

CALLING THE TUNE

by DEBORAH SAVADGE

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CHARACTERS

JJ Williams - a grandmother, feisty, 80

MYRA Glastonbury - her daughter; 50.

MICHAEL Williams - JJ's son, Myra's younger brother. He lives in Florida working at several part-time jobs from tour guide to Concierge.

Offstage voices -

Woman to play voices of Therapist, Judge and Nurse.

Man to play voices of Ben Silverman, and the court clerk

CALLING THE TUNE

**Greed...Loss...Envy...Aging...Family...Memory
Brother and sister clash over custody of their elderly
mother...and her money.**

SETTINGS

Unit set to represent multiple locations: JJ's home, a therapist's office, Myra's home, locations in an assisted living center, a residence motel room, a courtroom etc. Chairs represent a car; lights, as indicated, note change of location.

Note to actors: Slash marks (/) denote when the next speaker begin.

ACT ONE

AT LIGHTS UP, JJ is sitting at a table, playing solitaire. She wears an attractive upscale dress. SHE looks up, sees the audience.

JJ

My name is June Janine Pine Williams. My husband started with a little furniture business and we expanded and expanded. We did very nicely. In those days you / could

MYRA

(From off, calling)

Mother. *(Then, sharply)* Mother!

JJ

She wants me to go with her...to live "near her" in *(with distaste)* Texas. Can you imagine? I don't want to go to Texas. I have no interest in...Tex-as. I told her when she moved there, "Myra, why do you want to move down to godforsaken Texas? But she doesn't listen. I don't know how I raised such a headstrong little girl. *(SHE laughs.)* Of course, she's not a little girl anymore. *(SHE laughs.)*

MYRA

(From off, calling)

Mother! *(Entering, harried, carrying her mother's cardigan)* There you are! Why don't you answer when I call you?

JJ

That sounds like something I used to say to YOU.

MYRA

What?

JJ

That sounds like something I used to say to YOU.

MYRA

What is?

JJ

...What you just said.

MYRA

Oh? (*Handing her the sweater.*) Here. Let's put this on.

JJ

Why?

MYRA

Because you tend to get cold. And I don't want you to get cold.

JJ

(*To the audience*)

You see how she speaks to me? She speaks to me as if I were a child. All the time. I don't get anything but this...this...

MYRA

Who are you talking to?

JJ

(*Looking at us, then back at MYRA*)

Them.

MYRA

Who?

JJ

(*Nervous*)

...No one.

MYRA

Well, let's go now. Put the cards away.

JJ

Where are we going?

MYRA

You know. I've told you.

JJ

I don't recall...

MYRA

I'll tell you when we're in the car.

JJ

By then it will be too late.

MYRA

Put your sweater on. It's time to go.

JJ

Okay. All right, dear. If you say so.

MYRA

I do.

JJ begins to put her sweater on. CROSSFADE to MICHAEL wearing Florida colors.

MICHAEL

I don't keep in touch very well. I call once a week...or so. I send a gift on, the odd birthday. Christmas, of course. Mother's Day - when I remember. Sometimes it creeps up on me and I just call. I saw a lot of her right after Dad died. Then... She always seems to be doing very well. So it came as a shock when I heard.

CROSSFADE to JJ, playing solitaire, wearing sweatpants and a pullover.

JJ

(To the audience)

Guess where I am. *(Looking out at a man in the third row.)* Oh, you're very quick. That's right! I'm in Texas. What can I say?

They've got me in this "community." That's what they call it. Everyone is ancient. And they have this threat: they can move you to the Zombie Zone. Where the totally senile people live in a locked ward.

MYRA

Mother?

SHE wears a jacket, carries shopping bags.

There you are. I brought you some...

SHE rummages in her shopping bags.

JJ

(To the air, pointedly NOT to MYRA)

I'm not speaking to you. *(To the audience)* I'm not speaking to her til she puts me on a plane. I want to / go home.

MYRA

I brought you some clothes that are easy to put on and take off. The aides say that's very important.

JJ

Important to whom?

MYRA

You can be crabby to me if you like, but I plan / to be

JJ

Crabby? You think this is crabby? You ain't seen nuthin' yet, Schweetheart.

MYRA

Why are you talking like that? That isn't you, Mother.

JJ

I'm not myself. That's what You say.

MYRA

We might as well make the best of things.

JJ

"We?" *(To the audience.)* That's the way they speak here: "Why don't We get up now? We need to have some breakfast now. Why don't We try to move our bowels." If I say, "According to the laws of physics, 'We' can't do that." - they just think I'm loony.

MYRA

(Unpacking the new clothes, and taking off the tags)
They're just trying to make you feel at home.

JJ

It's easy to make me feel at home. Just Take me home. Just take me back to my / home.

MYRA

We've put it on the market, Mother. You signed the papers.

JJ

...You tricked me.

MYRA

I love you, Mother. *(JJ looks stricken.)* I'm just trying my best.

JJ

Refuge of scoundrels.

MYRA

What?

JJ

Last. Refuge. What do I mean?

MYRA

I don't know, Mother. Do you want to go down for a nap?

JJ

You may not speak to me that way!

MYRA

(No idea what has upset JJ) What?

JJ

I'm not a child.

MYRA

Then don't act like one.

JJ

Where's Michael? Where's my son?

MYRA

Do you want to brush your teeth?

JJ

No, I want Michael.

MYRA

He's in Florida, Mother. Floor-dah. Michael lives / in Florida

JJ

Well, bring him here. Get him to come here. I'm tired. I'm tired out from dealing with you.

MYRA

Do you want to put on your pajamas?

JJ

No, I don't want to put on my pajamas.

MYRA

You said you were tired.

JJ

I can be tired in what I have on.

MYRA

Okay. I just wanted to know if you wanted my help.

JJ

I'm not speaking to you right now.

MYRA

As you wish.

JJ

I'm not speaking to you.

CROSSFADE as MYRA exits; LIGHTS up on MICHAEL.

MICHAEL

(To audience)

Texas? Big surprise: She hated it there. And when I talked to her on the phone Mom said I should, "Come at once." I could have put her off, but I figured...

MYRA, in tennis togs, talks to MICHAEL by cell phone.

MICHAEL

So what's the crisis?

MYRA

No crisis. She's just being melodramatic. You know how she gets.

MICHAEL

I'm sure it's nothing her Darling Daughter can't handle.

MYRA

You're her darling Mikey. *(Baby-talk voice)* Her iddy biddy cutie pie beebee.

MICHAEL

Me? I haven't been around. You were always the Good Daughter.

MYRA

Are you kidding? I smoked cigarettes. I came home late. I wore my skirts too short.

MICHAEL

Yes, but I "never lived up to my potential."

MYRA

That was Daddy. For Mother, You were the Good Son. I was the Disappointing Daughter.

MICHAEL

So you want me to come there?

MYRA

Suit yourself, Sugar Breath. You usually do.

CROSSFADE. JJ plays solitaire.

JJ

(Counting out a traditional solitaire hand)

"...four, five, six, seven. All good children go to heaven." *(to the audience.)* They don't try very hard in this place. If you don't make a fuss, they leave you alone. I miss my bridge club at home. Eva and I were partners at bridge for years and years. We used to play with our husbands, and then with a couple of friends...It's so hard to keep a foursome together. People keep dying.

(MYRA enters wearing smart street clothes.)

MYRA

Joanie says you have a very good appetite.

JJ

I don't think that's any of Joanie's business.

MYRA

She's just trying to be sure you're adjusting.

JJ

I'm not. I'm not "adjusting." I don't want to adjust.

MYRA

It's not so bad. Is it?

JJ

It's okay when visitors are here, but Heaven forbid you should need anything when the Night Shift is on. The day staff is better, but they're the ones that say things like,

"Let's drink our orange juice. We like orange juice, don't we?" But if I say, "Speak normally to me, please." They think you're just being a crazy old lady. Some of them don't know the difference ...between an Old lady and a Crazy old lady.

MYRA

They just have to get to know you.

JJ

My friends at home know me.

MYRA

Aren't your friends mostly moving south?

JJ

Some. The ones who don't like winter. But I've always liked seeing the snow.

MYRA

But isn't it nicer to be able to go out every day into the sunshine?

JJ

This is not a resort. You seem to think you've brought me to a Club Med.

MYRA

If you're intent on hating the / place -

JJ

There's a lady on this floor. She calls out, "Don't. Don't. Don't." Or, "Oh no, oh no, oh no" over and over again. They keep her quiet during visiting hours, for the most part. I'm not sure how they do that.

MYRA

Would you like something to help you sleep?

JJ

No, I don't want pills to make me sleep and more pills to wake up. I'm not the one who cries out over and over again.

MYRA

Of course you're not.

*CROSSFADE. MYRA walks into light,
holding a box of tissues, sits.*

THERAPIST

(Voice/Over) How does that make you feel?

MYRA

Lousy.

THERAPIST

(V/O) What is it that you're looking for, from your mother?

MYRA

I'm looking for...What is it I'm looking for?

She never got that I hate yellow. She was always giving me yellow nightgowns. I hate yellow nightgowns.

THERAPIST

Uh-huh?

MYRA

When Michael was on teams both my parents would come see him play - even if he was fourth string. They never came to see me play field hockey. And they'd only come to tennis matches if it was the finals or something.

THERAPIST

Anything else?

MYRA

To this day, when she sees me, the first thing she Always says is: "What have you done with your hair?"

LIGHTS CHANGE. MYRA *joins* MICHAEL *in a car.*

MYRA

I'm surprised you actually showed up.

MICHAEL

I come...when I'm summoned.

MYRA

I need you to be on my side.

MICHAEL

(To the audience) Fateful words.

MYRA

What does that mean?

MICHAEL

I'm not talking to you.

MYRA

That's what she said.

MICHAEL

That's what Mom said to you?

MYRA

She's not talking to me until I send her back up north.

MICHAEL

Watch the truck on your left.

MYRA

(lightly) Shut up.

MICHAEL

(Impersonating JJ) "Shut up is naughty."

MYRA

How can you tell me how to drive in the city where I've lived for twelve years? You're my Kid Brother.

MICHAEL

I was just trying to keep us from getting killed.

MYRA

Do you have any idea what kind of stress I've been under?

MICHAEL

It doesn't seem to have affected your manicure.

MYRA

I'm delighted you deigned to come out here.

MICHAEL

Meaning?

MYRA

Can you calm her down a little? Help her settle in to the new place? She's having a hard time adjusting to the move. But everyone says that's perfectly normal. I need some time off. I'm in a doubles tournament this week.

MICHAEL

(to the audience)

Myra dropped me off at the Bon Secours Assisted Living Center. It's clean. It's quiet. Mother loathes it. They take her to the Music Room in a wheelchair to look at the tropical fish tank. She says she's forgetting how to walk. She hates being waked up for breakfast and told when to go to bed. She hates being asked to make a doll out of some yarn, a flower pot and a popsicle stick: "the Magic of Crafts." She practically hissed at a woman who said *(in the voice of the attendant,)* "What's it going to be today? Are you going to be a good girl or a bad girl?"

LIGHTS up on MYRA at her therapist's office.

MYRA

(Holding a folded piece of paper) My previous therapist suggested I make a list of all the ways in which my Mother let me down. He said I should review it with him, and then burn the list. He told me true forgiveness means the willingness to give up the hope that the past can be different...I made the list. I went over it with him, I burned it. ...But I'd written it on my computer...so I

MYRA CONT'D.

printed out another copy for you.

CROSSFADE. LIGHTS up on MICHAEL moving into JJ's space.

MICHAEL

Mother? Ma? How are you?

JJ

(Forlorn) Hello.

MICHAEL

How are you?

JJ

Michael? Michael, thank God you're here.

MICHAEL

Thank you. That's nice to hear.

JJ

Michael, my son, Michael.

MICHAEL

Yes, Ma. Is there something wrong?

JJ

Everything. Everything is wrong.

MICHAEL

Um, like what?

JJ

I can't... Is anybody listening to our conversation?

MICHAEL

No. Who would be listening?

JJ

Someone.

MICHAEL

What's wrong?

JJ

I'm getting slower in this place; I want to go home.

MICHAEL

You don't think that / after awhile

JJ

I've got to get out of here. Please.

MICHAEL

You don't think you'll get to like it here?

JJ

Michael, you know me. Do I seem like the sort of person who would like it in a nursing home...in TEXAS?

MICHAEL

So where do you want to live?

JJ

I want to go home.

MICHAEL

To New Jersey?

JJ

Yes. To Medford.

MICHAEL

But Myra said you sold your house.

JJ

Myra sold my house.

MICHAEL

Myra is good at that sort of thing.

JJ

It's all right. I don't need that big house,
but I want to live where my friends are. Be able to go to
Bridge Club and Garden Club and to church. Be around people
of different ages. Not these...loonies.

MICHAEL

But you're getting good...care here, aren't you?

JJ

...Oh, not you, too. I don't need "care." I had Della to
cook five days a week, and - Gabbie on Wednesdays, to
clean. I don't need to be here. I want to go back home.

MICHAEL

I think Myra thought / that you would

JJ

Myra thinks way too much.

MICHAEL

She thought it would be...nice to have you near where she
lives.

JJ

It would be nice? (*Confidentially*) Michael, she doesn't...

MICHAEL

What?

JJ

(*Decides not to tell him*) She can call me up. She can write

to me. I'd love to have her visit me...in New Jersey.

MICHAEL

Would you go back to Medford? It gets awfully cold there.

JJ

I don't need to go outside on cold days. I could get a...what's the word?...for a kind of apartment...

MICHAEL

A townhouse?

JJ

A condo! I could get a condo somewhere near there, where my friends could come see me. You could come.

MICHAEL

I live in Florida.

JJ

Of course you do. But you could come North, from time to time.

MICHAEL

Are you tired?

JJ

(Crabby) No. I'm not tired. But I'm losing my mind in this place. Can you tell? I'm forgetting words and things. I don't have any...call to use my brain in here and - what's the expression? - "Use It or Lose It."

CROSSFADE, MICHAEL walks into MYRA's light.

MICHAEL

(To MYRA) She's very unhappy.

MYRA

The social worker says she's adjusting nicely.

MICHAEL

Maybe the social worker is just saying what she thinks you want to hear.

MYRA

Makes a nice change.

MICHAEL

What does that mean?

MYRA

It would be nice if you or Mother would say what I want to hear.

MICHAEL

Aren't we supposed to be figuring out what's best for Mother?

MYRA

Don't give me that.

MICHAEL

What?

MYRA

That Saint Michael bullshit.

MICHAEL

I wasn't. I'm just saying.

MYRA

You're supposed to be helping me get her installed in the new place.

MICHAEL

Installed?

MYRA

You know what I mean.

MICHAEL

You said, "installed."

MYRA

Play cards with her. Read to her. Whatever.

MICHAEL

We should talk about what Mother might like better than this Assisted Living Nursing Home.

MYRA

Oh great! You're here for, what, three days, and you're going to find her a new facility?

MICHAEL

No. I'm not going to...I just...Do you think she'd be better off back in Medford where she has friends?

MYRA

Most of her friends are dead. Some of them have moved to be near relatives. The rest of them are these boring old biddies who sit around complaining about their ailments. She's better off in a warm climate near where - one of us - can look after her.

MICHAEL

Well, then, do you want me to take her to Florida?

MYRA

...And do what with her?

MICHAEL

There are a LOT of people from up North in Florida.

MYRA

We're not all crackers here dear; that's a myth.

MICHAEL

I know that. I wasn't / saying

MYRA

I've lived here a dozen years and you and she still can't stop making fun of the fact that I live in Texas.

MICHAEL

You just don't fit our image of the place.

MYRA

Texas is a huge, diverse state. We're not all...Laura Bush.

MICHAEL

I never said you were.

MYRA

(Starts to say something, thinks better of it...)
Anywaaaayyy, what would you do with her? *(MICHAEL looks at her, uncomprehending)* If you took her to Florida, Michael. Try to keep up.

MICHAEL

Oh. Um, I'd find her a place near me and hire a housekeeper, live-in, who could look after her.

MYRA

And on your income as a catering service waiter and part-time tour guide you would / pay for

MICHAEL

I'm not a... *(HE lets it go.)*

MYRA

...you would pay for that exactly...how?

MICHAEL

She has money. Doesn't she? I mean, what about the money from selling her house?

(MYRA looks at him, curiously.)

MYRA

I worked very hard, packing her up, organizing her belongings, deciding what to throw away, what to store ...and on and on.

MICHAEL

I know you did. I'm glad you did that for her. I would have helped you if you'd asked me.

MYRA

We're not moving her again.

MICHAEL

Don't you think she has a say in this?

MYRA walks briskly away. MICHAEL steps downstage, speaks to the audience.

Do you get what she's so weird about? I don't really get her these days, y'know?

MYRA returns, quietly.

I mean, I'm trying my best to be helpful here.

MYRA

Who are you talking to?

MICHAEL looks at her, looks at the audience, makes an ineffectual gesture toward the audience.
CROSSFADE. LIGHTS UP on JJ, in a wheelchair.

JJ

(After a moment)

I'm parked here. Like a vegetable. I am not a vegetable.
(Louder) I am not a VEGETABLE.

For the rest of the script please contact Deborah Savadge or Earl Graham, The Graham Agency.