

Shelter

Characters

DOT: A 58-year-old woman living in public housing.

JO JO: A 26-year-old woman and mother of three. Dot's daughter.

Time: 1983

Place: Camden, New Jersey

ACT I

SCENE 2

DOT enters the kitchen signing "I've Got the World on a String." She places a large cardboard box on the table, opens it and removes a miniature ceramic Victorian house. She lifts it up and admires her creation.

DOT

I'VE GOT THE WOLD ON A STRING, SITTIN' ON A RAINBOW
GOT THE STRING AROUND MY FINGER ...
WHAT A WORLD, WHAT A LIFE, I'M IN LOVE!
Oh yeah, this is gonna take a ribbon for sure.

(DOT places the house on the table and goes to the kitchen cabinet, gets a bottle of E&J brandy and pours some into a teacup.)

I don't know why people love Victorian houses so much. They're just big old things with lots of shit all over them. All kinds of gingerbread and 19 different colors like somebody couldn't make up their mind on what the hell they wanted ... But, I have to say I done a helluva job here. My best yet. Gonna win me

DOT CONT.

first prize. (Raises her teacup.) Here's to the Camden Crafters and beating the crap out of every last one of them.

(She swigs down her drink in one gulp.)

Ahhh ... Ain't nothing like a little Easy Jesus in the morning.

(There's a faint knock on the door. DOT turns making a face like she can hardly hear it.)

Now, who the hell is that?

(DOT opens the door to find JO JO standing there speechless, with the baby carriage next to her.

Oh no, not again. Christ, what is going on with you? Come in here.

(DOT leads JO JO to the kitchen table and wets a dish towel.)

Here, wipe your face. Where are the kids?

JO JO

They're still in school.

DOT

You took them to school looking like this?

JO JO

It happened after I dropped them off.

DOT

Well, what was it this time?

JO JO

Hector.

DOT

Shit, I know that. I mean, what set him off?

JO JO

He saw me and Nick down at the river.

DOT

Oh, real smart, Jo Jo. Hell, you're lucky the man didn't finish you off all together. You hanging with that cop. I told you nothing good was gonna come out of it. What's that cop gonna do for you, huh? Except give you a nice poke when you see him. Is that all you care about? Getting a poke in the woods?

JO JO

Stop it! I been through enough this morning. Nick is fine. Ain't nothing wrong with him. He's the only good thing I got right now.

DOT

Well, what about the kids? I'd say they're some good things.

JO JO

Of course. Sure. My kids. What are you accusing me of?

DOT

Nothing. I'm just saying you can't go cATTin' around on a man and expect to get away with it, that's all.

(DOT goes to the freezer and places ice cubes in another towel.)

JO JO

I can't even move with Hector. He's been following me around for weeks.

DOT

Sure, you think he's stupid? He knows you've been cATTin' around. That's why. You've been prowlin'.

JO JO

Quit saying that! You don't know nothing. Hector's gonna kill me.

DOT

Oh, I know his kind, honey. Don't worry. They don't kill. They just like to watch you squirm, that's all. Like your daddy. Think he was about to put me out of my misery? No way. It was too damn much fun to watch.

JO JO

You think I'm lying? One day he's just gonna walk up to me with a gun and say, "Jo Jo, this is for you." Bam!

DOT

Oh, no way! You still got that big imagination. Just like those famous nightmares of yours. They were real doozies ... Here, put some ice on that.

JO JO

I ain't imagining! You never believed anything I said anyway.

DOT

(DOT puts the towel to JO JO's face.)

I said put it on. Hold it there ... Look, I feel for you, honey. But what other choice do you have than keep Hector happy, huh?

DOT CONT.

There ain't no place else for you to go. You gotta learn to not antagonize the man -- give him reasons to go hitting on you.

JO JO

But ma ...

DOT

Now in my book, having a baby by another man, if that ain't a good reason, I don't know what is. Shit, I've been slapped round for a hell of a lot less than that. I mean, your daddy would haul off and send me halfway across the room, then turn around and say, That was my love tap, Dot. Don't you really get me mad ..." The son of a bitch bastard. Imagine! Love tap! He tapped me straight to Cooper Hospital, that's what he did.

JO JO

No way I'm going back to Hector. I ain't giving him a chance to send me to Cooper again.

DOT

(Pours some E&J into her teacup.)

You young girls just kill me, you know?

(Swings down the brandy._

Give up a good meal-ticket just like that! Ain't got no guts. That's what it is. You have a little spat and wham! You're right out the door. Well, what would have happened to you if I had done that? Huh? Where would we be now?

JO JO

Maybe I wouldn't be here with my face looking like a cantaloupe. Ever think that maybe we'd actually be someplace better?

DOT

You girls are always talking about some place better. Ain't what you got ever good enough? Always looking for something better than what you got right under your nose. Get you in trouble every damn time, Jo Jo. Every damn time.

JO JO

Having a dream is a lot better than just settling, pretending things are great, like you always did. I ain't gonna let Hector keep pounding on me. I ain't you!

DOT

So leave the son of a bitch bastard. Go ahead and make tracks. I don't even know why you come here and waste my time. Nothing I say ever makes no difference.

JO JO

(JO JO gets a bottle from the baby bag hanging from the carriage and begins heating it on the stove as DOT pages through a magazine.)

So, ma, I was hoping you'd let me stay here with the kids for a little while.

DOT

Oh, no, no, no, no. Uh uh. You ain't dumping that bucket of shit on my head. No way, honey. I told you long ago, from now on, the door swings one way -- out! I did my motherly duty, and my wifely duty ... more than most. It's Dotty-time now. I'm done playing house.

JO JO

I'm not talking forever, just a little while, until Nick can get things together for us, that's all.

DOT

And you sit here and tell me you ain't got a good imagination? You think that cop's gonna leave his wife for a homeless woman with three kids? Ha! Honey, you sure ain't learned a goddamn thing about men.

JO JO

I know about men. Don't tell me what I don't know about men.

DOT

I'm telling you so you learn. So maybe something will finally sink into that thick head of yours. (Pours more brandy.) See, honey, men are pure creatures of comfort. The more comfortable you make it, the bigger creature they become ... chomping away and sucking the life out of you. They do it so easy, you don't even know it's happening. Then one day they don't like that taste and, whoosh, you go flying off while they stand there and wave, "Bye, bye ... So long, fool!" Honey, you're being a made a fool. You know that?

JO JO

That's not Nick.

DOT

Oh, he doesn't care that you're tapped out.

JO JO

He says he's gonna help me.

DOT

He knows you don't have any place to live, right?

JO JO

I don't know what he knows. But he protects me. He's a good man.

DOT

Really? Well, I guess you just found yourself the only Dudley Do-Right in town.

JO JO

Look, I'm just asking for some help until I get things straightened out, that's all.

DOT

That's all? The city finds out I got four people stuffed in this chicken-coop apartment and we'll all be living outta shopping bags on the street ... That's all.

JO JO

A week ... Just a week. I promise to be out after that. Please, ma?

DOT

Argggggg.

(DOT picks up the ceramic house that's
been sitting on the table.)

You like my masterpiece, Jo Jo? Ain't it pretty.

JO JO

What? Yeah, it's nice, ma.

DOT

Nice? Why, it's a Michael goddamn Angelo. Gonna win me first
prize. Be nice to live in a place like this. Wouldn't it? Well,
ain't no way that's ever gonna happen. I'd have a better chance
of being fuckin' Miss America, wouldn't I honey?