

Better Homes & Homelands
–play in 1 act–
by Tim J. Lord

©2004, Tim J. Lord. All Rights Reserved

The Garden:

Brenda,
The Voice of the Angel of
Domestic Bliss & Happiness,
The Voice of the Devil of
Suburban Dissent & Dystopia,
Brenda's kids,

The stagehands,
Jim,

Wife of Politician Jim Talent
A devil on Brenda's shoulder

An angel under the ground

Played by 2 – 3 Cabbage Patch Kids® and a
tape recorder

They can be used in ways other than indicated

He's on the other side of the telephone

Notes:

All scene titles should be projected or spoken by **The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia.**

The music playing off the radio is Johnny Mathis. Over and over.

The music playing somewhere deep inside **Brenda** though is Kristin Hersh, with and without the Throwing Muses.

"home is where the heart lies..."

—kristin hersh, "vicky's box"

(Prologue)
Jim Talent is an evil fucker.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

This is my opinion. There is a real Jim Talent and he is a real evil fucker, but *this* Jim Talent is not *that* Jim Talent. This Jim Talent is *my* Jim Talent, a real evil fucker's evil fucker, the Beast of the Apocalypse (666), the Personal Satan of my very own Personal Hell.

Welcome to it.

But this is Brenda's story. And, indeed, there is a real Brenda Talent and she is the real wife of the real Jim Talent (evil fucker that he is); but *this* Brenda is not *that* Brenda. And, more importantly, I like *this* Brenda and am mostly ambivalent toward *that* Brenda.

There is a real Chesterfield and that is where this play really takes place—much to the dismay of all its purportedly perfect residents.

No names have been changed to protect the innocent, as evil fuckers are, by nature, not innocent, and those who are innocent have nothing to fear.

This Particular Suburban Ring of Hell.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness (cutting in):

The backyard of a very nice suburban home. The house and the land it's on cost somewhere in the \$150,000 to \$175,000 range in 1986 when it was built.

It's worth so much more than that now, especially with all the improvements that have been made, and the fact that it's home to Chesterfield's favorite son, the recently elected Politician Jim Talent.

There are tomatoes and flowers and landscaping with lush trees and shrubberies, poking their heads over fences on either side of this backyard—

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

But the only evidence of gardening existent *in* the yard is the bare patch of earth over which Brenda slaves.

And along the back side of the yard there is a levee.

It holds back the FLOOD.

Starting Your Very Own Garden in Your Very Own Suburb

(**Brenda** is in the garden.
Brenda's kids play nearby.
The **Voices** look on.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Brenda is working on her garden. Brenda's kids sit idly by, oblivious—as they always will be—to their mother's suffering. The swings on the playset rock gently in the never-too-upsetting gentle Chesterfield breeze.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

There are two things to know about starting a garden in Chesterfield:

1. The soil is entirely clay
- and 2. Nothing grows here.

However, no self-respecting housewife should let these two paltry obstacles stand in the way. Look at our mothers. They had to face the Depression, losing their husbands to the WAR and their homes to urban blight. Well, they made it through and got us here to the suburbs—thank Jesus—so we should be able to make a few flowers bloom. Even if the soil is clay and nothing grows here.

Brenda:

Grow.

Grow.

Grow.

Please.

Grow, please.

Please, Jesus, grow.

Grow and you will please Jesus.

And His Father.

Brenda (cont'd):

Holy Ghosty too.

And me. Please, Jesus, grow and you will please me, God knows.

Well God does know. How long I've been slaving over this bare patch of earth. Just to make a few flowers. I think I can. I know I can. I can make a garden in this yard. I will make a garden in this yard even if it kills me.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

And it very well might. You're not as strong as your mother, as Jim's mother either. What did you ever do?

Brenda:

I made the grass grow. Jimmy said sod. I said seed. So we sodded the front and seeded the back. Way back in 1986. When we bought this plot and built this house. And looky here. I have a grassy, seeded backyard.

And it only took six years.

So I grassed the back now I can make a few fuckin' flowers grow—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

What are you doing!

Brenda:

Oh!

Oh, Jesus—!

Oh!

I mean... Oh dear. I'm sorry, Jesus. I didn't mean to—

And the children...

Brenda's kids:

Mommy! We Love you!

Brenda:

Maybe they didn't hear me.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Of course they did. They won't now but they'll repeat it tonight in front of their father. Just you wait. Just you watch.

Voice of Jim:

Honey! I'm home

Brenda's kids:

She's in back, trying to grow a few fuckin' flowers.

Brenda:

Kids... What Mommy just said was...it was bad. You shouldn't ever repeat what Mommy said. Ever. Ever ever. Especially not in front of Daddy. Jesus won't love you if you ever repeat what Mommy said.

Brenda's kids:

Mommy! We love Jesus!

Brenda:

I know you do.

Well, that problem's solved.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Yes...but what's the real problem here?

(beat)

Brenda:

The garden. I can't grow anything. I planted annuals and perennials and biennials and bulbs weeks ago! And nothing. Not a single sprout, no little shoots, no sprigs—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

And no lovely flowers.

Brenda:

I'm a botanical failure.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

When all else is failed, go back to the start: Did you skip a step? For instance, did you break the soil?

Brenda:

This soil is unbreakable. It took me two weeks to erect these little ridges for that first batch of seeds—Now, they look like burial mounds.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Stop talking about heathen burial practices. Remember, the soil is dirty and God hates dirt. So break it. Break it a lot. Sweat and slave and so please God with your breaking of the soil. When God is pleased with your breaking of the soil your garden will become bountiful. And when your garden becomes bountiful, your *soul* will become bountiful. And when your soul becomes bountiful, God will love you.

Try to make God love you more than your neighbors.

Brenda (looking at the gardens that surround her):

I have a long way to go.

Brenda's kids:

Mommy! Break the soil! Break it!

(**Brenda** takes up her spade, raises it high above her head, looks to the bare patch of earth... And brings down the spade. It pierces the soil but the soil is not broken. Rather, the spade is broken.)

Brenda:

Oh Shi—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

The children!

Brenda:

—ugar.

Brenda's kids:

Yay! Mommy broke the soil!

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Mommy did not break the soil.

Brenda:

Mommy broke her spade.

Brenda's kids:

But we wanted you to break the soil! Mommy!

(They start to cry.)

Brenda's kids:

And we wanted ice cream.

(More crying.)

Brenda:

All right then. Ice cream. Ice cream and educational cartoons?

Go inside. Watch the TV. Watch the educational cartoons. Mommy will bring you ice cream. Mommy just has to clean up so she doesn't track muddy all over the housey.

Brenda's kids:

Yay!

(A stagehand or two enter and unceremoniously take **Brenda's kids** inside the house.)

Brenda:

I'm not cut out for this. I should just quit now while I still have some dignity. Even if I did get some of these flowers to grow, would I really be able to maintain them? Look at Nancy Jackson's Garden. Look at Meredith Smith's. Who can compete with them? Better to not start at all, than start and fail completely. Right?

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

A single ding from a single bell.
“Mail’s here!” A letter falls unnaturally from the sky
and sticks into the ground.

Brenda:

Ooh! Mail’s here.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

*“Dear Brenda,
The Subdivision Committee on behalf of the whole of Baxter Ridge
Subdivision would like to congratulate you and your hubby on his recent election
to the House of Politics. We’re all very proud of him and just everyone in the whole
neighborhood voted for him—EVERYONE—”*

Brenda:

Wasn’t that awfully sweet of them?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

*“We’ve also seen you in your backyard a lot lately—Gardening, perhaps?
We look forward to seeing the fruits of your labors and are sure the resultant
garden will be just as super-duper as your hubby per the rules, codes and by-laws
of the Subdivision.*

*See you around,
The Subdivision Committee”*

Brenda:

The Subdivision Committee. If they know what I’m doing then everyone knows.

Oh ground, oh soil. Please break. You have to break.

Please.

For the kids.

For my hubby Jim.

For Jesus and the Subdivision Committee!

Or just...just break for me. Break for me and, I promise, together we’ll do something
really special here.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

There is a rumbling deep within the earth. And then the levee starts to shake. A tiny

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia (cont'd):

hole is made out of which a tiny stream of water shoots. The water lands on the bare patch of earth and softens it up.

Brenda:

Well that's never happened before.

(**Brenda** picks up the broken bit of spade and, with great ease, breaks the soil.)

Brenda:

The soil is broken, thank Jesus.

Now, maybe, I can make the prettiest garden ever.

Brenda's kids (off):

Mommy! Mommy! Ice cream! Ice cream!

Brenda:

Kids! Mommy broke the soil!

Brenda's kids:

Yay!

(The earth rumbles.)

Brenda:

With a little help?

(The earth is still.)

Brenda pats the now broken earth lovingly and exits.)

When Your Hubby Is a Politician He Often Doesn't Come Home for Supper

(Supper has been set in the backyard. **Brenda**, however, is talking on the phone and strolling.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Brenda is on a cordless phone that probably cost about \$200, strolling through the backyard, admiring her broken soil.

Brenda:

Okay.

Okay.

Okay.

Yes, Dear.

Yes, Dear.

I love you too, Dear.

Yes, Dear.

I know that it's morning in The Far Away Easty and Saddam bin Hitler is just starting his work day.

And I know that means that you sometimes have to work late.

Oh not much... I did break the soi—

Yes, Dear.

Of course, Dear.

I love you, Dear.

I'll tell the kids you love them, Dear.

Brenda (cont'd):

I love you, Dear.

Goodbye.

I love you.

Good— (he hangs up) ...bye.

(silence)

Little patch of bare earth, you'll have supper with us, won't you? Yes?

Kids! Supper!

(**Brenda** moves the dinner around the bare patch of earth as **Brenda's kids** rush in. She serves everyone else, including the bare patch of earth, before she serves herself and is left with a tiny portion of cold food.)

Brenda:

Some for you, Kids.

And some for your father who won't be joining us tonight.

And for the bare patch of earth. But if you eat up and get all your vitamins, you won't be bare for long.

Brenda's kids:

Mommy! Where, oh where is Daddy?

Brenda:

Your father has to work late tonight, my darlings.

Brenda's kids:

Why?

Brenda:

Because there's a bad man he has to stop.

Brenda's kids:

Why?

Brenda:

Because there are some people in the world who don't get to live in the suburbs and don't get to have beautiful gardens like this one and that makes them mad so they'd rather kill us then move to the suburbs and make their own gardens.

Brenda's kids:

But Mommy!

Brenda:

Yes, my darlings?

Brenda's kids:

Your garden's ugly.

(beat)

Brenda:

All right, my darlings, dinner's over.

Brenda's kids:

No, Mommy, no!

(**Brenda** picks up the children unceremoniously tosses them to a stagehand who carries them inside the house.)

Brenda:

Bedtime.

Brenda's kids:

No, Mommy, no!

(**Brenda** is hesitant to go in and put the kids to bed. She plays with her tiny portion of now really cold food.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

It's not their fault you know.
You're the failure.
Your garden *is* ugly.
It's just a bunch of wet dirt. Not even mud.
What kind of home are you creating here?

(silence)

Brenda:

I got lost on the way to Schnuberg's today—can you imagine? Fortunately I found another Schnuberg's. It's so nice to have a supermarket that's located simply everywhere. Anyhow, here I am in this Schnuberg's far from my usual Schnuberg's—I mean miles and miles away—but I knew exactly where everything was. I didn't even realize it was odd at first. I just started my usual grocery routine and everything went exactly as it was supposed to. And then—somewhere in the bread aisle—there I was surrounded by all that...Wonder and it hit me—I *wasn't* in my usual Schnuberg's but everything was exactly as I'd left it at my old Schnuberg's. That's...awful—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

What?

Brenda:

Awfully amazing, I mean. What a wonderful world we live in where you can travel miles and miles from home and feel like you never...never...

I'm sorry where am I?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Wandering. Dreaming again.
No wonder your home is such a shambles
No wonder there are no lovely flowers in your backyard.

Brenda:

If I could get just one flower to grow, one little plant...
I could make this a beautiful place.
Make Jesus love me more.
Make... Him love me more.

Brenda (cont'd):

All I need is the perfect seed. Something that will grow and blossom...somehow in this barren wasteland.

(**Brenda** collects the plates and food and is about to exit into the house.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Suddenly, the never-too-upsetting gentle Chesterfield breeze picks up and becomes an actual wind. From over the levee floats a big, beautiful, neither chipped nor cracked seed. It lands in the middle of the bare patch of earth.

Brenda:

Well, what on earth! Where did you come from?

(No answer.)

Well, wherever it is, you certainly are the most beautiful seed I've ever laid my eyes on. And I'll bet you've got just the most beautiful flower inside you waiting to come out and be the start of my garden. Very well then, if there are no objections, I'll plant you right now.

(**Brenda** sets down the plates and goes to the bare patch of earth. She makes a hole and plants the seed.)

Brenda:

There. A little love and the perfect seed—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

But it won't be enough. "A little love and the perfect seed." It never worked that way for anyone.

You know why?

The soil. It's barren. No good stuff to feed the seed. It'll shrivel and die and never grow into that perfect thing you imagine.

Only one thing will save it now...

Brenda:

I could start a compost pile!

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Those hippy liberals would *love* that.

Brenda:

I could try...fertilizer.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

What kind? Think carefully before answering...

Brenda:

Chemical...fertilizer?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

'Atta girl.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The earth seems quivers at this notion.

Brenda:

Yeah... Chemical fertilizer. I'll pick some of that up tomorrow.

(Brenda exits.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The earth rumbles slightly.

When the Soil Is Broken You Must Bend It to Your Will

(**Brenda** enters, looking like she's been cleared to handle hazardous materials. She carries a box of fertilizer and makes her way to the patch of earth. **Brenda's kids** are there, playing.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

When confronted with uncooperative soil, such as one traditionally finds here in Chesterfield, you must persuade it that it is in fact what you want it to be. There is no patch of earth anywhere on this planet that doesn't want to yield pretty-pretty things. There are simply some patches that require more *persuasion* than others.

So, when dealing with a hostile soil, there's nothing better than a good potent dose of chemical fertilizer—the more living, non-plant things it can kill the better.

Brenda's kids:

Mommy, you're scary.

Brenda:

I'm being safe, my darlings. For you.

(to the bare patch of earth):

I'm sorry. This is going to hurt me as much as it hurts you. But it's good for you. My mother always used to tell me, "Brenda, if it doesn't hurt, it doesn't help." So you can rest assured that...this will make you stronger and happier... In the end.

(**Brenda** opens the fertilizer and you'd think it a miracle that it doesn't explode.)

Brenda:

Ok. So far so good. Now what now what? Dump the box out entirely? Maybe a spoonful—"A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down"—Get it under control, Brenda. You can do this.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

When in doubt, remember to always read the directions before beginning any project.

"For best effect, use one cup of poison—er, fertilizer—per square foot of ground."

Brenda:

Square foot? How much is that?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

“If you screw up this proportion, your garden will be a total failure and you will be the laughing stock of your neighborhood.”

Brenda:

Geez, no pressure, huh?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

“Pour the fertilizer onto the soil. Now see how your garden grows, grows, grows.”

Brenda:

That’s it? How can I be expected to use this stuff responsibly if that’s all they tell me?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Don’t forget to read the warning:

“DANGER. POISON. KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN.”

(beat)

(**Brenda** looks to her children. And back to the fertilizer. And back to her children. A stagehand enters with a box of fertilizer. The stagehand pours the fertilizer on the children. Another stagehand puppets the children.)

Brenda’s kids:

No! No! Mommy no! How could you! It burns! Why did you leave the poison where we could reach it! Oh the Horror! The Horror!

(Once the children’s death throws have ceased, the stagehands dust them off and set them to “play” once again.)

Brenda:

Come on, kids. Time to go inside.

Brenda's kids:

No, Mommy! No!

Brenda:

It's better this way.

Brenda's kids:

But it's a beautiful day out. The breeze blows gently and the sun is shining pleasantly.

(**Brenda** looks to the fertilizer.)

Brenda:

Not for long.

(**Brenda** herds the children inside and soon returns, now armed with tongs and approaching the box of fertilizer warily. She fishes out the scoop and tries to use the tongs to fill the scoop. She eventually uses her hands and holds the filled scoop over the bare patch of earth. But she hesitates...)

Brenda:

I guess I better put this fertilizer on you so you'll grow into a beautiful garden.

(She takes up the scoop once more and advances.)

Brenda:

Brace yourself!

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The earth rumbles slightly and a chunk of rich, black Mississippi River Valley topsoil falls from the top of the levee onto the bare patch of earth.

(**Brenda** stops and looks around warily.)

Brenda:

What— This is real topsoil, not clay at all.

(**Brenda** looks to the levee.)

Brenda:

Thank you.

(**Brenda** puts away the fertilizer, looks to see if anyone is watching and chucks the fertilizer into a neighbor's yard.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

For centuries your mothers and grandmothers have known the ins and outs of making a good, God-pleasing garden. And the Bible itself says, “And, yea, did the Lord spread his heavenly fertilizer—”

Brenda:

This earth doesn't need fertilizer.

(**Brenda** takes off her gloves and runs her bare hands through the rich, black Mississippi River Valley topsoil. She fishes out the one beautiful, radiant seed, spreads the topsoil around, replants the seed and pats the earth over it.)

When Your Hubby Is a Politician He Often Doesn't Come Home for Supper

(**Brenda** is sitting in the porch swing with the cordless phone that probably cost \$200 in her lap.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

From the surrounding houses we hear the very artificial sounds of “happy families,” enjoying dinner.

Brenda:

God, Jimmy, where are you?

I'm starving.

(The phone rings.)

Brenda (answering the phone):

Thank god! Are you near?

What? Oh... Thanks, Janeane.

Jimmy? You know I hate it when you have your secretary—

What?

No—!

But I've been working all day and you said you'd bring dinner home—

Yes.

Well, yes...

Fine.

Fine.

Brenda (cont'd):

So...how was your day?

Oh?

Really?

Great.

The garden's great. I expect it'll start growing any day now.

I've had a little help. From...

(beat)

Hon, what's on the other side of the levee?

(She has to hold the phone away from her ear, the screaming is so loud.)

Brenda:

Why am I asking? I've never seen—

What flood?

Not *the* Flood.

No.

Well, that's silly.

Of course, I believe in Heavenly Father Above and all his little minions—

Angels, saints, whatever. But I—

Well, I just question—

What!

No!

Brenda (cont'd):

I don't care what Martha Crocker says, you can't mail soufflés and have them arrive in one piece.

Fine then, I'll...try.

Yes. My pleasure.

Good night.

(pause)

(**Brenda** begins to pace and slams the phone into her thigh a few times.)

Brenda:

Sure... I'll send you food. And what about me? When do I get to eat?

Me and my little plant-to-be need to eat. Yes you do!

Need food, need nutrition to make the plant grow big and tall and beautiful. Beautiful for Jesus and the Subdivision Committee.

Beautiful for Jimmy, my dear, overworked-but-oh-so-very-concerned-about-his-country Jimmy.

And you need it NOW.

But, sorry, little plant-to-be, there is no food in this house—

No wait... The fertilizer! Where'd I put it?

(**Brenda** drops the phone and looks to where she threw the fertilizer. She scrambles over the fence to get it. Soon, the fertilizer comes flying over the fence, **Brenda** following close behind. She picks up the fertilizer and advances towards the bare patch of earth)

Brenda:

Need...to...eat...

(She opens the box.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The bare patch of earth quivers in fear of the chemicals about to be poured upon it.

(**Brenda** is just about to do the deed when the phone rings. **Brenda** stops, and freezes, trapped between dumping the fertilizer and answering the phone. After a brief struggle, she answers the phone.)

Brenda:

What!

Oh hi, Nancy. What? No. No. I was not just in your backyard. I...just came out onto the back patio. Where are you? Well, there you go, you've got all those marigolds and daisy-dos and ficus trees and tulips and rhododendrons and bradford pears and dogwoods and douglas firs and— What? Yes, I want my garden to be lovely and beautiful and plant-iful. No, I don't want to hire Plant Professionals; I want to do this myself. Yes, I have fertilizer— Yes, it's the chemical stuff— No! I wouldn't let the children get into it. Yes, I love Jesus—look! what I was trying to say is, you've got all those plants obscuring your view of the yard, you probably saw a squirrel and just thought it was me. Okay? All right. You too. Buh-bye.

(hangs up. beat...)

FUCK YOU AND YOUR PERFECT PURCHASED PLANTS, NANCY!!!

(The phone starts to ring again.)

And fuck the Subdivision Committe and fuck Jimmy and fuck Jesus too. You need to eat, little patch of earth, but you don't need their fucking fertilizer. We'll do this our way.

(She tosses the fertilizer back across the fence but this time it slams into Nancy's house. The phone rings more insistently but **Brenda** tosses it over the levee.)

Brenda:

Now then, my little patch of earth. Dinner time.

(She runs inside, comes back with a garbage can, dumps it out and picks out anything organic and tosses it onto the earth.)

Brenda:

Fruit rinds... Spoiled meat... Dirty diapers!
Not enough. Need more. Need more.

(A dog is heard barking next door. **Brenda** looks in its direction, grabs a plastic bag from the garbage can, and climbs over the fence. Moments later dog turds begin flying over the fence: big ones, little ones, slimy ones, dried out ones. **Brenda** climbs back over, very messy.)

Brenda:

Still need more.

(**Brenda** pulls down her panties and squats over the patch of earth. When she's finished...)

Brenda:

Just about right.

(We can hear the phone ringing but it sounds underwater.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Lights have begun to come on in the neighboring houses and excited voices from disturbed neighbors. Then, the flashing lights of a neighborhood security patrol car. Spotlights begin to track around the yard.

(**Brenda** does her best commando imitation and escapes into the house.)

The spotlights comes to rest on the bare patch of earth and we see the compost absorbed and a little sprout shoot up. It grows furiously.

**Shaping Your Garden Against the Will of Nature to Make It Most Appealing
or
Landscaping**

(**Brenda** enters from the house, refreshed after a peaceful night's sleep. She stretches and ambles barefoot across the lawn. It's a little while before she realizes that...)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

From the bare patch of earth, a plant has grown into something huge and fruitful—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

But horribly, terribly “ugly.”

(**Brenda** stands before it, mouth agape.)

Brenda:

Oh my, oh dear, oh Heavenly Father Above.

What have I...?

It's... It's a... It's a monster.

(The stagehands enter, skipping, with **Brenda's kids** in hand. They skip across the yard, around **Brenda** once and then they stop before the plant.)

Brenda's kids:

Mom— Mom—

(**Brenda's kids** scream and the stagehands chuck **Brenda's kids**, football-style, back into the house.)

Brenda:

Oh, Jesus... What have I created?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Gardening can be a frustrating endeavour. You pour your heart and soul into making

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness (cont'd):

the earth fruitful and wait and wait for it to produce only to find that your efforts have created something that's...less than appealing.

Brenda:

This will never do. Never ever. What will the neighbors say? What will the Subdivision Committee say?

(A single ding from a single bell:)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

“Mail’s here!” A letter falls unnaturally from the sky and sticks into the ground.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

“Dear Mrs. Talent,

The Subdivision Committee on behalf of the whole of Baxter Ridge Subdivision is concerned about how your garden is progressing. There were numerous reports of a disturbance in the vicinity of your backyard last night. The Subdivision Stormtroopers—um...Security Guards investigated but found nothing too out of the ordinary.

However, since you seem to be having some...troubles with your garden, please accept the attached gift of Subdivision Committee-approved flowers and vegetables to assist in your gardening woes.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

A box is dropped down near Brenda.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

*Watchfully Yours,
The Subdivision Committee*

(**Brenda** opens the box and removes numerous brightly colored plastic flowers and vegetables.)

Brenda:

That’s it! I need to— to make you...PRETTIER.

Because right now...you just won’t do.

Of all the possible plants...? How did this happen?

(During the following speech by the **Voice**, **Brenda** will arrange the plastic flowers on and around her plant, trying to find ways of making the plant more attractive.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Most likely you have sinned against Heavenly Father Above and now he is testing you. But a little faith and a lot of creativity can still turn any garden into an Edenic Paradise.

So first off, identify the suspect sin and eradicate it. Think. Think hard. It could be anything.

Did you take His Name in vain?

Did you dream of another life? One where you voted for the reproductive rights of illegal aliens?

Did you FEED SHIT TO THE GARDEN YOU GROW TO PLEASE HEAVENLY FATHER ABOVE????!!!

(**Brenda** stops dead in her tracks, looks to the monstrous plant and then to the sky.)

Brenda:

Is that what this is? Retribution?

(**Brenda** falls to her knees.)

Brenda:

I'm so sorry, Jesus, Heavenly Father.

All I ever wanted was to make the two of you happy.

Holy Ghosty too.

All I ever wanted was to praise you well.

I wanted to marry a good man and raise a family, make a household, a home for the people I loved. A home that would be a reflection of our love for You too. A home with a beautiful, bountiful garden to reflect our love for You.

But I was greedy. I see that. I was selfish and impatient and I let my faith in You lapse. Forgive me, Heavenly Father, even though I am not worthy of your forgiveness.

Forgive me for envying my neighbors.

Forgive me for sowing filth in your good earth. It is right that I reap filth.

Forgive me my pride, my belief that I could know better than the wisdom of

Brenda (cont'd):

ages.

Forgive me for doubting you.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

There is a very genuine, very solemn silence as the Heavens consider their answer.

(**Brenda** is patient. **Brenda** is meek. **Brenda** waits, asking no questions, in a state of deep contrition.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

A crack of thunder pierces the Heavens and they open—a brief but thorough downpour that drenches Brenda alone. The rain, in fact, seems to avoid her monstrous plant.

(There is a moment here and then **Brenda** collapses to the ground, weeping.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Brenda never even notices the giant leaf from the plant which stretches out to shelter her from the rain. Another leaf is shaking strangely, almost fistlike, skyward.

When Your Hubby Is a Politician He Often Doesn't Come Home for Supper

(**Brenda** is asleep beneath the leaves of the plant. Johnny Mathis, "Stranger In Paradise," is playing on the radio. There is a sound like a phone ringing underwater. **The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness** fishes the phone out of the levee and tosses it down next to **Brenda**.)

Brenda (answering the phone):

Hello...

Oh, Jim! Oh my— I— I was...asleep.
But thank god you called. I really need you right now.
I can't begin to describe the day I've had—

You what?

Well, sure, The Attorney Generaley—

What?

Are the contents of my garden a concern to The Attorney Generaley?

He has the power to monitor every garden in America?

Well, he shouldn't.

It's just one plant—

Of course it's a "legal substance."

You have satellite photos?!

Well, it does sort of look like a marijuana plant, but it isn't—

I know what marijuana plants look like.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

What are you doing! Take it back, take it back. You do not know what *marijuana* looks like. It doesn't even deserve to be called a plant—

Brenda:

I mean...you know...I saw one on the news, I think...

I don't understand.

I'm sorry what—?

(Brenda pulls the phone away from her ear for the loudness of Jim's yelling, as we hear **The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness** yell:)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Your plant's a disgrace! You're a disgrace!

(pause)

Brenda:

There's no need to take that tone with me, Jim. I'm a grown-up. I'm your wife. The woman you promised to love, cherish and honor—

Don't interrupt me! The woman you promised to love, cherish and honor. The woman who has stood by you throughout your political career—raising the kids by myself and keeping house and sleeping alone night after night after...oh-so-very-long night—

So, since you were last here, I have very lovingly tried to grow a plant in our backyard—

No! I am not having "relations" with the plant. I wouldn't even know how to do that.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

But she looks at the plant... curious.

(Brenda laughs.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Filthy! filthy!

Brenda:

No, I'm not laughing at you— Jim, this is ludicrous. We have always had a trusting relationship. Why can't you—?

The Subdivision Committee sent you a letter?

(A single ding from a single bell:)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

“Mail’s here!” A letter falls and—
you know the rest.

Brenda:

Hold on a sec.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Dear Mrs. Talent,

We've seen that...thing growing in your backyard. It reminds us of basketball nets and political signs and other undesirable landscaping elements—all of which are forbidden by numerous Subdivision Codes. We really think you ought to consider getting rid of it.

And, you know us. We'd hate to make this a “Big Deal.”

Sincerely yours,

The Subdivision Committee

Brenda:

Are you a part of this, Jim?

Quit being a politician for a minute and give me a straight answer:

Are you a part of this?

Well, Jim, maybe it's time that you—

Maybe it's time that you quit fucking around with Subdivision Committee letters and satellite photos and attorney generaleys and came home and fucked me instead, because then, I could at least fool myself into believing that you actually gave a damn about me and my garden!!!

(She hangs up and claps her hand over her mouth.)

There is a beat before she starts laughing. The phone starts ringing again, but **Brenda** removes the batteries.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Now you've done it. Worst Wife of the Year.

(beat)

So what do you have to say for yourself? How are you going to fix this? Isn't it enough that Heavenly Father Above and all his little minions—

Brenda:

Don't you mean saints?

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

DON'T CORRECT ME!!! You've defied Heavenly Father Above. You've defied your husband. Who's next, Brenda? Your neighbors? Your children?

Brenda:

Shutup already! Look at this plant...

(to the plant:)

Look at you, you're a mess.

And you're alone too. Nothing of your own. An exile, a misfit—

Everyone's disowned you and... You need me.

Jim and the kids and "Heavenly Father Above..."

they don't need me. They don't want me.

And I don't think that I want them anymore.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

OH MY GOOD LORD GOD!!! Take it back take it back take it back!

Take it back now and pray that Heavenly Father Above will forgive you.

Brenda:

Why should I care anymore? They don't care about me or the things that I care about.

Well... Well, fuck 'em!

Pulling Weeds & Handling Garden Nuisances

(The next morning. **Brenda** has been working on the plant all night. She's looking very dirty and dishevelled. And maybe she's smoking a cigarette.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Brenda has been working on the plant all night and already it looks stronger and healthier, almost like a new plant.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Breecen-daaaa... Breecendaaaa...
What are you doing, Brenda?

(**Brenda** gives the **Voice** the finger.
Brenda's kids are brought in by the stagehands.
They have no pants on.)

Brenda's kids:

Mommy, we're finished with the potty. Can you wipe our bottoms?

Brenda:

Today, my darlings, is a good day, I think, to start doing that for yourselves. Use the toilet paper and wash your hands afterwards.

Brenda's kids:

But, Mommy—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Really, Brenda, what do you think you're doing?

Brenda:

Screwing everything up, like I always do.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Don't be like that, Brenda. It's a slippery slope you're treading here. No matter what you do, this plant will never be acceptable. It can't give you what you need—

Brenda:

I've got nothing else.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

What about your standing in the community? Your home? Your children?

Brenda's kids (reentering):

All you have to do is cut down the wicked plant and we can all be happy again.

(**Brenda's kids** offer her an axe.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

You're turning your back on everything you've worked so hard to achieve. And for what?

Brenda's kids:

Don't you love us anymore, Mommy?

Brenda:

But my plant—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Your plant! Look around you. Your neighbors have plants. You have an abomination. Come back into the fold where life is easy. Or find yourself cast out of the Subdivision, left to struggle and toil.

What's it going to be?

(**Brenda** takes the axe and hesitantly turns towards the plant.)

Brenda:

Everything's so upside down, all backwards.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

No, it's simple. Cut down the plant. Cut it down. Be like everyone else.

Brenda's kids:

Be our Mommy.

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Be yourself.

Brenda:

But who is that exactly? I can't even hear myself think—

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Stop torturing yourself, Brenda. I am the the Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness and I know what's best for you. Haven't I given you a good life?

Brenda:

What life? Homemaking? I mean, I wanted to have a home and children—I really wanted children. But I didn't think I'd get stuck with these...monsters.

Brenda's kids:

Oh, Mommy! Mean, mean Mommy!

(They start to cry.)

Brenda:

Oh, Kids, I'm sorry—

Brenda's kids:

Mommy, don't chop us up with your axe!

Brenda:

What? No— Of course not. I'm setting the axe down over here. I'm sorry I said what I said. Now, what's wrong, my darlings?

Brenda's kids:

Mommy, you have to kill the monster plant. It scares us.

Brenda:

I'm not going to kill it.

Brenda's kids:

Mrs. Jackson hates it and Mrs. Smith hates it and Daddy hates it too.

Brenda:

Where did you hear that?

Brenda's kids:

Nowhere.

Brenda:

Who told you that?

Brenda's kids:

Nobody.

Brenda:

Well, Children, sometimes we have to do things for ourselves. I love the plant and if you give it a chance, maybe you could learn to love it too.

Brenda's kids:

What have we done to make you hate us so, Mommy!

Brenda:

Kids, you have to understand that I can love the plant and still love you. Okay? So, why don't you quit worrying and go play on your jungle gym?

Brenda's kids:

But your wicked plant looks over our beloved jungle gym menacingly.

Brenda:

I'm tired of discussing. I'm keeping my plant.

(A single ding from a single bell:)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

"Mail's here!"

Brenda:

Oh what now!

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

To the wife of Beloved Politician Jim Talent,

If you insist on continuing to give aid and support to the atrocity currently growing in your backyard the Subdivision Committee will be forced to send in some advisors and inspectors to assess any threats that said atrocity may pose to the wider community. We greatly appreciate your expected cooperation in helping to maintain the peace and property value.

You can expect us TOMORROW.

Cordially,

The Subdivision Committee

Brenda's kids:

See, Mommy, we told you everyone hated your plant.
Will you kill it now, please? Huh, Mommy, please?

Brenda:

For crying outloud, I'm keeping the plant!

Brenda's kids:

Okay then—

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Brenda's kids begin to assail the plant.

Brenda:

What are you— NO!

(**Brenda** rushes over and gives them a good spanking.)

Brenda's kids (amidst forced tears):

If you really loved us you'd kill the nasty plant. Daddy will love you again if you kill the plant. We will too.

Brenda:

Children... Mommy has learned some things about...love.

Love is not blind.

Love is is not unconditional.

Love is work.

Brenda (cont'd):

So, Mommy loves her children and Mommy loves Daddy. But Mommy is not happy with her family just now, and Mommy is finally doing something about that.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Brenda picks up the children and gives them to the plant.

Large vines curl around them, holding them tight.

Brenda:

And now, Mommy is leaving her children in the backyard with the mean, nasty plant until they learn to be a little less selfish and apologize to her. Mommy, meanwhile, will be inside, boarding up the windows and doors because no one is fucking with me or my plant.

(**Brenda** exits.)

Brenda's kids:

No, Mommy! Mommyyyyyy!

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The plant looms over Brenda's kids menacingly.

Maybe it even smiles in its plant way.

When Your Hubby Is a Politician He Often Doesn't Come Home for Supper

(The new cordless phone that probably cost another \$200 lies unattended and out of doors. It is ringing.)

(It continues to ring.)

(And ring.)

(And ring.)

(Finally, an answering machine picks up, and we hear:)

Brenda's voice on the answering machine:

Hi, you've reached the former home of Politician Jim Talent. If you'd like to reach him, you'll have to be much more important than, oh! say, his wife and kids. If you're calling for Brenda, specifically to complain about that monstrous plant she's growing in the backyard, go fuck yourself with a wooden spoon. Have a nice day!

(There is the mandatory beep and then a dial tone.)

(The phone begins to ring again.)

(It continues to ring.)

(And ring.)

(And ring.)

(**Brenda** enters from the house, picks up the phone, turns it on and turns it off.)

(There is a silence.)

Brenda's kids:

Can we come out of time out?

Brenda:

NO!

(silence)

(to the plant:)

We could end this the easy way. Just let them come in here tomorrow. Do their...
“inspection.” But that wouldn't be the end, would, it? They'd tell us how to comply.
Then they'd force us to comply. And in the end, I'd have to get rid of you, and we'd
both be back where we started...

(She looks to the plant.)

Brenda:

Not much peace to be found with that looming over us.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The plant sways in the gentle night breeze.

(The phone starts to ring again.

She chucks it into the water beyond the levee.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

The levee groans.

(beat.)

Brenda:

All right. I know what I have to do.

(**Brenda** takes a moment with the plant then exits
into the house.)

Preparing Your Garden for Long Periods of Stress and/or Neglect

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Morning in the the backyard. The breeze blows gently and the sun is shining pleasantly. Brenda's kids are still stuck in the plant.

(**Brenda** enters the backyard, reading a SubCom letter. She also carries a large cardboard box and sets it down. She goes back into the house.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

Dear Enemy of the Free Peoples of Baxter Ridge Subdivision,

Your refusal to allow the Committee's inspectors into your backyard is obviously an admission of your guilt. We sought peace. We strove for peace. Nobody, but nobody, was more reluctant to go to war than we. However, if your plant is not destroyed immediately, we will bring all our force against you.

WE SEE ALL,

The Subdivision Committee

(**Brenda** returns with a basket of supplies: packing tape, black marker, book of stamps, newspaper. Inside the box she makes a nest of newspaper. She crosses to the children.)

Brenda:

Kids!

Brenda's kids (tentatively):

Yes...Mommy?

Brenda:

Do you love the plant now?

Brenda's kids:

Not really.

Brenda:

Then how'd you like to go visit Grandma? Yes? Wanna go see Grandma Talent? She'll give you cookies! Cookies and toys!

Brenda's kids:

Yay! We love Grandma Talent!

(**Brenda** frees the kids.)

Brenda:

Okay then.

(singing:)

“Over the river and through the woods—”

Brenda's kids (singing):

“To Grandmother's house we go—”

(**Brenda** picks them up.)

Brenda:

“The box knows the way.

Take the kids away—”

Brenda's kids:

Box?

Brenda:

Into the box, my darlings.

Brenda's kids:

No, Mommy! No!

Brenda:

I'm afraid so. Now don't fuss. Sit still. There we go.

Grandma will cook you a nice dinner when you get there.

(**Brenda** addresses the box, marks it “Fragile” and “This side up.” When it's all set, the stagehands enter and take it away, leaving a receipt for **Brenda**. She waves goodbye.

(A single ding from a single bell:)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

“Mail’s here!” and a letter
flies across the backyard, ninja star-esque,
just missing Brenda and sticking into the levee.

(**Brenda** opens the letter.)

The Voice of the Angel of Domestic Bliss & Happiness:

If you’re reading this then...

Damn! Missed.

(**Brenda** crumples up the paper and tosses it over
a fence. She goes into the house and comes back
out with a pick-axe and a mining helmet. She
walks up to the levee and rears back the axe head.)

Brenda:

This is gonna hurt.

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

A large shadow suddenly falls across the backyard.

(**Brenda** notices it and readjusts the pick-axe to
hold it defensively.)

Brenda:

Get outta my yard—

Hello, Jim.

They didn’t really think that sending you could stop me, did they?

No! Stay where you are!

It’s too late for “I’m sorry” or “We can work this out.”

I don’t want to live in a neighborhood with neighbors I don’t know and never see.

I don’t want to raise those stuffed toys that pass for our children.

Brenda (cont'd):

I don't want to live with you. Not anymore.

I want a garden.

I want a free and open river

I want fertile land and verdant pastures.

And I want a little freedom to find out who I am.

But I can tell by the look on your face that I can't do that here. You won't let me.

Unfortunately, you can't stop me.

(**Brenda** starts swinging the pick-axe at the levee.)

Brenda:

You can't, can you?

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Jim's shadow tries to grab the pick-axe out of Brenda's hands, but, indeed, it has no power over her.

Brenda:

I didn't think so.

Uh oh! What's gonna happen if I keep picking away at the levee?

Can you guess? Huh?

Well, you won't have to— (a swing)

Cause I'm— (another swing)

Not— (another swing)

Stopping! (another swing)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Darkness falls and by the light of explosions we see Brenda cutting into the levee. Water starts to spray. After a while she can barely lift the pick-axe, so the plant takes part of the handle and helps her to swing. At last, they can swing no more, but the damage is done. There is a horrible sound growing. Brenda and the plant drop the axe and hold each other.

(Blackout & sound out.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Sounds of large things being wrenched from the ground and tremendous amounts of water suddenly flowing freely. Sounds of the faithful crying to the powerless skies.

When Your Hubby Is a Politician He Often Doesn't Come Home for Supper

(**Brenda** crawls out from under the plant's remains, drenched and covered in mud, still holding the pick-axe. She clears the mud from her eyes and surveys her surroundings.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

All traces of the house and the garden are gone.

The surrounding houses, gardens and fences are gone.

The levee is gone.

The plant remains but only barely.

The stalk, a leaf or two,
the strongest of the roots.

No sounds or hints of life.

(When **Brenda** sees the dead plant, she sobers.
She kneels down next to it and strokes it a bit.

(It's very quiet for a good long while.)

Brenda:

Wiped it all away. Nothing's left.

It's so quiet.

I'd forgotten what stillness sounds like.

It's really beautiful.

(**Brenda** starts to cry.)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

A seed that looks very much like the one out of which the plant grew floats down and lands in the palm of Brenda's hand.

(Brenda stops crying and looks at the seed.
Then she looks to the remains of her plant and
notices...)

The Voice of the Devil of Suburban Dissent & Dystopia:

Spores and seeds of all types begin to fall.

They create a path which leads Brenda away from the backyard.

(Brenda goes to the remains of her plant.
There is a moment, then:)

Brenda:

Thank you.

(Brenda picks herself up, new seed in hand and
begins to exit via the seed path.)

End of Play.