

WHAT GOES AROUND

A One-act Drama

By Richard Packham

Characters:

HELEN: 30s to 40s, self-confident, stylishly dressed

MARVIN: about 40

Scene: Very nicely furnished living room of an apartment

Time: Present or recent past

(MARVIN enters with a tray on which he carries a cocktail; places it on a table beside a lounge chair)

MARVIN: There! I hope it's right this time!

(MARVIN starts picking up, straightening things around in the room)

HELEN: (enters, dressed in a business suit, carrying a brief case) Okay, I'm home. Where's my drink?

MARVIN: Right there (points). I hope it's right.

HELEN: (sips the drink, puts it down) Too much bitters. Dammit, Marvin, why can't you get it right? One dash, Only one dash, not more, not less. One dash. Damn! (starts to exit to bedroom) Why can't you make a simple old-fashioned? Do it over!

MARVIN: Sorry, Helen. I thought it was just right.

HELEN: (from off-stage) Well, it wasn't. Damn, I put in a hard day at the office, contending with all kinds of shit, and I can't come home to a decent drink!

MARVIN: I'm sorry, Helen.

HELEN: Stop saying that you're sorry! What good does that do? You fucked up, as you usually do. "Sorry" doesn't unfuck it!

MARVIN: I'll try it again. (takes the glass, exits to kitchen)

HELEN: (enters, no suit jacket, slippers instead of high heels) Well, do it right this time, stupid! Or do I have to mix my own drinks?

MARVIN: No, I'll mix your drinks. That's the least I can do for you.

HELEN: I would think so. There's not much else you do.

MARVIN: (enters with a new drink) I do what I can, Helen. You know I'd do anything for you. (gives her the drink) Try this.

HELEN: (sips the drink) That's better. (sits in the lounge chair)

MARVIN: Dinner will be ready soon. I made meat loaf.

HELEN: Dammit, Marvin, how often do I have to eat meat loaf?

MARVIN: I thought it would be all right...

HELEN: We had meat loaf last week! Marvin, I don't make a lot of money, but I make enough that we don't have to eat meat loaf more than twice a year! Can't you come up with anything other than meat loaf?

MARVIN: Well, I'm sorry. I thought we should be trying to save a little money, since you're the only one working right now.

HELEN: Right now? Right now? When was the last time you brought any money into this household? Huh? Marvin? Huh?

MARVIN: Right, you're absolutely right. I haven't contributed much except my disability pension.

HELEN: Whoopee! We're rolling in money, with your damned disability pension! That's not even enough to cover the liquor bill!

MARVIN: Helen, I can't help it if I'm disabled and can't work.

HELEN: You know, I think it's all in your head. Psychosomatic, or whatever it's called. You've got mental problems, Marvin. Mental. You imagine things.

MARVIN: Maybe so, but it still hurts. My neck hurts. It has, ever since I was a kid. You know that.

HELEN: Yeah, that just goes to show that it's all in your head. You never were in an accident or anything like that. It's all in your head.

MARVIN: I can't help it if my neck hurts all the time.

HELEN: Yeah, right. Marvin, you're basically crazy.

MARVIN: Don't say that!

HELEN: Well, you are! One reason you can't get a job is that you can't wear a necktie. Do you know how many job opportunities that shuts you out of?

MARVIN: I'm sorry. I just freak out at anything around my neck. (feels his neck)

HELEN: So, is that crazy, or is that crazy? I say it's crazy.

MARVIN: Everybody has their quirks. Things that bother them.

HELEN: Right. Everybody. Everybody is disabled because of their quirks and can't work. Yeah, right!

MARVIN: Okay, I'm sorry.

HELEN: And for God's sake, Marvin, stop saying you're sorry! It doesn't change a goddamn thing!

MARVIN: Okay, I'm sorry.

HELEN: You're doing it again! (empties her glass) Get me another drink. (beat) And make it right, this time! (hands him her glass)

MARVIN: Okay, okay. (takes the glass, exit)

HELEN: (to herself) How did I ever end up with this dork! Damn! How much more can I put up with? (sits, relaxes, closes her eyes)

MARVIN: (enter with drink) Here you are Helen. I hope this is right.

HELEN: Wanna bet? (takes the drink, sips) It's okay. Better than nothing.

MARVIN: Helen, I do try. I want you to be happy. I am doing my best.

HELEN: Marvin, it was really by some quirk, I think, that you and I ended up together. I sometimes ask myself what the hell I was thinking, to marry you.

MARVIN: I'm sorry, Helen, that you feel that way. I thought we loved each other.

HELEN: Well, honey, I can't speak for you, but my feelings for you lately are just a notch above pure toleration. (takes a big swallow from her drink)

MARVIN: I'm sorry to hear that, Helen, because I really do love you.

HELEN: What the hell do you know about love? And for God's sake stop saying you're sorry! I'm sick of it!

MARVIN: I'm sorry. (beat) Oh, I said it again. I'm sorry. (beat) All right, I won't say it again.

HELEN: Look, I'm tired. Top off my drink. I'll skip the damned meat loaf. An old fashioned is better than hamburger any day, and more nourishing. (hands him

her glass)

MARVIN: (takes glass) Helen, do you think you should be drinking so much, instead of eating?

HELEN: Look, Marvin, I'll eat what I want and I'll drink what I want, and as much as I want, and I don't want your opinion about it. Okay?

MARVIN: (hesitantly) Helen, honey, maybe right now isn't the best time to bring this up, but...

HELEN: Bring WHAT up?

MARVIN: Well, since I'm pretty much at home all the time anyway...

HELEN: Yeah?

MARVIN: (pause) Well, I was thinking that we've been married for a while now, and...

HELEN: (sarcastic) You want a divorce, Marvin?

MARVIN: Oh, no! Not that. In fact, quite the opposite. I was thinking....(hesitates)

HELEN: Okay, okay, you've been thinking! Wow!

MARVIN: I mean, it's been on my mind lately

HELEN: C'mon, Marvin, WHAT? Are you going to make me wait forever for my damned drink?

MARVIN: Well, I was thinking that maybe it would be a good time to start a family.

HELEN: WHAT?

MARVIN: (quickly) Well, I'd of course be the one to take care of the baby, since I'm home anyway. You wouldn't have to be bothered about that part of it.

HELEN: Are you out of your friggin' mind, Marvin?

MARVIN: I thought it was a good idea.

HELEN: Well, you were wrong again, Marvin. I am not going to spend nine months with anything bloating my belly and then come home to a screaming kid and the smell of wet diapers! Not me!

MARVIN: But I thought you wanted kids, at least eventually.

HELEN: Whatever gave you that idea?

MARVIN: Well, (pause) I don't know. I guess I just assumed. You're good with kids.

HELEN: Hell, yes! Other people's kids! I enjoy seeing the elephants in the zoo, too, but that doesn't mean I want one of my own, in my bedroom!

MARVIN: So, will you at least think about it?

HELEN: No! I've thought about it!

MARVIN: Okay, okay.

HELEN: And the worst part would be actually making the damn thing!

MARVIN: Okay, okay.

HELEN: Now, can I get that drink?

MARVIN: Right, okay. Okay. (exit to kitchen)

HELEN: (shouts after him) I've had a damn hard day, and now I just want to relax.
(leans back, closes her eyes)

(pause)

MARVIN: (enters with drink) Here you go, Helen.

(Helen seems to be drowsing)

MARVIN: (at a loss what to do; puts drink down on table beside Helen; softly) Helen?
Helen? (to himself) What should I do? Should I wake her up? Damn, she'll be pissed no matter what I do. I always do the wrong thing! I hate this! (beat)
How did I get into this? (pause) What should I do?

HELEN: (without opening her eyes, and in a completely different voice; it is not Helen now that is speaking, although the words are coming from her mouth. It is a masculine voice, deep, slow, and solemn. If the actress cannot manage the change in voice, the words can be recorded and the actress can lip-sync) Are you asking for advice, Marvin?

MARVIN: What? Helen?

HELEN: (in the different voice, still with eyes closed) I am not Helen. Are you asking for advice?

MARVIN: What? Helen? What's the matter?

HELEN: I am speaking from Helen's body, but I am not Helen.

MARVIN: Helen, are you all right? (goes to her) Wake up! You're dreaming!

HELEN: I am not Helen, Marvin. I am Mormo. My name is Mormo.

MARVIN: (backs away) What do you mean? Helen? Helen?

(From now on, the words of the voice from Helen will be marked as MORMO's lines; all of Mormo's lines are spoken without gesture or movement)

MORMO: Marvin, I am Mormo. I am using Helen's body to speak to you.

MARVIN: What do you mean?

MORMO: Helen is temporarily away. She will return shortly, after I leave.

MARVIN: What do you mean? Helen, wake up!

MORMO: Helen is not here now. I am Mormo. I am here. You asked for help.

MARVIN: (frantic) I don't get this. What's happened to you, Helen? (shakes her)

MORMO: Please be calm. You have nothing to fear. I am here at your request.

MARVIN: My request? What request?

MORMO: You asked how you got here. You asked what to do. I am here to help you.

MARVIN: Helen, don't act like this! Why are you acting like this?

MORMO: Please understand. I am not Helen. I am Mormo.

MARVIN: What do you mean, you are not Helen?

MORMO: I am using Helen's physical body temporarily in order to speak to you and to help you.

MARVIN: I don't believe this! Helen, it's you, isn't it?

MORMO: No, I am not Helen. I can show you that I am not Helen.

MARVIN: How?

MORMO: I know things about you that Helen does not know. Many things.

MARVIN: Such as?

MORMO: Helen does not know about that incident with Alice Draper when you were fourteen years old, does she?

MARVIN: Alice Draper? Oh, my God!

MORMO: You have never told her about that, have you, Marvin.

MARVIN: No, never! But how would you know about that?

MORMO: We know many things. We do not know everything, but we know much.

MARVIN: I think I'm going crazy!

MORMO: No, Marvin. You are not going crazy. You are just not aware.

MARVIN: Not aware of what?

MORMO: Aware of reality.

MARVIN: Reality? What reality?

MORMO: You believe that you know reality. Like most people still in this life, you do not know reality.

MARVIN: What do you mean?

MORMO: Most of you believe either that your existence ends completely when you finally die, or that you pass on at death into some kind of reward or punishment, handed out by a divine judge. That this life is a test, and you have only one chance at it.

MARVIN: I don't know what I believe, but I guess it's something like that.

MORMO: You are mistaken.

MARVIN: I've never really thought about it much.

MORMO: This present life, that began when you were born, is only the latest in a long series that began eons ago.

MARVIN: You mean reincarnation? I don't believe in reincarnation.

MORMO: Whether you believe it, or even whether you understand it, matters not at all. But it answers your question.

MARVIN: What question?

MORMO: Your question about how you got here.

MARVIN: How does it answer that question?

MORMO: This is not the first life in which you and Helen were together as husband and wife.

MARVIN: What do you mean? How do you know that?

MORMO: About a hundred years ago you and Helen homesteaded land in the Great Plains. It was a hard life, and an unhappy life. And your actions in that life affect what happens to you in this life.

MARVIN: You're making this up. I don't remember anything like that.

MORMO: Of course you remember nothing about it, except perhaps vaguely.

MARVIN: (skeptical) So, you're saying that Helen was my wife in a previous life?

MORMO: No, I am not saying that. She was not your wife. She was your husband. You were HER wife.

MARVIN: This is nonsense!

MORMO: She was male in that life. Her name was Ezra Bradshaw. You were Ezra's wife Mary Ann. Your maiden name was Campbell. You had come from Scotland to America.

MARVIN: I was a woman?

MORMO: Beings often change their gender when beginning a new life.

(Mormo suddenly seems uncomfortable)

MORMO: Helen is causing me some resistance. She is very strong. I must leave, for now. I will return when I can.

HELEN: (shaking herself, opens her eyes, looks around somewhat frantic) What the... What's happened? (stands up, stiffly) I feel awful!

MARVIN: Is that you, Helen?

HELEN: What do you mean, is that me. Of course it's me! Who else would it be?

MARVIN: Well... the strangest thing just happened...

HELEN: You're telling me? Damn, but I have a headache! (takes a deep swallow from her drink) Freshen up my drink, Marvin!

MARVIN: (takes glass, exits; from offstage) You won't believe this.

HELEN: (sits again, rubs head) You won't believe THIS.

MARVIN: (enters, hands drink to Helen) Here. Maybe this will help.

HELEN: (takes a big sip of drink) Yeah, I hope so.

MARVIN: Is it okay?

HELEN: Yeah, it's fine. I wouldn't care right now even if it wasn't.

MARVIN: You were kind of passed out, but talking. Like talking in your sleep.

HELEN: Well, I wasn't passed out. And I wasn't asleep. It was like I was floating around the room...

MARVIN: Floating around the room?

HELEN: Yeah, that's what I said. (gestures as though pointing to something floating around) Floating around the room.

MARVIN: You were sitting in that chair the whole time.

HELEN: That's the damndest part of it. I could see you and I could see the chair I had been sitting in. But there was somebody else sitting in that chair.

MARVIN: Somebody else?

HELEN: Yeah, somebody else. Everything was kind of hazy, but it looked like an old man, and he was talking.

MARVIN: Really? Talking?

HELEN: Yes, talking. But I couldn't make out what he was saying. It was like you and he were having a conversation. About something.

MARVIN: (hesitates) Well, that's interesting. Because it was you, sitting in that chair, talking with your eyes closed. But it wasn't your voice. And I'm sure it wasn't you.

HELEN: So I wasn't dreaming?

MARVIN: No, because I was wide awake, talking to somebody that wasn't you.

HELEN: But it was me in the chair, the whole time?

MARVIN: I guess it was your body, but it wasn't you doing the talking.

HELEN: Who the hell was it then? You didn't see an old man?

MARVIN: No, all I saw was you. But it wasn't your voice.

HELEN: So what did the voice say?

MARVIN: It said that its name was "Mormo," and it - or he - had come to answer my question.

HELEN: What question?

MARVIN: I guess I had said something about wondering how I got here.

HELEN: What do you mean, how you got here?

MARVIN: You know, I guess it's sort of the basic existential question: Who am I? How did I get here? What am I doing here? What's in store for me?

HELEN: C'mon, Marvin. Why do you start wondering about that now? You've never been a deep thinker. Or a deep anything. You just glide through life like a dumb puppy.

MARVIN: Maybe you're just not aware.

HELEN: Aware of what?

MARVIN: That's what I asked Mormo.

HELEN: That's what you asked this... whatever it was, this ghost or spirit or figment of your imagination?

MARVIN: He said that's why he had come, to answer my questions.

HELEN: (sarcastic) And what did this thing tell you?

MARVIN: That we live multiple lives, and this life we are in now is just the latest in a long series.

HELEN: You mean reincarnation? Ha! I don't believe for one minute in reincarnation. Did he tell you you're coming back as a slug in your next life? (laughs) Yeah, right! That I could believe.

MARVIN: Look, don't laugh! He knew something about me, something that happened to me a long time ago that nobody, I mean NOBODY knows about.

HELEN: Oh? And what was that?

MARVIN: Never mind. He just seemed to know a lot about me.

HELEN: So because he knew one of your deep, dark secrets, you believe whatever he tells you?

MARVIN: Well, why shouldn't I?

HELEN: The devil will tell you a hundred truths just to get you to believe one lie.

MARVIN: Helen, you don't believe in the devil. Don't give me that.

HELEN: It's still a valid principle. Maybe I'll start believing in the devil.

MARVIN: It all seemed to make sense.

HELEN: So what else?

MARVIN: He said that you and I were married in a previous life.

HELEN: Oh, that's rich! Why would I have wanted you to be my husband again in this life, then?

MARVIN: I wasn't your husband. I was your wife.

HELEN: You mean we were lesbos? Oh, come on, now, Marvin!

MARVIN: No, no. You were a man. Your name was Ezra Bradshaw. I was your wife Mary Ann.

HELEN: You're off your rocker, Marvin. That's ridiculous.

MARVIN: We were homesteaders. That's what he said.

HELEN: Well, (chuckles) you certainly have retained some of your housewifely nature. And I'm still the breadwinner. (snorts) I guess nothing much changes from one life to the next.

(Helen sits down again, drinks, closes her eyes)

HELEN: Damn, I wish this headache would go away! I've never had a headache like this before. (long pause) I wonder if... (her voice changes to Mormo's voice)

MORMO: I have returned. Helen has relaxed and I have taken control.

MARVIN: This is really strange. I'm very uncomfortable with this.

MORMO: It is the most natural thing in the world.

MARVIN: You said... that is, Helen said that there is no way to know that you are telling me the truth.

MORMO: Yes, I am aware of what she said.

MARVIN: So what's the point? If I can't believe what you say, what good does it do?

MORMO: You must rely on your good sense. Why should I lie to you?

MARVIN: Helen said you might be an evil spirit, a devil.

MORMO: Yes, that is a possibility. What do you think?

MARVIN: I don't know. I really don't know.

MORMO: Do you want more information about your past? Your past lives?

MARVIN: Well, what can you tell me, more than you have already said?

MORMO: Ah, a great deal. Your present situation is a direct result of your previous life. And that life was based on the life previous to that. In each life you are placed where you can learn the lessons that you failed to learn before.

MARVIN: I don't get it. What was there about my previous life that has determined this life for me? I was a homesteader's wife, right? Seems strange.

MORMO: As Mary Ann you were submissive, weak, and not much more than a slave. You were given a chance in this life to learn more strength and self-reliance.

MARVIN: But the way you said Mary Ann was, that's just the way I am now!

MORMO: Yes. That is perceptive of you to realize that. As Mary Ann you were experiencing the result of an even earlier life.

MARVIN: Even earlier?

MORMO: Yes, as a powerful Russian landowner you had been mercilessly cruel to your serfs and your family. In a way, Mary Ann's life was penance for that life.

MARVIN: And Helen?

MORMO: Helen in her Ezra life, when she was your husband, was just as domineering and tyrannical as she is today. She too has learned nothing.

MARVIN: How was she domineering?

MORMO: Ezra demanded absolute obedience of Mary Ann. He mistreated her terribly. He was a slavemaster, not a husband.

MARVIN: Helen does not mistreat me.

MORMO: Perhaps not as badly as Ezra mistreated Mary Ann.

(pause)

MORMO: He caused Mary Ann's death.

MARVIN: Really? How?

MORMO: He strangled her to death in a fit of rage.

MARVIN: (unwittingly brings his hand to his throat) Oh my God!

MORMO: Do you understand now, why you have always had neck discomfort?

MARVIN: That's why? Because I was strangled in another life?

MORMO: You are nervous when anyone is behind you, are you not?

MARVIN: Why, yes, I am. I get very uncomfortable.

MORMO: He strangled her from behind. Then buried her body in a field. No one knew what had happened.

(pause)

MORMO: Helen is pushing me out again. She dislikes this conversation. (voice fades) I will be back...

HELEN: Why am I saying "I will be back" for God's sake (opening her eyes)?

MARVIN: Mormo was back again.

HELEN: (stands, starts to pace) Well, tell him just to stay away. I was swimming around the room again in my dream, and it was turning into a nightmare. And my head is splitting!

MARVIN: I don't think I can tell him what to do.

HELEN: Well, walk out of the room, or something! Don't pay any attention! It's YOUR imagination that's running wild!

MARVIN: What about you thinking you're floating? Isn't that YOUR wild imagination?

HELEN: That's just some kind of dumb dream. You said yourself I wasn't floating.

MARVIN: And you actually saw Mormo!

HELEN: Whatever I saw was a dream, a nightmare! Or a devil! You know, I have never believed in the devil, or evil spirits. But I'm beginning to think that something like that has got hold of you. It's evil. (pause) So what was this

thing telling you this time?

MARVIN: (hesitant) Well, he said that you were cruel to me in our last life.

HELEN: Oh, come on, Marvin! You're just making this up, to get back at me. Make me feel bad. Well, I don't!

MARVIN: No, honestly, that's what he said. I was your wife, but more like a slave.

HELEN: You know what I think? I think maybe you really have raised the devil. You are talking evil talk. That's got to come from the devil!

MARVIN: He says that you killed me.

HELEN: What? Okay, Marvin, that's enough of this.

MARVIN: You strangled me in a fit of anger.

HELEN: And you believe this? Oh, no! This is your subconscious coming out. (break) This is how you think of me? Hatred?

MARVIN: I'm just telling you what he said.

HELEN: Well, it's bullshit! I may not be the most loving person, but I never would have killed anybody, in this life or any other!

MARVIN: I know, but that's what he said.

HELEN: Maybe you need to see somebody, Marvin. Get some help. I can ask around...

MARVIN: I don't need any help! I'm just trying to figure out what this means. (break) And it's not just in my head. This voice was real, just like you are talking to me now.

HELEN: (sits, picks up the glass, takes a swallow) I can tell you right now, I'm sick of this! I don't need this! I want you to stop it!

(pause)

MORMO: (Helen's eyes are not closed this time, but staring straight ahead) Helen is trying to influence you, as usual. What will you do?

MARVIN: (pacing, to himself) I don't know, I don't know! I hate this! (to Mormo) Why did you come here? I was just fine. You are ruining whatever relationship I had with Helen. You are planting lies into my mind. I think Helen is right. You are evil, an evil spirit of some kind.

MORMO: Or perhaps Helen is the evil spirit? And I am telling you the truth?

MARVIN: (getting more frantic, pacing more nervously) I don't believe it! Stop this! I don't want to hear any more!

MORMO: The truth is often painful. We often resist the truth.

MARVIN: (now behind Helen's chair) I said to stop this! Stop talking!

MORMO: How can you learn anything if you do not listen?

MARVIN: That's it! You've said enough! I don't want to hear it!

(Marvin grabs Helen's neck from behind and starts choking her. She does not react)

MORMO: You cannot stifle the truth, Marvin!

MARVIN: (his voice changes during the following lines, to a higher, more feminine voice, as he continues to shake Helen's neck) I'm tired of it! I won't tolerate it any more. The beatings, the humiliation! I've had enough, Ezra! Yes, I poured out all your whiskey bottles. You always beat me when you drank. And that beating when you got angry that you had no more whiskey - you kicked me and beat me senseless and threw me against the stove. And it killed the child that I was carrying! You did that! You killed my unborn child! I prayed to God that night to send you to hell for that. That's when you crept up behind me and broke my neck! And to hell you shall go! To hell, Ezra, to hell!

(Marvin releases Helen, who slumps lifeless to the floor. He collapses to his knees, looks at her; stares off vacantly for a few moments)

MARVIN: (shakes her gently, to rouse her; he speaks with his normal voice) Helen? Helen? (pause; begins to sob) Oh my God, my God! (pause) Will this never end?

CURTAIN