Act 1, Scene 1

A sign: "Observatory Mansions: Spacious Apartments of Quality Design."
The reality: cramped apartments of inferior design.
Peeling wallpaper, shabby carpets, closed doors. A severed cable hangs above a defunct elevator shaft.

In the far shadows of the church next door, the semi-restored statue of Saint Lucy.

Deep in the cellar are hundreds of assorted stolen objects. An exhibition. Francis Orme appears amongst them, cataloguing. He wears heavy leather gloves.

In the units above are the various other residents of Observatory Mansions. Among them:
Peter Bugg, sweating and crying, shaving his hairless body;
Claire Higg, watching her old television set with hungry eyes;
Mother, pretending to sleep;
Father, sitting comatose in the observatory;
Twenty, Dog Woman, having a nightmare; and
The Porter, scrubbing and hissing.

From the shadows of Francis' memory, his parents begin to speak:

Father & Mother: Francis Orme.

Father: You are heir to a great and old family. Look after it.

Mother: Marry, get yourself a son. Never waste money.

Father: Extend Ormeland. If you can't, keep it as it is. If you lose one inch of it you will be cursed by your ancestors.

Mother: Look at our family's possessions, Francis. Look at them, aren't they beautiful? Never lose one.

A sickly breathing is heard. Francis turns towards the end of his exhibit. The breathing gets louder. He goes to pick something up but is prevented by a sudden knocking upstairs.

Peter's sweating intensifies. Claire turns her television up. Mother snores. Twenty's haunches rise. Father does nothing. The Porter stands and disappears into the shadows. Slowly, Francis locks the exhibit and goes up to the lobby, pulling off his leather gloves to reveal pristine white cotton gloves underneath. He looks at them slowly, ensuring they are still clean. Silence. Relief.

He notices a white envelope sitting on a stack of fliers. He picks it up, only to be shouldered aside by the Porter as he sticks a note to a wall nearby. Francis discards the letter and reads the notice.
(Whenever Francis reads, thinks, or is attempting in some way to scheme, he licks his bottom lip - his only self-cleaning possession - which has grown very swollen, accordingly.)

Francis: Apartment 18. To be occupied. One week.

Francis goes back into the cellar, but turns away from the exhibition towards the Porter's room. The Porter sits on a locked trunk, staring ahead. His room is otherwise empty, except for a cot and a duplicate uniform hanging in the closet.

Francis: Excuse me—

Porter: Ssss.

Francis: But—

Porter: SSSS!

Francis retreats back upstairs. Everyone waits.
Upstairs, Peter begins to tap his pen against the table. Claire pushes the buttons of her remote control. Twenty scratches. Porter scrubs. Mother tosses and turns. Father does nothing. Waiting is bad for them. Their breathing grows irregular, the soundscape crescendoing like some kind of anxious clock.
The various residents take turns creeping to their respective doors and peeking out. The Porter, cleaning unit 18, hisses at each one until they go back to hiding. He smiles at the tension. Francis decides:

Francis sneaks back into the Porter's room. He tries to open the trunk but it is locked. He hears footsteps approaching. Quickly, Francis moves to the closet and removes one brass button from the Porter's duplicate uniform. Francis returns to his exhibit, unlocking and disappearing behind the door just as the Porter returns to his room. Francis looks at the button.

Francis: Item Number 985.

He sets it down and picks up another object - this one larger and hidden in layers of bubble wrap - which had previously been resting in the spot where the button now resides.

Francis: Item Number 986.

He ritualistically presses it against his forehead before setting it back down, ensuring that it is now the last *object in the exhibition.*
Francis returns to the lobby. He looks at the rental notice and tears it up. He feels satisfied with this mild act of defiance. The Porter materializes behind him and sweeps up the scraps. Francis watches, no longer satisfied.
The knocking continues. Francis covers his ears and looks at apartment 18 with dread. Darkness.

Scene 2
The light outside turns sunny. Francis kneels by Mother's bed.

Francis: Good morning, Mother. It is sunny out. It should not be. It should be overcast.
It's a lovely spring morning. It should not be. It should be winter, like the rest of the year.
Mother? Do you know what today is? Today's the day apartment 18 is to be occupied.
Say something!

A knock. Mother rolls over. A second knock.

Peter: Francis? It's me, Peter Bugg!

Francis admits Peter.

Peter: Oh, Francis, it's—

Francis: I know. To be honest, I'm relieved. I don't think my heart could take any more waiting.

Peter: The Porter—

Francis: Done this on purpose, of course, the old sphincter muscle. He knows we hate waiting.

Peter: Downstairs, now—

Francis: But what choice do we have? It's not pleasant to get too close to that hiss.
It's not pleasant to get too close to the Porter…

Peter: Francis! The new resident is *here!*

Francis: Now?! Well who is he? I hope he's old.

Peter: No—

Francis: Dying then, at least?

Peter: No, not even— Oh Francis…

Francis: What?

Peter: (*A scandal*) It's a *woman!*

Francis: A woman?

Peter: Yes, and she spoke at me!

Downstairs, a laugh is heard.

Peter: What's that sound?

Francis: *Laughter...*

Peter: Good god!

They lock the door.

Francis: What could possibly be funny? Who is she?!

Peter: I don't know.

Francis: How old is she?

Peter: I don't know!

Francis: Well, what can you tell me?

Peter: (*Thinking intensely*) I can see her... I just can't see what it is that I should describe...

As Peter talks, the smoking silhouette appears again.

Peter: A vague mass... smoking a cigarette. Blurred— Ah, there was smoke in my eyes! No, wait, I was crying... And sweating... Oh, I must shave myself again—

Francis: What else? Come on—

Peter: Francis, you know I have seldom been able to focus my eyes around the female form! It is a complete mystery to me!

Francis: Did the new resident speak to you?

Peter: Yes, I've just now recovered. Oh, I could tell instantly that this is not the sort of resident we could ever be happy with. I mean, we've been perfectly fine here ever since the last one died, the one who broke the elevator—

Francis: I hope you told her as much.

Peter: Indeed I did! I looked directly around the place that a head might normally be expected on the female anatomy, and I told her - (*his face transforms into a mask of bitterness and hate*) "Go home."

Francis: Well done.

Peter: Yes, I thought so too… Until…

Francis: Until?

Peter: Well…

The silhouette speaks.

Anna: This is my home now.

Francis: Good god!

Anna's footsteps can be heard climbing the stairs.

Peter: It's her! (*Gasps*) And Claire Higg is all alone, unsuspecting!

Francis: We must warn her!

Neither of them moves.

Francis: Not now, of course.

Peter: Of course not. After her program is over.

Francis: Right.

They wait, anticlimactically.

Scene 3

Claire Higg watches TV. Stacks of soap opera digests stand about like skyscrapers. Her walls are covered in cutouts from entertainment magazines. One mustachioed rogue appears particularly often.
Epic soap opera music as Claire's TV program ends. A moment later, a knock is heard at her door.
She looks at the door with suspicion.

Peter: Claire? May we come in?

Claire: I'm busy.

Peter: Um… We interrupt this program to bring you an important update?

Claire sighs and clicks her TV remote at the door. Francis and Peter enter.

Claire: Ugh. It's that documentary about ugly, poor people again…

She tries to change the channel. Francis and Peter wait.

Claire: Well, let me fetch you a martini.

She pours them two martini glasses full of old, tepid pekoe. She plunks sugar cubes into them as though they were olives. Claire combs her hair and squirts sunscreen on her face and arms as she speaks.

Claire: I need you to do my shopping again, Mr Bugg.

Peter: Of course. (*Reads list*) Tea bags, *Soap Opera Digest*, champagne flutes, tuna chunks, tooth glue, and a bikini.

As they chat, Francis drifts over to a small empty picture frame atop the TV.

Francis: (*To himself*) Item Number 770.

Peter: Claire, do you know what today is?

Claire: Of course! It's Roger and Bellatrix's wedding. They're eloping, you know. (Their parents and I disapprove.)

Peter: Right, but aside from that—

Claire: Imagine, moving house the same day as a wedding! Greedy for attention, if you ask me. May as well be wearing a white dress…

Peter: You mean the new resident?

Claire: Yes! I heard voices in the hall.

Peter: Voices? Plural? With whom was she conversing?

Claire: With the *Porter.*

Francis and Peter scoff.

Peter: Quite impossible.

Francis: Talking and hissing, maybe.

Claire: Talking and *talking*. She tried to come in here—

Peter: No!

Claire: Yes! Just as Blade and I were off to visit Portia in the hospital. (Poor dear has got amnesia again.)

Francis flips through a soap opera magazine in an attempt to follow. Claire strokes the mustachioed clipping romantically.

Claire: I can't have her hanging around, especially considering Ricardo's weakness for the ladies. I love him, though he is a scoundrel…

Francis: Miss Higg, what did you hear?

Claire: What? Oh, just the two of them at first. But then then she knocked…

Peter: And did she say anything?

Claire: Yes! She said—

Anna: (*A silhouette*) I can hear your television.

Francis: And what did you say?

Claire: Nothing.

Francis: Good.

Peter: And then what did she say?

Anna: I'm your new neighbour.

Peter: And what did you say?

Claire: Nothing.

Peter: Good.

Claire: And then the voice said—

Anna: I hope we can be friends.

Peter: And what did you say?!

Claire: Nothing.

Peter & Francis: *Good!*

Claire: But then the voice said—

Anna: Should I come back later?

Peter: And what did you say?

Claire: I said— (*Cruelly*) No. Never.

Francis: Very good.

Claire: And then the voice went away, and it didn't come back.

Peter: You did splendidly, Claire.

Francis: Now, we must ensure that this woman is out of here within the week.

Peter: But how?

Claire: I'll keep my television set on at all times, with the volume at full!

Francis: Excellent, Miss Higg.

Claire: Except during news broadcasts.

Francis: Of course.

Claire: And documentaries.

Francis: That's—

Claire: And financial bulletins, black and white films, and wildlife programmes. But beyond that, my television shall remain at its highest volume!

Peter: Very good!

Francis: *I* will follow this new resident wherever she goes to discover why she wants to live here, and what will make her leave.

Claire: And what shall you do to support the cause, Mr Bugg?

Peter: (*Anxiously*) I don't know… Ooh! Perhaps I can be the lookout!

Francis: No, no. What you must do is steal the Porter's ladder from the basement—

Peter: This is getting so elaborate!

Francis: Listen! All you have to do is climb up to her window, enter her unit, make a note of her possessions, and then move them around. Put everything in a different place.

Peter: But why?

Francis: To intimidate her! When a person's objects are moved by an unseen force, it feels as if someone's messing with their internal organs, like their very soul is being played with.

Peter: Ah, yes. Well when you put it like that…

He continues his nervous sweating and weeping.

Claire: Mr Bugg?

Peter: It isn't that I'm not, you know, tally-ho or what have you, but I just wonder if perhaps I'm not the best man for the job.

Francis: You have to—

Peter: I'd leave fingerprints everywhere! And then what would happen if the police became involved? Yes, perhaps it would be better if someone with *gloves*…

Francis: (*Knowingly*) Ah, Mr Bugg, of course, I see what you're saying… You can borrow the rubber ones I wear when I wash the dishes.

Peter: Oh. Good.

Claire begins to turn the volume back up. Francis and Peter take this as their cue to exit.

Peter: Ah yes. Thank you… Goodbye, Claire…

She says nothing. He exits. Francis looks back at Claire watching her stories, her gaze fixed but happy.