

Egypt, 1250 B.C.

IN THE BEAUTIFUL HOUSE



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Tiy, an Egyptian boy
KiYa, an Egyptian girl and Tiy's sister
WENENKHU, a priest and the father of Tiy and Kiya
SENEBTISI, the mother of Tiy and Kiya
PAMU, a priest • TEPEMKAU, a priest
WOSRET, a priest • PTAHHOTEP, a priest
SENI, a priest
BODIES 1–4 (nonspeaking roles)
NARRATOR

SCENE ONE

NARRATOR: In 1250 B.C., during the time of King Ramses II, a family is having dinner at their home near Thebes. This is a calm and peaceful period in Egypt's three thousand-year empire.

TIY: Why do we have to live outside the gates of the city? The other kids treat us like we're weird.

KIYA: They're mean to us just because Papa takes care of the dead.

WENENKHU: It sounds like you're ashamed of what I do.

SENEBTISI: How dare you speak to your father that way, children! He has a very important job in the Beautiful House. What could be more valuable than a priest who helps the dead gain immortal life? What if he didn't have a job? You'd be living in a hut, eating boiled papyrus roots every day.

TIY: I'm sorry, Papa.

WENENKHU: Don't forget—when you're a little older, you'll be my apprentice. Then you'll learn to help the dead, too.

SENEBTISI: I have an idea! Why don't you take the children with you to work tomorrow?

WENENKHU: Take them to work? I'm not sure that's a very good—

SENEBTISI: The children might learn something useful, Wen, especially since they don't appreciate the work you do.

WENENKHU: I'm still not sure it's the best idea—

SENEBTISI: Nonsense!

WENENKHU: But Sen, I'm not sure Tiy's ready to see what I do yet.

SENEBTISI: Tiy'll be fine—and so will Kiya.

WENENKHU: All right, my beloved wife. Tomorrow I'll take you kids with me.

SENEBTISI: And you'd better behave yourselves!

SCENE TWO

NARRATOR: The next morning, the sun is shining bright and hot into the family's mud-brick home, as it does almost every day. Before breakfast, Tiy and Kiya are playing a board game called *senet*. A small monkey is perched on Tiy's shoulder.

SENEBTISI: Children, did you feed the sacred crocodile?

CHILDREN: Yes, Mother.

SENEBTISI: Thank you, Mother. It's easy for you kids to get dressed. All you have to put on are your earrings. Your papa has to put on his linen skirt and jewelry and then make up his eyes.

TIV: Can the monkey come with us?

SENEBTISI: Absolutely not. *Achoo!*

KIYA: I'm sorry about your cold, Mother.

SENEBTISI: Thank you, dear. I'll say an incantation to get rid of it. Depart, cold, son of a cold, you who breaks the bones, destroys the skull and makes sick the seven openings of the head! (*She breathes in deeply.*) Ah, much better! Put away that game of senet, and eat your breakfast.

KIYA (*muttering*): Spending the day with dead bodies. This is going to be so much fun.

SCENE THREE

NARRATOR: Wenenkhu, Kiya, and Tiy are crossing to the western bank of the Nile in a boat made of reeds. They see crocodiles floating like logs in the river. Big white and black birds called ibises flap overhead.

WENENKHU: Here's a test, children. Which god has the head of an ibis?

KIYA: Oh, oh, I know! Thoth!

WENENKHU: And who is Thoth?

TIV: He's the god of writing, and astronomy, and geometry, and medicine—

KIYA:—and talking, and writing, and he measures the earth, and he records all knowledge.

WENENKHU: Excellent!

TIV: Why is the Beautiful House on the other side of the river, Papa?

WENENKHU: Each day, the great sun god, Amun-Re, travels across the sky in his boat. He starts in the deserts of the east and passes over our holy river, the life-giving Nile. Then Amun-Re passes the black land—the rich soil along the riverbanks, brought to us by the yearly floods. Finally he passes into the red land of the western desert and disappears until another day. We bury the dead in the west because that's where the sun sets.

KIYA: Is that why we call the dead Westerners?

WENENKHU: That's right.



TIV: Why do we make mummies of the dead anyway?

WENENKHU: Do you remember the story of what happened to the great god Osiris?

KIYA: Osiris ruled the land of Egypt, and he was a good and wise ruler. Right?

WENENKHU: Very good, Kiya! Do you know what happened next, Tiy?

TIV: Osiris's evil brother Seth got hold of him. Seth ripped Osiris up and buried the pieces in fourteen different places.

KIYA: The goddess Isis, Osiris's wife and sister, found all the pieces. She put them together and breathed life back into him. Now Osiris is the king of the underworld.

TIV: But that doesn't explain why we make mummies.

WENENKHU: We hope to be restored, just as Osiris was restored. But, like Osiris, our bodies have to be restored, too. We used to bury our dead in the desert sands because the dry heat preserved their bodies for many generations. But they were often dug up and eaten by jackals. We had to find a way to take better care of the dead. Tiy, please—keep your hands in the boat. I don't want your fingers bitten off by a crocodile!

SCENE FOUR

NARRATOR: On the western side of the Nile, Wenenkhu, Tiy, and Kiya reach a low series of buildings. Outside, under an awning, the priests, Pamiu and Tepemkau, are washing a body on a table.

KIYA: What's that horrible smell, Papa?

TIV: Why are there so many flies buzzing around?

PAMIU: After a few minutes, you won't even notice the smell.

WENENKHU: Ah, Pamiu. This is my son, Tiy and my daughter, Kiya. Children, these are my fellow priests, Pamiu and Tepemkau.

TEPEMKAU: Nice to meet you!

PAMIU: Welcome to the Beautiful House.

TIV AND KIYA (*together*): Thank you.

WENENKHU: When we receive a body, we bring it to this area, which is called the Place of Purification. We wash the body with water from the Nile to make it clean and pure for the next stop. Follow me into the Beautiful House.





SCENE FIVE

NARRATOR: Wenenkhu leads Tiy and Kiya into the building. Bodies are laid out on tables. The priests, Wosret, Prahhotep, and Senbi, are working on the bodies.

TIY: Papa, are those people on those tables dead?

WENENKHHU: Of course, son.

KIYA: I think I'm going to be sick.

WENENKHHU: Don't be frightened, children. You'll get used to it. Just stand back and stay out of the way of the priests.

KIYA: We'll stay *way* back. We promise!

TIY: Why is this place called the Beautiful House anyway? It's so hot and stinky—and so not beautiful.

WENENKHHU: Because we make the dead beautiful for eternity. You'll see.

NARRATOR: Wosret puts a hook up a dead man's nose.

TIY: What is that priest *doing*?

WENENKHHU: That's Wosret. He's pulling out the brain, sweetheart. If he left the brain in, it would rot the body. The brain isn't that important. Some say it makes the arms and legs move. But as far as I'm concerned, all the brain does is create nasty, drippy mucus.

TIY: Won't there be an empty hole in his head?

WENENKHHU: He's a man of noble birth. Wosret will fill his head with resin.

NARRATOR: Prahhotep pops out a dead woman's eyeballs with his thumbs.

KIYA: Why is he taking out that lady's eyes?

WENENKHHU: Prahhotep will replace them with pretty glass eyes. Now, watch what happens when Senbi cuts open the stomach of that body. We call Senbi "the Ripper."

NARRATOR: As Senbi makes the cut, Wosret and Prahhotep throw stones at him.

WOSRET: Run away!

PTAHHOTEP: Depart, Ripper!

WOSRET: We command you to flee!

(*Senbi runs away.*)

KIYA: Why did they do that?



WENENKHHU: Actually, I don't know why we do that. It's a ritual we perform as part of the cutting in. The meaning has been lost in the sands of time.

KIYA: No, Papa, why are they cutting that man open in the first place?

WENENKHHU: When we get a body, we must act quickly before the decaying process sets in. We must take out the organs that rot.

TIY: What do you do with them?

KIYA: I don't think I want to hear this.

WENENKHHU: See the four jars over there? Those are canopic jars. We preserve the organs we take out—liver and kidneys, intestines, stomach, and lungs—and then put them in the canopic jars. The heart is the only organ we preserve and put back into the body.

TIY: Why?

WENENKHHU: The heart is a very important organ. It's the center of intelligence and the soul.

KIYA: Look at the lady on that table. She looks as if she could still be alive.

WENENKHHU: Poor Hehenty! She was far too young to die. They tried every kind of medicine to cure her: lizard's blood, the teeth of a pig, rotten meat, the brains of a tortoise, an old scroll boiled in oil. Priests charmed for her and placed amulets around her neck. But, amazingly, nothing worked!

KIYA: She must have had an evil spell placed on her.

TIY: What are they doing to that man over there?

WENENKHHU: We pack natron around the body. Natron is a special kind of salt that dries out the body.

KIYA: It's so much work.

WENENKHHU: If we don't do it, how will the dead reunite with their bodies? When we die, all the different parts of us fly apart. You know what the *ba* is?

KIYA: It's the spirit that flies in our body like a bird in a cage when we're alive.

WENENKHHU: And you know what our *ka* is?

TIY: The spirit that looks and moves just like us that is released after we die.

WENENKHHU: And you know your shadow that follows you faithfully every day?

KIYA: Yes, Papa.

WENENKHHU: Let me ask you then: What do you want to happen to you after you die? Don't you want to live with Osiris?





KIVA: Of course!

WENENKHHU: You must be reunited after death with your *ba*, your *ka*, your shadow, and your body if you want eternal life.

TIV: Then it's not enough to be turned into a mummy.

KIVA: Being dead isn't easy.

WENENKHHU: That's true. Before the dead can reach Osiris, they must say spells and answer many trick questions to get past the demons who guard the gates on the way. To help the dead, we wrap them up with the Book of the Dead.

TIV: What's that?

WENENKHHU: It's like a handy test-taking guide that gives the dead many of the answers they'll need. If they pass these tests, they come to a river. Then the dead have to pass more tests before a ferryman agrees to take them across to the heart of the underworld.

KIVA: Do they get to live with Osiris then, Papa?

WENENKHHU: First, the dead must pass the biggest exam of all. The jackal-headed god, Anubis, weighs their hearts against the Feather of Truth—which contains all of a person's evil deeds. The dead must make a confession before Osiris. They must confess all the bad things they *didn't* do, like—

(The priests step up and voice these confessions.)

WOSRET: I have not oppressed the poor.

PAMIU: I have not caused a slave to be ill-treated by his master.

TEPENKAU: I have not starved any man. I have not caused any to weep. I have not assassinated any man.

SENB: I have not committed treason.

PTAHHOTEP: I am pure.

TIV *(whispering):* What if the dead person's heart and the feather don't balance?

WENENKHHU: Those who fail the test are thrown to hungry, crocodile-like monsters that will keep devouring them forever. Those who pass can live with Osiris forever. They spend their days eating, drinking, playing senet, listening to beautiful flute music, and having fun in a land much like Egypt.

TIV: Now, that's more like it!

KIVA: Papa, is that man over there dried out enough to become a mummy?

WENENKHHU: Almost.



KIVA: What happens when he's, uh, done?

WENENKHHU: The drying takes about forty days. Then we put packing in the cheeks and arms to make them look fuller. We paint the women yellow and the men red and put henna on their hands and feet. Sometimes we put wigs on the dead or replace missing arms and legs. That way, they can go into the afterlife whole.

TIV: Then do you wrap them up?

WENENKHHU: Yes, we wrap the body with many strips of fine linen to protect it for all eternity. Look over there. Do you see what Wosret is doing?

NARRATOR: Wosret is wrapping thin strips of cloth around a dead man's hand.

WENENKHHU: First, Wosret wraps each finger and then the hand. Then he starts winding cloth around the head and around the rest of the body. It takes a lot of skill and a lot of cloth—more than four hundred fifty square yards of linen—to do it properly. Next we'll put the mummy in a coffin. The coffin will be placed in a tomb, which will have the person's name, and magical paintings to please the gods. We'll place the canopic jars in the tomb and other things to bring the person comfort in death. Cups, chairs, food—and *shabti*s, little figures of servants to help us in the next life.

TIV: I'd want to have plenty of figs in my tomb.

WENENKHHU: The last step before we bury the dead is the Opening of the Mouth. We priests touch the mouth of the mummy and say special prayers. Otherwise the mummy won't be able to eat, drink, breathe, or talk. Then we put the mummy inside the tomb and seal it.

TIV: I still don't understand. Why is it so important to keep the body if the person has already passed the tests and is with Osiris?

WENENKHHU: The Fields of Paradise are much like our Earth. It's possible we could die again.

KIVA: I used to think your job was sad, Papa, but I'm not so sure now.

WENENKHHU: We do our best to take care of the dead. They may miss their families on earth—as we miss them—but they're having a good time in the afterlife.

TIV: Papa, what will happen when you die? Won't we ever see you again?

WENENKHHU: I won't ever appear again on Earth. But if I'm good, I'll reach the Fields of Paradise. Someday you'll join your mother and me, and we'll all be together again.

KIVA: I'm going to hold my head up proudly from now on—no matter what anyone says about Papa's job.

TIV: I will, too. And I'll be proud to work in the Beautiful House some day.

