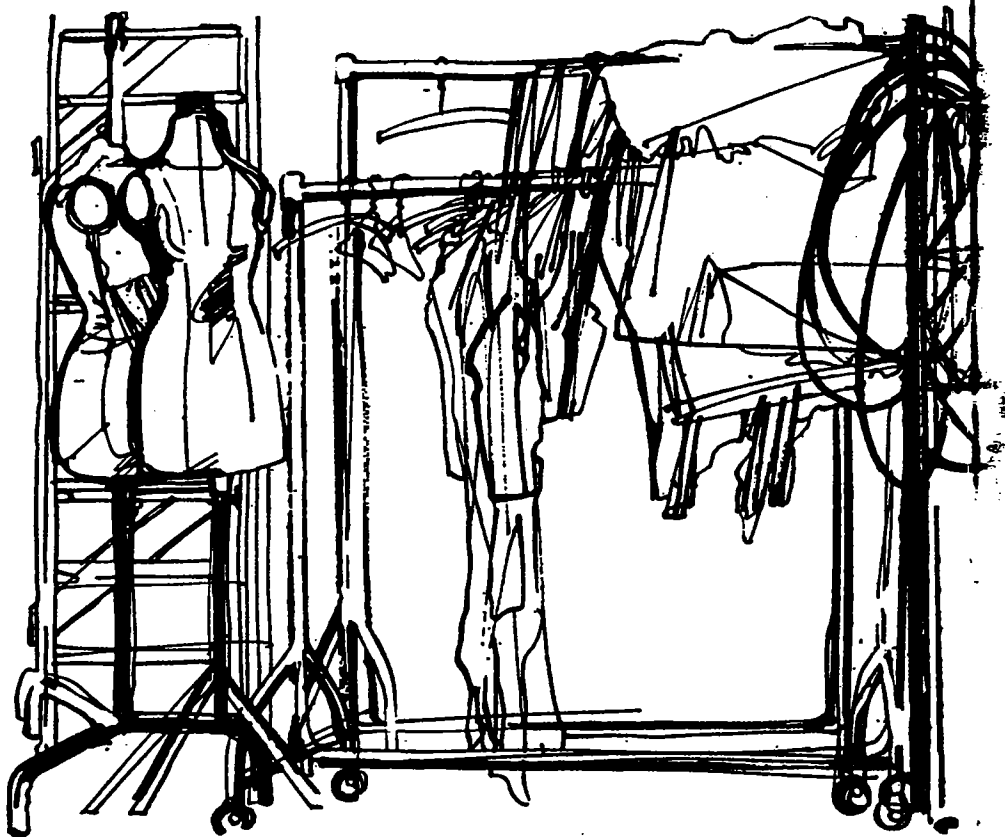


The Family Circle

by Frederick Feirstein



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INTRODUCTION

THE FAMILY CIRCLE was presented in an earlier draft, entitled HAROLD, by Mari Saville at The Provincetown Playhouse, New York, on the 9th May 1967.

The play exposes the murderous intent in the family unit's apparently sociable rituals. Frederick Feirstein says: 'I think THE FAMILY CIRCLE can be popular because it is relevant to two current movements - R D Laing's anti-psychiatry and the ecology movement. The family's tactics in destroying Harold are like the invalidation tactics of the families Laing studied in Sanity, Madness and the Family. The social extension of the smoking metaphor is air-pollution. Both the family's tactics of denial and Harold's passivity make a comment on the battle over pollution in the society-at-large. Also, in the service of consciousness-raising, THE FAMILY CIRCLE asks this question: How can we stop industrialists from polluting our environment when we can't stop those close to us from polluting our immediate environment? The answer lies in the social rituals of the play.'

Frederick Feirstein is a poet and has had five plays produced in New York since 1966. His play on Jonathan Swift, MASQUERADE, was placed second in the first Audrey Wood Playwriting Award Competition in 1971.

The Family Circle

FREDERICK FEIRSTEIN



DAVIS-POYNTER

CHARACTERS

HAROLD BECKER

DOT, Harold's wife

FATHER, Harold's father

MOTHER, Harold's mother

KAREN, Harold's sister

RAYMOND, Harold's brother-in-law

One Act, three Scenes

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ACT I

Scene 1

HAROLD's living-room. A vestibule leads from the living-room to offstage left. A bedroom and bathroom are offstage right.

DOT is at the window watching for HAROLD's family. HAROLD is stretched out on a couch in front of which is a coffee-table. HAROLD is listening to a record of Perry Como singing 'Oh There's No Place Like Home For The Holidays.'

Sound of a car pulling up.

DOT: (Nervously excited.) There's your parents now!

(Door bursts open. FATHER, MOTHER, KAREN, and RAYMOND enter. Ignoring DOT, they rush to hug and kiss HAROLD.)

(DOT waves meekly.) Hello there.

(MOTHER embraces HAROLD and DOT.)

RAYMOND: (To MOTHER.) Hold it!

(Pretends to focus an imaginary camera. MOTHER, HAROLD, and DOT hold pose.)

FATHER: (Beams) The newlyweds.

RAYMOND: (Clicks imaginary camera, sings out his accomplishment.) Ta dum!

KAREN: (Warmly) Harold, you're getting a belly.

FATHER: (Hugs KAREN and RAYMOND.) What a family!

(Joins them all into a circle in which they hug and kiss.)

HAROLD: It's so good to be back together.

RAYMOND: (Playfully whacks HAROLD's stomach.)
Come on, Har, out with a joke ...

(Record has reached its end. KAREN puts the needle back to the beginning.)

(BLACKOUT)

(Lights come up.)

HAROLD: (With gusto, tells the punch-line of a joke.)
And the lamb was curled in the ashtray!

(All laugh raucously.)

FATHER: (Wipes eyes.) That's funny.

RAYMOND: Boy, he sure can tell 'em.

DOT: (To FATHER.) He keeps me in stitches all night. (To MOTHER.) You'll never be a grandmother at this rate.

(BLACKOUT)

(Lights come up, music continuing.)

HAROLD: (With greater gusto, looking for approval and love.) And the cow was curled in the ashtray!

MOTHER: That's my Harold.

RAYMOND: (Beaming) Oh boy, what I married into.

(BLACKOUT)

(Sound of thunder obliterates music forever. Sound of rain as lights come up. MOTHER, FATHER, RAYMOND, and KAREN are smoking heavily. FATHER is smoking a cigar, the rest cigarettes. HAROLD has a cold and is coughing.)

HAROLD: And the moose was curled in the ashtray ...

(All laugh raucously except HAROLD and KAREN. Their laughter is slightly strained.)

FATHER: (Wipes his eyes.) That's funny.

RAYMOND: Boy, he sure can tell 'em.

DOT: (To KAREN, giggling.) Stitches, all night.

KAREN: (Slightly annoyed by DOT. To HAROLD.) Let's see if you can make the next one even better.

HAROLD: Remember when I was in the army?

RAYMOND: Yeah, yeah, go on.

HAROLD: (Chucks RAYMOND under chin.) No, don't look at me with such anticipation.

(Others laugh in approval.)

This isn't a joke.

DOT: Sure sure. (To MOTHER.) Everything he says is a joke.

HAROLD: Well . . . ?

(They all laugh.)

DOT: (To MOTHER.) You'll never be a grandmother at this rate.

(They are still laughing. HAROLD is slightly annoyed and coughing.)

HAROLD: You want me to go on?

(They nod.)

One day this guy calls up. I don't know who he is, and I had had a couple of snorts on the Q. T.

RAYMOND: Just like Harold.

DOT: I heard this one a million times and it still cracks me up.

HAROLD: Well I don't remember what happened exactly, but I really told him off. And you know what he said?

DOT: No.

(HAROLD savours the suspense.)

RAYMOND: Come on come on, tell us already.

HAROLD: He said, 'Do you know who I am?' I was so potted I wouldn't even know my own mother.

MOTHER: (Chiding, but in spite of herself amused.) Harold!

RAYMOND: Just like Harold.

HAROLD: So he said, 'Do you know who I am?' and I say, 'How am I supposed to know who you are? I'm not a mindreader, you know.' And do you know what he said? (Coughs)

DOT: No.

RAYMOND: Come on, who was he already?

HAROLD: He said, 'Do you know who this is?' I say, 'No.' He says, 'This is General Potter, that's who.' (Has a coughing fit.)

RAYMOND: (Laughs) Boy, he sure can tell 'em.

KAREN: (To RAYMOND.) What are you laughing at?

RAYMOND: I don't know, don't you think that was funny?

FATHER: Come on already, finish the joke.

HAROLD: So when he said this was General Potter, I said: 'Do you know who this is?' And he says, 'No,' and do you know what I said?

DOT: No.

HAROLD: I said 'Good!' And I hung up.

FATHER: (Wipes eyes.) That's funny.

(HAROLD sneezes.)

RAYMOND: Boy, he sure can tell 'em.

DOT: (To MOTHER.) Now do you see why you'll never be a grandmother?

FATHER: It sure is wonderful.
(KAREN laughs, thinking he's joking.)

DOT: Even if you'll never be a grandfather?

FATHER: It sure is wonderful.
(KAREN laughs harder.)

DOT: (In response to KAREN, laughs too.) It sure is.

RAYMOND: How about another one, Har? I can stay up all night listening to them.

DOT: (Proudly) See what I mean?

FATHER: It sure is wonderful.

KAREN: (Laughs uncontrollably.) (To FATHER.) Will you stop it already? (To HAROLD.) Come on buster, tell us another.

MOTHER: 'Buster.' I'm so glad we all get along so wonderfully together. (Lovingly) 'Buster.'

FATHER: That's what I said: It sure is wonderful to be together. You know, with the four of you so far away, Mother and I sit home all night, in the dark, and never laugh.

MOTHER: Oh don't say 'Never.'

FATHER: (Teasing HAROLD.) Well, once in a while Mother remembers one of your jokes . . . but that's very rare.

MOTHER: (Teasing) Only just once in a while.

HAROLD: (Smiles weakly.) O. K. (Blows nose.) But this cold is driving me crazy. Could you try blowing that smoke in the other direction?

KAREN: But getting back to what Dad was saying . . .

FATHER: It sure is wonderful to be together with both of you again. You know, even though we're thousands of miles apart, it seems, even after a few minutes, that we've never been apart at all.

MOTHER: What your father means is - correct me if I'm wrong dear - that even though we're thousands of miles apart, it seems, even after a few minutes, that we've never been apart at all.

(FATHER nods in approval.)

DOT: (Sentimentally) You know, I've never seen two more agreeable people.

MOTHER: What do you mean 'two'? (Pause) Six!

RAYMOND: Hey, why are we all sitting around making small-talk? You would think we've been here a week! Let's hear another joke.

HAROLD: Maybe a little later. (Blows nose.) This cold is driving me potzee.

DOT: (Looks to MOTHER.) Let's hear about the relatives first.

HAROLD: Would you mind blowing the smoke in the other direction?

MOTHER: (To DOT.) I didn't know you were interested, dear.

(HAROLD chokes on the smoke.)

RAYMOND: Of course she's interested. We're all interested.

HAROLD: (Gagging) Please?

MOTHER: Don't be such a sissy, Harold.

KAREN: Come on, Mother.

MOTHER: (Flattered) Don't rush me, don't rush me. (Pause) Well, Aunt Ida died yesterday. Poor thing. We had to bury her so quickly in order

MOTHER: to get out here.
(Contd)

FATHER: May she rest in peace.

KAREN: Poor thing. She was always so good to us too.

DOT: (Pipes up.) She didn't even know me; I was just a stranger to her and she greeted me with a basket of cookies just as if I was one of the family.

HAROLD: Who's Aunt Ida?

FATHER: Harold!

HAROLD: Would you mind not smoking so much; I think it's into my chest.

FATHER: Who's smoking? I'm just holding it.

MOTHER: You know your father never smokes, not since the cancer scare. (To HAROLD firmly.) And Aunt Ida just happens to be my brother George's nephew's brother-in-law - Harold who you are named after - 's cousin's mother (Pause) who just happens to be your Aunt Ida, may she rest in peace.

FATHER: (To HAROLD.) And so may your great-cousin George.

HAROLD: (Seriously) Which George?

MOTHER: Which George!

RAYMOND: Can't you see he's just joking?

MOTHER: Well I don't happen to see the humour in it.

RAYMOND: Oh come on Mother, that's Harold. And you have to take him with all of his faults as well as his virtues. If you love him, that is.

MOTHER: (Icily to RAYMOND.) No one questions the love of a mother.

RAYMOND: (Quickly) Or a brother-in-law or a son-in-law. Why are we arguing? This is a family.

MOTHER: (To KAREN.) You know, you sure married a wonderful guy. He fits in just perfect. I'm sorry Harold, let's hear another.

HAROLD: I'm a little tired. This cold is knocking me out.

MOTHER: Stop being such a damned hypochondriac, Harold. (To RAYMOND.) You know, when Harold was a little boy and I was working for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company . . .

RAYMOND: Yeah, yeah, go on. (To DOT.) Do you know what happens in this one?

DOT: No.

MOTHER: What are you laughing at? When Harold was a little boy . . . Oh Harold, it's so good to see you. I can't believe that we're thousands of miles away from each other.

FATHER: But it doesn't seem like it.

MOTHER: No dear, of course not. (Pause) Except after we leave. (Pause) But getting back to my little story. When Harold was a little boy and I was working for Metropolitan Life, one day . . . No, let me start again.

FATHER: (To RAYMOND.) What Mother is trying to say is this: One day, when she was working for the Metropolitan and Harold was a little boy . . .

MOTHER: No, you got it all backwards.

FATHER: (Confident) No I don't.

MOTHER: (Shaken) I told you, you have it all backwards!

KAREN: (To FATHER.) I think Mother's right.

FATHER: (Missing KAREN's signal to humour MOTHER.) No I'm sure I had it right . . . (Catches on.)

MOTHER: (Childishly) Well you didn't. Harold was a little boy long before I ever went to work for Metropolitan. That's why I went to work for Metropolitan in the first place: One day, I brought home some pamphlets from the Met about diseases. Harold got hold of them somehow and soon developed, in his mind of course just like that cold now, every disease imaginable.

HAROLD: (Caught up by the reminiscence, laughs.) I remember, I had a little charm all worked out that kept me free of all the diseases: (Quickly) Leprosytuberculosiscancersore-throatcold.

MOTHER: (Puts out cigarette; so does KAREN.) You see, Harold . . . ?

(Pause)

HAROLD: (Laughs generously.) I guess so. I guess I am a little bit of a hypochondriac. (Looks to FATHER.) But it runs in the family.

MOTHER: (Nods in approval. To RAYMOND.) His father is even worse than he is. (Confidentially, and watching for FATHER's reactions.) I remember once, he even thought he was pregnant. And he wouldn't go to work and sat home all day watching the ballgames.

FATHER: Mother has a tendency to exaggerate.

MOTHER: (To FATHER.) Of course dear, I was only kidding. (Lights cigarette.)

FATHER: (Relieved, trying to laugh.) What are you talking about? We didn't even have television in those days. (To children.) You see?

(KAREN lights a cigarette. The air is tense.)

MOTHER: Of course dear, I was just kidding. (To children.) We never argue. (To KAREN.) Did you ever see your father and I argue?

KAREN: No, of course not.

MOTHER: (To RAYMOND, preening herself.) See that?

HAROLD: (Coughing, pushes smoke away.) Of course not, they always shut the door and ruined our good time.

KAREN: (Blows smoke in his face.) Harold!

HAROLD: (Runs gagging into bathroom.) The old story! I could smell it brewing all day.

RAYMOND: Oh, he was just kidding.

KAREN: Well I don't like that kind of kidding, and neither does Mother.

MOTHER: You know how he kids, dear. (To HAROLD returning dishevelled, fly open.) Don't pay any attention to your sister, dear. We're all a little on edge whenever we first get together, we're so anxious to see each other.

DOT: And get along so well when we do.

RAYMOND: We have Harold to thank. He keeps us laughing.

KAREN: It's not just Harold . . .

MOTHER: Of course not dear, but you must say he helps.

RAYMOND: Come on Harold, tell us another.

DOT: I think something's bothering Harold.

HAROLD: (Gagging) Bothering me!

KAREN: Here it comes.

HAROLD: Here I am coughing my head off . . . I mean, what kind of inconsideration do you people have: just puffing away as calm as can be while I sit here and puke?

FATHER: (Lights his cigar, calmly.) Look how he rants.

HAROLD: I don't want to be petty, but this afternoon . . .

FATHER: This afternoon?

HAROLD: I couldn't stop coughing and you're calmly standing there playing pussycat with the seals.

RAYMOND: It was raining; we certainly couldn't play anything else.

HAROLD: (To FATHER.) For three goddamn hours: 'Here pussypussy, what's the matter, what's bothering you? Do we Beckers have herring-bone breath?'

FATHER: Just listen to him . . . like a madman.

KAREN: Tell me buster, what's wrong if your parents love animals? (Still to HAROLD.) That's more than I can say for some people I know.

RAYMOND: Who me? Why nobody loves animals more than . . .
(KAREN fixes him with a dirty look.)
Huh?

HAROLD: And on top of that, one cigarette after another all afternoon. (To FATHER.) And what are you: queer, the way you fondle that goddamn cigar?

MOTHER: (Tears in her eyes.) You know Harold, when you talk like that to me . . . well it's one thing. But your father . . . (Cries)

KAREN: (To HAROLD.) Why, you dirty (Gropes for word, then emphatically.) diaper!

DOT: Please, please, I'm sure it's some sort of misunderstanding.

MOTHER: (Weeping) We had to come out here a thousand miles just for this?

HAROLD: And last night, when you got here, I kept asking you, hinting as a matter of fact because I didn't want to put the damper on

HAROLD: anything, to try not to smoke.
(Contd)

MOTHER: Don't worry. We'll be gone first thing in the morning.

HAROLD: That's not what I meant!

FATHER: Harold, you really shouldn't upset your mother like this. We've had a trying time of it these past couple of days: first Aunt Ida, then your great-cousin what's his name . . .

KAREN: Goddamn it! I've had just about enough. If I was a man . . . (Looks at RAYMOND. He doesn't respond. To HAROLD.) Boy, you're really a selfish bastard, you know that? (To MOTHER and FATHER.) He know it. (Pause) All day long I've been asking everyone: What's the matter with Harold? The first full day here at his house and Harold's as dumb as an orange. Everyone's singing together as a family should, in the car, on the way to the seals. And does Harold join in with that voice the Archangelical Choir voted the second best tenor between June and September, 1977 to 8?

DOT: Second best!

MOTHER: (To HAROLD.) She doesn't know what she's saying. You should be ashamed you've upset her so much she'd say something like that.

HAROLD: I've upset her?

FATHER: Well, to be frank about it, Harold, I think you've upset all of us with your childish behaviour.

MOTHER: (Drawing heavily on her cigarette.) All right, all right, let's skip it. He's a big boy now; he knows what he's doing.

RAYMOND: This is ridiculous; let's stop it already.

DOT: What would Aunt Ida say if she saw us squabbling like this?

HAROLD: Take back her cookies.

KAREN: Look here, wise guy. Six months your parents are looking forward to seeing you. Six months. And the minute we get together: Bingo!

DOT: (Panicky) This is silly; we're arguing over nothing; it's a misunder . . . (To HAROLD.) I'm sure Karen didn't mean anything.

KAREN: Don't tell me what I did or didn't mean; you're so blinded by your love for that mole . . .

MOTHER: Aren't we all?

KAREN: Please Mother, you're hurt now and you're liable to say something you don't mean. But Harold's not blinded; he's got his eyes wide open and is looking right at your bronchees.

(HAROLD tries to interrupt her but She shouts him down.)

And stepping right on them as if they were stones. Six months his parents wait to see him; so I thought today we would go to the seals - such cute little things - and Harold's just standing around staring. We were making such endearing remarks and just generally having a ball. But Harold's just standing there . . .

HAROLD: In the rain!

KAREN: (Shouting) And Harold's just jealous with a face like stretched dough.

(HAROLD laughs in disbelief.)

FATHER: You have to admit son, your sister does have a point. I mean after all, your mother and I . . .

MOTHER: (Nobly) Oh this is silly. Harold meant nothing; Harold's just going through a stage, that's all.

KAREN: A stage? Mother's so good, she'll overlook almost anything. Well, I'll tell you something that'll set your ears running . . .

FATHER: Karen! (Pause) Get control of yourself.

KAREN: For that mole's sake?

DOT: Oh this is silly.

KAREN: (To RAYMOND.) What's the matter with you, frog?

RAYMOND: Well I uh . . .

HAROLD: You know this really hurts me. Here my family sees me coughing my lungs out for three solid hours . . .

MOTHER: (Mockingly) Three solid hours!

HAROLD: (Continuing, screams.) . . . and all the five of you do is make monkey faces at those damn seals!

DOT: I thought you said they were cute.

HAROLD: What am I going out of my mind? Mother's standing there poo-pooing like a hemorrhaging moose. Dad's groaning, 'What did I raise, a sissy?' (Points to DOT.) This one is whispering in my ear: 'The family didn't come out here a thousand miles for you to sit in the car.'

DOT: I thought it would stop any minute.

RAYMOND: So did I.

HAROLD: (To DOT.) And you're driving me nuts with that platitude.

MOTHER: Stop it already! What platitude?

HAROLD: A family that seals together stays together.

(They titter.)

MOTHER: Everything's all right; he's joking again.

HAROLD: (Suggestion of a smile. Points to KAREN.)
And she's looking at me like I'm committing incest.

RAYMOND: (Laughs) Just like Karen.

(HAROLD smiles a little more. They look for KAREN to smile. She responds with a sour smile.)

DOT: You see? Harold's smiling. Everything's going to be all right.

MOTHER: Look how handsome he looks when he smiles.
(HAROLD's smile becomes a little wider.)

DOT: (Comes over to HAROLD.) You see?
Nobody meant anything.

FATHER: Of course not. That's how we like to see you.

MOTHER: (Zippers his fly.) Now he looks like Harold again.

DOT: Come on Karen, how about it?

(They look expectantly at KAREN, waiting for her to relent.)

KAREN: I was never angry. I was just a little upset because Harold looked so depressed.
(Pause) And to be frank, I'm still a little upset.

MOTHER: (Looking at HAROLD.) Well come on dear, I'm sure Harold didn't mean anything.

FATHER: Now how about it? Are we going to get in a circle and hug and kiss or are people going to say the Beckers are a bunch of wet matches? (Grabs DOT's and KAREN's hands. MOTHER grabs RAYMOND's and HAROLD's hands. All form a circle and hug and kiss.)

RAYMOND: Oh boy, that was good.

DOT: You see, Harold? We all love you.

FATHER: It sure was wonderful.

MOTHER: This we ought to do more often. (Looks to KAREN.) All in all you have to admit it really was a nice day today, wasn't it?

KAREN: (Mumbles) I guess so.

FATHER: What do you mean, nice? It was wonderful. Those seals; weren't they the most delightful babies you ever saw?

RAYMOND: Hey, remember the one that kept seeming to say, 'Flip me?'

DOT: Yes?

RAYMOND: Boy, he sure was something, wasn't he?

DOT: He was almost as funny as Harold.

(Others titter and light up except HAROLD who is coughing.)

RAYMOND: No, didn't he keep seeming to say, 'Flip me?'

(FATHER looks at him scornfully and exits to bathroom.)

No I mean it; I could've sworn.

DOT: (Joins the tittering.) Well maybe, but I don't think so.

(HAROLD pushes the smoke away. Nobody takes note of it.)

RAYMOND: I think I read something once that these scientists are doing experiments with them down in Florida or someplace . . .

KAREN: Don't be silly . . .

RAYMOND: No I mean it. Honest. Somewhere down in Florida. Marines, I think. Yeah, that's it, it was in an enlistment commercial. You know, to get you interested in a career?

(HAROLD pushes smoke away and makes his disgust apparent. FATHER returns puffing cigar.)

KAREN: (Indignantly) What's the matter with Harold!

RAYMOND: No I mean it. Didn't you ever see the commercial . . . ?

KAREN: (Loudly to HAROLD.) What's bothering you now?

HAROLD: Nothing.

KAREN: (To FATHER.) There's that smell again.

HAROLD: What are you all: nuts?

(FATHER throws his hands up and exits to bathroom.)

KAREN: I could smell it coming.

HAROLD: I feel like I'm in a crazy house. Here we just finish arguing about . . . What am I, going nuts? Five minutes later, as if nothing at all happened, you're gaily blowing that damn smoke in my face stronger than ever.

(Flushing of toilet bowl can be heard.)

MOTHER: Harold, this pettiness of yours is getting all of us down.

HAROLD: Petty? Boy, you're a case, you know that?

MOTHER: If each of us paid attention to every little ache and pain . . .

(KAREN, RAYMOND, and DOT laugh patronizingly.)

HAROLD: (Pointing to KAREN.) Look at her; even now, when she sees how excited it gets me . . . (Coughing fit.) what that damn pollution is doing to me; she still doesn't put it out.

KAREN: All the windows are opened; you can't even breathe it.

HAROLD: What do I have to do, get on my hands and knees before you people will stop?

MOTHER: Oo, such melodrama.

HAROLD: You're not coughing your lungs out; you can afford to poo-poo everything. I'd like to see you cough your lungs out sometime.

FATHER: (Entering from bathroom with finger pointed.) You apologize to your mother for that.

MOTHER: (Taking cue from FATHER.) What is everyone supposed to do, lie down and die just because you imagine you have a cold? I don't like this pettiness Harold, never did.

FATHER: (To HAROLD.) I said an apology.

HAROLD: I have to get down on my knees to my own family not to turn this cold into pneumonia.

MOTHER: Oh the poor boy is dying. (Falsetto) Call an ambulance!

HAROLD: This is a zoo, a regular zoo. What the hell have I been talking about for the past twenty-three minutes?

FATHER: Don't you think twenty-three minutes harping on this nonsense was enough?

KAREN: (To RAYMOND.) I thought he was talking about this afternoon, didn't you?

RAYMOND: Well, to be truthful, Harold, I couldn't tell that you had a cold in the first place. That's why I didn't say anything.

HAROLD: What do you think this sounds like?

MOTHER: All right; so you're a little nasal.

KAREN: (Puts out cigarette.) All right, all right, I'm putting it out. What a host.

HAROLD: Oh my God.

MOTHER: (Grudgingly) All right, we'll all put them out, you happy?

(MOTHER and RAYMOND put out their cigarettes. FATHER puts out his cigar.)

HAROLD: Stunned.

FATHER: You know, Harold, this is getting to be a little too much. We all can't stop breathing just because you have a little cold.

RAYMOND: Come on Har, be a sport; nobody knew you still had a cold.

MOTHER: For six months, all we could think of was: we're going to see the children. Your father would count the days just like he did in the Coast Guard.

KAREN: (To HAROLD.) You see? But you never listen.

MOTHER: That's all right; we'll leave a little bit earlier than we had planned.

KAREN: You'll do no such thing!

MOTHER: Whenever we get together, all we seem to do is fight anyway.

DOT: Oh please.

FATHER: (To MOTHER, moves toward bedroom.)
Come on, I have to get back to the office . . .

RAYMOND: Why? What's the big rush?

FATHER: Nothing. I just owe a couple of bucks to a couple of bums.

DOT: Is it serious, Dad?

MOTHER: (Scornfully) Is it serious!

FATHER: (Laughing) What do you think, I'm like Harold? Nothing's serious except death, taxes, and another woman.

(All except MOTHER laugh.)

DOT: You'd better hurry up, Harold, and get out your mood or your father'll usurp you as the best joke-teller in the family.

MOTHER: This is no joking matter. (To DOT.) If you must know, if your father-in-law doesn't come up with the money, he might as well put a gun to his head.

HAROLD: What!

FATHER: Oh, you know how Mother exaggerates. (To MOTHER.) I can't understand what makes you say things like that sometimes.

DOT: Oh, don't get angry at her; she was only defending you.

MOTHER: Look, you go defend your husband.

DOT: I was only trying to . . .

HAROLD: (Turns contemptuously away from DOT; to FATHER solicitously.) Is it serious?

FATHER: It's nothing your father can't handle.

RAYMOND: Hey! What are we all getting serious about? (Looks to MOTHER.) A stranger would think we were petty.

DOT: That's right, we shouldn't be petty. We're a family. Why even Aunt Ida, and she hardly knew me, once gave me a basket of cookies.

MOTHER: May she rest in peace.

FATHER: You see, Harold, your mother and I have had a lot to contend with this week.

HAROLD: All right! Would you mind then just trying to remember to cut down on that smoking?

FATHER: We never forgot. We all thought your cold was better.

MOTHER: Your father would never intentionally . . . What's gotten into you, Harold?

HAROLD: (To FATHER.) Do you think everything'll be all right?

FATHER: Of course. We forgot it already. (Looks to Others for acknowledgment, which They give.)

HAROLD: No, I don't mean that. I'm talking about your debts.

FATHER: (Scornfully as if HAROLD is exaggerating.) 'Debts' !

HAROLD: But Mother said . . .

FATHER: What, Mother said? You know not to pay attention to what Mother says.

(MOTHER begins to get upset. FATHER over-rides her and hugs her.)

We're only joking. Nothing's serious except death, taxes, and a frowning old wife.

(MOTHER smiles a little, like HAROLD.)

Huh? (Tucks MOTHER under chin. She breaks out into a grin.)

HAROLD: (Jokingly) That's how we like to see you. Look how pretty she looks when she smiles.

DOT: Now he's like Harold again.

FATHER: Say, you know what I feel like doing?

DOT: (Giddy) Getting in another circle and kissing.

FATHER: (Grabs DOT's and KAREN's hands.) Right! How did you know?

(MOTHER grabs RAYMOND's and HAROLD's hands. All form circle and hug and kiss.)

MOTHER: Ah, just like old times.

RAYMOND: This beats the seals anyday.

FATHER: What a family these Beckers!

DOT: If only Aunt Ida could see us.

QUICK CURTAIN

ACT IScene 2

Next night. HAROLD is in a bathrobe, lying on the couch. He is very ill. MOTHER is standing in the vestibule with the doctor. The doctor can't be seen or heard, but from MOTHER's reactions the audience knows he is doing all the talking.

RAYMOND: (To HAROLD.) So, what's the punch-line?
(Notices HAROLD isn't paying attention.)
Huh? (Sees that HAROLD is looking anxiously in the direction of the vestibule.)
What are you worried?

HAROLD: Of course I'm worried.

(MOTHER fumbles for cigarettes.)

KAREN: Same old Harold. Here, take a sugar pill.

(HAROLD gives her a dirty look.)

FATHER: Now Harold, there's no need to be so
sarcastic. Your sister's only trying to
humour you out of it.

DOT: Sure baby, she just doesn't want you to add
worry to your discomfort.

FATHER: You've got to learn to take your mind off
these things, Harold. Now come on, out with
the punch-line.

DOT: Please?

(MOTHER enters, picks up cigarette
lighter from table.)

HAROLD: Mother?

(MOTHER doesn't answer, returns to vestibule, puffs nervously as doctor resumes talking.)

FATHER: Here we are sitting on pins and needles wondering about the gag's outcome and all you do is stretch your head into the vestibule.

RAYMOND: (Looks to KAREN for approval.) Come on Har old boy or I'll confiscate your pink pills.

HAROLD: (To shut RAYMOND up.) And the lamb was curled in the ashtray.

FATHER: (Wipes eyes.) That's funny.

RAYMOND: Boy, he sure can tell 'em.

DOT: Stitches all night.

KAREN: Let's see if you can make the next one even better.

(HAROLD looks at vestibule, MOTHER looks downcast, shakes her head, wipes her eyes.)

What's the matter, Harold, run out of jokes?

RAYMOND: What are you worried? You know Mom; they're probably squabbling over the bill.

(FATHER lights cigar.)

MOTHER: Thank you, doctor, we'll remember. (Makes a melodramatic effort to straighten up and enters the room.)

RAYMOND: You see, I knew there was nothing to worry about. Whenever Mother's worried about something, it shows all over her face.

HAROLD: What's the verdict, Ma?

MOTHER: Verdict? What do you think, he's God? (Makes a show of forcing a smile.)

DOT: Your mother's face can tell you, Harold; stop drooping.

HAROLD: What is it, Mother?

MOTHER: Oh stop being so melodramatic; it's nothing.

HAROLD: Look, don't tell me it's nothing. A doctor doesn't call out a relative when nothing's the matter. Why couldn't he tell me?

MOTHER: Relative? Is that all I am, just a relative?

KAREN: You see, Harold, what you do? You get a little ache or pain and you take it out on everyone else.

MOTHER: I've tried to spare you talking finances with that crook simply to be called a relative in return? I don't expect gratitude, Harold, but at least a little human decency; I'm not the maid, you know.

FATHER: I think your mother deserves an apology for that, Harold.

MOTHER: No . . .

KAREN: (Angry that MOTHER is indulging him.)
Mother!

MOTHER: (To KAREN.) Now he really is sick. We forget it.

DOT: (To HAROLD.) See? Why must you always be on the defensive?

HAROLD: (Shakes his head. Seeing the issue is dead.)
Well?

MOTHER: Well what?

HAROLD: Holy Moly.

MOTHER: Don't blaspheme.

FATHER: (Stands over him, threateningly.) Harold!

HAROLD: (To MOTHER, mock-earnestly.) I'm sorry I'm sorry. What did he say?

FATHER: That's not an apology.

HAROLD: I told her I'm sorry, what more can I say?

FATHER: Who's 'her'?

HAROLD: Jesus . . . ! Will you tell me what he said?

MOTHER: I told you, nothing.

HAROLD: Well he couldn't examine me and find nothing; I've been coughing my . . .

KAREN: (Annoyed) We know, Harold, we know.

MOTHER: Well he called it 'bronchial pneumonia.'

(HAROLD looks frightened.)

FATHER: Ah, they got fancy names for everything these days; that's how they keep you coming back.

RAYMOND: Sure, you got a bad toenail and they call it, 'Gangrenous Pediatrics.' (To KAREN.) I didn't go to medical school for nothing, you know.

(Doorbell rings. HAROLD looks somewhat relieved.)

HAROLD: Maybe that's the doctor again.

MOTHER: (Going to the door.) It's not the doctor.

HAROLD: Well if it is, tell him I want to talk to him.

KAREN: (Lights a cigarette.) What's the matter, Harold, don't you trust your own mother?

MOTHER: (Takes \$2 out of her purse, yells back.) Honey, I need fifty cents.

(FATHER exits to vestibule.)

DOT: See Harold? It couldn't have been very serious, or it wouldn't just be fifty cents.

RAYMOND: Come on Har, try not to be such a 'fraidy cat.

MOTHER: (Returns with pizza. FATHER closes the door.) Surprise!

(FATHER returns.)

KAREN: (Lights candle with her cigarette.) Oh Mother, you shouldn't have.

MOTHER: Well, I thought Harold could do with a little cheering up.

(HAROLD lies back and groans.)

KAREN: (Places candle in center of pizza.) Aren't you even going to say 'Thank you'?

(HAROLD grudgingly acknowledges MOTHER.)

DOT: Look, Harold, anchovies and pepperoni: everything you like.

RAYMOND: Come on Har, dig in.

(MOTHER offers HAROLD a slice. He turns over on his side, away from Them.)

FATHER: He's an ingrate. Why bother?

HAROLD: (Turns back.) What do I have to do: die, before you realize I'm sick?

KAREN: The least you can say is 'Thank you.'

MOTHER: Ah, don't pay any attention to him; he's just a partypooper.

DOT: Come on, let's dig in; it'll get cold. (Takes a slice.)

(KAREN, MOTHER, and RAYMOND put down their cigarettes and take slices. FATHER puts down his cigar and takes slice. The ritual eating of HAROLD, indicated by the effect of the shadows of the characters on the wall, begins.)