HELEN

Oooooohhhh!

HUBIE

Then there'll be those weekends we'll share in Monte Carlo, and the chateau in the south of France that we'll buy. Oh, if you don't mind, I'll splurge for that five thousand dollar TV projection system with quadraphonic Dolby I've seen wanting for the living room.

HELEN

Our living room? Come on now, you know we don't admit to television.

HUBIE

Silly! We'll hide it with our retracting Picasso mural.

(HELEN is at first thrilled, then torn.)

HELEN

But isn't all this so... so crass and material? Honey, what's becoming of us?

HUBIE

We're simply upgrading our values.

HELEN (pleased)

I didn't know you could upgrade values!

HUBIE

Of course, These days you can trade in a VCR, refinance a mortgage...honey, where've you been? This isn't 1969.

HELEN

I know. Lord, I know. But did we ever talk about money so much before?

HUBIE (standing back, arms akimbo)

How many times've I told you!

HELEN

Oh, I keep forgetting. Money is spiritual.

HUBIE

That's right. Now do you remember how I explained it to you?

HELEN (sheepishly)

Well, I....

(HUBIE pulls up a seat or carton and sits next to HELEN.)

HUBIE

HEL-LEN - helen - helen - helen - helen.. All right. When you transfer funds from savings to checking at the banking machine, do you see anything move?

HELEN

No. But there are electrons flowing, and--

(HUBIE pulls a \$5 bill from his wallet.)

HUBIE

Forget that. Look. What can this five dollar bill buy?

HELEN

Oh, I don't know -- nail polish?

HUBIE

Okay, But is this nail polish itself? Or does it just represent future nail polish like a soul represents a body, see? They're both insubstantial, abstract, but very, very real.

HELEN

Spiritual.

HUBIE

There!

HELEN

Well, I do feel better about it now.. But still, this house?

HUBIE

Yes, this house. Will you trust me?

HELEN

Not blindly.

(HELEN strolls away, contemplating, HUBIE seems defeated.)

Do you know what I'm thinking?

HUBIE (kindly)

Sweetheart, after fifteen years I still haven't mastered that trick.

HELEN

I'm thinking that when I wanted to put our IRA in Oppenheimer Growth and you wanted Southern Utilities, you went along with me.

HUBIE

I suppose I did.

(HELEN starts massaging HUBIE's neck from behind him.)

HELEN

And when I wanted to quit hospital administration and open that Sensuous Sushi Bar down on South Street, you encouraged me.

(HELEN kisses HUBIE on the cheek.)

HUBIE

How could I deny your self-actualization?

HELEN

You couldn't, you doll.

HUBIE

Hell, if you can't self-actualize what can you do in this world?

(HELEN kisses HUBIE on the cheek again.)

HELEN

And even after I realized that sushi makes me nauseous and changed my mind, I was really impressed. I mean -- you supported me.

HUBIE

Hey, remember that display tank? The sea cucumber?

HELEN

And that randy anemone. God, Jacques Cousteau would've blushed! And it's not just that. Like last Christmas, do you remember how well you took it when I asked you to return my gift?

HUBIE (wounded)

That hurt. I'd always dreamed of you in a lace teddy with a snap crotch.

(HELEN drapes her arms around HUBIE.)

HELEN

But darling, you know I'm allergic to Velcro!

(HUBIE kisses HELEN's hand.)

I know it hurt, but you were so good about it. So maybe. -

HUBIE

Maybe?

(HELEN strolls about, on the brink of a decision.)

HELEN

Just maybe I owe you this -- now DON'T hold me to it. I'm just thinking out loud.

(TEDESCO and PORTICO storm in, riding in the shopping cart, which is pushed by HERMIONE and GINGOLD. All are grinning. PORTICO and TEDESCO emerge from the cart.)

TEDESCO

Lotta fun ya got back there. Lotta liability, but lotta fun.

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD begin playing "Superman," by jumping off a table or sofa onto the floor, and back onto chairs. They play through the following dialog.)

HERMIONE (to HELEN)

This place is fresh `n exciting, Mom. Could you buy it?

GINGOLD (to HUBIE)

Yeah, Dad. Mr. Tedesco says we could have a swell tine arc-welding those... those...things out back. (to TEDESCO) What do you call them?

TEDESCO (handing a report to HUBIE)

Tractor-trailer chassis. Here's my report, by the way -- and my repair estimates. Like my Dad used ta say, "With enough dough, there ain't nothin' can't be fixed."

(HUBIE takes the estimate, scans it,)

HUBIE

Looks fine to me.

HELEN

Hubie, you know you can't do any of that work yourself! Honestly, honey, can you even repair plaster?

HUBIE (proudly)

It may surprise you to know that I've already subscribed to the Time-Life Handyman videocassette series. They even teach you how to patch and speckle.

HELEN

May I see that estimate?

(HUBIE hesitantly turns it over to HELEN.)

Thirty-five thousand dollars in repairs!!

HUBIE

Don't forget how little the house will go for.

PORTICO (sing-song)

A so-ong!

(HELEN sits, takes a hit of whiskey from a flask she pulls from her purse and rests her head in her hand.)

HELEN

Thirty-five-thousand of our spiritual dollars. Hubie, help me. I'm getting cold feet, frozen feet.....

(HELEN stretches out her legs on a nearby chair, tries to massage some life into them. HUBIE comes over and assists.)

...and arms...and head.

HUBIE

Remember our relaxation response...Breathe out...Yves. (ee-yuh)

HELEN (breathing audibly)

Yves.

HUBIE (exhaling heavily)

Yves...Saint Laurent.

HELEN (breathing heavily)

Yves...Saint Laurent.

TEDESCO (suddenly recalling something)
Oh! `Scuse me. I forgot to test that load-bearing member.

(TEDESCO goes to the second floor.)

PORTICO (to HELEN)

What you're going through is natural whenever we face one of life's big moments, dear. Now there are a few things we should all discuss together, if you don't mind, especially since you've never bought a home before.

(TEDESCO leaps as high as he can.)

TEDESCO
Haaaa-YAHH!!

(TEDESCO comes crashing down on the 2nd story landing floor, smashes through it partially, leaving his leg dangling in the living room.)

Not bad, not bad.

(TEDESCO has trouble extricating his leg and makes grunting noises as his leg flails wildly.)

HELEN
How did you say Mr. Tedesco was recommended to you?

HUBIE
Frank Malone, down at the office. He said he was even better and inspecting and exterminating than he was at his main job.

HELEN
What's that

HUBIE
Demolition.

(HELEN slumps back in her seat, holding her forehead.)

HELEN
I feel a migraine coming on.

HUBIE
He is a bit rococo, isn't he.

TEDESCO (shouting)
Ya got some structural weakness up here, but I think I caught it in time.

(PORTICO pulls up a seat. TEDESCO removes his leg from the bole, continues inspecting. HERMIONE whispers in GINGOLD's ear. Then GINGOLD runs upstairs and begins playing peek-a-boo through the hole in the floor with HERMIONE, who laughs each time.)

PORTICO
Now at settlement, there are a few trifles to take care of. There's your recording fee, title insurance, realty

transfer tax, notary fee, mortgage application fee, credit report fee--

(The kids pile up chairs and climb them,
playing King of the Mountain.)

HELEN

But we have good credit.

PORTICO

I'm sure. But is the bank! Ha! HA! Ha! You know how suspicious bankers are! Then there's the appraisal fee, the year's real estate tax in escrow, the private mortgage insurance, and the conveyance fee. But there's a silver lining in all of this.

(GINGOLD descends, runs towards the couch,
shouting to HERMIONE:)

GINGOLD

Beat ya to the couch!

HERMIONE

It's a divan!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD fly
into the couch and rebound off.)

HELEN (to PORTICO)

Now what's that silver lining -- free burial?

PORTICO

Ha! Droll! The conveyance fee, you see, already includes your title insurance ordering fee, your deed preparation charges and termite and chinch-bug inspection certifications. So you don't have to worry about those any more.

GINGOLD

Mom, what's a chinch-bug?

HELEN (shrugging)

Mrs. Portico?

PORTICO

Heavens if I know! But they do appear every 13th year except at the turn of a century...and this is Numero 13!... And that's all. Not so bad now, was it?

(TEDESCO descends to the first floor.)

HELEN

If by reason of temporary insanity we decide to go through with this will the bank approve our loan? What if I get caught first holding up a liquor store?

PORTICO

All of my clients are approved. I have a direct tie-in with the good folks down at Honeydew National Bank. It's by computer. I punch you in in the morning, and by evening they punch you out!

HELEN (sarcastically)
Friendly folks.

PORTICO
Oh, the best. Plus, I can get preferred rates for you.

(PORTICO winks. HUBIE holds HELEN's hand.)

HELEN
Honey? Those doubts...you still have them? Even itsy-bitsy teeny-weeny ones?

HUBIE
Does Mike Schmidt think about his doubts when he's up against Dwight Gooden? No! He takes his cuts. And I feel like swingin' for the fences!

HELEN (relenting, but feeling weak)
Well...if you're sure...

HUBIE (excited)
Then we'll take it! Well kids, like your new home?

(HELEN faints. HUBIE fails to notice.)

HERMIONE and GINGOLD
Yippee! Yippee!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD link arms
and dance around and around in a circle,
singing.)

We can play in the du-ump! We can play in the du-ump!

HUBIE
Honey, they love it! Honey? Honey?

(HUBIE shakes HELEN. GINGOLD checks her pulse.
HERMIONE gets behind HELEN and grasps her around
her chest.)

HERMIONE
I'll Heimlich her, just like Bert did to Cookie Monster!

HELEN
Blaahhhh!

HUBIE
What could she be gagging on?

(PORTICO finds a smelling salt capsule in her pocketbook and snaps it under HELEN's nose, reviving her.)

PORTICO

I usually save these for closings.

(HELEN continues to come to. TEDESCO crouches, holds one of her hands and shakes it enthusiastically.)

TEDESCO

Let me be the first to extend my heartfelt congratulations. As Father Baldicci (Bal-DEE-chee) used to say, "Novun osculatum naturam hoc minutum."

PORTICO

Your Latin sounds so lovely! I'll have to say that to all my homebuyers, if you'll pardon the larceny Mr. Tedesco. What does it mean, exactly?

TEDESCO

There's a sucker born every minute. (slaps his knee) Love that Father Baldicci. Just kiddin', by the way. An excellent property is what ya got here. They's all got a few DEE-fects, let's face it. But ya know? It just adds up to money an' time. Money an' time's all it is. (preparing to leave) Good luck to ya's.

HELEN

My God, how are we going to handle this, Hubie? Aren't you the teeniest bit scared?

HUBIE

Scared? Ha! Ha!...(suddenly serious) Sweetheart, I'm scarer than an albino in Aruba.

HELEN

But you can handle your fear. Not me.

HUBIE

We can handle it. Come here, darling.

(HUBIE places his arm around HELEN's shoulders, drawing her to him. Both face the audience. HUBIE gestures broadly with his free arm.)

There comes a time in the affairs of men and women when Courage, Sobriety, and Sheer Pluck join together to form a new, unstoppable force...

HELEN

And what's that, dear?

HUBIE

Chutzpah. And we've got it!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD look at each other in wild-eyed merriment, getting in a crouch.)

HERMIONE and GINGOLD

Chutzpah? (throwing back their heads) Ha! Ha! Ha!

(HERMIONE and GINGOLD link arms and dance around and around in a circle, singing:)

We ha-ave chutzpah! We ha-ave chutzpah! We ha-ave chutzpah!

(blackout)

THE END