

THE WASTE DISPOSAL UNIT

By Brigid Brophy

A Radio play [1964]

Cast

Virgil Knockerbicker	An American, 30s, gay
Homer Knockerbicker	His older brother, sweaty
Merry	Homer's wife
Lia-Pia	The palazzo servant
Angelo Lumaca	An Italian workman
Mrs van den Most	Merry's mother [doubles with Merry]

Scene

The salone of a palazzo in Northern Italy. The first impression is of magnificence; then, of ugly magnificence; finally, of empty, ugly magnificence. Walls, floor and the very window seats beneath the two vast windows are marbled: but the windows are uncurtained and the room is, in fact, unfurnished except for a crate of Coca-Cola bottles which has been dumped near the centre.

The Play

On one of the window-seats lies a relaxed young American, VIRGIL. His knees are crooked up into a lectern, on which he has propped a pretty little black note-book. Matching it, he is in black from the neck of his smart sweatshirt to his sneakers. He looks – probably by intention – not unlike the young lord Hamlet. All the hair on his head is evenly cropped to a quarter of an inch, and it stands up straight like the pile on velvet. A worried middle-aged American, HOMER is pacing to and fro, from time to time snatching off his rimless spectacles and wiping them. If, at one of his blinded movements, he passes near the Coca-Cola crate, he is in danger of stumbling over it. His lightweight, crease-resistant suit is crumpled and he is hot. He has loosened his tie to the point where one can hardly make out what it is like. His non-iron nylon shirt could do with an iron. He is rather fat.

In the wall to the left is a heavy renaissance portico containing a vast studded door which leads to the bedroom. An exactly similar door in the right wall leads to the kitchen. Both doors are shut.

The worried American's footsteps trace an echoing pattern as they cross the elaborate marbled patterns of the bare floor.

HOMER: Virgil?

VIRGIL: *[obligingly, but not looking up from his book]:* Homer?

HOMER: Virgil, you planning on lying around all day today, the way you did yesterday?

Virgil: Mm-hm.

[He waits to hear what Homer was leading up to. Nothing comes.]

- HOMER: *[anxiously]* This heat's murder. Merry says it isn't any worse than Southern California, but I tell her it is, it carries a higher degree of humidity. Southern California, you got the ocean. *[He seems to expect Virgil to contradict this. When nothing happens he murmurs to himself]:* Gee, it's hot. It's hot as hell.
- VIRGIL: *[absently, through his reading]* Maybe you should relax more.
- HOMER: I guess one in the family's enough.
- VIRGIL: *[without much interest]* One what?
- HOMER: *[embarrassed]* O you know. You know what I *mean*, Virgil. *[Changing the subject.]* It's hot enough so it even mists up my lenses. *[No comment from Virgil.]* You're lucky you don't have to wear glasses. This heat, you wouldn't be able to see to write.
- VIRGIL: *[offhand]* I'm not writing. I'm reading back what I already did.
- HOMER: That reminds me, sometime I got to talk with you. *[Interrupting himself:]* You want a drink, Virgil?
- VIRGIL: Mm-hm. Whisky sour.
- HOMER: I didn't mean hard liquor.
- VIRGIL: *[unperturbed]* Oh. No thanks.

HOMER: I wish we had a water cooler in this place. Guess I'll have myself a coke. I wonder if Merry could use a coke. You think Merry could use a coke, Virgil?

[Homer's head alludes to the door at the left.]

VIRGIL: How would I know? Go on in and ask her.

HOMER: Oh, I can't go in there right now. She isn't through fixing her face.

VIRGIL: Oh. Well yell.

HOMER: What?

VIRGIL: Yell. Ask her through the bedroom door.

HOMER: *[thoughtfully]* Yeh, I might do that. I might do that. Sure.

VIRGIL: Well go ahead.

HOMER: Sure.

[He is anticipated. A woman's voice, deliberately feminine, deliberately musical, calls from the other side of the door at the left.]

MERRY: Ho-mer !

HOMER: *[calling back]* I'll be right in, honey. I just grabbed myself a coke. I just gotta find some place to put it down.

[He crams it into the crate and runs over to the door: but as his hand turns the knob.]

MERRY: Oh, don't come *in*, Homer. *[He shuts the door again hastily.]*

HOMER: *[with deep sincerity]* I certainly am sorry, Merry.

MERRY: *[sweetly]* Why, that's perfectly all right, Homer, think no more of it. Homer?

HOMER: *[without impatience]* Yes, Merry?

MERRY: Would you look round the palazzo see if I left my Kleenex some place?

HOMER: Sure, Merry. *[He returns to the middle of the room.]* I don't see too well, my lenses got misted up again. *[Calling:]* I don't see them any place, honey, but I'll keep right on searching. Virgil? You seen them?

VIRGIL: Seen what?

HOMER: Merry's Kleenex?

VIRGIL: Sure. *[He pulls out the box from behind his back.]*

HOMER: Now why in the world would you want to do that?

VIRGIL: *[reproachfully]* This window seat isn't too soft, Homer.

HOMER: If you wouldn't lie around all day –

VIRGIL: Don't you want them?

HOMER: What?

VIRGIL: *[absently extending the box towards Homer]* Merry's Kleenex.

HOMER: *[flustered]* Wait a moment, can't you. I got to wipe off these lenses again.

VIRGIL: Don't *you* get steamed up too.

HOMER: I'm not getting steamed up, but you don't seem to understand, I got to get those Kleenex to Merry. Give here. *[Reproachfully:]* Why, Virgil, you crushed in one whole side of the pack. I don't know how Merry's going to –

VIRGIL: Yeh, well, these sharp-angled packs aren't really any more comfortable than marble. I guess I really took Merry's Kleenex more as a kind of talisman. You know, like a chicken sits on a china egg. To inspire my work.

HOMER: Now that's something I have to talk with you about, Virgil. I'll just go give these to Merry. I'll be right back. *[Approaching Merry's door and calling:]* Merry! I found them, honey. But I'm afraid the pack didn't stand up too well –

MERRY: Now isn't that too bad of me, Homer. I was just going to call out I didn't need them any more.

HOMER: O.

MERRY: *[winningly]* Homer, don't be sore. I found another pack right in here.

HOMER: *[sincerely]* O. I'm not sore, Merry. I'm certainly glad you found another pack. That's swell. You through yet, honey?

MERRY: *[singingly]* Not yet, Homer.

HOMER: O. O.K.

VIRGIL: *[while she reads]* Give here.

HOMER: What?

VIRGIL: If Merry doesn't want them, I may as well, sit on them a while longer. You never know what might hatch. I'll take a look round later, see if I can find a pack that isn't crushed. You don't have any scatter cushions round the place. Homer, I guess you don't have the domesticated touch, but you have to hand it to Merry, she certainly does have scatter Kleenex.

HOMER: *[beginning to be angry]* Now see here, Virgil.

MERRY: *[from the next room]* I don't hear you too well but you boys sound to be having a lot of fun out there. I'll be right along.

HOMER: *[calling back]* That's swell, honey.

VIRGIL: I don't figure how it takes a woman that long to make up like she was twenty-five when she *is* twenty-five.

HOMER: Now wait a minute, Virgil.

VIRGIL: *[coolly]* Mm-hm?

HOMER: Merry's a lovely person.

- VIRGIL: Sure. Sure, Homer. Merry's just great. She's great material.
- HOMER: What do you mean, *material*?
- VIRGIL: You know how it is, Homer. I guess I have a professional attitude, that's all. I'm certainly glad you married Merry.
- HOMER: *[menacingly]* I don't know just how you mean that, Virgil. Do you mean you're glad on account of your work?
- VIRGIL: O, I don't separate my work from my life.
- HOMER: Now that's something we have to talk about. I'll just have myself that coke ...
- VIRGIL: In fact I don't separate my work from *your* life.
- [HOMER puts the bottle abruptly back into the crate, and preparing to be angry]*
- HOMER: I didn't hear you too well, Virgil. I was kind of swallowing, but did you say my life or my wife?
- VIRGIL: O, I wouldn't dare –
- HOMER: Let's leave Merry out of this, Virgil. I want to talk with you.
- VIRGIL: Mm-hm?
- HOMER: Don't you ever look up from that book?
- VIRGIL: I'm told I have a very remarkable concentration.

HOMER: I guess you wouldn't break your concentration no matter what happened.

VIRGIL: *[still reading]*: Nothing does happen.

HOMER: Maybe not, but most of the time it sounds like it did. Know what I think, Virgil? I think Italy's the noisiest country I was ever in.

VIRGIL: It's no worse than Southern California.

HOMER: It is *so* worse than Southern California. Out here you get the cicadas. If it isn't the cicadas, it's the lambrettas. If it isn't the lambrettas, it's the doves. If it isn't the doves, it's those goddam chickens out there in the yard.

VIRGIL: I don't mind the chickens in the *yard* too much –

HOMER: Now see h –

VIRGIL: Cool off, Homer.

HOMER: How can I cool off, this heat? We ought to have drapes at those windows, cut out the sun, but I don't know the Italian for drapes, anyway Merry likes looking out the window I'm worried, Virgil. I don't know how Merry's going to take to this kind of climatic conditions.

VIRGIL: Relax, Homer, Merry doesn't feel it at all.

HOMER: You don't know how Merry feels. Merry is a very delicate character. I don't see how I can ask Merry to live in a climate like this.

VIRGIL: You didn't ask her. It was Merry's idea.

HOMER: You know what I *mean*, Virgil. You know how it is. A guy has to look out for his wife, he has to make provision. If I'd have known there wouldn't even have been a *shower* in the palazzo –

VIRGIL: You had one fixed.

HOMER: Sure I had one fixed, and I'm going to have plenty else fixed. I'm going to make this old palazzo like so it won't know itself But Merry's a very sensitive person. She's delicate, Virgil, even though she doesn't make any song and dance –

MERRY: *[calling musically from the next room]:* Ho-mer !

HOMER: Yes, honey?

MERRY: Could you step in here for a moment, Homer?

HOMER: Sure, Merry. I'll be right in. You through now?

[A bell rings loudly]

HOMER: I'll get it.

[He stops making towards the door at the left, and sets out for the door at the right: checks himself; executes a step-dance of hesitation; and finally calls, in a despairing flurry, towards the door on the left:]

I'll be right back, Merry. I just got to go see to the front door bell.

VIRGIL: Let Lia-Pia get it.

HOMER: How can I let Lia-Pia get it? She doesn't speak English.

VIRGIL: So she doesn't speak English. Maybe it was an Italian dropped by.

HOMER: Are you crazy? How would an *Italian* drop by?

VIRGIL: Well, we're in Italy.

HOMER: Sure. I *know* we're in Italy, but –

MERRY: Ho-mer! Would you step along to the front door? The bell just rang.

HOMER: Sure, Merry. Sure, I'll get it.

[Working his head with signals of assurance directed at the closed door to the left, he gets himself out of the door to the right, which he closes behind him. VIRGIL lays his book upside down on his humped knees and enjoys solitude and the sounds of the cicadas, the lambrettas, the chickens The knob of the door to the left turns, the door opens and MERRY, with exaggeratedly pretty stealth, tiptoes into the salone. VIRGIL braces himself to be crept up on. She arrives behind his head and laces her fingers over his eyes.]

MERRY: *[at her sweetest]:* Morning, Virgil. Guess who?

VIRGIL: *[sourly]:* Merry.

MERRY: You're a good guesser, Virgil.

[She releases his eyes, and he cranes round to look at her.]

VIRGIL: Mm-hm. Merry. Just like I thought. Morning. Merry. You look cute.

MERRY: *[her voice dimpling]:* Why, thank you, Virgil.

VIRGIL: Sure, cute. Little pony tail, all done up in a tartan bow, and those long white knee-hose, and your Bemuda shorts, and that cute little –what you call it?

MERRY: Shirtwaister?

VIRGIL: Sure, shirtwaister. O, you look cute, Merry. You look like all the college girls in Southern California rolled into one.

MERRY: Why, Virgil, that's the darlinest thing you ever said to me. I guess you must be becoming a better integrated personality. I'm going to give you a little kiss on your brow, just for saying that. *[She gives him an exceptionally dainty kiss.]*

VIRGIL: *[unmoved]:* O, don't take any account of me, Merry, I'm just apple-polishing. There's something I want you to tell me.

MERRY: Well I'll certainly tell you anything I can, Virgil, but Homer says you already know 'most everything. I'm going to just curl up alongside of you on this lovely RENaissance window-seat, and then you can ask me anything you want. I guess wherever I am I find myself some corner I can curl up in. There now, Virgil. What's your problem? You know, Virgil, Homer has a very, very high regard for your intellectual integrity.

VIRGIL: *[lazily]:* Now how would he be able to judge, I wonder?

MERRY: *[indignantly]*: Now, Virgil, Homer's –

VIRGIL: O sure, Homer's a lovely person.

MERRY: *[subsiding]*: I'm certainly glad you appreciate it. Now what is it I can tell you?

VIRGIL: Why don't you ever let your husband in your bedroom, Merry?

MERRY: *[in fury]*: Virgil Knockerbicker, how can you make such an absolutely awful insinuation? If you dare imply for one moment – *[Merry rises indignantly and makes for the door at the left.]*

VIRGIL: *[reasonably]*: Merry, I only asked.

[Indignantly and noisily Merry lays her hand on the door knob.]

MERRY: Virgil Knockerbicker, I'm going right back into the bouDOIR until Homer returns.

VIRGIL: Merry, what did I *do*?

MERRY: What did you *do*! You were insinuating that my relationship with Homer is not perfectly adjusted on the physical side.

VIRGIL: Merry, I only –

MERRY: You as good as called me a frigid wife!

VIRGIL: Merry, I –

MERRY: *[stamping in fury]*: I do *so* let him in my bedroom!

VIRGIL: He told me a while back he couldn't go in there.

MERRY: *[completely reasonable now she understands]*: O sure, but that was in the morning.

VIRGIL: *What's the difference?*

MERRY: Virgil, you certainly seem a little naïve for your age. Homer comes in my room nights – of course – and then he always goes away while it's still dark. He promised me that's how it would always be, and I know Homer won't break his promise. Then mornings he doesn't come in again before I got my face fixed.

VIRGIL: Is it *that* important he shouldn't see you without you got your face fixed?

MERRY: Well maybe it isn't that important right now, Virgil, but it will be. And the way Homer is, it could do a lot of damage to his feelings if I suddenly had to ask him to quit coming in when I got to be an age when it *would* matter. Right after Homer became my beau, I figured I ought to start right in planning the future. It was our wedding night I asked him to give me this promise. *[Impressively;]* That way I know he'll never break it.

VIRGIL: *[pondering all this]*: And you feel you couldn't possibly let him in till you're through fixing your face?

MERRY: *[quietly]*: No, I couldn't do that, Virgil. I just couldn't *do* that. You see, Virgil, I have something I want to preserve.

VIRGIL: Your face?

MERRY: *[gently, smiling]*: No, Virgil, something intangible, something that's been kind of entrusted to me. I don't know that you can understand very well, Virgil. Although you and I are pretty much the same age, I guess a woman matures faster than a man. I doubt that you have achieved sufficient maturation yet to understand. But what I feel is – well, I guess I feel that romance is a very wonderful and a very fragile thing.

[Sentimental pause: after which Merry gently turns the door knob.]

MERRY: I guess I'll just go along see who it was dropped by. Maybe I can help Homer some. *[In a leave-taking voice:]* Well . . . *[In a summing-up while pausing on the threshold voice:]* I'm glad you talked to me about this, Virgil. I'm not going to tell Homer we talked about it, because I believe that even within the marital framework there ought to be areas of privacy. If you have some more problems, Virgil, I hope you will talk with me about them. I have a personal conviction that relationships can only achieve a completely adjusted orientation if problems are brought right out in the open. And I sincerely hope we can all three pass a wonderful vacation in this lovely old palazzo.

[After directing a last spiritual smile down upon VIRGIL, MERRY leaves by the stage door at left. Virgil sighs with a bliss almost unbearable. The door at the right opens and LIA-PIA – an aged bundle in black cotton, with ginger-coloured felt slippers turning over at the sides – ushers in a plumpish, shortish, youngish Italian.]

LIA-PIA: *[making the soothing sounds of a mother dove]*: Si accomodi, signore, si accomodi, si accomodi, si accomodi.

[She shuffles out the way she came. The Italian, who has not noticed VIRGIL's presence, walks briskly to the middle of the room, whistling. He is the sort of man who would not notice he was waiting if he did not make signals of it to himself. He is immaculately pressed, laundered and barbered: white shirt, petrol-coloured, two-piece suit, the trousers held up by a narrow, imitation-crocodile belt, beneath which his waist bulges slightly and rather becomingly; straight black knitted nylon tie, plumb as a fluted pilaster: expanding gold watch-strap on small, clean though hairy wrist. Under his arm he carries a handleless dark grey briefcase of the kind of leather whose surface resembles seersucker. He balances his briefcase on top of the Coca-Cola bottles, and then raises one of his very small well-shod feet and balances that on the edge of the crate while he straightens his dark blue fluted nylon sock.]

VIRGIL: *[drawling]*: I don't know why the old thing told you to accommodate yourself. I don't see where you can.

THE VISITOR: *[taken by surprise]*: Ah, scusi, non avevo visto –

VIRGIL: O.K. maybe I *am* insignificant. You could sit on the Coca-Cola crate but I doubt that it's comfortable.

THE ITALIAN: *[recovering himself and beginning to bustle]*: Please, it is no matter. I am come to work, not sit. You are Mr Knockerbicker?

VIRGIL: Mm-hm.

THE ITALIAN: I am the man who is come to fix the –

VIRGIL: O, then I'm not the Mr Knockerbicker you want. The Mr Knockerbicker you want, the Mr Knockerbicker who counts,

will be along presently. Pardon me if I catch up on some reading while you wait.

THE ITALIAN: Please? The Mr Knockerbicker who counts?

VIRGIL: Sure, who counts out the dough. I'm just the kid brother. The Mr Knockerbicker who counts went to meet you , and the Mrs Knockerbicker who counts went right after him, but the way this palace is constructed, if you miss somebody the first time round, you have to go through a whole suite of rooms before you get back where you started. The Italian RENaissance discovered many important principles, but not that of the corridor.

[Brief pause during which the Italian stands rather formally beside the Coca-Cola crate.]

THE ITALIAN: Lumaca, Angelo.

VIRGIL: Knockerbicker, Virgil.

ANGELO: You are reading?

VIRGIL: *[continuing to do so]:* Mm-hm.

ANGELO: I, too, read very often. *[No reply from Virgil. After a moment:]* It is being very hot. *[No reply.]* I take off my coat. *[No reply.]* This is not a nuisance?

VIRGIL: *[without attending]:* Go right ahead.

[ANGELO takes off his coat, folds it neatly inside out so the sun will not fade it, removes his wallet from the coat pocket to his hip pocket, smooths the coat lining again, hangs the coat from the knob of one of the shutters near the

window-seat not occupied by VIRGIL, makes sure the coat is hanging straight and returns expectedly to the centre of the room.]

ANGELO: Ah, that is being better. *[No comment from Virgil]* You are not being too hot, dressed all in black?

VIRGIL: *[through his reading]*: Black is the coolest colour there is. And I am one of the coolest characters.

ANGELO: I am sorry. I have been bad to ask that question.

VIRGIL: How so?

ANGELO: Probably you are wearing the black because you are being bereaved.

VIRGIL: No, I wasn't bereaved recently, but now you come to mention it I'm prepared. I guess that's my only resemblance to a boy scout.

ANGELO: You are reading a book that is being interesting?

VIRGIL: *[murmuring]*: Enthralling.

ANGELO: Love story, police story, espionage, *Reader's Digest*, science fiction?

VIRGIL: Poetry.

ANGELO: *[with a laugh]*: I, too, am loving poetry. *[No reply.]* Even though I am being an engineer, I am loving poetry. You know what I am thinking, Mr Knockerbicker junior? I am thinking in life today there is not being enough poetry. *[He begins to walk to and fro to help the rhythm of what*

he is saying.] I am loving beauty in all its forms. I love poetry, music, paintings – I am loving all the arts. And you know why, Mr Knockerbicker junior? Because they are so beautiful. To me they are so beautiful. I am loving all the beautiful things – *[slyly:]* including the women, yes?

VIRGIL: *[absently]:* That so?

ANGELO: I think you are feeling the same, eh, Mr Knockerbicker junior?

VIRGIL: Mm-hm. *[After a second's pause:]* All except the women.

ANGELO: *[with amazed expostulation]:* How is this? You are not loving the women?

VIRGIL: *[laconically]:* I'm homosexual.

[ANGELO is more taken aback that he has ever been in his life before]

ANGELO: O. *[A pause, then feebly, in embarrassment]:* I am begging your pardon.

VIRGIL: *[graciously]:* Don't mention it. *[After considering this for a moment:]* What a *peculiar* conversation.

ANGELO: *[After a pause, rather timidly]:* Mr Knockerbicker junior, this poem you read, who is the author?

VIRGIL: *[reading to the end of the page, which he turns, before vouchsafing:]* I am.

[ANGELO seems to think this is meant to be funny and roars with polite laughter. When he comes to, he notices Virgil is still reading with complete gravity.]

ANGELO: You are meaning this is true? Really you have written a poem?

VIRGIL: Am writing. I didn't finish it yet.

ANGELO: And you are beginning it when?

VIRGIL: *[casually]*: When I was ten.

ANGELO: You are writing since you have been ten one poem? So many years, one poem?

VIRGIL: I'm not that old.

ANGELO: No, but –

VIRGIL: *[wearily, resigning himself to conversation]*: I guess it was the Romantic Movement spread the idea a poem has to be a lyric.

ANGELO: Without the lyric feeling, where is the poetry?

VIRGIL: Before romanticism was invented, there were plenty of long poems. My namesake Virgil, who was born not so far from here, wrote an extremely long poem. My brother's namesake wrote two of them. Dante and Milton also wrote long poems, but as my parents didn't have any more sons they are not commemorated in our family.

ANGELO: *[determined to keep the conversation going]:* Dante, Milton, that was long ago. Modern life moves with more pace, Mr Knockerbicker junior. *[Receiving no reply, he essays:]* How you find rhymes for a long poem? It is difficult, yes?

VIRGIL: *[laconically]:* I don't use rhyme.

ANGELO: Without the rhyme, how is it poetry? You are writing blank verses?

VIRGIL: I don't use metre.

ANGELO: What can it be like, your poem?

VIRGIL: My poem is kind of an American Song of Songs.

ANGELO: But without the rhyme, without the metre, where is the poetry?

VIRGIL: The poetry is in the subject.

ANGELO: Mr Knockerbicker junior, what is the subject of your poem?

VIRGIL: The subject of my poem is the American Woman.

ANGELO: Ah, now I am understanding. The American Woman, she is poetry herself.

VIRGIL: *[casually]:* Yes, I include her among the ideas which have a sufficient poetic content in themselves, along with the collision of planets and the copulation of dinosaurs.

ANGELO: *[overwhelmed]*: You must be a very poetical person, Mr Knockerbicker junior.

VIRGIL: Fortunately I don't have to reply to that compliment, because I hear the other Mr Knockerbicker on his way back. He has a very weighty tread. Come to think of it, Homer must weigh all of a hundred and sixty. *[The door on the right opens, HOMER comes quickly in.]* Meet Mr Homer Knockerbicker. Homer, meet Angelo Lumaca.

HOMER: *[gravely, but absently]*: Mr Lumaca.

ANGELO: Call me Angelo.

HOMER: *[anxious and preoccupied]*: Sure. Virgil, did you see Merry any place? Lia-Pia was saying something about the signora, but I didn't follow her too well –

VIRGIL: Merry went right after you. She'll be back.

HOMER: *[worriedly]*: I certainly hope she will. This palazzo . . . *[He sighs with worry.]* A person as delicate as Merry could easily get lost in a palazzo like this. Pardon me, Angelo. I'm sorry I had to keep you waiting. I got snarled up with the hired help, she only speaks Italian. I didn't get what she was trying to tell me . . .

[The other door opens.]

MERRY: O, Homer, there you are. I was – *[her voice breaks into dimples]* Why I didn't know we had company.

HOMER: Honey, I'd like to have you meet Mr Angelo Lumaca.

- ANGELO: Please call me Angelo.
- MERRY: Angelo? Why, that must mean angel. That's a perfectly darling name. I'd certainly feel very privileged to call you by a name like that. Welcome to our palazzo, Angelo. I certainly never thought I'd be welcoming a real Italian in a real Italian palazzo.
- ANGELO: Welcome to Italy, Mrs Knockerbicker. *[He kisses her hand.]*
- MERRY: *[delighted]*: You certainly have palazzo manners.
- VIRGIL: Now she'll want us all to kiss her hand every morning. It'll become a ritual, like the breakfast food.
- HOMER: Now see here, Virgil –
- MERRY: *[sweetly peace-making]*: Now, Homer, quit picking on Virgil. You know he can't help himself.
- ANGELO: *[making conversation]*: You hired this palazzo, Mr Knockerbicker?
- HOMER: What? O yeh, sure. For our vacation. *[He is still vaguely worried.]*
- ANGELO: You have a very old palazzo here, Mr Knockerbicker. Cinquecento.
- VIRGIL: And boy is it hideous.
- MERRY: Why, Virgil, how can you *say* such a thing?

- ANGELO: O, no, Mr Knockerbicker junior, you must be mistaken. This palazzo is very old, it is of the rinascimento, you understand?, of the sixteenth century. So it cannot be hideous.
- MERRY: O, don't take any account of Virgil. Have you looked out the window, Angelo? We have a real Italian yard out there, a giardino.
- ANGELO: *[like a conjuror delighted by what he has called forth]:* La signora parla italiano!
- MERRY: *[immeasurably pleased]:* O, no, not really, just a word or two I picked up from the hired help, but I certainly hope to learn a lot more. Yes, we have a real Italian giardino, and real Italian doves and real Italian chickens. I didn't learn the Italian for doves and chickens yet. But I get a big thrill just from watching those chickens and knowing every one of them is a real Italian chicken.
- ANGELO: You have twenty, thirty hens out there and only two cocks. *[Slyly:]* Nice life for the cocks, eh?
- Virgil:* If you like responsibility.
- HOMER: *[slowly getting Angelo's meaning]:* O, you mean the roosters.
- ANGELO: Please?
- VIRGIL: Somebody sold you English English instead of American English, Angelo. In the United States, we have to call them roosters, because American women have such effortlessly sexual trains of thought.

MERRY: *[sharply]*: Virgil, will you please be quiet?

HOMER: What'd he say, Merry, I didn't get it?

MERRY: Don't let's any of us pay any attention to Virgil. He certainly has some anti-social compulsions this morning. But I'm not going to let anything spoil this wonderful place. D'you know, Angelo, living here I can just imagine I'm back in those old days, with knights and cardinals and poison and frescoes and illuminated manuscripts . . . O, I was just wild to get here. Last fall, I said to Mr Knockerbicker 'Homer, if it's the last thing you ever do for me, take me to Italy.'

HOMER: *[worriedly]*: Yeh, I know, honey, but in those days they didn't have too good a concept of hygiene, and a place like this. . . .

MERRY: Homer, quit worrying. We're making out fine.

HOMER: *[hastily]*: So far, honey. Knock on wood. *[Worried, sotto voce:]* Where is some wood? Hell, this place's all marble.

VIRGIL: There's that Coca Cola crate.

HOMER: *[relieved]*; O, sure. *[Knocks on it.]* Thanks, Virgil.

MERRY: *[reproachfully]*: Now, Homer, quit fussing. What *could* happen?

HOMER: You're a brave little person, Merry. D'you know, Angelo, when we came here, they didn't even have a shower in this palazzo, only a tub.

- MERRY: Relax, Homer, will you. You'll get yourself a duodenal. Just relax, and let the lovely Italian culture just seep into you.
- HOMER: Maybe I'll get round to that, baby, when I get this place fixed so it's good enough for you.
- MERRY: O, you take marvellous care of me, Homer. D'you know, Angelo, Homer had a shower fitted.
- HOMER: *[still worried]*: Yeh, I had this shower fitted, and I installed another ice box –
- MERRY: Why, yes, Angelo, Homer had a complete kitchen installed right here, it's right through there *[pointing to the door at the right]* just next door to the living room, so we don't have to have our food cooked by the hired help any more.
- HOMER: When we first came, the hired help wanted to cook everything, but she was operating under pretty primitive conditions –
- MERRY: O, it wasn't just the conditions, Homer dear, it was the calories. I don't know, Angelo, if you ever saw a breakdown of the calorific content of olive oil, but believe me it would horrify you. Well, the first thing Homer did, he imported a stock of low-calory cooking medium from the States, and then he fixed up his little kitchen right out there –
- HOMER: Yeh, well, we have this kitchen, but there are some gadgets I wasn't yet able to find in Italy, and some we have that I imported but they're not yet operational.

- ANGELO: *[managing to interrupt at last]:* But Mr Knockerbicker, listen please. This is why I am here.
- HOMER: *[foggily]:* Why you are here – I don't get it. Pardon me a moment, Angelo. I have to wipe off my lenses again.
- ANGELO: *[pleading]:* Please, Mr Knockerbicker. I am the man who has come to fix the waste disposal unit!
- HOMER: *[very long-drawn as it slowly gets over to him]:* No-o-o? Well, how do you like that? *[in a beaming voice;]* Hullo there again.
- ANGELO: *[grinning in relief]:* Hullo.
- HOMER: Hi.
- ANGELO: *Ciao.*
- HOMER: *[laughing]:* We-ell. I guess that just about takes care of it. You know, I guess I thought that as you aren't an American you wouldn't know how to fix a waste disposal unit.
- ANGELO: I am the accredited Italian agent. I have here my card. You see. I am the accredited agent of the Atlantic Seaboard Waste Disposal Unit Corporation of New York, NY, USA.
- HOMER: Well, what do you know? Isn't that swell, Merry? Now can we have that waste disposal unit operational.
- ANGELO: *[confidently]:* You certainly can, Mr Knockerbicker.

MERRY: *[gracious livingly]*: Homer, would you take Angelo through there and show him where it has to be connected?

HOMER: I sure will.

[He ushers Angelo across the room and opens the door at the right for him.]

Right through there, Angelo.

Angelo: *[pausing on the threshold]*: You are going to enjoy this waste disposal unit, Mrs Knockerbicker. *[Reciting:]* This is the finest waste disposal unit on the market, a triumph of American technical know-how. This unit will dispose of ANYTHING. Say goodbye for ever to malodorous, unhygienic, germ-breeding, squelchy bundles. The Atlantic Seaboard waste disposal unit takes over. Soggy, crunchy, pulpy, bony, mushy, spiny – it's all one to the Atlantic Seaboard waste disposal unit.

VIRGIL: The guy certainly is accredited.

MERRY: *[in a last-minute thought]*: Say, Homer. Ask him if he ever fixed one before.

HOMER: You got something there, Merry. They told me this was the first they imported into Italy. Say, Angelo, did you ever fix one before?

ANGELO: *[reassuringly, and slightly on his dignity]*: Mr Knockerbicker, Mrs Knockerbicker. Please. I am the accredited agent. I fix it.

[The door shuts after HOMER and ANGELO. Swinging her pony tail, MERRY makes her way to the unoccupied window-seat, perches one urchin knee on it and looks out of the window. VIRGIL, on his window-seat, reads for a moment. Then:]

VIRGIL: *[without looking up]:* You mad at me, Merry?

MERRY: *[in a dreamy voice]:* Why no, Virgil. I guess I maybe would be, if I didn't know you have problems.

VIRGIL: I got problems O.K. How'm I going to end this poem?

MERRY: Maybe it'd make you fell less mixed up. Virgil, if you kind of explained your problem to me.

VIRGIL: I guess it's easier for composers. They just come back to the key note, and it sounds swell.

MERRY: And you want kind of a key note for your poem?

VIRGIL: It's not that simple. I need a climax – something terrible and tragic: and then a resolution: and then some kind of a final chorus, to round the thing off.

MERRY: I'll keep it in mind. Virgil, maybe I'll come up with something we can kick around together.

[The door opens and Homer returns]

HOMER: He's making out fine in there. We'll soon have that unit operational. And how are you making out, Merry? *[He places an infatuated kiss on the top of her head.]* Still looking out that window?

MERRY: O, I am as happy as can be just so I can watch those romantic old doves and those quaint little old chickens.

HOMER: *[running the strands of her pony tail through his fingers]:* You're just a lovely little person, Merry. You're just so satisfied with the simple things in life.

MERRY: *[her voice suddenly transfixed and hollow]:* Homer!

HOMER: *[wildly perturbed]:* Why, Merry! Hey, Merry! Merry, what's your problem? Merry, look at me! Virgil! She's gone quite rigid, like she was in shock. I guess I ought to pat her cheeks. *[Doing so, very gently:]* Hey, Merry, Merry!

MERRY: Homer, I been watching those roosters –

HOMER: Sure, Merry, I know it –

MERRY: *[in a voice italicized by horror]:* Homer, one of those roosters is a degenerate.

Homer: *[gently, understandingly, almost avuncularly]:* My poor little Merry, my poor little Merry, why did you have to be born so sensitive. Now, listen, Merry, you quit thinking of it right now. You start right in thinking about something beautiful. You start thinking about music or lovely old paintings or beautiful literature....

VIRGIL: Why don't you tell her take a look at the waste disposal unit?

HOMER: Why, Merry, you hear what Virgil said? I think that's a swell idea. Come along now. *[An arm tenderly round*

her, he leads her across the room.] If there's one thing that ought to take your mind off the ugly unclean things that happen in this world, it's that waste disposal unit. *[Opening the door on the right:]* You go right on in there, Merry, and see how the project's making out.

[He closes the door tenderly and softly after her: and then marches worriedly back across the room.]

HOMER: Now what're we going to do?

VIRGIL: I don't know why, but that question always panics me. Do about what, anyway?

HOMER: That rooster, of course. I can't ask Merry to share the premises with a rooster that's a degenerate.

VIRGIL: I don't see that's any worse than asking her to share them with a brother-in-law that's a degenerate.

HOMER: *[angrily]:* Will you quit talking that way. You'd be a perfectly healthful American boy, if only you'd try.

VIRGIL: I guess that's what unhealthy about me. I can't even try to try.

HOMER: *Why not, for pity's sakes? Don't I have enough on my mind already?*

VIRGIL: Maybe I'm afraid it would spoil my work.

HOMER: Now that's another thing. I keep trying to get round to talking with you about that. How much longer is your work going to take?

- VIRGIL: I can't say. I'm kind of held up for a climax.
- HOMER: *[deliberates: then:]* You know, Virgil, I sometimes get to wondering if you wrote anything at all.
- VIRGIL: *[deliberates in turn; then:]* O.K. I'll read it to you.
- HOMER: Right now?
- VIRGIL: Mm-hm.
- HOMER: But you didn't finish it yet.
- VIRGIL: I'll read it as far as I went. May be you'll come up with something for the ending.
- HOMER: I don't think I have any talent.
- VIRGIL: Then sit down brother and listen to mine.
- HOMER: How can I sit, there's no place to – I guess I can stand. It won't take that long, will it?
- VIRGIL: Why didn't you hire some furnishings for this palazzo?
- HOMER: That's a very selfish request, Virgil. You're the one that sits around all day. Maybe I'll hire some furnishings when I get round to it, but the first problem is to make basic living conditions fit for Merry.
- VIRGIL: O.K., brother, you stand. But don't move around any, you could distract me.

HOMER: O.K., O.K. Quit stalling, Virgil. Shoot.

[VIRGIL turns back the pages to the beginning of his book, clears his throat and then has a thought.]

VIRGIL: Say, Homer. I hope you know this isn't going to be poetry like you mean poetry. It's more like – did you ever read any Chinese poetry?

HOMER: *[vaguely]*: Sure, I guess I read some Chinese poetry some place, some magazine or something. In English.

VIRGIL: O, my poetry's in English, too. I just wanted you to know the opening sequences are modelled on Chinese poetry.

HOMER: Virgil, do you figure you can sell this? Is there a market for it? I don't know that the Chinese market's too easy to break into. I don't know, but it could even be poetry is scheduled.

VIRGIL: Scheduled?

HOMER: Schedule of prohibited exports, I mean, if you're thinking of **Red** China?

VIRGIL: *[in exasperation]*: Brother!

HOMER: O.K., O.K., I didn't say a thing, go right ahead.

VIRGIL: *[reading]*:

The American Woman
Is strange, terrible and beautiful,
Like fruits from the sea.

There is nothing she would not ask her husband to do
for her.

For this reason

She appears to be the most independent woman in the
world,

Just as aristocrats are said to be 'of independent means'
When they are in fact supported by slave labour.

[There is a pause.]

HOMER: Is that all?

VIRGIL: That's all of section one.

HOMER: Maybe I'll get to see more in it when I become better
accustomed to it.

VIRGIL: Section two. *[Reading.]*

The American Woman has grown

Like a cactus

In a place where there is no water.

The American Woman would rather be a lovely person
Than be herself.

The American Woman would rather be a lovely, warm,
genuine, sincere person

Than simply be.

[After a brief pause.]

HOMER: Say, Virgil, do you think that Merry's making out O.K. in
there? Suppose this guy Angelo makes a pass at her?

VIRGIL: Homer, quit worrying and concentrate. Merry can handle
it.

HOMER: I doubt that she can. That guy's a Latin, he's hot-blooded –

VIRGIL: You don't seem too well acquainted with Latin mores. If he does make a pass, he'll just pinch her fanny. That's the climacteric act for Latins. Merry'll just think a mosquito got her.

HOMER: I don't know that she –

VIRGIL: Of course she can handle it, Homer, she'll handle it with a flit gun. Now can I read the third canto?

HOMER: Third what? Sounds like you were going horseback riding.

VIRGIL: Homer, you're not *that* illiterate. Or maybe you meant it as a gag. The third canto is freer and more rhapsodic in style.

HOMER: O.K., O.K. I guess we'll get to hear of it if Merry has problems.

VIRGIL: *[reading:]*

There is only one American Woman but she has two faces: one old, one young. When she is young, she is younger than you would have thought possible. When she is old, she is older than the rocks she has persuaded her husband to buy for her.

The young American Woman is like an ad in a magazine of a glass of **milk fresh** from the ice box. She looks thirst-quenching. But when you taste her, she tastes of wood-

pulp. The young American Woman is a wax apple. She is flawless. But she has no sap. Except her husband.

When you have talked with her a little while you realize she was not begotten by sexual intercourse. Therefore:

When she grows old she becomes a goddess.

I love her best when she is old. For then she commands me more.

[Interrupting his reading:]

You know, I really mean that, Homer. I'm determined to live to be a very old man, because I want to see Merry grow old.

[Resuming his reading:]

I followed the American goddess
Through the beautiful shrines of Europe.
I shadowed her through the Louvre,
I nearly caught up with her in the Rue de la Paix:
I watched her buying leather goods from a tiny but very
expensive basement shop in Florence.
I dodged between her and the sunlight in Roman
colonnades;
I glimpsed her in Castile;
When I stood at the Parthenon she was there.
She loves all that is old and said to be beautiful.
She has no taste.
But she has attended many seminars on good taste.
The old American Woman
Is all locust and no wild honey.
She is dry and mottled, like peanut brittle.
If you held her and bent her, she would snap.

But you do not lay hands on a cult object.
The strands of her hair are one with the spun gold she
wears at her wrists and neck:
Her eyes are one with the topazes she wears on her
knucklebones:
The skin of her forearms is one with the alligator hide
that makes her purse.
I followed the tinkle of the charms on her charm bracelet
And the tinkle of her beaten metal hair.
I followed the clacking of her heels
And the clacking of her voice,
Which is an almost perfect imitation of the human voice.
I followed. I am unnatural; I am perverse.

The American Woman is more strange and more bizarre
Than the art of the mummy-maker.
And she is more old.
Organic in form, she is not created by life,
But is slowly deposited, like a tree of crystals
Imitating a baroque pearl.
The American Woman is a wax avocado pear
From a desert under the sea.

[Into the echoes of the last line, the door on the right bursts wildly open. In the background is a quiet but deliberate champ-champ from the waste disposal unit. In the foreground, ANGELO stands groaning and sobbing in the doorway, one white-sleeved arm over his eyes.]

ANGELO: *[sufficiently mastering his groans to cry out]:* O no no no
no no no no no. Orrore.

[Homer dashes across the room.]

HOMER: What happened? What happened to Merry? Let me in
there, Angelo. I got to get in there and see what
happened to Merry.

ANGELO: Non c'è niente da vedere.

HOMER: *[wildly]* What'd he say, Virgil?

VIRGIL: *[rising to the occasion and speaking threnodically]:* He says there is nothing to see.

HOMER: *[in a deep groan of horror]:* What?!

ANGELO: *[working his English for all it is worth in sorrowful explanation]:* Mr Knockerbicker, I tell her not to lean over it and peer down, but she wants to check I fixed it right –

HOMER: *[screaming]:* Can't you reverse the machinery or something? Let me IN there – *[He bursts past Angelo.]*

ANGELO: Mr Knockerbicker junior, *you* are understanding, are you not? I *did* fix it right. If only she had believed me. Of *course* I reverse the machinery but this is a very efficient unit. In thirty seconds, everything is – you understand? Mr Knockerbicker junior – EVERYTHING.

[The noise of the machinery stops. Homer comes brokenly back into the salone.]

HOMER: *[very tenderly]:* My little Merry! My little Merry! She was such a dainty little person, the last thing she would have wanted was to get mixed up with the garbage.

[A respectful silence is observed.]

HOMER: Virgil, I know you will never forget that just before – why, it could even have been at the very moment – *[He*

is about to break down, but manages to carry on] – well, anyhow, that you were just saying you wanted to live to see what a lovely, lovely old lady Merry was going to grow into.

[The other door opens]

LIA-PIA: Signori, ho incontrato questa signora davanti all casa, non so cosa vuole ... *[She shuffles out, closing the door.]*

HOMER: *[agonised as he recognizes the new arrival]:* Mrs van den Most!

MRS VAN DEN MOST enters. She looks exactly as we should expect Merry to look in thirty years' time, and is, of course, taken by the same actress]:

MRS VAN DEN MOST: Now, Homer. *[Waggishly:]* You know I asked you to call me something **more** intimate, such as Mom, because I think it would be so lovely for Merry to feel her family has been really integrated into her marriage.

HOMER: *[brokenly]* I didn't now –

MRS VAN DEN MOST: I know it, Homer, you didn't even know I was in Europe. Well, I figured I'd just hop over and see how you were taking care of my little girl. *[Homer groans.]* I was counting on giving you a real surprise, and I must say you certainly seem to have gotten one. I wasn't even going to ring the doorbell, I was **just** snooping around outside, when your lovely old Italian hired help came out to feed your chickens. Those certainly are lovely chickens, Homer, I can just guess how Merry loves those chickens. And your lovely hired help brought me right along in. *[Coldly:]* O. Virgil's here. Hi, Virgil. I certainly hope you're beginning to get a hold on those problems

of yours. *[Archly:]* Why, we have company, I didn't notice.

VIRGIL: This is Signor Angelo Lumaca.

MRS VAN DEN MOST: Why, you must be an Italian! I just love Italians, I love your RENaissance, I feel sure you must be a very good friend of my little girl, because she just loves the RENaissance too. Now where *is* my little girl? *[Archly:]* No, don't tell me. I can guess. Merry always takes such good care of her husband, Signor Lumaca, she's a real home-body. I don't have to ask where she is. I feel positive she's right along in the kitchen. Homer just loves her home-body ways, don't you, Homer? Right from the start, that little girl loved to be in the kitchen. She had such a happy temperament she made everyone happy. Well, I should know. Right from the start, she made *me* happy. Why, d'you know, Signor Lumaca, that little girl was toilet-trained before she was one year old. It was on account she had such a happy temperament I persuaded Mr van den Most to let me call her Merry. Lots of folks, when they first meet her, they think she's called Mary – Maria, as you would say it, Signor Lumaca – but no, her name is really Merry, M-E-double R-Y, because, I always tell them, she is. Now where is the kitchen? *[Archly:]* No, naughty me, I don't need to ask. I didn't pass it on my way along, so I guess it must be right through **here**. *[She opens the door at the right.]* I'll just go give Merry a little surprise. Merry! Merry, dear! *[Calling back into the salone:]* I didn't find Merry yet, Homer, but I saw you had a waste disposal unit installed. Now that's very thoughtful of you. Homer, I'm sure Merry appreciates that. I wouldn't have thought you could obtain one over here. Well, I guess you imported it, but I reckon it was quite a problem for you getting it operational. I wonder if you got it fixed right. *[Disappearing from the salone:]* I'll just go take a look ...

[The machinery starts.]

ANGELO: *[wildly]*: No! Mrs van den Most, no! Come back! No!

HOMER: *[dashing across the room]*: Stop her, Angelo! I'm coming! Stop her!

[The noise of the waste disposal unit rises to a climax: and stops. HOMER and ANGELO plod back.]

ANGELO: *[pitifully pleading]*: You see, Mr Knockerbicker junior –

HOMER: Virgil –

VIRGIL: *[in an incredulous, long-drawn drawl]*: NO?

HOMER/ANGELO: *[in unhappy unison]*: Yes.

HOMER: *[in a heavy, philosophical voice]*: The way I look at **it**, God proposes –

VIRGIL: And the Atlantic Seaboard waste disposal unit disposes.

HOMER: *[his philosophical air beginning to be tinged by the cheerful]*: Well, everything has to come to an end –

VIRGIL: *[rising to his feet]*: And the Atlantic Seaboard waste disposal unit is the American male's best friend.

[An electric pause. Then quickly gathering pace, feet and snapping fingers begin to beat out a rhythm, to which:]

HOMER/VIRGIL: *[chanting in unison]*:

Soggy crunchy
Pulpy bony
Mushy spiny

VIRGIL [SOLO]: Mottled shiny

BOTH: Pulpy bony

ANGELO: Signori Knockerbicker, *please* –

VIRGIL: *[stamping madly]*: How're you feeling now, brother?

HOMER: *[as in a college cry]*: How'm I feeling now? M-E-double
R-Y.

BOTH: Merry ! !

VIRGIL: Say goodbye for ever to squelchy bundles!

ANGELO: *[suddenly losing inhibitions and flinging himself into the
rhythm: singing]*: La donna è mobile! La donna è mobile!

All three [in a lunatic stomp]:

Soggy crunchy
Honeybunchy
Sodden dry
Sweetiepie
Say goodbye
Mushy spiny
Dainty tiny
Lovely happy
Minced-up pappy
Very merry

ANGELO: *[floating his tenor cry above the stomp]* La donna è mobile

VIRGIL: *[basso profondo]:* e disponibile !

[General breathless happy collapse.]

VIRGIL: Angelo, did it take but EVERYTHING?

ANGELO: *[with the utmost gaiety]:* Every single thing, Mr Knockerbicker junior.

HOMER: Even the second time round?

ANGELO: Second time round was even more efficient, Mr Knockerbicker. That machine likes something tough to bite on.

VIRGIL: *[solemnly]:* Angelo, Homer. I guess we have witnessed the ultimate triumph of American technology.

[The noise of the waste disposal unit rises as the lights fade.]

THE END