

IN FINE PRINT

by Bara Swain

CAST

BERTHA.....(70s) Divorced, energetic and engaging.
She wears slacks, top and orthopedic shoes.

MADLINE.....(70s) Widowed, independent woman. She
is discouraged and angered by her vision
loss. Madeline dresses carefully – matching
blouse and skirt, earrings, watch, shoes.

IN FINE PRINT

Time: A summer afternoon

Place: Madeline's home, Brooklyn, NY

At rise: Bertha (70s) paces. Madeline (70s) is sitting on the sofa reading a newspaper. She leans over the newspaper, trying to decipher the fine print. Several more newspapers are next to her. Others are stuffed in magazine racks and piled on the floor. Otherwise, the home is tidy and attractive. Bertha circles Madeline several times. Finally, she speaks.

BERTHA

Madeline ...?

MADELINE

Shhh.

(Bertha resumes pacing. Silence. Bertha approaches Madeline again.)

BERTHA

I didn't say that it's over. I said, "Arthur, I think we need to take a break." I was clear. Concise but clear. "Arthur," I said --

MADELINE

I heard you, Bertha. It's my eyesight that's going, not my hearing.

BERTHA

You aren't even listening.

MADELINE

"Arthur," you said, "we need to take a break."

BERTHA

I said, I THINK we need to take a break. And he said, "Why, Bertha? Did I do something wrong?" And then I said, "Maybe we need a little time apart to think about our future together." And Arthur said, "We've been going out for six months, Bertha, and --"

MADELINE

-- He said, she said. Get to the point, dear.

BERTHA

(glumly) I don't think we share the same values.

MADELINE

What -- he doesn't like pinochle?

BERTHA

VALUES, Madeline. I ... I just don't know if I can date a man who ... (Bertha hesitates, then spits it out) -- who called my daughter a tramp!

MADELINE

Which one?

BERTHA

Jennifer. (defensively) What do you mean, which one?

MADELINE

-- You have three daughters, don't you? --

BERTHA

-- Madeline, sometimes you make me feel like --

MADELINE

Don't interrupt, Bertha. It's not attractive at your age.

BERTHA

I'm eight months older than you!

MADELINE

Exactly. Now do you want to make yourself useful?

BERTHA

What's that supposed to mean?

MADELINE

It means, you're half an hour early. I am not responsible for anything I say for the next 30 minutes. So either sit quietly or hand me my magnifying glass.

BERTHA

(conceding) Where is it?

MADELINE

On the TV guide. Next to the thermometer.

BERTHA

(alarmed) Aren't you feeling well, Maddy?

(Reluctantly, Madeline engages in the conversation.)

MADELINE

Yes and no. I thought I was coming down with the flu.

BERTHA

(concerned) Do you have a temperature? Did you take some Tylenol?

MADELINE

No, but I took my pulse ...

BERTHA

And?

MADELINE

And I still have one, kenahera.

(Madeline brings the newspaper back up to her face, an inch or two from her eyes, and reads.)

“Edward Moreno, 44, was found mortally wounded with a knife in his chest on West 122nd Street near Lenox Avenue yesterday at 1:52 a.m.

(Madeline gasps. She lowers the newspaper and cries out.)

Oh, my God!

BERTHA

What’s wrong?

MADELINE

OH, MY GOD!

BERTHA

You’re scaring me, Madeline. What’s the matter?

MADELINE

(reading) *“Moreno was rushed to St. Luke’s Hospital where he died.”*

(Madeline looks up again, eyes wide in horror.)

BERTHA

Do you know him, darling? Talk to me, Maddie. Is there something I can do for you?

MADELINE

(hushed) My husband.

BERTHA

(gently) Seymour is gone, mamella. Do you want me to call your son? Do you want me to – what should I do, Maddie?

(Bertha sits down next to Madeline, who is struggling for composure.)

MADELINE

Right after Hurricane Donna --

(Bertha pats Madeline's hand.)

MADELINE cont.

-- Seymour took me on the I.R.T. up to Harlem. He'd just read that book "Go Tell It on the Mountain Top" by -- what's that schvartza's name?

BERTHA

James Baldwin.

MADELINE

So Mr. Baldwin used to hang out at this jazz bar on 124th Street. Such a dive, Bertha ... I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a zebra-papered back room, and a stage, and a small kitchen. We were starving, too, because I burnt the blueberry pancakes that morning, and Seymour didn't like eggs, not even my Eggs in a Basket --

BERTHA

-- I could eat them every day for the rest of my life --

MADELINE

-- You should be so lucky. (She continues) So we ordered collard greens and chicken wings because – gezai gzunt, that's all my Seymour could afford back then.

BERTHA

And?

MADELINE

(solely) It's a sign, Bertha. My clock is running out.

BERTHA

Because you ate fried chicken in the 60s!?

MADELINE

LENOX. It was called the Lenox Lounge! And here it is again, in black and white!

(Madeline hits the paper with the back of her hand.)

Edward Moreno died on LENOX Avenue, and ... (hushed) It's an omen, Bertha. My days are numbered.

BERTHA

(firmly) Madeline, I'm only going to say this once. You know what Dr. O'Connell said.

MADELINE

(grumbling) What does that shiksa know?

BERTHA

He gave you two rules to follow. He said – and I quote, number one: Exercise more.

(Belligerently, Madeline picks up the paper and puts it down three times.)

BERTHA cont.

And number two: Don't read the obituaries. (scolding) What's wrong with you, Madeline?

MADELINE

That's easy for you to say.

BERTHA

Oh, you think so? And who just spent the weekend in Massachusetts?

MADELINE

What's that got to do with –

BERTHA

-- Didn't Arthur and I spend a three-day weekend in the Berkshires, Maddie? In Lenox – LENOX, Massachusetts!?

MADELINE

Your Jennifer is so rich that she can afford a summer home in the Berkshires! My son the lawyer just bought a house in the Poconos, and --

BERTHA

-- MADELINE SCHWARTZBACH! If you keep changing the subject, I swear to God, I'm going to kill you myself!

MADELINE

(shrugging) What did I just tell you? My days are numbered.

BERTHA

Maddie, Maddie -- it's a figure of speech, Maddie!

(They stare at each other.)

You know, I came over here to talk to you about me and Arthur – not this ... mishigas about omens and collard greens and dying. You're NOT dying! And if I hear you say that you have nothing to look forward to, I'm going to --

MADELINE

-- What. Jump out the window?

BERTHA

The SECOND floor window! And I'll flatten your favorite honeysuckle hedge in the bargain.

MADELINE

We're not bargaining, Bertha, and I can tell you something else – I don't like being threatened! Now if you'll excuse me, I have 25 more minutes to read the papers, and that's 25 more minutes to ignore you! (She hesitates) Besides ...

BERTHA

Besides what.

(Madeline lays down the newspaper.)

MADELINE

You couldn't make a telephone call to me from the Berkshires? You're so involved with what's-his-name that you can't phone me?

BERTHA

You screen your calls! I left you four messages.

MADELINE

You didn't say to call back. You just said, "I'm having a wonderful time."

BERTHA

It was implied that --

MADELINE

-- I'm not listening. You're still – (looks at her watch) – 22 minutes early. And I've been looking forward to reading my papers all day. All day, Bertha. NOW GIVE ME THE MAGNIFYING GLASS!

BERTHA

AFTER YOU GIVE ME ADVICE ABOUT ARTHUR.

(Bertha starts pacing again. She plows on.)

So here's the thing. Arthur and I have been dating for awhile now ...

MADELINE

I'm not listening.

BERTHA

... and it took me a month to talk him into traveling with me. His son thinks he's too fragile – the phlebitis ... his blood pressure. Last month I parked in front of the A&P to pick up some sauerkraut – Arthur likes it with sesame seeds. You should try it some time, Maddy – and when he puts the quarter in the meter, he falls off the curb. So things happen, right?

MADELINE

I haven't heard a word you're saying.

BERTHA

So when I drive Arthur home, his son looks at the scrape – honestly, it wasn't any bigger than a Hebrew National – (Bertha indicates the size of a hot dog) -- maybe as pink, and Arthur's son looks at the little bruise and then he looks at me like I'm poison, with poisonous darts in his eyes, you know?

MADELINE

I don't know anything and I can't hear anything.

BERTHA

"Leslie," I said. His son's name is Leslie. What kind of meshuganah name is Leslie? Leslie Levitsky. Can it get any worse?

MADELINE

Don't ask me. I'm not listening.

BERTHA

I said, "Leslie, bad things happen to good people. It's not like he broke his hip!" I mean, it was an accident, right? We're not getting any younger!

(silence)

The truth of the matter is -- Leslie thinks I'm not good enough for his father. And the daughter-in-law is even worse. She pretends that she doesn't know who I am when I call – which isn't often. It's too ... it's humiliating, that's what it is. I'm a grown woman, Madeline, and I don't deserve that kind of treatment. (She pauses.) Sometimes ... sometimes I think they're afraid that Arthur might be interested in, you know, marrying me –

MADELINE

(mumbling behind her newspaper) "Make it legal, Mr. Seigal."

BERTHA

What?

MADELINE

I didn't say anything.

BERTHA

-- Not that I'm ready for marriage. And not that he's asked. But the girls are grown and ... well, what would happen if we DID get married? It's not a crime, is it? My youngest, my Jennifer, is married three times already, and she's 52! "Ma," she says, "I'm in the prime of my life." Honestly, Maddie, I think she takes after her father in the romance department, because cross my heart, she had a different suitor every night. EVERY night! One even rode a motorcycle, and another one stayed over and ate a bowl of cornflakes for breakfast – without his shirt on! (After a moment) Maybe Arthur's right. He could've used a better choice of words, maybe, like "Your daughter is loose. Or your daughter is ... very sociable." I don't know. It's depressing because ... (she sighs) I like

BERTHA cont.

this man. I think I could imagine spending the rest of my life with him ... even if – even if he doesn't like pinochle.

(Bertha looks miserable. Pause.)

MADELINE

Bertha, what's wrong with you? If you have feelings for Arthur, then why are you standing there moaning and groaning about tramps and sauerkraut and a selfish son who should know better. Pick up the phone and call him!

BERTHA

Shouldn't I wait for Arthur to call me?

MADELINE

What century do you live in? Call him and apologize. And tell him the truth, for crying out loud. Three weeks is a long time. You only live once!

BERTHA

But I'm afraid that his son --

MADELINE

Who gives a hoot about Leslie Levitsky! Did it ever occur to you that he might be jealous of you? Yes, you!

BERTHA

But --

MADELINE

So tell me, whose idea was it for Arthur to move in with them?

BERTHA

(after a moment) Leslie's. After Arthur had a knee replacement, he was afraid --

MADELINE

-- that he couldn't take care of himself? I bet he's also afraid that Arthur can't walk up your front stoop. Am I right or am I wrong?

BERTHA

You're right.

MADELINE

Of course, I'm right. Now hand over my magnifying glass, go home, pick up the telephone and tell Arthur how you feel. Better yet, drive over to his house and tell him in person. If the daughter-in-law doesn't open the door, throw stones at his window. Or your shoe. (Madeline points at Bertha's feet.) A good orthopedic can be your best friend in an emergency.

BERTHA

You're my best friend in an emergency.

MADELINE

So what are you waiting for? Go, mamella, go.

(Silence. Bertha walks over to Madeline and takes her hand.)

BERTHA

Thank you. I'm going to do just that --

MADELINE

-- Good girl --

BERTHA

-- but it can wait for a few minutes. First ... (Bertha reaches out) ... give me the newspaper.

MADELINE

What!?

BERTHA

(firmly) Hand over the newspaper, Maddie.

MADELINE

I will not!

BERTHA

I'm going to count to three. One ... two --

(Bertha grabs the newspaper from Madeline. Madeline grabs for it, but Bertha holds it out of her reach. Madeline is crestfallen. Pause.)

Now what do you want to hear first – the death notices or ... (Bertha opens up the newspaper) ... or one of these headlines. Do you want to hear about "*Husband mortally wounded and wife beaten by son with a pan in gated community*" or – oh, this sounds good – "*Coroner says nanny loved herself to death.*"

MADELINE

The death notices. They're in fine print – it's harder to read.

(Bertha turns the pages of the newspaper.)

BERTHA

Page 22. "Obituaries."

(She reads)

"*Frederick Coachman, 92, of Newark, New Jersey, made his transition on July 9, 2010.*"

MADELINE

(disdainfully) What – he went to the Catskills?

BERTHA

“Frederick was the loving husband of Aretha Coachman, devoted father of Solomon, Larry, Irwin Coachman, Yolanda Winston, Alfreda Daniels, and the late Vivian Coachman.”

MADELINE

He was busy in the sack, that one. Or Catholic.

BERTHA

“A celebration of his life will be held on Thursday at 11 a.m. at Metropolitan Baptist Church.” (to Madeline) You want to hear more about Mr. Coachman?

MADELINE

No, move on to the next stiff.

BERTHA

Moving on then.

(Bertha looks at the newspaper. Her eyes widen.)

Oh, my God.

(Bertha looks at Madeline, then back at the paper. Then at Madeline again.)

OH, MY GOD!

MADELINE

What’s the matter, Bertha?

(Bertha doesn’t answer.)

You’re scaring me, darling. What’s wrong?

(Silence.)

BERTHA

(reading) *“Arthur Levitsky, 82, of Brooklyn, New York, died on Friday, July 9, at Lutheran Hospital, after a brief illness.”*

(The lights begin to fade.)

“He is survived by his beloved son Leslie, devoted grandchildren Isaac, Mary Levitsky, and a host of nieces, nephews, cousins, friends, and ... and ...”

(Bertha weeps as lights go to black.)

End of play