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*Dramatic Publishing*

REGINALD ROSE'S

*The Death and Life  
of Larry Benson*

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS  
BY KRISTIN SERGEL  
ADAPTED FROM THE TELEVISION  
SHOW BY REGINALD ROSE

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**THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY**

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# The Death and Life of Larry Benson

***Drama. By Reginald Rose. Cast: 5m., 8w.*** The whole town is excited about Larry Benson's homecoming. More than that, they're astonished because Larry was reported missing in action on a distant battlefield more than three years ago. Everyone had given up and now he's suddenly coming home! But when he arrives, the young soldier who comes calling "Mom! Dad!" is a stranger. He continues to insist that he's Larry, and only after the buildup of tension and drama does the moment of truth and vindication arrive. *One ext. set.*

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A Play in Three Acts

# The Death and Life of Larry Benson

by

REGINALD ROSE

Stage Version by KRISTIN SERGEL

Adapted from the Television  
Show of the Same Name  
Initially Presented on  
STUDIO ONE, CBS-TV



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(THE DEATH AND LIFE OF LARRY BENSON)

ISBN 0-87129-843-0

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# The Death and Life of Larry Benson

*A Play in Three Acts*

FOR FIVE MEN AND EIGHT WOMEN

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## CHARACTERS

JESSIE BENSON  
SUSAN  
MARY ELLEN  
FREDA BENSON  
GRACE WILKEY  
MRS. POTTER  
WALTER POTTER  
SAM BENSON  
MRS. FITCH  
NETTIE CLARK  
MELVIN CLARK  
THE BOY  
BUD MERKEL

PLACE: *The living room of the Benson home in the small town of Oakmont.*

TIME: *The present.*

## SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE: *A Saturday afternoon in late summer.*

ACT TWO: *Immediately following Act One.*

ACT THREE: *Sunday morning.*

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## NOTES ON CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES

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**FREDA BENSON:** She is a greying, motherly woman in her late forties. Since her husband left his home, she has helped earn the family living by sewing for the neighbors. She looks a bit tired, a bit overworked—but she is obviously a woman of quiet strength.

**JESSIE BENSON:** Jessie is the 16-year-old daughter. She is a mixture of bubbling adolescence and absent-mindedness. Her joy at the return of her older brother is mixed with resentment toward her father.

**SAM BENSON:** He is a large man, near fifty; he is quiet, but a man who can easily be triggered to violence. He feels awkward and ashamed when he comes back to his former home; but he has heard Larry is alive and coming home—and he has to be there.

**GRACE:** She is a pretty girl of twenty, and practically engaged to Larry from the age of six. Although she is overjoyed that Larry is coming back after all, she is faced with the embarrassing task of telling him of her engagement to another man.

**THE BOY:** He is tall, well built, twenty-one years old. At times he seems to be in a dreamlike daze, clinging only to the fact that this is his home and these are his parents.

**MRS. POTTER:** She is the Bensons' next-door neighbor. She is always helpful toward Freda, and feels she should forget about that no-good Sam.

**MR. POTTER:** He has always been a good neighbor, helping Freda by cutting the lawn and putting up the screens.

**SUSAN and MARY ELLEN:** Jessie's girl friends are very excited, and slightly envious of Jessie's having a brother of twenty-one. Their brothers are all younger, and that's pretty useless from their point of view.

**BUD:** Bud is a nice-looking boy in his twenties. He is engaged to Grace, and his slightly guilty feelings annoy him.

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Larry was one of his pals—but after all, it's not as if he really had stolen the guy's best girl.

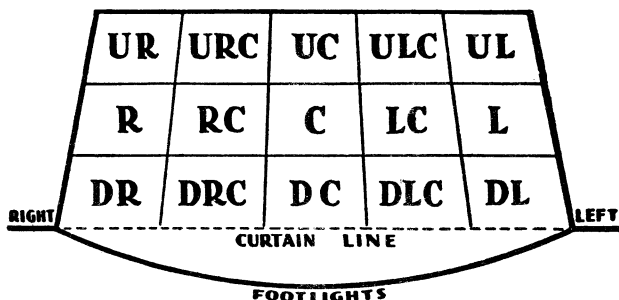
NETTIE: She is one of Freda's best customers, full of helpful advice—making suggestions as to how Freda can improve her lot, while she also demands that her new dress be finished by morning.

MRS. FITCH: Mrs. Fitch is an elderly woman, the first grade teacher who once gave Larry Benson a "D" in conduct.



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## CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS

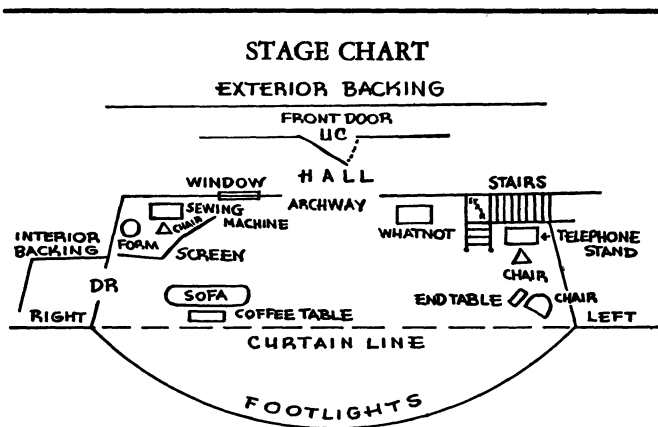


### STAGE POSITIONS

*Upstage* means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: U R for *up right*, R C for *right center*, D L C for *down left center*, etc. One will note that a position designated on the stage refers to a general territory, rather than to a given point.

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NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.



## PROPERTIES

**GENERAL:** Curtains or drapes for window; sofa and coffee table; easy chair and end table; telephone stand and chair; telephone; whatnot containing, among a varied assortment of knickknacks, a large framed portrait of a boy in uniform; wall mirror with several notches along frame at one side; sewing machine and chair; dressmaker's form, clothes rack, etc.; lamps, rugs and other furnishings as desired. **ACT ONE:** scissors on sewing machine, carpet sweeper for Jessie, folding screen off in hall, old battered cushion on sofa, Freda's purse on telephone stand. **ACT TWO:** The Boy's jacket over back of chair by telephone stand, pockets containing an assortment of loose change, a comb, a handkerchief and a harmonica. **ACT THREE:** Freda's purse on telephone stand, duffel bag for Sam (containing clothes, shoes, etc., and a small cardboard folder containing a photograph).

**MARY ELLEN:** Bunch of garden flowers wrapped in newspaper.

**JESSIE:** Slip of paper, hat and gloves.

**SUSAN:** Vase of flowers.

**FREDA:** Dress on a hanger, Mrs. Potter's cake plate, safety pin attached to pocket of her dress, cup of coffee, cream and sugar, coat and hat.

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GRACE: Gloves, handbag containing class ring, engagement ring on left hand.

WALTER: Large cake on a plate.

THE BOY: Duffel bag, handkerchief, piece of cake on plate.

SAM: Several bills.

MRS. FITCH: Purse.

NETTIE: Handbag with smaller purse inside, containing some bills.

### PRODUCTION NOTE

Nothing adds more to the polish of a production than the quick picking up of cues. Unless there is a definite reason for a pause, train your actors to come in with their speeches "on the heels," so to speak, of the preceding speeches. When a production lags, audience interest likewise will lag.

It is always advisable during the last week of rehearsals to hold one or more sessions during which the actors merely sit around in a circle and go through lines only, with the express purpose of snapping up cues.

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# ACT ONE

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SCENE: *The living room of a too-neat middle-class home in the small town of Oakmont. An archway U C leads into a small entry hall and the front door. There are stairs U L to the second floor of the home, while a door (or smaller archway) D R opens into the dining room and kitchen. To the right of the archway is a large window. At R C, facing the audience, is a sofa, with a small coffee table in front of it. There is a large comfortable easy chair D L, and an end table right of it. Just below the stairs is a telephone stand. In front of the stand is a small chair. To the right of the stairs, against the upstage wall, is a whatnot containing, among a varied assortment of knickknacks, a large framed portrait of a boy in uniform. On the wall downstage of the entrance D R is a wall mirror, with several notches along the frame at one side. The U R corner of the room contains a sewing machine and chair, a dressmaker's form, and other tools of the dressmaker's trade. This corner is usually concealed by a folding screen although the screen is not in sight when the play begins. Lamps, rugs and other furnishings can be added to complete the setting.]*

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: *It is a Saturday afternoon of a day in late summer. JESSIE BENSON, pretty, age sixteen, is at R stage, going over the floor with a carpet sweeper. Her two girl friends, SUSAN and MARY ELLEN, are looking at the large framed portrait of a boy in an Army uniform. MARY ELLEN, standing by the whatnot, has a bunch of garden flowers done up in newspaper.]*

SUSAN [*who has taken picture from shelf*]. It's funny. I must've seen that picture a million times. I never noticed how serious he looks.

MARY ELLEN. That's because it was taken in a studio. Everyone looks serious in a studio photograph.

SUSAN [*agreeing*]. And sort of nervous. . . . I wonder if it's because it costs so darn much.

MARY ELLEN. Just partly.

SUSAN [*replacing picture*]. I'm dying to see what he's like now. Jessie, you know the only thing I remember about your brother? [*Comes C as MARY ELLEN moves L C.*]

JESSIE [*not paying much attention to all this*]. What?

SUSAN. When he used to work at Marty's Gas Station he was the only one who let us take Coke bottles away from the machine. [*Pause.*] I wonder if he'll remember that.

MARY ELLEN [*rather scornfully*]. I'm sure he's thought of nothing else for three long years. [*Moves D L and perches on right arm of easy chair.*]

SUSAN [*building this up with much excitement*]. Three years! . . . What d'you suppose he'll be like? After all he's been through—I mean, just imagine . . .

MARY ELLEN. You sound as if he were a freak or something. Lots of fellows have been in the Army. Why should Larry Benson be any different?

SUSAN. After he was missing in action for three years? [*Moves toward her.*] Listen, anyone who's spent three years in foreign prison camps—

JESSIE [*suddenly*]. We don't know that!

SUSAN [*after a pause, quietly*]. I'm sorry.

JESSIE [*a very calm voice*]. I just mean—we don't know whether he was in a prison camp, or what. [*Turns away, resumes her sweeping.*]

MARY ELLEN [*to SUSAN*]. He might have lived in some native village, you know.

SUSAN. That's true.

MARY ELLEN. Got taken into some family. . . . I can sort of imagine a thing like that.

SUSAN [*giving her a withering look*]. After seeing it in the movies a million times, you can imagine it.

MARY ELLEN [*firmly*]. Well, it happened.

SUSAN [*scornfully*]. I suppose he could have married some half-caste girl, too.

MARY ELLEN. Maybe.

SUSAN [*suddenly serious, moving toward sofa*]. My gosh, you don't suppose he actually——

MARY ELLEN. Don't get any ideas, Susan. He's too old for you.

SUSAN [*loftily*]. Twenty-one isn't so old. I've dated a fellow who goes to college.

MARY ELLEN. This won't be any college boy type. Not after what he's been through.

SUSAN [*moving back to whatnot*]. You just said he'd be like everyone else.

MARY ELLEN. Well—naturally he'll be more mature.

SUSAN [*picking up picture again*]. Do you think he looks like Jessie?

MARY ELLEN. Well—in a way——

JESSIE [*this finally gets her attention, crossing up to SUSAN*]. What?

SUSAN [*glancing from picture to JESSIE*]. I'm trying to decide if your brother looks like you. [*Now MARY ELLEN rises and joins others.*]

JESSIE. Mother says when we were babies we didn't look a bit alike.

SUSAN [*again looking from JESSIE to picture*]. Look—if you cover the mouth and chin—— [*Holds a hand over part of photograph.*]

MARY ELLEN [*seeing it, too*]. No, it's the forehead! Like this! [*Puts a hand over part of picture.*]

SUSAN [*as they both stare at what's left*]. They do look alike. Except for the eyes. [*During a slight pause at this, JESSIE looks rather puzzled. Now SUSAN puts picture back on shelf.*] Jessie, you hardly seem a bit excited.

JESSIE. It doesn't seem real.

MARY ELLEN. Why not?

JESSIE. I don't know. . . . Mother kept saying he'd be back. She cleaned his room every week for three whole years. And she kept up his subscription to some magazine about cars—saying he'd want to have all the back issues.

SUSAN. Wish my mother were like that. I went to camp for two weeks and she threw out my whole collection of movie magazines.

JESSIE [*continuing her own train of thought, moving down in front of sofa*]. What seemed queer to me, I don't think she really believed he'd be back.

MARY ELLEN [*as she and SUSAN come C*]. Jessie, what kind of—I mean, what was Larry missing in?

JESSIE. It was a police action.

MARY ELLEN [*doubtfully*]. Oh . . .

JESSIE [*sbrugging*]. I don't know very much about it. Something's a police action when they don't want to call it a war.

SUSAN. You know what my theory is? Everybody's pretty careful about a war, but they've got to have some way to keep fighting— [*Getting a skeptical glance from MARY ELLEN.*] Well, I've thought a lot about this.

MARY ELLEN. I'm surprised that a person who nearly had to repeat History II should have such a brilliant theory.

JESSIE [*moving R, picking up her sweeper again*]. Oh, for goodness' sake, it doesn't make any difference. I don't care what kind of a fight it was, as long as my brother's coming home. [*Moves over toward L stage, sweeping.*]

SUSAN. I don't blame you. Imagine having an older brother

. . .  
JESSIE. Well, you've got two of them.

[*FREDA, Jessie's mother, enters D R on this last, unnoticed by the girls. She is carrying a dress on a hanger and puts it on the rack next to her sewing machine U R. She takes a small pair of scissors from the machine, and snips a loose thread or two.*]

SUSAN [*on spoken cue, "—two of them"*]. I said older brother. Mine are ages eight and eleven. From my standpoint, no use at all.

JESSIE. That's a fine thing to say—

SUSAN. Ha! You don't know what it's like, living in the house with that Gregory—he's just like an *animal*.

JESSIE. Susan!

SUSAN. I'm not exaggerating. This morning he got into my room with a bag of potato chips—[*Shudders at thought.*]—and *ugh!* I mean, you can't just blame a thing like that on reading the wrong kind of comic books. Honestly, if Gregory's ever missing in action it'll be *my* action.

FREDA [*moving in front of sofa*]. Jessie . . . [SUSAN stops suddenly, much embarrassed.]

JESSIE. Yes, Mom?

MARY ELLEN [*crossing, offering flowers*]. My mother sent these over for the house, Mrs. Benson.

FREDA. Well, they're lovely.

MARY ELLEN. They're the last of the garden this year.

FREDA [*accepting the last of the garden*]. Tell her I appreciate it very much.

SUSAN. I was just kidding about my brother Gregory. I mean, it must've sounded terrible.

FREDA [*puzzled; she hadn't listened to them; putting flowers on coffee table*]. Hm? [*Then thinking of a safe general comment.*] Well, you girls make yourselves at home. [*Then to JESSIE.*] Jessie, did you deliver that suit to Mrs. Baines?

JESSIE. Suit?

FREDA. You couldn't have forgotten. Remember, I gave it to you this morning.

JESSIE [*leaning on handle of sweeper*]. Let me think.

FREDA. Mrs. Baines wanted it by noon.

JESSIE. Oh—that horrible maroon thing you had to fix up. I mean, remodeled.

FREDA [*trying to keep impatience out of her voice*]. Yes, but did you—

JESSIE. I delivered it. [*Second thought.*] Yes, I'm positive. [*Continues sweeping.*]

FREDA. Well, thank goodness! [*Pause.*]

MARY ELLEN [*rather formally*]. We're awfully pleased about Larry's coming back, Mrs. Benson.

FREDA. Thank you, Mary Ellen. [*Turns and moves back to sewing machine, continues to snip threads from dress.*]

SUSAN. Everybody in town says they just can't believe it! I mean, they're so excited. [*Crosses up to her.*] Mr. Foss was



awfully disappointed when you didn't want him to fix up a parade. He said Larry ought to have a real hero's welcome.

FREDA [*disturbed*]. I think Larry'd rather not—

MARY ELLEN [*who has joined SUSAN U R*]. Mr. Foss and his parades. The town band can hardly play when they're all sitting down, let alone marching down the street.

SUSAN. A lot of people will be out there, though. They're going to give him quite a welcome.

FREDA [*quietly*]. Lots of folks knew Larry. They'll be wanting to see him. [*To JESSIE.*] Jessie, did Mrs. Baines give you a check?

JESSIE. Huh? [*Pauses in her sweeping.*]

FREDA. For the suit. Didn't she pay you?

JESSIE. How can you think about business at a time like this! No, she didn't.

FREDA. That's funny. She usually—

JESSIE. She couldn't. I didn't know how much to charge.

FREDA [*crossing toward JESSIE*]. I wrote it down for you, dear.

JESSIE. You did?

FREDA. Yes, I did—and you put it in your pocket. [*Reaches into pocket of JESSIE's blouse.*]

JESSIE [*as FREDA does this*]. I'm positive I didn't—

FREDA [*holding up slip of paper, smiling*]. That pocket.

JESSIE [*ruefully*]. I guess I did.

MARY ELLEN. Jessie, what happened to the memory course they advertised in the magazine—"Your Memory Can Be Your Salvation"—weren't you going to take it?

JESSIE. What course? I don't remember that. . . . [*As MARY ELLEN rolls her eyes at that, she turns penitently to FREDA.*]  
Shall I go back to Mrs. Baines?

FREDA. Not now. Larry'll be here soon.

JESSIE [*her excitement coming through*]. When—exactly?

FREDA. I can't say, right to the minute. He's got a ride with some other boy who's coming home this way. [*Moves toward the sofa.*] But it shouldn't be long.

JESSIE. My gosh—it could be any time.

FREDA. Might be a couple hours yet.

JESSIE. I'm not even dressed! [*She is showing excitement now. She starts toward stairs, then pauses on landing and looks over at sewing apparatus in U R corner.*] Mom, do we have to have that stuff sitting there?

FREDA. I'll be putting up the folding screen.

JESSIE. Well, let's *do* it—it looks so awful! Where's the screen?

FREDA. In the hall. You might—— [*JESSIE dashes out to hall U C and reappears almost immediately with a folding screen. She moves U R with it. MARY ELLEN and SUSAN take it and set it up so that it conceals corner with sewing machine. JESSIE, meanwhile, moves distractedly to sofa.*]

JESSIE. You just never notice how a room looks until you have company.

FREDA [*standing left of sofa*]. Now, Jessie——

JESSIE [*noticing old and battered cushion on sofa*]. Good grief, what's *this*? [*Holds it up by two fingers. FREDA crosses to JESSIE and says nothing, but takes cushion from her and holds it.*] Mom, I said what is that horrible thing——

FREDA. Took me a long time to find it, this morning.

JESSIE. What?

FREDA [*almost tenderly*]. Larry's cushion.

JESSIE. But it's a . . . [*She is suddenly quieted by her mother's manner.*]

FREDA. Doesn't look fit for anything—but Larry wouldn't let me throw it out. Said it felt just right under his head, when he used to stretch out on the sofa. Once I tried to burn it in the trash. But he fooled me. Stuck it under there where I wouldn't see it. . . . [*Puts cushion under one of larger sofa cushions.*] And there it stayed.

JESSIE. Of all the crazy things.

FREDA. He's probably forgot about it by now—but I'm going to leave it there. [*There is sound of a car approaching off-stage.*]

JESSIE. Listen! [*She dashes to window; a car passes by.*] Thank goodness—it wasn't! [*Gasps.*]

FREDA. What's the matter?

JESSIE. I'll bet I left bobby pins all over the bathroom

sink. [*Dashes to stairs.*] Larry used to go wild . . .  
[*Dashes upstairs.*]

FREDA [*as MARY ELLEN and SUSAN come in front of sofa.*].

Thank you for putting up the screen, girls.

MARY ELLEN. Shall I find a vase for those? [*Indicating flowers on coffee table.*]

FREDA. That'd be a help. [*Telephone rings as MARY ELLEN picks up flowers.*] There's a big one on the top shelf of the pantry.

SUSAN. We'll find it. [*She and MARY ELLEN go out D R. FREDA starts for telephone.*]

[*JESSIE dashes down the stairs.*]

JESSIE. Wait—I'll get it! [*Into telephone.*] Hello? . . . Just a sec. [*To FREDA.*] For you, Mom.

FREDA. Hope it isn't Nettie Clark, wanting her two-piece at a time like this. . . .

JESSIE. Doesn't sound like her.

FREDA [*into telephone*]. Yes? . . . [*In a shocked tone.*]

Grace! . . . No, excuse me, dear. It's just that I haven't heard your voice for a long time. . . .

JESSIE [*mouths words intently*]. Grace Wilkey? [*FREDA nods affirmatively. JESSE listens intently.*]

FREDA [*into telephone*]. Yes, he's coming home—I meant to call you myself, but I knew you'd heard. . . .

[*SUSAN and MARY ELLEN re-enter D R, empty-handed.*]

FREDA [*into telephone*]. What do you mean—you'll be here, won't you? . . . [*SUSAN and MARY ELLEN pause D R.*]

JESSIE [*to girls, motioning them to silence*]. Sh—it's Grace Wilkey. [*Comes down behind sofa.*]

SUSAN. What's she calling your mom for?

JESSIE. She was Larry's girl.

FREDA [*into telephone*]. No—I don't understand. . . .

MARY ELLEN. Larry's girl—but she's engaged to Bud Merkel.

JESSIE. I know. . . .

FREDA [*into telephone*]. I just thought he'd expect to see you when he comes, Grace. . . . Now don't get upset. Please.

. . . I don't know what to say. You do what seems best. I just think he'd wonder what happened. . . . [*Grace has evidently hung up.* FREDa *puts down telephone.*] She feels pretty bad about it.

SUSAN. Who wouldn't?

MARY ELLEN. Was she engaged to Larry?

JESSIE. Just about.

MARY ELLEN. And marrying Bud Merkel next week.

FREDa [*coming slowly down to L C*]. Three years is a long time for a girl to wait. I think she ought to be here when he comes home—that's all—anybody that was close to him. . . .

SUSAN [*after a pause*]. We found a white vase and a plain glass one, Mrs. Benson—

FREDa [*preoccupied*]. What?

SUSAN. You know, the flowers.

FREDa. I think the plain glass one looks best. [*SUSAN and MARY ELLEN turn and go out D R again.*]

JESSIE [*a serious tone*]. Mom. Is Larry all right?

FREDa [*startled by suddenness of question*]. What do you mean?

JESSIE [*coming C*]. You've been acting sort of funny. I just wondered—what was he like when you talked to him on the phone?

FREDa [*moving to chair D L*]. I told you, dear. It wasn't a very good connection.

JESSIE. I mean did he sound—weak?

FREDa. No. He sounded fine. [*Sits D L, but avoids looking at JESSIE.*]

JESSIE. I guess I'm just imagining. . . . Mom, what do you think he'll look like? I'll bet he's grown. Do you think he has?

FREDa. Maybe.

JESSIE. He was only eighteen and a half when he left. [*She has gone over to old wall mirror D R during this, one on which notches have been cut to measure the growth of children in the family.*] Look—he was up to here. [*Indi-*

*cates a notch on mirror.*] Boys grow until they're twenty-one, don't they?

FREDA. Some do.

JESSIE [*finding another notch on mirror*]. Was this the last time you measured *me*? [*Stands up against it.*] Wow, what a shrimp!

FREDA. That was a couple of years ago.

JESSIE [*leaving mirror, coming c again*]. I've been thinking, Mom. I mean about what to say to him and all. I'm not going to ask him about anything. That's what I've decided—about his being missing in action, or what it was like or anything. I think that's the best policy, don't you?

FREDA. Probably so. [*Rises and moves to window, looking out, as JESSIE continues.*]

JESSIE. If he wants to tell me anything, I'm just going to nod. [*Pressing her mother for a response.*] I was wondering, do you think maybe if he started to talk about it I should even change the subject?

FREDA. I wouldn't worry about that now.

JESSIE. What do you suppose those Army hospitals are like? I'll bet they're—well, you know—depressing.

FREDA. I don't know if they are.

JESSIE [*convinced that all is not well, moving directly to her*]. What's the matter, Mom?

FREDA. Nothing.

JESSIE. You *are* acting funny. All afternoon. You were singing this morning, when you were making breakfast. Aren't you happy?

FREDA. Of course I'm happy, dear. You'd better go up and change into something. People may start dropping in pretty soon.

JESSIE. I've been wondering what dress—is it better to wear something simple and everyday, or go all out—I can't decide. . . . [*Starts toward stairs.*]

FREDA [*turning away from window, blurting this out suddenly*]. Your father is coming here. [*JESSIE stops, shocked. She turns and looks at her mother.*]

JESSIE [*low, flat tone*]. What did you say?

FREDA. Your father. He called me a couple of hours ago. I haven't spoken to him in one year, and he called me on the telephone.

JESSIE [*coming toward her*]. I knew something had—

FREDA [*interrupting her*]. He wants to be here when Larry comes. I couldn't say no. It's his right. [*Pause.*] Jessie—he didn't even ask me how I was. . . .

JESSIE [*louder now*]. Well, why—should he come here? He could see Larry some other time—some place else. Why should he come *here*?

FREDA. Jessie. . . .

JESSIE. I don't understand. This was all going to be so wonderful. I've had butterflies in my stomach for three days—

FREDA [*moving past her, to C*]. He's Larry's father.

JESSIE [*following her*]. He's my father, too—and I don't even know him to say hello to him any more.

FREDA [*putting her hand to her lips*]. Don't say that. [*Turns away.*]

JESSIE. Mom! It was going to be fun tonight—Larry's coming home. A few months ago we thought he was dead, and now he's coming home—and it was just getting so I dared believe the whole thing. . . . This is no time for strangers.

FREDA [*reprovingly*]. Jessie. . . .

JESSIE. I don't know what to say to him.

MARY ELLEN [*offstage D R*]. Look out—you're spilling all over the place.

SUSAN [*offstage D R*]. I told you not to put so much water in it.

FREDA [*quickly*]. I can't give you the words, Jessie. They'll come. Go upstairs and get ready. [*Urges her toward stairs. JESSIE hesitates a moment, then goes upstairs quickly.*]

[*SUSAN and MARY ELLEN enter D R. SUSAN carries a vase with the flowers.*]

SUSAN. I'm sorry we didn't do a better job, Mrs. Benson. We tried putting them in one by one, like you're supposed to. [*Comes in front of sofa with MARY ELLEN.*]