

“The Chrysanthemums”

By John Steinbeck

Adapted for the stage by Matthew Spangler

NARRATOR: The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world. On every side it sat like a lid on the mountains and made of the great valley a closed pot. On the broad, level land floor the gang plows bit deep and left the black earth shining like metal where the shares had cut. On the foothill ranches along the Salinas River, the yellow stubble fields were bathed in pale cold sunshine, but there was no sunshine in the valley now in December. It was a time of quiet and of waiting. The air was cold and tender. A light wind blew up from the southwest so that the farmers were hopeful of a good rain before long, but fog and rain do not go together. On Henry Allen’s foothill ranch there was little work to be done, for the hay was cut and stored and the orchards were plowed to receive the rain when it should come. Elisa Allen was working in her flower garden. She looked down across the yard and saw Henry, her husband, talking to two men in business suits. Elisa was cutting down the old year’s chrysanthemum stalks. She put her strong fingers down into the forest of new green chrysanthemum sprouts that were growing around the old roots. No aphids were there, no sowbugs or snails or cutworms. She destroyed such pests before they could get started. After a while, the strangers got into their Ford coupe and drove away. Her husband came near and leaned over the wire fence that protected her flower garden from cattle and dogs and chickens.

HENRY: “At it again. You’ve got a strong new crop coming.”

ELISA: “Yes, they’ll be strong this coming year.”

HENRY: “You’ve got a gift with things. Some of those yellow chrysanthemums you had this year were ten inches across. I wish you’d work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big.”

ELISA: “Maybe I could do it too. I’ve got a gift with things, all right. My mother had it. She could stick anything in the ground and make it grow. She said it was having planters’ hands that knew how to do it.”

HENRY: “Well, it sure works with flowers.”

ELISA: “Henry, who were those men you were talking to?”

HENRY: “Why, sure, that’s what I came to tell you. They were from the Western Meat Company. I sold those thirty head of three-year-old-steers. Got nearly my own price, too.”

ELISA: “Good. Good for you.”

HENRY: “And I thought how it’s Saturday afternoon, and we might go into Salinas for dinner at a restaurant, and then to a picture show—to celebrate, you see.”

ELISA: “Good. Oh yes, that will be good.”

HENRY: “There’s fights tonight. How’d you like to go to the fights?”

ELISA: “Oh, no. No, I wouldn’t like the fights.”

HENRY: “We’ll go to a movie, then. Let’s see, it’s two now. I’m going to take Scotty and bring down those steers from the hill. It’ll take two hours maybe. We’ll go into town about five and have dinner at the Caminos Hotel. Like that?”

ELISA: “Of course I’ll like that. It’s good to eat away from home. I’ll have plenty of time to transplant some of these sets, I guess.”

NARRATOR: She heard her husband calling Scotty down by the barn. And a little later she saw the two men ride up the pale yellow hillside in search of the steers. Soon after, a squeak of wheels and plod of hoofs came up from the road. She saw a curious vehicle, an old spring-wagon, with a round canvas top like a prairie schooner. It was drawn by an old bay horse and a little grey-and-white burro. Underneath the wagon, a mongrel dog walked sedately. Words were printed on the canvas, in clumsy, crooked letters. Pots, pans, knives, scissors, lawn mowers, Fixed. Two rows of articles, and then, triumphantly, the word “Fixed” below.

ELISA: Elisa watched to see the crazy, loose-jointed wagon pass by.

NARRATOR: But it didn’t pass. It turned into the entrance road in front of the house, crooked wheels squeaking. It pulled up to the wire fence and stopped.

ELISA: The horse and donkey drooped like unwatered flowers.

NARRATOR: The dog darted from between the wheels and ran ahead. Instantly the two ranch shepherds flew out at him. The newcomer dog, feeling out-numbered, lowered his tail and retired under the wagon.

MAN: “That’s a bad dog in a fight when he gets started.”

ELISA: “I see he is. How soon does he generally get started?”

MAN: “Sometimes not for weeks and weeks. I’m off my general road, ma’am. Does this dirt road cut over cross the river to the Los Angeles highway?”

ELISA: “Well, yes it does, but it winds around and then fords the river. I don’t think your team could pull through the sand.”

MAN: “It might surprise you what them beats can pull through.”

ELISA: “When they get started?”

MAN: “Yes. When they get started.”

ELISA: “Well, I think you’ll save time if you go back to the Salinas road and pick up the highway there.”

MAN: “I ain’t in any hurry, ma’am. I go from Seattle to San Diego and back every year. Takes all my time. About six months each way. I aim to follow nice weather.”

ELISA: "That sounds like a nice way to live."

MAN: "Maybe you noticed the writing on my wagon. I mend pots and sharpen knives and scissors. You got any of them things to do?"

ELISA: "Oh no. Nothing like that."

MAN: "Scissors is the worst thing. Most people just ruin scissors trying to sharpen 'em, but I know how. I got a special tool. It's a little bobbit kind of thing—patented. But it sure does the trick."

ELISA: "No. My scissors are all sharp."

MAN: "All right, then. Take a pot, a bent pot, or a pot with a hole. I can make it like new so you don't have to buy new ones. That's a saving for you."

ELISA: "No, I tell you I have nothing like that for you to do."

MAN: "I ain't had a thing to do today, ma'am. Maybe I won't have no supper tonight. You see I'm off my regular road. I know folks on the highway clear from Seattle to San Diego. They save their things for me to sharpen up because they know I do it so good and save them money."

ELISA: "I'm sorry. I haven't anything for you to do."

MAN: "What's them plants, ma'am?"

ELISA: "Oh, those are chrysanthemums. I raise them every year, bigger than anybody around here."

MAN: "Kind of a long-stemmed flower? Looks like a quick puff of colored smoke?"

ELISA: "That's a nice way to describe them."

MAN: "Smell kind of nasty ill you get used to them."

ELISA: "It's a good bitter smell, not nasty at all."

MAN: "I like the smell myself, ma'am."

ELISA: "I had ten-inch blooms this year."

MAN: "Look. I know a lady down the road a piece, has got the nicest garden you ever seen. Got nearly every kind of flower but no chrysanthemums. Last time I was mending a copper-bottom washtub for her (that's a hard job but I do it good) she said to me, 'If you ever run across some nice chrysanthemums, I wish you'd try to get me a few seeds.' That's what she told me."

ELISA: "She couldn't have known much about chrysanthemums. You *can* raise them from seed, but it's much easier to root the little sprouts you see there."

MAN: "Oh. I s'pose I can't take none to her, then."

ELISA: "Why yes you can. I can put them in damp sand, and you can carry them right along with you. They'll take root in the pot if you keep them damp. And then she can transplant them."

MAN: "She'd sure like to have some ma'am. You say they're nice ones."

ELISA: "Beautiful. Oh, they're beautiful. I'll put them in a pot, and you can take them right with you. Come into the yard." Elisa ran to the back of the house. She returned carrying a big red flower pot. She dug up the sandy soil with her fingers and scooped it into the bright new flower pot. Then she picked up the little pile of shoots she had prepared. With her strong fingers she pressed them into the sand and tamped around them with her knuckles. "These will take root in about a month. Then the lady must set them out, about a foot apart in good rich earth like this, see? They'll grow fast and tall. Now remember this: In July tell her to cut them down, about eight inches from the ground."

MAN: "Before they bloom?"

ELISA: "Yes, before they bloom. They'll grow right up again. About the last of September the buds'll start. It's the budding that takes the most care. Did you ever hear of planting hands?"

MAN: "Can't say I have, ma'am."

ELISA: "Well, I can only tell you what it feels like. It's when you're picking off the buds you don't want. Everything goes right down into your fingertips. You watch your fingers work. They do it themselves. They pick and pick the buds. They never make a mistake. They're with the plant, you see? Your fingers and the plant. You can feel that, right up your arm, they know, they never make a mistake, you can feel it. When you're like that you can't do anything wrong. You understand?"

MAN: "Maybe I know. Sometimes at night in the wagon there—"

ELISA: "I've never lived as you do, but I do know what you mean. When the night is dark—why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet. Why, you rise up and up! Every pointed star gets driven into your body. It's like that. Hot and sharp and—lovely."

MAN: "It's nice, just like you say. Only when you don't have no dinner, it ain't."

ELISA: "Here. Put it in your wagon, on the seat, where you can watch it. Maybe I can find something for you to do." At the back of the house she dug in the can pile and found two old and battered saucepans. "Here, maybe you can fix these."

MAN: "Good as new I can fix them." At the back of his wagon he set a little anvil, and out of an oily tool box dug a small machine hammer.

ELISA: "You sleep right in the wagon?"

MAN: "Right in the wagon, ma'am. Rain or shine I'm dry as a cow in there."

ELISA: "It must be nice. I wish women could do such things."

MAN: "It ain't the right kind of life for a woman."

ELISA: "How do you know? How can you tell?"

MAN: "I don't know, ma'am. Of course I don't know. Now here's your kettles, done. You don't have to buy no new ones."

ELISA: "How much?"

MAN: "Oh, fifty cents'll do. I keep my prices down and my work good. That's why I have all them satisfied customers up and down the highway."

ELISA: "You might be surprised to have a rival some time. I can sharpen scissors, too. And I can beat the dents out of little pots. I could show you what a woman might do."

MAN: "It would be a lonely life for a woman, ma'am, and a scary life, too, with animals creeping under the wagon at night. Well, thank you kindly, ma'am. I'd do like you told me; I'll go back and catch the Salinas road."

ELISA: "Mind, if you're long in getting there, keep the sand damp."

MAN: "Sand? ... Sand, ma'am? Oh, sure. You mean around the chrysanthemums. Sure I will." The mongrel dog took his place between the back wheels. The wagon turned and crawled out the entrance road and back the way it had come.

ELISA: "Elisa stood in front of her wire fence watching the slow progress of the caravan. "Good-bye, good-bye." Along the river, the thick willow scrub flamed with sharp and positive yellow leaves. "That's a bright direction. There's a glowing there." Elisa turned and ran hurriedly into the house. In the bathroom she tore off her soiled clothes, flung them in the corner. Then she scrubbed herself with a little block of pumice, legs and thighs, loins and chest and arms, until her skin was scratched and red. When she had dried herself she stood in front of a mirror in her bedroom and looked at her body. After a while she began to dress. She put on her newest underclothing and her nicest stockings and the dress which was a symbol of her prettiness. She worked carefully on her hair, penciled her eyebrows and rouged her lips. Before she was finished she heard the thunder of hoofs and the shouts of Henry and his helper, as they drove the steers into the corral. She heard the gate bang shut and Henry entered the house. "There's hot water for your bath. Hurry up. It's getting late." When she heard him splashing in the tub, Elisa laid his dark suit on the bed, and shirt and socks and tie beside it. She stood his polished shoes on the floor.

HENRY: Henry came banging out of the door. "Why—why Elisa. You look so nice!"

ELISA: "Nice? What do you mean by 'nice?'"

HENRY: "I don't know. I mean you look different, strong and happy."

ELISA: "I'm strong? Yes, strong. What do you mean, 'strong?'"

HENRY: "You're playing some kind of a game. It's a kind of a play. You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon."

ELISA: "Henry, don't talk like that! I am strong. I never knew before how strong."

HENRY: "I'll get out the car." The little roadster bounced along on the dirt road by the river raising the birds and driving the rabbits into the brush.

ELISA: "Far ahead on the road Elisa saw a dark speck. She knew. She tried not to look as they passed it, but her eyes would not obey. "He might have thrown them off the road. That wouldn't have been much trouble, not very much. But he kept the pot. He had to keep the pot. That's why he couldn't get them off the road." The roadster turned a bend and she saw the caravan ahead. She swung full around toward her husband so she could not see the little covered wagon and the mismatched team as the car passed. In a moment it was over. The thing was done. She did not look back. "I'll be good, tonight, a good dinner."

HENRY: "I ought to take you out more often. We get so heavy out on the ranch."

ELISA: "Could we have wine at dinner?"

HENRY: "Sure we could."

ELISA: "Henry, at those prize fights, do the men hurt each other very much?"

HENRY: "Sometimes a little. Why?"

ELISA: "Well, I've read how they break noses, and blood runs down their chests. I've read how the fighting gloves get heavy and soggy with blood."

HENRY: "What's the matter, Eliza? I didn't know you read things like that?"

ELISA: "Do women ever go to the fights?"

HENRY: "Oh, sure, some. You want to go? I don't think you'd like it, but I'll take you if you really want to go."

ELISA: "Oh, no. I don't want to go. I'm sure I don't. It'll be enough if we can have wine. It'll be plenty." She turned her collar up so Henry could not see that she was crying weakly—like an old woman.