

# **The Disappearance of the Squirrel Lady Statue and Other South Side Mysteries**

By Jill Florence Lackey (2015)

Synopsis: The fictional plot explores several real-life mysteries on Milwaukee's South Side between 1931 and 1975. The major mystery is the disappearance of a sculpture of Mary Belle Jacobs, the founder of the controversial University Settlement House. Nicknamed "the Squirrel Lady," the statue stood in Kosciuszko Park for 44 years before it was curiously stolen from the grounds in December of 1975. Other mysteries abound and are explored through the fictional residents of this Kosciuszko Park neighborhood.

## *Characters*

*Gustav Olenski: Gustav ages from about 25 to about 68 during the performance. He is a somewhat intolerant second-generation Pole. He finds difference of any kind threatening. He has lived on Lincoln Avenue since his birth.*

*Lidia Olenski: Lidia is Gus' wife. She is a more tolerant Pole than her husband. She is generally gracious and conciliatory. Her family is also indigenous to the neighborhood. She dies before Act II.*

*Adrian Borkowski: He is sickly and pale looking—even from Act 1. He wears a hood and multiple neck scarves, trying to keep the wind away from his face. He is covered from head to toe with dusty-colored clothing. We hardly ever see his face, which is gray. He coughs and wheezes, but manages to make the rounds to all the neighbors, which he considers to be his calling. His mission is to keep the neighborhood strong and to unite and assist residents. NOTE TO RYAN—THE PLACES WHERE I HAVE ADRIAN COUGHING OR WHEEZING ARE ARBITRARY. YOU FIGURE OUT THE BEST PLACES TO DEMONSTRATE HIS ILLNESS.*

*Esperanza Ramirez Olenski: She is a curandera who rents the upper unit of the Olenski house with her mother in the late 1960s. She has a Spanish accent and exudes a mystical aura. She speaks in a very careful, reserved fashion—always seeming to be more interested in the person she's speaking to than in what she has to say. She keeps secrets well, given the*

*nature of her calling. She eventually marries Gustav. She understands Gus' fears. From their first meeting, she "understands" Adrian.*

The set will be the front of a house. There will be an erected "porch" of about 4' in width with three steps. This will be against a set with a doorway and two windows at each side. Actors can enter the set from the sides (as if walking on the sidewalk) or from the front door opening. There will be one chair on the porch. The chair always belongs to Gustav.

## ACT ONE

*WARDROBE: Gustav and Lidia will be dressed in Depression-era clothing. They are working class Poles and their clothing will reflect this. Kasia will wear a babushka to hold back her hair.*

*Adrian will be dressed in grayish clothing that covers him head to toe. He will always wear a hood and scarves around his neck of grayish hues. His face will be made up to be grayish also. His gait and speech show that he is sickly—he walks with difficulty and speaks with hoarseness or breathlessness and a cough. He has a heavy Polish accent.*

*The sign will say, "AUGUST, 1931. THE DEDICATION OF THE SQUIRREL LADY STATUE AT KOSCIUSZKO PARK."*

*GUSTAV OLENSKI will be seated on the chair on the porch looking through binoculars. Next to his chair is a copy of the Kuryer Polski. Kosciuszko Park is straight ahead. His house is on Lincoln. LIDIA OLENSKI will be just inside the front door. They both appear to be in their 20s. Off stage, but later approaching, is ADRIAN BORKOWSKI.*

GUSTAV

*Grunting loudly and in dissatisfaction as he looks through the glasses.*

LIDIA

*Entering through the doorway, standing on the porch.* I don't know why you don't just go over there.

GUSTAV

Never!

LIDIA

Give me the binoculars!

GUSTAV

*Hands her the binoculars.* Suit yourself.

LIDIA

*Looking through the binoculars.* Hmm. A bit of a crowd. Some guy who looks like a minister—seems to be leading them in a prayer.

GUSTAV

*Angrily--rises from seat.* See! Not even a priest! And this a Polish neighborhood. I'll bet none of our people even showed up for this.

LIDIA

Still looking through the binoculars. Hmm. Don't recognize any . . . Oh, there's Mrs. Stowlowski . . .

GUSTAV

I don't even think she lives here anymore.

LIDIA

. . . And Mrs. Kryszak . . .

GUSTAV

Figures.

LIDIA

. . . Oh, and I think I see Adrian Borkowski.

GUSTAV

I don't even know how you can tell, with all his robes and stuff.

LIDIA

Well, it's the robes I recognize.

GUSTAV

What is he doing there honoring the founder of that settlement house? Hell, he was born in Poland!

LIDIA

It looks like he's leaving.

GUSTAV

Why does Adrian always have to poke his nose into everything?

LIDIA

*Slowly* . . . And he might be hobbling this way.

GUSTAV

Well, if he does, do NOT invite him to dinner.

LIDIA

Because?

GUSTAF

Because??? Because he has never bothered to return the favor. Not once have I even been inside his house.

LIDIA

Well, he lives alone. Probably can't cook.

GUSTAF

And that's another issue. Why isn't he married? He's just so . . .

LIDIA

Different?

GUSTAF

Weird.

LIDIA

Gus, he's sickly. He looks like an old man, but I think he's our age.

GUSTAF

Convenient, if you ask me. I heard he's still living off his parents. I think he lives in their house still.

LIDIA

Gus, there is a Depression going on. You barely have work.

GUSTAV

But I still earn enough to feed our kids. I tell you, Lidia, there's something very wrong with this Adrian. If he's so sick, why does he have the energy to go house to house begging dinner invitations?

LIDIA

I don't think he begs invitations, does he?

GUSTAV

Then I don't know what you call it. He comes with all the gossip, looking all grey and half dead and wheezing . . .

LIDIA

*Looking to her left.* Shhhh. Here he comes.

GUSTAV

*Looking to his left.* Hello, Adrian.

ADRIAN

Dzień dobry. [Good day]

GUSTAV

Why are you all bundled up on this beautiful August afternoon?

ADRIAN

*Speaking with slight breathlessness and heavy Polish accent.* It's the chill. I'm so congested. And how are you and the lovely Mrs. Olenski?

LIDIA

*Smiling graciously.* Well, we are just fine, Adrian. I see you were over at the statue unveiling.

ADRIAN

I just went to see who was there. *Out of breath.* But I didn't have the energy to stand through all those speeches.

GUSTAV

And who was there?

ADRIAN

Little Jane Mayers. You remember her—her mother worked at the settlement house. She'll be doing the actual unveiling, I heard.

GUSTAV

Who else?

ADRIAN

Some people from the City. *Cough.* Mrs. Kryszak. Lots of people I never saw before.

LIDIA

I haven't seen Mrs. Kryszak at the butcher shop for some time. Is she well, Adrian?

GUSTAV

How would Adrian know?

LIDIA

Adrian visits all our neighbors, Gus. Something we should do more often.

ADRIAN

Actually, Mrs. Kryszak was having some trouble with her feet lately, but she got that taken care of. *Catching his breath*. The ones you might want to keep in your prayers are the Rozak kids. They are having a terrible time with whooping cough.

LIDIA

Oh my. And the Rozaks are having such bad luck, with him losing his job.

ADRIAN

Ah, yes. And now the kids. I made up a syrup for them—a mixture of roasted garlic, red clover tea, and honey.

LIDIA

Seriously?

ADRIAN

My great uncle got the recipe from the Potawatomi tribe when he moved in.

GUSTAV

I wouldn't trust any of those Indian cures.

LIDIA

But we use Oil of Wintergreen.

GUSTAV

Well that's . . . well, everyone uses Oil of Wintergreen.

ADRIAN

That's an Indian cure too, Gustav Olenski. It's from wintergreen berries.

LIDIA

Adrian, did your great uncle know a lot of the Indians when he moved in?

ADRIAN

He did. They were our neighbors. *Cough.* Some still are.

GUSTAF

*Sarcastically.* Well with all those connections, I'm surprised you couldn't find a cure for your—what do you call it—chill?

LIDIA

Gus, you're being rude.

GUSTAV

Hmmm. *Grabs the binoculars from Lidia and resumes watching the unveiling.*

ADRIAN

I was visiting with the Lenz family a few days ago. It seems that John Lenz was able to get a job at the tug boat company. That's good news, isn't it?

LIDIA

I don't believe we know the Lenzes, do we, Gus?

GUSTAV

*Shrugs shoulders.*

ADRIAN

They're Kashubes. Used to live on Jones Island.

GUSTAV

Then best we don't know them.

ADRIAN

*Quickly, to get in a jab.* And just how is your business going these days, Gustav Olenski? For starters, have you gotten that hydraulic bottle jack yet for your little construction company?

GUSTAV

*Shocked by the question, sits up straight in his chair in anger.* No! Of course not. Who's in a position to buy equipment these days?

ADRIAN

Ah yes, who is in a position?

LIDIA

*Shakes her head and retreats through the door, back into the house.*

GUSTAV

When the kids are grown and I can rent out the upper flat—then maybe I can get the hydraulic bottle jack. It's a major investment.

ADRIAN

So, you are essentially a handyman these days, Gustav Olenski?  
*Cough.*

GUSTAV

*Sarcastically.* I have a truck! Whatever I do, I'm proud to do it, "Adrian Borkowski." Not like some men who go gossiping from house to house and never do a lick of work.

ADRIAN

You might be surprised to find out one day that my work actually is visiting.

GUSTAV

*Looks away.* His work is visiting. What hogwash! *He picks up the binoculars next to his chair and resumes looking at the statue unveiling. He turns the binoculars to his right.* Achhh!

ADRIAN

What?

GUSTAV

Get a look. *He points to his right and hands the binoculars to Adrian.* What the hell do you call that?

ADRIAN

*Looking through the binoculars.* That's just Tata Rybe.

GUSTAV

Just Tata Rybe? He's walking on his hands next to the pond, in front of a bunch of kids!

ADRIAN

He's good at acrobatics, Gustav Olenski. He amuses the kids . . . and adults. *Out of breath.* He's the guy that leads our parades on Lincoln. The one doing the summersaults.



GUSTAV

That was Tata—whatever? He's some kind of Jew, right?

ADRIAN

No.

GUSTAV

*Takes back the binoculars and looks through them.* But he's wearing that long black beard and those black clothes. Black hat .

. .

ADRIAN

He comes from Poland, like me—like your parents. *Snidely.* If you had kept up with your Polish, he'd be your friend too.

GUSTAV

I doubt it.

ADRIAN

His real name is Chelminiak. Tata Rybe is a nickname he got from

. . .

GUSTAV

I'm not interested. He's too strange.

ADRIAN

I think he makes the neighborhood more interesting. *Cough.* We need different people here—it gives the neighbors something to talk about, something to keep them together.

GUSTAV

*Grumbling.* I could do without that kind of "interesting."

ADRIAN

He's out of work too, Gustav Olenski, like so many of us. He walks on his hands and the men pour little shots of liquor into his flask.

GUSTAV

*Angry.* Oh, fine! So we have a drunk entertaining our kids!

ADRIAN

Actually he doesn't drink. When his flask is full, he sells the contents. You'd be surprised how much he gets to bring home to his family. He collects junk too on . . .

GUSTAV

That sounds like a bunch of crap to me.

ADRIAN

*Sighs.* Ah, Gustav Olenski. I think you just have fears.

GUSTAV

What fears?

ADRIAN

Of anything that is different.

GUSTAV

Nonsense.

ADRIAN

Why don't you see where they're at with the unveiling.

GUSTAV

*Grumbles.* *He looks straight ahead with his binoculars.* It's unveiled.

ADRIAN

And?

GUSTAV

It's stupid. It doesn't look like her at all. I don't know why they have her in a pose feeding squirrels. I don't ever remember seeing Mary Belle Austin Jacobs feeding squirrels.

ADRIAN

*Trying to catch his breath.* Someone in the speeches said that she was fond of a statue in Chicago that had something to do with squirrels.

GUSTAV

I don't ever remember her putting her head outside that settlement house, to be blunt. *He puts the binoculars down and turns to Adrian.* So, Adrian, I suppose your family was a big fan of that settlement house?

ADRIAN

*Puts hands in a praying position.* Mother of God, no. They wouldn't let me go near it.

GUSTAV  
Really?

ADRIAN  
They may not have been the most social people, but they were surely very Polish.

GUSTAV  
Well, I guess I know what you mean by that.

ADRIAN  
My mother went there just once—for a baking lesson. *Trying to catch his breath.* When she told the social worker—who was probably Mary Belle—about her Polish dishes, the woman made her feel like she wasn't an American.

GUSTAV  
*Grumbles.* My family had the same experience. Some say it did good things with its classes, but mostly for the people didn't want to keep their traditions. I went there now and then to borrow books, but I think I was the only one from my family.

ADRIAN  
You know that Mary Belle taught a class on Americanization.

GUSTAV  
I heard. It was all about how to become a separated citizen without all those ethnic and ancestral ties.

ADRIAN  
Ah yes. Separated. A very good word for it, Gustav Olenski. I know of one very sad story that came out of that experience.

GUSTAV  
With the University Settlement House?

ADRIAN  
Truly, yes. Someday I will share it with you.

GUSTAV  
Not now?

ADRIAN  
It's long. Not today.

GUSTAV

*Grunts.* You and your little secrets.

ADRIAN

*Ignores comment.* We can all hope that one day people will start to recognize that heritage groups—all of them—are good for a neighborhood.

GUSTAV

I don't know why you say all of them. We're pretty much all Poles here.

ADRIAN

Well, there's the Kashube.

GUSTAV

Kashubes are Poles—more or less—just a lower form.

ADRIAN

Ah, there you go again. You do have fears. And maybe it won't always be just Poles here.

GUSTAV

You talk like a fool . . .

ADRIAN

Perhaps.

GUSTAV

So, "Adrian Borkowski"—the neighborhood ambassador—just why did your family up and move away from here?

ADRIAN

Because of my brother's death.

GUSTAV

*Looks suddenly interested.* How so?

ADRIAN

He drowned in the pond.

GUSTAV

The pond?

ADRIAN

*Head lowered.* Yes.

GUSTAV

The pond across the street? At Kosciuszko?

ADRIAN

Yes.

GUSTAV

Oh, I did hear about that. Maybe five years ago. Some 22-year-old man was out late and took out one of the row boats. No one knew exactly who he was.

ADRIAN

Alas, my brother.

GUSTAV

Well, you know, your family and mine went to different parishes, so we didn't keep up much. I am sorry to learn that was your brother, Adrian. I really am.

ADRIAN

My parents and my younger brother Leon moved to Cudahy right after that. They couldn't bear to look at that pond. They left me behind.

GUSTAV

You could have gone with them?

ADRIAN

All my friends were here . . .

GUSTAV

Again, I am sorry . . .

ADRIAN

*Adrian sighs, coughs.* Well, I must get along now and make myself some supper.

GUSTAV

Oh yes, supper.

*Lights begin to dim.*

ADRIAN

Dobry wieczór. [Have a good evening] *Struggles and walks away very slowly.*

GUSTAV

Adrian . . . wait . . . maybe you could . . . *Gets up and shouts through the door.* Lidia! . . . *Looks back and sees Adrian has left.*  
Oh darn . . .

*Lights off.*

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## ACT II

WARDROBE/MAKEUP. It is now 1967. The clothing will be 60-ish. GUSTAV will have grey hair, reading glasses, a few lines in his face, and will be dressed in working class clothes. ESPERANZA will be dressed in Mexican peasant clothing and carrying a cloth tote bag. ADRIAN will have the same clothes and makeup as he had before, except that now he will be walking with a cane.

*The sign will say, "SEPTEMBER, 1967, SHORTLY AFTER THE FAIR HOUSING MARCHES CAME TO KOSCIUSZKO PARK."*

*GUSTAV OLENSKI will be offstage getting his makeup and grey hair fixed for a few minutes. ESPERANZA RAMIREZ will come out of the door and stand on the porch. ADRIAN BORKOWSKI is offstage but will approach on the sidewalk.*

ESPERANZA

*Comes out the front door and stands on the porch. Next to her is GUSTAV's chair, a newspaper, and the set of binoculars. ESPERANZA checks the items in her tote bag. She realizes she has forgotten something and goes back inside. Oh, soy un idiota. She leaves her bag on the porch. She returns quickly with a bundle of herbs and places them in her bag. She looks out at the park (straight ahead). She picks up the binoculars and looks out for a moment.*

ADRIAN

*Slowly approaches the porch with his cane. Hesitates at the porch, looking up at ESPERANZA.*

ESPERANZA

*Unaware that ADRIAN has approached the porch, she continues looking through the binoculars and then lowers the binoculars slightly and jumps, seeing the giant figure of ADRIAN through the glass. ¡Oh, Dios mío!*

ADRIAN

*Breathless. I am so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.*

ESPERANZA

*Grasping her heart.* But you did. In more ways than you know.

ADRIAN

You were looking at the park. Are you going to join the demonstration?

ESPERANZA

Not today. I have a call to make.

ADRIAN

Ah, yes. *Breathless.* I understand you are a curandera.

ESPERANZA

*Looking perplexed.* How did you know that?

ADRIAN

I was visiting with the Figueroas. They said that a beautiful curandera and her mother had rented the upper flat at Gustav Olenski's place.

ESPERANZA

You visited with the Figueroas?

ADRIAN

Yes, surely. The oldest son is at the demonstration now. I just came from there.

ESPERANZA

*Still looking perplexed.* You . . . are you the one that does all the visiting?

ADRIAN

Ah, my reputation precedes me. I introduce myself—Adrian Borkowski. *He bows.* And I imagine you would be the beautiful curandera, Esperanza Ramirez?

ESPERANZA

*Still looking perplexed, but embarrassed.* That is my name. And I am a curandera.

ADRIAN

Then I must welcome you to the neighborhood. I have known the Olenskis for a good share of my life—Gustav, his children, and his late lovely wife, Lidia.



ESPERANZA

*At a loss for words. Yes . . . of course. She places the binoculars back next to the chair.*

ADRIAN

And you must tell me, did Gustav finally get his hydraulic bottle jack, now that he has a renter?

ESPERANZA

I . . . uh. I think . . .

GUSTAV

*Suddenly appearing in the doorway. You darn right, Gustav bought that hydraulic jack, you nosey old fart!*

ADRIAN

*Coughs.* Well, I was interested of course . . .

GUSTAV

Of course. Always the busy body. I take it you have been prodding information out of my new tenant?

ADRIAN

Well . . .

ESPERANZA

*Ill at ease.* He was very nice . . . Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Borkowski. I have to be leaving now to . . .

GUSTAV

*Grabs her arm.* No, not yet. Take a long look at this specimen down on the sidewalk? You see how grey he is? You hear his wheezing and coughing? *Turns to ADRIAN.* See, she's some kind of a shaman. *Rolls his eyes in an exaggerated way at ADRIAN.* She can cure you of everything.

ESPERANZA

Ah, no. My work is not magic. I can help, but I'm not a miracle worker.

GUSTAV

Nonsense! Now is the time to prove yourself. This guy has been sick—or so he says—since I met him. Too sick to work. You can wave your magic wand at him and . . .

ADRIAN

I think you are insulting our neighbor, Gustav Olenski. I know a little bit about curanderismo, and I know there's no wand waving.

ESPERANZA

I really must get going . . .

GUSTAV

No wands? *Reaches in her bag and grabs the bundle and waves it.* She waves these bundles of herbs over people.

ESPERANZA

*Grabs the bundle from him.* What I do, Mr. Olenski, if you will pardon me, is discuss what creates havoc in a person—what causes extreme states of emotion . . . anger . . .

ADRIAN

It seems to me, Gustav Olenski, that it is you that are in need of her services.

GUSTAV

I'm not the sick one. *Points to ADRIAN.* Look at him! He can barely breathe. Can't you roll an egg over him or something? *He sits down on his chair.*

ESPERANZA

*She walks down the steps and very, very slowly approaches ADRIAN. She walks slowly around him, then stops, and gently pushes a bit of his hood back from his hairline. She nods, and then backs up slightly. She speaks slowly and mystically.* I do see your affliction, Adrian Borkowski. I do.

ADRIAN

*He nods in an understanding way.*

ESPERANZA

But you have no need of me.

GUSTAV

*Jumping up from the chair.* Aha! I knew it. You've been faking all these years!

ESPERANZA

*Backs away nervously from ADRIAN.* I don't think that is the right interpretation, Mr. Olenski. But I think there is much more that

Adrian Borkowski could tell you, if your relationship with him was a little more harmonious . . .

ADRIAN

*Carefully.* Perhaps, one day.

GUSTAV

“Perhaps one day.” This is what you always say about your all your little secrets.

ESPERANZA

I really must go. You can see that this is a neighborhood that needs healing. *Points to park.* When I get back, I will make a tea for you, Mr. Olenski. *She walks away.*

GUSTAV

*Looking sharply at ADRIAN.* It’s syphilis, isn’t it?

ADRIAN

What?

GUSTAV

Your mystery illness. That’s it, isn’t it?

ADRIAN

*Catches his breath.* You talk like a fool, Gustav Olenski.

GUSTAV

Then why didn’t you ever marry? Have children?

ADRIAN

I have my nephews.

GUSTAV

In Cudahy?

ADRIAN

Yes, the children of my brother Leon. And there are all the people in the neighborhood.

GUSTAV

*Looks through his binoculars and points to the park.* Like those?

ADRIAN

Of course. *Coughs.*

GUSTAV

“Of course.” So now we have Groppi inciting the Mexicans to riot too. And right by the children’s park.

ADRIAN

He wasn’t inciting them to riot. *Catches breath.* He was telling them to stand up for their rights. I was there.

GUSTAV

Standing up for their rights? Isn’t that what the settlement house was preaching? That we should all demand our rights—be individuals separated from the rest of society?

ADRIAN

Oh that is not Groppi’s message. *Catches breath.* He wants them to stand up for their ethnic group—not at all what they taught at the settlement house.

GUSTAV

*Grumbles.*

ADRIAN

When the Negroes marched here last month, they wanted respect for themselves as Negroes. Same with the Mexicans and the Indians. Those settlement houses wanted everyone to forget about their heritage—be like the English or something—whatever being “American” was supposed to be. *Catches breath.* But we stayed proud to be Polish, didn’t we?

GUSTAV

Hmmm. That we did. *Puts his chin in his hands, thinking for a couple of seconds.* Which brings up a subject, Adrian Borkowski—something you never told me about.

ADRIAN

And what is that.

GUSTAV

You know what it is. That story you always say is too long to tell—something about that settlement house?

ADRIAN

Well, it's not such a long story. It's only that I might be inflating the influence of the settlement house in this very sad sequence of events.

GUSTAV

Well, I'll be the judge of that. Just tell.

ADRIAN

It concerns my brother.

GUSTAV

Leon, or the one who drowned?

ADRIAN

*Catches breath.* The one who drowned.

GUSTAV

*Raises his hands.* Go on.

ADRIAN

Well, my brother had a sweetheart. Her name was Ursula Banasik. Do you remember the Banasik family? They used to live on 15<sup>th</sup> Place, near the river.

GUSTAV

I do. But I think they moved. That was a long time ago.

ADRIAN

Yes, that is the gist of the story. My brother began courting Ursula when they were both 15. They planned to marry when they left high school. *Catches breath.* But Ursula's family was very involved in that settlement house. Her mother was most involved. She started giving up her Polish ways. She got it into her head—and here, Gustav Olenski, is where I might be blaming the settlement house too much—she got convinced that her family could do better if her husband got a job someplace else and they moved to a place where they could be less fettered by people. *Catches breath.* Somewhere nice outside of the city. A place where they weren't restrained by all the Polish people who stuck their nose into their business and pressured them into keeping up traditions.

GUSTAV

I don't think you're exaggerating the influence of the settlement house here—this is what they taught.

ADRIAN.

Oh, they did—which was why my parents would not let us go there. But these beliefs were part of general American culture at the time. *Catches breath.* I think that the settlement house was just reflecting that.

GUSTAV

I disagree. But go on.

ADRIAN

*Catches breath.* Well, when Ursula's parents moved—somewhere near Franklin—they no longer kept up their ties. They were alone out there. Surrounded by farms and land. Without their clubs and fraternals, all they had to look forward to was buying stuff—or so it seemed to us at the time. Ursula started to talk as if my brother wouldn't earn enough money to be a good husband. *Coughs.* Her brothers got into trouble stealing stuff. One ended up in the House of Corrections.

GUSTAV

So you believe that the move changed them?

ADRIAN

It did. All they'd learned at the settlement house was to be successful, and that seemed to mean having lots of things and absolute privacy. This is what they had—a big house near no one, lots of nice clothes, an automobile, electric appliances, backyard furniture . . .

GUSTAV

And how did that affect the relationship between your brother and Ursula?

ADRIAN

They stayed together for years. He kept hoping that she would stay with him. But she eventually found someone who was making more money—someone who was a lot less ethnic. *Catches breath.* He was 22 then.

GUSTAV

Twenty two? This is when he drowned, right?

ADRIAN

Yes. He went to a tavern and drank until he could barely stand. He took out one of those rowboats at the pond, and he drowned.

GUSTAV

Are you suggesting it was a suicide?

ADRIAN

Perhaps he was too drunk to even know what he was doing—  
whether he intended to drown or not.

GUSTAV

That is a horrible story. But I don't think you are exaggerating the  
influence of the teachings of the settlement house. I think they . . .

ADRIAN

But most of the Poles weren't influenced by the settlement house,  
remember that.

GUSTAV

True.

ADRIAN

And today we still have the neighborhood. *Coughs.*

GUSTAV

I'm not so sure of that. *Picks up binoculars and looks at the park.*

ADRIAN

But they want the same thing. Gustav Olenski. *Catches breath.*  
Think of this. We will have more interesting people, and they will  
feel free to take pride in their backgrounds.

GUSTAV

*Still looking. Slowly, cautiously.* I don't know.

ADRIAN

But look at what makes up good neighborhoods. *Catches breath.*  
You have all these little networks making up these bigger  
networks. Even when the neighborhood was all Polish—we had our  
little clubs and fraternal groups. We all had our own parishes. To  
have a well-functioning bigger group, you need the smaller groups.

GUSTAV

*Grumbles.* Maybe. But that's no guarantee.

ADRIAN

Against what?

GUSTAV

Even if it is as you say, Adrian Borkowski, you still can have the government coming in and razing the good neighborhoods. Look at what they did here on 4<sup>th</sup> Street? Now we don't have enough housing for even the Poles.

ADRIAN

*Catches breath.* Oh, I so agree. This is one of the reasons the Negroes are demonstrating. The government razed their neighborhood and they have nowhere to go—they need housing in other neighborhoods.

GUSTAV

Whatever you do, someone is trying to break you up.

ADRIAN

Which means some of us have to fight harder. *Catches breath.* That's why I do my visiting. The neighborhood is where children learn how to be good adults. The neighborhood is where the sick and elderly are watched over.

GUSTAV

I did appreciate all your visits when my wife was so ill.

ADRIAN

I am happy to hear that.

GUSTAV

You once said that visiting was your "job"—I do hear about you visiting people who are sick.

ADRIAN

Again, I am happy to hear that.

GUSTAV

Mrs. Zelinski said you stopped by every day when her husband was ill. She said you brought fresh fruit. I'm not saying that it replaces real work, mind you.

ADRIAN

I understand your point, Gustav Olenski, but when my brother died, my parents left immediately. I was left so alone and didn't want that to happen to others.

GUSTAV

Still, to say this is your "job" . . .



ADRIAN

*Catches breath.* Now it seems we have another ambassador—this lovely tenant of yours.

GUSTAV

I don't know why you keep talking about how lovely she is. She's a little long in the tooth if you ask me.

ADRIAN

Oh you will learn to appreciate her.

GUSTAV

I appreciate that I was finally able to buy my hydraulic bottle jack. That's about as far as I want to go. Her ways are just too weird.

ADRIAN

How so?

GUSTAV

The healing stuff. The Mexican stuff. Have you ever heard of the Day of the Dead?

ADRIAN

Certainly.

GUSTAV

And you don't find anything weird about people who try and arouse dead people? Offering them tamales, for God's sake?

ADRIAN

There's considerably more to the holiday than this. *Cough.* And I think if we looked deeply into our . . .

GUSTAV

And you don't find anything strange about a woman who goes around healing people with eggs?

ADRIAN

Again, I think if we looked into our pasts, we'd find . . .

GUSTAV

She'd make a good partner for you, Adrian Borkowski. You think she's beautiful and she likes visiting.

ADRIAN

She is beautiful. Maybe you might consider her.

GUSTAV

I'd never remarry. Plus I'm in my 50s for heaven's sake.

ADRIAN

I see her as someone you need.

*Lights begin to dim.*

GUSTAV

*Slowly.* Yeah, sure.

ADRIAN

*Slowly.* Yes, need.

GUSTAV

I'll need her when the dead eat tamales. *Chuckle.*

ADRIAN

We'll see.

*Lights out.*

### ACT III

WARDROBE/MAKEUP. It is now 1975. The clothing will be 70-ish—not changed much in style. But it is December, so people will be dressed in coats or heavy sweaters when on the porch, doorway, or sidewalk. There will be some kind of table with a phone on it just inside the doorway. The table will not be visible to the audience. It is just a prop for the phone.

*The sign will say, “DECEMBER, 1975, DAYS AFTER THE THEFT OF THE SQUIRREL LADY STATUE.”*

*ESPERANZA is in the doorway with a dial-phone in her hand.*

ESPERANZA

Yes, this is Mrs. Olenski. *Pause to listen.* Yes. Si. Most certainly. The bath waters will be most effective. *Pause to listen.* Si. As long as you have faith. *Pause to listen.* Si. Si. Anglo-los doctores no pueden curar enfermedades 'mexicanas.' *Pause to listen.* Si, I will be at the market later. We can have a discussion.

ADRIAN

*Approaches the porch from the sidewalk. He is carrying two newspapers.*

ESPERANZA

*Still on the phone.* Oh, I have a visitor. *Nods to Adrian.* Si, I will look for you then. *Hangs up the phone.*

ADRIAN

It is a lovely day today, for December, don't you think?

ESPERANZA

It surely is.

ADRIAN

*Coughs.* I imagine you have heard.

ESPERANZA

Oh my, yes. The statue. *She puts the phone down inside the door.* People have been everywhere—asking questions.

ADRIAN

What have they told you?

ESPERANZA

That a park worker came to work very early and found it gone.  
That is the story. They don't have any good theories yet.

ADRIAN

And how is Gustav? Is he grumpy about Christmas coming?

ESPERANZA

Gus is always grumpy. You know that.

ADRIAN

Oh yes. *Catches breath.* But I think he's a little less so since your wedding.

ESPERANZA

At times, perhaps. At times he tries. But do tell me, what news do you have of our neighbors?

ADRIAN

Well, everyone is talking about the theft of the Squirrel Lady, of course.

ESPERANZA

Of course.

ADRIAN

But the charming little Margarita Lopez is preparing for her quinceanera.

ESPERANZA

Me sorprendo. She grew up so fast!

ADRIAN

And you will be happy to know that the handsome Grace Lupenski has finally agreed to marry Ted Borzak.

ESPERANZA

*Puts her hands to her chest.* No! When did you hear?

ADRIAN

Just last night. They told me I was the first to get the news.

GUSTAV

*Appears in doorway.* What news?

ESPERANZA

Grace Lupenski has finally agreed to marry Ted Borzak.

GUSTAV

Oh, I need to sit down. *Sits on his chair.* This I don't believe. He's been chasing her for, what, 20 years?

ESPERANZA

And they told Adrian first.

GUSTAV

*Grumbles.*

ESPERANZA

*To ADRIAN.* Do they have the date set?

ADRIAN

They're checking with the Basilica right now.

GUSTAV

I don't know how they're going to afford that wedding. Ted will want to invite the entire neighborhood and half of Poland.

ESPERANZA

So true, Gus. And what other news do you have, Adrian?

ADRIAN

*Catches breath.* Felix Gomez wants to open a Mexican restaurant here—in that building on 11<sup>th</sup>.

GUSTAV

*Jokingly.* No one here will eat Mexican food!

ESPERANZA

*Slaps him.* Guess who lives for his enchiladas now?

ADRIAN

*Coughing and wheezing.* Oh, and I must tell you this. Gustav Olenski. I ran into someone very interesting last week.

GUSTAV

Well, what's interesting to you is usually of no interest to me.

ESPERANZA

Be nice. Do tell us, Adrian.

ADRIAN

I ran into a Chelminiak descendent.

GUSTAV

A what?

ADRIAN

A descendant of Tata Rybe.

GUSTAV

Why did I know this would be of no interest to me?

ESPERANZA

Well, I'm interested. Do tell me about Tata Rybe.

GUSTAV

*Achh. Gets up from chair and begins to walk inside the door, but stops at the doorway.*

ESPERANZA

*Walks down a step and leans toward ADRIAN, talking softly. You see what a phony my husband is. He wants to hear what you have to say, but can't admit it.*

ADRIAN

Tata Rybe's real name was Stanislaus Chelminiak. He died in the 1950s at a great age. I was at the funeral.

ESPERANZA

Of course you were. Go on.

ADRIAN

*Coughing and wheezing.* He entertained everyone in the neighborhood. He was a very small man and dressed all in black. His beard was down to here [*points to his waist*]. He spoke only Polish but led all our parades. He would open new streets. He was always invited to come to children's birthday parties to entertain them.

ESPERANZA

What did he do?

ADRIAN

*Trying to catch his breath.* He was an acrobat of sorts. He'd walk on his hands, run like a deer, jump fences, do summersaults. He did all this, even though he had been disabled in some kind of accident.

GUSTAV

*Walks forward.* Aha!! I knew it. Another malingerer! The man could do all this but couldn't do a day's work!

ESPERANZA

I want to hear the story, Gus.

ADRIAN

He actually did work. He collected junk. He had a horse and buggy and would go as far as Jones Island to get junk and sell it. In fact, that's how he got his name. *Trying to catch his breath.* Once when he was collecting junk on Jones Island, one of his sons found a keg of herring and shouted to his father, "Tata, Rybe!" meaning, "Father, Fish!" The reason this story became so legendary was that there had been this long rumor circulating that the keg actually contained a large sum of money left behind by earlier occupants of the island.

GUSTAV

*Appears interested. Now sits down on his chair.*

ESPERANZA

And was it?

ADRIAN

*Catches breath.* At his funeral they said that had just been a story. The keg really did contain nothing but herring.

ESPERANZA

But . . . ?

ADRIAN

*Trying to catch his breath.* But the descendant—a grandson—told me that the keg actually did contain something of great value. He wouldn't tell me what it was—and of course I cannot attest to the veracity of the story and I'm sure that others will deny it—but he said that Tata took it home and he and his daughter sold the alleged item.

GUSTAV

So this is how this guy managed to live without a job?

ADRIAN

Oh he still salvaged junk. He had many ways of making money.

ESPERANZA

I think it's fascinating. It's like Mexican folklore.

GUSTAV

I don't know why we're even making a big deal out of this . . . uh . . .  
. eccentric.

ADRIAN

It's always people like Tata—people who are different in some way—that make neighborhoods work. People will always get together and discuss him. The Drezden cigar store—down the street [*points west*] named a cigar after him. *Trying to catch his breath*. After a while they called the shop Tata Rybe Cigars. There was a baseball team named after him in the Walter Allen Twilight League. Gustav Olenski remembers.

GUSTAV

*Shrugs off the comment.*

ESPERANZA

Well, I love it. And I think right now we're going to have another piece of neighborhood folklore to hand down.

GUSTAV

Oh, you don't mean the theft of the squirrel lady?

ESPERANZA

I do. I think people will develop their own theories on what happened to it.

ADRIAN

And I agree.

GUSTAV

Hogwash! It was some kind of vandalism. I heard there was this disgruntled park worker who'd threatened to take it.

ADRIAN

Well whoever it was, it had to be someone with the right equipment. *Opens up his newspaper*. Here is what the Sentinel is



saying this morning. “A four-foot statue of Mary Belle Jacobs, a pioneer social worker, was missing Tuesday from its place in the south end of Kosciuszko Park. *Trying to catch his breath.* James Filut, park supervisor, said he believed thieves removed the statue from its base with a hydraulic jack and rolled it down a hill to a car of truck. [*Looks up at GUSTAV facetiously.*] The statue is 500 to 1000 pounds and is valued at \$10,000.”

GUSTAV

*Nervously.* Well, no respectable contractor with a hydraulic jack and a truck would steal this. You could never sell it.

ADRIAN

*Turns to his second newspaper.* Let me read from another article. “Police didn’t know Tuesday why the statue was taken, but Park Supervisor James Filut said it couldn’t be called the work of pranksters. Blab la bla. *Trying to catch his breath.* Two Milwaukee scrap metal dealers said bronze was selling for 35 to 40 cents a pound, making the scrap metal value of the statue \$175 to \$400.” *Looks up knowingly at GUSTAV.*

GUSTAV

*Had been raising himself from his seat while ADRIAN read.* This is bullshit!

ESPERANZA

He’s joking with you, Gus.

GUSTAV

He’s not joking! He’s accusing me of theft! I won’t take this kind of crap from some malingering ass with his “secret” illness! I won’t take it.

ADRIAN

I wasn’t serious.

GUSTAV

If anyone had a reason to get rid of that statue it was you! Now I’m sick of your stupid “visits”—sick to death of them!

ESPERANZA

He doesn’t mean it, Adrian. He doesn’t have a good sense of humor. Just go to your place for a few minutes and come back.

ADRIAN

I don't know if I can come back.

ESPERANZA

Please, Adrian, please. It's time for me to talk to him.

ADRIAN

Perhaps it is . . . *Slowly walks away.*

ESPERANZA

*Slowly sits down on the steps. Doesn't speak.*

GUSTAV

*Slowly sits down in his chair. Doesn't speak for several seconds. Regains his composure and speaks humbly.* What is it you want to talk to me about?

ESPERANZA

*Shakes her head. Does not answer.*

GUSTAV

I just don't understand why he never had a job. How can "visiting" be anyone's job?

ESPERANZA

*Shakes her head. Does not answer.*

GUSTAV

Why is he so secretive about what's wrong with him?

ESPERANZA

*Does not answer.*

GUSTAV

Maybe he does do some good things for the neighborhood.

ESPERANZA

*Does not answer.*

GUSTAV

Okay. Okay. Esperanza, I'll stop by his house . . . maybe tomorrow.

ESPERANZA

You don't know where his house is.

GUSTAV

*Very contritely.* The Borkowski house was somewhere just off of Becher. I think on 10<sup>th</sup>.

ESPERANZA

*Does not answer.*

GUSTAV

Maybe I'll call him.

ESPERANZA

*Gets up slowly from the step and goes inside the door. She takes the phone off the table and hands it to GUSTAV.*

GUSTAV

*Looks at phone on his lap for a few seconds. Contritely.* I don't have the number.

ESPERANZA

No, you don't.

GUSTAV

Can you give me the phone book?

ESPERANZA

*Goes inside the house and brings back a phone book.*

GUSTAV

*Pages through the book for some time, lifting his hands in frustration.* Maybe it's unlisted. I see his brother's number.

ESPERANZA

Leon?

GUSTAV

*Yes. Puts the phone book down with it still opened to the right page upside down and dials a number.* Oh, yes, is this the Borkowski residence? I was trying to reach Adrian and don't have his number . . . *Nods to ESPERANZA.* Oh yes, please do. It is very important that he calls me right away. . . 331-4241. Thank you very much. *Turns to ESPERANZA.* It was unlisted. The brother will call him and ask him to call here.

ESPERANZA

*Slowly.* This will be interesting.

GUSTAV  
What should I say?

ESPERANZA  
*Shakes her head, says nothing.*

GUSTAV  
He has been good for the neighborhood. He was very kind to Lidia when she was ill.

*Phone rings.*

GUSTAV  
*Picks it up immediately. Speaks urgently.* Hello! Adrian? This is Gustav Olenski. . . Gustav Olenski? . . . This is Adrian Borkowski, isn't it? . . . Oh, but you sound like someone else. I think there is a mistake. *Slowly hangs up the phone.* I think maybe this Leon I called was not his brother. Let me try him again. *Picks up the phone book and points to the number he was dialing before. He dials.* Yes, hello Mr. Borkowski, Mr. Leon Borkowski. I think there's been some mistake. I received a call from an Adrian Borkowski, but it wasn't the Adrian I know. I was looking for an Adrian that lived near Kosciuszko Park. I thought he was your brother. . . *Turns to ESPERANZA.* He called his son, named Adrian. *Talks into the phone again.* Yes, near Kosciuszko Park—where I think his parents once lived . . . Yes, I believe they are dead now. . . The house was what? *Starts to enter a state of shock as he is getting startling information . . .* I don't understand. . . But when? . . . Adrian would be your brother, right? . . . *Some time passes—about 10 seconds—and GUSTAV is overcome by shock. His mouth drops open. He slowly drops the phone receiver.*

ESPERANZA  
*Walks over to GUSTAV. Smooths the hair on top of his head in an understanding way. She hangs up the phone receiver that had dropped to the ground. It would have been better if he could have told you. Moves to the top step and sits down.*

GUSTAV  
*Remains in a state of shock.* He said . . . he said . . .

ESPERANZA  
I know. I know. *Pause.*

GUSTAV

*Remains in a state of shock. But what? What is happening?*

ESPERANZA

I think I must tell you a story. *Pause.* Will you listen?

GUSTAV

*Nods head slowly.*

ESPERANZA

It concerns my great grandmother. She was a mestiza—a Maya. Are you following?

GUSTAV

*Still in shock. Yes.*

ESPERANZA

She told me the story that had been passed on to her. It concerned a small village in Yucatan—in Mexico. It was remembered only as the Village of Senor Palib. Palib was the man who had been its leader and kept the village safe for over 30 years. *Pause.* Are you okay?

GUSTAV

*Remains in a state of shock looking straight ahead but not moving at all. Go on.*

ESPERANZA

But things had been bad for the Maya under the old Spanish rule because the Indios were considered the lowest caste in Mexico. It was in the middle of the last century that a few Maya chiefs and their followers revolted against the Yucatecos. These were the higher caste people of European background. *Pause.* I fear you are not following this.

GUSTAV

*Perfectly still. Just go on.*

ESPERANZA

The fighting went on village by village. They called it the Guerra de castas—the Caste War. Senor Palib kept talking to his people, advising them to stay out of the fighting. He said that it often happened during these warring times that people would end up turning against their own.

It looked at last like the fighting would stop, but then something happened. A miracle occurred—as some claimed, even

still today. A voice was suddenly heard from a cross in a tree in the jungle. The voice called on the Maya to keep up the fight. Soon a large group of people began to organize around this talking cross and they called themselves the Cruzob. Senor Palib's villagers began to get excited over this, but he begged them to stay calm. Senor Palib believed the miracle was false. Yet he dared not say anything.

But he lost. Eventually a large group of villagers joined the Cruzob. Before long the war came to the Village of Senor Palib. Many were killed, including Senor Palib. The villagers gave him a traditional burial and then all who were in good health fled the village in fear that they would be killed too. Only some children and a few sick and elderly stayed behind. The war had brought a new epidemic of measles and smallpox to the area. *Pause*. Gus, you look to be very cold. I can finish this story inside.

GUSTAV

No, finish here.

ESPERANZA

The caste war went on for over 50 years. When it finally ended, two of the men who had fled the Village of Senor Palib decided to return home. They were very old at the time. When they got back to the village they found that some of the children they'd left behind were still in the village—now old themselves. And what they also found brought them to their knees. It was Senor Palib—still the same age he was when he had died.

GUSTAV

But . . .

ESPERANZA

I know what you are going to say, Gus. Let me finish first. The villagers said that Senor Palib could not stay calm in his grave—that he knew that all the helpless people of the village were still there without anyone to lead them. Eventually his spirit would not rest and his spirit returned to help them as he had during his former life. And that is the story. *Pause*. Now ask your question.

GUSTAV

*Takes several deep breaths and shakes his head, unable to speak.*

ESPERANZA

Do you want to tell me now what Leon told you?

GUSTAV

*Remains in a state of shock looking straight ahead but not moving at all. That the Borkowski house was sold in 1930.*

ESPERANZA

Go on.

GUSTAV

And the new owners had it torn down.

ESPERANZA

And Adrian?

GUSTAV

*Stoically.* Leon's brother Adrian died in a drowning accident at the park when he was 22. Leon had no other brothers.

ESPERANZA

Yes.

GUSTAV

And you knew?

ESPERANZA

Yes.

GUSTAV

That he was a . . .? *Makes hand jesters like a ghost.*

ESPERANZA

Yes. I think many people in this neighborhood know.

GUSTAV

But he ages.

ESPERANZA

Does he?

GUSTAV

Doesn't he?

ESPERANZA

He carries a cane now—probably for the sake of those that would not understand.

GUSTAV

But he wheezes and can hardly walk. He's grey.

ESPERANZA

He drowned, Gus. He drowned. He still feels the water in his lungs. His coloring is of a drowned man. But if he would remove his hood and all those scarves, I think you would see he has not aged since his drowning.

GUSTAV

*Puts his head in his hands.* But what do we do?

ESPERANZA

We make our peace with him. He is here to help, not harm us.

GUSTAV

I don't know that I can.

ESPERANZA

I know that you can.

GUSTAV

Do you think he . . . ?

ESPERANZA

Took the statue?

GUSTAV

*Looking to his left.* Oh no, here he comes. I can't stay here. *Begins to push up from chair.*

ESPERANZA

*Pushes him back down.* You will go nowhere. You will make peace now, Gustav. The neighborhood must have harmony.

GUSTAV

Should I tell him I know?

ESPERANZA

I think it would be best to restore the harmony. Later—when he wishes—he will tell you. *Turning to Adrian.* Adrian, I am so happy you've come back.

ADRIAN

*Walking by with a bag of something in his hands. Apologetically.* Well . . . I was simply on my way to the Hernandez household to drop off some clothes.



ESPERANZA  
Clothes?

ADRIAN  
Yes, the Lopez children have grown out of them and I knew where they might be needed.

ESPERANZA  
*Nudges GUSTAV.*

GUSTAV  
Oh, yes . . . Oh, that was very nice, Adrian.

ADRIAN  
Well, there's no reason for them to be thrown out.

ESPERANZA  
It's nearly suppertime, Adrian. Perhaps you might consider . . .

ADRIAN  
Well, I'm not sure if I have the time. I promised the Jankowskis that I'd stop in . . .

ESPERANZA  
And how is Grandmother Jankowski these days?

ADRIAN  
I think she's adjusting better to the new neighbors. Just yesterday she told me that Puerto Ricans were actually citizens of the United States.

ESPERANZA  
Many people don't know that. Did you, Gus?

GUSTAV  
Uh, no.

*Lights begin to dim.*

ESPERANZA  
Now Adrian, I really must insist that you stay for dinner.

GUSTAV  
*Stiffly.* Yes, please stay for dinner.

ADRIAN

Well . . .

ESPERANZA

*Slowly, with the fade out.* Well nothing. I have something special planned. Right, Gus?

GUSTAV

I think we're having tamales.

ESPERANZA

Yes, Adrian, tamales.

ADRIAN

Well, then, perhaps . . .

*Freeze. Lights out.*