

A Brief History of Mah Jongg

Faye Sholiton





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The Rich History of Mah Jongg

Mah Jongg was developed in the mid-to-late 1800s in the gambling houses of China. In the 1920's, a Standard Oil executive learned the game while working in China. He and his wife enjoyed it so much, he brought it to the United States. To help sell the game, he simplified the rules and attributed its origins with Confucius. The game was a national fad, associated with Hollywood celebrities and First Lady Harding. In the late 1930's a group of Jewish women simplified the game further, standardized the rules and created the National Mah-jongg League. The tradition of playing Mah Jongg in Jewish American homes continues today.

For more reading on this subject, consider these resources:

Heinze, Annelise. *Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture*. Oxford University Press. 2021

Click here for an American Historical Review Article:

Annelise Heinz, "Maid's Day Off": Leisured Domesticity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 124, Issue 4, October 2019, Pages 1316–1331, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz642>

The show was commissioned by the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Cleveland to accompany the *Project Mah Jongg* exhibit.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MAH JONGG

by

Faye Sholiton

For my mother – and her friends.

Cast

JANET: Age 75. Organized a Mah Jongg game in 1970 that marked the rhythms of her adult life. She kept a journal about the four friends who met every Monday for 20 years. A devoted wife and mother. Kept an immaculate house but couldn't (or wouldn't) boil water. Died in March 2012.

WINNIE: Also 75. Janet's lifelong friend. A bitter divorce left her scrambling to support her children. Through it all she never missed a Mahj game, a house payment, or a chance to eat dessert.

HELEN: At 78, she is a former beauty queen who can find a man without even trying. Her motto, not shared by her daughter, is, "Grab a man and keep him happy. If he's got a bank account, so much the better." She's fun to be with, hard to shop for. A good time as long as she's not your mother.

MARJ: 72 years old and the only player at the table who actually cares about the game. Does everything by the book and owns thousands of them. Cared for elderly parents for years, leaving her available only on Monday afternoons.

LISSA: Janet's daughter, now 45. An expert on all things environmental. Shortly after her mother's death, she has convened the Monday Girls for an explanation of what abruptly ended their game 22 years earlier.

YOUNG LISSA: Janet's daughter as she was at age 20. Passionate, angry, hypercritical. Can be performed by the stage directions' reader.

Place

The living room of a suburban Cleveland home.

Time

April 2012.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MAH JONGG

Setting: A stage cluttered with moving boxes and packing material. At Center is a card table with four chairs. The table is set for a Mah Jongg game. Under the table is a thin suitcase.

At Rise: JANET enters and looks around. Noticing a bound journal, she picks it up.

JANET: (*reading*) "A Brief History of Mah Jongg. (*And then from memory.*) April 6, 1970. It is said that the game of Mah Jongg is some twenty-six hundred years old, arriving in China around the time of Confucius, inexplicably, centuries before the invention of carryout containers. [...]"

But American Mah Jongg came much later, specifically the early 20th century, when our *bubbes* on the East Coast discovered that something was missing from their lives. Carryout food, for one. And while they were at it, they decorated the living room...which until now had stood empty as a desert...with Chinoiserie. I love that word. It sounds like *chazzeraï* and connotes 'something you could live without, by why should you?'

Around the same time, our foremothers also began collecting thin little suitcases that held little ivory tiles. They set aside three or four hours every week, same time always, and declared it Mahj Day or Mahj Night. Always with the same people. Other women who spoke the language of "one crack, two dot, three bam." "Soap" had a whole new meaning.

These women passed their sets to their girls. And God forbid they had more than one daughter. I mean, with sons, you could divide up the football tickets, fifty-fifty, or the proceeds from the house. But with daughters...how do you split a Mahj set? It was a riddle for King Solomon.

The men learned to tolerate the whole package, ignoring the oversize furniture and *chotchkes* that turned the living room into a Hong Kong bazaar. They even got a taste for egg foo yung, which with a little imagination and a bagel, could have been served at Sunday brunch. ...

We've picked Monday. Monday afternoon. It's going to be just the four of us: Helen, Winnie, Marjie and me. No substitutes. We plan to collect a few quarters every week to put toward a vacation somewhere.

In the meantime, Mondays will be our little gift to ourselves. Winnie calls it our reward for getting to a new week. I, of course, have no room to talk since I haven't changed my first diaper yet. But that will change in June. God willing. I hope it's a girl. I've already picked her name. Lissa. For my mother who left me her Mahj set.

The game is here today. I brought in egg rolls and egg foo yung. We'll eat under the needlepoint that Don had made for me. It says, Janet's kitchen. Never Open. He won't say so, but tonight, I think he's actually looking forward to the leftovers."

(Off stage, chatter increases. HELEN, WINNIE and MARJ enter, engaged in conversation. They will not notice JANET at any time. But when they see the table, already set with racks and tiles, they stop in their tracks.)

WINNIE: *(looking skyward)* Oh, Janet.

JANET: Winnie. Dear Winnie.

HELEN: Glad she's not around to see *this*.

WINNIE: Are you kidding?

HELEN: I was referring to the mess!

WINNIE: She'd be thrilled to see us again!

HELEN: She can see us.

WINNIE: You think? You think she's also a little sad, then?

MARJ: She's dead, Winnie.

WINNIE: I know that.

MARJ: As such, she doesn't feel much of anything.

JANET: *(She points an index finger at MARJ.)* Zzzzt!

(MARJ slaps her neck, baffled.)

WINNIE: Still, it's a shame.

HELEN: She loved this place.

MARJ: Not the kitchen. The woman couldn't boil an egg.

JANET: (*pointing*) Zzzt!

(*MARJ slaps her neck, as before.*)

WINNIE: What I meant... it's a shame she's not here for ...*us*.

MARJ: Since when do we get mosquitoes in Cleveland this time of year?

WINNIE: Ask Lissa. She'll quote you chapter and verse on climate change. Anyway, it was nice of her to invite us back.

MARJ: Was it?

WINNIE: Yes!

HELEN: She must've had a reason.

MARJ: Safe to say, it wasn't about the game.

WINNIE: Could we give her the benefit of the doubt? She served a beautiful lunch. *Catered*.

MARJ: You can doll it up all you want. Tuna salad is tuna salad.

WINNIE: And the éclairs were sinful.

MARJ: Winnie, your bundt cake was sinful.

WINNIE: Served on Janet's china, for heaven's sake!

HELEN: First time I've ever seen it.

MARJ: But we were still relegated to the kitchen.

HELEN: Her mother's daughter.

WINNIE: "Don't mahj where you eat." *That* should have been on the needlepoint.

MARJ: I felt like we were the last ants at a picnic.

JANET: *(pointing)* Zzzzt!
(MARJ slaps her neck again, more baffled than ever.)

WINNIE: It was delicious. And I didn't see one scrap of food left on either of your plates. Here she comes. *(LISSA, 45, enters, drying her hands. JANET looks on.)* Lunch was delicious, honey. Mom would have been proud.

LISSA: Mom would've asked me why I used the china. Can I get anybody anything else?

WINNIE: We're fine.

MARJ: Come. Sit down!

LISSA: That was it! Coffee! I couldn't find the plug.

WINNIE: She always kept it inside the pot.

LISSA: Really?

WINNIE: Unless it had coffee in it.

LISSA: Be right back. *(to MARJ)* Will you finish setting up?

MARJ: With pleasure.

(MARJ begins to set up the last of the tiles. The others reach in to help. They freeze.)

JANET: "April 7, 1980. A banner day in the history of Mah Jongg. I picked up the new rules today at Cedar Center. The line snaked all the way to Corky & Lenny's. For the first 20 people, they threw in a 1980 calendar. I know you shouldn't look a gift horse and all that, but the year's nearly half gone already. But that's not the main event on this glorious spring day. Winnie, Helen, Marj and I are about to celebrate a full decade of Mondays together. While we've been shuffling tiles, Winnie lost a husband and gained 20 pounds. Helen's buried a husband, married another and proudly boasts that she can rub the numbers off any credit card before its expiration date, just from normal use. Marjie has cared for and buried two parents who had no idea who she was for nine years – and polished off some 500 books, by her count. And my beautiful husband took me to China to eat Chinese food morning, noon and night. And I have a daughter who is my sun, moon and stars. She was well worth the wait. When I pulled out my set this morning, it was Lissa's voice I heard. She was little again, (not that she's such an Amazon at 49 pounds) waiting for the Monday Girls to leave. From the time she was three, she helped put away the tiles, calling out each one by name. And on the last tile, which was always the same, she'd announce, "One bam!" and give me a playful punch on the arm. Then we'd both say (*in a childish voice*) Thank you, ma'am!"

(WINNIE, MARJ and HELEN resume setting up the tiles or walls of tiles

WINNIE: Wait!

MARJ: What.

WINNIE: The rules! These are from 1990.

MARJ: Relax. I picked some up.

HELEN: For everyone?

MARJ: You thought it would go better if we played by different rules? (*MARJ distributes the rules.*) Hot off the presses.

WINNIE: Wow. Two thousand twelve.

MARJ: This isn't news, Winnie. Is it?

HELEN: Does Lissa even *play*?

WINNIE: Where would she find the time?

HELEN: Is she still throwing blood on hapless shoppers?

WINNIE: That was decades ago, Helen, and it was hardly blood.

HELEN: Tell that to the dry cleaner.

MARJ: She'd damned well better know the game.

WINNIE: Or else what?

(The table is nearly ready. MARJ notices something strange.)

MARJ: What the hell?

(They stop in their tracks.)

WINNIE: There's one missing!

MARJ: I can see that.

HELEN: Well, look for it!

WINNIE: Where, exactly? *(They search.)* Janet always had a sense of humor. You suppose she pulled out a joker?

MARJ: Turn 'em all over.

WINNIE: What?

MARJ: I need to know what's missing.

WINNIE: *(with reverence)* Janet.

LISSA: *(entering)* You were right. It was in the coffee pot. What are you doing?

MARJ: We're missing a tile, Lissa, and we're about to figure out which one.

LISSA: Oh. Right.

MARJ: You knew?

LISSA: Yeah.

HELEN: Since when?

MARJ: Do you know which one?

LISSA: I might.

MARJ: You could save us all a little time—

WINNIE: Honey?

HELEN: You have our attention.

LISSA: It was one crack.

MARJ: That's it? (*LISSA shrugs.*) Well, it's a bit irregular, but I suppose we could play without it.

HELEN: And how, pray tell?

MARJ: I need a minute. (*MARJ studies her rules. HELEN and WINNIE follow suit.*)

WINNIE: We'd still have plenty of hands. We can make do. (*Again, they study the rules.*) It wasn't that easy when I could still concentrate. Do we know *why* the tile was missing?

HELEN: What difference does it make?

WINNIE: Well, if this was deliberate...

HELEN: A little passive-aggressive, don't you think?

WINNIE: It might just be Janet. Trying to speak to us.

HELEN: She had plenty of time while she was alive.

MARJ: I'm with Helen. If we're holding a séance, I'm out of here. *(silence)* Good. Lissa, since we're *here*, you'd be East. *(pause)* What are you waiting for?

LISSA: *(pause)* It was deliberate.

WINNIE: I knew it!

MARJ: Bullshit.

WINNIE: Excuse me?

MARJ: You heard me.

WINNIE: The rules, Marj. No swearing.

LISSA: So only Aunt Winnie is curious.

HELEN: I didn't say that.

LISSA: It was one crack.

MARJ: So you said.

LISSA: ...One utterance.

HELEN: Oh?

LISSA: One ugly remark that couldn't be retracted.

MARJ: *(stops turning tiles)* Shit! You're not kidding, are you?

WINNIE: And she was that hurt?

LISSA: Mmmm.

MARJ: So hurt that it broke up the game?

LISSA: Sorry to say.

WINNIE: Do we get to hear what it was?

LISSA: I was kind of waiting for someone to ask.

WINNIE: Of course, we'd ask! She was our friend, baby.

LISSA: I know that.

HELEN: And the only woman on the planet who could keep up with me.

MARJ: At what?!

LISSA: *(to HELEN)* Your shopping marathons were the stuff of legend.

HELEN: She could spend my money faster than I could.

WINNIE: I loved her longest.

LISSA: She knew that, Aunt Winnie.

WINNIE: She got me through algebra. And my marriage. And my divorce. And, and, and—

LISSA: She always said you deserved better.

WINNIE: I did.

MARJ: She read every book I ever gave her. Wouldn't leave me alone until we talked about it. She had a good mind. A good heart.

HELEN: But there's that missing tile.

MARJ: And I treated her like shit.

LISSA: No, you didn't!

MARJ: I don't think she even *liked* Mahj.

LISSA: That's crazy. She lived for this. *(They freeze.)*

JANET: "April 2, 1990. A day of milestones! It's 20 years this week for the Monday Girls! Time to review what our card tables have witnessed over two decades. I continue to take a lot of crap for ordering in. Marj has threatened to start packing her own lunch when it's my turn to host. She says she can't look at another tuna salad platter. "Too Denny's," she says. Winnie begs her to stop teasing me. Says it's unbecoming. Winnie's just coming through a rough patch, but I think she's going to make it. Why is it that children from broken homes feel it's their right to sit in judgment of their parents? And who decided to call them 'broken' homes? What home isn't 'broken' in some way that no plumber or electrician can fix? And Helen, radiant, resplendent Helen! Found a fourth husband last year and she's positively giddy! This one has a home in Florida and I fear the game is going to go South, as well. I'm going to propose that if Helen does become a snowbird, that we use our kitty to either fly her back and forth or else fly all of us to Boca. To celebrate our milestone, I brought in egg rolls and the most divine shrimp with lobster sauce and house fried rice, from the Peking Gourmet. Denny's, my ass."

LISSA: At times, it felt like you were the best thing in her life.

WINNIE: No, that's not true, honey.

LISSA: One of my earliest memories was hearing you guys down here, gossiping and clicking tiles.

WINNIE: Clicking and clucking.

LISSA: Helen, you always looked like you just stepped off a movie set. Winnie, you were always quiet, but I knew you were there because you were shushing Marj. And Marj, you swore like a truck driver. Nobody wanted to be the first to leave because you didn't want to miss anything.

WINNIE: Or be talked about.

LISSA: And you were so blissfully happy.

WINNIE: We were?

MARJ: *(pause)* It was my crack, wasn't it?

LISSA: Marj—

MARJ: You know what she called me? “The library.”

LISSA: Out of reverence!

MARJ: She was a sponge, bless her heart.

LISSA: She hung on your every word.

MARJ: Until I blew it. I shared a confidence with her and thought she had blabbed to the rest of you.

WINNIE: Janet would never betray a friend.

MARJ: No?

WINNIE: I was the one who said something cruel.

LISSA: You?

WINNIE: You know how she was always teasing me about my weight?

HELEN: We all did, Winnie.

WINNIE: Never mind. But, Lissa, when you had your...problem? I told her to get her some help. For both of you. I only meant well.

LISSA: You were right!

WINNIE: But she was cooler toward me after.

LISSA: What were you supposed to do? Slip a message in a fortune cookie?

WINNIE: I don't know. I certainly didn't have the first clue about motherhood.

HELEN: *(pause)* I lied to her. Once. Would that count as a crack?

MARJ: Absolutely!

HELEN: Lissa, I told her I had only two tickets to the Bolshoi, and I had four. She had so wanted us to take you and Lydia, but I was in one of my sour spells and didn't want to be bothered dragging our kids along. I sold the other tickets.

WINNIE: I'd have killed for tickets to the Bolshoi.

HELEN: I blew it. Over and over again.

WINNIE: Marj? What confidence?

MARJ: Excuse me?

WINNIE: What could you possibly tell Janet that you couldn't share with the rest of us?

MARJ: Winnie!

HELEN: I'm with her on this one. I thought we shared everything.

LISSA: I could leave.

MARJ: It's pretty stupid, looking back.

WINNIE: All the more reason to tell!

MARJ: It happened years ago. A few weeks before the game broke up. I was at Borders. I used to go at closing because the store was always empty and I really had to concentrate to be sure I didn't already own the books in my basket. I went to the parking lot. It was pitch black that night. Two guys came out of nowhere. Big guys.

HELEN: Dear God.

LISSA: They hurt you?

MARJ: I was banged up pretty bad.

HELEN: They didn't...?

MARJ: They just wanted my purse. Had to rearrange my face to get it.

WINNIE: You told us it was a deviated septum and that while you were out, they were fixing your jaw, too!

LISSA: Geez, Marj.

MARJ: It was my own damned fault. I had no business being out there alone.

LISSA: They ever find them?

MARJ: And to add insult to injury, I had bought a second copy of *Burden of Proof* that night. Imagine buying that twice!

LISSA: And you shared this with Mom?

MARJ: Did I have a choice? She could read a face like nobody I've ever known.

HELEN: Anyway, Janet was something of an expert on facial surgery.

LISSA: Ouch.

MARJ: She took one look at me and said, "Out with it."

WINNIE: Trust me. She never breathed a word.

HELEN: This is the first I'm hearing.

LISSA: *Burden of Proof* was on her nightstand for years.

WINNIE: So you're saying it wasn't Marj. And it wasn't me.

HELEN: She didn't say that.

WINNIE: So it *was* me.

HELEN: Well. Out with it!

LISSA: Guys. Really. Stop.

WINNIE: After Lou left, all those years, things got a little rough for us. You know. Financially.

HELEN: You were working.

WINNIE: On a secretary's salary?

HELEN: You said they treated you pretty well!

WINNIE: Tuition was coming due again. I had to ask her for a loan.

HELEN: I don't understand.

MARJ: I think we just assumed you were at least... supported.

WINNIE: Hardly.

MARJ: I hope you sued his sorry ass.

WINNIE: He was still their father.

LISSA: So you never said anything?

WINNIE: They *still* don't know who paid for their college.

MARJ: Lord.

WINNIE: That's when I took the weekend job at the snack bar.

HELEN: You said you were volunteering!

LISSA: You went to Mom for help?

WINNIE: I paid back every penny, Lissa. With interest. And nobody knew about the arrangement, either. But I think she must have resented my imposing on our friendship.

HELEN: Jesus, Winnie. We would've helped you!

WINNIE: Helen, you *did*. She took the money from our Mahj pool.

HELEN: And rightfully so!

MARJ: Who the hell knew?

WINNIE: Not me, that's for sure. I always assumed it was her money. But I guess she figured it was a way for all three of you to bail me out.

HELEN: How much could that have been?

WINNIE: With interest, it was around six thousand.

HELEN: Dollars?

WINNIE: No, Helen. Lira.

HELEN: That woman could keep a secret.

WINNIE: At that last, what turned out to be our last game, I handed her my final payment. That's when she told me about how she financed the loan. I got a little steamed, getting all of you involved like that. I think I might have said something like, "There. We're even." I was angry at Lou for putting me in such a position; and at all of you for being so damned...solvent.

MARJ: And you said, "There. We're even?"

WINNIE: Something like that.

MARJ: And you've been beating yourself up about that for 22 years?!

WINNIE: Try being poor, Marj.

MARJ: *(to Winnie)* It wasn't you, dear.

HELEN: So it was me, then.

LISSA: Geez Louise!

WINNIE: This had better be good.

LISSA: Fine. Go on.

HELEN: All right. We've all agreed I wasn't the world's greatest mother. *(beat)*
Well, don't all jump in at once.

WINNIE: I'm the one whose kids chose to live with their father.

HELEN: Actually, Lissa, it was something that involved you.

LISSA: Oh?

HELEN: Do you recall talking with my Lydia shortly before our last game?

LISSA: No. We hardly ever spoke.

HELEN: She would have repeated something I told her.

LISSA: We kind of moved in different circles.

HELEN: I made an offhand remark. I was trying to impress on her the need to marry young, and often.

LISSA: Knowing Lydia, I suspect she had other plans.

HELEN: She was 24, dear. The clock was running down. It was a different time, remember. Anyway, I said something that might have hurt her feelings. I told her, "You've got the kind of looks that fade."

LISSA: Ouch.

HELEN: We spiraled downhill from there. I assume you shared that with your mother.

LISSA: Mom and I weren't talking much at that point either, if you recall.

HELEN: Well, during that last game, Janet barely made eye contact. I assumed it was because you tattled on me.

LISSA: Really, I can't imagine that I would've even gotten involved. I was saving the world.

HELEN: Well, something had changed.

LISSA: On that, we agree.

HELEN: Anyway, I knew about your...extracurricular activities...

LISSA: I see.

HELEN: Did she see anybody else's kids getting arrested?

LISSA: It was a different time politically, too, and it was clear we were about to start another illegal war over oil rights.

HELEN: Not to everyone...

LISSA: Mom used to say, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

HELEN: But when we saw you on the news, you weren't...yourself.

LISSA: Who was?!

HELEN: Slurring your words. And you looked like...something the cat dragged in. Barefoot, for God's sake! I told her I wasn't the only one who needed some remedial parenting classes. And then, she did the strangest thing. She didn't cry. Didn't strike back. She just smiled at me.

LISSA: Name one perfect parent, Helen. Why do you think I never had kids?

HELEN: Next thing I knew, the game ends. Poof. Adios, muchachas.

LISSA: Okay, stop. Okay? It wasn't any of you.

HELEN: Who then?

MARJ: Oh, for Christ's sake.

WINNIE: Marj? Do you mind?

MARJ: What.

WINNIE: Language?

LISSA: *(pause)* The one crack was mine.

HELEN and WINNIE: What?!

LISSA: I'm the reason your game broke up. But it was great hearing your stories and making me feel even worse about what I said.

WINNIE: You?

MARJ: Okay. Out with it.

LISSA: Aunt Helen, as you have duly noted, I had a few anger issues back then. High school was torture. And college was just more of same. My textbooks never challenged a single idea and my professors were so scared of dismissal, they were dead from the neck up. My folks had already laid out forty thousand bucks, and the world was going to hell in a hand basket. So I came home, you know? Where they have to take you in? And on that Monday morning, I came in and saw Mom unpacking those white cartons and littering the kitchen with paper plates and plastic forks and Styrofoam cups. And then you guys came in and sat around laughing and telling stories and throwing your money around. And Mom pulled out the new rules and you talked about them like they were Biblical revelations and I had to get out of there, or explode.

(The lights shift. Under a memory light, MARJ, WINNIE and HELEN become their younger selves. MARJ covers the part of her face that is bandaged. JANET enters with a wastebasket and starts cleaning around her guests. LISSA exits. The women finish setting up the game.)

HELEN: Last hand, okay?

JANET: What's the rush?

WINNIE: I'll bet it involves a new credit card...

MARJ: Not my best day anyway.

WINNIE: And why is that?

JANET: She's otherwise occupied, Winnie.

MARJ: *(to JANET)* What's that supposed to mean?

JANET: Nothing. The wounds are still fresh.

MARJ: And someone has a big mouth.

HELEN: But they were self-inflicted, right?

JANET: Helen!

HELEN: 'Deviated septum,' my Aunt Fanny!

WINNIE: Anyway, let us celebrate what's good!

HELEN: And what would that be?

WINNIE: I don't know. We're *here*...

MARJ: Jesus, Winnie! Were you planning to kill yourself?

WINNIE: Marj!

JANET: Look. We've all been through a rough patch.

(MARJ glowers at JANET.)

WINNIE: The stress gets to you, you know? And now our kids are following suit.

MARJ: Speak for yourselves.

WINNIE: Please. We've just enjoyed a delicious lunch and a lovely game.

MARJ: All talk, if you ask me.

WINNIE: And we've got each other.

JANET: Thank you, Winnie.

WINNIE: I say it's time for a whaddy call it, road trip.

JANET: That's intriguing.

MARJ: Have you been listening at all?!

HELEN: Did I miss something?

WINNIE: All that money we've been putting aside for the past twenty years. I say we spend it on something foolish. A spa day. Or a weekend in Paris!

MARJ: Just how much do you think we've collected?

WINNIE: Janet's treasurer.

JANET: I'd have to look.

WINNIE: Well?

JANET: I'll look then.

(JANET opens the box and finds a savings passbook. YOUNG LISSA enters, dressed in something that suggests rebellion. She silently observes.)

WINNIE: Well?

JANET: Seems we have five thousand, eight hundred thirty-eight dollars.

HELEN: You're kidding!

JANET: We could definitely do a spa day. ...In Paris!

WINNIE: Really?

JANET: Yes, really.

WINNIE: I'd have to get time off.

JANET: We'd go for a weekend.

WINNIE: Not to mention a passport.

JANET: I could plan all the meals.

HELEN: What's French for carry-out?

MARJ: Could we bring a mahj set?

JANET: Baggage is free, my dear. Bring whatever you like.

HELEN: Plan on an extra bag for the return. I could find Dior blindfolded.

WINNIE: So we're set? We're actually doing this?

JANET: Give me one good reason why we shouldn't! (*JANET sees LISSA*)
Lissa! Hi. Come say hello.

YOUNG LISSA: Don't mind me.

JANET: Really. Come on in!

YOUNG LISSA: See you for a minute?

JANET: Of course. (*JANET and LISSA move to the side, stopping the game.*)
What is it? Out with it.

YOUNG LISSA: Pampered Poodles.

JANET: I beg your pardon?

YOUNG LISSA: You're a bunch of kept women. Nothing of your own to claim but your mahj winnings, which except for Aunt Winnie, wasn't yours to begin with. God. What a waste of time on the planet! You sit here every week and talk about food and shopping and other people who aren't here to defend themselves. You just filled an entire trash bag with your garbage, for God's sake! Do you have any idea how long that will be around?

JANET: Ah.

YOUNG LISSA: Right now, I realize you probably wish you had never taught me to talk.

JANET: That's ridiculous.

YOUNG LISSA: Or think.

JANET: When have I ever asked you to stop thinking?!

YOUNG LISSA: When did somebody ask *you*?

JANET: I don't follow.

YOUNG LISSA: You've got a college degree, Mom! A teaching certificate. A brain. But what do you *do* with yourself?

JANET: I see.

YOUNG LISSA: I don't think you do. (*JANET picks up the wastebasket and EXITS to kitchen. LISSA turns to the other women.*) She'll be right back.

(*YOUNG LISSA exits. JANET returns, empty-handed, again in her late 70s.*)

JANET: "April 3, 1990. A Brief History of Mah Jongg is in its final chapter. In fact, it might end right here. Yesterday at this time, I gleefully distributed the new rules. Lunch never tasted sweeter. I swear they put sugar in every dish. Winnie's back on track and we're thinking about putting our money to good use. A weekend in Paris is on the table. Unless. Unless we're fiddling while Rome burns. And losing sight of why we were put on this earth. I'm 55 years old. I need to explore my options. I need to...I just have to get through summer with the girls. Because Helen is probably going to leave for Florida in October and this seems like a natural time to break up the game. Let it die a natural death, ...while I figure out the new rules." (*Lights shift. JANET crosses to the kitchen door. The game resumes, in the present.*)

HELEN: Is Lissa planning on spending the entire day in that kitchen?

MARJ: Probably alphabetizing Janet's recipes.

JANET: (*pointing*) Zzzzt!

(MARJ swats herself.)

WINNIE: Marj, could you keep your voice down!

HELEN: So she was actually *at* our last game.

MARJ: She was a loose cannon back then. I used to think it gave her some perverse pleasure, pulling Janet away from the table.

HELEN: Did Janet even come back in?

MARJ: She said something didn't agree with her.

HELEN: Her daughter.

MARJ: So there we sat. End of story. Not a very satisfying conclusion.

WINNIE: I just remember her calling me afterwards to tell me where she kept the passbook.

HELEN: Do you still have it?

WINNIE: Heavens, no. It needed her signature. But I know it had all our names.

HELEN: We couldn't even co-sign?

MARJ: I like to think we could.

HELEN: So you never got it.

WINNIE: She was still Treasurer. Nothing had changed. You know, if it were me, I'd have put it right back in the box. (*searches through the box*) Not here now.

MARJ: We're not talking about chump change.

WINNIE: (*calling*) Lissa?

LISSA: (*off*) Coming!

MARJ: So Janet just up and took it!

WINNIE: When did you know her to up and *take* anything? And besides, didn't she talk about opening a brokerage account or something? In which case, we certainly signed off on that, too.

MARJ: She probably took the tile, as well.

HELEN: That can't have been Janet.

MARJ: Why not?

HELEN: Way too fastidious.

WINNIE: Actually, Lissa knew which one it was. (*LISSA enters*) You knew which tile!

LISSA: I did.

MARJ: Never mind the tile. What happened to the money?

HELEN: Honestly, Marj

LISSA: In a minute, if you don't mind. This isn't so easy.

HELEN: So, what was the one crack? What exactly did you say to her?

LISSA: I called you all pampered poodles.

WINNIE: I'd hardly call me pampered.

MARJ: For your information, dogs give me hives.

LISSA: I was wrong.

HELEN: Not about me. But go on.

LISSA: Mom had found something in the three of you that I may never know. Lifelong friends. True devotion. Trust and—

WINNIE: You got that right.

HELEN: You were going to add something else.

LISSA: And a brokerage account I can't touch.

MARJ: What kind of account?

LISSA: The next day, the third of April, she took your Mahj pool and invested it.

MARJ: What kind of money are we talking about? Winnie thinks it was around \$5,000.

WINNIE: Somewhere between five and six. That's what was in the passbook. I could be a little off.

LISSA: Well, she made it work for you.

WINNIE: Go on.

LISSA: She bought stock....In Apple Computer.

WINNIE: You're shitting me!

MARJ and HELEN: Winnie!

LISSA: Anyway, the joke's on me. Now I have to probate her portion of it. I was so hoping to avoid probate.

WINNIE: How much, Lissa?

LISSA: Actually, I found her last few brokerage statements in the hutch. In the drawer above the mahj set.

WINNIE: Back up, honey. What's it worth now?

LISSA: As of this morning, nearly a quarter of a million dollars.

WINNIE: Say that again.

LISSA: Plus or minus. *(She produces several sheets of paper and passes them around.)*

HELEN: Enough for a weekend in Paris.

WINNIE: And a passport! I never did get one.

LISSA: You've got enough to have it expedited, Aunt Winnie. Hell, you could buy a congressman!

MARJ: Anything else in that hutch?

LISSA: A box, actually. Tied up with a ribbon. Inside was a torn-up IOU from you, Winnie, that said, "You never owed us anything." There was a copy of *Burden of Proof*, with a note that said, "You gave this to me twice, Marj." And, Helen, there was a letter she never mailed to Lydia which said, "Thank you, darling, for sharing your pain. You are and always will be beautiful. Your mother knows this better than anyone."

HELEN: No note for me?

LISSA: Not specifically.

HELEN: She had nothing to say to me personally.

LISSA: But there was a letter for all of you. *(to HELEN)* Your name's first. *(They gather around to hear the letter. JANET crosses back into the room.)*

JANET: *(reciting)* "March 22, 2012: My darlings Helen, Winnie and Marjie, If you're reading this, I am finishing a book that began some 42 years ago. About us. I put it down in 1990, a day after I walked away from the circle we had so carefully built for ourselves. But I needed to find my way to Planet Janet. To determine that I was making a difference in the world. Helen, I knew you were taking off for Florida. Marj, I knew you had buried your last ward, leaving you open to finally meet the man of your dreams on that Dude Ranch in Colorado. And Winnie, you would finally find the love you so richly deserved in the grandchildren who love you with such abandon. We traveled together for a time, on our sea of tiles. I needed to care for an ailing husband and find my way back to my child. It all worked out, didn't it?"

LISSA: *(continuing)* "Don't be sad that I'm not here to celebrate our lifelong friendship. And don't blame anyone, especially yourselves, for breaking up the game. Be honest. None of you misses my cooking. Nor did anyone ever accuse me of being a decent Mahj player. Rejoice in the blessings we shared and the lessons learned along the way. Take care of yourself and of each other. Please, everyone, find a place to spend your little windfall, knowing that I'll be right there with you."

JANET: And Marj, there are no mosquitoes in Cleveland in April.

MARJ: Did anyone else hear that?

WINNIE: Hear what? *(to LISSA)* Thank you.

LISSA: *(finds a tile in her pocket and drops it on the table.)* One crack.

WINNIE: So she didn't take it.

LISSA: She'd have sooner torn up her carryout menus. Anybody up for a game?

WINNIE: Really?

MARJ: I think we can work with a novice.

HELEN: We can talk you through it, honey.

LISSA: Watch and learn, ladies. *(to JANET, in their playful voice)* "Thank you, ma'am." *(pause)* I'm East?

(They begin the game. The rhythmic clacking of tiles begins as the lights fade.)

THE END