

TALES OF THE LOST FORMICANS

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TALES OF THE LOST FORMICANS
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Constance Congdon's most well-known play, *TALES OF THE LOST FORMICANS*, has been produced in Helsinki, Brixton, Cairo, Berlin, Tokyo and in over a hundred productions in the United States, and in New York City by the The Women's Project and then in a very successful revival by the Monster[less] Theater in 1996. Her plays, *CASANOVA* and *DOG OPERA* were both produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York. She has also written librettos for four operas and eight plays for children, one of which went to the Moscow Central Children's Theatre in 1989. Her play about the first woman President, *LIPS*, was commissioned by Spielberg's Dreamworks through Playwrights Horizons and was produced at Primary Stages in New York in 1998. The *AUTOMATA PIETÀ*, a play she wrote for the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco's Young Conservatory was remounted at the Magic Theater. The Profile Theater in Portland, Oregon, devoted their year 2000 season to her works and their production of *NO MERCY* included a new companion piece by Congdon called *ONE DAY EARLIER*. The American Conservatory Theatre commissioned a new verse version of *THE MISANTHROPE* from Congdon for their 2000-2001 season and in 2004, *A MOTHER*, an original play based on Gorky's *Vassa Zheleznova* and starring Olympia Dukakis. Both of these plays are published by Broadway Play Publishing Inc, also the publisher of the

acting editions of TALES OF THE LOST FORMICANS, LIPS, and A SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS. DOG OPERA is published by Samuel French and is also included in *The Actor's Book Of Gay And Lesbian Plays*. Two new plays, DARK BRIDGE MOUNTAIN and her epic HISTORIA FAMILIA: THE CHILDREN OF THE ELVI await fabulous productions. Her newest play, PARADISE STREET is in development at New York Theater Workshop. A book of four of her plays *Tales Of The Lost Formicans And Other Plays* is published, quite beautifully, by Theater Communications Group. Congdon is an alumna of New Dramatists, a member of PEN, has taught playwriting at the Yale School of Drama, but her home base has been Amherst College where she has taught playwriting since 1993.

for my father, Ned Congdon

CHARACTERS

CATHY, *nee* MCKISSICK, *early thirties*

ERIC, *her son, fifteen*

JIM MCKISSICK, *her father, late fifties*

EVELYN MCKISSICK, *her mother, early fifties*

JUDY, *early thirties*

JERRY, *early thirties*

AN ACTOR, *male, younger than JIM, who plays the following roles: HANK, TRUCKER, ALIEN TRUCKER, CARTOON*

ALIEN, *and JACK*

All ALIENS are played by the human cast members.

PLACE

A New York apartment (briefly)

A large middle-class subdivision somewhere in Colorado

TIME

1988, *enfolded in the ever-present*

PRODUCTION NOTES

About the staging and style:

The staging should be relatively seamless with the stage space shared by all the characters. Furniture, objects in the world are minimal because they are artifacts. The entire play can be done with a kitchen table and four chairs.

The ALIENS are played by the human cast members wearing matching sunglasses. They are human in their demeanor except that they are slightly detached, overly pleasant, and sound a little like stewardesses. [The character of JIM is only effective as an ALIEN in ACT ONE.]

The VOICEOVER speeches should be shared by the actors as ALIENS. They need not be hidden while they do the VOICEOVERS, although sometimes it might be interesting if they were.



ACT ONE

(As the audience files in, JERRY lies on the stage, in darkness, lit by a hand-held fluorescent lamp beside him. He is looking at the night sky with binoculars. He's lying on a sleeping bag. The chair and table for the next scene are pre-set nearby. After the audience gets settled, the lights bump all the way up and three ALIENS enter. they are the actor playing EVELYN, the actor playing CATHY, and the actor playing JIM. [The ALIENS look just like the characters they play except they are all wearing matching sunglasses—this device will be used throughout to distinguish the ALIENS from the human characters]. Two of the ALIENS unfold a star map and the CATHY / ALIEN finds a small dot and points to it)

CATHY / ALIEN: *(To audience)* You are here.

(As they roll up the map, JERRY gets up and exits, discouraged, crossing near them, dragging his sleeping bag and carrying his flourescent lamp—he doesn't see them, but they see him. One of the ALIENS cues the music and "restaurant music" is piped in. ALIENS exit, leaving a stage bare except for a chair and table, part of a kitchen ensemble, typical in suburbia, but dated by a decade or so. The chair is upholstered with plastic and the legs of both chair and table are of bent chrome. The chair has a hole in the back rest—a design element common to chairs of this type.)

VOICEOVER: First item. A situpon. *(Aside, softly)* What? *(Back to mike)* Chair. Chair. For sitting. Sitting and eating or some other ritual. Goes with table...which we'll see in a minute. Note the construction. Forward legs *(Aside)*

—they call them legs? (*Back to mike*) Forward legs are made as one unit, curving up to provide the rear of the chair. Rear legs are constructed in a smaller curve unit which fits under the seat and inside the forward leg unit, providing a very strong system for the body pads—cushions—and then the body itself. The wobble that some of these chairs exhibit we attribute to climate changes...or some other entropic reality.

(*An ALIEN enters and “shows” the chair—sort of like Vanna White on “Wheel of Fortune”.*)

VOICEOVER: Care was taken in beautifying the chair. The sleek surface of the legs reflects light except, of course, where there are spots of oxidation. And this surface is the substance chrome. We have several other examples of that substance—evidently a precious metal used as a surface to apportion many religious objects, specifically the numerous wheeled sarcophogae used to carry spirits to the next world. The cushions of the chair are covered in a substance made to mimic the epidermis of the sitter, but treated to hold a sheen which is kept polished by friction of the buttocks against the surface. The significance of the hole in the back rest is unknown to us at this time. It was, perhaps, symbolic. A breathing hole for the spirit of the sitter, or even the ever-present eye of god.

(*ALIEN exits. JIM enters, a middle-aged man in work clothes. He is wearing lipstick and has a bandage on his right index finger.*)

VOICEOVER: Next, the table. Four legs—the hard surface covered with geometric shapes—decoration or, perhaps, a code?

(*JIM lowers head, face down, staring until it slowly touches the table surface, stays there. After a beat, the table wobbles.*)

JIM: Hmmmm. (*He rests the side of his head on the table—pressing it gently against the cool of the surface.*) Ahhh.

VOICEOVER: The table legs also wobble—this leading us to theorize that perhaps both examples of the wobble phenomenon are not random but conscious built-in representations of the unreliable nature of existence for this particular...species.

JIM: (*To someone offstage*) I'm gonna finally fix the goddam toaster. Evelyn?

VOICEOVER: Wait. Reverse it, please. (*Pause*) Please reverse it—it's too early—something else goes here—

JIM: Nilava? Retsote moddag aw sif eelaknife annog mee. (*He reverses his movements very fast and exits.*)

VOICEOVER: There.

CATHY: (*To audience*) Why would I move back home?

VOICEOVER: This is right.

CATHY: (*To audience*) I mean, I have a perfectly nice home of my—wait a minute—(*Stops to listen to something offstage, then back to audience.*)—anyway, it's a two-bedroom apartment, rent-controlled—(*Stops again.*) Excuse me—(*To someone offstage*) Honey? Mike? Is that you? (*Exiting to check on "Mike"*) Mike? Are you throwing up? (*Sticking her head back in to talk to the audience*) He's in the bathroom. (*Offstage, to "Mike"*) I'm coming in. (*A beat*) (*Sticking her head back in to talk to the audience*) Bad news. Excuse me... (*Offstage, to "Mike"*) What? You *what*???! And she's *what*???! (Re-enters fully, talks to audience.) Life's funny. One minute you're married. The next minute, you're not. One of his students, eighteen years old, "Kimberly", plays the oboe, the baby is his. (*Pause*) I wonder how things are at...what's that word? (*She exits.*)

JUDY: (*From offstage*) Home!! I'm home!! Jason!! Jennifer!! Somebody help me get these groceries outa the car!! (*Enters and crosses, lugging bags of groceries, stops near her exit and speaks to audience.*) Last week one of the neighbors ran her rid'em mower the entire length of the street, on the grass—one mowed swatch through eight or nine lawns—flowers, toys, garden hoses all mowed into teeny, tiny little pieces—looked like a party. Then she hit somebody's rotary sprinkler and it threw her off course, but she kept on going, her foot flat on the gas, screaming at the top of her lungs until she came to rest, violently, against a garbage truck. Her husband died last year—he used to do all their moving. I—I—I gotta move outa here. (*She exits.*)

VOICEOVER: They reproduce with difficulty.

ERIC: (*To CATHY offstage*) You hear me, Mom? Everything is completely fucked up! I didn't get the fucking divorce. It's not my fucking fault. And now my entire life is fucked! *Moooooommmmm!*

(*CATHY enters and looks at ERIC.*)

VOICEOVER: They are grouped in loosely structured units called families. Ring.

ERIC: (*Picks up phone.*) Yo. (*To CATHY*) It's someone named Grandma. Wait—is this the Grandma we're supposed to live with? (*To person on phone*) Where is this place? (*Listens to answer—turns back to CATHY*) No. No fucking way. Fuck no.

(*CATHY takes phone.*)

CATHY: (*On phone*) Mom? Yes, they all use that word. A lot.

VOICEOVER: The economic system is antiquated, but communication is excellent, in spite of primitive equipment.

CATHY: *(On phone)* Yes, everything is fine. He's excited about coming. Excuse me— *(To ERIC, sotto voce, handing ERIC the phone)* Now, for Chrissake be nicccccccccc.

ERIC: *(Into phone)* Whatsup, Grandma.

(Can't do it, hands CATHY the phone.)

CATHY: I'll call you back, Mom?

EVELYN: *(On stage, on the phone)* No.

CATHY: *(On phone)* No?

EVELYN: It's your father.

(JIM wanders on.)

CATHY: What?

EVELYN: He's...different. I don't know....

CATHY: Should we still come home?

ERIC: This is my home.

EVELYN: Please.

ERIC: This is my home!

EVELYN: Please.

ERIC: *This is my home.*

EVELYN: Please.

(The both hang up. EVELYN follows the wandering JIM off as he exits.)

CATHY: Eric, we *have* to go home. We are going home. *And that's final!!!*

ERIC: You're outta control, Mom. You need to get some fucking help.

CATHY: *Listen!!! I am the mother!! You are the child!! I am in control here!!! I am the adult!!!*

ERIC: Mom. There are no adults in this world. I just figured that out this year. And this boy's not going to live in any fucking suburb. No way. *(He exits.)*

VOICEOVER: No way.

(JUDY is standing, looking out over the audience's head, pointing out houses to CATHY.)

JUDY: Twisted cape, raised ranch, then that split level—

CATHY: They're new, then.

JUDY: Ten years ago.

CATHY: That was our little hill.

JUDY: It was just leftover dirt from something else. It wasn't, like, a real hill or anything.

CATHY: So after split level—the rest of the street—

JUDY: Some new siding. Above-ground swimming pools. Trying to be, you know....*(Points at a house)* New garage. It's a kit.

CATHY: Really? Huh. *(About another house)* Boy, that lawn looks like hell. He used to keep it perfect.

JUDY: You don't know?

CATHY: What?

JUDY: Spread newspapers on the living room rug, lay down, and shot himself.

CATHY: Oh my God!

JUDY: Of course, it still soaked through.

CATHY: *(Still about the suicide)* Why?!

JUDY: He lay there all afternoon. Wall-to-wall carpeting. *(About another house)* And over there? She never leaves the house.

CATHY: That was a showplace inside.

JUDY: Still may be. We'll never know.

CATHY: (*Another house*) The...boys. Those wild boys...

JUDY: Killed in Vietnam. Killed in a car wreck. And the other one's a lawyer.

CATHY: Mom never wrote.

JUDY: I thought you knew, or I would've—

CATHY: Yeah.

JUDY: Nobody writes...

CATHY: No. (*A pleasant memory of someone*)
Oh, whatever happened to Darryl?

JUDY: San Francisco.

CATHY: Is he still alive?

JUDY: I dunno.

CATHY: (*About the neighborhood*) Strange.

JUDY: Yeah, it's pure Mars. I had to move back. I couldn't afford my rent plus the day care. Mom's alright with the kids. I mean, that's the way families used to do it all the time. This is a nice place to live. We grew up here. It's not the subdivision that's the problem, it's the society. My mother and I... get along. (*Long pause, waiting for CATHY to say something about this—agree with her*) I mean, you're doing all right, aren't you?

CATHY: (*Realizing that JUDY wants to hear this*) Yeah.

JUDY: It's only temporary. Until I get a better-paying job. I think I'm gonna start at one of those learning centers they advertise on T V—you can put it on your Mastercard.

CATHY: What are you gonna learn?

JUDY: Radiology. I don't know about wearing all that lead. Can't be good for you. What are you going to do?

CATHY: Something'll come up.

JUDY: Remember that little dog that was in love with you?

CATHY: Oh, the humper.

JUDY: Why don't we call him up for Saturday night? Boy, uh. *(Beat)* Actually, he's dead. They get kidney problems, those dogs.

CATHY: *(Thinking about the suicide)* Why did he do it?

JUDY: *(Thinking about the dog)* He was a slave of love, humping your leg—his little pink thing reaching out... with no place to go. So sad.

CATHY: No, I meant Mister Whatshisname.

(CATHY puts a finger to her forehead like a gun. JUDY moves the "gun" so that the "barrel" is in CATHY's mouth.)

JUDY: Bang.

CATHY: Oh.

JUDY: Yeah, he meant it.

CATHY: But why?

JUDY: Seems so incredible to you? He wasn't happy!

CATHY: Well, who is?

JUDY: But in a house that nice! You know?

(JUDY exits. CATHY stays on the "lawn.")

(JIM enters as before, wearing lipstick, and puts his head down on the table, just as before.)

VOICEOVER: This is the correct placement. Thank you.

JIM: *(About the coolness of the table against his head)* "Ahhh." *(To someone offstage)* I'm gonna finally fix the

goddam toaster. Evelyn? *(He exits, returns with the toaster, sits.)*

CATHY *enters the scene and addresses the audience.*)

CATHY: *(To the audience)* I'd forgotten how small this house is.

(EVELYN enters, holding a dish towel.)

CATHY: *(To EVELYN)* What?

EVELYN: He's in the kitchen. He's just sitting there.

CATHY: *(To EVELYN)* What time is it?

EVELYN: Ten a.m.

(CATHY enters JIM's space, EVELYN following.)

CATHY: *(To JIM)* What are you doing home, Dad?

JIM: *(Pleasant, oblivious)* Hi. I fixed this damn thing again.

EVELYN: What are you doing home, Jim?

JIM: What's for supper?

CATHY: What you got on your mouth?

JIM: Chapstick.

EVELYN: It's an honest mistake.

(EVELYN wipes lipstick off JIM's mouth.)

(Phone rings.)

CATHY: *(On phone)* Hello. *(She hands receiver to JIM.)* Dad?

JIM: *(Takes receiver, then puts it to his ear.)* Uh-huh?... Hello, old buddy... Home... What?! *(Looks at watch.)* What???! *(Stands, drops phone.)* No. *(Starts to exit, looks at CATHY.)*

CATHY: What is it, Dad?

EVELYN: He's supposed to be at work! Don't you see?! He's supposed to be at work!!

JIM: I—I don't understand.

CATHY: Want me to go with you?

JIM: To work with me? Why? It's all right. Doesn't anybody think it's all right?! (*He bolts out the door.*)

CATHY: Dad—come back. Daddy—wait!

(*CATHY exits after JIM.*)

(*EVELYN notices the phone receiver which hasn't been hung up—she picks it up.*)

EVELYN: Hello? Jack?... He's left. He'll be right there... No, he's fine. Came home to get Cathy. She's... visiting.... I'm fine, Jack.... Bye-bye.

(*She hangs up the phone. She looks at the paper towel with the lipstick in it. The toaster pops—it's fixed. ERIC enters in his jockey shorts—he's just gotten up.*)

ERIC: Toaster fixed finally? Get some frozen waffles today—okay, Grandma?

EVELYN: No.

ERIC: Jesus, I can't even eat what I want? (*Exiting*) I don't get to live where I want, I can't say what I fucking want to say—

EVELYN: What did you say? (*Exiting after him*)
What did you say?

ERIC: (*Offstage*) *What kind of fucking life is this, huh???*

(*JERRY enters, sits in the kitchen chair, and talks to the audience.*)

JERRY: First off, they get a warehouse—doesn't have to be all that big. A Butler building, say, about the size of a Safeway. And the first thing they do is spray the walls and the ceiling flat black. And then they bring in about thirty loads of number ten gravel and they cover the floor with it. And then a couple, three loads of retaining

wall rock—you know the size I mean—about as big as my fist. And they sprinkle that over this base of gravel. Now you know they've made some mounds here and there, so the floor isn't completely flat. They hang some lights from the girders and set up some big spots, and they got a control booth in a corner. Then they bring in the machines—the lunar lander and the L E M. And that's when they set up the cameras, shout "action!" and make a movie. Then they print it in black and white on crummy film in slow motion and pipe it onto all the television sets. And whammo—all the world sees a man land on the moon and plant the American flag. I mean, "Moon Rocks"? Really. And don't talk to me about Voyager. They got a ride a Walt Disney World better than that. Think about it.

(JERRY *exits.*)

VOICEOVER: He loses three days—no—wait. This is the female bonding scene.

(JUDY and CATHY *are talking.*)

CATHY: The kids? Your mom?

JUDY: At the mall.

CATHY: But I could've—

JUDY: I wouldn't go near the house—are you kidding me? His apartment. Are you into this? You don't seem into this.

CATHY: Oh—I *love* it.

JUDY: Yeah.

CATHY: I *love* this.

JUDY: Yeah.

CATHY: It's too much.

JUDY: Yeah.

CATHY: God.

JUDY: Right.

(Long pause as they both smile and nod)

CATHY: We're talking the same guy.

JUDY: Right.

CATHY: The one.

JUDY: That's right.

CATHY: Amazing. Makes me crazy! Uh! You are my hero. You are definitely my *hero*.

JUDY: There's just one thing.

CATHY: What? What?

JUDY: *(Beat)* I said the L-word.

(Pause)

CATHY: What?

JUDY: I said the L-word.

CATHY: No.

JUDY: Yes.

CATHY: Was he...there?

JUDY: Was he there.

CATHY: Are you sure he heard you?

JUDY: Oh yeah.

CATHY: What did he do?

JUDY: It seemed to throw him off rhythm slightly.

CATHY: Then? You said it then?

JUDY: I know.

CATHY: Boy.

JUDY: I know.

CATHY: Was there any discussion...later?

JUDY: Nope.

CATHY: An acknowledgment of any kind from him?

JUDY: Are you kidding? *(Beat)* Are you kidding? *(Beat)*
It would've been easier if I'd farted, frankly. Oh God.
Oh God.

CATHY: I know.

JUDY: It's just—been a long time for me.

CATHY: I know.

JUDY: I just sort of, like, lost it.

CATHY: I know.

JUDY: Oh God, what an amateur.

CATHY: It'll be all right.

JUDY: He heard me say it.

CATHY: He'll forget. Men have short memories.
Particularly for emotional information.

JUDY: Oh boy.

CATHY: Don't worry about it.

JUDY: I'm fucked. I'm totally fucked. Can you tell me
I'm not fucked?

CATHY: Maybe he's different.

JUDY: I wish I could take it back.

CATHY: *(To herself)* Oh my God. Starting from scratch.

JUDY: What?

CATHY: Nothing.

(CATHY and JUDY exit in opposite directions.)

VOICEOVER: The buying of food is a ritual.

(JIM enters and sits at the kitchen table, and stirs his coffee very carefully, completely immersed in this action.)

EVELYN enters.)

EVELYN: (*Ready to go*) Alright.

JIM: (*Pleasantly*) Okay.

EVELYN: Are you go to the ready store?

JIM: What?

EVELYN: (*Annoyed, as to a child*) Are—you—ready—to—go—to—the—erstoe?

JIM: I—I—

EVELYN: *Yaagh!! Yaagh!!* Are you ready to go to the Yaagh?

JIM: Alright!

(EVELYN exits. After a long beat, JIM stands up and begins to look around for her.)

JIM: *Evelyn?* Baby?

(ALIENS enter and take his table and chair, so when he comes back to where he was sitting, everything is gone. JIM panics and begins to run around. Suddenly a pair of headlights appears right upstage from him—JIM freezes in their light. A loud diesel horn honk. A TRUCKER enters, having climbed down from the truck.)

TRUCKER: *Whatthehelliswrongwithyou?*

JIM: Who are you?

TRUCKER: Are you *blind?!!*

(EVELYN enters with groceries in a couple of bags.)

EVELYN: *Jim!! Good God!!*

TRUCKER: Is this guy yours???

EVELYN: Jim—you were right there with me at the check out—I turn around and you were gone!!

TRUCKER: Keep him out of the street!!

JIM: *(To TRUCKER)* I'll be with you in a minute.

EVELYN: *(To TRUCKER)* We're sorry.

JIM: Nice truck. Peterbilt!

TRUCKER: *(Exiting)* Dickhead!

JIM: *(To EVELYN)* Where's my coffee?

EVELYN: Come on, Jim.

(EVELYN exits and JIM starts to follow. ALIENS replace his table and chair, but not his coffee. He turns and notices his chair and table again, crosses to it and sits—the coffee is gone. EVELYN enters in different clothes.)

EVELYN: Alright. What do you want to do today? *(About his clothes)* Wait—didn't I lay out some clean clothes for you? These are the same ones you wore yesterday, Jim.

JIM: I can't keep track of my damn coffee. Isn't that funny?

(EVELYN gets a fresh cup and puts it down in front of him. JIM puts his hand in it and burns it.)

JIM: It's hot. *Owwwwwww!!*

EVELYN: *(In sympathy and fear)* Oh Jim! That's your hurt hand! *(She tries to get him up.)* Come to the sink—I'll pour cold water on it.

JIM: No. Every time I leave this chair, something happens.

EVELYN: I'll get a washcloth.

(She exits. HANK enters—he's a male relative of JIM's.)

JIM: Hank!!

HANK: Jimmy!!

(JIM puts out his hand—HANK shakes it vigorously and it doesn't hurt. JIM looks at his hand in amazement.)

HANK: How are you doing?

JIM: What are you doing here?

HANK: I'm collecting for the Sunday paper.

JIM: No kidding. Why?

HANK: That'll be three thirty-five.

JIM: (*Looking in his billfold*) I don't have it.

HANK: (*Whispers*) Get out while there's still time.

(*Horn honk. HANK speaks in a normal voice.*)

HANK: Gotta run. I'll be back.

JIM: That's what you always say. Hank? Hank!!

(*EVELYN enters, dressed differently again.*)

EVELYN: I was honking for you, Jim. Didn't you hear me?

JIM: Hank was here, Evelyn!!

EVELYN: Hank is dead, Jim. Jim?

JIM: But he was here.

EVELYN: Jim—the paperboy yesterday—you called him Hank.

JIM: The paperboy is Scott.

EVELYN: Yes, that's right. Scott.

JIM: Scott—I know. I know that.

EVELYN: The doctor wants to check your hand today—
(*She looks at his burned hand—the same one that had the bandaged finger at the beginning of the play.*) Jim!! You took the bandage off again!! Dammit! Come on.

JIM: Wait.

EVELYN: What is it?

JIM: I—I have to find my insurance card.

EVELYN: I left the car running. Don't be long. *(She exits.)*

(JIM takes out his billfold and sits down at the table and goes through all the cards and the pictures. As he lays the cards out carefully in a row, an ALIEN enters and begins to pick them up. JIM doesn't notice—he's become too involved, distracted, looking at some of the pictures he's found in his billfold. The ALIEN exits with the cards— JIM turns back to go through them, notices that they are gone—pats the table where they were, looking for them. Sound of a car horn honking. The honking becomes a long hum. JIM stares ahead.)

(CATHY and JUDY are doing the L-Word scene as in the earlier part of the play—but the tape is running backwards. JIM exits.)

CATHY: *(To herself)* Cha-erks mumrf geentrats.
Dog eyem ho.

JUDY: *(Backing in)* Kab ti kate dluk I heewa I.

CATHY: Tner-rerf-fid see eebyaim.

JUDY: Tuff tawn my eem illet ooya nak. Tuff eelatote my. Tuff my.

CATHY: Ti touba eerow tnode.

JUDY: Ooya vul I. Ee-ace I dnaa ereeya gnikuf alohwa a ni amite tsnif.

VOICEOVER: We've seen this.

CATHY: Notayem-rofni lanoyhs-tomee rof—

VOICEOVER: I said we've seen this. And X-load tape. It's a zoomer. Thank you.

(CATHY and JUDY exit.)