

HAPPY ENDINGS

Screen Short based on my one-act play

by Ronald V. Micci

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FADE IN:

EXT. MAIN STREET - SMALL WONDER, UTAH - DAY

Two determined old-timers, ELEANOR and BERTRAND CORNWEEVIL, come charging at a brisk walk past storefronts en route to the bank.

ELEANOR

Why would Mr. Higginbotham be calling us, Bertrand? Why, why, why? Tell me. Have we done something wrong?

They halt in front of the PARADISE NATIONAL BANK. Eleanor fiddles with Bertrand's shirt buttons.

ELEANOR

Oh, we do have to get you some new clothes, Bertrand, truly we do.

She turns, faces the bank. Opens the door. MR. HIGGINBOTHAM, the loan manager, is staring her right in the face.

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

(with an edge of malice)

Mr. and Mrs. Cornweevil, so good of you to come.

(gestures)

Please.

The Cornweevils enter.

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

Right this way.

They follow Higginbotham to his desk.

ELEANOR

Such a nice man is Mr. Higginbotham. I'm sure he's going to offer us our choice of coffee or tea.

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

(gestures)

If you will.

They take seats at Higginbotham's desk.

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

Tea, but hardly sympathy, Mrs. Cornweevil.
To wit, you're behind in your loan payments
on the farm -- either you pay or we take it
away.

ELEANOR

Oh Mr. Higginbotham, isn't that being a bit
hasty?

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

Hasty, Mrs. Cornweevil? You're in arrears.
Indeed, in arrears up to your ears. Am I making
myself clear?

ELEANOR

Indeed, Mr. Higginbotham, but you wouldn't
throw us off our land?

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

Oh wouldn't I?

ELEANOR

In so doing, you would be depriving us of a
happy ending.

MR. HIGGINBOTHAM

Thus are the vicissitudes, Mrs. Cornweevil.
Life's endings aren't always happy.

ELEANOR

Oh Bertrand, I was so hoping for a happy
ending, indeed I had all but promised you one.
This is most distressing, most distressing
news indeed. But we shall see about this, Mr.
Higgingbotham, yes we shall see. You haven't
heard the last of this. Don't count us out.

(rises)

Good day.

EXT. MAIN STREET

The Cornweevils make their way past storefronts.

BERTRAND

What are we going to do?

ELEANOR

Leave it to me. Now, let's see if we can get you fixed up. . . Oh look, your favorite store.

They stop in front of a clothing store.

INT. CLOTHING STORE

Eleanor and Bertrand with faces pressed to the window peering in. The STORE CLERK working the cash register pauses, takes this in.

They enter, survey the scene.

Eleanor points in the direction of the men's department. Bertrand makes a beeline there.

Eleanor moves to the front counter.

No words are spoken, but she hands the Clerk her credit card. He swipes it through the machine -- shakes his head "no" -- hands it back.

Eleanor moves to Bertrand, who is browsing among the clothes racks, takes him by the scruff of the neck and ushers him out.

INT. MOVING TRUCK - ELEANOR AND BERTRAND

Eleanor at the wheel.

ELEANOR

Don't worry, Bertrand. We'll find a way to come up with that money. We always have in the past.

EXT. CORNWEEVIL RANCH

Eleanor pulls the truck into the drive.

INT. FOYER

Eleanor and Bertrand enter.

ELEANOR

Now, you make yourself comfortable. I'll bring the teaching aids.

Bertrand heads for living room. Eleanor goes to kitchen.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Eleanor enters carrying an easel.

ELEANOR

Sit, Bertrand, please.

As Bertrand takes a seat, Eleanor sets up the easel before him and places a giant cue card on it. The card is a graph, with lines rising and falling.

ELEANOR

Your attention, please. Charts, Bertrand, they're wonderful teaching aids. Now observe -- this is our projected rate of growth for the current year, and this is our rate of growth through the year 2030. With negative growth expected in the near term, and taxes on the rise, let me zero it out for you -- we're broke.

BERTRAND

Broke?

ELEANOR

Yes, am I not making myself clear?

BERTRAND

Yes. But I thought -- well, you know --

ELEANOR

That your flimsy little railroad pension and the microscopic trickle of Social Security that we get each month would be enough to see us through? Wrong. . . . Again, observe -- this is the two of us, Bertrand, two tiny people arrayed against a giant mountain of taxes. Indeed, *this* is us -- and *this* is the Matterhorn. And how do we surmount such a formidable obstacle, how you might very well ask indeed. Well, the answer is simple -- we don't. You see, the government has built that mountain so high that nobody gets over it, not, at least, if they do so honestly. And so, what do we do?

BERTRAND

Cheat?

ELEANOR

Oh no, Bertrand -- no, no, no. We're honest citizens, we don't cheat. Have you ever heard of something called the Laffer Curve, Bertrand? I do believe you have. Well, we're somewhere along that curve, but I can assure you we are not laughing. I'm not laughing, Bertrand, are you? No, to be perfectly honest, we find ourselves in a tight spot, a very tight spot indeed. And yet, dear husband, I have always been a believer in happy endings. And by that I mean, what if a stranger should come to the door this very minute? What if he should pound his fist this very minute on the door?

BERTRAND looks bewildered. KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! at the door.

ELEANOR

And there it is, as lately prophesied -- the proverbial knock at the door. Yes, what if a stranger should knock at the door, Bertrand? And indeed, it has come to pass. Should we allow our stranger to persist, should we? Or should we allow him in?

BERTRAND

I think we should answer it.

ELEANOR

Be sure, Bertrand, be absolutely sure.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

ELEANOR

There it is again. My, but our stranger is persistent, isn't he? Who is this stranger of ours? Do we dare let him in? Yes, to answer my own question, we most certainly do.

She moves to the door, opens it. MR. LODESTONE is standing there.

ELEANOR

Good afternoon to you, sir. What may I ask is your business?

LODESTONE

What may I ask is your pleasure?

ELEANOR

Already I see that you are a man with a certain distinct style and appeal. Come in, come in.

LODESTONE enters.

LODESTONE

Good afternoon, sir.

He shakes hands with BERTRAND

LODESTONE

And now, madam, you strike me as someone in the mood for a happy ending. So mightn't we cut directly to the chase?

ELEANOR

We mightn't and we will.

LODESTONE

Your pastures here in the glorious Midwest, madam, are resting squarely on oil. And now, if you'll just sign this contract.

He waves a contract in her face.

ELEANOR

What did I tell you, Bertrand -- a happy ending.

She takes the contract from him.

ELEANOR

But why be so hasty? Won't you sit down, Mr. -- ?

LODESTONE

Lodestone.

ELEANOR

Mr. Lodestone. Please, sit down. I think we could all do with a nice cup of coffee.

(MORE)

ELEANOR (cont'd)

You'll entertain Mr. Lodestone, won't you, Bertrand, while I get the coffee? But don't let him trick you into signing anything, not until we've had a nice little talk. . . Take a load off,

(Mr.)

Lodestone.

She goes out; LODESTONE sits next to BERTRAND.

LODESTONE

You would still own the land, Mr. Cornweevil. Of course you understand that. We would only be concerned with the drilling rights.

ELEANOR returns with coffee on a tray.

ELEANOR

Now, how did I do that so quickly? . . . Ah, you underestimate me, Mr. Lodestone. Now, let me just set this down and you can have yourself a nice fresh cup of coffee.

She sets down tray.

ELEANOR

Please -- help yourself.

They sip coffee.

ELEANOR

Was Bertrand telling you about the old days, Mr. Lodestone, the years when he worked for the railroad? Tell him about the narrow gauge up in Butte, Bertrand, about how you came screaming down off the mountain in a blizzard, you and that old coal burner of yours. Yes, you and all that excitement. While I sat up with the gals talking around the fire, knitting quilts. Tell him about the way things used to be.

BERTRAND

Well --

ELEANOR

That's enough. What's past is past. What Mr. Lodestone has an eye to is the future, isn't that right, Mr. Lodestone? And what I'd like to know is, just how profitable might that future be?

LODESTONE

De-licious coffee, Mrs. Cornweevil, de-licious. If you'll just sign here on the dotted line, you'll find that future can be most profitable indeed.

ELEANOR

In dollars and cents, Mr. Lodestone -- just exactly what are we talking?

LODESTONE

We know there's oil here, Mrs. Cornweevil. We get to drill, and you get the thrill.

ELEANOR

How much of a thrill might that be?

LODESTONE

You get to keep fifty percent of the profits from what comes up out of the ground. Sound like a happy ending?

ELEANOR

Very. But what would you say to 75/25, the lion's share going to little old us?

LODESTONE

I'd say you're being very greedy, Mrs. Cornweevil, most greedy indeed. Not moments ago you were ready to go belly-up, admitting, if I'm not mistaken, that you were flat broke. It seems to me that in this instance, beggars can't be choosers.

ELEANOR

I wouldn't be so sure, Mr. Lodestone, I wouldn't be so sure. When push comes to shove, haven't we the inalienable right to the happy ending of our choosing?

LODESTONE

You chose the knock at the door, Mrs. Cornweevil, and with that knock comes this contract. Those are the terms. If you prefer, the knock can vanish from the door.

ELEANOR

(abruptly)

Well, that's it, Bertrand. No deal. Oh, I was so hoping for a happy ending, and indeed I had all but promised you one. And yet, I'm going to have to decline your offer, Mr. Lodestone. I hope you won't find me too greedy. I must decline your offer and bid you good day.

BERTRAND

Wait.

LODESTONE

Better think twice, Mrs. Cornweevil. The deal you do, is better than the deal you don't.

ELEANOR

Devilishly true, Mr. Lodestone, devilishly true. But I'm afraid I've made up my mind.

BERTRAND

But -- ?

LODESTONE

It's your decision, of course, Mrs. Cornweevil, I know better than to try to force your hand, albeit an offer this lucrative does not come along every day. And an advance of, say, \$50,000 in cold cash and a blank checkbook with a one million dollar line of credit might help sway your decision.

He removes wad of cash from pants pocket and hands it to her.

ELEANOR

Surely there must be a catch.

LODESTONE

No catch, Mrs. Cornweevil. Just sign right here on the dotted line.

ELEANOR scrutinizes contract.

ELEANOR

I see the name of your outfit is Hades Drilling and Excavation, Mr. Lodestone. The word Hades has a nasty taint to it.

LODESTONE

It does indeed.

ELEANOR

Likewise, your motto on the letterhead -- "We drill for your soul."

LODESTONE

I simply like to think of it as drilling, shall we say, from the bottom up.

ELEANOR

I am also curious about this small print.

LODESTONE

Mere legalese, Mrs. Cornweevil, the usual technical scratchings, and nothing to concern yourself about. Simply sign over the rights to your soul -- I mean, your land -- and we shall conclude our deal. Why delay your happy ending?

ELEANOR

Bertrand?

He nods emphatically.

ELEANOR

I'm not convinced it is merely oil you're drilling for here. No, Mr. Lodestone, I believe this is just not for us. And so, not to seem unduly abrupt, I must bid you good day.

BERTRAND

Wait!

ELEANOR

Bertrand, say a sweet goodbye. Trust me in this. Good day, Mr. Lodestone.

LODESTONE

I hate for you to pass up such a lucrative deal, Mrs. Cornweevil, but I must defer to your judgment. Good day to you, and to you, Mr. Cornweevil. Should you have a change of heart, that's where you can reach me.

He gives her copy of his business card. He bows, goes out.

BERTRAND

There goes our happy ending. We blew it.

ELEANOR

You don't seriously believe that stranger was peddling drilling rights to oil, Bertrand? No, no, no -- he was after something more. Something more precious dear than any sensible person would be loath to part with. He wanted something more, Bertrand. Think, Bertrand, think.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! at the door.

ELEANOR

Don't, Bertrand, I warn you.

BERTRAND

Please?

ELEANOR

We'll come up with the money somehow. We always have before.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! BERTRAND throws her a look of desperation.

ELEANOR

Oh, very well. If it will make you happy, go ahead and answer it. I'm going back to my knitting.

BERTRAND goes to the door. ELEANOR can't resist sneaking up behind him, peeking over his shoulder.

BERTRAND

Good afternoon, sir.

(MORE)

BERTRAND (cont'd)

What's that you say, you come to offer us the
promise of eternal salvation?

(gestures)

Those two horns on the top of your head?

(a pause)

I must tell you, that offer *does* sound almost
too good to be true.

He turns to us, winks.

FADE OUT.

THE END