

PAYS AND NIGHTS OF BEEBEE PENSTEPMAKER by WM SVOBER

BEEBEE. Well I'm not interested in home or anything to do with it!

MELINDA. O.K., keed. Excuse me for livin.

BEEBEE. I'm sorry, Mama. (Pause.) Mama? (Pause.) Mama, what's wrong?

MELINDA. (After a pause.) Nothin.

BEEBEE. Why didn't you answer me?

MELINDA. I was just thinkin about somethin.

BEEBEE. Are you all right?

MELINDA. Yes, darlin, I'm fine.

BEEBEE. You sound tired or like you've got a cold.

MELINDA. No, I'm fine.

BEEBEE. You haven't been climbin up wafshin windows again, have you?

MELINDA. No, I have not.

BEEBEE. And you're keepin away from that electric chill chaser in your nylon duster.

MELINDA. Uh-huh.

BEEBEE. I'm scared to death some mornin you'll pull out the cord with your hands drippin/wet. And there you'll be. White as paper and shakin like a leaf with a hundred and ten volts passin through your entire body.

MELINDA. I beey takin care of myself for a mighty long time.

BEEBEE. Well, O.K., Mama.

MELINDA. O.K., Beebee.

BEEBEE. O.K.

MELINDA. You come home when you feel like it, darlin. Your room's always ready and waitin for you. Goodbye, Beebee.

BEEBEE. Goodbye, Mama.

Begin

(As Melinda hangs up telephone, light on family area goes out. Melinda sits down. Beebee hangs up her phone and freezes. The clock ticks to denote the passage of time. The lights in Beebee's apartment come up full. Nettie Jo enters dressed for a date.)

NETTIE JO. Beebee?

BEEBEE. Hey, Nettie Jo. (Nettie Jo stands in front of armchair and takes a modeling pose. Beebee gets a sketchbook and pencil

out of coffee table drawer, sits on sofa and begins to sketch Nettie Jo.)

NETTIE JO. You antsy about somethin?

BEEBEE. (Shakes her head.) Uh-uh.

NETTIE JO. Ever since you dropped your novel and took up art, you seem much more moody to me.

BEEBEE. I haven't dropped my novel. I put it aside to let the ideas solidify.

NETTIE JO. Since you put it aside then. You seem much more moody to me. (Crosses to kitchen, gets coke out of refrigerator and opens it.)

BEEBEE. I don't think I am.

NETTIE JO. I do. I think you are.

BEEBEE. Hold still, Nettie Jo.

NETTIE JO. (Returns to her position in front of armchair.) Don't you want me to be evanescent?

BEEBEE. Not tonight.

NETTIE JO. That's the way I feel tonight.

BEEBEE. You look very pretty.

NETTIE JO. Thank you. (She smiles.)

BEEBEE. Don't smile.

NETTIE JO. How's your new art teacher?

BEEBEE. I stopped goin to him.

NETTIE JO. Stopped goin to this one too? Why?

BEEBEE. He was talkin more than he was teachin.

NETTIE JO. Who will you go to now?

BEEBEE. Nobody for a while. I thought I'd work on my own. Hold still, Nettie Jo. I wish you'd have your hair cut. All I can see is hair.

NETTIE JO. Most people like it long. (Sits in armchair.) Mother could sit on hers. I've got a picture of her doin it. Lookin up into a sterlin silver handmirror. (Poses like her mother.)

BEEBEE. Come on now, Nettie Jo.

NETTIE JO. How many teachers have you been to?

BEEBEE. What difference does it make?

NETTIE JO. Two or three anyway.

BEEBEE. What difference does it make? None of them fit the bill. I don't either, I guess. When I first go to them they all think I'm wonderful. They say how expressive and sensitive and all that. (Nettie Jo pulls at her skirt to even the hem.) Nettie Jo will you

hold still? (Nettie Jo resumes posing.) And the first few days I am good. Then I get so bugged I freeze up and I get just horrible. And I stay horrible. And I tell myself I'm not doin it for them. And all right so I'm horrible now, if I was good once I'll be good again. But I'm not. Well, I'll have to work harder, that's all. Keep workin is the important thing. (Closes sketchbook and puts it in coffee table drawer.)

NETTIE JO. (Sits in armchair.) I wish you'd date more.

BEEBEE. I've told you a thousand times those T. D. Hackameyer boys don't interest me.

NETTIE JO. You don't give yourself a chance to meet anybody else. Then when you do you never will date em more than once. I wish I had a nickel for every boy I've had Tommy bring up here that you've turned thumbs down on.

BEEBEE. Nettie Jo, stop talkin like my mother.

NETTIE JO. I think you're workin too hard.

BEEBEE. (Rises.) And I think you're just breezin along with the breeze, aren't you, Nettie Jo? Lettin the rest of the world go by.

NETTIE JO. I might as well. I certainly can't change it.

BEEBEE. (Circling Nettie Jo.) You go right down the years sittin on your one spot. You sit on your one spot at the office. You sit on your one spot in your folks' split level ranch house. You have no outside interests other than men. No hobbies, handicrafts or sports. No religious convictions or philosophical leanings. Just sittin. One spot Nettie-Jo Republ. The girl who never gets off her behind.

(Moves around in U. R. area.)

NETTIE JO. Correct, Beebee. And I'm havin a grand time doin it. BEEBEE. You live a day at a time with never a passin thought for tomorrow or the day after.

NETTIE JO. Correct, Beebee.

BEEBEE. And what beats me is you're satisfied.

NETTIE JO. I don't have any ambition, Beebee.

BEEBEE. That's the kind sails right to the top like a gas balloon.

NETTIE JO. What do you want me to do?

BEEBEE. I don't know. But there's somethin wrong about bein so satisfied with everything the way it is and goin along with the crowd. You have to gain special recognition in some way. In some way, Nettie Jo. If you don't you end up nothin—a nonentity. Another face in the crowd. And that's like bein dead. Do you want to wind up dead without one person to remember your name?

NETTIE JO. (Rises, crosses to bureau and gets nailfile.) If I'm dead, why should I care if people remember my name? (Crosses back to armchair, sits and files nails.) And I've got enough to keep in mind without worryin whether I'm leavin behind some mark that I won't even be able to look at. Anyway, what's wrong with bein another face in the crowd?

BEEBEE. It's death in life, that's what. It's walkin through the world without touchin a thing. It's blendin in instead of stickin out. And God knows folks try to push you into the wallpaper from the minute you're born. Startin with your family. She gets this from so and so. That from somebody else. Eyes, ears, character, bad habits, good habits. Just when you think you finally got somethin on your own, as sure as Christmas somebody comes along and says, "Isn't that exactly like Uncle Whatchamacallit." There you are locked tighter than a Chinese puzzle without knowin where one person ends and the other ones begin. (Sits on coffee table.) Then your mother starts sayin why aren't you more like people your own age? Why don't you join a sorority, a club, go to dances?

NETTIE JO. Did you ever do any of those things, Beebee?

BEEBEE. No.

NETTIE JO. Why?

BEEBEE. I didn't want to. (Pauses, then reflectively.) The funny thing is, if I had gone along with the rest, I would have been last in line.

NETTIE JO. Why?

BEEBEE. They weren't interested in me and I wasn't interested in them. It was like they had something extra. A gift I didn't have. And it made me feel cut off.

NETTIE JO. What gift was that?

BEEBEE. (Absorbed in her words.) The gift of ease. Of comradeship. Of . . . belongin to somethin.

NETTIE JO. Beebee, I don't know if you realize it or not but you just contradicted yourself.

BEEBEE. How? I didn't.

NETTIE JO. You just finished sayin the last thing you wanted to be was part of a group.

BEEBEE. And I meant it. But a person can still be momentarily seduced by the idea of somethin they think is wrong.

NETTIE JO. Beebee, do you want to be like me?

BEEBEE. Like you! (Rises, crosses D. L. then circles around Nettie

Jo.) Like you, Nettie Jo, like you! Why Nettie Jo, you're the last person to step on grass I'd want to be like. Why I'd take a flyin leap off anything high enough if I thought I was any-thing approachin bein like you.

NETTIE JO. If that's so, it makes me wonder sometimes why I'm your only friend.

BEEBEE. (*Childs u. r. above coffee table.*) You're not.

NETTIE JO. Who else do you see?

BEEBEE. I live in the same apartment building with you. I couldn't get away from you if I tried.

NETTIE JO. You haven't tried very hard. In fact it's been just the opposite. You're always askin me up here every hour of the day or night on any pretext other than just to visit. I don't know why you can't admit sometimes you'd just like to visit.

BEEBEE. (*Crosses D. R. between coffee table and bed.*) Well I'm admittin now that I'm gonna avoid you from now on like the bubonic plague!

NETTIE JO. O.K., Beebee, but I'll tell you this. For my money and for all your talkin—you're not much further along than me.

BEEBEE. I'm not huh? I'm not huh?

NETTIE JO. No.

BEEBEE. All that proves is that you're blind in one eye and can't see good out of the other.

NETTIE JO. And you can see out of both of yours I suppose.

BEEBEE. At least I use mine for somethin besides Maybelline!

NETTIE JO. Maybe so, but two years ago you said . . .

BEEBEE. (*Stunned.*) Two years ago?

NETTIE JO. Yes, Beebee, two years ago. I met you two years ago.

BEEBEE. What month is this?

NETTIE JO. June.

BEEBEE. I thought it was the tag end of May.

NETTIE JO. No, it's the second of June. You were doin all that talk about love and a career bein God's answer to hundred proof bourbon. And I thought it was a fine idea. Still do for that matter. But what have you done?

BEEBEE. What do you mean what have I done?

NETTIE JO. What have you got to show for your two years besides a stab at a novel and a few weeks of art school. What have you settled on?

BEEBEE. I've settled on paintin.

NETTIE JO. With writin on the side and music in the background. Well, I'm sorry, Beebee, but I don't see where all your "doin" gives you any right to criticise my "sittin"—cause from where I'm sittin, your doin don't look like much. (*Beebee sits on coffee table.*) Oh, Beebee, I didn't mean to say all that.

BEEBEE. Never mind, Nettie Jo.

NETTIE JO. When you jumped on me with all fours you just got my back up.

BEEBEE. I don't blame you.

NETTIE JO. (*Rises and crosses to Beebee.*) Beebee, I'm worried

about you.

BEEBEE. Well don't be.

NETTIE JO. I already have. And he thought it was a wonderful idea.

BEEBEE. Nettie Jo.

NETTIE JO. The thing of it is I think a change of scene might give you a fresh viewpoint.

BEEBEE. Well, thanks, Nettie Jo but . . .

NETTIE JO. My thought is a fresh scene and fresh faces might help you get settled on something. And I'd certainly feel better about you. Will you think about it?

BEEBEE. (Distracted.) What?

NETTIE JO. I say will you think about it.

BEEBEE. Yes, I'll think about it.

NETTIE JO. Well. I'll see you later. I'll come up when I get home if it's not too late.

BEEBEE. Goodbye, Nettie Jo. *(Nettie Jo exits. Beebee crosses u. r. with emotion.)*

Two years! That's three hundred and sixty odd days times two! And how many hours and how many minutes and how many seconds? God, what have I been doing, all this time?

*(The sound of the ticking begins under and increases in volume as the speech progresses.)* You must have put me in a trance. I'm so dogged by time all I been doing is lettin it go by. I been here two years! People ask me what are my interests, and I say I'm a writer/pianist or a pianist/writer or a pianist/painter or a writin piano playin painter. When all I am is a nine to five worker at T. D. Hackameyer's with an unfinished novel, a grubby sketch-book, and an apartment that's drivin me stark sturin crazy. I need somebody! Somebody for me! If I had somebody I'd know what to do and how to do it. Well, what do you want, Miss Beebee?

*(Fiercely.)* I want man in the image of God! Isn't that what you're supposed to be produc'n? Then do it goddamit! If I'm my own worst enemy make me not my own worst enemy. I've got strings attached and they're tying me in knots! *(The ticking has become almost louder than her voice. It stops abruptly.)*

BLACKOUT AND CURTAIN

ACT II

*The lights come up in Beebee's apartment. It is late evening. Summer. A year has passed since the last act. The furniture has been rearranged and a couple of pieces have been added. The sofa/bed is now all the way L. with the coffee table in front of it and the end table on the D. side. The bureau is D. R. and to the L. of it is an ottoman. The armchair and table are slightly R. C. and there is now a kitchen table all the way R. When the lights come up, Beebee, dressed in summer slacks and blouse, is seated at the kitchen table typing furiously. Her manuscript box is on the table beside her. Ed Busby, an attractive, intellectual burn of about thirty reclines in the armchair eating salted nuts. He is watching Beebee. She hesitates for a moment.*

ED. Stop thinking.

BEEBEE. *(Laughing.)* I forgot.

ED. Let it flow. Let it flow. *(He takes a bite of peanuts.)* Don't be afraid to follow where your impulse takes you.

BEEBEE. I'm stuck! I've repeated the last sentence six times. *(She types.)* Seven times. *(She types.)* Eight times.

ED. *(Rises and crosses to Beebee. Looks over her shoulder.)* I don't care if you repeat it a thousand times. Just so you keep the words coming.

BEEBEE. *(Laughing.)* I can't think of anything else to say!

ED. Then write that down.

BEEBEE. You mean write down, "I can't think of anything else to say?"

ED. Exactly.

BEEBEE. Isn't the time almost up?

ED. *(Looks at his watch.)* You still have ten seconds.

BEEBEE. *(Getting the giggles.)* Ten seconds! Have mercy!