

A Wake

Inspired by Brecht's – *A Wedding*

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Scene: A wake. Large table, chairs, etc.. The casket is upstage behind a curtain. Cast: Gianni, the deceased; his wife Josie; his brother Altiero; his best friends Frank and Maria (husband and wife); his son Robbie (Roberto); Matt (Mateo) and Scilla (Priscilla) (children of Altiero); Rocky (Raquella -- daughter of Frank and Maria). The children are all late teens early twenties.

(Opens with a charade. In a staging the signs and responses should be freely ad-libbed before correct answer.)

ROCKY: Five words. A famous solemn saying. *(Begins charade signs. Motions indicating an attack of some sort, she collapses to the floor, etc.)*

ROBBIE: First word. Strangle...Choke...Faint...Shoot...Collapse...Heart attack...Overacting...*(Flat on back, hands across chest)*. . .Oh, of course *(looking upstage)*....Death! *(Touch nose got it sign. More signs. Two fingers, then one finger on each hand slowly coming closer and stopping an inch apart.)* Something for the occasion...Second word....Small word...a....of....It...the...thing...that...thing...*(Stop – points behind her)*. . .Must be, that. *(Touch nose. Signs three fingers then leaping for joy, smiling, laughing.)*

SCILLA: My turn, Robbie. Death that....Third word. Cheerful...happy....joyful...fun...very bad taste...insane.

MATT: Is this saying famous or just sick?

SCILLA: Shut up and wait your turn. Death that..that....wonderful thing. Death that...what? *(Sits with hands folded in front looking heavenly upward)* Oh, what a fine experience...it's simply delightful. *(touch nose)* Death that simply fine experience. *(shakes head - negative)* No? Death....Death that simply wonderful..No...Death that delightful. *(Touch nose. Rocky now signs as if she's trying to cover herself)* Death that delightful cover-up...Shroud. Death that delightful mystery. *(Rocky now signs as if she is beating herself on the bottom)*

MATT: Out of the way, Scilla. I've got it now...It's Rocky's favorite wet dream...Death, that delightful whack on the bottom!...Spanking....*(goofing and loud laughter builds toward the conclusion of the charade)* What?....Not spanking? It has to be. Whipping. Beating. Striking...Masochistic. . .

ROBBIE: You've forgotten the first signs, nitwit.

MATT: "Death that delightful nitwit"...hey, I kind of like it!

SCILLA: *(To Matt)* You're the nitwit...she was covering herself up..

MATT: Because she was ashamed of her shameful dream?!

ROBBIE: *(Rocky now pretends to be peeking from behind something)*. Could be. Sneaking...peeking...Oh, with spanking...hiding Death that delightful hiding *(touches nose)*....or is it hidden *(waves that off)*...no, hiding...Death that delightful hiding....I don't get it...

MATT: Maybe death finishes us off by giving us a hiding...so to speak *(points to heart)*.

ROBBIE: Or it might be hiding on us in a delightful way.

SCILLA: Weird...Death delights in hiding. *(None are paying attention to Rocky's signs for the last word. She whacks Scilla to get her attention.)*

MATT: Oh!..Death is delightfully angry today! *(Rocky jumps on a spot as if she's taking possession of it.)* All right!..It yours...You own that spot...thing...location...floor...You've got the floor.

SCILLA: *(Rocky makes like she's setting up house)* Oh, you live there...It's an apartment...a pad.

ROBBIE: *(She signs getting closer and closer)*. Well, then, you live there, it's your place *(she touches nose - Got it!)*...Place! Death that delightful hiding place! *(Lots of hoopla)*

MATT: What?...How can you hide in death when you cannot possibly be discovered once dead. It has to be at least theoretically possible.

ROBBIE: King Tut tried to hide...but they found him anyway.

SCILLA: You're too literal...It's poetical..A relief from the weariness of the world.

ROCKY: Let's just say it's a gift to us from the ancient world.

ALTIERO: *(Entering room)* What's this racket? We could here you all the way out on the patio. You think this is an amusement park or something? Roberto...That's your father and my brother behind that curtain.

SCILLA: Robbie...take curtain 3 instead...

ALTIERO: Priscilla!...Quiet!....and you too, Mateo. My own children acting like goofballs! That's your uncle....and this is a wake, not party time! Raquella...Gianni was the best friend of your folks. Don't you think he deserves respect?

ROBBIE: What are we supposed to do.....spend hours just moping around?

ALTIERO: The final moments with your father's remains and you have nothing to think about?

SCILLA: Death?.....What's there to think about?

MATT: I tried but came to a *dead* end. *(He laughs – his father scowls)*

ALTIERO: How about remembering Gianni? Look around you. Everything in this fine home was built by the man lying in that casket? Every nail, every screw, every dowel, every dovetail, every mortise & tenon....With his own hands. Even the box that hold him. And not for himself, but for his family....

ROCKY: Robbie...I'd Goodwill the casket...

ALTIERO:...For his family...For his WHOLE family...and that's ALL of us!

ROBBIE: We've been reminiscing about Pop for days...even when he was sick...we can't - *(Sounds of people coming inside)*

ALTIERO: *(Looking back)*...Okay...Listen – Josie, Frank and Maria are coming in. Raquella, your mother brought some food. How about helping her serve it? Maybe you will be able to keep your mouths shut when food is stuffed in it. *(Restrained snorts imagining that impossibility until Altiero glares at them)*

JOSIE: *(Sobbing. Goes right to the casket and kneels.)* Giovan!..Giovan!..My Love!..My Strength!...So Strong!.....and now. . . GONE!

MARIA: Josie..Come...Sit down. Have a little something before the service.

JOSIE: Maria!...Maria!...I couldn't possibly hold down a thing.

FRANK: Come, Maria, put something on a plate..

JOSIE: No, please, . . .just maybe a little something to drink..a tiny glass of crème de cocoa – but you eat...eat.

ALTIERO: Josephine...I'll get it for you.

JOSIE: *(Looking at the food - and with a complete change of tone)* Squash flowers. Maria, you brought squash flowers! Robbie, why haven't you taken any squash flowers? You love squash flowers.

ROBBIE: Because I thought they were that carduna crap.

JOSIE: No, look. *(Holding up a fritter)* See the orange flower inside?

FRANK: What's wrong with carduna? Your father loved carduna. Everybody loves carduna....even Rocky.

MARIA: Frank...that's RAQUELLA.....Rocky!...What kind of name is that for a girl?!

MATT: A perfect name if she keeps stuffing herself with carduna.

ROCKY: I do not *love* carduna. Just because I sometimes *eat* carduna does not mean I *love* carduna!

SCILLA: (*Grabs a fritter and shoves it in Robbie's face*) Here Robbie...Have some carduna!

MARIA and JOSIE: It's NOT CARDUNA!!!

ROBBIE: Okay! Okay! Do you mind if I wait until later?

MATT: (*Grabs a fritter and ostentatiously eats it*) Mmmm...Robbie...better not wait too long!Mmmmmmm.....It's impossible to eat just one....Mmmmmmm...And it tastes just like.... *carduna!*

MARIA and JOSIE: It's NOT CARDUNA!!!

SCILLA: Of course not. (*To Matt pointing to inside of a fritter*) Can't you see – the marigold tint?! It's obviously. . . CHICKEN!...

JOSIE: It's NOT. .

ALTIERO: (*Returning with drink. To his children*) You two!...STOP IT! Here Josephine, have a sip of the crème de cocoa.

JOSIE: Grazie, Altiero. . . (*Gulps most of it*) It's squash flowers a la Parmigiana.

ROCKY: Why not, 'a la Romana?'

MARIA: Why Romana?

ROCKY: Because you used Pecorino Romano...there's nothing from Parma in it...not unless you brought back some breadcrumbs from your last Italian trip.

MARIA: Fritters made like these with parsley, cheese, breadcrumbs in an egg batter are called parmigiana. That's all!

ROCKY: Even in Rome?

ALTIERO: You see?!...They question everything!

MARIA: So what's the difference anyway?

ROCKY: Cows and sheep.

FRANK: Speaking of cows and sheep, Altiero, do you remember the time when Sam was fooled into buying a male goat and....

MARIA: Frank, be still! Now is not the time to tell stories like that.

ROCKY: Why not?...It's a funny story.

MARIA: It's not funny...It's silly...And besides, it makes fun of our dear departed Sam.

ROBBIE: Anyway, What happened to the cows and the sheep?

MATT: They transmogrified into goats. How appropriate on this solemn occasion.

ALTIERO: Mateo! *(Raising hand as if to strike him)*

FRANK: All I was going to say is that he sure was mad when he tried to milk him. *(All the youths laugh)*

SCILLA: Who?...Sam or the goat? *(more laughter)*

MARIA: So he says it anyway!..What a buffone!

FRANK: Buffone!...Gianni loved to hear my stories. Sometimes I'd be with him for hours while he was in his workshop making all this beautiful furniture. *(Here a loud cracking sound is heard when Altiero moves around in his chair)*

ROBBIE: It's true! *(pointing to the chairs)* Listen!. . . Pop built his laughter into the chairs!

ALTIERO: Kids today....*(Shaking his head)*....No respect...

SCILLA: What's to respect?

ALTIERO: What's to respect? Why are we gathered here? This is not the time and place for fun and games.

ROBBIE: Pop passed away. What does putting on a sad face have to do with respect?

MARIA: Kids think they'll live forever.

JOSIE: *(Sobbing)* Giovan....Gone...Gone!

SCILLA: We loved Uncle John...that's all that counts.

ROCKY: And we show it by getting together...and reminiscing...and...

MATT:...and eating squash flowers.

FRANK: Speaking of squash flowers...Remember the people who used to come up from the city to pick carduna....?

MARIA and JOSIE: They're NOT CARDUNA!

FRANK: I know -- they're *squash flowers*! I'm talking about *carduna*. Remember Tom and Agatha coming up from Union City?

ALTIERO: (*Chuckling*) And almost getting kicked off the train because of the carduna aroma when they returned.

ROBBIE: There!..You see!...Carduna has a nasty smell to go along with the taste.

FRANK: It's not nasty...It just has...

MARIA:...An earthy smell..

JOSIE:...Pungent, like nature.

ROBBIE: Then maybe we shouldn't have had pop embalmed.

MARIA: Roberto!...How could you...?

ALTIERO: No respect!...Just no damn respect!

JOSIE: (*Sobbing*) Giovan...Giovan..We had to...It's the law. . .

FRANK: (*Holding a glass of Gianni's home made wine*) Go easy, Altiero.....Gianni was a fun-loving guy. Remember how he'd sing while crushing grapes to make wine. (*Holds up indicating this is some of Gianni's homemade wine. Then takes a sip and gags.*)

ALTIERO: (*barely suppressing a laugh*) I remember him making more vinegar than wine!

ROBBIE: The pleasure was in the making.

JOSIE: Your father made fine wine!

ROBBIE: Just not that much of it.

FRANK: And he'd sing...and even do a little dance.

SCILLA: Lou Monte!

MARIA: No Lou Monte! This is a wake, after all!

ROCKY: Just Mom's song!

MARIA: Button up, both of you!...This is not a wedding reception!

ROBBIE: Lou Monte and Maria's Song?

MATT: "I just met a girl names Maria..."

FRANK: Not that one.

JOSIE: Gianni loved that show, even though it had Puerto Ricans...

ROCKY: *Lazy Mary.*

MARIA: NO LOU MONTE!

FRANK: I don't even remember the words....Lazy Mary you must get up...blah, blah..blah...

MARIA:I can't believe....

ROCKY: No, it's not 'can't'...It's 'I'm not able.'

FRANK: *(Singing)* Oh, Yes!...Lazy Mary you must get up.

ROCKY: *(Sung)* I'm not able.

FRANK: *(Singing)* Lazy Mary you must get up. . .We need the sheets for the table.
(Everyone laughs)

MATT: *(With eyes shut)* I'm imagining a picture of that family dinner!

ROBBIE: Disgustingly fascinating!

MARIA: *(To husband)* Buffone! *(Altiero...who can't help but laugh...plops down in a chair and it collapses under him. More laughter.)*

ROBBIE: *(Helping his uncle up)* Another sign from Pop through his handiwork. He wants everybody on their feet and dancing.

ALTIERO: By dropping me on my ass?!

ROCKY: Come on Robbie.

(The youths dance energetically to Lazy Mary tune. The elders at least stand and can't help smiling because of the fond memories it evokes)

JOSIE: Enough! Please...What must the neighbors think?

MARIA: Like we've created a new holiday.

FRANK: Remember how Gianni always wanted to play Sette Mezza after midnight Christmas Eve?

MATT: Even we kids could be the bank.

ALTIERO: And Briscola on all other occasions.

ROBBIE: Cards! What a great idea! There's a deck somewhere. *(Goes to get it)*

MARIA: Frank, can't you see that your remembrances lead to one unseemly thing after another?

ROCKY: *(To her mother)* I loved watching the cute way you cheated.

MARIA: Cheated?!...I never did any such thing!

ROCKY: Sure you did...You'd stick out the tip of your tongue to signal to your partner what cards you had.

SCILLA: Careful, Rocky...Remember they'd swap wives when playing in pairs. Maybe your mother was signaling more than a card!

MARIA: Priscilla!

JOSIE: *(Sobbing)* Giovan...Giovan...There was no swapping!

FRANK: *(Laughing, to his wife.)* Gianni would get so mad at you!...You never got it right!

ALTIERO: *(Also laughing. To Frank)* Yeah...And then you'd make everybody switch back to husband and wife... because, if anybody was going to insult Maria...It had to be her husband!

JOSIE: Maria...It's true..You really were a terrible player. . . you mustn't blame Giovan if he sometimes –

FRANK: Yes...But I wouldn't let anybody abuse you. You played a shitty hand of

Briscola...but you were still my little stronzo.

MARIA: *(smiling)* Really!...Franguch!

(Robbie returns with a deck of cards)

ROBBIE: Found them! Look. *(Holding up cards)* A 40 card deck with the old country design. *(While grabbing a chair)* Matt, bring over Pop's card table...Scilla, Rocky get some chairs.

(Tables and chairs are arranged down stage while the older folks are upstage) Let's show them how we remember them playing. Partner up!

MATT: I'm not playing with my sister!

ROCKY: How unseemly!....But she's Josie, and I'm Maria.

ROBBIE: And I'm Pop and Matt, Frank.

SCILLA: Let's get on with it!

(Scilla partner's with Matt. Rocky with Robbie. Cards are dealt. The men cast their cards down on the table with a great flourish, while the women do so very casually. During all this facial signals are being cast across the table, especially by the men. Then as their partners seem not to get them right, the facial signals become more distorted...More grotesque. Then they start kicking each other under the table. Finally Robbie gets up in a rage)

GIANNI: *(To Maria)* Man-a-gia!...What a morone!

FRANK: Come on, Gianni, it's just a game!

JOSIE: Giovan would never say such a thing!

MARIA: *(To Gianni)* Only a *chuch* would get so excited!

MARIA: I'm not so sure, Josie, but I know we'd never say that!

GIANNI: If we're playing cards...then we should play cards...and not sit with our heads up our....

JOSIE: Giovan...We've played enough, let's stop and have some coffee and ciambelli. ..

GIANNI: At least let's finish the set!

FRANK: Gianni did have a bit of a competitive streak.

ALTIERO: I'll say...Remember the time he threw that bowl of....

JOSIE: Altiero...What are you saying about my Giovan?

ALTIERO: I'm sorry, Josie, but he was my brother and....

FRANK: Now Gianni...calmate...calmate...You know how it is playing with women...pazienza. Here (*handing Robbie a glass of his father's nasty-tasting wine*) have a soothing sip of vino. (*Robbie takes a gulp of the wine and then reacts as if it's poison and sprays it over everything and everybody*)

ROBBIE: (*To Matt*) Why the hell did you give me that nasty muffa-tasting shit?!

JOSIE: Roberto, stop acting like a pig!

MARIA: I'm not playing with such a slob!

JOSIE: (*To Rocky*) Who are you calling a slob?

JOSIE: Shame on you! Insulting my Giovan and/or Roberto!

MARIA: They've turned this wake into a three ring circus!

FRANK: Gee...But didn't we love those card games?!

JOSIE: C'mon!...C'mon!...Let's make peace – switch and finish the game.

(*Now it's Matt and Rocky, and Scilla and Robbie facing each other.*)

FRANK: It's my turn. (*brief pause*) **Briscola!** (*He throws a card down hitting the table with so much force that it collapses sending all the youths off their chairs and on the floor. Josie and Maria come near to see that everybody is okay. Frank and Altiero can't help but laugh.*)

ALTIERO: (*To Matt*) Will you never stop?! It's like the Keystone Kops!

FRANK: (*Laughing*) The Four Stooges! Gianni would have loved it!...No matter how bad things got, we'd always end up laughing.

ALTIERO: (*Trying to restrain a laugh*) Either we laughed or we'd have to drink more of his wine! (*To the older folks*) Let's go outside while the kids clean up the mess they've made.

JOSIE: Yes...I haven't shown you the garden yet. Some of the things Giovan planted are ready to be picked.

(The older folks go off stage. And the youths pick up some of the broken furniture)

MATT: Sorry about breaking your dad's card table.

ROBBIE: That's okay. Nothing lasts forever. Pop didn't...and neither did much of what he made. *(Walking toward the casket)* What's all this for anyway? *(The others also move closer)*

ROCKY: It's a demonstration of respect.

MATT: No matter how much they insist we don't have any.

ROBBIE: Yeah...If it's not a somber ceremony it's not respectful. But being a ceremony, it's more like a thing, a mechanical event, than a feeling.

SCILLA: Then it's a remembrance..Look how we all had recollections of Uncle John.

ROBBIE: Maybe that's it. *(Moving close to the casket)* I couldn't help recalling the time I was sleighing behind the house and missed the turn smashing a hole in the back of our garage. *(Now kneeling at the side of his father's casket.)* Remember, Pop, how you came running up and at first saw the hole in the garage. Boy, were you mad! But then you saw me coming up out of a pile of snow with it all sticking to my face - Remember how you couldn't stop laughing?! *(At this point he is leaning over the casket close to the corpse with his hands on the side of the casket -- and the platform holding the casket collapses tipping the casket sideways onto Robbie)*

SCILLA: Robbie!...My God!

ROCKY: *(Helping him up)* Are you alright?

ROBBIE: Yeah...I guess this time the joke was on me!

MATT: *(Who has set the casket upright. The body has fallen out.)* We've got to get everything back in place before they come back in!

ROBBIE: *(To the girls, with 'take charge' attitude)* Clear off part of the table. Hurry! *(They push things to the side)* Matt, help me put Pop on the table. *(They put him on the table and begin to straighten up his clothes)* Scilla, bring something out for them to drink. That way they'll stay out on the patio for awhile. *(Scilla leaves with beverages)*

(They continue tidying the corpse)

ROCKY: Look at his cheek.

ROBBIE: What?

ROCKY: It's bruised.

MATT: I wouldn't have thought it possible.

ROCKY: What will we do? Your mother will notice.

ROBBIE: *(Looking around the table. To Rocky.)* Hand me one of those cannoli.

ROCKY: What?

MATT: Come on, old boy, this is no time for a snack!

ROBBIE: Give me a cannola!...The confectionery powder!

MATT: Give him a cannola!

(Robbie picks up some off the powder on his finger tips and begins rubbing it on the bruise. Rocky catches what he's doing.)

ROCKY: Here, let me. *(And she finishes the job)*

ROBBIE: Now help me put Pop back in the box...*(They do so)* Good...Now, let's arrange the casket on the table.

MATT: *(Referring to the casket)* Gee...This thing is rickety.

ROBBIE: The joints have loosened up. *(And he begins to pound them back in place when Scilla rushes in)*

SCILLA: The hearse has arrived! They're coming in!

(The older folks enter. Josie is upset seeing the casket on the table.)

JOSIE: What's it doing there!

ROBBIE: We heard the hearse had arrived...so we got it ready.

JOSIE: But, how....?

ROBBIE: Mom...We're the pallbearers, remember?

JOSIE: But you're the son...You're supposed to be with me.

ROBBIE: You heard what Pop said just before the end...Didn't you? He wanted the young people closest to him to carry him on his final earthly journey.

ALTIERO: It's no use, Josie...They've totally dispensed with tradition.

MARIA: Who ever heard of girl pallbearers!

ROCKY: It's okay when they're named Rocky.

FRANK: What are we going to do...go against Gianni's final wishes? Now that would be proof of no respect!

JOSIE: Alright! Alright! Far be it for me to go against what my Giovan wanted. *(Robbie begins to close the coffin lid)* Wait! I want one final look at my dear Giovan. *(Moving very close to the body and sobbing)* Giovan!...My dear husband...This is our final moment together until we meet again in the hereafter. *(She kisses him on the area of the cheek where the confectionery powder was used. She then stands smiling and licks her lips slightly, then picks up a napkin and dabs her lips with it. The youths look at each other nervously.)*

MATT: We'd better go. The hearse has been waiting for some time.

ROBBIE: *(Closing casket)* We'd better get moving. We'll meet you at the cemetery.

ALTIERO: *(Angrily)* Do you at least mind if the blood relatives of the deceased place their hand on the casket as it is carried?!

(The four youths are lined up on either side of the coffin so as to pick it up. Altiero and Josie are on either side with their hand on the top front. Frank and Maria are to their respective sides.)

ROBBIE: Okay, ready? On the count of three we lift. One..two...three.. *(They lift but only the upper part of casket rises leaving the corpse below. Only the youths can see this and are stunned. Robbie waves them forward and they all depart with the empty coffin. After a short period of time all four come rushing back onstage)*

SCILLA: *(Looking at body.)* This is awful!

MATT: Dad is going to go through the roof!

ROCKY: Robbie...Imagine what will happen to your mother when she finds out! We'd better call a doctor!

ROBBIE: She's not going to see anything. This is a graveside service. The hearse is going to weave through the center of town at a snail's pace so that everybody can take off their hats and look sad. We can easily get Pop to the cemetery before they arrive and then carry the rest of the casket to the grave while they are still getting out of the limo.

SCILLA: What about the cemetery people?

ROBBIE: I'll order them away. I am the son.....they must do what I say.

MATT: The transfer of respect has begun! Well...alright then...let's get going!

ROBBIE: Do you mind! I'd like to have a final few seconds with my father! (*Getting close to the body*) Pop...Sorry to say that not much of what you made works...but you did...both as a provider and as a father...and for that I will be forever grateful. I know they will never let me inscribe your favorite epitaph on the tombstone, so I will recite it directly to you. (*brief pause*) 'When I die...my soul will turn into the flower of a burdock plant...and a jackass will eat it.'

(*As they get into position to carry the body which is on the bottom of the coffin*)

SCILLA: (*Sarcastically*) Gee, I can't imagine why anyone would object to that on a tombstone!

ROCKY: (*As they pick up corpse*) Hey!...Wait a second!...Isn't burdock...

ROBBIE:....Yes...it's CARDUNA – and I'll be damned if I ever eat any of it!

MATT: Too bad!...Now that you've gotten the jackass part spot on! (*Grabs a piece of squash flower fritter and eats it. The others look at him.*) Don't worry, IT' S NOT CARDUNA!

(*As they leave with the body they all pick up some squash flower fritters*)

[End – Second edition]

###

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