

ACT I, SCENE TWO

If you'll permit me to break the fourth wall, my name is **Hazie Coogan**.

My vocation is not that of a paid companion, nor am I a professional housekeeper. It is my role as an old woman to scrub the same pots and pans I scrubbed as a young one—I've made my peace with that fact—and while she has never once touched them, those pots and pans have always belonged to the majestic, the glorious film actress Miss **Katherine Kenton**.

It is my task to soft-boil her daily egg. I wax her linoleum kitchen floor. The endless job of dusting and polishing the not insignificant number of bibelots and gold-plated gim-cracks awarded to Miss Katie, that job is mine as well. But am I Miss **Katherine Kenton's** maid? No more so than the butcher plays handmaiden to the tender lamb.

My purpose is to impose order on Miss Kathie's chaos . . . to instill discipline in her legendary artistic caprice. I am the person **Lolly Parsons** once referred to as a "surrogate spine."

While I may vacuum the carpets of Miss Kathie's household and place the orders with the grocer, my true job title is not majordomo so much as mastermind. It might appear that Miss Kathie is my employer in the sense that she seems to provide me funds in exchange for my time and labor, and that she relaxes and blooms while I toil; but using that same logic, it could be argued that the farmer is employed by the pullet hen and the rutabaga.

The elegant **Katherine Kenton** is no more my master than the piano is master to **Ignace Jan Paderewski** . . . to paraphrase **Joseph L. Mankiewicz**, who paraphrased me, who first said and did most of the dazzling, clever things which, later, helped make others famous. In that sense you already know me. If you've seen **Linda Darnell** as a truck-stop waitress, sticking a pencil behind one ear in *Fallen Angel*, you've seen me. Darnell stole that bit from me. As does **Barbara Lawrence** when she brays her donkey laugh in *Oklahoma*. So many great actresses have filched my most effective mannerisms, and my spot-on delivery, that you've seen bits of me in performances by **Alice Faye** and **Margaret Dumont** and **Rise Stevens**. You'd recognize fragments of me—a raised eyebrow, a nervous hand twirling the cord of a telephone receiver—from countless old pictures.

The irony does not escape me that while **Eleanor Powell** lays claim to my fashion signature of wearing numerous small bows, I now boast the red knees of a charwoman and the swollen hands of a scullery maid. No less of an illustrious wag than **Darryl Zanuck** once dismissed me as looking like

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Clifton Webb in a glen plaid skirt. **Mervyn LeRoy** spread the rumor that I am the secret love child of **Wally Beery** and his frequent costar **Marie Dressler**.

Currently, the regular duties of my position include defrosting Miss **Kathie**'s electric icebox and ironing her bed linens, yet my position is not that of a laundress. My career is not as a cook. Nor is domestic servant my vocation. My life is far less steered by **Katherine Kenton** than her life is by me. Miss **Kathie**'s daily demands and needs may determine my actions but only so much as the limits of a racing automobile will dictate those of the driver.

I am not merely a woman who works in a factory producing the ever-ravishing **Katherine Kenton**. I am the factory itself. With the words I write here I am not simply a camera operator or cinematographer; I am the lens itself—flattering, accentuating, distorting—recording how the world will recall my coquettish Miss **Kathie**.

Yet I am not just a sorceress. I am the source.

Miss **Kathie** exerts only a very small effort to be herself. The bulk of that manual labor is supplied by me in tandem with a phalanx of wig makers, plastic surgeons and dietitians. Since her earliest days under a studio contract it has been my livelihood to comb and dress her often blond, sometimes brunette, occasionally red hair. I coach the dulcet tones of her voice so as to make every utterance suggest a line of dialogue scripted for her by **Thornton Wilder**. Nothing of Miss **Kathie** is innate except for the almost supernatural violet coloring of her eyes. Hers is the throne, seated in the same icy pantheon as **Greta Garbo** and **Grace Kelly** and **Lana Turner**, but mine is the heavy lifting which keeps her on high.

And while the goal of every well-trained household servant is to seem invisible, that is also the goal of any accomplished

puppeteer. Under my control, Miss Kathie's household seems to smoothly run itself, and she appears to run her own life.

My position is not that of a nurse, or a maid, or a secretary. Nor do I serve as a professional therapist or a chauffeur or bodyguard. While my job title is none of the preceding, I do perform all of those functions. Every evening, I pull the drapes. Walk the dog. Lock the doors. I disconnect the telephone, to keep the outside world in its correct place. However, more and more my job is to protect Miss Kathie from herself.

Cut direct to an interior, nighttime. We see the lavish boudoir belonging to **Katherine Kenton**, immediately following tonight's dinner party, with my Miss Kathie locked behind her en suite bathroom door. From offscreen, we hear the hiss and splash of a shower bath at full blast.

Despite popular speculation, Miss **Katherine Kenton** and I do not enjoy what **Walter Winchell** would call a "fingers-deep friendship." Nor do we indulge in behavior *Confidential* would cite to brand us as "baritone babes," or **Hedda Hopper** describes as "pink pucker sucking." The duties of my position include placing one **Nembutal** and one **Luminal** in the cloisonné saucer atop Miss Kathie's bedside table. In addition, filling an old-fashioned glass to overflowing with ice cubes and drop-by-drop pouring one shot of whiskey over the ice. Repeat with a second shot. Then fill the remainder of the glass with soda water.

The bedside table consists of nothing more than a stack of screenplays. A teetering pile sent by **Ruth Gordon** and **Garson Kanin**, asking my Miss Kathie to make a comeback. Begging, in fact. Here were speculative Broadway musicals based on actors dressed as dinosaurs or **Emma Goldman**.

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Feature-length animated versions of *Macbeth* by **William Shakespeare** depicted with baby animals. Voice-over work. The pitch: **Bertolt Brecht** meets **Lerner and Loewe** crossed with **Eugene O'Neill**. The pages turn yellow and curl, stained with Scotch whiskey and cigarette smoke. The paper branded with the brown rings left by every cup of Miss Kathie's black coffee.

We repeat this ritual every evening, following whatever dinner party or opening my Miss Kathie has attended. On returning to her town house, I unfasten the eye hook at the top of her gown and release the zipper. Turn on the television. Change the channel. Change the television channel once more. Dump the contents of her evening bag onto the satin coverlet of her bed, Miss Kathie's **Helena Rubinstein** lipstick, keys, charge cards, replacing each item into her daytime bag. I place the shoe trees within her shoes. Pin her auburn wig to its **Styrofoam** head. Next, I light the vanilla-scented candles lined up along the mantel of her bedroom fireplace.

As my Miss Kathie conducts herself behind the en suite bathroom door, amid the rush and steam of her shower bath, her voice through the door drones: *bark, moo, meow . . . William Randolph Hearst. Snarl, squeal, tweet . . . Anita Loos.*

In the center of the satin bed sprawls her Pekingese, **Loverboy**, amid a field of wrinkled paper wrappers, the two cardboard halves of a heart-shaped candy box, the pleated pink brocade-and-silk roses stapled to the box cover, the ruched folds of lace frilling the box edges. The bed's billowing red satin coverlet, spread with this mess, the cupped candy papers, the sprawling Pekingese dog.

From out of Miss Kathie's evening bag spills her cigarette

lighter, a pack of **Pall Mall** cigarettes, her tiny pill box paved with rubies and tourmalines and rattling with **Tuinal** and **Dexamyl**. *Bark, cluck, squeak . . . Nembutal.*

Roar, whinny, oink . . . Seconal.

Meow, tweet, moo . . . Demerol.

Then, fluttering down, falls a white card. Settling on the bed, an engraved place card from this evening's dinner. Against the white card stock, in bold, black letters, the name **Webster Carlton Westward III**.

What **Hedda Hopper** would call this moment—a “Hollywood lifetime”—expires.

A freeze-frame. An insert-shot of the small, white card lying on the satin bed beside the inert dog.

On television, my Miss Kathie acts the part of Spain's **Queen Isabella I**, escaped from her royal duties in the **Alhambra** for a quickie vacation in **Miami Beach**, pretending to be a simple circus dancer in order to win the heart of **Christopher Columbus**, played by **Ramon Novarro**. The picture cuts to a cameo by **Lucille Ball**, on loan out from **Warner Bros.** and cast as Miss Kathie's rival, **Queen Elizabeth I**.

Here is all of Western history, rendered the bitch of **William Wyler**.

Behind the bathroom door, in the gush of hot water, my Miss Kathie says: *bark, bray, oink . . . J. Edgar Hoover*. My ears straining to hear her prattle.

Fringe dangles off the edge of the red satin coverlet, the bed canopy, the window valance. Everything upholstered in red velvet, cut velvet. Flocked wallpaper. The scarlet walls, padded and button tufted, crowded with **Louis XIV** mirrors. The lamps, dripping with faceted crystals, busy with sparkling thingamabobs. The fireplace, carved from pink

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onyx and rose quartz. The entire effect, insular and silent as sleeping tucked deep inside **Mae West's** vagina.

The four-poster bed, its trim and moldings lacquered red, polished until the wood looks wet. Lying there, the candy wrappers, the dog, the place card.

Webster Carlton Westward III, the American specimen with bright brown eyes. Root-beer eyes. The young man seated so far down the table at tonight's dinner. A telephone number, handwritten, a prefix in **Murray Hill**.

On the television, **Joan Crawford** enters the gates of **Madrid**, wearing some gauzy harem getup, both her hands carrying a wicker basket in front of her, the basket spilling over with potatoes and Cuban cigars, her bare limbs and face painted black to suggest she's a captured Mayan slave. The subtext being either Crawford's carrying syphilis or she's supposed to be a secret cannibal. Tainted spoils of the New World. A concubine. Perhaps she's an Aztec.

That slight lift of one naked shoulder, Crawford's shrug of disdain, here is another signature gesture stolen from me.

Above the mantel hangs a portrait of Miss Katherine painted by **Salvador Dalí**; it rises from a thicket of engraved invitations and the silver-framed photographs of men whom **Walter Winchell** would call "was-bands." Former husbands. The painting of my Miss Kathie, her eyebrows arch in surprise, but her heavy eyelashes droop, the eyelids almost closed with boredom. Her hands spread on either side of her face, her fingers fanning from her famous cheekbones to disappear into her movie star updo of auburn hair. Her mouth something between a laugh and a yawn. **Valium** and **Dexedrine**. Between **Lillian Gish** and **Tallulah Bankhead**. The portrait rises from the invitations and photographs, future parties and past marriages, the flickering candles and

half-dead cigarettes stubbed out in crystal ashtrays threading white smoke upward in looping incense trails. This altar to my **Katherine Kenton**.

Me, forever guarding this shrine. Not so much a servant as a high priestess.

In what Winchell would call a “New York minute” I carry the place card to the fireplace. Dangle it within a candle flame until it catches fire. With one hand, I reach into the fireplace, deep into the open cavity of carved pink onyx and rose quartz, grasping in the dark until my fingers find the damper and wrench it open. Holding the white card, **Webster Carlton Westward III**, twisting him in the chimney draft, I watch a flame eat the name and telephone number. The scent of vanilla. The ash falls to the cold hearth.

On the television, **Preston Sturges** and **Harpo Marx** enter as **Tycho Brahe** and **Copernicus**. The first arguing that the earth goes around the sun, the latter insisting the world actually orbits **Rita Hayworth**. The picture is called *Armada of Love*, and **David O. Selznick** shot it on the **Universal** back lot the year when every other song on the radio was **Helen O’Connell** singing “**Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered**,” backed by the **Jimmy Dorsey** band.

The bathroom door swings open, Miss Kathie’s voice saying: *bark, yip, cluck-cluck* . . . **Maxwell Anderson**. Her **Katherine Kenton** hair turbaned in a white bath towel. Her face layered with a mask of pulped avocado and royal jelly. Pulling the belt of her robe tight around her waist, my Miss Kathie looks at the lipstick dumped on her bed. The scattered cigarette lighter and keys and charge cards. The empty evening bag. Her gaze wafts to me standing before the fireplace, the tongues of candle flame licking below her

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portrait, her lineup of “was-bands,” the invitations, all those future obligations to enjoy herself, and—of course—the flowers.

Perched on the mantel, that altar, always enough flowers for a honeymoon suite or a funeral. Tonight features a tall arrangement of white spider chrysanthemums, white lilies and sprays of yellow orchids, bright and frilly as a cloud of butterflies.

With one hand, Miss Kathie sweeps aside the lipstick and keys, the cigarette pack, and she settles herself on the satin bed, amid the candy wrappers, saying, “Did you burn something just now?”

Katherine Kenton remains among the generation of women who feel that the most sincere form of flattery is the male erection. Nowadays, I tell her that erections are less likely a compliment than they are the result of some medical breakthrough. Transplanted monkey glands, or one of those new miracle pills.

As if human beings—men in particular—need yet another way to lie.

I ask, Did she misplace something?

Her violet eyes waft to my hands. Petting her Pekingese, **Loverboy**, dragging one hand through the dog’s long fur, Miss Kathie says, “I do get so tired of buying my own flowers. . . .”

My hands, smeared black and filthy from the handle of the fireplace damper. Smudged with soot from the burned place card. I wipe them in the folds of my tweed skirt. I tell her I was merely disposing of some trash. Only incinerating a random piece of worthless trash.

On television, **Leo G. Carroll** kneels while **Betty Grable**

crowns him Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Pope Paul IV is Robert Young. Barbara Stanwyck plays a gum-chewing Joan of Arc.

My Miss Kathie watches herself, seven divorces ago—what Winchell would call “Reno-vations”—and three face-lifts ago, as she grinds her lips against Navarro’s lips. A specimen Winchell would call a “Wildeman.” Like Dorothy Parker’s husband, Alan Campbell, a man Lillian Hellman would call a “fairy shit.” Petting her Pekingese with long licks of her hand, Miss Kathie says, “His saliva tasted like the wet dicks of ten thousand lonely truck drivers.”

Next to her bed, the night table built from a thousand hopeful dreams, those balanced screenplays, it supports two barbiturates and a double whiskey. Miss Kathie’s hand stops petting and scratching the dog’s muzzle; there the fur looks dark and matted. She pulls back her arm, and the towel slips from her head, her hair tumbling out, limp and gray, pink scalp showing between the roots. The green mask of her avocado face cracking with her surprise.

Miss Kathie looks at her hand, and the fingers and palm are smeared and dripping with dark red.