Let Him Sleep
’Til It’s Time for His Funeral

By Peg Kehret

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LET HIM SLEEP ’TIL IT’S TIME FOR HIS FUNERAL

By PEG KEHRET

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(In Order of Speaking)

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SETTING

Time: June, 1993.
Place: The living room of the Dollefson home.

SET DESCRIPTION

There is a flowered sofa and a coffee table at CENTER. A large rocking chair is LEFT. There are two small end tables, one next to the rocker and the other to the right of the sofa. A big desk is at an angle at RIGHT. There is a desk chair that doesn’t match. Pots of African violets sit on the desk, coffee table, and end tables. There are an assortment of odds and ends such as vases and other knickknacks placed around the room. All are old and in poor condition. The effect is of homely clutter. A working door at LEFT leads to the kitchen and garage, while entrance DOWN RIGHT leads to the bedrooms. The door to the street is UP RIGHT.
LET HIM SLEEP ’TIL IT’S TIME FOR HIS FUNERAL

Scene One

1 AT RISE: The living room of the Dollefson home. It is the beginning of June. MARIANNE and JACKIE ENTER UP RIGHT, struggling to carry a large, decrepit, ornate urn. It is chipped, cracked, and dirty. They manage to get it in the door and put it between the coffee table and the rocking chair before they sink, exhausted, onto the sofa.

JACKIE: Whew. When you asked me to help you carry it in, you didn’t tell me it was solid lead.

MARIANNE: It is heavy, isn’t it? The men at the auction put it in the car for me, so I didn’t realize.

JACKIE: Now that it’s here, what are you going to do with it?

MARIANNE: I’m not sure. But it was too good to pass up.

JACKIE: You could put it outside and use it for a birdbath.

MARIANNE: ( Gets up, puts her purse on the desk, and starts arranging pots of African violets around the urn.) Maybe I can use it to display my violets. I’ve always wanted something unusual to help display my violets.

JACKIE: It is unusual.

MARIANNE: ( Stands back, judging how the violets look.) What do you think?

JACKIE: I think when John hears how much you paid for that, you’re going to be in trouble.

MARIANNE: ( Puts plants back where they were.) No, it overpowers the plants. I’ll have to think of something else.

ELIZABETH: ( ENTERS DOWN RIGHT, carrying a pad of paper and a pencil.) Mom, do we have any Sudsy Shampoo? I need a label.

MARIANNE: I think so.

JACKIE: What contest are you entering this time?

ELIZABETH: It’s the Sudsy Shampoo Slogan contest. They have a brand new ingredient that no other shampoo has, and they’re having this contest to find a slogan for it. First prize is a lifetime supply of Sudsy Shampoo.

JACKIE: What’s the ingredient?

ELIZABETH: Soap. Do you want to hear my slogan?

JACKIE: Sure. ( Listens intently, but MARIANNE is busy dusting off the urn.)

ELIZABETH: ( Recites, in singsong fashion.) “Suds your hair before your date, you’ll make your boyfriend salivate.” ( Looks expectant at JACKIE and MARIANNE.)
JACKIE: That’s very clever, Elizabeth. I think you have a good chance of winning.

ELIZABETH: Thanks. I was going to rhyme with “drool” but I decided this is more sophisticated. As soon as I get this mailed, I’m going to start on my entry for the Heart’s Desire Contest.

MARIANNE: (Absently, still busy with the urn.) What Heart’s Desire Contest?
ELIZABETH: The one in the newspaper. Win your Heart’s Desire. Anything you want, as long as it doesn’t cost over twenty-thousand dollars. I’m going to ask for a college scholarship to Tank University.

JACKIE: But Tank University is a men’s school.
ELIZABETH: I know. Wouldn’t it be fun? Mom, if we do have some Sudsy Shampoo, where would it be?
MARIANNE: Look in the bathroom.
JACKIE: If you don’t find a label, you can look at my house. Russ always buys Sudsy.
ELIZABETH: Thanks. (EXITS DOWN RIGHT.)
MARIANNE: Does it make you salivate?
JACKIE: You really should encourage Elizabeth more. You hardly listened to her slogan.

MARIANNE: I encourage her by paying the postage on all those contest entries.
RUSS: (KNOCKS lightly at UP RIGHT door, then opens it slightly without waiting. Calls in.) John? Are you home?
MARIANNE: Come on in, Russ. (RUSS ENTERS UP RIGHT, carrying a drill.) John went to get his hair cut. He should be back any minute.
RUSS: I’m just returning his drill and borrowing a staple gun, if it’s ok.
MARIANNE: Sure. Help yourself. You know where everything is in that garage better than I do.
RUSS: I see you’ve been to another auction. (Circles the urn.) What is it?
MARIANNE: It’s an urn. From the look of it, I’d say it’s a real antique.
RUSS: From the look of it, I’d say…
JACKIE: (Quickly.) She isn’t sure yet what she’s going to do with it.
RUSS: Too bad spittoons aren’t in fashion anymore.
JACKIE: Russ!
MARIANNE: Listen, I was lucky to get this! There were two other people bidding against me.
RUSS: The owner and the auctioneers assistant.
JACKIE: Don’t pay any attention to him, Marianne. He never has appreciated antiques. (JOHN ENTERS LEFT, wearing a cardigan.
sweater, buttoned, although the rest of the cast wear light-weight, summer clothing. He walks slowly, slightly bent, like a much older man. He eases into the rocking chair with a sigh, as if the effort of walking in had been too much for him.) Hello, John.

RUSS: Hi, John.

JOHN: (Weak.) Hi.

JACKIE: What’s the matter? Don’t you feel well?

JOHN: I’m all right... for a man my age.

RUSS: It must have been some party. You look like you were up all night.

JOHN: No, I went to bed at eight. I can’t keep those late hours like I used to. (Sighs.)

MARIANNE: (Goes and kisses JOHN hello.) Please don’t start this again.

JOHN: The years creep by, and before you know it you can’t have fun like you once did.

RUSS: What’s wrong with you? You sound like my grandfather.

JOHN: Do you realize that fifty years is half a century? Half a century! I, John Dollefson, have been alive for nearly half a century.

JACKIE: Congratulations, John. That’s quite an accomplishment.

JOHN: No! It isn’t any accomplishment at all.

MARIANNE: (Tries to change the subject.) Your haircut looks very nice.

JOHN: That’s good, since it may be the last one I ever get.

JACKIE: (Surprised.) You mean you’re going to let your hair grow long?

JOHN: Ha! I wish I could. I mean that pretty soon I won’t have enough hair left to bother cutting.

MARIANNE: You aren’t that bald.

JOHN: (Rubs hand over head.) I’ve seen more growth than this on a moldy orange.

MARIANNE: You’re exaggerating again.

JOHN: You think so? Then why did the barber ask me if I wanted a cut or a polish?

RUSS: He was just joking.

JOHN: And what about the shampoo? There were three people ahead of me today, and he tried to sell all three of them a bottle of shampoo. But did he try to sell me some shampoo? No, he did not.

MARIANNE: You’ve been getting your hair cut there twice a month for six years, and you’ve never bought a bottle of shampoo. The barber probably got tired of trying to sell it to you, that’s all.
JOHN: That barber’s no fool. He knows I won’t be needing shampoo much longer. All I’ll need is a damp cloth and maybe some suntan oil so my head won’t peel.

MARIANNE: You know what you really need?

JOHN: Yes, a new body.

MARIANNE: No. A new attitude. Just because you’re going to be fifty in a couple of weeks—

RUSS: So that’s it.

JOHN: (Cringes.) I don’t want to talk about it.

RUSS: But you’re acting like your life is practically over.

JOHN: It is.

RUSS: It is not. I’m past fifty, and I’m still here. I’ll bet half your friends are over fifty.

JOHN: Friends? What friends? Nobody has friends any more. The world’s changed, Russ. It’s different now than it was when we were young. People cared about each other then. They trusted each other. Everybody looked out for the other guy. Now it’s dog eat dog.

MARIANNE: You’re being pessimistic. We have lots of friends. Why, I’ve been thinking of giving a nice party for you on your birthday—maybe a barbecue in the backyard—and I’ve had a terrible time keeping the guest list low enough so we can afford to do it.

JOHN: I don’t want a party. Especially not a birthday party. The only reason anyone would come is for the free food.

JACKIE: That’s a terrible thing to say. What kind of friends do you think we are?

MARIANNE: He doesn’t mean you, Jackie.

JOHN: Everybody’s so busy trying to make ends meet these days that there’s no time for friendship.

JACKIE: Unless you die. Then everyone takes time to go to the funeral.

JOHN: That’s true. I never thought of that before.

JACKIE: When my aunt died, all the people who had been too busy to go and visit her in the hospital managed to find time to attend the funeral. All I could think of that day was how much auntie would have enjoyed being there to visit with all her friends.

MARIANNE: That’s sad.

JOHN: That’s very sad.

JACKIE: I wish we could have had the funeral first, while auntie was still here to enjoy it.

JOHN: The worst part about turning fifty is that I have nothing to show for it. Fifty years of living and nothing to show for it.
1 JACKIE: That’s not true. You have lots to be proud of. You have a good marriage and a lovely daughter—

JOHN: If I died tonight, you wouldn’t have to bother with a funeral. I have so few friends, it wouldn’t be worth the trouble.

5 JACKIE: I’d come, John.
RUSS: Not me. I’d say, “John who?”
JACKIE: Russ!
RUSS: John knows I’m kidding.

JOHN: You aren’t far from the truth. A year from now, who would even remember me?

MARIANNE: I would.

JOHN: George Gershwin died when he was only thirty-nine and look how much he accomplished. “Rhapsody in Blue”… “Porgy and Bess”… “An American in Paris”…

15 RUSS: You don’t give yourself enough credit. You’re highly thought of at work. You own your own home—

JOHN: It’s mortgaged.

RUSS: And you own all your furnishings… (Gives a grand sweep of his hand, stops when he gets to the urn, looks around at the rest of the knickknacks, pauses, and drops his hand.) John, do you think you could help me find the staple gun? I came over here to borrow it, and I’m not sure where it is.

JOHN: (Sighs loudly and rises slowly from the chair.) Fifty years, and all I have to show for it is a staple gun. (EXITS LEFT, followed by RUSS. As soon as they go, MARIANNE jumps up and rushes to the door, listening to be sure they’ve really gone.)

JACKIE: He is depressed, isn’t he? He didn’t even notice the urn.

MARIANNE: (Slowly.) Jackie, you have given me a terrific idea.

JACKIE: I have? What is it?

MARIANNE: Promise me you won’t tell anyone. Not even Russ.

JACKIE: I always tell Russ everything.

MARIANNE: Not this time. You have to promise.

JACKIE: All right, I promise. What’s your idea?

MARIANNE: I know what I’m going to give John for his fiftieth birthday. (Pauses, dramatic.) A funeral.

JACKIE: What?

MARIANNE: I’m going to give him a surprise funeral. His funeral. John is going to have what your aunt didn’t have—the chance to attend his own funeral. All his friends will come and everyone from his
office. He’ll realize how much he means to everybody. He’ll see how important he is, and he’ll be happy again.

**JACKIE:** I’m not sure you can do that. It might be illegal.

**MARIANNE:** Why would it be illegal to have a funeral?

**JACKIE:** I think somebody has to die first.

**MARIANNE:** I doubt very much if there is any such law.

**JACKIE:** Maybe not. Probably the matter doesn’t come up often enough for there to be a law. But how will people know about the funeral? You can’t very well send invitations.

**MARIANNE:** They’ll see the obituary notice. I’ll write it and send it to the paper, and they’ll print it.

**JACKIE:** What if the newspaper checks and finds out that John didn’t die?

**MARIANNE:** Why would they do that? You’re worrying about silly details. What’s the matter! Don’t you like my idea?

**JACKIE:** I’m not sure. I have to think about it.

**MARIANNE:** Well, I like it. I have an instinct for these things. And I know that this idea is right. It’s just what John needs to snap him out of this mood he’s in. Let’s see... (Goes to the desk and finds a calendar. Flips to the middle of the calendar.) John’s birthday is June twenty-eighth. (Looks at the calendar.) Oh, good, the twenty-eighth is a Monday. That’ll work out just fine. We’ll pretend that John dies on Friday night, the twenty-fifth. I’ll have the obituary printed on Saturday and hold the funeral Monday afternoon. We’ll make a long weekend of it.

**JACKIE:** It’ll be a long weekend, all right. How are you going to hide John all that time? You can’t let him go outside or answer the phone or anything. Once people hear that he’s dead, they’ll be coming to the house.

**MARIANNE:** That’s right. (Thinks a moment.) You’ll have to get rid of John for the weekend.

**JACKIE:** I’ll have to get rid of John?

**MARIANNE:** You and Russ. Maybe I can send John over to your house Friday night to borrow something, and Russ could keep him talking. Sort of like the man who came to dinner.

**JACKIE:** You expect Russ to keep John talking for three days?

**MARIANNE:** I suppose that isn’t too realistic. But we’ll have to do something.

**JACKIE:** What about the fishing trip that John and Russ are always talking about? Maybe they could do that.
MARIANNE: That’s it. That’s perfect! Oh, Jackie, I knew you’d help. We’ll get Russ and John to go fishing. They can leave after work on Friday and not come home until Sunday night. Then on Monday morning, instead of waking John up to go to work, I’ll let him sleep until it’s time to get ready for his funeral. (Pause.) Maybe we should have the service in the morning, that way there won’t be such a time gap between the fishing and the funeral.

JACKIE: Russ is always gloomy on Monday morning anyway. He might as well have a good reason.

MARIANNE: I’ll wait until everyone is seated and it’s time to start the funeral, and then I’ll bring John in the back of the church to watch.

JACKIE: The church! Marianne, you can’t have this funeral in the church.

MARIANNE: Why not? We’re members.

JACKIE: It wouldn’t be proper. You’re having this funeral under false pretenses and if you do it at church you’ll start a lot of trouble. You may anyway, but at least don’t involve the church in it. Can you imagine how many people might cancel their pledges if the press got wind of a deal like this? I can just see the headline: “Phony Funeral at St. James.”

MARIANNE: Then I’ll have it at a funeral home.

JACKIE: That might not be so easy, either.

MARIANNE: Why not? I’ll pay for the facilities.

JACKIE: They’ll be expecting a body. They make their profit on the preparations, too, not just on the funeral service.

MARIANNE: I’ll tell them the body will arrive Monday morning. I’ll say he’s out of town, and that’ll be true. He will be out of town, fishing with Russ. I’ll say I want a simple service with a closed casket.

JACKIE: Casket! Marianne, you’re going to have to buy a casket.

MARIANNE: I suppose I will.

JACKIE: Caskets are expensive. Even the plain, bottom-of-the-line ones cost a couple of hundred dollars.

MARIANNE: Oh, I won’t be getting bottom-of-the-line. I’ll have to buy a fancy one.

JACKIE: You will? I didn’t think you believed in spending a lot of money on things like that. I’d have thought you’d choose a simple pine box.

MARIANNE: I would if John was really dead. But the purpose of this funeral is to show him how much everybody cares for him. I’ll have to get a fancy, expensive casket.

JACKIE: What will you do with it after the funeral?

MARIANNE: Maybe I can sell it.
JACKIE: I doubt if there’s much market for a used casket.

MARIANNE: It wouldn’t be used. Not really.

JACKIE: Maybe the funeral home would buy it back at a discount.

MARIANNE: If they won’t, I’ll place a want ad.

JACKIE: You could use it for a planter. Think how many African violets it would hold.

MARIANNE: I can always just store it in the garage. There’s so much junk in there now that no one would even notice if I added a casket. John can keep his tools in it.

JACKIE: No matter what you do with it afterwards, you’ll still have to pay for it. That’s a lot to spend for an oversized tool box.

MARIANNE: That’s going to be the big problem... how to pay for all this. I was having enough trouble planning my budget for a barbecue.

JACKIE: Could you withdraw the money from your savings account?

MARIANNE: I could. But John would kill me if he found out.

JACKIE: Then you could have a double funeral. How romantic.

MARIANNE: Except I’d be the only one dead. No thanks.

JACKIE: At least that way the coffin wouldn’t go to waste.

MARIANNE: (Goes to desk, thumbs through phone book.) I wonder if the funeral home takes Mastercard.

JACKIE: In case you want to die now, pay later?

MARIANNE: They must have some kind of credit plan.

JACKIE: Why don’t you just have John cremated and put his ashes in your new urn?

MARIANNE: That’s a great idea. (Goes to urn, looks at it, appreciative.) I wouldn’t need to buy a coffin, and I could use this lovely antique... (Stops suddenly.) No! Jackie, I can’t cremate John. He won’t really be dead.

ELIZABETH: (ENTERS DOWN RIGHT, carrying an envelope and a newspaper. Puts the paper on the end table by the sofa.) I found a Sudsy label. I’m going to mail this right now so it’ll get postmarked before midnight. Then I can start on my Win Your Heart’s Desire entry. That one’s a local contest so I figure I’ll have a better chance to win. Fewer entries.

MARIANNE: (Interested for the first time.) What did you say the prize is in this Heart’s Desire thing?

ELIZABETH: You have to say what you want most in the world and the winner gets his wish. It can be anything as long as it doesn’t cost more than twenty-thousand dollars.
MARIANNE: I could put on quite a funeral for twenty-thousand dollars.

ELIZABETH: Did somebody die?

MARIANNE: No... I was just thinking. Go ahead and mail your entry. *(Picks up the newspaper and starts looking through it for the contest.)*

JACKIE: Good luck, Elizabeth. I hope you win all the Sudsy.

ELIZABETH: Thanks. I figure if there’s anything at all to the law of averages, then I’m about due to be a winner. *(EXITS UP RIGHT.)*

JACKIE: Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?

MARIANNE: *(Nods.)* I’ll win the contest and let the newspaper pay for John’s funeral.

JACKIE: What if you don’t win?

MARIANNE: *(Finds what she’s looking for.)* Here it is. *(Reads a second.)* Jackie! The winner will be notified on June twenty-fifth! The timing is perfect. And listen to this, “Entries will be judged on originality.” What could be more original than wanting a funeral for someone who hasn’t died? I’m a cinch to win. I think I’ll even invite John’s brother.

JACKIE: The one in Oklahoma?

MARIANNE: Think how surprised John will be. They haven’t seen each other in years. I can pay for the airplane ticket, and it won’t cost Roy a thing. He’ll come for sure if it doesn’t cost him anything.

RUSS: *(ENTERS LEFT.)* Did John leave the staple gun in here? We can’t find it.

MARIANNE: Russ, you know that fishing trip that you and John have always wanted to take?

RUSS: Yes.

MARIANNE: We think you should take it.

RUSS: You do? What changed your mind?

MARIANNE: We think it might cheer John up.

JACKIE: Make him forget about his birthday.

RUSS: That’s a good idea. Maybe we could go next weekend.

MARIANNE: *(Quickly.)* No. That’s too soon. I wouldn’t have everything ready.

RUSS: What’s to get ready? All we need is a couple of sleeping bags and our fishing gear.

MARIANNE: It’s too soon for us to get ready. Jackie and I want to plan our weekend so we aren’t too lonely while you’re gone. Why don’t you wait and go on, say, June twenty-fifth? You could leave right after work on Friday and stay until Sunday night.
RUSS: The twenty-fifth is fine with me.
JOHN: (ENTERS LEFT.) Did you find it?
MARIANNE: I haven’t seen the staple gun in weeks.
RUSS: What are you doing the weekend of the twenty-fifth? Do you have anything planned?
JOHN: At my age, you don’t plan that far ahead. I may be here… or I may not.
RUSS: How does a weekend in the woods sound? Two days of sunshine and fresh air. Fishing in the streams, sleeping under the stars…
JOHN: Getting arthritis in my back.
RUSS: Picture it, John. Just you and me on the bank of Red Rock Creek, eating our breakfast of freshly caught trout. No telephone, no interruptions. We’ll be two he-men in the rugged outdoors. Pioneers, living off the land. Pitting our strength against the wiles of nature.
JOHN: I don’t think Marianne would let me.
MARIANNE: I want you to go.
JOHN: You do?
MARIANNE: I think it’s a fine idea. You and Russ work hard. You deserve a little vacation.
RUSS: What do you say, John? Are you willing?
JOHN: I don’t know. (Interested in spite of himself.) It’s been a long time since I backpacked into the woods, and I’m not getting any younger. I’m not sure I could do it.
RUSS: Of course you can do it. You’re in your prime! A little hiking is just what you need to firm up the old muscles, get rid of the flab.
JOHN: Well…
MARIANNE: He’ll go.
RUSS: Good.
JOHN: What will you do that weekend?
JACKIE: We’re going to do some shopping.
MARIANNE: For a planter for the African violets.
RUSS: Ed Davis went to Red Rock Creek last weekend and caught his limit both days.
JOHN: His limit. (Straightens up, as if feeling better.) Well, if Ed Davis can do it, you and I can certainly… ( Notices the urn for the first time.) What the devil is that thing? (Walks to it, standing straight and forgetting to act old.) No… don’t tell me what it is. Just tell me how much you paid for it.
MARIANNE: Believe me, it was a real bargain.
JOHN: That means she paid more than fifty dollars. Whenever she says it was a real bargain, it means over fifty dollars. Of course, it could be worse. If she’d said it was a steal, I’d know it cost over one-hundred dollars.

RUSS: Let’s take a look at our fishing gear and see if we need to get anything before our trip. (RUSS and JOHN EXIT LEFT.)

MARIANNE: It’s going to work. Everything is falling right into place. He’s acting more normal already, don’t you think?

JACKIE: He did notice the urn.

MARIANNE: John is going to have the biggest, most exciting funeral of his entire life.

JACKIE: I hope you know what you’re doing.

MARIANNE: The first thing I have to do is get my entry written for the Heart’s Desire Contest. Then I can make Roy’s plane reservation and order the casket and hire an organist and… I’d better make a list. (Goes to the desk.) I’ll never remember everything if I don’t make a list.

JACKIE: What will you do if you don’t win the contest?

MARIANNE: I’ll win. I have to. It’s the only way I can possibly pay for all this. (Rummages through the desk drawers.) Why is there never any paper when I need it? (Rips off the calendar’s cover, and writes “John’s Funeral” in large letters with a felt tip pen and shows it to JACKIE.) Look, Jackie. There it is in print. John’s Funeral. (Writes.) Hire organist… order flowers… reserve Swan’s Mortuary… (Looks up.) I think Swan’s is the best, don’t you? I kind of like their jingle on the radio. (Sings, to the tune of “Happy Birthday to You.”) “Have your swan song at Swan’s.”

JACKIE: (Walks to rear door.) I have to go home and start dinner. I’ll see you later.

MARIANNE: (Writes again.) Plan music… I wonder if we could work in the Hallelujah chorus. It’s always been John’s favorite.

JACKIE: Maybe when John enters.

MARIANNE: Write obituary… Oh, this is going to be fantastic! John’s funeral will be so much fun, he’ll feel like a teenager before it’s over.

JACKIE: I hope so. (EXITS UP RIGHT.)

MARIANNE: (Looks at list, thinks a second.) John’s suit. I’d better take his good suit to the cleaners right away. (Drops the list on the desk as she hurries OFF DOWN RIGHT. JOHN and RUSS ENTER LEFT, carrying fishing poles and tackle boxes. JOHN has a lovely pole, RUSS’ is much smaller and older. RUSS wears a fishing hat with flies
PRODUCTION NOTES

PROPERTIES ONSTAGE

Scene One: Flowered sofa, coffee table, large rocking chair, end tables, big desk with a phone, non-matching desk chair, pots of African violets, vases, and other knickknacks. Inside the desk there is a calendar, phone book, and a felt-tip pen.

Scene Two: Same as in Scene One, with the addition of the following: pile of letters on desk, one envelope has an airplane ticket inside, papers on desk, umbrellas in urn.

Scene Two: Same as in Scene One, with the addition of the following: several suitcases, the smallest of which has an airline ticket lying on top of packed clothes.

PROPERTIES BROUGHT ON

Scene One:
  Large ornate urn (MARIANNE, JACKIE)
  Purse, dustcloth (MARIANNE)
  Pad of paper, pencil, envelope, newspaper (ELIZABETH)
  Drill, fishing hat with flies (RUSS)
  Fishing poles, tackle boxes (JOHN, RUSS)

Scene Two:
  Paper on clipboard, pencil, envelope (ELIZABETH)

Scene Three:
  Tin of cookies (MARIANNE)
  Purse (ELIZABETH)
  Business card (MR. JANSEN)
  Bottle of champagne (JACKIE)
  Staple gun (RUSS)

SOUND EFFECTS

Doorbell.

COSTUMES

Most of the cast wear light summer clothing. John, however, wears a buttoned, cardigan sweater.
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