

# OPERATION TAKE BACK DAD

By Matt Buchanan

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**CHARACTERS**  
*(in order of appearance)*

Mr. Gardner

The Dad

Patty

The 2nd Oldest

Lily

The Oldest

Bill

The Youngest

Mrs. Gardner

The Mom

Ricky

The 2nd Youngest

Randi

Ricky's Twin

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In order to allow more flexibility in casting, the roles of Ricky and Randi are intended to be gender-neutral. As written, Ricky is a boy and Randi is a girl. However, Randi could be a boy—just change the “i” to a “y.” Or Ricky could be a girl—just change the “y” to an “i.” (In this case, when Mrs. Gardner calls Ricki by her full name in Scene Five, she should call her “Erica” instead of “Richard.”) If the twins are of the same sex—whether male or female—the name of the school play mentioned in Scene Four should be changed from *Twelfth Night* to *A Comedy of Errors*. Since the characters are pre-adolescents, no other changes should be necessary,

In thinking about the set, the watchword should be “simplicity.” Five scene changes in a play this short is a lot, and it is important that they be accomplished as quickly as possible so that the audience is not left waiting in the dark. The bare minimum necessary to convey location and provide furniture for the actors to work with is all you should use. If more detailed sets are desired, consider building the kitchen on one side of the stage and the den on the other, so that the action can switch instantly from one to the other. Another solution would be to build a turntable with the kitchen on one side and the den on the other. (In either of these scenarios, the scene outside Mr. Gardner’s office might be played before the act curtain, with just a freestanding doorway.) But the play is written so as to work with minimal sets—just a bit of furniture and some props.

Similarly, costume changes should be kept to a minimum. Since the play covers several days, logically the characters should have several costumes each, but if their costumes are simple enough—play clothes or school clothes for the children, a plain suit for Mr. Gardner, etc.—the audience will easily accept them wearing the same clothes throughout. The only necessary costume change is when the two older girls dress up as men. The play is structured so that these two characters are offstage for a few minutes before and after their appearance in these costumes, to give them time to change without delaying the play, and since the men’s clothing should logically be too big anyway, they can just put them on over their other costumes.

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#### SCENE ONE

**MR. GARDNER'S den:** *(All that's really needed is a desk and chair, a bookcase, and a door.) MR. GARDNER sits at his desk, entirely engrossed in paperwork.*

**At rise:** *PATTY enters with a note from school. SHE stands by the desk waiting for him to look up, but HE doesn't. HE mutters to himself.*

MR. GARDNER: Seven fifty? That can't be right. Where is —oh, here it is. The idiot's dropped a zero.

PATTY: *(Tentatively)* Hey, Dad?

MR. GARDNER: But then, where's the—honestly, the people we hire lately.

PATTY: Dad!

MR. GARDNER: And subtract that from the gross—

PATTY: *(Grabbing his elbow)* Dad!!

MR. GARDNER: Patty! When did you get home?

PATTY: I've been home for hours, Dad!

MR. GARDNER: *(Turning most of his attention back to his work)* Oh. Well did you have a nice time?

PATTY: It was okay. Look, Dad, I've got a note from school you have to sign.

MR. GARDNER: Well, it will probably get better in time. I used to love baseball when I was your age.

PATTY: *(Deliberately places the note on top of his work)* It's soccer, actually, and here's my note. I need permission to go on a school trip.

MR. GARDNER: *(Brushes the note aside to look at a figure. HE's talking but HE's still mostly absorbed in his work.)* Yes, sir, loved it. The summer air—thirty-five—the smell of the leather—carry that over—the crack of the bat—

PATTY: Dad! Oh, what's the use? *(snatches her note from the desk and starts to leave)*

MR. GARDNER: Oh—Patty! When did you get home? You'll have to excuse me—Dad is very busy. Very important work to do.

*(PATTY exits, slamming the door. MR. GARDNER stares blankly at the door for a moment, then returns to his work. HE works in silence for a*

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*moment, then the door bursts open and LILY and BILL charge in. LILY holds a portable video game high above her head as BILL tries to take it from her.)*

BILL: Gimme! Gimme my GameBoy! Dad!

LILY: What GameBoy? It's mine now.

BILL: Dad! Make her gimme my GameBoy!

*(LILY is now fending BILL off by the simple expedient of placing her hand on his forehead and holding him at arm's length, as HE hits and kicks out at her with little effect.)*

LILY: After what you did to me, you're lucky it's just a GameBoy. Ow!

*(BILL has managed to land a punch.)*

Okay, that's it! You're going down, you little insect!

*(SHE tosses the video game onto a high shelf and tackles him. They roll around on the floor right at MR. GARDNER's feet. Throughout all of this HE has been working obliviously, but now the fight has become impossible to ignore.)*

MR. GARDNER: Lily and Bill! Can't you see that Dad is trying to work here? You know how important Dad's work is, don't you?

*(They stop fighting but don't actually let go of each other.)*

LILY: Dad, Bill ruined my life!

BILL: She took my GameBoy!

LILY: I can't ever go back to school now.

BILL: Make her give it back!

LILY: He told Archie Johnson that I only started wearing a bra two months ago.

BILL: Well, you did! I was there when you and Mom picked it out. Hey, you're crushing my legs!

LILY: Archie told his sister, Fran, and she told everyone, and now my life is ruined.

BILL: Who cares anyway? I don't wear a bra and you don't see *me* worrying about it.

LILY: Dad!

MR. GARDNER: I'm sure these things will work themselves out. Now, please go play somewhere else. Dad is very busy with important things.

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LILY: This *is* important!

BILL: My GameBoy! Lily!

MR. GARDNER: I'm sure you do. Run along, now, and let Dad work.

BILL : *(extricates himself and makes a disgusted face)* I'm going to watch TV.

*(HE stalks out. LILY hesitates, retrieves the video game from the shelf, and follows him out. MR. GARDNER works in silence for a few moments. MRS. GARDNER enters, followed by the twins, RICKY and RANDI, who look sheepish and a little apprehensive.)*

MRS. GARDNER: Forrest, the twins and I need to talk to you.

MR. GARDNER: Can't now dear. Very busy. You know how they depend on me at the office. I have a very important job.

MRS. GARDNER: But you're not at the office. You're at home. Surely they can't expect you to work all the time?

MR. GARDNER: *(Still not looking up.)* Ah, but they do, dear. They do.

MRS. GARDNER: I had a call from Ricky and Randi's teacher this afternoon. Do you know what these two hellions did this time?

RICKY: We didn't!

RANDI: It wasn't us!

MRS. GARDNER: Shush! Wait 'til I tell you—

RANDI : It was Ricky's idea!

RICKY: Was not! Anyway, it wasn't us.

MR. GARDNER: Well, that certainly sounds like an interesting day.

MRS. GARDNER: Forrest, you're not even listening.

MR. GARDNER: *(Looking at her for the first time.)* Of course I am, dear. Go ahead.

*(MR. GARDNER actually listens to the following, his mouth gradually dropping open. )*

MRS. GARDNER: These two stole the class hamster and set it loose in Mrs. Prescott's office.

RANDI: He's a gerbil actually.

RICKY: Called Binky. And it wasn't us

MRS. GARDNER: Mrs. Prescott is terrified of mice. She climbed on top of her desk.

RICKY: Jumped on top.

RANDI: Practically flew.

MRS. GARDNER: The desk wasn't up to supporting her weight.

RANDI: A *tank* wouldn't support *her* weight.

RICKY: But it still wasn't us.

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MRS. GARDNER: It collapsed, and she fell and broke her leg in three places.

RICKY: Almost broke the floor in three places.

MRS. GARDNER: When she fell, she knocked over her electric heater. It started a fire.

RANDI: It was just a little fire.

RICKY: Practically nothing. A spark.

MRS. GARDNER: It was a little fire. Would have done little damage. Practically none.

RICKY: Except for the sprinklers.

MRS. GARDNER: Except for the sprinklers. The smoke triggered the sprinkler system and the whole building was soaked.

RANDI: Everybody got sent home early.

RICKY: We're heroes of the school.

RANDI: Except it wasn't us.

RICKY: Not at all.

MRS. GARDNER: Hundreds of books were ruined. The school is considering a lawsuit. What are we going to do with these two delinquents?

*(MR. GARDNER stares a moment longer, his mouth still hanging open. We feel HE may actually be ready to take action. The twins look on in suspense—but not fear. If anything, they look hopeful. Then HE closes his mouth with decision and goes back to his work.)*

MR. GARDNER: Well, I'm sure they meant no great harm. You just deal with it, will you dear? I'm awfully busy.

*(MRS. GARDNER and the twins exchange glances, then exit without a word. After a moment, MRS. GARDNER returns, marches to the very center of the room, and screams. MR. GARDNER doesn't look up. SHE exits without looking at him. After SHE's gone, HE looks up.)*

Did you get the car serviced, dear? *(Pause.)* Never mind. I'll do it next week. Now what has the idiot done here? Ah—he's transposed the numbers. Forty-seven—not seventy four. That makes more sense. Thank goodness I spotted it. *(HE works on in silence for a moment.)*

*(Then LILY and PATTY burst in.)*

LILY: Dad!

PATTY: Come quick, Dad!

LILY: Bill swallowed his toothbrush!

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PATTY: It was Lily's toothbrush, actually.

LILY: You've got to—*(hearing what PATTY said)* eeeww!—*(recovering)*  
You've got to come right now!

PATTY: He's turning blue.

LILY: We've tried everything.

PATTY: Ricky and Randi took turns jumping on his stomach.

LILY: Didn't work. Mom shook him upside down by his ankles.

PATTY: Didn't work. Emptied his pockets though. Do you know he had three live frogs and a working mousetrap in there?

*(LILY smacks PATTY.)*

LILY: Dad, you've got to come save him. Do the Heimlich or something.

PATTY: He's dying for sure, Dad! Come save Bill!

MR. GARDNER: *(Looking up.)* Oh, hello, girls. Just about ready for bed, are we? Homework done?

LILY: What?! Dad, Bill—

MR. GARDNER: I'm sure they do, dear, but you've got to let Dad work in peace. His work is very important. They rely on him at the office—they really do.

*(They exchange frustrated glances. RANDI bursts into the room.)*

RANDI: Fire! Fire! The house is on fire! Ricky was mixing chemicals in the attic and he started a fire! The whole upstairs hall is gone!

RICKY: *(bursts into the room)* Flood! There's a huge flood! Randi tried to flush Bill's teddy bear down the toilet and now there's three feet of water in the kitchen!

BILL: *(bursts into the room)* Help! Mom fell down the stairs and her head came off! I tried to get it but it rolled under the couch!

Mrs. Gardner *bursts into the room.*

MRS. GARDNER Forrest! Come quick! Someone's just driven an eighteen-wheeler through the living room window and halfway down the stairs! The children are all trapped in the basement!

MR. GARDNER: *(Looking up)* Ah. Family all here, then? Well, good night. Big day at work tomorrow.

*(And HE exits, kissing MRS. GARDNER absently and patting one or two of the children on the head in passing. The family stand in silence for a moment or two, looking at one another in disbelief. Then, in unison, they all scream at the top of their lungs.)*

ALL: Aaaaaauuuuggghhhhhhhhhh!

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*Blackout.*

### SCENE TWO

*The Gardner kitchen, the following morning. (All that's really needed is a kitchen table and chairs and an exterior door.) MR. GARDNER stands near the door, a briefcase in one hand and a coffee cup in the other. RICKY and RANDI are seated at the table, fighting over the syrup pitcher. BILL is eating cereal. MRS. GARDNER stands holding a coffee cup. LILY and PATTY are not present.*

*At rise, MR. GARDNER finishes his coffee and hands the cup to MRS. GARDNER.*

MR. GARDNER: Just coffee this morning, dear. Very important meeting first thing. Don't want to be late. Big presentation tomorrow.

MRS. GARDNER: Don't forget—we have a parent-teacher conference tomorrow night.

MR. GARDNER: Can't you take care of that, dear? I may have to take old man Fitzsimmons out after the presentation.

MRS. GARDNER: Mrs. Maloney really prefers to meet both parents. Besides, Bill has been dying to hear what we think of his artwork that's hanging in the classroom.

BILL: *(Looking up from his cereal)* I made a picture of us. At Disney World.

RANDI: When have we ever been to Disney World?

BILL: I used my imagination.

MR. GARDNER: Well, I'll try, but I don't know. It's a busy time at the office. They really rely on me, you know.

MRS. GARDNER: Yes I know, dear, but you really *should* try. Your children rely on you too.

*(And HE's out the door. MRS. GARDNER crosses to holler offstage.)*  
Lily! Patty! You're going to be late!

RICKY: What are we going to do about Dad?

BILL: What about him?

RANDI: What about him? He's never here.

RICKY: And when he's here, he's still not here.

MRS. GARDNER: *(Sighs)* I know. I'm sorry. But your father has a very important job.

RANDI: *We're* important.

RICKY: I know I am.

BILL: I'm important.

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MRS. GARDNER: Maybe when this big project is over. You know how they rely on your father at the office.

(LILY and PATTY enter. PATTY makes a dive for the table and grabs a waffle.)

PATTY: Ha! Got the last waffle.

LILY: Thank you.

(SHE plucks the waffle from PATTY's hand and takes a huge bite.)

PATTY: Hey! Mom!

MRS.GARDNER: Hurry up, girls. Why are you always late?

PATTY: Well, I'm always late because I'm always late. Especially on Mondays. And Lily is always late because it takes her an hour to put on her face.

LILY: Hey—you think it's easy being gorgeous?

RANDI: How would she know?

(Patty deliberately sits on Randi's lap—hard— and starts to eat from her plate. Randi yells.)

Mom!

MRS. GARDNER: Come on, everyone, or you'll all be late. I'll get the car.

(SHE exits. RANDI pushes PATTY off. PATTY picks up a glass of orange juice and sips. Suddenly SHE spits out a mouthful.)

PATTY: Augh! What is that?

RICKY (inspects her glass) Looks like a salamander.

RANDI: I'd say it's more of a newt.

PATTY: How did it get in my orange juice?

RICKY: (With a knowing smirk) Now that's a good question.

RANDI: A mystery for the ages.

PATTY: You two are a menace.

RANDI: We aim to please. I wouldn't try the cornflakes if I were you.

(With nothing to eat or drink, PATTY sits.)

RANDI: Seriously, though, we've got to do something.

RICKY: Seriously.

LILY : About what?

RICKY : About Dad.

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LILY: Oh. I know. You know what he did last week? I asked him if I could get a horse, and he said, “I’m sure he didn’t mean it, honey. It probably means he secretly likes you.” Something must be done.

PATTY: Like what?

RANDI: That’s what we’re trying to figure out.

LILY: (*Looking speculatively at PATTY*) Maybe if one of us got really sick—

PATTY: (*Looking back at her*) Or fell under a bus—

BILL: Why does he have to work all the time?

RICKY: He has an important job.

RANDI: He tells us so all the time.

BILL: Tommy’s dad has an important job, and he has time for Tommy.

LILY: Tommy’s dad is a trash man.

BILL: Well, that’s important. There’s lots of trash.

RANDI: What does Dad *do* anyway?

RICKY: I know—he’s always talking about how important it is, but what *is* it?

PATTY: Who knows? Something to do with money.

BILL: And numbers. He’s always grumbling about numbers.

LILY: He’s an accountant or something. In a big firm downtown.

PATTY: Where apparently everybody but him is a big idiot.

RICKY: They rely on him there.

RANDI: They really do.

RICKY: Totally. Without him the place would fall apart.

RANDI: Totally.

LILY: That job takes up all his time. He’s *our* Dad too.

PATTY: Yeah. We can’t keep letting them have him.

RANDI: We’ve got to take our Dad back!

RICKY: Fight the power!

BILL: Fight the power!

LILY: Well, obviously, but how?

PATTY: I wonder—

RICKY: What?

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