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ALMA. If you prefer to run around in a circle—

ROGER. Rosemary means what are we waiting for?

ALMA. For the rest to arrive, we're not fully assembled.

MRS. BASSETT. It's almost half an hour after eight when we usually start.

ALMA. We've never had such a small attendance as this. I—I wonder why? *(She knows, of course, that the Rectory is considered a disaster area.)*

MRS. BASSETT. *(Winking at Vernon.)* It's just the weather, Miss Alma, that's all it is, but since it's unlikely to get warmer, I suggest we discuss the manifesto which is hot off the press.

ALMA. I hope I'm not alone in opposing the manifesto.

MRS. BASSETT. I'd like to know why you oppose it.

VERNON. I think it's a question of whether or not we have a serious purpose. I was under the impression that we *had* a serious purpose, but of course, if we *don't* have a serious purpose—

ALMA. Of course we *do* have a serious purpose, but I don't see why that means we have to publish a—manifesto about it!

ROGER. What's wrong with a manifesto?

VERNON. Even if nobody reads the manifesto, it—*crystallizes*—our purpose, in our own minds.

ALMA. Oh, but to say that we—have such lofty ambitions.

ROGER. But, Miss Alma, you are the one who said we were going to make Glorious Hill the *Athens of the Delta*!

ALMA. Yes, but in the manifesto it says the Athens of the whole South, and besides an ambition, a hope of that kind, doesn't have to be—published! In a way to publish it—destroys it! —a little . . .

MRS. BASSETT. The manifesto is beautiful, *perfectly* beautiful, it made me cry!

VERNON. *(Who composed it.)* Thank you, Nancy.

ROGER. Boys and girls, the meeting is called to order. Miss Alma will read us the minutes of the last meeting.

MRS. BASSETT. Oh, let's skip the minutes! Who cares what happened last time? Let's concentrate on the present and the future! That's a widow's philosophy! *(The doorbell rings. Alma drops her papers.)* Butter fingers!

ALMA. *(Breathlessly.)* Did I—hear the bell—ring? *(The bell rings again.)* Yes! —it did! *(She starts to pick up the papers, they slip again.)*

Start

STOP

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ALMA. Mrs. Bassett says it's a widow's philosophy to skip the minutes. And so we are skipping the minutes—ha, ha, ha! I hope everybody is comfortable?

ROSEMARY. I'm just as cold as Greenland's icy mountains!

ALMA. Rosemary, you always are chilly, even in warm weather. I think you must be thin-blooded! —Here. Take this shawl.

ROSEMARY. No thank you, not a shawl! —at least not a gray woolen shawl, I'm not *that* old yet, that I have to be wrapped in a gray shawl.

ALMA. *Excuse me, do forgive me!* —John, I'll put you on this love seat, next to me. —Well, now we are completely assembled!

MRS. BASSETT. Vernon has his verse play with him tonight!

ALMA. (*Uneasily.*) Is that right, Vernon? (*He has a huge manuscript in his lap which he solemnly elevates.*) Oh, I see that you have.

ROSEMARY. I thought that I was supposed to read my paper on William Blake at the meeting.

ALMA. Well, obviously we can't have both at once. That would be an embarrassment of riches! —Now why don't we save the verse play, which appears to be rather long, till some more comfortable evening. I think it's too important to hear under any but ideal circumstances, in warmer weather, with—with *music!* —planned to go with it . . .

ROGER. Yes, let's hear Rosemary's paper on William Blake!

MRS. BASSETT. No, no, no, those dead poets can keep! —Vernon's alive and he's got his verse play with him; he's brought it three times! And each time been disappointed.

VERNON. I am not disappointed not to read my verse play, *that* isn't the point at all, *but—*

ALMA. Shall we take a standing vote on the question?

ROGER. Yes, let's do.

ALMA. Good, good, perfect, let's do! A standing vote. All in favor of postponing the verse play till the next meeting, stand up! (*Rosemary is late in rising.*)

ROSEMARY. Is this a vote? (*As she starts to rise Mrs. Bassett jerks her arm.*)

ROGER. Now, Mrs. Bassett, no rough tactics, please!

ALMA. So we'll save the verse play and begin the New Year with it! (*Rosemary puts on her glasses and rises portentously.*)

ROSEMARY. The poet—William Blake!

Start

MRS. BASSETT. Insane, insane, that man was a mad fanatic!
(*She squints her eyes tight shut and thrusts her thumbs into her ears. The reactions range from indignant to conciliatory.*)

ROGER. Now, Mrs. Bassett!

MRS. BASSETT. This is a free country. I can speak my opinion. And I have read up on him. Go on, Rosemary. I wasn't criticizing your paper. (*But Rosemary sits down, hurt.*)

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett is only joking, Rosemary.

ROSEMARY. No, I don't want to read it if she feels that strongly about it.

MRS. BASSETT. Not a bit, don't be silly! I just don't see why we should encourage the writings of people like that who have already gone into a drunkard's grave!

VARIOUS VOICES. (*Exclaiming.*) Did he? I never heard that about him. Is that true?

ALMA. Mrs. Bassett is mistaken about that. Mrs. Bassett, you have confused Blake with someone else.

MRS. BASSETT. (*Positively.*) Oh, no, don't tell me. I've read up on him and know what I'm talking about. He traveled around with that Frenchman who took a shot at him and landed them both in jail. Brussels, Brussels!

ROGER. (*Gaily.*) Brussels sprouts!

MRS. BASSETT. That's where it happened, fired a gun at him in a drunken stupor, and later one of them died of t.b. in the gutter! All right, I'm finished. I won't say anything more. Go on with your paper, Rosemary. There's nothing like contact with culture! (*Alma gets up.*)

ALMA. Before Rosemary reads her paper on Blake, I think it would be a good idea, since some of us aren't acquainted with his work, to preface the critical and biographical comments with a reading of one of his loveliest lyric poems.

ROSEMARY. I'm not going to read anything at all! Not I!

ALMA. Then let me read it then. (*She takes a paper from Rosemary.*) . . . This is called "Love's Secret." (*She clears her throat and waits for a hush to settle. Rosemary looks stonily at the carpet. Mrs. Bassett looks at the ceiling. John coughs.*)

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.