



DOMINOES

BY SUSAN EMSHWILLER



DRAMATISTS
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DOMINOES
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*For Chris,
who keeps me laughing.*

CHARACTERS

MIKEY

MOTHER — mother of Mikey

POP — father of Mikey

DAN — milkman

BUDDY — Army pal of Mikey

SOFIA — Italian waitress

FRIEND — Italian friend of Sofia

CARMELLA — Italian hooker

KATIE — girlfriend/wife of Mikey

TEENAGER — milkman

MAGGIE — teenage daughter of Mikey and Katie

SETTINGS

ACT ONE

1942.

A small Midwestern town,
and the Italian countryside.

ACT TWO

1946 and 1975.

The same Midwestern town.

NOTES

As there are scenes set in several locations, the settings described are suggestions.

The actual sets can be as minimal or abstract as desired.

Mother and Pop's house can be more exactly dressed, and the other sets can be suggestive.

DOMINOES

ACT ONE

Scene 1

The time is 1942. A small lower-middle-class home on the outskirts of a big city. The parlor is comfortable and homey. A few little china figurines rest on doilies on the worn but well-cared-for furniture. The overstuffed chairs have molded themselves to specific bodies. The entire furnishings were probably purchased through the Montgomery Ward catalogue. A cathedral radio occupies a central place in the room. It is a cool, fall Sunday afternoon.

Mother, an overweight woman in her late forties, enters through the front door. She is in her Sunday best, as elegant as the wife of a public servant can be. In the hall, she takes off her coat and hat and places them carefully on the rack, then moves to the parlor where she drops heavily into her armchair and slips off her tight shoes.

Pop, about fifty, dressed in a conservative suit and tie, steps in the front door and bends painfully to pick up the Sunday newspaper from the mat. He places his hat on the hook, moves to the parlor opposite Mother, sits, and opens the paper. All this action is done with a slow grace and methodical movements, as he has only one arm. The sleeve of his missing arm is tucked neatly in his jacket pocket.

Mother and Pop ignore each other. Not actively, not intending to hurt or incite anything — it's just their life together.

Mother rubs her stockinged feet together. Pop holds the paper up, covering his face. Long moment.

MOTHER. Where's Mikey?

POP. Gassing up the Ford. *(That's the end of their conversation. Nothing more to say to each other. After a bit, Mikey enters the front door. He is a boy/man of eighteen, dressed in slacks, a sweater, and a windbreaker: neat, conservative, good-boy clothes that he tries to wear as recklessly as possible. Passing through the parlor, he takes off the windbreaker and throws it over the back of a chair as he heads into the kitchen. Mother listens to the kitchen noises as Mikey cuts a big slice from the white cake on the table.)*

MOTHER. *(Calling to the kitchen.)* Use a plate and fork, now.

MIKEY. I am. *(Mikey gets a plate and fork.)*

MOTHER. You might ask if Daddy or I want a piece.

MIKEY. You want a piece?

MOTHER. Daddy, do you want a piece of cake?

POP. No.

MOTHER. Daddy doesn't.

MIKEY. Do you?

MOTHER. I shouldn't.

MIKEY. But ...

MOTHER. I'll keep you company. *(Mikey returns from the kitchen with the plate of white cake. He hands it to Mother and starts putting on his windbreaker again.)* Where's yours?

MIKEY. I thought I'd pop out for a bit.

MOTHER. Oh, Mikey, I can't eat this all by my lonesome. I was just going to for the company. I want to see you.

MIKEY. You've seen me all morning.

MOTHER. I'm not going to get sociable and start in chattering in the midst of Service.

MIKEY. You had no problem telling me to straighten up about six times.

MOTHER. You slouch like a hooligan. People will think you don't have parents.

MIKEY. Is this what you wanted to chatter about? *(Mikey moves to the hall. Mother sighs dramatically. Mikey pulls a comb from his back pocket and fixes his hair in the hall mirror.)*

POP. Where're you headed, boy?

MIKEY. Goin' to make the rounds. See if I can scare up a buddy or two.

MOTHER. Your last Sunday, wandering aimlessly —

MIKEY. I'm taking in the sights.

MOTHER. You know every tree and mud puddle for three miles around. You going to visit that girl?

MIKEY. What girl?

MOTHER. That Jinny. She's an odd-looking child.

MIKEY. Jean.

MOTHER. Oh, everybody's so grown up all of a sudden.

MIKEY. Seems like we have to be. *(There is a heavy pause.)*

MOTHER. Won't you stay and have a sit-down with me. Your father and me? Wouldn't you like that, Daddy?

POP. Let the boy go if he wants to.

MOTHER. Why do you two always gang up on me?

MIKEY. Mother —

MOTHER. I'm not going to see you for heaven knows — *(She covers her mouth and turns away.)*

MIKEY. *(Crouching beside her.)* I'm coming back. You know that. Nothing is going to happen. I promise.

MOTHER. *(Plaintively.)* You promise?

POP. He can't promise —

MOTHER. He can. He can, and he does! Don't you? Don't you promise?

MIKEY. I promise.

MOTHER. Safe and sound.

MIKEY. Safe and sound. *(Pop grunts cynically and gets up, moving to the mantle. He slowly loads and lights his pipe. Mother strokes Mikey's head.)*

POP. Boy can't promise. Won't hold.

MOTHER. Oh, hush.

POP. Doesn't know what he's in for.

MOTHER. What good are you?

POP. In the wink of an eye.

MOTHER. Hush now! I won't stand for it. *(Pop sits again and raises the paper in front of his face. Smoke rises from behind it. Mother turns her attention to Mikey's hair.)* You need a haircut.

MIKEY. *(Standing, moving away from her.)* I'll get it there.

MOTHER. You should go in looking sharp. Make a good impression.

MIKEY. They have their own ideas of how I should look.

MOTHER. I hope they leave some up top to part on the side. You're such a handsome boy. Isn't he, Daddy?

POP. Mmmm. *(Mikey touches Mother's shoulder.)*

MIKEY. I'll see you later.

MOTHER. You don't be late. Don't see that Jinny girl. You don't want her having to fret while you're away. It's not fair. Bad enough you make me worry —

MIKEY. I won't be late — just going out to wander a bit.

MOTHER. You'd think we were carriers of T.B. or some plague at the rate he wants to spend time with us.

MIKEY. *(Going to the hall, he opens the front door.)* Just a few hours.

MOTHER. Do you know how many hours are left? Do you think I'm not counting them. I am. I'm trying to put on a strong face.

(Mikey is caught at the door. He stands there staring out into the world.

After a long moment, he closes the door, moves back into the parlor, turns on the radio, and sits down, eyes closed. A love song of the period plays on the radio. Mother, happy now, sways and hums along.)

I used to dance — oh, my. Never had a dance free. The boys couldn't get

enough of me ... *(She sings along to the song, stands up, and sashays around in her stockings, moving toward Mikey. Pantomimes looking at her dance card.)*

Oh, yes, I think I do have one dance left.

MIKEY. No, Mother.

MOTHER. You're going to be dancing with heaven knows who over there ... *(Mikey opens his eyes slowly. Mother holds out her hand to him.)*

It's kind of you to ask. *(Mikey raises himself out of the chair and takes Mother's hand. They start dancing. She holds herself proudly.)*

Remember when you were just a tiny angel? You used to stand on my feet and we would dance all through the house! I'd have to stand on

your feet now, you've grown so. *(Mother giggles and places her feet on Mikey's. He moves about, walking her around the room. She laughs heartily.)*

Oh, be careful. Not so fast. You'll cause a wreck. *(Mikey laughs despite himself. He spins and circles. Mother hangs on for dear life.*

The song ends and Mother steps away, dizzy. Pop snaps off the radio. Grinning, Mikey plops into a chair, breathing hard. Mother moves behind him and holds his head to her chest. He likes it.)

You are such a wild one. My wild boy. *(The clock chimes four.)* Goodness gracious,

look at the time! You must be starving, Mikey. Here, have my cake.

MIKEY. Aren't you having any?

MOTHER. No, I'll just watch you enjoy it. A mother can't ask for more.

MIKEY. Mmmmm. Mmmmmmm! This is so good! It's the best cake in history.

MOTHER. You are terrible. Be real.

MIKEY. I am.

MOTHER. Honestly, I don't know how I put up with you.

MIKEY. Few days, you won't have to.

MOTHER. I declare, sometimes you say the most heartless things.

MIKEY. Never mind. I'm here now. You want to play cards? Checkers? Craps?

MOTHER. (*Laughing.*) OH! You incorrigible boy! Do you — ?

MIKEY. I never. Saw it in the picture shows, is all.

MOTHER. You'll be off learning all sorts of things.

POP. Damn right.

MOTHER. (*To Pop.*) Don't you dare! Don't you dare! (*Mikey quickly gets a pack of cards from the side table drawer and pulls his chair up to Mother.*)

MIKEY. What do you want to play? (*Mikey shuffles the cards. Mother watches silently.*)

MOTHER. Did you know Buddy Hoskins is in town? In to see his folks. He's looking very sharp. Brass buttons.

MIKEY. Good.

MOTHER. You should call on him. He might have a few tips.

MIKEY. Tips?

MOTHER. Pointers. Advice.

MIKEY. I'll do well enough.

MOTHER. No harm getting a jump on things. Lord knows, I can't tell you. Daddy can't tell you.

POP. Talk won't tell nothing. Can't.

MIKEY. I don't need advice. I don't need help. Why are we talking about this?! I don't want to talk about this! I don't want to see Buddy. I want to play cards.

MOTHER. Well, aren't you carrying a short fuse today. I never understood your moods. I don't have moods. I always say, a moody person is a selfish person. (*Mikey turns away and pulls his chair back to its place.*)

MIKEY. Pass me the funny papers, Pop. (*Pop passes him the front page section. Mikey doesn't look at it.*) Fun-ny papers.

POP. Read the news first. Catch up on events.

MIKEY. I'm going to the goddamn events! I'm going to be the goddamn event! (*Pop hands over the comics. He eyes his son for a tiny*

DOMINOES

by Susan Emshwiller

5M, 6W

Mikey, about to head “over there” to fight in WWII, can’t win on the home front. Mom manipulates her son with baby-talk, pouting, and flirting. Pop demeans the young man with his cynical worldliness. The family dynamics play out with humor and pathos; Mikey yearns for warmth and intimacy, but his folks can’t give it. Every grunt or glance is a power-play. Mikey’s war experiences accentuate his dilemma between needing real connection and sinking into boorishness. Back home, shamed by his powerlessness, Mikey becomes all that he hates in his parents. The dysfunction of family is passed down, and the dominoes of one generation topple the next.

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