WHO KILLED JENBERET?
A play by Sean Hoade

ACT ONE

Curtain rises on a stage decorated with a fancy talk-show desk and chairs to the extreme left. The rest of the stage is even darker, but you can see the shadows of living room furniture and windows. Larry King is seated behind the desk and a middle-aged rich-looking couple is seated on the opposite side. As the lights come up on the talk-show part of the stage, Larry looks out to the audience like he's looking at the camera on a set.

LARRY: Welcome back to Larry King Live. On tonight’s show, we examine the case that has shocked a nation and made the covers of Time, Newsweek and People as well as fronted the ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, MSNBC and CNNSI news broadcasts. The body of six-year old beauty queen JenBeret Rambling was found the day after Christmas in her family home. Police speculation fell immediately on her parents: Jim Rambling, a software company president, and Penny Rambling, a homemaker and Hummel figurine collector. Tonight we have the Ramblings here in their first public appearance since last night’s Dateline NBC to help us answer the question all America is asking: Who killed JeaBeret? (turns to Ramblings) Welcome to the show.

JIM: Good to be here, Larry. Nice to get an opportunity to clear our good name.

PENNY: The media have blown this all out of proportion—the constant coverage has gotten in the way of our finding the real killer!

LARRY: So you told Diane Sawyer last week.

PENNY: And I will keep saying it until we are exonerated!

LARRY: Of that I’m sure. Jim Rambling, software tycoon, college sports hero, potentially deadly parent. Which of these doesn’t fit, Jim?

JIM: Actually, “tycoon” may be a bit strong.

LARRY: Hold on! You live two doors down from Bill Gates, correct?

JIM: Yes, half a mile or so.

LARRY: And your Web browser, Nude .Internet, is giving his Explorer a run for its money?

JIM: We fill a niche, yes.

LARRY: Software’s a pretty cutthroat business, isn’t it?

JIM: You don’t know the half of it.

LARRY: So one who is seen as a tycoon might be a target for ruthless murderers...

JIM: (getting it) It’s not easy being a tycoon, Larry.

LARRY: I’m sure it isn’t. Penny Rambling, mother, homemaker, ruthless practitioner of child homicide. Accurate?

PENNY: Homemaker is a bit demeaning, Larry. Someone of my stature is more of a domestic supervisor. We have a staff of fourteen.

ANALECTA

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LARRY: My apologies. Did you like to dress JenBeret up for the beauty pageants?
PENNY: Oh, she and I had a wonderful time. From the four to six hours she spent in makeup to the endless posture practice and etiquette lessons, she had everything a six year-old could want: Trophies, certificates, even checks that went into her trust fund.
LARRY: A charmed life—but one that ended too soon! Did her place as a beauty queen and spoiled rich kid place her in danger from jealous rivals?
PENNY: I wouldn’t say she was spoiled, Larry. We just gave her every opportunity for excellence—
LARRY: But overly privileged children make excellent targets, don’t they?
PENNY: Targets for what?
JIM: Honey, we’re trying to find JenBeret’s killer.
PENNY: (getting it) She had everything. And how she showed off! Ostentatious little tart—
LARRY: Okay... I’m sure everyone at home knows the story of how your beautiful, spoiled daughter—the product of a software tycoon and a domestic supervisor—was found dead in your basement. But for the benefit of those who like lurid details, could you take us back to the day her body was discovered?
JIM: Be glad to. It was the day after Christmas, and just a few days before JenBeret’s biggest pageant yet...

At this point, the lights come up on the rest of the stage, onto which several characters have come. There are two uniformed police officers and two prepubescent children dressed exactly as the Rambling3 are dressed on the Larry King set. The small boy is Jim Rambling, and the small girl is Penny Rambling. (The Jim and Penny speaking to Larry will be referred to as JIM and PENNY, and the little Jim and little Penny on stage will be referred to as LITTLE JIM and LITTLE PENNY.)

LITTLE JIM: Since when can’t police have drinks on the job? Man’s got to be relaxed to do your kind of job. One false move, one 31ip-Up, your cover’s blown, everyone knows what you’re up to—
OFFICER #1: Mr. Rambling, we were called here by your attorney, Mr. Marvel? Your daughter is missing, is that right?
LITTLE PENNY: We are distraught, officer. We haven’t seen JenBeret for at least two hours. She’s just six years old!
LITTLE JIM: She also has a pageant tomorrow. She can’t do the kind of preparation a major contest requires if she’s off running around with some gap-toothed swamp born prison escapee!
OFFICER #1: So you think she’s been kidnapped.
LITTLE JIM: Maybe—
LITTLE PENNY: We should search the house first, shouldn’t we? Maybe she’s somewhere around here. I mean, before we go and waste the whole day dredging ponds and such.
LITTLE JIM: Good thinking, dear. She’s just a wee little thing. I have a strange feeling, also, did I mention that? A mixture of dread and of inevitability...

Now the lights go up on Larry and the Ramblings seated at the table, but also remain on the scene at the house. Here there is intercutting between the dialogue with Larry and the dialogue in the house.

LARRY: Is that right? Dread and inevitability? As if you knew what you would find that cold, unforgiving December day?

PENNY: May I answer that, Larry?

LARRY: Of course, Penny Rambling.

PENNY: There is absolutely no way Jim could have known what was in the basement that day, no way at all. It was a complete and total coincidence that at the exact moment Jim mentioned the basement—

Action now returns to the Rambling’s living room.

LITTLE JIM: I will check the basement! Perhaps there is something down there that will be helpful! (Little Jim starts for the door leading to the basement stairs when the door swings open and out steps MR. MARVEL, the Rambling’s attorney) Mr. Marvel!

OFFICER #1: Your lawyer?

MARVEL: One and the same! Pillars of our community such as Jim and Penny Rambling must have legal representation at all times, especially when their daughter has been killed in their basement!

(Gasps all around.)

OFFICER #2: JenBeret is down there? Good thinking, Mr. Rambling!

LITTLE JIM: Yes, I thought it would be best to have my lawyer here.

OFFICER #2: No-I mean, you knew your daughter was in the basement, right?

MARVEL: That is unsubstantiated speculation, officer, and I’ll have none of it! Mr. And Mrs. Rambling know nothing about this horrible crime, if indeed a crime has been committed, and furthermore, we will allow police blunders and leaks to make this case into a media feeding frenzy!

LITTLE PENNY: (Looking out the window) Oooh, is that Peter Jennings driving up?

LITTLE JIM: That could be a problem. I promised dibs to CNN.

OFFICER #2: Mr. Rambling?

LITTLE JIM: I have a reputation to protect!

General bustle as several television cameramen and photographers force their way in, flashbulbs popping. We scarcely notice as the officers make their way through the door leading to the basement. A REPORTER wielding a microphone pushes to the front of the media crush.

REPORTER: Jim Rambling, how is a rich, successful software tycoon such as yourself dealing with the death of your beauty-pageant winning daughter?

LITTLE JIM: You from CNN?

REPORTER: No sir, ABC, number one in news!

LITTLE JIM: No comment yet, no comment. CNN, is anyone from CNN?

CNN REPORTER: That’s me. Sorry I’m late.

LITTLE JIM: Okay, let him through. Ready? (holds Little Penny close and looks solemn) We will not rest until the killer is caught and brought to justice, the same way that video-game lovers everywhere won’t rest until they punish the evil Dr. Overlord for enslaving the big-breasted citizens of Mammar 12 in Rambling Software’s new game, Big-Breasted Women and Laser Guns and Blood.
CNN REPORTER: Hey, can we get some footage of the body being brought up from the stairs?

Just then, the officers emerge from the door to the basement, one of the carrying the body of JenBeret. She should be played by a 16-18-year-old woman, blonde, busty. Even as she is carried by the officer, she is wearing a tiara and a beauty-queen sash. The crush of reporters and cameramen push even closer as the officers step into view, but Little Jim and Marvel keep them at bay—except for the CNN reporter and cameraman, who they slyly let through. As the CNN team approaches the girl, the reporter gets into position in front of the officer and nods to the cameraman to start shooting the scene.

CNN REPORTER: We’re here at the home of Jim and Penny Rambling, a successful couple by all accounts, but whose lives may hide a dark secret...

The lighting once again accents the Larry King set

LARRY: That was the first you realized the media would make a field day out of this horrible tragedy?

PENNY: I’ll never forget how Dan Rather looked when CNN scooped him for the story.

LARRY: Well, Jim? How about it? Why did you give the number-one news gathering organization on the planet, an organization known for professionalism in gathering the news as well as presenting refreshing and entertaining fare such as Larry King Live, first shot at the news story of the century?

JIM: We wanted the killer to be found as quickly as possible.

LARRY: But if the camera crews arrived before the officers even found the body—

JIM: Actually, my attorney officially found the body and owns all rights to any stories involved.

LARRY: Okay, before the body was discovered, camera crews were already on their way. So what you’re saying is that you were so eager for a killer to be found, you actually called the news media before you were certain a murder had taken place!

PENNY: That’s how much we care, Larry. We would do anything for her, even if it meant assuming she had been murdered before she was gone an hour.

LARRY: You are something else, Ramblings. I dare say that in my forty years as a talking head, I have never seen such anticipatory devotion.

JIM AND PENNY: Thank you, Larry.

LARRY: (turning to audience/camera) When we come back: JenBeret’s last day, as remembered by her parents. Stay tuned.
Lights go down on both the Larry King set and the living room set that all the audience sees is the front of the stage, onto which an ANNOUNCER steps. The announcer has strapped to him a desktop, from which he reads.

ANNOUNCER: I'm Tom Bond, and here are the main stories we're following this hour: A nerve gas attack in Tokyo sends 20 people to the hospital. A millennial apocalyptic group calling itself the Harry Karays has claimed responsibility, and says it will strike again within days, with deadly force. Millions are anxiously awaiting its arrival. (looks at new item) In other news, the rocketing popularity of Beanie Babies is showing no signs of stopping. At a shopping mall in Boise, Idaho, a rampage by anxious shoppers for the newest Beanie Baby, Elephant Man, sent 20 people to the hospital. The manufacturer accepts full responsibility, and hopes to have a new Beanie Baby doll on the market within days, with a full marketing campaign. Millions are anxiously awaiting its arrival. (gives warm smiles) We now return to Larry King Live, only on CNN.  

Lights come back on Larry King Live set as announcer exits

LARRY: Welcome back. Penny, as JenBeret’s mother, you were always very close with her, especially when you would get her ready for her beauty pageants.

PENNY: That’s right. In fact, the day before she was... the day before, we worked all day getting her ready to avenge an earlier loss.

LARRY: The day before? Wasn’t her body found the day after Christmas?

PENNY: Yes...

LARRY: Please continue.

PENNY: We were working hard to get JenBeret ready for the “Little Miss Denver Broncos” show after the “Treat your Daughter like a Painted Lady” pageant debacle in Colorado Springs...

Lights come up on the living room set, which now has a full-length mirror standing in it as well as dresses and makeup supplies everywhere. The “adult” JenBeret and Little Penny are placing dresses in front of her to see how they look in front of the mirror. JenBeret is still dressed in the tiara and sash from the earlier scene.

LITTLE PENNY: Roxy Gates has nothing on you, sweetheart. She can’t hold a candle to you. She is vanilla pudding. She is yesterday’s newspaper. She is shit.

JENBERET: She beat me, mommy. Fair and square.

LITTLE PENNY: Fair and square! That bitch couldn’t win a beauty pageant fair and square even if her father weren’t the enigmatic billionaire software tycoon Bill Gates!

JENBERET: MO-o-o-m...

LITTLE PENNY: Sorry, sweetie. That little wench stealing the crown from you just gets to me, that’s all. Having to congratulate her mother at the Software Tycoon Spouse
Tupperware Party along with Jenny Jobs and Wilma Wozniak...

JENBERET: I think Daddy's enigmatic, mommy.

LITTLE PENNY: That's sweet, pumpkin, but your father is just weird. There's a difference. Besides, $400 million in net worth is fine, fine-until some neighbors have to show off their $32 billion.

JENBERET: Daddy says most of that's in Microsoft stock, mom.

LITTLE PENNY: (Jerking JenBeret's hair back, making her daughter gasp.) I'd sell my soul for ten shares of Microsoft stock, baby. (beat) Don't tell your daddy I said that. (Little Penny messes with JenBeret's hair for a while longer, having to stand on a chair to get to it, and then smiles at their reflections in the mirror) I think this is the one, JenBeret. This time you're finally going to beat Roxy Gates, the six-year-old monster of the runway. You're going to be my "Little Miss Denver Broncos!"

JENBERET: I like John Elton.

LITTLE PENNY: Elway, honey. You like John Elway. Be sure to look at the team owner when you say that. He'll be the one with the rhinestone eyeglasses.

JENBERET: Mom, what would you do if you thought I might not win this contest?

LITTLE PENNY: What ever do you mean, pumpkin?

JENBERET: I mean, if you thought I might not win, you wouldn't kill me in the basement or anything, would you?

LITTLE PENNY: Of course not—

Lights go up on Larry King set.

LARRY: Wait a minute. Are you saying that the day before her death, the day before her body was found in the basement, that she took the time to make sure that you would not be a suspect?

PENNY: That's right.

LARRY: Mrs. Rambling, I have been a reporter and celebrity interviewer for forty years-I have my forty year retrospective show next week in a special prime-time edition of Larry King Live—and you are telling me that your six-year-old daughter wanted to make sure that her own mother had no motive to kill her?

PENNY: No motive at all, Larry.

LARRY: Good enough. Please continue.

PENNY: There really isn't much more to say. I got JenBeret looking, to be honest, the best she ever had during in her entire six years on Earth, and I am very confident that she would have beaten Roxy Gates to become Colorado Spring's next "Little Miss Denver Broncos" if fate had not intervened.

LARRY: Roxy Gates-now, she is a six-year old spoiled rich beauty pageant contestant like JenBeret was, correct?

PENNY: Correct. Roxy is the unholy spawn of Bill Gates and his wife, Lucky Bitch. (collects herself) Anyway, Roxy had just somehow beaten JenBeret for the "Treat your Daughter like a Painted Lady" title, and we were hopping mad...

Lights come up on living room set.

JENBERET: Mom, it's really no big deal. Roxy win3 some, I win some. It keeps it more exciting for everyone that way.

LITTLE PENNY: You just shut that mouth right now before I wash it out with soap, little lady! Roxy humiliated you, she stomped on your pride, ripped your heart out-

LARRY (at table): Excuse me, Mrs. Rambling, but it sounds like you were much more
upset at the 103S than your daughter was. Could it be you were upset that she wasn’t taking the competitions seriously enough? Maybe upset enough to kill?

PENNY (at table): Uh... um... well, let me continue, Larry. As soon as I pointed this out to her—

JENBERET: That bitch! I'll rip her lungs out!
LITTLE PENNY: Now, JenBeret, there's nothing to be this upset about—why, you're much more upset than I am!
JENBERET: Of course I am, mommy! Roxy Gates has taken away my very soul, My reason for being! I must be the most beautiful, always! I am much, much more upset than you are!

PENNY: (at table) So yes, Larry, she was beside herself.
LARRY: (at table) Of course.

LITTLE PENNY: Now that you're calmed down, let me make clear to you what this contest means: It is the difference between my being accepted by Lucky Bitch Gates and her club and being rejected! You are the key, JenBeret—one way or another, you will be my entry into that club!
JENBERET: Don't worry, mama, I'll win.
LITTLE PENNY: (Walks to stage right and starts a soliloquy) Oh, you had better win, little JenBeret. I remember when my own mother primped and primed me for my first pageant. It was a colorful, wonderful affair—terrified little girls wetting themselves, shaky mothers lighting cigarettes with other cigarettes, the degradation, the preparation for real life! (sighs) That's all I want for you, JenBeret, to have the chances I had—and to do even better, marry higher, be your own woman! (sighs again and looks back at JenBeret, who is looking at herself in the mirror) But if you don't win...

Lights go down on living room set and come up on Larry King set.
LARRY: If she didn't win, then what? You'd kill her?
PENNY: Of course not! If she didn't win, we'd just console ourselves with being white, rich, and frigid!
LARRY: Ah, very good. Well, Jim, how about you? Absent-minded, preoccupied, workaholic father—how did you feel about JenBeret's prospects for victory? Or the consequences of defeat?
JIM: Um, to tell you the truth, Larry, I was so busy with the launch of our Censor Evader software for kids, I wasn't even aware that Penny was entering our child in these little contests. Hell, until I noticed JenBeret's picture on CNN, I thought we had a boy! (To Penny) Isn't JenBeret a boy's name?
PENNY: Dammit, Jim, don't you ever pay attention? I told you when you called the birthing room from Las Vegas, "Jen" means "Beautiful child" and "Beret" means "of pretentious, nouveau riche parents."
LARRY: Very descriptive.
JIM: I like it.
(Penny rolls her eyes. Larry turns to the audience/camera)
LARRY: Coming up next on this special sweeps-week edition of Larry King Live, we get to the bottom of the Bill Gates-Jim Rambling rivalry. Enough to kill over? We'll find out after this.
Lights do down on entire stage and the announcer Steps to center stage again, lit by spotlight.

ANNOUNCER: Tune into Showbiz Today for the best of the day’s show business news. Tonight, Tom Cruise shares his thoughts and feelings about his co-star, Zaftig the Wonder Chicken, in Steven Spielberg’s new remake of Springtime for Hitler. (shuffles papers) Also, find out all there is to know about The Artist Formerly Known As The Artist Formerly Known As Prince, since he’s changed his name once again, this time to a symbol that kind of looks like a schwa and kind of looks like the silhouette of Peggy Fleming. (shuffles papers again) And after Showbiz Today, we’ll cover the assassination of Iraq’s president Saddam... (struggles) Hussy-in. Hussan. Tune in tonight.

Announcer exits stage right as the lights come back up on the Larry King set. The living room set has now been altered to be an office setting with a large executive desk and two uncomfortable looking chairs in front of it.

LARRY: And we’re back. Jim, attention has turned to your rivalry with Bill Gates, the aforementioned enigmatic billionaire successful software magnate—

JIM: Yeah, yeah, we all know who he is.

LARRY: Isn’t it true that you tried to interest Gates in your software company before he turned you down, insulted your ideas, and arranged for you to be, as Microsoft puts it in their brochure for competitors, “disappeared”?

JIM: That’s just standard software business practice. Gates had every reason to purchase my company, but there was a factor I hadn’t counted on...

Lights go up on office set. Seated at the desk is a young boy, the same age as the children playing Little Jim and Little Penny Rambling, wearing glasses, a short-sleeve business shirt and a clip-on tie. This is BILL GATES. The door to the office opens and Little Jim enters. He looks confident and hopeful, wearing a smile and darting across the room to shake hands with Gates, who languidly offers his hand to shake.

GATES: You can take a seat if you want, Jim, but I’d save myself the effort. We don’t have much to talk about.

LITTLE JIM: Not much! Bill—

GATES: Please, call me Mr. Gates.

LITTLE JIM: Listen, Mr. Gates, my Nude Internet browser has the potential to revolutionize the whole Web industry! Think of it—no more bothering with Web sites featuring news or information! Just skin, skin, skin flowing bit-by-bit into your computer all day long! The business applications alone—

GATES: Like what?

LITTLE JIM: No more need to get hookers for your sales reps out of town—just let them play with a laptop until they get their rocks off and they’re ready for another day of imposing Microsoft’s dominance over the world!

GATES: But Jim, Microsoft has been investing in prostitute technology for ten years. We’ve grown our own cyborg hookers: disease-free, completely compatible with all of our sales reps’ hardware, if you know what I mean.

LITTLE JIM: Well, there’s a lot more to Rambling Software than just Nude Internet, Mr. Gates. We have some of the best interactive simulations of senseless violence you’re ever likely to see! Some people have actually suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome from just the free sampler disks we send in the mail!

GATES: Jim, we stole the source code for that from you months ago. When it comes to traumatizing people, frankly, Microsoft is the world leader. What else you got?

LITTLE JIM: Well, we... look, Bill, is this about the pageant yesterday?
(Gates puts on a mask of surprise)
GATES: What, the thing with Roxy and JennaBear?
LITTLE JIM: JenBeret. Yes, the one that your daughter won over my daughter.
GATES: (laughing) Do you really think I, the most powerful man in industry, pays attention to that kind of thing?
LITTLE JIM: It’s just that your attitude towards me seems ... different. Like you don’t have the same regard for me.
GATES: Look, Jim: I could care less about those silly beauty pageants; I hardly even know they’re going on! I mean, yes, my daughter beat yours by .02973 points, the first time anyone has beaten her in competition. And yes, maybe I have a little less respect for those I vanquish that for those I envy. But so what? That’s the nature of my business!
LITTLE JIM: So, because my daughter lost to your daughter, my software company is less attractive to you now?
GATES: Look, as long as your daughter is second-best, I pretty much have to figure anything you have is second-best. I mean, you don’t get near the personal publicity I do. People need that to identify with your software. Why do you think Norton puts his smarmy face on the front of his Utilities packages? Hell, Jimbo, no one even knows your face!
(Little Jim sits stunned in his seat, not knowing what to do
LITTLE JIM: Well, what if JenBeret beats Roxy to become the Little Miss Denver Broncos?
GATES: Then we can talk. But honestly, I don’t think she has a chance. Not after the pageant last week. No, Jim, I think your market share will continue to dwindle until I can buy Rambling Software for packing peanuts. No hard feelings, though, right?
(Gates extends his hand. Little Jim shakes it, zombie-like)

Lights come up on Larry King set.

LARRY: Incredible, Jim Rambling. So what you’re saying is that Bill Gates, the enigmatic tycoon—
JIM: He threatened me—he said that if I didn’t get my name out there soon, if I was known only as the father of a second-rate beauty contestant, then my business was doomed.
LARRY: Sounds like a pretty good reason to make sure she was ready for the contest.
JIM: (agitated) The contest?! Larry, there was no way she was going to win that Denver Broncos title! Not after the disaster—
PENNY: Jim! JenBeret had every chance to win that next pageant. Roxy Gates had become lazy, weak, arrogant—
LARRY: In a week?
PENNY: These children have the minds of 30-year-olds, Larry. They can rise and fall faster than their coaches, tutors, advisors, paid friends, and accountants can even keep up with! I’m telling you, Roxy Gates was primed for failure! That’s why Lucky Bitch killed JenBeret!
LARRY AND JIM: (in disbelief) What?!
LARRY: (to audience/cameraman) Hey, with that, folks, why don’t we take a quick commercial break, and we’ll be back with more startling developments or double our sponsor’s money back!

Lights go down on main stage and announcer enters from stage
right, holding something under a silk handkerchief.

ANNOUNCER: (in TV huckster’s voice) Haven’t you been moved by the constant coverage of the JenBeret Rambling murder case? Who could forget the first tearful denials of guilt, the second tearful denials of guilt, or the third tearful denials of guilt, accompanied with a large reward for information on the “real killers”? And JenBeret herself—her perfect makeup, the childlike features, the six-inch stiletto heels? From the first television coverage with the picture postcard Rambling mansion cordoned off with yellow police tape, to the repeated revelations of the National Enquirer, no American has been left untouched by this great national tragedy and media opportunity.

(whips handkerchief off object, which is a painted collector’s plate) That’s why we at the Franklin Mint commissioned this once-in-a-lifetime collector’s plate commemorating the JenBeret murder case. With its lifelike depiction of the basement and garrote, as well as TV cameras and tabloid racks, this plate, specially valued for a limited time only at $34.99, is sure to take a treasured place in any living room, den, or child’s playroom.

(taking a legalese tone) While past performance is no guarantee of future value, collector’s plates of the Menendez trial and the O.J. Simpson verdict have nearly tripled in value. (back to huckster voice) Don’t let the splashiest case since the Lindbergh baby pass you by! Order your JenBeret Rambling collector plate today!

Lights go back up on Larry King set as announcer exits stage right.

LARRY: Welcome back. Now, Penny, you were saying you believe that Lucky Bitch, wife of enigmatic software blah blah Bill Gates, is a prime suspect in this case.

PENNY: That’s right—I think Bill’s wife, Lucky Bitch Gates, killed our daughter so she wouldn’t disgrace Roxy at the next pageant!

JIM: No, Penny—the “Painted Lady” contest, the defeat... Mr. Gates, if you’re watching, I’m sure Roxy would have kicked our little JenBeret’s ass—

PENNY: That is not true! JenBeret lost by the slimmest of margins—

LARRY: Mrs. Rambling, why don’t you take us back to that day, the day of the “Treat your Daughter like a Painted Lady” pageant.

PENNY: Well, it was just a week after the “Make your Daughter look like a Two-Dollar Whore” show in Aspen...

The lights go down on the Larry King set as a shimmery curtain, like that of a ’70s talk show, falls onto the right half of the stage. The CNN announcer steps out in front of the curtain, which will represent the beauty pageant stage.

ANNOUNCER: (in a cheesy MC-type voice) It’s been a tough decision, folks, but we’ve narrowed the field down to just two contestants! (leads audience in applause) Before we announce our finalists, I’d like to thank our judges: (points to front row of audience as if people named are sitting there) First of all, coming all the way from Yuba, California, the man who gave us such hits as “Knock Three Times” and ...(looks beseechingly to audience) “Time in a Bottle”? “Mr. Bojangles”? (gives up) Well, he gave us “Knock Three Times”-Mr. Tony Orlando! (leads the audience in applause) Okay, next, you know him from the classic television show “BJ and the Bear,” it’s Greg Evigan! (leads audience in applause) Finally, last seen filthy and hiding in shrubbery before her
big comeback as a spokes-has-been for Charter Hospital, it’s Margot Kidder! (leads audience in applause and checks note cards) Thank you judges. Okay, now I’d like to announce our two finalists. Number one is that six-year-old sexpot, JenBeret Rambling! JenBeret, looking fantastic and in usual sash and tiara, enters stage right and stands next to announcer. She smiles and waves at the audience professionally.) And JenBeret will be facing some pretty stiff competition from the world’s richest girl, Roxy Gates!

Out from stage left, past the Larry King set, step two long, gorgeous legs. Attached to them is a sultry 16-18-year-old brunette, ROXY, who slinks in a little silky red outfit, complete with black sash and tiara, kisses the announcer on the cheek, and blows a sexy kiss to the audience.

ANNOUNCER: Who says these contests are bad for little girls? Just look at that confidence! (Announcer takes a step forward. Behind him we can see JenBeret and Roxy interacting: sticking their tongues out at each other, pushing, kicking. In other words, acting like six-year-old rivals) You know, folks, it’s always been my pleasure to help show the specialness and folksiness of these little pampered strumpets. Some people say that they’re just spoiled rich kids, but I say they’re spoiled rich kids with style, grace, and surprisingly—heck, arousingly—adult views of the world. (As the announcer steps back, the girls’ hijinks ceases and they resume their “innocent” pageant smiles) JenBeret, Roxy—we have a lot of inappropriately mature questions to ask you and tasks for you to perform, but first, can you tell all of us why you want to be Colorado’s Little Painted Lady? JenBeret?

JENBERET: (smile plastered to her face, but becoming teary-eyed the more she speaks) When I was just a child, just two years old, my mother took me to the cosmetics counter at Woolworth’s. She showed me the pretty colors and the nice textures. I wanted it all! (starting teary-eyed part) But she told me that I was too good for Woolworth’s makeup! Too good for Mary Kay! Too good-yes, Colorado, too good for Avon! I knew then that I would aspire to become our state’s Little Painted Lady, because this pageant’s sponsor, Test-On-Bunnies America Inc., makes the best darn cosmetics that ever blocked a pore!

Announcer leads audience in applause as JenBeret steps back, face covered in tears. Roxy is unmoved.

ANNOUNCER: Beautiful, JenBeret Rambling. Now, Roxy Gates, why do you want to be Colorado’s Little Painted Lady!

ROXY: Things weren’t always easy for my family. Yes, we have billions, but sometimes even that doesn’t bring comfort. Early mornings, when the house staff has been up drinking malt liquor and vandalizing their own homes, you can’t even get a poached egg upon entering the kitchen! (sobs and is comforted by the announcer, but continues) There have been times, ladies and gentlemen, when my only friend has been makeup. When I have spent hours being attended to with rollers and brushes to make me the most beautiful I could possibly be. (getting inspired) Cosmetics, dear friends, has made me what I am today! And what I am today is six years old, and proud to be a Test-On-Bunnies Painted Lady!

Announcer leads audience in very spirited applause, more intense.

ANALECTA
than what JenBeret received. Roxy steps back next to JenBeret, and they
take to sticking their tongues out at each other, etc., behind the
announcer’s back.

ANNOUNCER: Wonderful, wonderful. Now on to the talent portion of our show.
(takes something from his pocket) Roxy, could you use your tongue to tie this cherry
stem into a knot?

Lights come up on Larry King set.

LARRY: Amazing, amazing. So there was some bad blood between JenBeret and
Roxy?
PENNY: You bet there was, Larry. I concocted that Woolworth’s story for her using
some of the best speechwriters money can buy, and then Roxy Gates, who certainly could
afford writers of her own, goes and gives an impromptu speech! The sponsors were
impressed, told the judges how to vote, and the rest is Painted Lady history.

JIM: JenBeret was beside herself. She spent practically the entire next day by herself,
playing with dolls, digging in the backyard-isolating herself!
PENNY: She hardly touched her complimentary makeup set. That just wasn’t like her.
LARRY: So you think maybe she was getting burned out on the whole pageant-a-week
business, ready to live a normal six-year-old’s life?
PENNY: (looking at Larry like he’s from Mars) Of course not! She obviously was
disgusted with the judges’ selection of Roxy Gates and so she was protesting by coloring,
playing hopscotch, all that nonsense that didn’t add one bit to her marketability or her
media presence!

Larry ponders this statement for a moment.
LARRY: Are YOU sure it wasn’t suicide?

LARRY AND PENNY: Larry!

LARRY: Just asking. (Now to audience/camera) Okay folks, you’ve heard their story,
their list of suspects, and their alibis. The Ramblings didn’t know we were going to do
this, but we’ve invited Bill, Roxy, and Lucky Bitch Gates to join us in our next half-hour
and help us find out: Who Killed JenBeret? We’ll be back.

ACT TWO

The lights go up on the Larry King set. A curtain remains down on
the rest of the set. Larry is joined now by Jim and Penny Rambling, but
also now by BILL, LUCKY BITCH, and ROXY, who is played in the
Larry King segments by a young girl about the same age as the actors
playing the Ramblings in the re-enactment’s. Bill and Lucky Bitch are
played by adult actors who look much like the young actors playing them in the earlier scenes—Bill is geeky and wears glasses, like the real Bill Gates we know through the media. (Here he will be referred to as Bill, as opposed to the younger actor designated by Gates earlier.)

**LARRY:** Thanks for staying with us, folks. Now we can get down to solving the mystery of JenBeret Rambling. We’re going to take some calls, but first, I’d like to welcome enigmatic billionaire software tycoon Bill Gates—(Gates nods) His wife, Lucky Bitch—(Lucky Bitch nods) And their daughter, now alone atop the grade-school beauty pageant heap, Miss Roxy Gates. (Roxy gives a little beauty pageant princess wave) Welcome, all of you. Let’s go to the phones. Hello,, Eddie from Paradox, New York.

**EDDIE:** (voice only) Hello?

**LARRY:** Hello, Eddie, you’re on *Larry King Live.*

**EDDIE:** Hi, Larry, great show. I’m glad this case is no longer being ignored by the media.

**LARRY:** Thank you, Eddie. What’s your question?

**EDDIE:** Well, my question is for Roxy gates. I’d love to have her phone number! (All at table laugh, except Roxy, who looks disturbed) But seriously, Larry, my question for Roxy is: Aren’t you really the killer? I mean, you’re the one that had the actual rivalry with JenBeret. Could you address this?

**LARRY:** How about it, Roxy? Eddie has a pretty good point. All signs point to your undeniable guilt!

**LITTLE ROXY:** (clearing throat and sounding very adult) JenBeret Rambling and I had a complex relationship. We competed, but we also shared a closeness adults with their cognition shaped by cynical experience can’t hope to relate to. I remember one time with Jen, just after the “Painted Lady” contest, when I showed her what sisterhood really meant between two golden girls destined for all the success and happiness our fathers could buy...

Lights go up on stage right, where the older actors playing JenBeret and Roxy have entered, as always wearing their beauty contest outfits complete with sash and tiara. They are playing hopscotch.

**ROXY:** You touched the line, JenBeret. You’re out.

**JENBERET:** I’ll appeal that.

**ROXY:** Appeal? To who?

**JENBERET:** Hopscotch didn’t just happen, Roxy Gates. There is a rules commission, a body of authorities that monitor the games around the world...

**ROXY:** What? Says who?

**JENBERET:** Says my mom. She says that everyone who plays unfairly, whether it’s in hopscotch or in, say, international software monopolies, will be caught and censured.

**ROXY:** Ha, ha. It is to laugh. But you’re still out. (JenBeret sits down to sulk while...
ROXY jumps through her paces and begins picking up rocks. You know, you had a real shot at winning the crown this time around. I still can’t believe I beat you.

JENBERET: (sitting on edge of stage with her chin in her hands) My mom says it’s just because they want a new face. They can’t have the same glamorous, gorgeous, sexy six-year-olds winning every contest.

ROXY: Maybe... or maybe your day has passed, JenBeret Rambling. Maybe it’s time for you to start entering pre-teen pageants instead of the same old seven-and-under contests.

JENBERET: You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Have the whole playing field to yourself?

ROXY: Hey, I’m your friend. I’m just worried that there are forces about who’d like to see you removed from the contest.

JENBERET: What do you mean?

ROXY: (coming over and sitting next to JenBeret) I mean... I’m not the only other contestant out there. These are big stakes we’re talking about here. Free makeup for a year. Your own pink mini-jeep. A dream date with Jonathan Taylor Thomas. It’s not to be taken lightly.

JENBERET: I’ve been at this longer than you have, Roxy. I know the dangers.

ROXY: I’m not threatening you; I’m letting you know what’s going on. Things have changed since you hit the circuit. The child pageant business is nothing to toy around with now. They’ll put your feet in alphabet blocks; you’ll be sleeping with the Fisher Price.

JENBERET: You’re creeping me out.

ROXY: (getting up) I’m opening your eyes. Just be careful. Watch your sash.

As Roxy exits stage right, lights go up on Larry King set.

LARRY: Pretty heavy stuff for six-year-olds.

LITTLE ROXY: Haven’t you read Piaget? I think Mafia intimations clearly fall under the realm of concrete operations, if you catch my drift.

LARRY: Too true. Are you satisfied, Eddie?

EDDIE: I thought they’d be totally cutthroat, but I guess Roxy was just really looking out for JenBeret’s best interests! I’m convinced.

LARRY: That’s great, Eddie. Makes us feel like we’re doing our job. Hey, what do you do out there in Paradox?

EDDIE: Oh, I’m an appeals court judge.

LARRY: Should’ve guessed. (turning to Lucky Bitch) Lucky Bitch Gates, former secretary at Microsoft, now wife to the richest man in creation. Feel good?

LUCKY BITCH: I’d rather be rich than happy any day, Larry.

LARRY: Well put. Okay, we have a caller with a question for Lucky Bitch. Susan from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, you’re on the air.

SUSAN: (voice only) Hello? Larry King?

LARRY: Yes, Susan, you’re on. Did you have a question?

SUSAN: Yes, but first, can I say that you have the classiest show on television. I watch it every day. I tape it. I put it on a 100P 30 I can see your pointy nose and receding hairline all day, every day, no matter what I’m doing. I masturbate to your face each morning!

LARRY: Thanks, Susan. No matter how many time I hear that, it always makes me sick. Your question for Mrs. Gates?

SUSAN: I was just wondering what motive Lucky Bitch had for killing JenBeret-I mean,
she has it all: Loving absentee husband, gorgeous sexually active six-year-old beauty-pageant-winning daughter, not to mention that whole 32 billion-dollar thing going on over there.

LARRY: I think Mrs. Gates had plenty of motive to whack her neighbor’s daughter, didn’t you, Lucky Bitch? The fear of your daughter being trounced after her brush with victory, renewing the inevitable fears of inadequacy you must hold being the white trash wife of the world’s most enigmatic and powerful software tycoon? Shouldn’t we be just a little suspicious of a woman who based her entire life around the achievements of her daughter, and then saw her daughter’s competition erased with the death of her next-door neighbor?

Shouldn’t the finger really be pointed at you, Lucky Bitch Gates?

LUCKY BITCH: Nope.

LARRY: Good enough. When we come back, we’ll find out what each of our guests had to gain by murdering JenBeret, and then we’ll blame one of them and go home. Now the news.

Lights go down on Larry King set and announcer enters from stage right, again with the desk strapped onto him.

ANNOUNCER: Here’s the top stories we’re following this half-hour: (shuffles papers) A crazed gunman was arrested after opening fire in a tractor showroom yesterday. Early reports indicate that his wife had left him for one of their salesman. The wife reportedly pinned a John Deere letter to his pillow... (shuffles papers) In other news, the crash of a Polish airliner into a cemetery yesterday still has Warsaw authorities baffled. So far they have recovered 12,000 bodies... (shuffles papers) And finally, authorities in Boulder, Colorado, have indicated they may be close to naming a suspect in the JenBeret Rambling murder case, possibly before the next commercial break of Larry King Live, depending on what new evidence is uncovered. Stay tuned for these and more headlines. Now back to the show.

Lights go up on Larry King set as announcer exits stage right.

LARRY: Welcome back to Larry King Live, once again, joining me tonight are the Ramblings and the Gates, two families in turmoil after the suspicious death of precocious beauty queen JenBeret Rambling. Jim, let’s start with you. What did you have to gain from your daughter’s murder?

JIM: What? Nothing!

LARRY: Come on, Jim. Nobody does anything without an angle. What’s yours?

JIM: Well, okay, if you think of it that way, the media coverage has made Rambling Software a household name, a real player in the business.

BILL: It sure has made his company more attractive to me.

JIM: You bet. People who think I didn’t kill JenBeret are buying my software out of sympathy, and those who think I did kill her are buying it in the hope it’ll provide some titillation! So the whole murder thing really has worked out nicely. (beat) But I didn’t do it.

LARRY: Of course not. Penny, you must have stood to gain something from your daughter’s untimely demise. What was it? An early out of the pressure-filled pageant world?

PENNY: Heavens, no. I loved that! The glitter, the glamour, the young farters darting about! No, I’d say the best thing to come out of JenBeret’s death has been my total acceptance into the social circle of the wives of cutthroat software titans. I mean, they watch TV, they have the newspapers read to them they have total sympathy for what I’ve
gone through, not to mention the titillation of knowing someone who may be a cold-blooded murderer! It’s been great!

LARRY: Glad to hear it. Bill Gates, you’ve got everything anyone could want. Total world domination, tons of cash, a gorgeous wife despite your round shoulders and weak chin—what’d you get out of this horrible event?

BILL: Oh, plenty. See, that’s where other-less-”tycoons” falter. Once they’ve got market share, they just try to hold on. For me, there’s always more. Lots more. The money is just a by-product of my quest for more.

LARRY: So how did JenBeret help?

BILL: Well, heck, Larry, with her death, I was able to harness media attention in a way I never had before! Coverage of me or my software was always critical in some way, at least until I bought the network. But when JenBeret died, I could play the card of being her best friend’s father—

LITTLE ROXY: Best friend!

BILL: Hush. I could play that card to get people to lay off. Yes, they still had loads of problems with my software and business practices, but they were too titillated by my connection to the JenBeret case to care! I got exposure in the tabloids, one realm I thought I’d never conquer!

LARRY: Congratulations. Lucky Bitch? You gave a stirring defense a few minutes ago, but what did you really think of this whole debacle?

LUCKY BITCH: Oh, really, I couldn’t have been happier. The media coverage of the pageants has brought in prizes from all areas of fashion and industry. Now not only do we have Test-On-Bunnies cosmetics, but we have fur companies, petroleum refineries, and strip miners all lining up to sponsor our little contests! Without the titillation Roxy’s rival generated, we’d still be holding contests at the elementary school instead of at the Denver Marriott!

LARRY: That is impressive. Roxy Gates, lifetime competitor with JenBeret, not to mention apparent member of a first-grade organized crime syndicate. What did you get out of JenBeret being bumped off?

LITTLE ROXY: Peace of mind, of course, knowing that I’d be a shoo-in for the various pageants and whatnot my mother was always bringing me to. (beat) But Larry, I have to say that the real gift JenBeret’s untimely death has given me is that it has brought me closer to my spiritual side, closer to God. (There is total, stunned silence as Roxy’s words sink in. Then she laughs) Just kidding! The TV coverage titillated my friends so much they pay me just to watch me re-enact our catfights! Hell, I’m the most popular girl in school now!

All at table share a warm laugh.

LARRY: Okay, there you have it, folks, the motives, alibis, lies, jealousy, posturing, and backstabbing you’ve come to expect in this case. Now it’s in your hands. We’ll let you, the studio audience, decide who killed JenBeret!

Hopefully, audience will cheer at this point. Larry gets up and motions for all of the others to stand as well. They follow him to center stage, where a stagehand gives him a game-show-type microphone. He lines Jim, Penny, Bill, Lucky Bitch, and Roxy up in a line facing the
audience. They look a little nervous but like they are enjoying themselves

LARRY: This is a first for cable and entertainment, folks—a trial in which you get to be the judge, jury, and—depending on the outcome of a pending court case—possibly even executioner! Interactive TV, it’s the wave of the future. (pause while Larry gets himself geared up) Here’s what we’re gonna do—I’ll place my hand over the head of each suspect, and you let me know by applause how guilty you think he or she is! (goes to beginning of line, Jim Rambling) He’s a cold, MIA father trying to unload his software company through media exposure—JenBeret’s father, Jim Rambling!

This part of the play is going to be a little fluid, because of the variability of audience reaction. The suspects can’t help themselves, and motion for the audience to applaud, just like contestants in a high-school talent show.

LARRY: (moving on to Penny) Okay—she’s an overbearing mother completely out of touch with reality, but who is climbing the social ladder thanks to media exposure—JenBeret’s mother, Penny Rambling! (Larry waits for applause to subside, then moves on to Bill) He’s the enigmatic software tycoon billionaire geek you love to hate even as you buy his products. He’s seen Microsoft stock go through the roof thanks to free advertising through media exposure—Roxy’s father, Bill Gates! (Larry waits for applause to die down, then moves on to Lucky Bitch) Now, she’s been called the luckiest bitch in the world, marrying Bill Gates and his billions, but she’s been even luckier thanks to the media attention since JenBeret’s death—it’s Roxy’s mother, Lucky Bitch Gates! (Now Larry is at the end of the line, with Little Roxy. He pauses for effect, and gets his engines ready. He saves special attention for Little Roxy; it’s obvious he thinks she’s the one the audience should vote for) And finally, she’s a beauty contestant, a Marxist, an organized crime leader. She had the most to gain from JenBeret’s death, even though she purported to be her friend. She got tons of media exposure, first as the sad surviving pal, then as the person who had the most to gain! It’s the unchallenged winner of the Little Miss Denver Broncos beauty pageant, Roxy Gates! Let’s give her a big round of applause!

With Larry’s prodding, it should be Roxy who is selected as the killer by the audience, but whoever “wins” should say the next line.

WINNER: Wait a minute! This is insane! I didn’t kill JenBeret! I didn’t want all the media exposure—in fact, the media’s the one that’s been the real winner here!

JIM: That’s true—the National Enquirer needed to fill the void left by the O.J. case ending—

PENNY: And CNN would have had to lay off a whole team of legal experts without a fresh case—

BILL: And the Denver News-Free Press has seen its circulation triple since the murder—

LUCKY BITCH: And how many people have gotten book deals off this case already?

ROXY: (more slowly, with venom) And hasn’t Larry King Live jumped to the top of the talk-show heap since the killing?

LARRY: What are you implying—

ROXY: Haven’t you, Larry King, really had the most to gain from JenBeret Rambling’s
death?

**LARRY:** (looking very nervous) I-I’m-It’s just a talk show—

**ROXY:** With big ratings, bigger than ever before—(turns to audience) What do you think, folks? (pulls a chair over so she can stand on it and put her hand over Larry’s head) He’s the slimy vulture who’s never afraid to exploit a victim-Larry King!

*This should rouse the audience into stronger applause than for any of the other defendants. Jim, Penny, Bill, and Lucky Bitch cheer like crazy. Larry looks troubled at first, then smugly defiant*

**LARRY:** Fine, fine, send me to jail. (as he addresses each person, they shrink back and reconsider) But Roxy, when you step out of the limelight I gave you, someone else is gonna step in. (to Lucky Bitch) Sponsors want exposure, darling, something you can get only through me. (to Bill) I use Windows—you want me to tell the whole world that? “Convicted Killer Prefers Microsoft Products”? (to Penny) Do you think people have sympathy when they don’t see the tears on their TV screens? These are the people who thought Bosnia was a new chocolate-flavored drink until CNN showed them what was going on! (to Jim) The window of opportunity is small, Jim-hot companies have to stay in the public eye, and that means media exposure! With me gone, how are you going to get that? (Now Larry addresses the audience/camera) And all of you, sitting at home, what are you going to do if they send me to jail or to the electric chair, huh? How are you going to know what to think, who to like and who to hate? Face it, folks, you need me and my kind! You’re closer to us than you are to your neighbors! What would you possibly do without us? (Larry takes a minute to let that settle in to the audience and the defendants on stage, then turns to Roxy) Well, Roxy Gates? Who killed JenBeret?

**ROXY:** (beat) It remains a mystery.

**LUCKY BITCH:** A puzzle.

**BILL:** An enigma.

**PENNY:** A quandary.

**LARRY:** (Larry now turns to Jim, who doesn’t immediately answer as the others did) Well, Jim Rambling? Who killed JenBeret?

**JIM:** (with a smile) You did, Larry!

**LARRY:** (also smiling) That’s right! And what is anybody going to do about it?

**JIM:** (giddy, almost laughing now) Absolutely nothing!

**LARRY:** God bless America! (heading back to his desk) That’s all we have for you tonight, folks, but tune in tomorrow when we’ll be interviewing Charo, Erik Estrada, and the Australian band Men at Work to try to find the answer to the question that has kept all the world glued to their televisions: Was John F. Kennedy murdered? (waving) See you tomorrow, folks!

As audience applauds, the suspects smile and shake Larry’s hand.

All are very happy at the media exposure—especially Larry, of course.

**CURTAIN**