

A SONG IS BORN

A Stage Play in One Act

Based on the 1948 Samuel Goldwyn Motion Picture

Directed by Howard Hawks

From a story by Billy Wilder and Thomas Monroe

Written for the Stage by

Daniel Pettus

Running Time: Approximately 1 Hour 45 Minutes

One Act – No Intermission

Live Jazz Ensemble Throughout

*A musical comedy in the tradition of
jazz, swing, boogie woogie, blues, and the human heart.*

Revision 6 – April 13, 2026

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PROFESSOR HOBART FRISBEE

Director of the Totten Foundation. Folk music expert, early forties. Mild-mannered, bookish, sincere, and entirely unprepared for the world outside his library.

HONEY SWANSON

A nightclub singer. Late twenties. Beautiful, streetwise, and carrying more guilt than she lets on.

MISS EMMELINE TOTTEN

The Foundation's wealthy patron. Proper, imperious, and secretly devoted to Hobart.

MISS BRAGG

The Foundation's housekeeper. Severe, rigid, and the last moral authority in any room she enters.

TONY CROW

A gangster. Charming, dangerous, and accustomed to getting what he wants.

PROFESSOR ODDLY

Senior musicologist. Jovial, round, perpetually eating.

PROFESSOR TWEED

Musicologist. Wiry, anxious. Speaks in unfinished sentences.

PROFESSOR GENCH

Musicologist. The group's designated pessimist and, paradoxically, its moral anchor.

PROFESSOR MAGENBRUCH

Musicologist. Profoundly hard of hearing. Uses an ear trumpet.
Never misses what matters.

PROFESSOR ELKON

Musicologist. The youngest. Considers himself daring.
Occasionally correct.

PROFESSOR SIGGY

Musicologist. Austrian accent. Theatrical disposition.
Pressed-flower sentimentality beneath it.

MR. WARREN

Miss Totten's attorney. Humorless, efficient, and correct about
everything he wishes he weren't.

JOE

Tony's henchman. Large. Slow. A blunt instrument in a good
suit.

MONTE

Tony's other henchman. Weaselly and watchful.

FELIX

A window washer. Musical, quick, irrepressible. Carries a
notebook of club addresses at all times.

JEROME

Felix's partner. Steadier, funnier in the way steady people are
funny.

JUSTICE OF THE PEACE DINGLE

Ancient. Profoundly hard of hearing. Entirely at peace with
whatever chaos surrounds him.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY HARRIS

Determined. Not easily fooled. Slightly too late to everything.

THE MUSICIANS

A jazz ensemble – present throughout. They are never mere background. They are a chorus, a conscience, a punctuation mark.

SETTING

New York City and its surroundings, 1948.

The stage is dominated by the TOTTEN FOUNDATION OF MUSIC – a grand, overstuffed brownstone research library on the Upper West Side. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. A massive oak table at center, buried under nine years of paper. Musical instruments are propped in every corner: a tuba here, a violin case there, a forgotten French horn on top of a dictionary, and – perched high on a shelf above the entrance, balanced with the precariousness of history – a very large bass drum that has been there so long it is considered part of the architecture.

Tall arched windows upstage. A piano stage left, un-played for years. A staircase leading to the upper rooms. Side doors leading to a guest room, a kitchen corridor, and the front entry.

The set transforms minimally and fluidly to suggest other locations. A jazz nightclub occupies the downstage left area when lit differently. The road is suggested by a shift in light and four chairs arranged as a car. The inn near Kingston is suggested by a wooden sign and repositioned furniture. The play never fully leaves the Foundation. It is the world's center of gravity.

A NOTE ON THE MUSICIANS & TIME

The band is onstage throughout. They are a living presence – not accompaniment but active participants. They respond to the action. When the play is funny, they swing. When it aches, they slow. The musical vocabulary includes boogie woogie, blues, Dixieland,

swing, jump, and bebop, building to a full ensemble performance of 'Flying Home' (Hampton/Goodman, 1939) in the climax, and a warm reprise in the finale. The musicians should be introduced to the audience as themselves in the program.

This play moves. The scenes flow into one another with the propulsive logic of a jazz performance – theme, variation, development, resolution. There are no blackouts between scenes, only transitions of light and music. The play does not stop until it is finished.

SCENE ONE: THE TOTTEN FOUNDATION — MORNING

Lights rise slowly on the TOTTEN FOUNDATION. Morning. Dust motes in the light. The MUSICIANS are already present in their corner, instruments at rest but ready, watching the room with the patient intelligence of people who understand that everything eventually becomes music.

Seven professors occupy the research table in various attitudes of scholarly exhaustion. PROFESSOR ODDLY eats a sandwich. PROFESSOR TWEED paces in a small, anxious circuit. PROFESSOR GENCH stares at the ceiling. PROFESSOR MAGENBRUCH has his ear trumpet aimed at the window. PROFESSOR ELKON sharpens pencils. PROFESSOR SIGGY stands at the window with his hand pressed to his chest as though preventing his heart from escaping. At the head of the table, surrounded by the highest mountain of papers, PROFESSOR HOBART FRISBEE writes with ferocious concentration, his glasses at the very end of his nose.

This is nine years. It looks like nine years.

ODDLY

(between bites)

Hobart. Stephen Foster.
Beautiful Dreamer. Year?

HOBART

(not looking up)

1864. Published posthumously.

ODDLY

Waltz?

HOBART

Three-four time. Parlor song. Please, Oddly.

Silence. Pencils scratch.

GENCH

(to no one in particular)

Nine years.

TWEED

I'm sorry?

GENCH

Nine years at this table.

Nine years of my life.

Do you know what I might have accomplished in nine years?

ELKON

A different encyclopedia?

GENCH

(considers this)

– That's almost certainly it.

SIGGY

(turning dramatically from the window)

Do you hear that, gentlemen?

Silence.

TWEED

I don't –

SIGGY

Precisely. The silence of great minds at work. It is almost music in itself.

MAGENBRUCH

(loudly, having heard nothing)

What? Is someone talking about a recital?

EVERYONE

No, Magenbruch.

MAGENBRUCH

Pity.

The door opens. MISS BRAGG enters with a tea tray, moving with the authority of someone who views domestic service as a form of moral enforcement.

MISS BRAGG

Tea.

(Sets it down. The clatter makes everyone flinch.)

I'll also remind you that Miss Totten arrives at eleven with her attorney, and I expect this room to look less like a paper mill after a tornado.

HOBART

Thank you, Miss Bragg.

MISS BRAGG

(noticing)

Professor Oddly. Is that a sandwich?

ODDLY

It's quite small –

MISS BRAGG

This is a research library. Not a delicatessen.

She exits. A beat.

GENCH

She's right about Miss Totten, you know.

Something's wrong. You don't bring a lawyer to say everything's fine.

HOBART

(still writing)

I'm sure it's a routine visit.

GENCH

(producing a crumpled invoice from his coat)

Has she seen last spring's expenditures?

The room goes quiet. The other professors become very interested in their papers.

HOBART

(slowly putting down his pen)

What expenditures from last spring?

SIGGY

Supplemental research materials.

TWEED

Instruments, strictly for- for-

ODDLY

The tuba was academic.

HOBART

We already have a tuba.

ODDLY

A baritone tuba. This was a contrabass. Entirely different animal.

Hobart takes the invoice. Reads it. His eyebrows rise with the slow inevitability of bread.

HOBART

Gentlemen. This is more than our entire previous year's allocation.

GENCH

I know.

HOBART

When Miss Totten arrives –
I do the talking.
All of you look scholarly.
Look nearly finished.

GENCH

We're not nearly –

HOBART

Look like it.

The MUSICIANS play a low, ominous little phrase. The professors return to their work.

SCENE TWO: THE FOUNDATION – LATER THAT MORNING

The lights shift only slightly – it is still the Foundation, but time has moved. The table has been incompetently tidied. MISS TOTTEN sweeps in with MR. WARREN at her heel. She is sixty, impeccably dressed, and carries herself like someone who has never needed a second opinion. She scans the room, and her gaze lands on Hobart.

MISS TOTTEN

Hobart.

HOBART

(standing, toppling one stack of papers)

Miss Totten! What a pleasure. You look, that is, welcome. Welcome to the Foundation.

MISS TOTTEN

(warmly)

You say that every time, dear.

WARREN

(opening his briefcase)

Shall we come to the matter at hand—

MISS TOTTEN

We shall come to nothing until everyone is seated, Mr. Warren. Sit down, please.

They sit. Warren lays out documents with the efficiency of a man delivering a verdict.

WARREN

Professor Frisbee.

The original grant was intended to produce a completed encyclopedia within five years.

You are in year nine.

Our accountants project the work will be completed—

(checking notes)

never.

GENCH

(under his breath)

There it is.

WARREN

Miss Totten is therefore considering withdrawing her sponsorship entirely and redirecting her resources toward the Totten Memorial Concert Hall.

The professors look stricken. Oddly's sandwich lowers.

HOBART

(carefully)

Miss Totten.

I won't pretend the project hasn't taken longer than we anticipated.

Music is an inconsiderate subject — every time we believe we've catalogued the whole of it, it produces something entirely new.

(He stands.)

But consider what we have here.

Seven specialists. Nine years of primary research.
A document that will serve musicologists,
historians, and students for a hundred years.
What is the cost of a century of knowledge, Mr.
Warren?

WARREN

I can tell you exactly –

MISS TOTTEN

Mr. Warren. Hush.

Warren closes his mouth.

Miss Totten looks at Hobart for a long moment.

MISS TOTTEN

I want a full progress report. Documented. End of
the month.

And Hobart...

your chapter on American folk music is the one I'm
most eager to read.

See that it's complete.

HOBART

You have my word.

*She extends her hand. He shakes it. She holds it a beat longer than
necessary. The other professors observe this with undisguised
calculation.*

MISS TOTTEN

Don't disappoint me.

She sweeps out. Warren follows with a sharp click of his briefcase.

The professors exhale as one.

ELKON

She was always going to stay. She's mad about him.

HOBART

She was responding to a scholarly argument.

GENCH

She held your hand for six seconds. I counted.

HOBART

I was not aware you were—

GENCH

I had nothing else to do.

Hobart sits, adjusts his glasses, and returns to his work with great dignity. The others smile behind his back.

The MUSICIANS play a brief, amused little figure, the sort of music that has known something before you do.

SCENE THREE: THE FOUNDATION – AFTERNOON

Work continues. The clock on the wall says three. The professors have resettled into the specific silence of people who are not speaking and know exactly what the others are not saying.

A knock at the upstage window. Everyone looks up. Two men are outside on the ledge, squeegees in hand, faces pressed to the glass. FELIX and JEROME - window washers, approximately twenty-five, possessed of the easy confidence of men who have never once felt unwelcome anywhere.

ELKON opens the window. Felix climbs in with the ease of someone who has never considered that he might not be welcome anywhere.

FELIX

Morning, professors! Sorry to bother the big brains.
You're the music people, right?

HOBART

We are musicologists, yes.

FELIX

See, we got a situation.
Radio quiz show next week. Music category.
We know the classical side cold – been studying–
but when it gets to boogie woogie, swing, jive,
jump, blues, two-beat Dixie, rebop –

The professors look up one by one. It is the look of men who have just heard their subject speak.

HOBART

I'm sorry. Rebop?

JEROME

(climbing in after Felix)

Some call it bebop. Depending on who you ask.

HOBART

I don't believe we have a current entry on -boogie woogie?

ODDLY

There's a footnote in the appendix -

FELIX

A footnote. (to Jerome) A footnote.

He crosses to the upright piano in the corner, dusty, untouched for years, sits, cracks his knuckles, settles his weight, and plays.

What comes out is a BOOGIE WOOGIE - rolling, thunderous, joyful, filling the room like sunlight through a door that's been shut too long. The left hand churns beneath the right like the engine of something that never stops.

The professors freeze.

Then, one by one, something shifts in their faces. Oddly sets down his sandwich. Magenbruch removes his ear trumpet and simply listens, his expression transformed. Siggy grips the back of his chair. Gench, for the first time in the play, does not look like a man awaiting disaster.

Hobart stands very still. Then, carefully, he picks up his notebook and begins to write.

HOBART

(barely audible, writing rapidly)

Rolling bass... left hand... cross-rhythmic...
syncopated... Lord.

Felix transitions into TWELVE-BAR BLUES, then a TWO-BEAT DIXIELAND stomp. Jerome demonstrates rhythmic patterns, calling out names and origins.

JEROME

This is Dixie – two-beat, born in New Orleans.

(Clap pattern shifts.)

Chicago style.

(Faster, asymmetric.)

And right here – this is rebop. Bebop.

Born in Harlem, some say Kansas City first, but it
flowered in Harlem.

HOBART

(writing furiously)

Harlem – Kansas City roots – what clubs –

FELIX

You want names?

HOBART

I want everything.

FELIX

(grinning at Jerome)

I think we just got an A on our quiz.

The MUSICIANS in their corner begin to join, first a bass, then a muted trumpet, then the full ensemble. The music swells and fills every corner of the room.

The professors are on their feet, not dancing exactly, but unable to remain entirely still. Their bodies are discovering something their books never told them.

Hobart stands in the center of it all, notebook in hand, spectacles askew, looking like a man who has just learned that his subject has been alive all along and he simply hasn't been listening in the right places.

The music builds, crests – and then:

Felix stops. The professors come back to themselves.

HOBART

(breathless)

I need to make some calls.

(He looks around at his colleagues.)

Gentlemen – our folk music section is outdated.

Not slightly outdated.

Fundamentally, profoundly, embarrassingly outdated.

I am going out tonight to correct that.

GENCH

Out? Out where?

HOBART

To the clubs. The real ones.

(To Felix and Jerome)

Will you give me a list?

FELIX

(already pulling a notepad from his pocket)

Been waiting for you to ask.

Felix writes quickly. Jerome looks around the room, at all the instruments, the years of careful paper.

JEROME

(quietly, to Felix)

These fellas are serious.

FELIX

(equally quietly)

That's exactly why they need us.

Felix tears out the page and hands it to Hobart. A moment passes between them, the window washers and the musicologist, that is, in its small way, the beginning of something.

SCENE FOUR: A JAZZ NIGHTCLUB – THAT NIGHT

The lights shift. The downstage left area blooms into amber, we are now in a JAZZ NIGHTCLUB. Small tables, low light, the kind of dark that is also warm. The MUSICIANS have reconfigured – they are now the house band. The bass player nods at the pianist. The pianist nods at the room. The room is ready.

HOBART enters in his coat and tie, notebook under his arm, looking like a man who has wandered into the Amazon while searching for the periodicals room. He checks the address Felix gave him. Looks up. Checks again. A WAITER materializes.

WAITER

Help you, pal?

HOBART

Yes. I'm a musicologist.

WAITER

Terrific. Table?

HOBART

Near the bandstand, please.

He sits. Opens his notebook. Uncaps his pen. Listens with the focused intensity of a man at an extremely important lecture.

The MUSICIANS play - cool, after-hours blues. And then HONEY SWANSON walks to the microphone.

She is wearing a dress the color of midnight. She moves as though she has never in her life been in a hurry. She nods to the pianist,

a gesture so small and so certain it tells you everything. And she sings.

The song is slow and searching, a blues about wanting something you can't name and losing something you didn't know you had. It is the kind of song that finds something in you that you thought you'd put away.

HOBART stops writing. His pen rests on the page, poised, but nothing comes out. He watches.

When the song ends, TONY CROW materializes at Honey's elbow, impeccably dressed, proprietary, easy in the way of someone who has never had to ask for anything twice.

TONY

Beautiful, baby. As always.

HONEY

Thanks, Tony.

TONY

There are people waiting. In the back.

HONEY

Give me a minute –

TONY

(gently, unmistakably firm)

Now.

He steers her away. Honey glances back once, at the room, the stage, the open air of it, before disappearing into the shadow of the back tables.

Hobart looks at his notebook. He has written, without realizing it, one word: 'Beautiful.' He stares at it. Crosses it out. Writes: 'Blues vocal, emotional immediacy, West African tonal influence—'

He looks up again in the direction she went.

Later. The club is thinning. Hobart has been talking with the bandleader, his notebook now full. He approaches several musicians, extending invitations to the round-table discussion, hands shaken, names taken.

He is heading for the door, satisfied, when he nearly walks into HONEY at the bar.

HOBART

Oh — I beg your pardon, I —

HONEY

(looking at him with mild curiosity)

You've been here all night writing things down.

HOBART

Research.

My colleagues and I are compiling an encyclopedia, and I've discovered our section on popular music is rather...

(He trails off, looking at her fully for the first time up close.)

You sang tonight.

HONEY

I noticed.

HOBART

That note you bent in the second chorus –
the way you let it fall rather than resolve –
do you know that technique traces directly back to –

HONEY

(a small smile)

West African vocal tradition?

HOBART

You know music theory?

HONEY

I know music. Theory came later.

Beat. He looks at her. She holds his gaze without effort.

HOBART

I'm assembling a round-table discussion tomorrow
morning.

Jazz musicians, blues performers, swing artists.

I'd very much like you to –

HONEY

I appreciate the invitation, Professor, but I don't
think I'm what you need for a round table.

HOBART

On the contrary –

*Near the door, the DISTRICT ATTORNEY HARRIS enters with a
plain-clothes detective, scanning the room.*

*Honey clocks them instantly. Her expression does not change. Her
decision is immediate.*

HONEY

(quietly, taking Hobart's arm)

Actually, Professor. About that round table.

HOBART

Yes?

HONEY

Is the Foundation very far?

HOBART

Three blocks east –

HONEY

(already steering him toward the side exit)

Let's go.

HOBART

(moving with her, bewildered)

Does this mean you're joining the research group?

HONEY

Sure, Professor. I'm a regular scholar.

They slip out. Behind them, HARRIS scans the bar, misses her by seconds.

HARRIS looks at his detective. The detective shrugs. Harris pulls out his notepad and writes something.

HARRIS

(to himself)

She'll surface. They always surface.

SCENE FIVE: THE FOUNDATION – LATE NIGHT

The light returns to the Foundation. Night. A single lamp. The big room quiet and enormous. The bass drum sits high on its shelf, perfectly still.

HONEY sits in an armchair. Her heels are off. She looks around at the books, the stacked manuscripts, the dusty piano, the tuba in the corner. HOBART makes tea with the earnest concentration of a man who does not make tea often.

HONEY

You live here?

HOBART

I have a room upstairs. We all do, more or less. It started as a convenience.

HONEY

And became a life?

HOBART

(considering this)

Yes. I suppose that's it exactly.

HONEY

Don't you have – people? Outside of this place?

HOBART

I have six colleagues who know more about harmonic theory than any living human beings. That's rather a lot.

Honey almost smiles.

Hobart brings the tea. It is, to his credit, tea.

HOBART

Are you going to tell me why we left in such a hurry?

HONEY

Does it matter?

HOBART

It matters to me.

She looks at him, the steady, measuring look of someone who doesn't quite trust sincerity when she meets it.

HONEY

I'm in some trouble.
Nothing that has to become your trouble.
I just need to be somewhere that isn't –
somewhere else.
For a little while.

HOBART

This is a research library. Being somewhere else is what we do best.

Honey laughs, quick, surprised, real. The kind of laugh that surprises the person laughing more than anyone.

HOBART

You could stay the night.
We have a guest room.
I'll explain to Miss Bragg in the –

HONEY

Please don't wake up Miss Bragg.

HOBART

(hastily)

No. No, absolutely not. In the morning. Everything
in the morning.

*He retrieves a blanket from a shelf, the kind that lives on
library shelves and has clearly been there since before anyone can
remember, and hands it to her.*

HOBART

Goodnight, Miss Swanson.

HONEY

Goodnight, Professor.

He starts toward the stairs. Stops.

HOBART

That note you bent – in the second chorus –
I need to ask you about that tomorrow.
Specifically the...

HONEY

Goodnight, Professor.

HOBART

Yes. Right. Goodnight.

He disappears upstairs. Honey sits in the lamplight alone.

A single saxophone – slow, searching, barely above a whisper.

Honey's face in the lamplight is complicated. Relief. Guilt. Something she hasn't named yet. She looks at the room around her, all those books, all those years of patient, careful knowledge, and for a moment she looks almost safe.

She looks at the high shelf. At the bass drum. It sits there, mute and enormous, keeping its own counsel.

She closes her eyes. The saxophone plays on.

SCENE SIX: THE FOUNDATION – THE NEXT MORNING

Morning. The Foundation has been transformed.

The round-table discussion is underway. MUSICIANS fill the room with jazz players, swing artists, blues guitarists and the professors are in full scholarly mode, notebooks flying. Felix and Jerome are there too, effectively hosting. Instruments are everywhere. Someone is playing the tuba. Someone else is demonstrating a handclap pattern on the oak table. The nine years of careful paper have been shoved aside with cheerful irreverence to make room for the present.

It is the most alive this room has ever been.

HONEY is present but near the edges, still in her evening dress, which she has covered with one of Miss Bragg's aprons, which is a profound statement about the night's passage.

MISS BRAGG watches from the doorway with the expression of someone witnessing the collapse of everything they hold dear.

At the piano: a musician demonstrates the evolution of jazz, from New Orleans Dixieland through Chicago style to the swing era to the first stirrings of bebop. The professors follow along, heads bent over notebooks, pencils moving. Magenbruch has abandoned his ear trumpet entirely and is leaning forward with an expression of pure transport.

FELIX

Now, Professor – you asked about the jump bands.

Illinois Jacquet. Lionel Hampton.

That's where 'Flying Home' comes from.

(to the musician at the piano)

Can you give him the head?

The musician plays the opening phrase of FLYING HOME. The professors react as if a door has blown open in a sealed room.

HOBART

(writing)

The melodic cell – call and response structure – the horn as voice –

JEROME

That's it exactly, Professor. The horn is always talking.

MAGENBRUCH

(leaning in)

The horn is always talking. (He writes this down with the reverence of a man receiving scripture.) I shall use that.

In the side room, HONEY slips away from the discussion. JOE and MONTE are there. Joe is large and still. Monte is watchful.

MONTE

(low)

Tony sent this.

He produces a small box. A diamond engagement ring – impressive, cold, expensive.

MONTE

He wants you wearing it. Makes the arrangement cleaner.

HONEY

(not touching it)

Cleaner than what?

JOE

Marry him, you don't testify. Simple math.

HONEY

Nothing about Tony is simple.

MONTE

He's very fond of you, Honey. In his way.

HONEY

I know his way.

MONTE

Then you know what the other option looks like.

Beat. Honey takes the box.

HONEY

Tell him I'll think about it.

MONTE

He'd prefer 'yes.'

HONEY

I'll bet he would.

Joe and Monte withdraw. Honey stands alone, holding the box.

She returns to the round table. She sets Tony's ring box on a shelf behind a stack of books, without looking at it again.

At the table, HOBART catches her eye and smiles, open, uncomplicated, without agenda.

Honey almost looks away. Doesn't.

SCENE SEVEN: THE FOUNDATION – THAT AFTERNOON

The round table winds down. Musicians drift out, shaking hands, accepting invitations for tomorrow. The professors are transcribing with the energy of men who have rediscovered their purpose.

HONEY is teaching the professors about jam sessions. Felix is at the piano. Jerome is demonstrating call-and-response. Two professors have acquired tambourines, which they are using with more enthusiasm than skill. The room is full of sound and laughter – real, unguarded laughter, the kind these walls haven't heard in nine years.

Hobart watches Honey in the center of it all – explaining, demonstrating, her face unguarded in a way it wasn't last night – and something in his face is very clear, very specific, and entirely without his permission.

He turns back to his notebook. Writes: 'Jam session – spontaneous collective improvisation – democracy in sound.'

He pauses. Then adds, very small, at the bottom of the page: 'She laughs with her whole face.'

He looks at what he's written. Closes the notebook.

MISS BRAGG enters and achieves a degree of rigidity usually associated with load-bearing architecture.

MISS BRAGG

She is still here.

HOBART

She is, yes –

MISS BRAGG

Professor Frisbee.

I have managed this household through two floods, a mice infestation, and Professor Siggy's opera period.

I have never threatened to resign.

SIGGY

(stung)

My opera period was enormously –

MISS BRAGG

I am threatening to resign.

This is a house of serious scholarship.

Not a – a –

(She gestures at Honey in a way that encompasses all of her.)

This person cannot stay.

HONEY

I can hear you.

MISS BRAGG

I intend for you to.

Everyone looks at Honey. Honey looks at Hobart.

She crosses to him with the slow deliberateness of someone playing the only card she has. She stops close – very close.

HONEY

(quietly)

Hobart. Close your eyes.

HOBART

Is this – is this a music –

HONEY

Close your eyes.

He does. She kisses him. A real kiss – long enough that the professors forget to breathe and Oddly's sandwich hits the floor.

When it ends, Hobart opens his eyes very slowly. His glasses have fogged.

HONEY

(softly)

That's what they call yum yum.

HOBART

(after a long pause)

...I'll need to look that up.

HONEY

(turning to Miss Bragg, calmly)

He asked me to stay.

Miss Bragg stares at Hobart.

HOBART

(with quiet, surprising firmness)

She stays, Miss Bragg.

Miss Bragg's jaw moves without producing sound. She turns and walks out with perfect posture.

ELKON

(whispering to Oddly)

He's never done that.

ODDLY

(whispering back)

Neither have I, and I'm starting to feel genuinely cheated.

SCENE EIGHT: THE RESEARCH ROOM – THAT EVENING

That evening. Hobart finds Honey alone in the research room, looking at the books with the expression of someone trying to understand a language from the shapes of its letters.

He is carrying a small wrapped box.

HOBART

I've been trying to think of how to say this in a way that doesn't sound – that is –

I'm aware that I'm not exactly the sort of man who –

He hands her the box. She opens it. Inside: a modest engagement ring. Slender gold band. An engraving on the interior.

HONEY

(reading quietly)

'For my most significant discovery.'

She is very still.

HOBART

I know it's abrupt.

I know I'm a professor who lives in a library and knows more about the parlor song than the world outside.

But I find that every time I try to return to the encyclopedia I'm writing about you instead, and the encyclopedia is rather important,

so I think the solution is—
Honey, will you marry me?

*A long moment. Honey holds the ring in her palm and looks at it.
Something moves across her face – real and frightened and wanting.*

Then the telephone rings.

They both look at it. It rings again.

HOBART

I should –

HONEY

Yeah.

Hobart answers.

HOBART

(into phone)

Totten Foundation. Yes. Who is – (listening) Yes,
she's – yes, sir, she's right here. (to Honey,
muffling the receiver) It's a man named – he says
he's Daddy?

Honey's face changes.

HONEY

(carefully)

I'll take it.

*Hobart hands over the receiver, smiling benevolently – the smile
of a man about to ask a father for his daughter's hand.*

Honey takes the phone, turns slightly away.

HONEY

(low, controlled)

Tony. Don't –

But Hobart, brimming with courtly intention, gently takes the phone back.

HOBART

Sir? This is Professor Hobart Frisbee.

I'm calling on behalf of –

well, I'm calling as the man who would very much like your blessing to marry your daughter.

I want you to know that I hold her in the highest –

Honey reaches for the phone. Hobart holds up a gentle finger – one moment.

On the other end of the line, TONY's voice is smooth, delighted.

TONY

(through the phone)

Well, Professor. What a wonderful surprise. As it happens, her mother is terribly ill. Might not last the week. I know Honey would want her mother to see the wedding. Why don't you all come to Rancocas, New Jersey – tonight if you can manage it. I'll arrange everything.

HOBART

(deeply moved)

Of course. Of course, we'll come. The whole party of us. (To Honey, hand over the receiver, eyes shining) He wants your mother to see the wedding. She's ill, Honey -- we must go tonight –

Honey looks at Hobart's open, guileless face. She takes the phone.

HONEY

(into the phone, very quiet)

You're enjoying this.

TONY

(through phone)

See you soon, sweetheart.

He hangs up. Honey holds the receiver for a moment.

HONEY

(to Hobart, slowly)

He wants us to drive out tonight.

HOBART

Of course! Your mother –

HONEY

(she stops herself – closes her eyes –opens them)

...We'll go. But I need a minute first.

She crosses to the window. Her back to him.

HOBART

Honey? Is everything –

HONEY

Give me a minute, Hobart. Please.

He waits. The MUSICIANS play, something low and uneasy, a bass note held long.

*Honey stares out the window at the city. In her closed fist:
Hobart's engagement ring. She is not wearing it.*

SCENE NINE: THE FOUNDATION – MINUTES LATER

Before they can leave: MISS BRAGG. She enters carrying a newspaper, her face white with righteous vindication.

MISS BRAGG

(reading aloud)

'Police seek nightclub singer Honey Swanson for questioning in connection with the activities of gangster Tony Crow, wanted for murder.'

'Miss Swanson is believed to be in the company of –'

(She lowers the paper.)

'Believed to be in the company of.'

Professor Frisbee.

I am calling the police.

She crosses toward the telephone. Honey moves faster – she gets there first, lifts the receiver, and begins speaking with calm authority before Miss Bragg can reach her.

HONEY

(into the phone, crisply)

Yes, operator? I need the police department, please
– this is urgent –

Miss Bragg stops. She stares.

MISS BRAGG

What are you –

HONEY

(covering the receiver, to Miss Bragg, in a low, urgent voice)

There's a man outside. I've seen him twice on this block. He's been watching the house.

The professors look at each other. Then at the window.

ODDLY

(alarmed, mouth full)

A man?

TWEED

Which side of the –

ELKON

Is he still –

MAGENBRUCH

(ear trumpet swiveling toward the window)

Did someone say there's a badger?

The professors converge on the window in a single body. Miss Bragg hesitates – years of household crisis management pulling at her before her certainty about Honey pulls back.

MISS BRAGG

This is a –

HONEY

(into the phone, louder)

Yes, I'm still here – an address? One moment –

(to the room, urgent)

Does anyone know the street number?

SIGGY

(instinctively)

Forty-seven west –

MISS BRAGG

(too late)

Don't answer that –

But the room is in motion. Gench has produced a notebook. Tweed is pointing at two different windows. Oddly has crossed to the front door and opened it, peering out with scholarly intensity. Elkon is behind him. The general flow of bodies is entirely toward the front of the house.

Honey – still holding the phone – catches Hobart's eye across the room.

A long beat. She doesn't look away. Neither does he.

He understands.

HOBART

(to the room, quietly, firmly)

Gentlemen. Bags.

There is a beat of confusion, then the professors move – not toward the window, but toward their coats and overnight bags, which are already packed.

MISS BRAGG

(realizing)

Professor Frisbee –

HOBART

Miss Bragg. The overnight bags are in the hall.

MISS BRAGG

I am not interested in the –

HOBART

They'll need to come in before dark. The forecast mentions rain.

He says this with complete sincerity. He has always asked this of her. Miss Bragg's reflexes betray her for exactly three seconds as she calculates whether the bags are actually at risk.

Three seconds is enough.

Honey sets down the receiver. The professors are already moving toward the door – a cheerful, chaotic tide of overnight bags and forgotten hats. Honey slips into their current, and the door opens, and they are gone.

Miss Bragg is left standing in the middle of the Foundation. Alone. The front door still swinging.

She looks at the telephone.

She crosses to it. Lifts the receiver.

MISS BRAGG

(into the phone, with absolute composure)

Yes. Police, please.

She looks at the empty room around her – the scattered papers, the abandoned sandwiches, the faint warmth of people who were just here.

MISS BRAGG

(quietly, to the room – to no one)

You have made a very significant error, young lady.

She waits for the operator. The MUSICIANS play a short, determined little march.

GENCH

(from somewhere down the street, to no one in particular)

I want the record to show that I had a bad feeling about all of this from the beginning.

EVERYONE

(calling back, receding)

We know, Gench.

SCENE TEN: THE ROAD TO NEW JERSEY

The road. Hobart drives a rental car, this is represented by four chairs arranged as a car, the professors packed in with their overnight bags and notebooks, Honey in the front seat. The MUSICIANS play a bouncy traveling theme, something with a vaudeville lurch to it, because this journey is going somewhere, and it isn't sure it should.

ODDLY

(cheerfully)

I've never been to New Jersey for a wedding before.

GENCH

I've never been to New Jersey for anything good.

TWEED

How far is Rancocas from —

ELKON

Forty miles, I think. Maybe fifty —

MAGENBRUCH

(shouting over imaginary wind)

What? Did someone say something about a recital?

EVERYONE

No, Magenbruch.

Hobart drives with the intense concentration of a man who does not drive often. Honey sits beside him, very quiet, watching the road.

HOBART

(quietly, eyes forward)

Are you all right?

HONEY

I'm fine.

HOBART

You've been very quiet since –

HONEY

I said I'm fine, Hobart.

Beat.

HOBART

Your father sounded like a very, a very decisive man.

HONEY

(a small, hollow laugh)

That's one word for it.

Hobart glances at her. Opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again.

HOBART

Honey.

I want you to know that whatever your –
whatever the circumstances are.

Whatever trouble you're in.

I'm not – I don't frighten easily.

I know I look like a man who frightens easily, but I

–

At this precise moment, Hobart looks back at the road and discovers that it has curved.

The car has not.

A tremendous CRASH – represented by the MUSICIANS producing a sudden, catastrophic chord, the chairs jolting, bags flying, the professors pitching sideways. A hubcap rolls musically across the stage.

Silence.

GENCH

(from somewhere underneath Siggy)

I want the record updated.

ODDLY

(from the floor, still holding his sandwich)

Is everyone – is everyone –

MAGENBRUCH

(having heard none of it, pleasantly)

Are we there?

Hobart sits gripping the steering wheel, which has come partially off.

HOBART

(to Honey)

Are you hurt?

HONEY

(straightening her hair)

I'm fine. (Beat.) How's the car?

Hobart looks at the car. The car is not fine.

HOBART

We'll need to stop for the night.

**SCENE ELEVEN: AN INN NEAR KINGSTON, NEW JERSEY – THAT
NIGHT**

The INN NEAR KINGSTON. A modest country inn, suggested by a wooden sign and a warm, slightly worn interior. Individual bungalows. A front desk. The night is dark and quiet.

The professors have been assigned their rooms. Hobart has Room 4. PROFESSOR ODDLY has Room 5. The bungalows are adjacent. Outside, the door numbers are small and, crucially, the '9' on Honey's bungalow is on a loose hinge and has flipped to read '6' – which is, fatefully, Oddly's number.

Honey checks in last, at the front desk, while Hobart arranges keys.

HONEY

(to the desk clerk, quietly)

Is there a telephone I can use? Private?

DESK CLERK

In the back, ma'am.

Honey disappears toward the back. Hobart, returning with the keys, notes she's gone and turns back to the professors.

HOBART

Room four is mine.

Oddly, you're in five – just next door.

Gentlemen, I'd suggest we all get some rest and start fresh in the –

GENCH

How fresh can we start?
We're in New Jersey.
The car is destroyed.
We're going to a wedding that –

HOBART

(firmly)

Goodnight, Gench.

The professors disperse to their bungalows, Magenbruch being gently steered by Elkon.

In the back of the inn: a small, dark telephone alcove. HONEY stands with the receiver pressed hard against her ear.

HONEY

(low, controlled)

Tony. We're at an inn outside Kingston.
We had an accident – don't worry about it –
we'll be there in the morning.

(Listening.)

Yes.

(Listening.)

I heard you.

(Listening, her jaw tightening.)

I said I heard you, Tony.

She hangs up. Stands in the dark for a moment.

She looks at her hand – she is still holding Hobart's engagement ring, which she has not put on. She looks at it for a long moment.

Then she slides it onto her finger.

She looks at it there. Something in her face breaks open just slightly.

She takes it off. Puts it in her pocket. Goes back to her bungalow.

Meanwhile: back in New York City – the Foundation. The telephone.

MISS BRAGG stands at the receiver with the patience of a woman who has managed this household through two floods and is not going to be defeated by a single telephone operator.

MISS BRAGG

(into the phone, pleasantly but implacably)

Good evening. I need the number for every inn, hotel, or boarding house within thirty miles of Kingston, New Jersey.

(Beat.)

Yes. All of them.

She has a small notepad. She uncaps her pen.

The MUSICIANS play a determined little march – not hurried. Just inevitable.

The inn. Late night. The bungalows are dark and quiet.

HOBART, in pajamas and dressing gown, steps out of his bungalow with a book. He cannot sleep. He looks at the book, looks at the stars, and then remembers that Professor Oddly is next door in Room 5 and that Oddly keeps a flask of warm cider for nights like this.

He pads quietly across to the adjacent bungalow. The numbers are small and the night is dark. He finds the bungalow with a '6' on

*the door – which is, of course, Honey's '9' flipped upside down.
The door is unlocked.*

*He steps inside. It is dark. He cannot see. He feels for a chair
and finds one, sitting.*

HOBART

(in a low whisper)

Oddly? Oddly, are you awake?
I brought a – I don't actually have the cider,
I was hoping you had the –
Oddly?

Silence.

HOBART

(warming up slightly, speaking into the dark)

Can't sleep. Keep thinking.
You know, Oddly, I find myself in a situation that
is rather outside the scope of the encyclopedia.
She is – Honey is –
I find it very difficult to describe her using the
vocabulary that I have,
which is embarrassing for a man who has spent nine
years compiling vocabulary.
She's like –
she is like music that you hear once and cannot
locate again.
You know it exists because you still feel it, but
you can't find the page it's written on.
Do you know what I mean?
Oddly?

A long pause.

From the darkness – a voice.

HONEY

(from the bed, very quietly)

This isn't Oddly's room, is it.

Hobart freezes.

HOBART

...No.

HONEY

You're in my room.

HOBART

...Yes.

A beat.

HOBART

I'll go –

HONEY

Hobart. Stay.

Beat.

HOBART

The things I just said –

HONEY

I know.

HOBART

I was speaking to – I thought Oddly –

HONEY

I know, Hobart.

The dark between them. The MUSICIANS play, very soft, barely breathing. A single sustained note.

HONEY

That music you're describing. The kind you can't find the page for.

HOBART

Yes?

HONEY

I know what that is. That's the kind worth writing down.

Silence.

Then, voices outside. Car doors. Footsteps on gravel.

Honey sits up in the dark.

HONEY

(suddenly alert)

Get down.

HOBART

What –

HONEY

Get. Down.

Hobart gets down. The door opens. TONY CROW enters, followed by JOE and MONTE. Tony turns on the lamp.

He takes in Hobart crouched beside the bed. His expression is amused and cold.

TONY

Well. Isn't this cozy.

Hobart stands slowly, with as much dignity as a man in a dressing gown can manage.

HOBART

I beg your pardon. I believe there's been a – who are you?

TONY

(ignoring him, eyes on Honey)

I got tired of waiting, sweetheart.
Thought I'd come meet your professor.

HONEY

Tony –

TONY

(to Hobart, pleasantly)

You've been a good sport, Professor. Taking care of my girl.
But the thing is –

(he reaches into his jacket and produces the newspaper)

– Honey and I have some business to take care of.

She's going to marry me, see.
And then she won't need to talk to any district
attorneys.

Hobart looks at Tony. Looks at Honey.

*Honey meets his eyes. And there it is, all of it, in her face. The
gangster boyfriend. The murder charge. The subpoena. The diamond
ring. All of it, right there, where she can't hide it anymore.*

HOBART

(very quietly)

...She's not your daughter.

TONY

(smiling)

No, Professor. She's not.

*A long beat. Hobart looks at Honey. His face is not angry. It is
something much worse than angry, it is the face of someone who has
just discovered that something they thought was real was something
else, and they are trying very hard to understand what that means.*

HONEY

Hobart —

Hobart turns and walks out.

The door closes.

TONY looks at Honey.

TONY

He'll live. Now let's talk about our wedding.

HONEY stands very still in the center of the room. She is looking at the door through which Hobart just left. She is not looking at anything else.

SCENE TWELVE: OUTSIDE THE INN – SHORTLY AFTER

Outside the inn. A moment later.

MISS BRAGG arrives – slightly disheveled, traveling bag in hand, two POLICE OFFICERS at her heels. She did not take a cab. She did not call ahead. She worked through four operators, identified three inns, and arrived at the correct one on her second try. This is what moral outrage looks like when it is also organized.

MISS BRAGG

(to the officers)

The gangster is inside that bungalow.

The singer is with him.

And Professor Frisbee is –

(She stops. Sees Hobart standing alone outside in his dressing gown.)

Hobart.

She only calls him Hobart in moments of genuine crisis.

HOBART

(quietly)

Miss Bragg.

MISS BRAGG

(to the officers, with sudden authority)

Wait here.

She crosses to Hobart.

MISS BRAGG

(not unkindly)

Are you hurt?

HOBART

No.

MISS BRAGG

Did she –

HOBART

No. She didn't – no.

A beat. Miss Bragg, who is not a tender woman, puts her hand briefly on Hobart's arm.

MISS BRAGG

I'll have the officers –

HOBART

(quietly)

Not tonight. Let's – not tonight.

Miss Bragg looks at him. Then, unexpectedly, she nods.

MISS BRAGG

(to the officers)

We'll manage from here. Goodnight, gentlemen.

The officers exchange a glance and withdraw. Miss Bragg stays beside Hobart in the dark.

The MUSICIANS play – a long, slow, aching phrase. A blues that doesn't resolve.

SCENE THIRTEEN: THE FOUNDATION – THE NEXT MORNING

Morning. The Foundation. The professors return, quiet and diminished. They take their places at the research table without speaking. The room looks exactly the same as it did at the beginning, all the papers, all the books, all the years of careful work – and yet it feels different. Smaller somehow, and sadder.

Hobart sits at the head of the table. He picks up his pen. He puts it down.

Oddly does not produce a sandwich.

Gench does not say 'I knew it.' This is the most eloquent thing he has ever not said.

Siggy sits at the window with his hand over his heart – but this time it is not theatrical.

MISS BRAGG brings tea. Sets it down gently. No clatter. She goes out.

TWEED

Hobart. We –

HOBART

Let's get back to work.

TWEED

Of course. Yes.

They pick up their pens.

Silence.

MAGENBRUCH

(gently, which is unusual for him)

Hobart. The music she showed us. It was – it was very fine, wasn't it.

HOBART

(a long pause)

Yes, Magenbruch. It was very fine.

He opens his notebook. He finds the page where he wrote 'Beautiful.' He did not cross it out hard enough – he can still read it.

He picks up his pen and gets to work.

The front door opens.

MISS TOTTEN sweeps in with MR. WARREN.

MISS TOTTEN

(without preamble)

Gentlemen. I won't prolong this. Mr. Warren?

WARREN

(opening his briefcase with practiced finality)

Miss Totten has reviewed the newspaper coverage of the past forty-eight hours.

A nightclub singer with gangster connections living at the Foundation.

The professors absconding to New Jersey.

A housekeeper deceived and left behind while the entire household absconded to New Jersey.

The Foundation's name has appeared in connection with a murder investigation, Professor Frisbee.

This is not the kind of publicity that –

MISS TOTTEN

I'm withdrawing funding for the encyclopedia.
Effective immediately.

The professors look up.

ODDLY

Miss Totten –

SIGGY

Nine years –

MISS TOTTEN

(firmly)

My decision is made. (She looks at Hobart, and in her eyes there is something beyond disappointment, something closer to hurt.) Hobart. I expected better from you.

Hobart does not defend himself. He simply looks at her.

HOBART

I'm sorry, Emmeline.

He has never called her by her first name before. She registers this, registers all of it, and then turns and walks to the door.

She stops.

MISS TOTTEN

(without turning)

For what it's worth –

I did read the pages you gave me.
The folk music chapter.
It was extraordinary, Hobart.
It was the best thing in the whole encyclopedia.

(A beat.)

What a terrible waste.

She goes.

Warren lingers just long enough to pick up his briefcase.

WARREN

(without satisfaction, which surprises him)

I am sorry, gentlemen. For what it's worth.

He goes.

The professors sit in the wreckage of nine years.

GENCH

(after a very long silence)

I'm not going to say it.

ELKON

Thank you, Gench.

GENCH

I want credit for not saying it.

EVERYONE

We know, Gench.

The MUSICIANS play, very low – the melody from Honey's song in the nightclub, barely present, like something half-remembered.

SCENE FOURTEEN: THE FOUNDATION – THAT AFTERNOON

A bang at the front door. Then, the door swings open.

JOE and MONTE push through. Joe has a gun. Monte has a gun. The social dynamic simplifies immediately.

JOE

Everybody stay where they are.

The professors freeze.

MONTE

(scanning the room)

Where's the girl?

HOBART

She's not here.

MONTE

She's gonna be here.

Tony's bringing her.

We're just making sure everybody's comfortable in the meantime.

Joe gestures with the gun. The professors and the several MUSICIANS who are present arrange themselves along the wall. Joe stands over them. Monte takes the door.

GENCH

(to the room, very quietly)

I want the record to reflect that I –

ODDLY

Gench.

GENCH

I'm just saying –

ODDLY

We know, Gench.

The side room of the Foundation.

TONY CROW enters with HONEY, his hand on her arm, not rough, but immovable. JUSTICE OF THE PEACE DINGLE follows, ancient and serene, carrying a small book. He has clearly been under the impression for some time that this is a perfectly ordinary appointment.

TONY

(to Dingle, pleasantly)

Right in here. Nice and private. Just a small ceremony.

DINGLE

(nodding contentedly)

Lovely. Lovely. I always say a small wedding is the most personal. (He opens his book.) Shall we begin?

HONEY

(to Tony, low)

You can't do this.

TONY

(gently)

Honey. Be reasonable. You testify, I go away for a very long time. You marry me, you can't testify at all. It's elegant, really.

HONEY

You don't want to marry me. You want a legal firewall.

TONY

Can't it be both?

HONEY

(looking at him)

You know I don't love you.

TONY

(a brief flash of something real beneath the charm)

I know.

(He recovers.)

Love is a luxury, sweetheart.

Right now we need a marriage.

Dingle clears his throat pleasantly.

DINGLE

Whenever you're ready, dear. I haven't got anywhere to be. Well – I do, actually, there's a lovely supper waiting – but I'm a professional. Shall we?

TONY

(to Honey)

Shall we?

Honey stands very still.

She thinks of the inn. The dark room. Hobart's voice describing her as music he can't find the page for.

She looks at Tony.

HONEY

(very quietly)

No.

TONY

(the charm cooling)

Honey –

HONEY

No, Tony.

I'm not doing it.

TONY

(quietly dangerous)

Think very carefully –

HONEY

I have thought.

I have thought about nothing else for three days.

(Her voice steady, which is the bravest thing she has ever done.)

I am not going to marry you.

You can do whatever you're going to do,

but I am not going to stand in this room and say those words.

A beat.

TONY

(to Dingle)

Give us a moment.

DINGLE

(cheerfully, having heard none of the tension) Of course! Take your time. I'll just - (He opens his book and begins quietly reading, perfectly content.)

Tony looks at Honey. His jaw is tight.

TONY

(low)

I will not ask again.

HONEY

I know.

Tony looks at her for a long moment.

TONY

(calling out)

Joe! Monte! Start the ceremony!

**SCENE FIFTEEN: THE FOUNDATION — THE MAIN ROOM — THE SAME
MOMENT**

In the main room of the Foundation.

*Joe stands guard over the professors and musicians along the wall.
Monte is at the door.*

*The professors are arranged in a line. They look at each other.
They look at Joe. They look at the instruments arranged around the
room.*

Hobart's eyes travel slowly upward.

*Above Joe — precariously, improbably, balanced on the edge of the
high bookshelf directly over his head is the very large bass drum.
It has been there for nine years and is essentially part of the
architecture. No one thinks about it anymore.*

Hobart looks at the drum.

He looks at the musicians beside him.

He looks at the drum again.

*He remembers: the Anvil Chorus. The beginning of the evening. The
way the drum trembled at high volume. The way it tipped.*

*A thought arrives. It arrives with the slow inevitability of a
very important idea that has been waiting in the wings for exactly
the right moment.*

He turns, very slightly, to FELIX beside him.

HOBART

(barely moving his lips)

Can you play 'Flying Home'?

FELIX

(barely moving his)

From the top?

HOBART

All of it. As loud as you can. All of you.

Everything you've got.

Felix looks at the drum above Joe's head. Looks at Hobart. A grin spreads slowly across his face.

Felix looks down the line at JEROME. A small nod.

Jerome looks at the MUSICIANS. Tiny signals pass between them, a glance, a finger, the smallest lift of a chin.

JOE notices the whispering.

JOE

Hey. What are you – nobody said you could –

HOBART

(suddenly, pleasantly, as though just remembering something)

Joe. You said earlier that you liked music.

JOE

I never said –

HOBART

I thought you did. In any case we're going to play something. Just a small demonstration. Entirely academic.

JOE

Nobody's playing anything. Sit down and be quiet before I –

FELIX sits at the piano.

His hands come down.

'FLYING HOME' erupts from the piano like a force of nature, big, rolling, irresistible, the kind of music that bypasses the brain entirely and goes straight to the feet. The opening riff announced itself in 1939 and has never stopped moving.

The MUSICIANS join – one by one and then all at once – trumpet, trombone, bass, drums, clarinet – and the room fills with sound so complete and joyful and overwhelming that it seems to physically expand the walls.

JOE takes a half-step back in surprise.

The half-step puts him directly under the bass drum.

The drum, which has been sitting on that shelf for nine years and has been waiting, in its way, for exactly this much vibration, begins to tremble.

It tips.

Hobart watches it tip.

It tips further.

The music surges, Felix hammering the keys, the brass section giving everything –

The drum falls.

It lands directly on Joe's head with a resonant, magnificent BOOM – a sound that the musicians instinctively and immediately incorporate into the music. Joe goes down like a building that has been professionally demolished.

At the same moment, PROFESSOR ELKON – who has been shuffling toward the edge of the large Persian rug under Monte's feet – grabs the end of the rug and pulls.

Monte goes up.

Monte comes down.

Monte does not get up.

The music plays on, triumphant, hilarious, alive.

The professors look at each other.

ODDLY

(with genuine delight)

That was music theory.

Hobart is already moving, out of the main room, toward the side room, moving faster than he has moved in nine years.

He pushes through the door.

TONY has Honey's wrist. DINGLE has his book open and is reading from it with pleasant efficiency, having constructed his own version of events from the sounds he was unable to hear.

DINGLE

– and do you take this woman –

HOBART

Stop.

Tony turns.

For just a moment, the two men look at each other, the gangster and the professor, and it is not, despite appearances, an unequal contest.

TONY

(dangerously quiet)

Professor. Walk away.

HOBART

Let her go.

TONY

(releasing Honey's wrist, turning to face Hobart fully)

You don't want to do this.

HOBART

I find that I do.

Tony swings.

Hobart ducks, which surprises everyone, including Hobart, and comes back up with a right cross of such unexpected force and accuracy that Tony Crow, wanted for murder, feared across three boroughs, goes down and stays down.

Hobart stands over him.

He looks at his hand with profound scientific curiosity.

HOBART

I didn't know I could do that.

DINGLE

(pleasantly, still reading from his book)

– to love, honor, and cherish, for as long as you both shall live?

HOBART

(to Dingle)

Not right now, thank you.

DINGLE

(nodding agreeably)

Of course, of course. Very good.

He closes his book, tucks it under his arm, and wanders contentedly toward the door.

DINGLE

(to himself)

Lovely ceremony. Very intimate.

He goes.

TONY stirs on the floor. He looks up at Honey.

TONY

(from the floor, a last flicker of the old charm)

You could've just said no.

HONEY

(quietly)

I did say no.

TONY

...Yeah. You did.

He is still on the floor when D.A. HARRIS arrives – at last, approximately one act too late but deeply committed. Officers cuff Tony. Officers find Joe and Monte in the main room, still unconscious, the large bass drum resting peacefully on Joe's head.

HARRIS

(taking in the scene)

I've been looking for this man for six months.
(Looks at the bass drum.) Do I want to know?

HOBART

(with genuine academic pride)

The physics of resonance vibration and their structural applications. It's going into the encyclopedia.

Harris looks at Hobart. Decides not to pursue it.

Tony is led out.

SCENE SIXTEEN: THE FOUNDATION – THAT EVENING

The Foundation. Quiet now. The officers have gone. The musicians are packing up slowly, warmly, reluctant for the night to end. The professors drift about the room, putting things in order, restoring the familiar comfortable chaos.

Felix plays something soft and slow on the piano – not a performance, just music thinking to itself.

HONEY stands alone near the door.

HOBART approaches.

They stand together without speaking for a moment.

HONEY

The district attorney will still want me to testify.

HOBART

I know.

HONEY

After that – I don't know what comes after that.

HOBART

I have a suggestion about what comes after that.

She looks at him.

HONEY

Hobart.

Everything I told you –

HOBART

You told me you were in trouble. That was true.

HONEY

I let you believe things that weren't –

HOBART

You showed me music I didn't know existed. That was also true.

HONEY

I lied to your housekeeper's face and walked out while she was trying to stop me.

HOBART

She's recovered. She's already reorganized the kitchen.

HONEY

(a small, pained laugh)

I'm not – I'm not someone who belongs in this place, Hobart. In this world of yours. All these books, all this – I don't know the harmonic series. I don't know music theory. I just sing.

HOBART

(gently)

You taught seven musicologists more in two days than they'd learned in nine years. I'd call that a qualification.

Honey looks at him.

He reaches into his dressing gown pocket and produces the small ring box.

HOBART

I believe this ended up in your possession at some point and then came back to me. I'd like it to go back to you. Permanently this time, if you're willing.

Honey looks at the box.

HONEY

I don't deserve -

HOBART

(firmly, gently, with a certainty that surprises both of them)

Let me decide what I deserve, Honey. That's my department.

A long beat.

Honey takes the box. She opens it. She takes out the ring and looks at the engraving: 'For my most significant discovery.'

Hobart takes it from her hand and slides it onto her finger.

They look at each other.

HONEY

You're going to put me in the encyclopedia, aren't you.

HOBART

I already have.

She kisses him.

The *MUSICIANS* – Felix first, then everyone – begin to play. Not 'Flying Home' the battle anthem, but something warmer, rounder, a melody that sits in the chest.

The professors drift back in from wherever they've been, drawn by the music. Miss Bragg appears in the doorway, takes in the scene, and her face performs a series of rapid internal negotiations before arriving at something that is not quite a smile but is not not a smile either.

ODDLY produces a sandwich from somewhere. He has always had a sandwich somewhere.

MAGENBRUCH removes his ear trumpet and listens with his whole face.

GENCH, in the corner, picks up his pen and begins to write. He is smiling. He would deny it under oath.

TWEED approaches *FELIX*, who is still at the piano.

TWEED

(shyly)

Could you – that is – could you teach me that? The boogie woogie? I've been thinking about it since yesterday and I –

FELIX

(making room on the bench)

Sit down.

Tweed sits. Felix puts Tweed's hands on the keys.

FELIX

Left hand first. It's all in the left hand.

Tweed plays. It is terrible. It is the beginning of something.

ELKON, watching this, pulls out his notebook.

ELKON

(writing)

Note for the encyclopedia: jazz is not a subject.

Jazz is a verb.

He looks at what he's written. Nods with quiet satisfaction.

The music grows. Felix begins 'Flying Home' – not the emergency version, the battle version – but the real version, the joyful version, the version that exists because music exists and music exists because people need it to.

The whole company plays.

The whole room is alive.

Hobart and Honey stand together in the center of it all.

HOBART

(leaning close, speaking over the music)

There's something I need to ask you. Professionally.

HONEY

(leaning in)

Oh?

HOBART

That thing you do – with the note in the second chorus –

the bent resolution –

I need to understand the mechanics of it.

For the encyclopedia.

HONEY

(laughing)

Right now?

HOBART

The section's due to Miss Totten by the end of the month –

Honey kisses him again, which settles the matter.

The MUSICIANS play.

The lights are warm and full.

MISS BRAGG, in the doorway, performs one final internal negotiation.

She steps into the room.

She sits down.

She listens.

The music plays on and on and the lights hold on the room full of people and sound and nine years of careful knowledge and two days of something that turned out to be more important than all of it.

The music swells.

END OF PLAY

PRODUCTION NOTES

ON THE MUSIC

The jazz ensemble should be treated as a full creative collaborator in production. The musical director should be given latitude to expand, develop, and improvise within the framework provided. 'Flying Home,' composed by Lionel Hampton and Benny Goodman in 1939, is essential to both the climactic action and the finale. All other musical selections should reflect the period authentically – 1948 New York, which meant bebop was arriving from Harlem and Kansas City, swing was still the dominant popular form, blues was being played in every room, and Dixieland was very much alive. The music should never be polished in a way that makes it feel like a museum piece. It should sound like something happening right now.

ON THE COMEDY

This play is, at its core, a comedy – but it earns its comedy through character rather than situation. The professors are funny because they are specific and real. Hobart is funny because he is sincere in a world that has forgotten how to be sincere. The comedy and the tenderness are the same thing. The director should resist the urge to push either one at the expense of the other.

ON MISS BRAGG

She is not a villain. She is a woman whose entire moral framework is being tested by events that fall outside its parameters. Her final moment – stepping into the room and sitting down to listen – is the play's quiet second ending. It should not be played for laughs. It is, in its small way, a conversion.

ON HONEY

She must never be played as a victim or a prize. Every choice she makes – including the ones that complicate everything – is an active choice made by a woman of intelligence and will. Her journey is not from bad to good. It is from defended to open. That is harder, and more interesting. In the original 1948 film, Virginia Mayo's performance was dubbed by singer Jeri Sullivan. On stage, Honey should sing in her own voice – raw and unpolished if necessary. That is the point.

ON HOBART

He hits Tony Crow and surprises everyone including himself. This moment must land as both funny and genuinely heroic. He is a mild man. Mild men, when they act, act completely. The audience must believe it.

ON THE BASS DRUM

The drum must be visible from the first moment of the play. The audience should notice it before they know why. In the 1948 film, the Anvil Chorus is first used to demonstrate the drum's vibration vulnerability, then 'Flying Home' is used to actually bring it down. This stage version collapses those two steps – but the drum's presence should be established early and felt throughout. It is a Chekhov's gun that plays in 4/4 time.

ON JUSTICE OF THE PEACE DINGLE

Dingle should be played with absolute serenity. He is not confused. He has simply constructed a perfectly satisfactory version of events from the sounds he was able to hear, and that version is adequate for his purposes. Every moment of chaos in the side room is, to him, a perfectly agreeable small ceremony. His exit line – 'Lovely ceremony. Very intimate.' – is not a joke. He means it.

ON THE FILM

A Song Is Born (1948) was produced by Samuel Goldwyn and directed by Howard Hawks – a remake of Hawks's own Ball of Fire (1941), which starred Barbara Stanwyck and Gary Cooper. The story originated with a Billy Wilder-Thomas Monroe screenplay. The 1948 cast included Danny Kaye as Frisbee, Virginia Mayo as Honey, and – in an extraordinary and unrepeatabe gathering – Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Charlie Barnet, and Mel Powell performing together. This stage adaptation honors their legacy and the irreplaceable tradition they represented.

A SONG IS BORN was written for the stage by Daniel Pettus.

Based on the 1948 motion picture produced by Samuel Goldwyn,
directed by Howard Hawks,
from a story by Billy Wilder and Thomas Monroe.
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