

TEACUP TIPSY

a fable in one act

by

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CHARACTERS

Lyla	Dancer, a graceful if withered rose, worn down by the harder edges of existence
Reginald	Mousy, whose only outstanding characteristics are his pronounced stutter and his ideals
Mrs. Widdershins	Growsy, miserly old bat who lives to harangue others and make all the world feel her pain
Man In The Box	Homeless, with many a tale to tell and wisdom to impart, all in iambic pentameter

SETTING

A tea shop.

TIME

Present day.

SCENE: The tea shop

(Man In The Box crouches in his box on the sidewalk just outside the door to St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy, a tea shop of former glory. Its tables and chairs are noticeably run-down, with a chair leg or two obviously missing, the chair propped on something else. Oddly, there are two-dimensional, life-size silhouettes of customers in various poses filling a number of the chairs.)

MAN IN THE BOX

(to audience, adjusting hearing aid)

Come, O gentle hearts, and turn up your ears  
For I've a fable to tell this fine morn.  
'Twill reduce some to tears, others to cheers  
On this day like all too many, save one:  
The day our loveless Lyla loved anew.

(Lyla enters dancing, sadly.)

This morn she danced in as usual, wiping  
Drops from her sorrow stained cheeks that on  
Fertile ground might have blossomed forth flowers  
Of any hue, scent, or wondrous beauty!  
But not this ground. Nay. For lo! dreaded Starbucks  
Cast its dark shadow on the rosy dawns  
Of her younger years, dooming her mother's  
Pride and joy, the most charming wee tea shop,  
Vibrant center of life and love to a  
Bustling and grateful neighborhood.  
Dispenser of delightful teas and talk  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy, shattered.  
No blade of lush grass, nor dew-dropped petal  
To adorn this benighted vale of pain since.  
Woe follows woe, then, unstemmed. Luckless Lyla's  
Mama passes from this sorry, sore place  
To join her gentle Papa, far long gone,  
Leaving lonely Lyla sweeping up fragments.

(Reginald enters.)

Enter the unlikely hero, a man  
With much to say about a better world  
If only this tim'd soul could find his voice.

(Reginald stares at the tea shop, then  
through a window watching Lyla dance,  
sweeping sadly with her broom.)

REGINALD

(stuttering)

Oh...ma...ma...my!

MAN IN THE BOX

(to Reginald)

Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

REGINALD

Wha...what?!

MAN IN THE BOX

Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

REGINALD

Wha...what?

MAN IN THE BOX

Whose footsteps--?

REGINALD

Ma...mine!

(Lyla dances a cup of tea out to Man In  
The Box watched by an awe-struck Reginald.  
She dances back into the tea shop.)

MAN IN THE BOX

(sipping)

Ne'er a finer, more luscious cup of tea  
To be found any spot outside bright heav'n.  
Brewed with soft tears and devotion this cup.

REGINALD

Re...really?

MAN IN THE BOX

(coughing into cup, then offering it)

Aye. Yon maid fails not to gift me each dawn.

No matter her sorrows, her woes. Try some?

REGINALD

(hastily)

Uh...uh! Uh...no! No...than...thanks!

MAN IN THE BOX

(slurping)

Suit yourself!

REGINALD

Umm...wha...what's her...na...name?

MAN IN THE BOX

Man In The Box to all sundry I be.

REGINALD

Oh. Please...pl...pleased to ma...make your acquaintance.

MAN IN THE BOX

Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

REGINALD

Regi...Reg...Reginald. I'm an accoun...  
accou...accountant.

MAN IN THE BOX

I'm sorry for you.

REGINALD

(not noticing, staring at Lyla)

What? But what's...her...na...name?

MAN IN THE BOX

Lyla. The loveless, luckless, the lonely.

REGINALD

(murmuring)

Lyla.

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

REGINALD  
(not stuttering)

She's beautiful.

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

(Mrs. Widdershins enters.)

MAN IN THE BOX  
Behold, the bat! The growsy old hag! The--!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
Don't you come near me, you scuzzy fleabag!

MAN IN THE BOX  
Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
You know who I am! It's not like she has any other  
customers.

MAN IN THE BOX  
Aye. And what a tortured blessing be you.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
You--! Get a job or something.

MAN IN THE BOX  
I have one! Minstrel to all who listen!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
(grunting, entering tea shop)  
I meant a real job.

(She stumps over to Lyla who turns with a  
beautiful, sad smile.)

LYLA  
(not meeting her eyes, reciting dully)  
Good morning, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What's good about it?

LYLA

(reciting dully)

What may I bring you this day?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy. St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.

REGINALD

What's she doing?

MAN IN THE BOX

Peace!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy. St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy!

LYLA

(smiling at her, sadly, reciting)

Well done, Mrs. Widdershins. Thank you for taking the  
Teacup Challenge. You have won your free mug of tea  
at St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

It's not like I haven't done it before.

LYLA

(reciting)

No, Mrs. Widdershins. What may I bring you this day?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Hmph! Earl Grey. Milk and lemon.

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

(Lyla dances her a cup. Mrs. Widdershins  
sits at a table.)

LYLA

(reciting)

Congratulations, Mrs. Widdershins. A crowning cup for the victor. *(more freely)* Sugar may better suit this gray morn.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I'm sweet enough already.

LYLA

(returning to reciting)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

(Mrs. Widdershins fussily takes out her knitting and takes a sip.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

It's too hot! What are you trying to do? Burn an old lady and earn yourself a whopping lawsuit!?

LYLA

No, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Not like the old days, I'm sure.

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Your mother always knew how to serve Earl Grey at just the right temperature.

LYLA

(sadly)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

(Lyla dances between the tables and counter, wiping tables, setting flowers in vases, dusting the silhouettes.)

REGINALD

Wha...Wha...What was tha...that all about?

MAN IN THE BOX

The Teacup Challenge is what you have seen  
Any one patron, be he high or low  
May take up the challenge and recite thus  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy five fold  
Times, spritely, in the blink, wink, of an eye  
Without stumble, nor pause, nor err of like  
To win one mug of hot tea on the house  
And most blessed of all, Lyla's smile.

REGINALD

Her...sm...smile?

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

REGINALD

(inspired)

Win her...sm...smile?

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye. Like behold the bright hues of wondrous  
Joy at the brink of dawn to start your day.

REGINALD

(excitedly)

By recit...recit...reciting St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy  
fi...five times...fa...fast?

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

REGINALD

(deflating)

Without error.

(beat)

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

REGINALD

Oh.

MAN IN THE BOX

Courage, man! No peak is gained 'twout scal'ng it.

REGINALD

Uh...ri...right. Are you go...going to co...come in?

MAN IN THE BOX

Nay. The days are long on yon pavement cold  
For old, tired bones. Not yet, though. I wait.

REGINALD

Fo...for what?

MAN IN THE BOX

For the sea change, the turning of the tide.

REGINALD

Oh. When wi...will th...that happen?

MAN IN THE BOX

You will know it when you feel the current.

REGINALD

Oh.

(He squares his shoulders, enters shop.)

LYLA

(not meeting his eyes, reciting)

Good morning. What may I bring you this day?

REGINALD

(desperately)

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy! (*shocked at himself,  
plunging on*) St. Teresa's Tea...Tea...Teacu...Tea...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(chortling loudly)

That has to be the worst attempt at the Teacup  
Challenge I've ever seen.

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Never saw anything so bad in your mother's day. Hee-  
hee-hee!

LYLA

No, Mrs. Widdershins.

REGINALD

Uh...I...I...I'm sor...sorry.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What a mouse of a man! Why, this is better entertainment than American Idol!

LYLA

Ye--...No--...Something, Mrs. Widdershins.

(Reginald turns to bolt.)

LYLA

What may I bring you this day?

REGINALD

(turning back)

Som...some...something...soothing.

LYLA

(not meeting his eyes, more freely)

Soothing, I can do. A peppermint with honey adorned.

REGINALD

Ye...Ye...Ye...Ye...Ye--!

LYLA

(returning to reciting)

Won't you sit down?

(She dances him a cup as he finds a seat at a table. He, pays, takes a sip and sighs. She dances away.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

So, you thought you'd try the Teacup Challenge, did you?

REGINALD

I...I...I...I!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Spit it out, man! What's wrong with you? Got a stutter or something?

REGINALD

I...I...I...I...Yes.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lacy Widdershins.

REGINALD

Oh! I...Reg...Regi--!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

In my day, a man would stand when introducing himself.

REGINALD

(jerking to his feet)

Oh! I'm sor...sorry. Regi...Reginald.  
Accou...Accountant.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Bean counter, eh?

REGINALD

Ye...Yes.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well, if I had a nickel for every syllable you stammer out trying to form a sentence, I'd be a wealthy woman. You couldn't count 'em all. Hee-hee-hee!

REGINALD

Ye...Yes.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well, don't just stand there looking like a fool! Sit down! Sit down!

REGINALD

Than...thank you.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What do you think of my Teacup Challenge idea?

REGINALD

Yours? It wa...wa...wa--?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Goodness! A woman can get exhausted making conversation with you. Don't worry, I'll do it. Yes, it was mine. Lyla may be a nice girl, but she's no businesswoman. Too generous by far! Not like her mother, Latia, in her heyday. Why, St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy used to be the belle of the ball in this neighborhood! Where everyone came! Even the mayor - the old pinchfist - would sit right over there (*pointing*) surrounded by his toadied up cronies, planning all the ways they would steal money from an honest old woman, just wanting to enjoy her golden years, with their crackpot schemes to levy more taxes, more fees! Paving potholes! Let their SUVs bottom out, if you ask me!

REGINALD

Uh...uh...uh...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And these parks! With their picnic benches always rotting, and swing sets always breaking down, and ponds always scumming over with algae, and, and, and trees having to be sprayed for gypsy moths! That costs a whole bundle, I can tell you! What for!? Too many sniveling, snot-nosed kids in this world, as it is. Make 'em stay indoors, if you ask me! They're all going to wind up behind bars, anyway! Might as well get 'em used to it. Isn't that right, Lyla?

LYLA

(*absentmindedly*)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Too right! Now where was I?

REGINALD

The...the...tea...teacup...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Too right! The Teacup Challenge! When that newfangled Starbucks opened down the street (*pointing*), things weren't so bad, at first. Her mother wasn't concerned. I told her to be. But she wasn't, old fool. Then, another one opened (*pointing*) two blocks away, and another one (*pointing*) across the street and another one on the corner, and (*pointing*) another one over there! Her customers all dried up! No longer the belle of the ball in these people's eyes! Ungrateful wretches! After all that Latia did for this neighborhood. No, no! They didn't care! They wanted to be stylish! Style is as style does it was in my day! Right, Lyla?

LYLA

(*absentmindedly*)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

You're too generous for your own good, I tell her! Don't I, Lyla? Just look at the way she gives away her tea to that lousy doormat outside every morning! Every morning, I tell you!

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

So, I came up with a way to get her customers back, I did! I told her, she needed a gimmick! Thus, the Teacup Challenge! And, I didn't charge her a penny for the idea, did I, Lyla?

LYLA

No, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And it worked, didn't it, Lyla?

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(proudly)

I take that challenge every morning. Not that I ever got anything out of it.

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Eh?!

LYLA

(hurriedly)

I mean, no, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Too right!

(Reginald looks around the empty shop,  
then gets up and goes outside.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Where are you going?! Hmph! In my day, young men asked permission to take leave of their elders.

MAN IN THE BOX

Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

REGINALD

Mine. Why...?

MAN IN THE BOX

Because!

REGINALD

(gesturing at silhouettes)

Oh. But, then...?

MAN IN THE BOX

That, too! 'Twas my notion, aye, to be sure!

REGINALD

Why?

MAN IN THE BOX

I found yon maid weeping one gloomy morn  
At table, her porcelain'd arm cov'ring  
A wee small business seminar spread  
That said, to be success, appear success.  
Yon maid was beside herself with tables  
Shorn of patrons dear, all the world to see  
An empty tea shop where no soul lingers  
To sip, to sup, to sit, to chat, to laugh.  
Nay fear, yon maid, I said! This, we can do:  
Cut out yon silhouettes for yon tables  
To people! Through windows, then, the world  
Will see a tea shop happy and content  
And there, the happy patrons, purses full  
Will abide. To linger, to sip, to sup.

REGINALD

That's--

MAN IN THE BOX

'Tis! A brilliant stroke in a world grown dark.

REGINALD

An...interesting sales tech...techni...technique.

MAN IN THE BOX

Thank'ee! That day, my post here I took to  
Welcome all and sundry who would betide.

REGINALD

But...bu...does it...wo...work?

MAN IN THE BOX

Of course! It brought you hither, did it not?

REGINALD

I...I...I...

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

REGINALD

Will...will you co...come in?

MAN IN THE BOX

Not yet.

REGINALD

The sea change?

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

REGINALD

What's it like?

MAN IN THE BOX

You will know it when you feel the current.

(Reginald enters tea shop.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Scrounging, that's what they were doing! I can tell you that! Tipping, tapping with their tiny hammers on every cabinet, every wall, every floor, every ceiling, every nook, every cranny! All over the house! In the attic, in the basement, in the pantry, in the parlor, in the sitting room, in the quarters above the second garage...oh, back are you, mouse of a man? I was telling Lyla what the holidays have become like at our house now that my nephews have begun visiting! We have a real honest to goodness family gathering!

LYLA

(absentmindedly)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

They'll never find it, I can tell you that! Nope! They're just going to have to sit at my knee until I'm six feet under and the will is read! Hee-hee-hee!

REGINALD

I...I...I...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

For God's good sake, man! Spit it out!

REGINALD

I see.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Good! Now sit down and let me tell you what the last Christmas was like! It was such merry, yuletide fun! With that great, gorgeous tree and its hundreds of ornaments, they stayed up all night, examining each one for secret compartments and the like! Hoping to find the family jewels! Oh, my I love the holidays. By the end, they were positively white and faint from lack of sleep that whole week long. Why, you should come over some time and meet them! They're coming for Mother's Day.

REGINALD

I...I...I...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Never mind. Start your answer now, and I'll get it by then. They're good boys. Spoiled to the core by their mother, being the rotten fruit of her eye, of course. No, in my day, it was spare the rod and spoil the child, and that's how it should be.

REGINALD

Really?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes! Dole out to this world with a giving heart and you're asking to be taken for every penny, that's what I say! Open-handedness is for fools. Better to treat this world wisely with a closed fist! Lyla, I'm finished with my tea.

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(proudly standing)

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy. St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy. St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.

LYLA

(smiling at her, sadly)

Well done, Mrs. Widdershins. Thank you for taking the Teacup Challenge. You have won your free mug of tea at St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy. What may I bring you this day?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Melon tea. With two cubes.

LYLA

(tiredly)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

(She dances a cup to Mrs. Widdershins.)

REGINALD

I thou...I thought...that could only hap...happen once. A...day.

LYLA

Congratulations, Mrs. Widdershins. A crowning cup for the victor.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(sipping)

Does it? Nobody ever tells me anything. That's good. A little cool, this one, Lyla. But never mind. This old woman has seen worse. Where was I?

REGINALD

On gener...genero...generos--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

That's right! That fool's gold of generosity! Why, in my day--

REGINALD

But, I think--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

In my day, young men did not interrupt their elders.

REGINALD

I'm sor...sorry. But, I was ju...just thinking that...I like generosity.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, really?

REGINALD

Ye...yes. I think that gen...generosity stretches us...Mak...Makes us bet...better people in the lon...long run.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What brazen poppycock is that?! Make us better people?! I suppose then that I should give my Bentley to the next homeless wretch dotting the intersection simply because the charlatan is carrying a sign that says, "God wants you to help me"!?

REGINALD

No! I'm on...only say...say...say--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Don't rush, boy. We have all day.

REGINALD

That..tha...that we should give...with...with...within limits.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Limits.

REGINALD

Yes. Right up to our lim...limit. To protec... protect ourselves.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well, at least you show some sense. My Bentley's my limit. And my Belair. My Studebaker. My Styleline. My Thunderbird. My Roadst--

REGINALD

And once we've reached that limit, we go past it.

(Unnoticed, Lyla looks at him.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Go past it! But...why?

REGINALD

That...tha...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, for heaven's sake!

REGINALD

That we may grow fro...from the experience.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Grow?! Grow?! How? Poorer?!

REGINALD

No. More compa...compassionate.

MAN IN THE BOX

(loud enough for all to hear)

'Twas a winter isle, that one, that did see

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(shouting out to him)

Oh, shut up you dilapidated and dingy derelict!

MAN IN THE BOX

'Twas a winter isle, that one, that did see

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(shouting again)

Nobody's interested in your willy-nilly tales of woe,  
you hear?

REGINALD

I am.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

It's just another one of his stories! He's got  
hundreds of them. And they all say the same thing.

REGINALD

Shh!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And, once he gets started, a defenseless old woman,  
ignored by all, can't get a word in edgewise!

MAN IN THE BOX

'Twas a winter isle, that one, that did see  
Bitter winds and icy floe, mounting snow  
To freeze out what little warmth there did find  
Amongst the gentle people. A child born  
One day was, a daughter to a couple  
With cupboard bare and less in store beside.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

See? It's always a daughter. And they're always  
poor.

LYLA

Soft. Ease be.

(Reginald stares at her. She blushes and  
looks away.)

MAN IN THE BOX

Nay fear. This daughter was to loving hearts  
Their proudest possession, if possession  
A child may be termed. Their happiest light,  
Source of all joy, all laughter, all bright tears  
Of pride and perplexity. For there was  
That day when daughter a cub found adrift  
And tried to help only to know that cub's  
Mother's quick-earnèd wrath. The fierce bear snow  
Roared her rage, rearing claws, and teeth too sharp  
Prepared to pounce, stilled only by father's  
Shout and all too ready arrow and bow.  
All paused. And waited, searching for a sign.  
Then, wondrous moment! Daughter stayed the hand  
Of father stern and saved that fierce bear snow  
'Til, cub gathered with many a growl, she  
Trundled off into the safe, far distance.  
"She loves her daughter more than life," daughter  
Told, "As you do me." Father smiled, confused,  
Yet proud. Many a moon they knew such bliss.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Here comes the bad part.

REGINALD, LYLA

Shh!--Peace!

(Reginald stares at her, amazed. She avoids his gaze.)

MAN IN THE BOX

Before the howling storm came, bitter wind  
Freezing all hope, all love, all tenderness  
In this winter isle of icy floe and--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Mounting snow. He repeats himself, see?

(The others ignore her. She harrumphs.)

MAN IN THE BOX

Ever and anon the angry storm blew!  
Thinner, thinner by day did these hearts grow  
Giving all they had to lovèd daughter  
As want stretched forth its dark hand's ceaseless grip.  
Older, frailer, weaker, spare none for them,  
Nay, their daughter's needs must always come fore  
Even to the end. 'Til, first the Papa  
Breathed his last.

(Lyla gasps.)

Leaving the Mama alone

This burden to carry 'midst bitter ice  
And chill, freezing wind. The mother had saved  
One last morsel of their long empty store.  
She caressed this morsel with all her tears

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, please.

MAN IN THE BOX

All her love, all her hopes, too, all her dreams  
That this last morsel to her daughter fed  
Might carry the child as far as needed  
To survive the storm's long, dark, pit'less night.  
Cried her last, with tremblin' fingers she placed  
This last morsel, swollen with devotion  
Into her daughter's starvèd mouth and kissed  
The little one's fever'sh brow and--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

--Died.

(Lyla sobs.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

We get it. What happens next?

MAN IN THE BOX

Her mother's dearest, fondest hopes proved true:  
The wee one lived moon by moon, the morsel  
sustained by. Yet, her mother's deepest fears  
Also proved true as the dread dark storm's clutch  
Ne'er slacked its grasp. What's more, I fear to tell  
The morsel reached its end, its power, too,  
Failed before the ne'er-ending icy blast.  
Alone the wee one found herself too soon,  
Moon by moon passing, growing thinner now  
As she saw her own parents grow before.  
With mounting care, mounting fear, mounting snow  
Her only companions, lone, she set forth.  
Her quick freezing tears on cheeks her sole warmth  
She met one day--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

How long is this story going to go on?!

MAN IN THE BOX

'midst the snow, icy floe  
That fierce bear snow, now woef'ly cubless, too.  
No pounce this time, rearing claws, teeth too sharp  
Just sad growls and mewls to a face well-known  
And a will fierce not to lose one cub more  
To the dark, cold, lasting night of harsh storms.  
They made their home in fierce snow bear's snug cave  
Warmed by each other's love and tenderness,  
If little food. 'Til the fateful day came--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Finally!

MAN IN THE BOX

Food at the last, fierce bear snow gave herself  
To her daughter, the most precious morsel  
She could find.

(All moan in different emotions.)

MAN IN THE BOX

Such gifts oft prove enduring true.  
Daughter, sorceress made of mothers' morsels  
Honored them to lasting glory. That storm  
Blew many a moon, ere it, too, blew out.  
That day, daughter, into the new cleared sky  
Threw up fiery emblems of mother first's  
Love and hopes, shaped as mother two that we  
May all, each night, observe with wond'ring eyes  
To remember.

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What a load of schmaltzy blather!

LYLA

Peace. Pray hold.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lyla?!

LYLA

(blushing)

Such dreams our world might know.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(shouting at Man In The Box)

See! See?! See, what the effect of your stories are  
on the untutored young! (to Lyla) And I suppose  
you're going to tell me that this fantasy you dream of  
is one in which we should all give selflessly without  
any hope, or care, of getting anything back in return.

LYLA

'Tis...a dream.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Good luck!

LYLA

(sadly)

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh! Fine! Dream on, girl! Why, your mother had some foolish notions in her day, but this one tops them--!

REGINALD

(abruptly standing)

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy! St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

But you haven't finished your first cup!

REGINALD

I...I...St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy! Saint...Te...  
Te...Cup...cup...tea...Saint...cup...tea...tea...  
tea...tea! Gah!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(laughing loudly)

What a poor church mouse of a man, you are! Hee-hee-  
hee!

REGINALD

(sitting, sadly, wretchedly)

I...I...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Fortune favors the bold and the deluded as they say!

LYLA

Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

REGINALD

I...I...May I? Tr...tr...try a second time?

LYLA

(not meeting his eyes)

Mrs. Widdershins?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Eh? Uh, well, that's a point isn't it? Hmmm...we do  
have to respect the artistic integrity of the Teacup  
Challenge idea...Hmmm...

REGINALD

Pl...pl...please?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(proudly, grandly)

As the visionary who designed this great gimmick, I would have to say that...Yes. Let's let him have his second attempt.

REGINALD

Tha...than...thank you!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Save it for your second try. You're going to need it.

REGINALD

(weakly)

Yes.

(He stands, visibly concentrating with great effort. Lyla looks away.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well? Get on with it, man! Spit it out!

(beat)

REGINALD

(fearfully)

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy. Saint...Teres...Tip...  
Topsy...Cup...Cup of...something...tea...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(chortling more loudly)

You didn't even get past the first one this time! Why this is more fun than the Home Shopping Network!

REGINALD

(sitting, wretchedly)

Oh...oh...

(Lyla moves away.)

REGINALD

(hurriedly)

May...ma...may I have another?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Not a third attempt?! No, no, no, no, no. We can't stretch artistic integrity that far!

REGINALD

I mean...meant...a cup of...tea.

LYLA

(turning, not meeting his eyes)

What may I bring you this day?

REGINALD

Uh...uh...some...uh...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, for goodness sake! Give him something with a little fire in it! To stiffen up his spine. The man's got the backbone of a sponge!

REGINALD

I...I...I...I...

LYLA

(more freely)

A little fire I can do. A lemon grass, a third steeping has known.

REGINALD

Tha...than...thank you!

(She dances him a cup as he watches her every step. Mrs. Widdershins' watches with evident amusement. He pays and Lyla moves away. Reginald sips in misery.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

How is it?

REGINALD

Bit...bitter.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Good! A little bitterness every now and then builds character! Makes you realize that you can't go through this world with blinders on.

REGINALD

I don't...! Don...don't have...bl...blind...blind  
on.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, yes you do. All that talk about generosity stretching us, making us more compassionate in the long run. And Lyla's nonsense about giving to this world without expectation of any return. Hah! You'll learn. A few more years of strolling through life with those dewy eyes trusting others' supposed goodness. Trusting others to do the right thing! A few smack downs will do you some good. You'll learn.

REGINALD

(stung)

And...what...makes...you so...cer...certain?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

One church bake sale proves the point. One church bake sale will make the scales drop from your eyes, so to speak. Hee-hee-hee!

(Lyla turns, interested.)

REGINALD

Church bak...bake sale?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes. Behold the great drama of the church bake sale! Endless, bitter wrangling over which treats should have the prime position on the table: cherried brownies? rice krispie bars? snicker-doodles? pointsettia balls? s'mores bars? double chocolate biscotti? oatmeal and raisin cookies? monkey peanut butter bars? macadamia nut chocolate chip? lemon curd bars? Scottish shortbread? ginger snaps? acorn magic delights? apple spice drops? banana orange bars? maple--?

REGINALD

But?!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes?

REGINALD

Isn't there roo...room for all?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Of course not! Simpleton! This is a retail operation. And the real estate that captures the human eye in any display, as any retailer will attest, is preciously small. Oh, the endless committee meetings, the fierce debates, the fiery sermons, the sizzling homilies delivered on the merits of each treat! Which should be chosen for the ultimate honor? All the charismatic and cantankerous personalities of the congregation marking out fortified positions on the battlefield, rallying all who would come to their unfurled standards. Loyalties put to the ultimate test, life-long friendships betrayed at the last moment, whole flanks turned on a moment's notice because of some last minute midnight phone call offering Judas gold to the faint of heart, resulting in blood feuds that span so many embittered generations that the Hatfields and McCoys tiff seems child's play in comparison!

REGINALD

A bake sale?! A church bak...bake sale!?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(with dignity)

Of course! Why, Hattie Smith still tells the story of the awful, the fateful day when the Annual Church Bake Sale Planning Committee of '38 chose stolid workhorse of bake sales everywhere, blackberry yummys, for the honor only to have Regina Reynolds change her mind at two in the morning, caucus her phone tree to hang all their fortunes on the latest fad: calypso pine-lime bars. The results were disastrous. Sales dropped overnight! Too late they tried to change back to the blackberry yummys. But, no use! The branding had taken hold in the minds of the consumer, and the damage was irretrievable. Hattie's grandmother stopped talking to Regina Reynolds from that day forward. The following autumn's Homecoming Sunday, she even tried to have Regina Reynolds shunned for her treacherous perfidy!

REGINALD

No!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes! To this day, three generations later, the Smiths and the Reynolds sit on the opposite ends of the pews, refusing to acknowledge each others' existence. That's where trust gets you in this world!

REGINALD

But...why? This is...hor...horrible! For what reason?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

These are questions of great moment! In any year, a church struggles to make ends meet. The Annual Church Bake Sale is usually all that stands between a congregation's life, liberty and happiness or the closing of the church's doors. Choose the wrong treat for the ultimate honor of prime place on the table and you doom a church's happy community life into the squalid, wretched existence of having to rent out the building to (*shuddering*) Al-Anon types.

REGINALD

I...see...I...guess.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And this year, it gets worse.

REGINALD

Wor...worse?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes! In these hard financial times, of whole nations', whole hemispheres, economies teetering on the brink of destruction all because one American president decided, not through lack of attention, but to drive his economy into another Great Depression... in these times of horror and anxiety, imagine the stakes involved for your small neighborhood church!

REGINALD

Ummm...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

When all the pikers are claiming that (*mimicking*) they've lost their jobs! their 401Ks aren't what they used to be! their stock portfolios weren't diversified enough! their trust funds are dried up! Imagine how empty the offering plates become during wretched times such as these!

REGINALD

I...see.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Imagine the pressures involved in this year's Bake Sale! (*chuckling*) Oh, the blood-letting we'll see this year! Actually, why not come and worship with us some Sunday morning? We're really a very friendly and welcoming congregation. Come as you are!

REGINALD

I...uh...

(Lyla turns away.)

REGINALD

(panicked)

I still...be...believe...that trust between strangers is...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Is what?

(Lyla turns back.)

REGINALD

Is...is...is...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, for crying out loud! Good god, you flabby jellyfish of a--!

REGINALD

All! All that...st...stands between us and a world so cold...so lo...lonely, so heartless that nobody wants to live in it anymore. I certainly don't.

(Lyla watches him earnestly, unnoticed.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What?! (to Man In The Box outside) See you pathetic Pied Piper of phantasms and pretense! That's right! Lead them on! Lead them all to the river's edge to drown their dreams!

REGINALD

I...didn't ge...get that fr...from Man In The Box.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, really?

REGINALD

Yes.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Then, I suppose you're about to tell me that you believe that wagonload of horse manure?

REGINALD

Yes. Yes, I do.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Trust.

REGINALD

Trust.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Between strangers.

REGINALD

Between strangers, yes.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Gospel truth.

REGINALD

I...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Hah!

REGINALD

It's just...th...that...I...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Put your money where your mouth is, boy!

REGINALD

I...It's just that I...don't go to ch...church.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, well, if that's all that's bothering you, I can help you there!

REGINALD

No...it's just...th...that...Yes...yes...Gospel truth.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Hmph! Okay, let's put it to the test: You drive to the grocery store to buy a carton of milk. That's all you want. You're in a hurry. As you step out of the car, a man approaches. He looks distressed, a bit disheveled, but basically cleaned up. He says, "My car just ran out of gas. Could you loan me five bucks so that I can fill a can at a gas station?" What do you do?

REGINALD

Uh...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

So much for gospel truth!

REGINALD

But...is thi...this a big city or a sm...small town?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Should it matter?

(Lyla turns away.)

REGINALD

(hurriedly)

No! No.

(She turns back.)

REGINALD

I...It...it doesn't matter. I give him the five bucks.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(relishingly)

Fair enough. Same scenario, different man. This one is dirty, unshaven, smelly, reeking of rum and piss, clearly hasn't slept in a bed, taken a shower, or changed into clean clothes in weeks. Same question: "My car just ran out of gas. Could you loan me five bucks so that I can fill a can at a gas station?"

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Hah!

REGINALD

I...don't know.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I knew it. There's your trust between strangers! All that stands between us and a cold and comfortless world!

REGINALD

(helplessly)

I...!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Don't worry, boy.

REGINALD

Why...why not?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I like you the better for it. So long as you keep your wallet in your pants and go buy your milk.

MAN IN THE BOX

(loudly, from outside shop)

Mild meadow at Bartholomew Fair

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, shut up, you mangy, moth-eaten mongrel of a make-a-do minstrel!

REGINALD

Oh, please, now...!

MAN IN THE BOX

(imperturbably)

Mild meadow at Bartholomew Fair

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

See what happens when you encourage him! You rob a simple old woman of good heart her simple pleasure of peace!

REGINALD

But, I li...like his st...stories. At least I liked th...the last one.

MAN IN THE BOX

Mild meadow at Bartholomew Fair  
Sun-kissed that day was, touching all the wares  
The good folk had brought forth to see, to share.  
Brightest of all were the rich hues of cloth  
Dyed in scarlets and golds and vivid blues  
Of the town Master Weaver's eyes and hands.  
The envy of all, his work was, known  
for his discriminating touch and taste  
That had ornamented many a chair  
Or cushion or bombe or caparisoned  
Steed fit to bear a king in lux'ried state.  
Yet not known to all, Master Weaver's eyes  
Sharp now dulling, his hands firm now shaking.  
His fam'ly dear kept troth that none may know  
So long as may be.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes, yes, yes. How tragic. Where's the girl?

REGINALD

What?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

The girl! There's always a girl, remember?

LYLA

Serene. Be still.

MAN IN THE BOX

Lo! This day, the wealthiest and cruelest  
Of all the nobles of the realm came forth.  
Hearing the Master Weaver's worth, he sought  
The perfect wedding gown for his young bride.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Bride?! Bride!? She's not supposed to be a bride.  
The girl's always poor, remember?

LYLA, REGINALD

Soft!--Shh!

MAN IN THE BOX

This wealthy noble cruel demanded a  
Bliaut of scarlet

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(shouting)

A what?

MAN IN THE BOX

Eh?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(shouting)

A what?!

MAN IN THE BOX

Kirtle or fitted gown of French design.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh. Why didn't he say so? This, this is what you get  
from pan-handling the pavement all day long, a bundle  
of plague-ridden rags, harassing, terrifying the good  
folk of the city. Instead of cleaning up, tightening  
down, and (*loudly*) working a decent job like a model,  
productive citizen. Why, you wind up on welfare,  
draining the taxpayer's coffers, speaking gibberish  
and sounding like a foreigner! (*loudly*) Why not start  
wearing a headrag, too, you desert mite!

MAN IN THE BOX

Bliaut of scarlet and gold for his bride  
To be. To be the finest in the land by far  
And o'ershine all his rivals in greatness.  
But, ware! Master Weaver's friends did him tell.  
Dyes for such a fine bliaut a year's living  
Did cost. And if he failed, who would replac't?  
More'oer dark deceit stains noble cruel's name.  
By trick or trap, wile or ruse, noble cruel  
Will soonest leap than play fair, pay his due.  
The Master Weaver was torn in twain true  
By this commission chanced. To win meant  
Secure for his fam'ly dear. But to lose!  
His heart faltered in now failing to choose.  
Not so his daughter true

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(murmuring, caught up)

There she is.

MAN IN THE BOX

whose close eyes, fingers

Had from her father many talents learned  
Pleaded they take noble cruel at his word,  
Bid Master Weaver this commission 'cept.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Stupid girl!

MAN IN THE BOX

"One week" wealthy noble cruel cried and left.  
A week of tumult and deep care that was  
Costly in little sleep and much fear.  
As father's eyes failed him further than he  
Had ever known before. The last, last eve  
Raised a hue and cry, his eyes dark now grown  
As a moonless night, now filled with tears.  
His dyer's pot empty, weaver's loom bare.  
A year's living lost, bought in dyes unused.  
Lo! Daughter then this burden took, to dye  
Said hues of bright carmine scarlet and gold  
And weave all into a bliaut so fine  
Father's friends amazed, saw her talent true,  
the father surpassed.

(All sigh in different emotions.)

MAN IN THE BOX

The next morn, wealthy noble cruel hearing  
Of Master Weaver's eyes gone dark, hastened  
To Bart Fair's meadow the gown to collect.  
Daughter true presented the bliaut fine.  
Alas! Noble cruel demanded whose work  
This be. Daughter true told true--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

...The fool.

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lyla?!

REGINALD

Yes, shh!

MAN IN THE BOX

Wealthy noble cruel feigned in bliaut fine  
An err to find. He claimed the dress a fault,  
Daughter true inept, an artless clumsy,  
Wretch. Up he swept, bliaut fine on his steed  
And galloped away to his wedding day  
No payment to daughter true, nor father  
Due.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well, what'd she expect?

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins, soft! Ease be!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lyla, what's gotten into you? Your mother would never  
have--

REGINALD

Is there more?

MAN IN THE BOX

Mild meadow at Bartholomew Fair  
Sun-kissed that day was, that saw daughter true  
Weep deep tears, ruing noble cruel to trust.  
Nay fear! Word spread from father's friends to all  
Of bliaut fine's wondrous dyes and light weave.  
All the world lent hand, carrying word by mouth  
By hoof, by wing to all the land, the king.  
He listened. He thought. He pondered. He moved.  
To wealthy noble cruel's wed he now sped.  
He saw the bliaut fine with wondering eyes.  
To Bart Fair's meadow next did his steed go,  
A piece of bliaut fine in tow, where there  
Daughter true did he meet and ask her how.  
She blushed, then trusted and, falt'ring, explained.  
King, awed, daughter true his castle did take  
To create, to guide, to teach, all who would  
Her craft to learn. Soon kingdom fair came known  
For her dyes, her weaves, and knew a luster  
Of name that ne'er failed, daughter true's fine art.

REGINALD

Wow! The pow...power of the pe...people.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes, if only we all had a king who could swoop down  
and rescue our chestnuts from the fire like that, he  
might have a story worth listening to.

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins...the king!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, little miss busy-body who is suddenly developing a  
mouth? In my day, children did not interrupt their  
elders. But, what, pray tell, is this story about,  
then?

LYLA

Daughter true...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And? So? Come on, enlighten us with all your vast  
experience of this world!

(beat)

LYLA  
(sadly)

There be.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
There, see? Goodness knows where you young people would wind up without the firm, steady, wise hand of we elders to set you straight!

LYLA  
(tiredly)  
Yes, Mrs. Widdershins.

REGINALD  
(abruptly standing)  
Saint--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
Oh no! Not again! Even I have my limits watching some hapless Don Quixote tilting hopelessly at windmills.

REGINALD  
I...I...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
Here, boy. I can't stand to see a fool suffer. I'll do it for you.

(Reginald exits the shop.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
Where are you going? What happened to trust between strangers?!

MAN IN THE BOX  
Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

REGINALD  
Mine.

(beat)

MAN IN THE BOX

Well?

(beat)

REGINALD

How...?

MAN IN THE BOX

A peak twice scaled, and failed, is best gone round.

REGINALD

Oh.

(beat)

REGINALD

But...

MAN IN THE BOX

B'times, the deepest hearts are not won but wooed.

REGINALD

(inspiredly)

Ah!

(beat)

REGINALD

(breathlessly)

I st...still...nee...need...one more...

MAN IN THE BOX

The most tim'd voice has, yet, a song to sing  
When his most fervent passion is aroused.

REGINALD

That's...that's it!

(He strides proudly into the shop and  
stands by his chair.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And what wisdom did the fusty, filthy fungus gnat have  
to impart this time?

REGINALD

(singing, badly off-key)

Swaying room as the music starts  
Strangers making the most of the dark  
Two by two their bodies become one

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What on earth?! You sound like a wounded dog! Sit  
down and quit all that wretched howling!!

(Lyla stares at Reginald, mystified)

REGINALD

(screwing up his courage, continuing)

I see you through the smokey air  
Can't you feel the weight of my stare  
You're so close but still a world away  
What I'm dying to say, is that

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Stop it! Shut up!! Lyla, stop him!

REGINALD

(more loudly yet)

I'm Topsy for you!  
Touch me once and you'll know it's true  
I never wanted anyone like this  
It's all brand new, you'll feel it in my kiss  
I'm Topsy for you, Topsy for you!

(Lyla dances to him, smiles at him.)

LYLA

Well done, Mr...

REGINALD

(eyes wide, breathless)

It's Reg...Reg...Regin...Reg...Reg...!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Reginald, the mousy accountant.

REGINALD

Ye...ye...ye...ye...Yes!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Whose only outstanding trait is his stutter.

LYLA

Well done, Reginald. Thank you for taking the Teacup Challenge. You have won your free mug of tea at St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What?!

LYLA

What may I bring you this day?

REGINALD

I'll take...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

You'll take nothing! That was no Teacup Challenge! Lyla, he'll get nothing!

LYLA

(more freely)

Foxtrot smooth, pricked with an orange drop sharp.

REGINALD

Fox...foxtr...fox...?

LYLA

(more freely\_

A textured brew of peppermint tang, South African Rooibos and Egyptian chamomile coupled.

REGINALD

It sounds...ama...amazing! And all I want...wanted was your smile.

LYLA

(smiling beatifically, if sadly)

My smile you have.

(She dances him a cup as he sits, proudly, if a little shaken.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What just happened?

MAN IN THE BOX

(loudly)

Behold! A fresh new breeze bloweth in your face.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

More like a wind breaking if you ask me.

LYLA

(serving him)

Congratulations, Reginald. A crowning cup for the victor.

REGINALD

Why do...do you always sound like you're re...reciting lines?

LYLA

The words are not mine.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

They're mine! Part of my brilliant design for the Teacup Challenge! But the line is "A crowning cup for the victor. This time." She always forgets the last two words.

REGINALD

I wonder why.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

So do I! It's just two words.

(Reginald exits tea shop.)

MAN IN THE BOX

Whose footsteps linger on the threshold of St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy this morn?

REGINALD

Will you come in now?

(beat)

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

(Reginald helps him up; they enter shop.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What is he doing--?!

MAN IN THE BOX

Behold, the bat! The growsy old hag! The--!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Get out! Get out you greasy, grimy, grubby, grungepot of filth!

REGINALD

He's ma...my guest.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Not on my watch, I tell you! This neighborhood has already gone to the dogs what with all those Starbucks littering the street!

REGINALD

He's my guest.

(Reginald seats Man In The Box at a table.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lyla! Now, see here! Get that scummy, scuzzy, sloppy, slovenly, stragglng snailslime out of this establishment!

LYLA

(ignoring her)

Good day, Man In The Box. What may I bring you?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(slapping table)

No! It's "What may I bring you this day?" "What may I bring you (*emphasizing*) this day?" Worse and worse! (to Reginald) Do you see what you've done?!

REGINALD

I like the change. It's more na...natural.

MAN IN THE BOX

Ne'er a finer, more luscious cup of tea  
To be found any spot outside bright heav'n.  
Brewed with soft tears and devotion, one cup.

LYLA

(more freely)

Soft tears I can do. Raspberry patch, to sweeten your tongue.

(She dances him a cup.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

At least she got that line right!

REGINALD

But...! You wrote all her li...lines?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Of course!

REGINALD

But...why?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

She has no words of her own. That's what I told you, she's no businesswoman, not like her mother. Too generous by far. Case in point!

REGINALD

Don't let's st...start on generosity again. (to Lyla)  
You really have no words of your own?

LYLA

I do not.

REGINALD

But, why? Your voice is so beau...beautiful to listen to.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(rasping)

Oh, please! What use is a beautiful voice when it has nothing worthy saying?

LYLA

(sadly)

My thanks to you.

REGINALD

But...that's...!

LYLA

Worry not. Please. For what I know not how to say, I dance.

REGINALD

You dance your words?

LYLA

Yea.

REGINALD

Why?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Isn't it obvious, you clod-pated cretin! She's lost everything in life!

REGINALD

Everything!?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Everything. Her happy childhood, then, her father, then her mother and now, with all those florid fops flaunting their Ferraris in for a flashy Frappuccino, then out of the neighborhood again without so much as a bye your leave! What do you expect?! Now she's losing her mother's dream as well!

REGINALD

St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.

MAN IN THE BOX

Vibrant center of life and love to once  
Bustling and grateful neighborhood.  
Dispenser of delightful teas and talk  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy, shattered.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I like the way I tell the story better.

REGINALD

But...but...but...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, for heaven's sake!

REGINALD

There mu...must be something to be done!

LYLA

Yes. I accept.

REGINALD

Accept?

LYLA

My sorrow.

REGINALD

Your sorrow!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

She accepts the world as it is. Of course! It's the wisest thing to do. About the only wise thing she ever does.

REGINALD

No!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

No, what?

REGINALD

No, if we don't li...like the world, we...we...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, please! More of this woo-woo be the change you want to see in the world nonsense!

LYLA

Wait, please. My acceptance of my sorrow, I will dance for you.

REGINALD

But...

LYLA

Nay, please. Pray, watch and listen.

(She walks over to the cracked boombox, turns it on. To a moving Pie Jesu, she dances a heart-breakingly beautiful movement. Reginald bursts into tears. Mrs. Widdershins slowly stands, her face a mask of pain. Lyla finishes.)

REGINALD

It's so...beautiful.

LYLA

(putting a finger to his lips)

While I dance, I live. More I cannot say.

REGINALD

What about the day you st...stop dancing?

LYLA

The day I die.

(She dances away from him.)

REGINALD

I won't st...stand for this.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

You're sitting.

REGINALD

(standing)

I won't stand for this. When...times are hard, wh...when we don't think we can keep go...going, that's when we dig deep down within us to find--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, fiddlesticks! (to Man In The Box) See the kind of nonsense you're stuffing in their heads! (to Reginald) I always find it an insufferable bore when the young start prating on about things they clearly do not understand!

REGINALD

Not understand?!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes! Who are you to preach about facing up to adversity when it's abundantly clear that you have no idea what it's like to weather a storm of cosmic proportions!

REGINALD

Cosmic what?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

When the entire universe is arrayed against you! Negotiate one obstacle only to find yet one more thrown up in its place! And if that's not enough, the suffering to be borne on top of it all! Trial after tribulation, affliction accumulated with anguish, difficulty deepened by distress, misfortune meted out with misery.

REGINALD

The...church bake sale?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

No, not the bake sale! Life! Suffering! Torment! Torture! Woe! Life!

REGINALD

But...I thought you were...weal...wealthy.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(breaking)

So what?! What good does a capacious coffer do you when you've no one to share it with?

REGINALD

I'm...sorry.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I told her. I told her that when Sam died--

(Lyla sobs.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

--to go slow. To be more careful. More cautious. Lyla's their blessing and she was all the child had now! But, oh no! She had to go full-steam ahead, charging straight ahead into a full-blown competition with Howard Schultz himself!

REGINALD

Starbucks.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(hissing)

The Anti-Christ! A behemoth of a corporation so large, a Hydra of so many vile heads, that it has branches on every corner of the tea capital of the world!

REGINALD

I don't...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Beijing! If the Chinese are going to throw over their much-vaunted tea-soaked tradition five thousand years old, and start slurping Pumpkin Spice lattes, instead, what hope can we Teacup Topsy have!

REGINALD

Did she listen to you?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(breaking)

She should have!

REGINALD

But why?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Why?!

REGINALD

I mean no dis...disrespect. But, she was the entrepreneur building her bus...business and you were...well...just her customer.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(crying)

She was my friend. The only one I have ever known.  
First, the Good Lord took Ol' Pete from my grasp.  
Then, He took Sam next--

(Lyla stops dancing and sits, crying  
quietly.)

REGINALD

(thickly)

Lyla's father.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And then Latia...she...

REGINALD

Lyla's mother.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(sobbing)

Yes! We were the three Ls, I'd tell her - Lacey,  
Latia and Lyla - love, luck and light to our  
neighborhood! We were going to be happy forever!  
(*gathering herself*) First, love disappeared from my  
life. Then, luck left Latia and, after she exhausted  
herself going head to head with the Beelzebub,  
charging straight into an early grave, the light left  
her daughter, never to return.

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I asked her, when she was breathing her last, "Was it  
worth it?" She smiled, because she believed that she  
had won, for the Starbucks across the street had just  
closed its doors. The next day, another two branches  
opened down the street.

(beat)

(beat)

LYLA

(dancing again)

Please fear not, Mrs. Widdershins. I dance once more.

REGINALD

Well...good!

LYLA

What comes I know not. What comes I fear not, for I dance.

REGINALD

Well, I...haven't experienced that kind of suffering, but...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I don't know why the Good Lord has rained down such misfortune upon our houses. I've prayed! Goodness knows, I've prayed for the tide to turn in our favor.

MAN IN THE BOX

Behold the sea change approacheth!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

The what?

MAN IN THE BOX

You will know it when you feel the current.

REGINALD

I haven't had anything like that happen to me. But, I just I can't believe in a God who ra...rains down misfortune on anyone. The world maybe, I me...mean sure. But God doesn't.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, what do you know? You don't even go to church!

MAN IN THE BOX

Sweet-scented olive grove on hillside stood

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, Lord!

REGINALD

Good!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What's good about it?

REGINALD

I needed some help there.

MAN IN THE BOX

Sweet-scented olive grove on hillside stood  
In gentle climes of sun-strewn hues and balms  
Where one may stroll, and sit, and olive chew  
And spit the tangy pit to new grove grow  
And garland said hillside's dew with olives new.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Enough about the olives!

REGINALD

I like it. It reminds me of the Garden of Eden.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(ignoring him)

And?

MAN IN THE BOX

There, in gentle climes of sun-strewn--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Hues and balms. Hues and balms. Got it! And?

MAN IN THE BOX

A shepherdess bold--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(contentedly)

Ah.

MAN IN THE BOX

--did there her flock tend  
Morn after eve, eve after morn a time.  
Now shepherdess bold among olives strolled  
In these happy, gentle climes, chewing and  
Spitting, sunning and sitting, feel an ache  
Of a lack persistent within. She sighed  
She moaned, she groaned, she roamed up hill and down  
This lack persistent to ease.

LYLA

This I do understand.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS  
(affectionately)

Yes, Lyla. You would.

MAN IN THE BOX

One day, in clime of sun-strewn hues and balms  
A crone wizened shepherdess bold did meet  
And did plea, "Whither my lack persistent?"  
"'Tis God you seek, child dear" crone replied.  
"How may God I find?" shepherdess bold tried.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I can help her there!

REGINALD

Somehow...

LYLA

Soft. Ease be.

MAN IN THE BOX

"'Tis not how to quer' but where, child dear."  
Shepherdess bold did flock then leave to crone  
To keep 'til her return. To hillside then  
With pockets olives deep she bade farewell  
And set out for God to find in the world.  
Seeking the loft'est height she first did tend  
Scaling the highest mountaintop she knew.  
Seven years full did it take with palms raw  
Scraped and bleeding, 'til with final gasp  
Hover'ng 'bove the highest wafts of white cloud  
On eminence grand, she climbed there to find  
A raven col'ssal coal preening her wings.  
"Is this the place God I may find?" she gasped.  
"Ne'er that I e'er did see," raven coal cawed  
And spat, and spewed, and preened, and flew away.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well, of course not!

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins, peace, pray hold.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

All I'm saying is that--

REGINALD

Shh!

MAN IN THE BOX

Having sought high, now low shepherdess bold  
Did seek. Off that eminence grand did she  
Jump.

(All gasp in different emotions.)

MAN IN THE BOX

And fall, plummeting far, far below  
To oceans's wide welcome arms to enfold and  
Brine to drink, swimming down, down, down, sunlight  
Left seven years behind, with bright glowing  
Coiling lamprays to guide her journey deep.  
There, at ocean's floor, did shepherdess bold  
Find a magnificent devilfish dread  
In gloom, bid her closer to come to see.  
Shepherdess bold stroked near, devilfish dread's  
Waving tentacles of slime, writhing b'hind  
To wrap her in death's tight grasp devilfish  
To dine.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

No!

LYLA, REGINALD

Peace!--Shh!

MAN IN THE BOX

Shepherdess bold now did bubble  
"Is this the place God I may find?" her plea.  
"Ne'er that I e'er did see!" devilfish dread  
Gloom did drool and move to snatch the child dear!  
Up, quick as a wink, blink, shepherdess bold  
Sprang away, strokes strong and sure to the sun  
Light in water deep, then slight, then jump out  
On dry land!

(All exclaim and sigh.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What happens next?!

MAN IN THE BOX

Seven more years did shepherdess bold roam  
Far and wide in her ceaseless quest, God to  
Find. Whole kingdoms did she save from monsters  
Fierce. Hydra's heads hewn, Chimera's claws clewed  
Medusa's mane marred, Cyclops' cave charred and  
A whole host of others like. But ne'er an'where  
Did God she find. 'Til, wearied dear, her quest  
As empty as full her breast honors borne  
Her hillside grove of olive tang, hues and  
Gentle climes did she repair, crone wizened  
To hold, to hug, to sit, to sup, to tell  
Of her failure dear.

(All sigh for a beat.)

REGINALD

That...that ca...can't be it!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Of course, that's it! What did you expect? A happy  
ending?

REGINALD

Well, I don't know. Per...perhaps...she finds God...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Of course, she does! You said it yourself: She lived  
in the Garden of Eden, with all its olive pits  
littering the ground. She was just too stupid to see  
that!

REGINALD

No, no! It can't mean that. To tr...travel all over  
the world, have all those ad...adventures just to find  
out in the end that--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

There's no place like home. God is everywhere! You  
don't have to go to the ends of the earth to learn  
that! If you young people would listen to your elders  
once in a while it would save you the cost of airfare.

LYLA

Serene. Be still. There is more to tell.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lyla?!

LYLA

(dancing)

For there among the gentle climes and hues  
Of olive tang and tim'd flock lowing dear  
The shepherdess bold, one night dark and deep  
Beheld a truth so sapient and startlin' sage  
That all the world marveled at her wisdom.

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Which was?

LYLA

'Twas in the quest for God that she found God.  
And need now search for God, high, nor low, no more.

REGINALD

She became her own god?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What?! What a mound of meretricious malarkey. Why,  
that's...that's...that's...the godless hare-brained  
heresy of a hatch of heathen Communists! Lyla! Where  
on earth did you--?!

LYLA

(sadly)

If only I knew such strength.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(moving to her)

I know, child dear. I'm sorry.

MAN IN THE BOX

Behold! The sea change is nigh!

REGINALD

(standing)

I've got it!

(All stare at him for a beat.)

REGINALD

Mrs. Widdershins! You would do anything for Lyla's happiness, isn't that right?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Of course! She's my god-daughter! Or, she would be if she would only come to church. That's why I always tell her that--

REGINALD

Later.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

In my day--!

REGINALD

What you're saying is that she's like a daughter to you.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Of course!

REGINALD

Good. But how? Can you give me an example?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Well...I can tell you that any doltish dimwit who dares to date Lyla will have to go through me, first!

REGINALD

Uh...great.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And any witless wretch who wishes to win her hand will be weathering weekly Sunday night dinners at my house for the rest of my long, long existence.

REGINALD

(weakly)

Even...better.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I'm a good cook.

REGINALD

Yes, yes. What I mean is how...much would you give for her happiness?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Everything!

REGINALD

Problem solved! Give her your money!

(Mrs. Widdershins, Lyla gasp.)

LYLA

Reginald, soft, ease be!

REGINALD

It only stands to reason.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

But, I...

REGINALD

Come, Mrs. Widdershins. Put your money where your mouth is.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

No, it's just that...

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins, no! Peace, pray hold!

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(weakly)

I would, dear. Every penny. But...it's all gone.

REGINALD

Gone!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Gone. These years past.

REGINALD

But, where did it...? Your second garage?!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Rented out to (*shuddering*) Al-Anon types. The first one, too.

REGINALD

And all of your cars?!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Sold. Long ago. Even the Bentley.

REGINALD

Sold!? But, how...? Why? Wh...?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Fine. Fine! You think it's so easy watching your life's treasure fade away, year by year?

REGINALD

But I don't understand. It's only money. That's a hardly a reason to--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(*hissing*)

I was talking about Lyla!

REGINALD

Oh. But...where...?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

To Latia. Oh, I told her, I told her. But she was my friend. The only I've ever known. There never was all that much, truth be told. But, I gave it to her.

REGINALD

To...Lyla's mother?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Yes.

REGINALD

What for?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

To save her store her, you stupefied simpleton!

REGINALD

How much...?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Scads.

REGINALD

Scads.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

And that's the only answer any bamboozlingly boneheaded bean counter is ever going to get from me on that subject!

REGINALD

Scads. For what?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(giving up)

Press Releases. Advertising. Promotions. Better product placement. Buzz marketing. Publicity stunts. Online marketing. Mailers. Branding. Door to door "surveys." Banners. You name it, Latia tried it. There was even a new look planned, before all the money dried up. All to out-Starbucks, Starbucks.

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I gave her every penny I had.

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins!

REGINALD

When was this?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, for crying out loud, you moronically mealy-mouthed muttonhead of a--!

REGINALD

Please. I'm trying to help. For how long?

(beat)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(dully)

Five years. Her last five.

(beat)

REGINALD

And how long has Lyla been running the Teacup Topsy?

(Mrs. Widdershins looks to her.)

LYLA

(intrigued)

Here, I have known three full springs without my mother's embrace.

REGINALD

Three years.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

So?

REGINALD

Just that...Latia ran through...scads...of money in five years trying to keep her business from closing while Lyla has kept it open for three years on a shoestring.

(beat)

REGINALD

Isn't that right?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I...guess so. I...never...

REGINALD

Strictly speaking, by analogy, then...well...I may be a muttonhead, but that tells me that when all is said and done...daughter true, her mother surpassed.

(beat)

LYLA

(standing, looking at him)

What must we do?

REGINALD

First, believe in yourself as a woman of business. Trust me, any boneheaded bean counter will tell you that you've earned that. The rest...

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

This is all...too much for a broken-down old woman who has so little money that she has to take the Teacup Challenge everyday just to have a cup!

LYLA

O, Mrs. Widdershins!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh, Lyla. I couldn't tell you! I had to keep it from you, you do understand that, don't you? I thought if I could pretend, it would hold out some hope for you...

REGINALD

Hah!

MAN IN THE BOX

You will know it when you feel the current.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Shut up, you--!...Please, Man In The Box, please be a little more...

MAN IN THE BOX

Aye.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Thank you. *(to Reginald)* What is it, Reginald?

REGINALD

Hope is the key. It is a maxim in my field that the merchant's will breaks long before the cash flow.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

*(hissing)*

That's it?! Easy for you to say!

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins. Ser--

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(grumbling)

Serene. Be still. Yes, I know.

REGINALD

More importantly, the successful business is that which bases itself on the owner's particular, unique strengths.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What?

REGINALD

Play to your strengths.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Oh.

REGINALD

Personally, I don't have any problem with Starbucks or Howard Schultz. In fact, I even admire his ethics.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(hissing)

Lucifer!

REGINALD

The man spends more on healthcare for his employees than he does buying coffee to sell to his customers. In any case, I have no argument with him or Starbucks. Work alongside them, I say. Find the niche they're not filling. They have their customers, we just have to find ours.

(Lyla looks at him, smiles.)

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Ours?!

REGINALD

(hurriedly)

Uh...yours! Their customers are different than yours. You said it yourself: They are simply looking for a trendy place to meet their friends so they can feel, or at least appear to be, stylish. They're not really interested in the neighborhood's past or its future. They're too busy, really. Starbucks is, by its nature here to earn corporate profits by taking advantage of a trend. The Topsy, however, by its very essence represents the past, and the future, the hope of this neighborhood. We...you...merely need to recover the lost grandeur of St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(dryly)

Now, why didn't I think of that?

REGINALD

No, no! Hold on! (*pointing*) You said that the mayor used to hold meetings here with his cronies. Why not take some of these silhouettes, barter some tea with some artists and ask them to paint portraits of the mayor and his cronies doing deals?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Barter?! Tea?!

REGINALD

Or pay them. A little.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

With what?

REGINALD

With costs controlled.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

By whom?

REGINALD

(hurriedly)

Or go even bigger with the nostalgia idea! Framed pictures on the walls of the Topsy's past, with faces that people recognize from their past. Maybe the whole storefront a mural of famous people who used to spend time here. It sends a message: They became a part of the Topsy, so can you! Lots of people feel lonely in this world. Who want to find a place that they can feel a part of. Make it...make it a...community center of sorts!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

No! I already have enough Al-Anon types in my life!

REGINALD

I was thinking more of Lyla teaching dancing lessons to children while their mothers meet their friends over a pot of tea. Here's another one: hiring waitresses who dance throughout the day! That Lyla trained!

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Back to money again!

REGINALD

Or, combine the two! Somehow! Or...well...there are lots of ideas. You've got the basic problem solved: Lyla's already proficient at keeping the Topsy open on a shoestring. That gives u...you...time to figure out how to grow from there! The most important thing you need now is what you're recovering today: hope. With hope, the Topsy will flourish again.

(beat)

LYLA

Reginald speaks truth.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

I don't know, Lyla! Talk about hope is cheap. Even a new coat of paint costs twenty bucks that we don't have.

LYLA

Reginald speaks wisdom.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

You're not listening to me.

LYLA

(moving to Reginald)

Reginald speaks with an open heart.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What?!

REGINALD

(clearing throat)

I don't have...scads...but an accountant's job is always pretty secure and it does pay regularly.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

What?!

REGINALD

If you will take my hand.

LYLA

With solace, with joy, to dance.

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Lyla!

(Lyla takes Reginald's hand with the first notes of a sweepingly graceful waltz.)

MAN IN THE BOX

(approaching Mrs. Widdershins)

Lass?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

(snarling)

Not on your life!

(Man In The Box shrugs, moves away.)

LYLA

Mrs. Widdershins! Please! Happy does he make me!

REGINALD

(laughing happily)

What's for dinner Sunday?

MRS. WIDDERSHINS

Meat loaf!

(She shrugs, picks up a silhouette as all dance, Man In The Box swaying a few steps to himself.)

MAN IN THE BOX

(to audience)

Happ'ly does my tale dance its final steps  
But this: St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy  
Grew to know all Lyla's, Lacey's, Latia's  
Fondest dreams, with the added luster of  
Reginald's new-found strength and ideals  
Spoken out, shared with a world long grown dark,  
Now new-lit with new-found inspiration.  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy again  
Vibrant center of life and love to a  
Bustling and grateful neighborhood.  
Dispenser of delightful teas and talk  
St. Teresa's Teacup Topsy, shattered  
Once, found life anew, bright beacon b'came to  
All who have lost, to dare to dream again.

(Fade.)