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The Boarding House



Adapted from James Joyce's "The Dubliners"

by

David H. Klein

This play, an adaptation of stories from Dubliners by James Joyce, suggesting the moribund nature of Dublin--and Ireland--should be played, where possible and feasible, for comic value, as long as the comic timing does not overshadow Joyce's overall vision of the city.

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Characters

Mrs. Mooney: A woman in her mid-fifties.
Mary A maid from the country, eighteen years old.
Polly **Mrs.** Mooney's nineteen-year-old daughter.
Bob Doran: A boarder in **Mrs.** Mooney's house. He is about thirty-five years old.

Place: Ireland

Time: *The late 1900's*

The Scene: *The setting is a front parlor, furnished with a couch, some over-stuffed chairs, and a table or two. Against the back wall is a window covered with white lace curtains. Beside the window is a long pier-glass, The setting should be light and airy with an atmosphere of pristine purity.*

At Rise: **Mrs. Mooney** is giving orders to the maid, whose name is **Mary** but whom **Mrs. Mooney** likes to call MARIE, because it sounds more "elegant." **Mrs. Mooney** is a large imposing woman. If she were a prizefighter, she would be a heavy weight. Her voice is loud and imperious. She wears an elaborate white suit, which she calls her "church suit" and which she feels gives her an aura of impervious sanctimony.

Mrs. Mooney: (to **Mary**) Clear the table and don't forget to collect the leftover bread crusts from the breakfast dishes. They'll be just fine for Tuesday's bread pudding. Bread pudding is always an excellent dessert.
Mary: And inexpensive, too, ma'am.
Mrs. Mooney: There's no point in throwing out good leftovers. Thrift, I always say, is next to godliness.
Mary: And a penny saved is a penny earned. You've said that many a time.

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Mrs. Mooney: I'm glad to see that you're learning. You're a good girl, Marie.

Mary: I can't get used to "Marie" when my Christian name is Mary, just plain Mary.

Mrs. Mooney: You will. Marie is much more genteel. A name like that will make others treat you with respect. I only have your interests at heart.

Mary: Yes, ma'am. I mean "madam." You've been so kind to a poor country girl like me without no one in the whole wide world. Giving me a job, straight off. Sure, Dublin must be paved with gold.

Mrs. Mooney: Behave and do as you're told, and you'll do well. I'll teach you all the tricks of my trade. I need someone dependable like you to keep an eye on things.

Mary: I'll do anything, madam. I want to please.

Mrs. Mooney: Then pay careful attention to the boarders and let me know what's on their minds. Lonely men will always confide in a pretty girl. But don't be too friendly or familiar--unless there's something to be gained, of course. Men want pleasure, but they don't want to pay for it--like overgrown children who never think of consequences. Sad, but that's the state of the world. Too many young girls have been ruined by promises hastily made between kisses.

Mary: My mum always said girls like that had to pay the piper.

Mrs. Mooney: I agree. But so should the young men. And pay in full. A man always has money in his pocket. But a woman's reputation is the only thing she has. Once her name is tarnished, she might as well be dead and buried. That's what life and my own experiences have taught me. Never allow your heart to rule your head.

Mary: You're very wise, madam.

Mrs. Mooney: It took me years to learn that lesson. Handsome is not always what handsome does. Believe me, appearances are deceptive.

Mary: And nowadays, the men are full of idle talk. They only want what they can get from you.

Mrs. Mooney: Exactly, Marie! You'll do just fine working for me. As long as you don't lose your head. Young men can be so persuasive. But not my boarders. Most of them are well-behaved and respectable and come from Dublin.

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Mary: Except for the tourists from the Isle of Man and Liverpool. (*pause*) And the actors.

Mrs. Mooney: (w*agging her finger at **Mary***) You mean the "artistes." They're traveling performers from the vaudeville shows. Usually, I take a higher class of person, but it livens up the house for the others to have entertainers on the premises. And on Sunday nights, when they are not working, they put on a good show.

Mary: Which doesn't cost anything, either.

Mrs. Mooney: I always say that free entertainment is the best.

Mary: You're absolutely right, madam.

Mrs. Mooney: Yes, you'll do just fine with me, especially since Polly. . .

Mary: May be leaving?

Mrs. Mooney: (*not a question, but an interrogation*) Leaving?

Mary: (*ingenuously*) Oh, yes, ma'am, with Mr. Doran. Everyone knows they're sweet on each other. It's so romantic, to see them together. They make such a lovely couple.

Mrs. Mooney: And why didn't you tell me at once that they were up to. . .

Mary: Oh, ma'am, I know how to keep my mouth shut and I thought. . .

Mrs. Mooney: That I knew?

Mary: (*flustered*) Oh, ma'am, I'd never say that.

Mrs. Mooney: But is that what you think?

Mary: Whatever you think I should think, I'll think. I'm only a poor country girl and city ways are so confusing.

Mrs. Mooney: That's more like it, my dear. You're learning to listen to your betters.

Mary: Oh, thank you, madam. I certainly am. Besides, Mr. Doran is such a soft-spoken and refined man, not like some of the others. I never heard him say anything disrespectful, and I'm sure he's treating Miss Polly like a gentleman. Besides, everyone in the house knows about the romance . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Everyone?

Mary: I think so . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Even Jack?

Mary: On, especially him. Your son's been keen on what's going on. He looks out for his sister's reputation.

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Mrs. Mooney: I'm sure he does. After all, his interests don't lie far from hers.

Mary: Why, only a few weeks ago, that blonde juggler from London--I can't remember his name, madam--made a suggestive remark about Miss Polly and Jack--I mean your son--almost became violent. He shouted at the juggler and said that if any fellow tried that sort of a game on with his sister he'd bloody well put his teeth down his throat, so he would.

Mrs. Mooney: Things have gone too far. This is the sort of thing I need you to tell me at once.

Mary: Yes, Madam.

Mrs. Mooney: It's time to make things right. It's a good thing Miss Polly has her mother to protect her. Call her down immediately. Tell her that her mother wants to speak to her. Immediately! It's almost 12 o'clock. don't want to be late for Sunday mass.

Mary: Yes, madam. I'll get her at once.

*(She exits. **Mrs. Mooney** walks over to the pier-glass and rearranges her hair and outfit. She turns and faces the audience, occasionally glancing back at her reflection in the mirror. While she speaks, we can hear **Polly** humming.)*

Mrs. Mooney: (*alternating between the audience and her image in the pier-glass*) Children can be a worry. I thought Polly was shrewd like me. She must have known I was watching her and Mr. Doran. I'd better tighten the noose

*(**Polly** enters, resembling a perverse Madonna. She has the habit of glancing upward when she speaks with anyone. She enters the room, singing.)*

Polly: " I'm a naughty girl... You needn't sham. You know I am."

Mrs. Mooney: Polly, come over here and sit down. There's something I'd like to talk to you about.

Polly: (Sits down) What is it? Did I do anything wrong?

Mrs. Mooney: That depends on what you call wrong. It's very delicate

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matter. But being direct with you would be the easiest way of beginning. There have been rumors about you, dear.

Polly: (*feigning surprise*) About me?

Mrs. Mooney: Yes, about you and Mr. Doran.

Polly: About me and Bob? I ain't done nothing wrong.

Mrs. Mooney: (a*nnoyed*) Polly, watch your English. How many times have I told you that "ain't" isn't a proper word.

Polly: But I ain't. . . No, I mean I haven't done anything wrong. Bob and me . . .

Mrs. Mooney: "Bob and I . . ." (*pause, as it sinks in*) So it's Bob you call him.

Polly: I thought you knew, mother.

Mrs. Mooney: Knew what?

Polly: That I call him by his Christian name? There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

Mrs. Mooney: That depends on how far things have gone. And how could I know about that?

Polly: You always know everything that goes on.

Mrs. Mooney: (*slightly impatient*) And just what is going on? Just how intimate are you?

*(**Polly** is flustered, hums softly, and taps rhythmically on the side table to averts her mother's fixed stare.)*

Polly Whatever do you mean? Intimate?

Mrs. Mooney: Polly, stop that tapping and look at me.

*(**Polly** taps a few more times, then stops when **Mrs. Mooney** glares at her.)*

Mrs. Mooney: I mean to have a serious conversation with you. The most important conversation of your life.

Polly: But what have I done?

Mrs. Mooney: To be perfectly frank, you and Mr. Doran have been carrying on under my roof. A scandal, that's what it is. All the boarders know about it. My reputation will be ruined. After all, I run a respectable house.

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Polly: (*crying*) What can I do about it? I thought you wanted me to be friendly...

Mrs. Mooney: Friendly, yes; but not intimate. And you know very well what I mean. I knew you were a lively young girl. That's why I decided to keep you at home after you lost your last job just to help out with running the house. I also knew the boarders liked to look at a pretty face and that. . .

Polly: (*through her tears*) I could flirt with them. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? There ain't nothing wrong with that.

Mrs. Mooney: (s*lightly outraged*) I'm not talking about flirtation, young lady. I'm talking about something more serious--my reputation and your reputation--a dishonored mother and a disgraced daughter.

Polly: (*still crying*) But what can I do now?

Mrs. Mooney: (*adamant*) Demand marriage. Go to Mr. Doran and make him agree to. . .

Polly: Marry me?

Mrs. Mooney: Yes, marry you.

Polly: (i*n a fresh outburst of tears*) I could never do that, mother. It's so--so unromantic. I want Bob to propose to me.

Mrs. Mooney: (*exasperated*) Don't be such a little fool. Mr. Doran's a good catch. There aren't that many young men in Dublin with a good job and a future ahead of them. A lot of them spend more time at the pub than at earning an honest living. Mr. Doran'll help you move up in society and...

Polly: I don't want to marry like that. I want Bob to say he loves me and then propose to me.

Mrs. Mooney: (*more exasperated*) You're a silly little goose, young lady. Take my word for it. Just look at my own marriage.

*(The waterworks stop and **Polly** looks up, curiously.)*

Polly: Your marriage? You loved my Dad . . . You always said . . .

Mrs. Mooney: I've said a lot of things in my life. Always to protect you and your brother. But you're old enough now to know the truth so you

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know the traps men can set for you. Your father proposed to me and I fell for his sweet talk.

Polly: But that was different.

Mrs. Mooney: Different? It's not different. All men are alike. They can butter you up with sweet talk, but they won't assume responsibility unless they're forced to.

Polly: It ain't like that with me. Bob and me are serious. We're in love.

Mrs. Mooney: And I wasn't? Do you think you're the first girl ever to fall in love? That was my big mistake—falling in love. Love can be cruel, believe me. When I first met your father, he was foreman in my father's butcher shop. I was young and innocent and fell for all his romantic twaddle. I thought everything he said was the gospel truth.

Polly: Wasn't it?

Mrs. Mooney: No. And we didn't live happily ever after they way they do in fairy tales. When my father died, your father started to ruin our butcher shop. He wasn't used to having money. It passed through his fingers and he drank it away. Then one night, in a drunken frenzy, he ran after me with a cleaver. Then I threw your father out, the little drunkard.

Polly: (*humming again*) "I'm a naughty girl . . ."

Mrs. Mooney: Stop that humming and pay attention. I'm telling you all this for your own good. What was I supposed to do?

Polly: I dunno. Love can always find a way.

Mooney: Love? I had no time for love. I had to think of your brother and you. That's why I went to church and got a separation, with all the children in my care. I salvaged the little money I had left and bought this house. And that's the end of my romance.

Polly: Bob's not like that.

Mrs. Mooney: They're all like that and the sooner you realize it the better for us all.

Polly: Bob's not like that.

Mrs. Mooney: They're all like that and the sooner you realize it the better for us all.

Polly: But. mother, I couldn't force Bob into marrying me. That's not the way I want to get married. I want him.

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Mrs. Mooney: (*fanning the flames of her own outrage*) To make the first move? He's already done that. Now he has to pay. He's old enough to realize that he's wronged you and me. Taking liberties with my daughter while I offered him genuine hospitality--he knows better than that.

Polly: (*defiant, now*) I won't force him into marriage. There's nothing you can do about it.

Mrs. Mooney: Yes, there is, young lady. I intend to do something about it at once. First, I call your brother down. He's quite persuasive with his fists and Doran is no match for him. He'll knock some sense into him.

Polly: Don't tell Jack. Please, don't tell him. He'll hurt Bob.

Mrs. Mooney: And why shouldn't he thrash any man who dishonors his sister? *(She calls, in a loud voice*.) Jack, come down . . .

Polly: *(rushing to her mother*) Please. Don't call Jack. You know how quick he is with his fists.

Mrs. Mooney: Then stop your sniveling and pay attention to what I say. Think about your future. I sent you to work as a typist. And what happened? Your father, reeking of liquor, snuck down to the office every other day and asked to see you. Fortunately, I pulled you out of that job before you got fired. What will happen to you if you let Doran slip through your fingers?

Polly: That won't happen. He'll propose to me. **Mrs. Mooney:** Stop prattling and pay attention. If I send you out to work again, what's to prevent your father from pestering you?

Polly: But he's my father and I . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Love him Like you love "Bob"? Your father came around to the office not because he loves you but because he wanted a handout. He needed money for liquor and that's all. He doesn't care about you, Polly. He's never once in all these years helped to support you. Be grateful you have a mother to look out for your best interests.

Polly: But, Mother . . .

Mrs. Mooney: What kind of a future do you have? You'll never keep a job as long as your father lives. He'll see to that. Without a job, how will you take care of yourself? I can't keep you in the house indefinitely.

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Marie is very efficient and she's all the help I need. If you don't work, where will you meet eligible young men? Answer that question, Polly.

Polly: But Bob . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Bob is fine as long as he is your husband. If you don't marry "Bob," who will you marry? Husbands are hard to find in Dublin and Mr. Doran comes from a good social background; he has an excellent job, and at his age--what is he--thirty-five?--I'm sure he has some money stashed away in the bank. I myself couldn't have chosen a better candidate for marriage.

Polly: But, Mother, I told you . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Pay attention. Do you want to end up an old maid? Is that the kind of life you see for yourself? And think about me for once. How will I ever get you off my hands if you don't accept Mr. Doran's offer?

Polly: Get me off your hands!

Mrs. Mooney: You know what I mean!

Polly: I'm afraid I do. But he hasn't offered me anything yet.

Mrs. Mooney: Just leave it to me. That's what mothers are for--to see that their daughters get married. I wasn't lucky that my mother died when I was still a babe and my father didn't have the sense to see that my marriage was doomed. Only a mother could have seen how my marriage would turn out. Praise be to God that you have one. I'll call Mr. Doran to come downstairs.

Polly: (*upset*) Here? To see me? I couldn't face him. What if Bob denies everything? I couldn't bear that. I'd kill myself.

Mrs. Mooney: Stop that foolishness. I thought I talked some sense into you. I'll leave you alone with him for a while so that you can tell him how things stand and after you have a little chat with him, I'll talk to him. Now remember to act helpless and cry. Don't let him off the hook. Use all your feminine wiles. (*She calls*.) Marie. Marie

*(**Mary** enters.)*

Mary: What is it, madam? I've finished clearing off the table.

Mrs. Mooney: Very good. I want you to get Mr. Doran at once.

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Mary: Yes, madam, at once. (*looking at Polly*) Oh, Miss Polly, congratulations. I can almost hear those wedding bells.
Mrs. Mooney: That's enough, Marie. Get Mr. Doran.
Mary: Yes, ma'am. No, I mean madam.

*(**Mary** exits.)*

Mrs. Mooney: I'll leave you now, Polly, so you can have a pleasant chat with Mr. Doran. And go to the mirror and fix your face. You want to look your best for . . .
Polly: Bob. Yes, Mother.

*(**Mrs. Mooney** exits and **Polly** goes to the mirror.)*

Polly: (*Drying her eyes, she begins to sing*.) "I'm a naughty girl. You needn't sham: You know I am."

*(While she is singing, **Doran** enters. Seeing him in the mirror, Polly turns around and runs to him and embraces him.)*

Doran: (*pushing her away*) Be careful. Someone will see us.
Polly (*through her tears*) It doesn't matter any more, Bob. II don't care if the whole world can see us What am I to do?
Doran: What on earth are you talking about?
Polly: I told my mother everything about our affair this morning.
Doran: Everything?
Polly: Not all the details but enough... And now she wants to see you.
Doran: (*nervously*) See me about what?
Polly: (*still crying*) About what we're going to do. I'm so upset. I'll kill myself.
Doran: (*holding her*) Calm down. I'll get us out of this mess.
Polly: (i*ngenuously*) How, Bob? Mother is furious. She won't listen at all.
Doran: Don't worry. I'll handle her. I'll think of something.
Polly: I don't know what you can say. I never seen her so angry.
Doran: Saw, saw, Polly. I told you to watch your grammar.

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Polly: Please, Bob, be patient with me. I'll try to watch my grammar, but ain't there--isn't there something you want to tell me?

Doran: Tell you? Yes, we're in trouble now that your mother knows.

Polly: But you really must have something else to say . . . That you . . .

Doran: Yes. We should have been more careful.

Polly: What are we going to do?

Doran: What am *I* going to do. How can I find a way out of this mess?

Polly: But I thought you loved me. You said you loved me, and you know I love you. You know how much I care for you. I fell asleep waiting for you to come home last night. I saved a piece of cake for you and . . .

Doran: (*impatiently*) Stop babbling, Polly. I never promised you anything. I've never lied to you, have I?

Polly: But you've said you loved me. If I 'd known you'd take on like this, I would've never . . .

Doran: Started the affair. You were the one who trapped me. Remember, you knocked on my door one night and . . .

Polly: I only asked you to relight my candle after a gust had blown it out.

Doran: You were half naked!

Polly: It was bath night and I wore a flannel robe . . .

Doran: . . . that flew open and then. .

Polly: . . . then we kissed and kissed and I lost all self-control for love of you. I didn't plan to fall in love and . . .

Doran: (*throwing up his arms*) This is what it led to-- scenes and hysteria. I should have known better than to have an affair with a nineteen year old girl. I should have been more discreet. I should have . . .

Polly: (*crying*) What's going to happen to us? Mother wants to see you. What will you tell her?

Doran: Don't worry, Polly. Your mother is no match for me.

*(From the hallway, **Mrs. Mooney** can be heard coughing repeatedly. She then enters.)*

Mrs. Mooney: I think you both have had ample time to take care of business.

Polly: But, mother, Bob won't . . .

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Mrs. Mooney: Mr. Doran will do what is proper after I have a chat with him. Now, Polly, leave us alone for a few minutes and then I'll call for you.

*(Still crying, and casting woeful glances at **Doran**. **Polly** exits, reluctantly.)*

Mrs. Mooney: Let's not waste time, Mr. Doran, and get down to business You owe me an apology and you owe Polly...

Doran: I don't owe anyone an apology. Whatever happened was not my fault.

Mrs. Mooney: Are you blaming Polly? Why, no one in his right mind would believe that.

Doran: What I am saying is the truth, like it or not. I didn't make the first move. She started things up . . .

Mrs. Mooney: And you think you can go off without making reparations?

Doran: Is it money you're after? How much do you want to hush up the affair? Twenty-five pounds?

Mrs. Mooney: (*indignantly*) Twenty-five pounds?

Doran: Well, then, fifty?

Mrs. Mooney: (*laughing*) Fifty?

Doran: Then, seventy-five pounds. Seventy-five pounds is the highest I'll go.

Mrs. Mooney: Some mothers, I've heard, would accept such paltry sums.

Doran: (*reluctantly*) Then, one hundred pounds. Take it, or leave it.

Mrs. Mooney: (*looking outraged*) Have you lost all sense of decency to think that I would barter for my child?

Doran: (*equally outraged*)
Child? You call her a child?

Mrs. Mooney: Yes, a child, an innocent child.

Doran: I'd call her a seductress.

Mrs. Mooney: (*becoming exasperated*) Let's be honest and stop this charade. A man of your experience would find it easy to take advantage of a young girl. Anyone can see that you're a man of this world who has tasted its pleasures, and that you're old enough to know better than to prey on a . . .

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Doran: A clever temptress. She enticed me over and over again--as if it had all been planned out.

Mrs. Mooney: It was planned out--by you. A man of your years is no match for a child. Polly could never had plotted to have tricked you by herself.

Doran: She could if she had her mother's help.

Mrs. Mooney: How dare you imply that I had anything to do with this sordid affair? The guilty would do anything to deny their complicity. First, you betray my daughter. Now you try to slander me. Believe ne, Mr. Doran, you'll have to come up with a better argument. Remember, I'm not a child.

Doran: (*in an extremely sarcastic manner, emphasizing the word "madam" to stress its pejorative meaning*) Of that I am fully aware, madam.

Mrs. Mooney: Madam? Madam, indeed! Do not overreach yourself, Mr. Doran. I run a respectable house in a respectable neighborhood. Hardwicke Street is a first-rate address.

Doran: That you run a house is not open to debate. .All the boarders are aware of your running a house. Almost everyone in Dublin is aware of your running a house. Only you seem to be unaware of . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Such slander will get you nowhere.

Doran: Slander? It's the truth. I'm not the first one Polly's laid down with. And I can get witnesses to that . . .

Mrs. Mooney: (*approaching Doran who is seated*) Insults, Mr. Doran, just insults. (*wagging her finger at him*) I'll have you know I had to deal with stronger opponents than you and I won every time. I don't know what kind of gambler you are, Mr. Doran, but I'm holding all the right cards in my hand.

Doran: (*taking a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and wiping his forehead*) So it's come to gambling, has it? Well, let me tell you, I'm a gambler.

Mrs. Mooney: (*laughing*) And a poor one at that. You gambled on Polly's silence and did not count on her mother's intercession.

Doran: A better word would be manipulation.

Mrs. Mooney: Have it your way, Mr. Doran, but I'll do everything in my power to protect my daughter and my interests. I have public opinion,

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morality, and religion on my side. Your only course of action is to admit defeat and . .

Doran: And do what?

Mrs. Mooney: Marry Polly.

Doran: (*wiping his forehead with his handkerchief*) Marry Polly?

Mrs. Mooney: Yes, marry Polly.

Doran: But . . .

Mrs. Mooney: Come now, Mr. Doran. There are no ands if and buts about it. Marriage is the only solution. Besides, you're getting on in years and it's time for you to get a wife.

Doran: A wife? Marriage?

Mrs. Mooney: Yes. A wife and marriage.

Doran: Marriage is out of the question. Why I'd be a laughingstock. All the other boarders would know that I had been had like an animal caught in a trap. I couldn't face them.

Mrs. Mooney: But you wouldn't have to face them for long. We'll have the wedding as soon as possible and then you and Polly could set up house immediately.

Doran: (*shouting and walking menacingly toward **Mrs. Mooney***) No way will I marry Polly.

Mrs. Mooney: Contain yourself, Mr. Doran or, better yet, leave the premises.

Doran: Leave the premises?

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