Scene Seven

(At the Hotel de Noailles, March 16, 1777. Door downstage right. Window upstage right. Credenza midstage left, against the wall. Tea table midstage. Henriette, Adrienne’s mother enters stage left, and just observes her daughter. Adrienne is reading a letter, obviously not good news. Lays the letter down, picks up a feather duster and ferociously dusts.)

***Adrienne:*** (Sees her mother. Stops. Looks at her, stonefaced. Adrienne is pregnant. Greets her mother, matter-of-fact.) Mama. (Goes back to ferociously dusting.)

***Henriette:*** Adrienne. (Watches. Clears her throat.) What are you doing?

***Adrienne:*** Dusting.

***Henriette:*** I see. (Pause.) Why?

***Adrienne:*** (Stops. Deadpan. Firmly. Looks straight at her mother.) It’s all I know to do. (Back to dusting.)

***Henriette:*** Something wrong?

***Adrienne:*** What makes you think that?

***Henriette:*** Oh, I don’t know. I’ve just never seen you dust before, that’s all.

***Adrienne:*** First time for everything. Did you need something.

***Henriette:*** No, no. (Pause.) You missed a spot…there…(Points to vague area near Adrienne.)

***Adrienne:*** It doesn’t matter.

***Henriette:*** Adrienne. Stop. What’s the matter?

***Adrienne:*** If I stop, I think. When I think, it all comes crashing down.

***Henriette:*** What are you talking about? What comes crashing down? (No response.) I saw the courier. Did you get news?

***Adrienne:*** There. On the table. (Motions to the letter. Continues dusting.)

***Henriette:*** (Picks up the letter and reads it; Adrienne continues busy work.) Doesn’t say where he’s going. He just says he’s going.

***Adrienne:*** We know where.

***Henriette:*** He doesn’t say it.

***Adrienne:*** America. (Matter of fact.) He doesn’t have to say it. You and I know. Don’t we?

***Henriette:*** (Shrugs as if to agree. Looks back at the letter.) Did Papa get a letter, too? Says here Papa will explain. Did the courier deliver to your father?

***Adrienne:*** I don’t know. (Stops. Thoughtfully. Takes the letter back.) “But I have given my word, and I would die rather than go back on it.” What kind of man have I married? (More statement than question.)

***Henriette:*** You know very well.

***Adrienne:*** Mama, this once, just this once, be on my side.

***Henriette:*** To him honor matters.

***Adrienne:*** I’ve made up my mind. I’m mad at him. Henriette barely a year old. Sickly. She’s a sick child. This baby here soon. (Rubbing her pregnant abdomen.) He deserves a cussing. Give me cuss words, Mama. Good ones. I’ll feel better. Get it out of me. Shockers. What are the worst, the most vile cuss words, one’s that’ll hurt him.

***Henriette:*** You don’t mean it.

***Adrienne:*** Right now. At this moment. I do mean it.

***Henriette:*** I know the words.

***Adrienne:*** Tell me. Tell me now.

***Henriette:*** Are you sure? You’ll be surprised.

***Adrienne:*** I’m ready. Tell me the vilest, filthiest…

***Henriette:*** (Looks right and left to be certain no one is in earshot. Hesitates.) Really. They’re too severe. Your delicate condition.

***Adrienne:*** Darn my delicate condition!

***Henriette:*** (Arched eyebrow.) Darn? You get good marks for effort. Feel better?

***Adrienne:*** Does “darn” count as vile? There is a sense of liberation when you say it out loud.

***Henriette:*** If darn makes you feel liberated, I’ll give you a handful that’ll free every inhibition. But you must employ them selectively. Routine destroys their value. Let me tell you some barnburners. (Whispers to Adrienne, whose eyes get wide.)

***Adrienne:*** (Backs away, covers her mouth in horror.) They are evil. The worst words.

***Henriette:*** It embarrasses me that I know them. But in a pinch they come in handy.

***Adrienne:*** We need to clean your mouth. (Sticks the feather duster in her face.)

***Henriette:*** What are you doing? Adrienne! (Laughs as she fends off the feather duster.)

***Adrienne:*** Dusting dirty words. (Laughs. Stops. They both laugh. Adrienne embraces her mother.) I love you. (Quietly. Retrieves the letter.)

***Henriette:*** He is doing what his heart says he must do.

***Adrienne:*** (Reads.) “I had never realized how much I loved you.” Yet he hauls off on a field trip with the boys. Three thousand miles away.

***Henriette:*** He doesn’t love you any less. This is something he must do. He’s been searching for his purpose. He found it.

***Adrienne:*** I can’t be angry. I try. I knew this day would come, somehow. Even when he tried to be like Noailles…gambling, racing, drinking…

***Henriette:*** That time is gone. It was innocent. He was finding his way. I could not love him more if he were my very own son. You know I want the best for both of you. (Worried.)

***Adrienne:*** I know. Something troubles you.

***Henriette:*** People mean well, I suppose. But when they find out…They will tell you how unfortunate you are, now that he’s gone. They will give you sympathy till you are sick of it. Perhaps they will say they don’t understand how your husband could leave you, to go so far on so perilous a mission. They think they lift your spirits. They’ll look to you to agree with them. They’ll invite you to plunder…to plumb the depths of self-pity. I worry…If you give this attitude a vent, it will destroy Gilbert’s reputation and you with him. People want to think the worst. It elevates their own esteem, when they can belittle somebody else. Don’t give in.

***Adrienne:*** (Looks admiringly at her mother.) How do you come to be so wise?

***Henriette:*** Comes naturally.

***Adrienne:*** I’ll not shed a tear. Not one, not that anybody can see anyway. Gilbert’s purpose will be my purpose. (Thoughtful.) Mama. What if…What if he doesn’t come back?

***Henriette:*** Well. You’ll live your life a spinster and you’ll be everlastingly lonely and you will have earned the right to complain about it.

***Adrienne:*** (Sees her mother smile. Adrienne smiles.) Mama, that was rude. Feather duster time…(Pokes duster at her mother, chases her about.)

***Duc:*** (From outside the room.) Mama! Adrienne!

***Henriette:*** Papa must have gotten a letter. That’s his roar.

***Duc:*** (Rushes in through the door, waving a letter.) From Gilbert. Today’s post. Unbelievable! (Stops suddenly. Addresses Adrienne, then Henriette.) Your husband. Your son-in-law.

***Henriette:*** (With authority.) Has he no relation to you?

***Duc:*** (Pulls up short.) Do not trifle with me, woman.

***Henriette:*** (Looks at Adrienne. Smiles.) This is man-speak. It means: Woman mind your place.

***Duc:*** (Serious.) This is not the time. This is serious. He has done it now. It’s a disgrace. It’s an embarrassment.

***Adrienne:*** Papa. Please. What does the letter say?

***Duc:*** It’s unbelievable.

***Henriette:*** We’ve established that.

***Duc:*** Woman, you try my patience.

***Henriette:*** Papa, you have no patience.

***Adrienne:*** Give me the letter. (She snatches it. The Duc paces.) He’s bought a ship. He has a crew. He’s sailing to America. To fight with the insurgents against England.

***Duc:*** I tell you. Disgrace to France. Embarrassment to family. (Pause.) Ruins my holiday to Italy.

***Henriette:*** (Looks at Adrienne, then back to the Duc.) What does your holiday to Italy have to do with it?

***Duc:*** You know very well. My sister and her husband and I planned a trip to Italy…Florence, Rome, Naples…we meet at Marseilles April 15, then to Italy. Gilbert…this affair will ruin it.

***Henriette:*** I’d forgotten. You and your sister can be insufferable when you’re together.

***Duc:*** I told you, you didn’t have to go. Less than a month away.

***Adrienne:*** Papa, what are you going to do?

***Duc:*** I told him…I told him not to do this. What do you mean, “What am I going to do”? I’ll stop him. I’ll use everything I can to stop him. I’ll have the prime minister (flustered)…I’ll have Maurepas clap him in irons. The Bastille is too good for him!

***Adrienne***: (Henriette by her side. Sternly.) Papa. You will do no such thing. Do you hear me?

***Duc:*** (Stops his pacing and ranting, cold. Turns on Adrienne.) What did you say?

***Adrienne:*** You will do no such thing.

***Duc:*** (Stares at her.) This boy…abandons you…one child in the cradle and one on the way…disobeys me…

***Adrienne:*** (Cuts him off.) He is not a boy. He is not in your service. He is not yours to command.

***Duc:*** (Silence. Duc stares at her. Rises to full height. Very angry. Deliberate walks to Adrienne. Stops. Raises his left hand across his body as though to backhand her. Henriette steps between them, deftly. Duc brings his hand down slowly.)

***Henriette:*** No harm is to come to him. Not by you.

***Duc:*** Maurepas. I’ll see Maurepas. The King if need be. This enterprise will stop! (Wheels about, storms out.)

***Henriette:*** My dear, you have witnessed a pineal gland out of control.

***Adrienne:*** What will come of it?

***Henriette:*** It will work itself out. Whatever happens, you are armed. You know cuss words. (Embraces Adrienne.)

(Lights dim.)