

The Honeylocust Tree

Winner, ETC. Readers Theater, Naples FL

[At rise]

Standing at the front door of a house in a middle-class Pittsburgh neighborhood is Lila Gross, 82. It's around noon of a mild day in April. She has a small roller bag suitcase at her side. She takes out her key ring, which holds several keys. She struggles unsuccessfully to find the one that works.

LILA: (to herself)

What's the matter with these damn keys...maybe it's this one...come on, work! (She bangs the doorknocker) Boys? Boys! (She pounds on the door with her fist.) Boys!

MAGGIE [from inside]:

[Her voice calling from inside] Wait a minute, I'm coming.

Maggie Wolfe, a woman in her early 30's opens the door

Can I help you ma'am?

LILA:

Who are you and what are you doing in my house?

MAGGIE:

Excuse me?

LILA:

I said, what are you doing in my house?

MAGGIE:

Your house? What do you mean, your house.

LILA:

That's what I said, didn't I?

MAGGIE:

Look, lady, I have no idea what you're doing here or what you're talking about. Now if you'll excuse me.

Maggie tries to close the door but Lila puts her foot between the door and the doorjamb.

LILA:

Now you just hold on, whoever you are. This is my house I'm talking about.

MAGGIE:

Lady, move your foot, all right?

LILA:

No.

MAGGIE:

All right, let's try this. Ma'am, are you lost or something?

LILA:

Lost? How could I be lost at my own house?

MAGGIE:

(Sighs) Wow. Listen dear, I really don't have time to stand here all day and continue this silly argument about who's house it is. I really don't. I have work to do. I have a baby inside. So would you please remove your foot from my door?

LILA:

Just a second. This is 707 Mellon Street, isn't it?

MAGGIE:

Yep, last time I looked, that's what the number says. But it's not your house.

LILA:

Now *you* listen. I've lived here for 47 years. My husband Al and I bought this place for \$17,500 with the G.I. bill after he came back from the war in Germany. Al was the second boy I dated. He proposed to me at a dance at the Rainbow Gardens dance hall. They were playing I love you for sentimental reasons. *(She starts to sing or hum the tune.)*

MAGGIE:

Yeah, well, that's very sweet and charming and all, but like I just told you, I truly do not have time for this, all right? So once and for all, read my lips: This. Is. Not. Your. House. It's my house. I bought it three months ago.

LILA:

Ha! Now that is ridiculous. How could you buy it if I didn't sell it to you? Are my sons in there?

MAGGIE:

What? No.

LILA:

I need to call them about this.

MAGGIE:

Fine. Go ahead and call them. Just move your foot and get off my porch.

LILA:

How am I supposed to call them from here? I need to come in and use my telephone.

MAGGIE:

You don't have a cell phone?

LILA:

Don't be ridiculous. Why would I need a thing like that?

MAGGIE:

Oh gee, I don't know, maybe because it's 2004? You do know what year it is, right?

LILA:

I don't like your tone of voice, missy.

MAGGIE:

Missy? (*Maggie laughs.*) God, this is like an episode of *Outer Limits*.

LILA:

Go ahead and laugh. You won't think it's so funny when my boys get here. They'll know what you're up to. Are you one of those squatters?

MAGGIE:

Oh my God. You need to stop watching reality television.

LILA:

James and Randy grown men now. James is as grey as I am. Randy shaves his head. I think he's going bald and he's trying to cover it up. I always tell him, Randy, you can't fight nature.

MAGGIE:

Wait, wait, hold on a minute. James and Randy?

LILA:

How many times do I have to tell you? Now like I said, I need to use the phone.

MAGGIE:

James and Randy.... Wait a minute. Gross! You last name is Gross, isn't it.

LILA:

How in the world do you know?

MAGGIE:

Now look, Mrs. Gross...

LILA:

You can call me Lila. Only my doctors call me Mrs. Gross.

MAGGIE:

O.K., Lila. You know what? I think you should call your sons right now. Come with me.

LILA:

It's about time.

Maggie and Lila enter the living room. On one side is Maggie's desk with her computer and paperwork. In a playpen in the center of the room is Maggie's infant daughter. Lila makes a beeline for the playpen.

LILA:

Oh my goodness if she isn't the cutest little thing.

MAGGIE:

Mrs. Gross. Lila? Where are you going?

LILA:

I just love her curls. My son James had curly hair, strawberry blonde, just like hers. I wanted to keep it long but my husband Al said cut it off, you don't want the boy looking like a sissy. James is divorced now. People these days get divorced over the slightest things, as if a marriage never should have any bumps in the road. And Randy, he's still single. Sometimes I think he goes with men.

MAGGIE:

Lila, could you please just sit down over here on the sofa while I get the phone?

LILA:

That's a lovely philodendron. Funny, I don't remember having one. What's the baby's name?

MAGGIE:

Nora.

LILA:

Nora. Isn't that lovely. Like in the old movies. They show movies almost every night up at Sunset Towers, but they're stupid, most of them. The only reason to go is they're free. Your Nora has the bluest eyes.

MAGGIE:

Thank you. Anyway, here's the phone.

LILA

Where's the cord?

MAGGIE:

Cord? You never heard of a cordless phone?

LILA:

(Looking at Maggie's hand) Oh my, look at your nails. Now that's what I call a beautiful manicure. Who does your nails?

MAGGIE:

What?

LILA:

Up at Sunset Towers they have a woman comes in twice a week to do nails. She's Asian. The way she talks you can't understand a word she says. She only charges six dollars, but that's about all it's worth, the way she slops on the polish. I could complain, but what good would it do, since as I say she doesn't speak the language. That's a beautiful wedding ring, too.

MAGGIE:

Yeah, I guess so.

LILA:

After Al died, I just couldn't wear my ring anymore. It just didn't feel right. I mean, once your husband's dead your not married anymore so why wear the ring? I had mine made into a pendant. I should have packed it before I left Sunset Towers.

MAGGIE:

Wait a minute. Sunset Towers? Isn't that way over in Homestead? How did you get here?

LILA:

I took a yellow cab. It was \$23.60, plus tip. My car is in the garage. I haven't driven it for months. It probably won't start. Al says you have to run the engine at least once a week or the battery will go dead.

MAGGIE:

Lila, your car isn't in the garage.

LILA:

My sons James and Randy, they don't want me to drive anymore. I don't know why. What did you say your name was? Nora?

MAGGIE:

That's the baby's name. I'm Maggie Wolfe.

LILA:

Well, Maggie, to tell you the truth, I don't have much use for Sunset Towers. It's full of old people sitting around the lobby, trying to figure out what to do with themselves. Waiting to die, I suppose. No sense talking to them. Half of them don't understand what you say and the other half is hard of hearing. They give you a nametag to wear. As if I didn't know my own name.

MAGGIE:

(Laughs) Really.

LILA:

Believe me, it's no laughing matter. It wasn't my idea to move up there, but when I fell down the steps with a basket of laundry and turned my ankle, James, he's my oldest, he said I was too old to be running up and down the stairs.

MAGGIE:

Well he was right. But why did you...

LILA:

So anyway, this morning I was getting box of cornflakes from the top cabinet when a mouse ran out of it. Could have been a rat, the size of it. It rubbed against my bad ankle. I can still feel the fur against my skin. Gave me the creeps. Then it shot into my bedroom.

MAGGIE:

God, that is so disgusting. Did you call maintenance?

LILA:

What can they do? The rat was gone. Well, I'm not staying in a place with rats in your cupboard. You're supposed to sign out, but I didn't tell anyone I was leaving, not even my friend Sally Jessowitz. She's nice but she's a talker. She would blab it all over the place.

MAGGIE:

You mean nobody knows you left?

LILA:

There's no rats in my house. This place is dry as a bone. Even the basement. Al made sure of it. It's where I store all the pictures of my boys. They're arranged in albums. Come on, I'll show you.

Lila gets up and starts for the basement stairs.

MAGGIE:

Lila, slow down, where are you going? You need to call your sons.

LILA:

I must have been up and down these stairs a million times. I was carrying a basket of whites and the next thing I knew I was at the bottom, flat on my back.

MAGGIE:

You could have broken your neck.

LILA:

That's what Randy said. They kept me in the hospital for four days. For an ankle. I told them, wrap it up and let me go home. They even took X-rays of my head. Now why would they do that for an ankle?

They pause at the top of the stairs.

MAGGIE:

Oh shit. There's that dripping noise again. It's driving me crazy.

LILA:

Oh, that? Come downstairs and I'll show you.

MAGGIE:

No, you need to...well all right, but please be careful, O.K.? The last thing I need is a lawsuit.

LILA:

There. See behind the furnace? There's a bucket that hangs from the drain valve. For the overflow. That's your drip. You need to empty it into the set tub every so often.

MAGGIE:

Christ, I didn't even know it was there.

LILA:

Also, it's time to change the batteries in the smoke detectors. I do it every year when it changes to Daylight Savings Time. Like I say, my husband used to take care of this kind of thing.

MAGGIE:

Mine, too.

LILA:

What? What do you mean? Did something happen to him?

MAGGIE:

You could say that.

LILA:

Did he...did he have an accident or something?

MAGGIE:

I wish he'd gotten run over by a dump truck. But the truth is, the bastard walked out on me two months ago.

LILA:

Oh my. That's terrible.

MAGGIE:

Yep. It sure is.

LILA:

(After a pause) You wanna talk about it?

MAGGIE:

What?

LILA:

Talk about it. My husband Al used to say it's better to get things off your chest. Never go to bed angry, he'd say.

MAGGIE:

Thanks for the Hallmark Card sentiment.

LILA:

Otherwise, how could we have stayed married 47 years?

MAGGIE:

Lucky you.

LILA:

Was there another woman?

MAGGIE:

What? Jesus Lila, maybe? I don't know. I woke up one morning and he was gone, and on my night table there was a note—I can't do this anymore. One lousy sentence. Typed, not even hand-written. I can't do this anymore. He didn't even sign it.

LILA:

Just like that, he walked out on you and the baby? Oh my.

MAGGIE:

All his clothes were still in the closet. He didn't even take his laptop. So I didn't get it. I was afraid maybe the note was a suicide note. I called his office but they said he wasn't in. I got even more freaked out. So I called his parents, told them about the note, told

them I was really scared, and I asked them if they knew where Robbie was. You know what his mother told me? She said, we're so sorry, but Robbie needs to find himself. *Find* himself? Damn it, he's 32 years old. He should have fucking found himself before we got married. Sorry about the language.

LILA:

It's o.k. It's nothing I haven't heard before. Believe me, having two boys, you hear things. Of course Al, if he heard them speak like that there was hell to pay.

MAGGIE:

Maybe I should have suspected something, he'd gotten so quiet, but I thought, he has a lot on his mind, what with his big job at the firm and the new house and the new baby and all. I mean, I'd ask him Robbie, is something bothering you, honey please tell me, and he'd say, no no, I'm fine. And then I get, I can't do this anymore.

LILA:

Maggie, it wasn't your fault.

MAGGIE:

You're damn right. I mean, what the hell did I ever do to deserve this? I'm not a shrew. I'm not a bitch. I'm nice, goddamn it. Maybe that's my problem. Nice girls are easy to fool. But you know what the worst part of it is? Sometimes at night, I miss him so much I ache all over.

LILA:

Sometimes that's how I feel about it Al. I roll over in bed and expect to see him but all that's there is the other pillow. Why did he have to die on me? It makes me so mad some times. People say there's a reason for everything. That's a bunch of baloney.

MAGGIE:

No shit.

LILA:

Yeah, no shit.

MAGGIE:

Anyway, it's been too long. Robbie's not coming back.

LILA:

Walking out on you like that, I wouldn't take him back even if he did.

MAGGIE:

So what am I supposed to do now? Go on Match Dot Com? Hello, I'm Maggie, I'm skinny and have red hair and cute tits, I've been told, and just recently I was abandoned by my bastard husband who walked off to find himself. Oh yeah, and I have one infant. I don't like long walks on the beach because red heads get sunburned. I'm a reluctant cook.

I hate the holidays, and sex, I can take it or leave it...oh but wait, I'm good at math...God, I can't believe I'm telling you all this.

The baby starts crying and the telephone rings.

LILA:

Good Lord, something's wrong with the baby.

MAGGIE:

Oh Christ. Come on, Lila, we have to go upstairs. Watch your ankle. (She snatches her cell phone from her desk.) Hello, Maggie Wolfe...hi, Arthur, how are you? Good, good. Hey listen, can I put you on hold for just a second? Thanks...Lila, can you take her a minute? I have to take this call.

LILA:

Come here, little sweetheart. (Takes baby from crib) Hi there, baby. I'm your Aunt Lila. Yes I am. Now what's all this fussing about? (sings) Hush little baby don't you cry, Lila's gonna sing you a lullaby. (Continues to hum melody)

MAGGIE:

No, I'm fine, Arthur. Just a little out of breath from running up the stairs. So, anyway, the reason I called you before, I need the cost basis for that Class A Enterprise Fund you sold last year...cost basis...no, it's O.K., your advisor will know.

LILA:

You are the sweetest little thing, do you know that? You have the bluest eyes in the world. I'll bet everyone tells you that, don't they. But it's true. Are you hungry? Aunt Lila's gonna fix a bottle up, special, just for you.

MAGGIE:

Right. Oh, and Arthur, as soon as possible, O.K.? Yes. Great. And tell Kathy I said hi...yes, good speaking with you, too. Bye bye.

LILA:

She stopped crying. See, Maggie?

MAGGIE:

I do. You're good with her.

LILA:

My sons don't have any children and probably never will. James is divorced and Randy, well. Nora's the only grandchild I'll ever have. Unless you have more. Why not? You're young enough. Nora would love a little sister or brother.

MAGGIE:

I'll uh, take that under advisement. Lila, listen. Obviously my hands are full here. So please. I need you to call one of your sons to take you home.

LILA:

But I am home.

MAGGIE:

But you're not. This isn't your house anymore. Your sons sold it to me.

LILA:

But it's not their house to sell.

MAGGIE:

But they did. They have power of attorney.

LILA:

Attorney? I don't understand what you mean by that. James is a high school teacher and Randy's a mechanic. He has his own garage. He takes care of my car for me. It probably won't start. It may need a new battery.

MAGGIE:

Lila, what I am telling you is that they sold this house to me in your name.

LILA:

They can do that without asking me?

MAGGIE:

They must have explained this to you.

LILA:

The may have said something of that nature, I don't remember.

MAGGIE:

And now you live in Sunset Towers.

LILA:

I remember the day they moved me up there. The place is so small, it took them less than an hour to set up the furniture. I could clean it in ten minutes. You see how clean I keep this place. Even the basement. Dry as a bone.

MAGGIE:

Lila...

LILA:

The boys told me how much I was going to enjoy it. I asked them, well, what exactly am

I supposed to do with myself all day. Randy said something about doing arts and crafts. Ridiculous. I never did arts and crafts in my entire life. So then James tells me, just relax, do activities, make new friends. They said they'd take care of the house for me. I thought they meant cleaning the windows and mowing the lawn and so forth until I moved back. See, the apartment in Sunset Towers, I thought it was just until my ankle got better.

MAGGIE:

Sunset Towers is where you live now. It's your home.

LILA:

It's a home but it's not my home. Do you understand? (*Stands, places baby in the crib, starts to pace*) Maggie, I've been meaning to ask you. Whatever happened to the Honeylocust tree that was in the front yard? The city of Pittsburgh planted it for us forty-five years ago. All the neighbors, we used to sit under it in the summer and drink iced tea and talk about this and that. My boys used to swing on the branches, play Tarzan of the Apes.

MAGGIE:

The tree was rotting from the inside. I had it taken down.

LILA:

Rotting? I never noticed. Well, if it had to be done, it had to be done. A tree is a living thing. I wouldn't want it to suffer. Maggie, listen. I don't mind if you and the baby live here. You take the master bedroom. I could take the spare, or if you don't want me going up and down the stairs I'll sleep on the pullout sofa. It's a queen size so it's plenty big. The sheets are in the linen closet. Does the baby sleep through the night? It won't bother me to get up to feed her. Unless you're nursing.

MAGGIE:

Lila, please. Call your sons, all right? (*She holds out the cordless phone*)...no, wait, it's all right, I'll call them. (*Scrolls through her cell phone, dials*) Hello James? Hi, Maggie Wolfe...good, and you?...um, listen...no, the house is fine, great, no problems, dry as a bone...listen, your mother is here...yes...just a little while ago...no, she's all right, she's just a little, uh, confused, I think...no no, it's all right, but I think you should come by and pick her up, O.K.?...yes, I'll tell her...15 minutes, that's fine...yes...no, don't apologize, it's all right... O.K., you, too. Lila? That was James. He's coming by to pick you up in 15 minutes.

LILA:

James is coming? Well. You know what, Maggie? I could use some fresh air. Maybe I'll just go outside and wait by the Honeylocust tree.

MAGGIE:

O.K., hold on just a second. Let me get Nora. We'll wait with you.

(They go out to the front yard.)

LILA:

This stump. It's where the tree was.

MAGGIE:

I know.

LILA:

In the summer the leaves were bright green. They rattled when the wind blew. And in the fall, they turned golden. Like a sunset. You should have seen it.

MAGGIE

It sounds beautiful.

LILA:

In the fall my boys would rake up the leaves into a big pile and jump in. James would bury Randy up to his neck. Did I show you the picture Al took of them? There was this low limb my boys swung on, just like chimpanzees. We could put a swing on it for Nora. For when she gets older.

MAGGIE:

Lila, would you like to hold her until James comes?

LILA:

Come here, sweetheart. (She takes the baby)

MAGGIE:

Would you like a photo?

LILA:

But where's the camera?

MAGGIE:

(She holds her phone up) Smile! (She takes the photo and shows it to Lila) See?

LILA:

My goodness. Look Nora, it's you and me.

MAGGIE:

So cute. And Lila, you know what? We can plant a new tree. Right here. What do you think?

(Lights)