

DAVID: I'm one of those people who takes other people to the opera... against their will. I estimate that since the age of 14, I've introduced more people to the Met than the good folks at Texaco. And every time, at a performance of *Boheme* or *Aida* or one of the other easy ones, as the chandeliers dimmed, I'd make the same joke. I'd say, "Now, try to enjoy it. It's all right if you don't. You're just here to find out if you have this particular genetic aberration." They usually didn't but they'd look adorable pretending they did. Anyway, I never imagined how that joke would come back to haunt me. I'm a set designer. At least in training. I wanted to design sets for Broadway starting when I was a kid and saw every show in town except *Oh, Calcutta* because you had to be 18 or older. By the time I was old enough to see *Oh, Calcutta*, Broadway had lost its appeal: hardly any plays, and an audience of nothing but Japanese tourists and Hadassah ladies with husbands who spent the first 15 minutes of Act I parking the Caddie. So, I embarked on a career in the Opera. I'm on the production staff at the Met. Which means I paint a lot of trees. But I figure, if you're going to work in an elitist art form that only a handful of people give a shit about, why not go all the way? And in opera, the composer's dead. So the designer can do something fabulous without getting a pissed off phone call from Arthur Miller's attorney. For instance ... here we have a smart looking Manhattan apartment. This is where my sister and her husband lived after they got married. Pages thirty through thirty-four of the Ikea catalogue. No real personality, but nothing objectionable. This is where I saw my family together for the last time. Now, if this were an opera, and everything is, I'd do something spectacular. The Swiss designer, Appia, taught us that a good set is an image of how the characters view the world. Forget what's real, life is too short. Take her away. I was in a heavy Wagnerian phase at the time. Immersing myself in the *Ring Cycle* day and night. Pretty impressive, huh? It's a little too *Lost Horizon*, I know, but a lot more interesting than Ikea. This is how I like to picture what happened that stormy season, when I saw the last of the Golds. They would never understand, but to me, it's the perfect setting. Wagner put gods and goddesses on the stage looming on mountaintops in front of stormy skies. With miles of glorious music under them, they decide the fate of the world, not with magic and thunderbolts, but in domestic squabbles: conversations between husband and wife, brother and sister, parent and child. The Gold family, my nice family, had domestic squabbles and conversations, and we also decided the fate of the world. You'll see. It was my sister's anniversary and we had reservations for dinner. And she had a secret.

DAVID: And it's not about a ring. Jot just a ring. It's about everything. Life, love, civilization, evolution. It's amazing. This twisted little anti-Semite with bad skin and B.O. created a work of art that is as unfathomable as the Bible. Let me give you an example. The last scene of *Die Walküre*. Wotan, the head god, is angry at his daughter, Brünnhilde, because she defied his wishes. Brünnhilde is Wotan's favorite child, she is the living embodiment of his will. But she has disobeyed him. Wotan has no choice but to punish her by taking away her godhead. He makes her a mortal woman. He puts her to sleep and lays her down on a rock surrounded by magic fire. Brünnhilde will rest there until a hero brave enough to walk through that fire can wake her. A hero who knows nothing of fear and obeys only Nature's law. A hero who is strong enough and courageous enough to truly love. Wotan knows too well that he will never see his child again. He kisses her on the forehead and says "Farewell, you valiant, glorious child!" Forced into obeying laws that he no longer understands or believes in, this god must abandon what he loves most of all. In one moment, with fire sweeping through the sky, we see parent and child, god and mortal, parting ways for eternity. And we know that it could be no other way. **How does it end?** Very simple. The end of everything as we know it. The world has become corrupt and lazy. It seems that mortals lie, cheat, and steal even worse than the gods did. True love is destroyed as people cling to twisted ideas of honor and duty that are based on lies. Brünnhilde's hero, Siegfried is murdered. Inconsolable, and seeing how the world is turning to shit, she erects a giant funeral pyre. There is no point in preserving this failed civilization. Brünnhilde sacrifices herself and all that is in the hope that something better may emerge. She calls up to Wotan, sitting powerless in his castle in the sky, *Ruhe, ruhe, do Gott!*" Rest, rest, O God! She mounts her horse and jumps into the fire. The flames rise to consume everything in sight, including the castle of the gods. And then, the mighty river overflows its banks and sweeps away all the wreckage, covering everything and everyone with a great flood of rebirth and new potential. Finally, as the water sinks back to its natural level, a few dazed survivors appear to behold the brae new world that stands before them. It's up to them now. And it's up to us what to make of it. That's just a rough idea. There's a lot more to it than that. I left out the dragon and the dwarfs. You can see how it's fun to work on.

DAVID: Oh, sure, everybody knows that part. That's the "Ride of the Walkürries." I nearly got in a fist fight with an usher who referred to it as "Theme from *Apocalypse Now*." These things are important to me. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde returns the magic ring to the river Rhine, from where it was stolen in the first place. And right after she does this, the world ends in a cataclysm of fire and water. Now, since the first performance, people have pointed out that doesn't make any sense. We're told over and over that all the trouble started when the gold was stolen from its natural place in the Rhine, so when it's put back, the curse should end and everybody should live happily ever after. The gods don't have to die, the world doesn't have to burn, we don't have to start all over. So why does it happen? Wagner went through a slew of different endings and this is the one he decided upon, he must have known what he was doing, there must be a simple explanation. And there is. When a friend asked him why it happens this way he said, "Listen to the music, you'll know." And sure enough, the arrogant little Nazi was right. You sit in the theatre and experience this onslaught of sound and destruction, and you know that it was all inevitable. This is the way everything comes to an end. I find myself in the same position when I tell friends about what happened to the Gods. They say, "I don't believe it," or "that makes no sense." And the only explanation I can give is, "if you were there, you'd know." Logic is besides the point. I think that's why I love the opera. When art is at it's most outrageous, when it cannot be easily believed, that is when it most resembles life. The answers are in the experience.

DAVID: A few weeks later, Stephen and I celebrated our third anniversary. To prove to him how much I had matured in my new sense of independence and manhood, I let him arrange the evening. He took me to a Bruce Springsteen concert. And people say *Tristan* is long! But I like it. I'm use to hearing people sing for four hours without understanding a word. Afterwards, we went home and gave each other gifts. We're not crazy about crystal and glass, so we checked out what the third anniversary is according to tradition. Anyone know? Leather. That we liked. Relax. He gave me a wallet. I've been true to my word. To this day, I haven't spoken to the Golds. It hasn't been easy. More than once my mother showed up at our apartment in the middle of the night, crying and pounding on the door. But I just buried my head in Stephen's chest until my father came and dragged her away. Dad didn't share Mom's flair for melodrama. He just sent me checks, which he knew I wouldn't cash, accompanied by notes that read, "How can you do this to your mother?" I never heard from Suzanne. She understood. But maybe they all do now. I never hear from anyone anymore. Once, just once, I almost broke down and called the Golds. A conductor friend of mine invited Stephen and me over for dinner to introduce us to his very distinguished new boyfriend. None other than Dr. Adrian Lodge. "Jewish anti-Semites, they're the worst." Right, Ma? I hardly listen to *The Ring Cycle* now. Still, I talk about it in my course at N.Y.U. I'm famous for my lecture about the Magic Fire, not because it's so insightful, but because I usually break down and cry. So, what is the Magic Fire? Shaw wrote, it is the Lie that must hide the Truth. It's the teaching of the Church, the law of the State. It's the fire of Hell that will burn you if you question what you're told. It's everything you're afraid of because you're supposed to be. But then how come Siegfried walks right through it without so much as singeing an eyebrow? It's not because he's such a hero. Most of the time he's played by a tenor who looks like Ed Asner in a blonde wig. It's because the Magic Fire is a fraud. It can't hurt you. Mankind will keep creating new and better worlds, and there will always be those who are left, for whatever reason, on the other side of the Magic Fire. If only we were brave enough to walk through that fire, and unlock that door, we would awaken another part of our soul. And we would know what it means to truly love. Without question.

SUZANNE: I should have told him first. “Shoulda, woulda, coulda.” Do you get points for at least knowing when you should have done something? Do I get partial credit for guilt? I should have stayed in ballet class. I should have invited Margo the handicapped girl to my bat mitzvah. I should have been a doctor. That’s a biggie. I had the interest, had the grades. But I hate being tested. My heart starts pounding and my hands sweat. You can’t get an M.D. if you hate being tested, so I switched to marketing. My parents were devastated. They said I always take the easy way out. I guess I do, I married Rob. No, I take that back. There’s nothing wrong with Rob. My name was Gold, his was Stein, if I married him I’d be Goldstein, it made Jewish sense. You should have seen him in college. Rob was amazing, really passionate about everything, like he didn’t know it was the Eighties. When he chose research over a medical practice, I thought it was so noble, so sexy. I didn’t think how much less he’d be making than the average anesthesiologist. I take that back, too. God, why do I do that? I love Rob. I couldn’t live without him. I tried. Five years ago. We had been together *forever* and I decided enough was enough. I needed to find myself and reach my potential. Dr. Rob was a symbol of everything wrong with my life. So, I walked. It was exhilarating at first. On the go in the big city. Got a new outlook, a new self image. I was ready to start dating. Uch, how do people do this? I would go with women from work to bars and then go home and cry my eyes out. I’m sorry, I am not equipped to sit in some yuppie watering hold with my tits sticking out and appear interested in some M.B.A. with thinning hair telling Ivan Boesky jokes. But, I didn’t give up. I took control of my life and I went, I swear to God, to a computer dating service. Data Dates. On Lexington. Isn’t that embarrassing? I met with this perky woman named Jan who still had a Dorothy Hammill haircut which I thought was rather odd. She told me they have a large base of subscribers who pay yearly until they find their “life mate,” that what she said, “life mate.” It sounded like something on *Nova*. They take down all this information and then they put you on a video. There’s a library that has books of pictures of the people available and then you can watch the ones who interest you on TV. “Well, Jan, that sounds very high tech,” I said, which made her even perkier. “Oh, Suzanne, I really want to see this work for you. Are you committed? Tell me you are and we’ll get started right away.” It was very seductive, you know, in a Jews for Jesus kind of way. And then I asked about the money. “Suzanne, don’t let the money stop you. We’ll work it out.” “But, how much is it?” Okay, it was thirty-five hundred dollars for the first six months and twenty-two fifty after that. I said, “Excuse

me?” And then Jan tossed her Dorothy Hammill hair to one side and said, “I know it sounds like a lot. Let me talk to my supervisor.” By this point, my heart was pounding like during the S.A.T.’s, so I slipped out of Jan’s office and ran down the hall to a the elevator. And there on the left, was the library. I knew I wasn’t supposed to go in, I wasn’t “committed,” but I couldn’t resist, I had to see. I opened the eligible man book and tried not to hyperventilated. How can I describe to you what I saw? The best I can do is: think *WKRP in Cincinnati*. Without the cute one. I almost paid over five thousand dollars to have dinner with Les Nesman. God, how dare these people take advantage of our needs that way. Especially in a desperate era like this one. I ran home and cried my eyes out. Were these really my options – whining Wharton graduates or “dating cults”? Or being alone? It was multiple choice and I never felt so unprepared. I just wanted to crawl under a rock and go to sleep for thirty years. I called Rob immediately. Two months later, we were engaged.

WALTER: I went to the doctor the other day because my stomach was being a little too sensitive to the Dow Industrial Average. Sometimes I think they should use my bowel movements as a major economic indicator. Anyway, I was stuck sitting in the waiting room, amazing how those guys get away with that, and I started reading one of those *People* type magazines. They had a ten page spread on all these Hollywood stars who are coming out now and saying they were physically and emotionally abused by their parents. Can you imagine? My mother is seventy-eight years old, I would be afraid to say something like that in private, never mind in a magazine. She would come to my office and bash my head in with a frozen noodle pudding. And I'm telling you, she was worse than any of them. We just didn't think in those terms. We didn't spend our lives trying to figure out how many ways our parents screwed us up. They managed to make it through Depression and war keeping food on the table and clothes on our back, and if they didn't say "I love you" once a week or give you enough "positive reinforcement," you lived. America made too much money, that's the problem. Suddenly, we got all this time to sit around and figure out why we're still not happy. You notice it's movie stars and yuppies who do on *Donahue* and into therapy to talk about their rotten parents. Your average guy making ends meet doesn't give a rat's ass about "getting in touch with the child within." He wants to get fed and he wants to get laid. Done. Blaming their parents, the nerve of them. When we were growing up, it was the kids who were the disappointments. Is that out of fashion now, or what? I can't say these things around Phyllis or she'll give me the look. You know the look. The one that says, "All right, I love you anyway." I hate that look. It doesn't even take long for it to work, maybe half a second and I crumble inside. Because there it is, the face of the woman I've lived with for thirty years saying that I don't deserve her, which I know is true, or that I don't love the kids as much as she does, which I know she thinks, but which is utter nonsense. I love my kids so much I want to burst. Just look at them. They're smart, smarter than Phyllis and me ever were. They've got a rhythm when they talk, it's amazing, you can't keep up. They're beautiful. But, look, I'm disappointed. Sure. Every parent has been disappointed by their children since God with Adam and Eve. Suzanne, she could have been a doctor, a surgeon yet. She had straight A's. But she likes to take the easy way out. So she works at Bloomingdale's, a place, thank God, that hasn't gone under. Yet. She married early, the first guy she went with seriously. The first guy. Still, Rob's good to her, I can't complain. And David? Oh, he could have been ... he could have been

anything he wanted to be. On television, if he wanted. With everything we did for him.... But, that's life. What are you gonna do? You give your life for them, they disappoint you, and you love them. And that's the gift. You find yourself able to love them, even with all the crap. They didn't ask to come into this world. It was our decision. You throws the dice, you takes your chances. And you try not to think about it.

PHYLLIS: We live in the Information Age. It's true. Every Sunday, while Walter plays tennis, I sit in bed with all the *New York Times* for the week, Monday to Sunday. The kids make fun of me. They say, "Mom, read 'the Week in Review' that's all you need. You're gonna be out of date anyway." Still, I lie there reading everything I didn't get to. It's a compulsion, a disease. I'm so afraid I'll be caught in conversation without knowing what Anthony Lewis wrote about Israel on Tuesday and I'll be sent to Jewish Liberal detention. I get very nervous. Anyway, it takes me the whole day and I usually finish the week's pile just in time for *60 Minutes* which we watch to see if Mike Wallace is destroying anyone we know. That's how I start the week. My brain is so full of news and issues, opinions and statistics, that sometimes I have to read Danielle Steele just to clear my head. Otherwise, I wake up screaming, "I'll take social injustice for six hundred, Alex!" You always hear people say we don't know enough. We're all ignorant. That's why the country's falling apart. Well, I don't see that, not for a minute. IF you ask me, I think we all know too damn much. We're all being oppressed by information that has nothing to do with our experience. All we can do is react. Years ago, we didn't know about blacks. Not really. They were blacks, live and let live. We didn't know about sex, how it was supposed to feel, what to do. Who thought it was supposed to be any better than it was? We didn't know about addictions, about life in prison, about the plight of transsexual, cross-dressing priests. Right? Years ago, you lived your life. Now, we have to see so concerned all the time about every terrible unfair thing that goes on, that we all walk around with these pained Barbara Walters expressions plastered on our faces. And what good is it doing? Not only have we completely failed at helping anybody else, but we have taken the beauty and simplicity out of our own lives. Am I right? This is a terrible thing I'm saying. I know. It sounds like I'm advocating ignorance, wanting to look the other way. But I'm not. I think people are good and should be left alone. If they could just do what their hearts tell them to do, everything would be all right. IF they would just listen to their hearts. Sometimes, I hear people around here say, "If my daughter did this," or "If my son was like that, I'd run him out of the house." And I want to say, "No, you wouldn't. That's very easy for you to say, sitting there with your Vuitton bag, driving your Infinity, and expecting the world to cater to you. But you don't know how you'd feel. You don't know how your heart breaks when the world around you doesn't match your expectations." "You have no idea." That's what I want to tell them. But it's none of their business. So I don't say anything. I just sit there. I don't say anything.

ROB: Look, David, I understand how you feel. Sometimes I wish we could get out of the way and let Nature take over, like in the opera. But in reality, Nature fails. You have no idea what horrific defects can strike a person, and now we can find out before they embark on a tragic life. We have the technology, we're going to have more and more information. There's no going back. Why force someone through an unhappy existence? Not to mention their family. Let's give people the choice. Let each family do what's right. It's nobody else's business, not the government's, not some religious crackpot's not even the doctor's. Just last week a woman at New York Hospital found out that her fetus had a tumor the size of a baseball on the tailbone. IF it was benign, the doctors would have to remove it and the kid would have no legs or backside. IF it was malignant, the kid would die. That's Nature, David. That's God's work, but now we have the ability to head it off at the pass.

ROB: My favorite toy as a kid was always Lego. I must have had more Lego blocks by the time I was ten than that city in Denmark where they have that whole Lego metropolis. I could never understand the attraction of a toy that came ready in the package. What good was that? I would beg my parent to only buy me toys that said “Assembly Require.” And then I would see how fast I could put the stuff together without ever reading the instructions. It didn’t always come out looking like the picture on the box, but it was more important for me to attain that feeling of fulfillment. The power of the creator. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I think my road to a career in genetic research was paved with Lego. I always had a fascination with components; how things are put together, how to take them apart, how to change them. It still excites me. I sit there in the lab, surrounded by these million dollar machines under those buzzing fluorescent lights and I think, why not with people? There’s obviously a lot, we can all agree, that needs to be corrected. Or can at least be improved. Just look at the amount of suffering, inward and outward, all around us. Let’s use every weapon we have to combat it. Is that such a horrible thing to think? Of course not. Well, my father turned bright red when I said something similar at the dinner table. He called me a Nazi. “You are hateful,” he said. “Why has God punished us with a Nazi for a son?” So think I called him a backward little man living in the Stone Age. At which point, my mother started crying and running around lighting candles. Things haven’t been the same since. I had pretty much put that whole argument out of my mind until David started his crusade. It’s a complicated issue, of course it is. I don’t deny that. But I can make a helluva case that what Oxy does is a lot more useful and productive for society than spending tax dollars to have fat Germans walk around a stage with helmets and spears for five hours. How dare he raise the specter of genocide, like some college kid saying anything to win an argument! Suzanne and I have enough problems without him poking around her conscience. Or mine. Lets face it, do I want a kid who’s going to know every time he looks in Suzanne’s eyes that he’s not the one she wanted? I know what that’s like. The bottom line is this: You think it’s so easy to have a family today? The family is an endangered species. There are kids on the streets, broken homes, abuse. Why stack the deck against us? Why walk into a no-win situation? Don’t believe what David says. This isn’t an opera about the fate of humanity. It’s the simple story of one family making a very private decision. He, of all people, should know to respect other people’s privacy. We need to do what’s right for us. Don’t put the fate of the world on our shoulders. We can’t carry the load.