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DEM BONES

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CHARACTERS

(In order of appearance)

GLADYS OAKS – Female, 70. Matriarch of the Oaks family. Widowed.

BIRCH OAKS – Male, 40. Deputy Sheriff. Divorced. Lives at home with his Mother.

HOLLY OAKS FREEMAN – Female 45. Married to Haynes Freeman. Mother of Heather. Lives in Atlanta.

JOSHUA OAKS – Male, 35. Doctoral candidate in Paleontology. Partner of Bernard Smalls. They live in New York City.

BERNARD SMALLS – Male, 30. African American. Music teacher.

PAT DAVIS – Female, 45. Hairdresser. Girlfriend of Birch Oaks.

LUKE DOUGLAS – Male, 75. Baptist Preacher.

Time: The end of the Twentieth Century

Place: A farmhouse on a lake in rural South Carolina

ACT ONE

Scene 1

(A Saturday in April, daybreak. **Gladys Oaks** and her son **Birch Oaks** are in a bass boat on the lake. Birch is fishing. Gladys is watching. The rising sun gives off a red glow.)

BIRCH

Red sky at morning, sailor take warning.

GLADYS

Red sky at night, sailor's delight.

BIRCH

Mama.

GLADYS

What, Birch?

BIRCH

Suppose there's a red sky at night, and when the sailor gets up the next morning, there's another red sky. What's he supposed to feel like then?

GLADYS

I guess he's cautiously delighted. Or delightfully cautious.

BIRCH

That's one cockeyed sailor.

GLADYS

I love the way it reflects off the lake, the red. I'm gonna miss this old place.

BIRCH

Yeah, red's nice, Mama. But green's nicer. I love the way it peeled off Mr. Asaka's bankroll.

GLADYS

He wrote a check, Birch. They weren't green. I don't quite remember... Were they blue?

BIRCH

One million buckaroos! Damn! I was proud of us.

GLADYS

Watch your language, now. They could have been yellow. Some checks are.

BIRCH

We negotiated like real Jews.

GLADYS

Birch! Don't be mean. Mr. Goldberg down at the bank couldn't have been more polite.

BIRCH

I meant it as a compliment. They're good businessmen.

GLADYS

Or was it Greenberg? I don't rightly remember what color "berg" he was. I just wish your daddy had been there. He would have known what to do.

BIRCH

I thought we did okay. When they build that factory it's gonna give a lotta people good jobs.

GLADYS

Regardless, it's done. Now I want to make sure the last fish fry goes perfect. Give our home a proper goodbye.

(Pause).

BIRCH

Mama.

GLADYS

Yes, Birch?

BIRCH

Hand me my tackle box.

GLADYS

Are you hungry? I brought some bacon and egg sandwiches.

BIRCH

I'll take me one of them oranges I brought.

I'm gonna try me a plastic worm. That's what they want, I bet.

(Casting his line) Whooooo! Suck on that thing!

(Gladys hands him an orange. Birch's cuts a hole in the top of the orange, through which he sucks the juice.)

GLADYS

You're gonna scare the fish away, whooping like that.

BIRCH

I can't just fling it out there. I got to put the voodoo on it.

(Pause).

GLADYS

Do fish suck?

BIRCH

Huh?

GLADYS

What you just said. I thought fish bite.

BIRCH

Actually, they suck down the bait, then I bite them with a hook.

GLADYS

(Speaking to the one fish they've caught) Hey little fishy. If you hadn't sucked you wouldn't be in this predicament. (She looks away, then back at the fish.) Have you seen Howard? (to Birch) If the fishies could talk, I bet they'd have some stories to tell!

BIRCH

Mama, that's weird!

GLADYS

(To all the fish in the lake, in general) Come on little fishies, suck! (To Birch) I'm just helping with your voodoo.

BIRCH

You're only supposed to do it when you cast out your line. *(He casts his line.)* Whoooooee! Suck on that thing!

(Pause).

GLADYS

You sure do eat a lot of oranges lately. You ought never catch another cold.

BIRCH

You know we're right over where Daddy's cornfield used to be. Nothing sweeter than just-picked corn.

GLADYS

That little hill across the way is where Mrs. Hamby's fruit orchard was. I do miss the jellies and preserves she used to give us. This was a close community before they dammed the river up. There aren't many of us left.

BIRCH

Those woods over there where that cove is used to be plumb full of deer. Me and Red Duncan became blood brothers over there. We used to spend all day in the woods pretending we was Indians, stalking deer.

GLADYS

You didn't have to pretend too hard. You are part Cherokee. Almost every family that's been around these parts for more than a few generations is part Indian.

BIRCH

Or part nigger.

GLADYS

Birch! We don't use that word anymore!

BIRCH

Nobody heard me.

GLADYS

I heard you. God heard you. I never used that word when it was considered acceptable. We were always taught to say "nigrah" to be polite. Then it was "negro", then "black"...

BIRCH

Who can figure what they want to be called now?

GLADYS

Well, it's surely not what you said. Why is it that you boys always played "Indian", but you never played "Nigrah"?

BIRCH

Mama!

Sure feels weird taking orders from Red. Since he got elected Sheriff he's got all high and mighty. I have to work a drunk driving checkpoint Saturday night, but I'll be off for the shindig.

GLADYS

Who would have thought when y'all were running around barefoot and half naked that you would grow up to be heroes.

BIRCH

Its DUI, Mama. It ain't Elliott Ness.

GLADYS

Don't make light of the good you do or the danger you risk. You boys put your life on the line to protect this county. Don't forget to invite Red. He's practically family.

BIRCH

I hear the fishing is pretty good down below the dam lately. We could drive down there and fish off the pier.

GLADYS

Noooo! I never liked being below that dam, even with your Daddy. It scared the dickens out of me. I was always afraid the floodgates were going to open or even worse, that the dam might bust and we'd be swept away.

(Pause)

BIRCH

Mama.

GLADYS

What honey?

BIRCH

I think I'm gonna try me a bomber. This worm ain't getting us nowhere.

(He changes his bait.)

Daddy sure was some fisherman; he had a charm. He'd drop three or four lines in the water at the same time, and the fish would just rush up to 'em like kitty cats to mama's titties.

(He casts his line.) Come on, bass, suck on that thang!

GLADYS

Come on fishies. Birch has put the voodoo on you.

BIRCH

It's gonna be like old times, Mama. Leave your worries at the doorstep. Better yet, leave them in Atlanta and New York. Mama, hand me another orange.

GLADYS

Did you talk to Jeannie.

(Silence).

My grandbabies are coming, aren't they?

BIRCH

Yup.

GLADYS

Is she dropping them off?

BIRCH

Yup.

GLADYS

She gonna come pick them up?

BIRCH

Yup.

GLADYS

Did she give you any trouble? It's not your weekend.

BIRCH

I thought she was gonna make me get a damn court order. Shit! I mean, shoot, Mama. You're the only goddamn grandma they got. (*Gladys looks at him, wounded.*) I'm sorry, Mama.

GLADYS

I'm going to have to get Preacher Douglas to have a heart-to-heart with you.

BIRCH

It seems to me like Luke's been having a lot of heart-to-heart's with you lately. He's been to the house three times this week. Mama, I think he's sweet on you.

GLADYS

He just needs some companionship and understanding since Frances passed away. Luke and I have known each other for over fifty years. He's a good friend and a true man of God. I don't know what I would have done without his friendship and pastorage after Howard ...

(*Pause*)

BIRCH (*sings*)

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

BIRCH AND GLADYS

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

BIRCH

Mama.

GLADYS

What, Birch?

BIRCH

My voodoo ain't doing doo doo.

GLADYS

I'm ready to go back now. I'm cold, and the fish just don't care about us anymore.

BIRCH

I don't think they'd be good to eat anyway. The PCB levels in this part of the lake are so high, and the rain yesterday just stirred 'em up from the lake bottom.

It don't matter. I saw big display case full of fresh trout fillets over at the Winn Dixie yesterday. They'll fry up just fine, and nobody will ever know the difference.

GLADYS

Fine. I'll drive over to Dixie store this afternoon and see what they have fresh. I can put them in the freezer. It'll be less work. It'll do just fine.

But Birch... don't tell anybody. I'd just as soon they thought we caught them. We want it to be as much like it used to be as we can make it. If people knew otherwise... well I just don't know.

BIRCH

Okay, Mama. This here booger's still alive. I think she's about to lay eggs. That's why her belly is so chubby. Come on, fat little mama. Go on back in and make two-headed babies that glow in the dark.

Mama.

GLADYS

(Holds out an orange for him.) Here, Birch.

BIRCH

Thank you, Mama.

GLADYS

I better pick up some more oranges while I'm at the Winn-Dixie, too.

(Lights fade)

Scene 2

*(In the living room of the Oaks home at Oak Grove. **Holly Oaks Freeman** has just arrived. She removes her jacket and takes out her Blackberry hand-held device and reads some email. While this is going on, Gladys is in the kitchen.)*

GLADYS

(Offstage)

What a fellowship, What a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Are you sure I can't fix you a sandwich? I just made egg salad.

HOLLY

No, Mama. I had a late lunch. I should have left early, but I had a long meeting with Ed Barnhill, my law partner. I-85 was slowed to a snail's pace. There was an accident north of Lavonia.

GLADYS

(Entering living room.) I hope nobody was hurt. Here, honey, here's your tea.

HOLLY

I don't know if anybody was hurt, but it sure did make a mess. *(Takes a sip; winces)* Mama, nobody makes tea like you.

GLADYS

Your daddy always did love my tea.

HOLLY

Nobody in Atlanta puts this much sugar in it.

GLADYS

Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Is it too much?

HOLLY

No, darling, it's lovely. I love it

GLADYS

I'm glad you got here before they get back from the airport. I'm a nervous wreck. My skin's fluttering.

HOLLY

Of course you're nervous. It's been so long. But don't worry. Josh hasn't changed much. Last month when we had dinner in New York it was just like we had seen each other the day before.

GLADYS

He's still my baby. I want to get everything right. They'll be here soon.

HOLLY

Everything will be fine, Mama. Here, have a seat. Relax. Let me fix your hair.

GLADYS

I fixed it already.

HOLLY

And it's lovely! I'll just fluff it up a bit.

(Gladys sits while Holly works on her hair).

GLADYS

What was Bernard like? Josh's friend? When you were in New York?

HOLLY

I don't know. I didn't meet him. I don't know why he has to bring Bernard with him. We don't know him. We don't know his people.

GLADYS

Their plane was supposed to get in at nine. They should be here any minute.

HOLLY

This is not the appropriate time for outsiders.

GLADYS

How is Haynes?

HOLLY

I really should call him and tell him I got here okay.

GLADYS

Tell him we miss him. We're so proud of him. Imagine, a Georgia state legislator in the family.

HOLLY

He's not a legislator, Mama darling. He's a legislative aid.

GLADYS

I don't keep up with politics much.

HOLLY

Although Haynes does all the work, he gets none of the credit, and credit is what counts in politics. He's at a fund raiser for the County Republican Party. Newt Gingrich is speaking.

GLADYS

Is he someone important?

HOLLY

He used to be. Behind the scenes he still is. Haynes has been a disciple of Newt's since before he went to Congress. Around our house it was always "Newt this..." and "Newt that...". At first I thought he was having conversations with a talking salamander.

GLADYS

Well, last week I spoke to a fish.

HOLLY

Newt has a vision for the future.

GLADYS

Is he like Quasimodo?

HOLLY

Who?... Oh, you mean Nostradamus.

GLADYS

That's right. Quasimodo was the hunchback of Nostradamus.

HOLLY

Haynes and I have been working together recently. Actually, I'm working with Haynes' boss, the Senator. My law firm has a client, a developer who's fighting his way through the jungle of wetlands regulations. He wants to build a resort community on one of those lovely islands off the Georgia coast.

GLADYS

Is it like Hilton Head?

HOLLY

Not yet, but we're working on it. The environmental extremists are fighting us all the way. Something silly about egrets and terns. However, they keep lawyers like me in business.

GLADYS

The green people are protesting about the factory they're going to build on our property. I hope they're wrong. I wouldn't want to sell it to anybody who's going to do something bad for people.

HOLLY

Don't worry, Mama. They *are* wrong. They overreact to everything. It will be a lovely factory. We'll make a lovely island. Everything will be just lovely, whether *they* like it or not.

GLADYS

You know New York used to be an island.

HOLLY

Manhattan still is. I think the egrets and terns left there a long time ago. Along with most decent people. I'm sure Greenpeace protests because they mistreat the rats or some such. There are still a few lovely parts of New York left. The cities in Europe are so different. They're safe and clean and the people are lovely. At least in Western Europe.

GLADYS

Did Heather get off to Europe all right?

HOLLY

Yes, they took off last night.

GLADYS

Are they nice people she went with?

HOLLY

The Childs? Nice enough, I guess. They're not our people.

It's important for her to experience Europe. I feel truly privileged to have strong connections to European culture. It has enriched my life immeasurably, and I want Heather to have the same opportunities. I wish I could have taken her there for her first time, but I just haven't the time to get away.

GLADYS

You were the first person on either side of the family to leave the country. Except for the war, of course. It was from that trip that you brought me a picture of Junior's grave at Normandy. A simple white cross, and the grass - so green.

HOLLY

A sea of crosses and stars. So still. So silent.

GLADYS

He never had a chance to write me from France. (*Gladys takes Junior's picture from the telephone table.*) My brother was the most beautiful man I ever saw - until I met your daddy. (*She takes Howard's army picture from the table, looks at both.*) Junior looked like Gary Cooper and Howard looked like Clark Gable. Who needed movie stars when you had the real thing?

HOLLY

Mama, be careful now; don't get all bleary-eyed. Be strong, darling.

GLADYS

You're right. Josh'll be here soon. I don't want to look all puffy.

HOLLY

Did I tell you that I might be on the jury for the Grand Prix Dressage at the Olympics?

GLADYS

Oh! I packed up a box of your old ribbons and trophies and horsy things. I thought you might want to take them. It's in one of the moving boxes.

(They start looking for the box with the horsy stuff in it.)

HOLLY

I've tried to get Heather interested in equitation, but kids today aren't interested in anything lovely that requires discipline and control.

GLADYS

Your certificate is in there from when you competed in the Olympics.

HOLLY

I was an alternate, Mama. I didn't actually get to compete. Here it is. *(She finds the box and takes out some of the items and looks at them.)* I miss riding. Ed Barnhill, my law partner, is quite a good horseman. He has a lovely farm with stables near our house in Cobb County. Sometimes I ride him... with him.

Let me help you with these boxes.

(They start going through the boxes. Those that are full, they tape shut. Those that aren't full, they pack more things in them, then tape them. Sometimes they take items out and look at them before putting them back in. This activity continues until the men arrive from the airport.)

GLADYS

Birch has been a great help to me. He takes care of the climbing and heavy lifting. The piano is yours. I'm sure Birch can get a truck and drive it down to Atlanta for you.

HOLLY

We have the Bosendorfer in the great room. Just give it to charity, or throw it away. Did y'all catch many fish last week?

GLADYS

Oh, they were practically jumping in the boat! It's going to be just like old times.

HOLLY

What's on the menu for the fish fry tomorrow?

GLADYS

Well, we've got the fish, of course, with hush puppies, macaroni pie, corn on the cob, baked potatoes, potato salad, slaw, three bean salad, carrot slaw, sliced tomatoes, cantaloupe, tea, and I'm making your Daddy's favorite, blackberry cobbler and banana pudding, congealed salad and orange slice cake.

HOLLY

Lovely! My mouth is watering already! *(She takes out her Blackberry).* Let me email my Pilates instructor and schedule some extra sessions next week.

GLADYS

And I'm sure some of the relatives will bring their specialties.

HOLLY

Who's coming, tell me, Mama?

GLADYS

Well, there's us four - five if you count Bernard.

HOLLY

I guess we have to.

GLADYS

And Preacher Douglas. He preached a good sermon last Sunday on how men ought to be men.

HOLLY

That would be nice for a change. Men like Daddy just aren't around anymore.

GLADYS

I don't know what I would have done without Luke Douglas after we lost your daddy. He's been such a comfort. But then he's always been that way. Whenever there was sickness or death or hard times for anybody in the congregation, he's always there, praying, comforting, helping out any way he can. I guess it makes us all feel safer when somebody like Luke is around.

HOLLY

It's called leadership, and it's in short supply these days.

(Pause)

GLADYS

Did you know that Luke fought at Normandy?

HOLLY

I seem to recall hearing about it.

GLADYS

He fought right alongside your Daddy and my brother. He's retiring in two weeks. The church sure will miss his preaching. Red Duncan's coming. He was elected Sheriff, you know.

HOLLY

Red? That's wonderful! Is he still good looking? He was so good looking. Red's always been all man. Umm!

GLADYS

He's starting to get a little gray around the temples, but it looks distinguished on him. He's turned into a fine family man, a pillar of the community.

HOLLY

Are any of the McElroy's coming?

GLADYS

Uncle Eddie's got a slipped disc, but Aunt Geneva is coming and bringing cousin Gwen and her brood.

HOLLY

Those children were always filthy dirty. You'd think Gwen couldn't afford soap. What about Uncle Frog and Aunt Pert? I always love to see them.

GLADYS

I didn't tell you about Frog and Pert?

HOLLY

Oh, no, it's not tragic is it?

GLADYS

I'm afraid it is.

HOLLY

Oooh, quick tell me!

GLADYS

Well, they've been put in a home in Anderson. Both of them have the Alzheimer's.

HOLLY

No! When did that happen?

GLADYS

You know they were both so scatterbrained, we weren't sure if anything was wrong or if it was more of the same...

HOLLY

Go on. What happened?

GLADYS

Back just before Christmas, they were going to go shopping, so they drove to the mall.

HOLLY

Yes...

GLADYS

Well, they pulled up in front of the Belks' and got out of the car. And...

HOLLY

What, Mama, what?

GLADYS

Frog was wearing his hat, and Pert was wearing her gloves... and that was all!

HOLLY

No!!! That's not true!

GLADYS

I swear before Jesus. Except for the hat and gloves, they were naked as jaybirds!

HOLLY

They could have caught cold!

GLADYS

A security guard saw them before too many other people did and took a blanket out and brought them to the mall office.

HOLLY

It must have been embarrassing!

GLADYS

One of the deputies, showed up and tried to charge Frog with driving without a license, but Birch got there in time and told him that Frog just left his wallet in his pants.

HOLLY

My Lord! I should visit them before I go back. I can't imagine Frog and Pert naked.

GLADYS

You don't want to. I go visit them every week, even though they don't know who I am. I guess it's just as good they lost their minds together. They always did everything together.

(A siren and car horn are heard outside).

GLADYS

They're here! Josh is here! My goodness, I'm a mess.

HOLLY

(Takes her mother by the shoulders) You're fine, Mama. *(Blends Gladys' rouge with her thumb)* You look great. Everything's going to be okay. *(Holly unties Gladys' apron and tosses it into an open moving box.)*

(Josh enters).

JOSH

Mama...

GLADYS

(Embracing him) Joshua, oh Joshua. Welcome home baby. I've missed you so much. Thank God you're home. Thank God you're home.

JOSH

Don't cry, Mama. *(Hands her his handkerchief)*

Holly, it's good to see you again. *(Josh and Holly embrace)*

HOLLY

Welcome home, Josh. *(Holly looks at the door, then with barely masked optimism)* Aw, darling, was Bernard unable to come?

*(Josh turns toward the door where Birch enters with the luggage. **Bernard** comes in behind him. Josh takes Bernard by the hand and walks him up before Gladys.)*

JOSH

Mama, I want you to meet my lover, Bernard Smalls.

(Bernard extends his hand. Gladys stares vacantly.)

Say hello to Bernard, Mama.

GLADYS

(Dazed) Hello, lover...

JOSH

Bernard, this is my sister, Holly Freeman.

HOLLY

(Shaking Bernard's extended hand) Mr. Smalls. *(All the charm she can force)* Such a pleasure to meet you.

(Awkward pause)

JOSH

Well... I guess we're here at last.

GLADYS

Uh huh...

HOLLY

Yes, we're all here. Obviously.

(They are all looking at Bernard.)

BERNARD

What? Did I forget to take the bone out of my nose or something?

BIRCH

Why don't we take your bags upstairs? Get you two settled in.

(Birch, Josh and Bernard head upstairs. Gladys calls out after them.)

GLADYS

Come right back down; I want to look at you.

BIRCH

(Calling after her) Mama, bring me one of them oranges in the brown sack, would you?

GLADYS

I think he's on a health kick or something. *(She exits to kitchen.)*

(Holly goes to her briefcase and takes out her Blackberry and dials.)

HOLLY

Haynes, this is Holly. I'm here, and everything couldn't be more lovely! I hope your dinner with Newt was super. I'll call later. Bye.

(Dialing again. When it connects she speaks in a quiet voice.) Ed... hi, it's me. I'm at Mama's; I can't talk long. How was the dinner? Did you see Haynes? I wish he did. He's too boring to have a girlfriend...

(Gladys appears at the kitchen door, about to come in. Holly doesn't see her. When she realizes what is being said, she quietly goes back into the kitchen.)

This afternoon was great! You are such a good lover, Ed... You want to do what to me?... Ooooh! Hold on, let me check...

(Holly checks her Blackberry. Birch comes downstairs.)

BIRCH

What the hell?

HOLLY

Oh, it's that god awful spam! You know, always sending me emails about how to enlarge... well, you know.

BIRCH

I hope that's the "before" picture.

HOLLY

(Looking at her Blackberry) What's wrong with it... Oh, Birch!

GLADYS

(Comes back and hands Birch an orange.) Remind me to pick up another bag of oranges when we go out tomorrow.

BIRCH

He's black.

GLADYS

Oh, I made brownies! *(She exits to the kitchen.)*

BIRCH

Did you know he was black?

HOLLY

No. It does seem like something Josh would have told us about in advance. Did he think we wouldn't notice? I'm not prejudiced, but Josh should have shown some consideration.

BIRCH

The whole drive from the airport, every time I looked in the rearview, there he was, just looking at me.

HOLLY

Birch, do you think Mama's all right? She's under so much stress lately.

BIRCH

This can't be helping her any. I don't know what kind of deal Josh has in mind, springing Bernard on her like that.

HOLLY

None of the rest of us brought guests.

BIRCH

Well, my "guest" divorced me, and yours don't like us anyway.

HOLLY

Oh that's not true. He's just always so busy. Let's try to keep things calm. For Mama's sake. How have you been, Birch? You have big old dark circles under your eyes.

BIRCH

I've been pulling a lot of double shifts to make child support payments. Being deputy ain't too lucrative if you're honest.

HOLLY

Mama tells me Red Duncan was elected Sheriff.

BIRCH

Yeah, old Red's my boss now. It's kind of weird. I have to show him respect and all. I can't use his nickname anymore.

HOLLY

Why Birch, he's your blood brother. I'm sure he won't mind if you keep calling him "Red".

(Josh appears at the bottom of the stairs.)

BIRCH

But I can't call him "Red on the head like the dick on a dog", like I used to, can I? *(Mocking)* No! That would be insubordination.

(Gladys comes into the room with a tray of iced tea and brownies.)

GLADYS

I have brownies and tea. These brownies were always your favorite, Josh. They have pecans in them. Isn't your little friend going to join us for brownies?

JOSH

Bernard's a little tired from the trip.

GLADYS

I have milk if he doesn't like tea. Do his people like tea?

JOSH

He thought he would lie down for a while.

GLADYS

Let me look at you. You look so good, Josh. You haven't changed in five years. Birch, Holly, don't he look just like Josh?

JOSH

It's me, Mama. You look great.

GLADYS

Don't be silly. I'm getting to be an old woman, Josh. How was your drive in? Did you see lots of familiar places?

BIRCH

Mama, I drove Josh by the new bridge they're building.

JOSH

So much has changed. If Birch hadn't been driving I know I would have lost my way.

BIRCH

It's the biggest damn bridge in the Upstate.

HOLLY

Of course it pales in comparison to the bridges in New York City. I love to fly in over Manhattan at night and see all those bridges with all those lights.

JOSH

Nothing compares to New York's bridges in size and diversity. Like everything else in the city.

HOLLY

Sometimes I think too much diversity.

GLADYS

It's so big it would just intimidate me so. I'd be walking around slack-jawed, looking up at the buildings.

JOSH

Mama, you'd love New York. You should visit sometime. I'll be your tour guide.

GLADYS

Holly, can you imagine your mother in New York City?

BIRCH

Just don't go imagining me up there. I wouldn't give you fifty cents for the whole damn town!

GLADYS

I've never even been on an airplane. How was your flight down?

JOSH

Fine. I thought we'd never get to the airport. Bernard was sick, so we got a late start. And traffic was backed up on the BQE.

GLADYS

The BQE?

BIRCH

Brooklyn Queens Expressway.

(Josh looks at him.)

I read road maps a lot. To pass the time. I know most of the major thoroughfares in the country. Even some in Canada.

JOSH

Do you know the Trans-Canada highway?

BIRCH

Number One and the 401. Yep, I know pretty much number One, but I'm still studying on the 401 branch.

JOSH

A few months ago I did a lot of driving on number One near Calgary. I had to go to the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller to measure some T-Rex teeth.

BIRCH

Yeah, I know Drumheller. Out of Calgary you take the number Two, then the number Nine. About 90 miles, more or less.

JOSH

Wow! You do know your roads.

BIRCH

It gets my mind away from things.

HOLLY

Why were you measuring teeth?

JOSH

Part of my dissertation. I put a lot of teeth measurements and where they were found in a computer database, trying to find patterns.

GLADYS

You were always wandering all over the fields around here when you were a kid looking for fossils. I used to worry that you would get lost. Sometimes you were gone for hours.

JOSH

Mostly what I found were rocks. An occasional trilobite, but not many fossils.

BIRCH

Sounds like your job's a lot of fun. You get to go places and work outside a lot.

JOSH

Yeah, we both always liked being outside, didn't we. I caught a 22 inch brown trout near Brooks.

BIRCH

Jesus! What were you using?

JOSH

Dry flies.

GLADYS

Your Daddy always did brag on you, about how neatly you tied your flies and how gracefully you cast your line.

JOSH

Birch taught me how to tie flies.

BIRCH

Yeah, I did. As soon as I taught you anything you always did it better than me.

JOSH

You were a good fisherman, Birch.

BIRCH

I never caught a 22 inch trout.

HOLLY

Maybe they grow bigger in Canada.

BIRCH

You say you caught it in Brooks... that's on number One about halfway between Calgary and Medicine Hat.

JOSH

Man, I'm impressed.

GLADYS

Medicine Hat? You mentioned Bernard was sick. I have Alka-Seltzer or Pepto-Bismol.

JOSH

Bernard has HIV. The drug cocktails have been working well, but recently he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma - a kind of cancer. He's taking chemotherapy. We're trying to find a match for a bone marrow transplant.

(Dead silence for a moment.)

HOLLY

Josh, you should have told us.

BIRCH

Always got to spring stuff on us.

GLADYS

The Wal-Mart is open late. Maybe they have latex gloves or something.

JOSH

Could we please be rational? There is no chance of contagion through casual contact. However, should any of you decide to have sex with Bernard, please use a condom. And Birch, I would not recommend that you and Bernard become blood brothers.

BIRCH

We don't need any New York sarcasm.

HOLLY

How long does he have?

JOSH

For what? What do you mean?

HOLLY

To live. How long does Bernard have to live?

JOSH

Who knows? Nobody knows that. I don't know how long I have to live.

GLADYS

(In terror) Josh, no! Not you...

JOSH

No, Mama, no. I was trying to make a point. None of us knows when we'll die. I've been tested. I'm negative.

GLADYS

Thank you, Jesus!

BIRCH

What about when you boys... bump uglies?

GLADYS

Wouldn't somebody like another brownie?

JOSH

(To Birch) When we do what?

BIRCH

Can't you get the disease from him when you do whatever the hell it is y'all do to each other?

GLADYS

I could pop some corn.

JOSH

We take precautions. Do you practice safe sex, Birch?

BIRCH

I ain't queer.

GLADYS

There's some leftover fried chicken in the ice box.

HOLLY

Boys, let's change the subject, please.

JOSH

Everybody should use condoms. I can't even fantasize about unsafe sex.

GLADYS

(Shudders) Neither can I!

BIRCH

You know condoms ain't as safe as they say.

GLADYS

Please! Would y'all like an egg salad sandwich? It's fresh.

HOLLY

You make sure Bernard washes his hands after he touches... before he touches anything we might... We have all these people coming and all that food.

JOSH

We're very careful. I would never do anything to put you at risk - or me - or Bernard. Please don't treat him like a leper.

GLADYS

The poor thing. I feel so sorry for him.

JOSH

Don't do that either! Please, now. You're all bright, compassionate people. There's no need for hysteria. Everything will be fine. Just stay calm and treat Bernard like a normal person. That's what he is - a normal person.

HOLLY

Of course, Josh. I'm not prejudiced. I once held an AIDS baby.

BIRCH

You just make sure you keep him under control, Josh.

GLADYS

It's everywhere, now. Even here. Jean Griffith's boy Jimmy died from it... I'm sorry, son.

HOLLY

How did you and Bernard meet?

JOSH

Bereavement counseling. Jimmy had died two months before, and Bernard had recently buried his lover, Michael. We were both vulnerable and lonely...

GLADYS

Vulnerable and lonely... Josh, we missed you dreadfully at your Daddy's service. I kept praying you would show up.

BIRCH

You caused Mama a lot of pain.

GLADYS

Stop it. That's water under the bridge and I don't want to hear any more about it.

BIRCH

You should have at least shown up for Daddy's funeral.

GLADYS

I have the guest book from the service. *(She goes to get the book)* We had three silver framed pictures of your Daddy. The one of him in his Army uniform, one from our wedding and one with you three kids. *(Hands Josh the book)* There were flowers and candles. The church was overflowing; everybody loved your Daddy so much.

JOSH

I see Coach Cobb was there. Is he still coaching?

GLADYS

He's retired from the college.

HOLLY

He asked about you. He wanted to know if there was anywhere to play baseball up in New York.

BIRCH

If you'd stayed with it, you could be playing in Yankee Stadium now.

JOSH

I don't know. I don't think I was ever that good. I did play in the Gay Softball League for a while.

BIRCH

That must have been a sight!

JOSH

You'd be surprised. A lot of the players were better than me. Our top hitter had your swing, Birch.

BIRCH

I was a pretty good hitter. Did he use the one-handed follow-through?

JOSH

Yes... *She* did... a lesbian named Smitty.

BIRCH

You let girls on the team?

HOLLY

You don't know, Birch. Maybe it was the girls who let Josh on the team.

JOSH

It sounds like a beautiful service, Mama. I'm exhausted. I really should go check on Bernard and get to bed.

GLADYS

Birch is taking me over to Greenville tomorrow. I have to sign some more papers. Would you two like to ride over with us and see the condo?

HOLLY

Oh, that would be lovely!

JOSH

Sure, I'd love to go.

BIRCH

It's nice. Wall-to-wall carpet, new appliances, central air...

GLADYS

It's got a patio. The brochure calls it a "lanai".

BIRCH

We'll leave about 8:30.

JOSH

Okay. I'll see you in the morning. *(He starts up the stairs.)*

GLADYS

I'm glad you're home, Josh.

JOSH

(Comes back down the stairs and embraces her) Me too, Mama.

(Lights fade)

Scene 3

(Josh's bedroom. During this scene, Josh is just back from the shower, naked, but wrapped in a towel.. Bernard, in pajamas, wakes up and sits up in the other twin bed.)

BERNARD

Oh, my! Where did the twister drop me this time? Oh, it's you Hunk. You were there - in my dream. And Zeke and Hickory and Uncle Henry were there, too.

JOSH

Do you have a fever? You're a little warm.

BERNARD

So this is the closet you grew up in.

JOSH

Mama kept everything like it always was. Maybe she hoped it would work some voodoo and turn me back like I was. Or at least like she thought I was.

BERNARD

So sad to see hopes dashed.

JOSH

Do you feel any better? When I left you up here you looked a little wobbly. At least you got your color back.

BERNARD

The one thing everybody seems to notice here.

JOSH

A lot has changed.

BERNARD

You mean in the New South they're wearing Ralph Lauren sheets. How reassuring. I saw the look on Deputy Oaks' kisser at the airport. I know that look. I could see my reflection in the lachrymal fluid of those gorgeous eyes. A giant pair of "nigga lips", sitting down on a skinny little neck.

JOSH

I never thought of Birch as having "gorgeous eyes".

BERNARD

Mama Oaks seemed a little nonplussed by my incarnation, to say the least.

JOSH

She's just on overload. We all are. She'll adjust.

BERNARD

I should have stayed in New York. Lighten her load a little.

JOSH

If I'm going to re-integrate with my family, they have to know and accept all of me, and that includes you.

BERNARD

You can stop that right now! Maybe you just need me as a buffer. If things don't work out with your folks, it won't be because of you, but because they couldn't deal with the little colored boy.

JOSH

That's not fair. I need you here. I can't do this alone.

BERNARD

Well, why don't you go see the Wiz and ask him for some courage, baby? Just tell him you're a friend of Dorothy; he'll fix you right up. And bring a little something back for Dorothy.

(Looking around at the walls) Oh my! Look at all these trophies and plaques. I didn't know you were a sports queen.

JOSH

Baseball paid for my college. I was All American. Birch thinks I should have gone pro.

BERNARD

I can't wait to tell Sammy and Anton that you were Miss Athlete! They will be most amused.

JOSH

I would rather you didn't.

BERNARD

You don't like Sammy and Anton, do you?

JOSH

I'm uncomfortable around them. I don't think they like me.

BERNARD

Pourquoi?

JOSH

They make me feel like I'm not queer enough. When I'm around your friends I feel like Marilyn Munster.

BERNARD

Do I detect a little self hatred? Where is your gay pride?

JOSH

I'm neither proud nor ashamed. It should be a neutral characteristic. I understand the oppressed need a morale boost, but haven't we matured enough to get beyond cheerleading?

BERNARD

I like cheerleading. Cute little skirts, pom-poms, the whole nine yards. Do you know what they call you behind your back, Sammy and Anton? Bone Girl! If it will make you feel better I'll tell them you had a closet full of hoop skirts and came down with the vapors.

Who are these two in the picture with you?

JOSH

That's Jose, my roommate on the left. He was from Puerto Rico. Played shortstop. That's Maryann on the right. She was my fiancée.

BERNARD

As in engaged?

JOSH

You get the picture.

BERNARD

He was fierce!

JOSH

Jose was my boyfriend.

BERNARD

Boyfriend and fiancé simultaneously? Oooh! You're just full of surprises. Did you actually do it with him?

JOSH

Almost.

BERNARD

There is no almost. You did it or you didn't.

JOSH

We won the conference championship that year. The coach threw a party at his house for the team. The season was over so there was lots of beer. Everybody got shitfaced. Me and Jose found a utility closet and there in the glow of the pilot light of the water heater, started making out and groping. Somebody broke a glass or something and the Coach's wife came to get a broom and when she opened the door I had my tongue down Jose's throat, he had his leg wrapped around my hips; both of us had our shirts unbuttoned. I had his pants unzipped. She just stood there and stared for the longest time. We were frozen, petrified. She called for the Coach and then just stood there and started crying.

BERNARD

I know. The sight of his bare chest would have me in tears as well. Gnashing of teeth and all that jazz.

JOSH

Coach Cobb called my father; they were old friends. Daddy drove out the next day to see me. He said he was sure it was just a phase, that we were drunk and heady with the thrill of victory. He said he would spend whatever it took for psychiatric help, shock treatments, whatever it took.

BERNARD

Honey, Torquemada couldn't make me straight.

JOSH

Daddy worshipped me - or who he thought I was. And that was part of me, but only part. I told him the truth. I told him I was in love with Jose. He slapped the shit out of me. It was the only time he ever hit me. He told me my life would end miserably and I would burn in hell forever. As he left he told me never tell my mother or it would destroy her.

I was so naive. I thought that after the initial shock, my father would learn to love all of me the way he had the half of me. I thought he would come to love Jose as his son. Some fantasy, huh?

BERNARD

You did need shock treatment. At the highest voltage. What happened to the Latin honey?

JOSH

Jose was devastated. He dropped out of school and took off. I wrote discreet letters to him at his parents' address in San Juan, but I never heard anything from him. He was beautiful.

BERNARD

Were you really in love?

JOSH

Deeply.

BERNARD

Scorching, tropical passion?

JOSH

Hotter than I've ever felt... except for you of course.

BERNARD

You can stop that right now! Keep it real. When did your mother find out... about you?

JOSH

I wrote her a letter after Daddy... went missing.

BERNARD

I thought he drowned.

JOSH

That's the assumption. He went out fishing in the boat one morning. When he didn't come home, the sheriff and some of the neighbors went out looking for him. They found his boat drifting in the middle of the lake. They never found the body.

BERNARD

Your poor mother.

JOSH

She keeps it all inside. Frantic composure. We all have our little oxymorons.

BERNARD

Not for me. I howled for days when Michael died. As Sammy puts it, I ululated. I still whimper on occasion.

JOSH

Daddy always told us, 'weeping is for willows, not for Oaks.'

BERNARD

Pity the poor Oaks.

JOSH

(Drops his towel and embraces Bernard.)

Wanna bump uglies, as Birch would say?

BERNARD

As attractive as that sounds...

JOSH

It might be therapeutic to fuck in my father's house.

BIRCH

I'm tired...

JOSH

Yeah, I guess I am too. We've been tired a lot lately.

BERNARD

No, we haven't been tired. *I* have been tired.

JOSH

I understand. It's okay.

BERNARD

You give up too easily. Be bold!

JOSH

Oh really? *(Josh starts to unbutton Bernard's pajama top and starts rubbing his shoulders.)* Does that feel better?

BERNARD

(Insinuating himself into Josh's arms, his eyes closed.) Uhhmmmm. Mmm Hmm... *(Josh folds his arms around Bernard and cradles him.)* Oooooooooo... Bone Girl's gonna bone me...

(Lights fade.)

Scene 4

(The Oaks' living room. **Pat Davis** is sitting at the dining table wearing stretch pants, a flowery shirt and a turban. She is reading a supermarket tabloid and singing.)

PAT

You put your uhm uhm in.
 You take your uhm uhm out.
 You put your uhm uhm in,
 Then you grind it all about.
 Then you do the fucky wucky
 And you turn yourself around.
 That's what it's all about.

(Bernard comes downstairs wearing a floor length red satin robe, a red turban, and underneath the robe, ruby slippers.)

BERNARD

Who dat?

PAT

Hey there. You must be the boyfriend. I bet you are.

BERNARD

Who are you?

PAT

I'm the girlfriend. Name's Pat, Pat Davis. You're Bernard, ain't you?

BERNARD

Whose girlfriend?

PAT

Birch. You know Birch?

BERNARD

Oh, yes. The Deputy. Sexy. I don't think he liked me.

PAT

Oh, yeah, honey, Birch is a sexy man. Boiling passion down deep if you know how to get there. Seems the more he holds it down the hotter it gets. All that pressure building up. Like a piston, that's what it is. A hot love piston.

BERNARD

Internal combustion!

PAT

We have us some fun! I'm sorry you think he don't like you. Deep inside Birch loves everybody. He just can't show it. He ain't in touch with his feminine side. (*Looking him over*) You obviously don't have that problem. On the other hand, he loves to get in touch with my feminine side, if you know what I mean (*She winks at him*).

BERNARD

I believe I do.

PAT

I like you, honey. You got a sense of style about you.

BERNARD

Where is everybody?

PAT

They all went over to Greenville to see Miss Gladys's condo.

BERNARD

Ah, yes. I was invited, but I gracefully declined.

PAT

I hate condos. Got no aura to them. The ghosts don't even know which unit to go home to. If there is any. That's another reason I don't care for a condo; there usually ain't no ghosts. I mean, what's the point in being alive if you ain't got no contact with the dead? See what I mean?

BERNARD

Who let you in?

PAT

Door's unlocked.

BERNARD

You mean I've been here, all alone with the door unlocked?

PAT

Who you wanna to keep out?

BERNARD

Everyone.

PAT

You got nothing to worry about. I got no malice toward nobody. Except my neighbor, Mr. Hughes. His yard is a big old mess. I'm working on having a accident of nature befall him.

BERNARD

Why don't you just ask him to clean it up?

PAT

I don't like conflict. I'd rather just put a hex on him. Honey bunch, I love your turban.

BERNARD

Thank you. I wrap my own.

PAT

(Pointing to her turban) Rollers.

BERNARD

(Pointing to his) Chemo.

PAT

Birch told me you was sick. Come over here, lamb. Sit with me. Come on! I ain't gonna hurt you. I'm a good witch! *(Bernard sits at the table next to Pat.)* Gimme your hand. *(She caresses his hand.)* Nice and silky. That's a sign you're sweet and smart too!

BERNARD

I use a good moisturizer.

PAT

Your Mount of Venus is good and strong. You love people, and you're graceful and tender. You do have good contact with your feminine side. You love music too, don't you?

BERNARD

I teach music.

PAT

Lots of folks teach things they don't love. But your hand tells me you love it.

Your Mount of Mercury is a little high. Gotta be careful, now. You got a sharp a tongue sometimes.

BERNARD

Oh, darling, I need it. I live in New York.

PAT

Oh dear, your life line's a little short. But there's a bunch of stuff at the end. You got a good strong heart line. I love your heart line! It starts deep in the Mount of Jupiter. You are a sweetheart! I bet you're idealistic in love, ain't you?

BERNARD

I had a trick make me call him "Don Quixote" once. He called me "Aldonza, the Whore."

PAT

(Laughs big and hearty) Know what, sugar britches? I'm gonna do a tarot reading for you. *(She pronounces 'tarot' to rhyme with 'carrot'.)*

BERNARD

I've always wanted to go to a fortune teller!

PAT

Tarot ain't fortune telling. It can't tell you exactly what's going to happen in the future. It digs up what's already there, buried deep deep down inside. You gotta open the door to your heart of hearts and let me in.

BERNARD

You can stop that right now!

PAT

You gotta take care of your unfinished business. Don't look at me like that. You know I'm right. Tarot's a way to grab hold of the power we all have inside to create our own reality.

BERNARD

Like my ruby slippers? *(Pulls up his robe to reveal his slippers.)*

PAT

Oh, pumpkin, I love those! Where'd you get 'em?

BERNARD

A little hole in the wall in the East Village. They were only \$29.

PAT

I got to have me a pair. If you see a pair in size eight - women's size eight - get 'em for me and I'll send you the money. They are precious! Just precious! I'm not kidding, now, I want me a pair of those slippers.

Cut these cards. *(Bernard cuts the cards.)* I'm gonna make this real easy. A simple spread.

BERNARD

Where did you learn to do this?

PAT

I studied with Sister Mohawk. My customers at the shop always thought I gave good advice, like I had a gift or something. So I thought I should take it serious, and learn how to do it right.

BERNARD

What sort of shop?

PAT

I got me a hair salon out next to the truck stop on Highway 14. A one-chair deal I call "Tease and Tarots". I charge for hair; readings for free. Sorta like a public service.

(Pat deals the cards.) This here is called the "Five Card Horseshoe". The first card tells you what your present position is. Turn it over. *(He turns the card. Pat announces each card with great portent.)* The Wheel of Fortune.

BERNARD

Spin it, girl!

PAT

Now, the outside of the wheel is the things that's going to happen in your life; the hub is your true self. While the outside spins around, the center stays in the same place. Now you can let the wheel spin out of control or you can control your own destiny with your true self, your center.

BERNARD

Or we could have a cocktail and say que sera sera.

PAT

That's what I used to do.

BERNARD

Do you think they have liquor in the house?

PAT

Don't do it no more, honey. I had to get sober. That's where I met Birch... at the meetings.

BERNARD

So the Deputy quit, too.

PAT

It's kinda complicated. You see, he's in the program and goes to the meetings and all, but he shoots vodka into oranges with a syringe and sucks on oranges all day long. He thinks I don't know. Everybody knows... except his mama, and she knows, but she pretends she don't know.

Anyway, back to the cards. The Wheel of Fortune is good for you to start with. Fate and circumstances can control your life if you don't have a good purchase on your true self. Now close your eyes. *(He does.)* Just relax and listen and feel until you have a clear picture of the hub of the Wheel, your true self. Can you feel it? Do you know who you are, Bernard?

BERNARD

I am fabulosity incarnate.

PAT

And don't ever forget it, baby. If you always see clearly the miracle that you are, it don't matter what happens around you, the Wheel won't never spin out of control. Open your eyes, now.

The next position is your present expectations. Turn it over. *(He turns the card)* The Chariot. Look at the picture. The driver is trying to hold onto things, but it's like two mules wanting to go in different directions. It could be you against somebody else, or it could be feelings inside of you turning against each other.

You've got to decide where you want to steer your chariot. 'Til you sort things out, it's like trying to see cross-eyed.

(Pat gazes into Bernard's eyes.)

Are you two in love?

BERNARD

Who?

PAT

You two.

BERNARD

(A little defensive) Who two?

PAT

Oooohh! There's someone else, ain't there? I thought so.

BERNARD

What do you mean?

PAT

Somebody other than Josh is vying for your affections. That's what it is, ain't it? *(Sudden alarm)* Tell me it ain't Birch. I just couldn't stand it if we was rivals.

BERNARD

IT AIN'T BIRCH! It *isn't* Birch.

PAT

Good. I never could stand it when my girlfriend stole my man.

BERNARD

Me neither!

PAT

But I'm right, ain't I? There's someone.

BERNARD

I must have screwed up my medication. I'm hallucinating.

PAT

No, Sweet tater, I'm as real as it gets. You got to pull the chariot one way or the other. You can't sit here at the crossroads much longer. You got to choose.

BERNARD

Oh my! Come on, read some more, girlfriend. What's this card for? *(He touches the card.)*

PAT

That's the unexpected.

BERNARD

Well I didn't expect that.

PAT

See, it's working. Now turn it.

(Turns the card)

PAT

The Devil!

BERNARD

Oh my! Oh my! Oh my! Oh my! *(Holds his fingers in a cross formation.)*

PAT

Hold on! It don't have to be bad. Sugar, work with me here. He stands for the dark side of your nature. You got both dark and light aspects. You gotta have both, like your masculine and feminine side. Dark or light don't mean good or evil by themselves. It's what you do with them. Sometimes you need to tap into the dark side to do good things.

BERNARD

I bet you loved *Star Wars*.

PAT

Oh, honey! I could just eat that Harrison Ford up! Billy Dee Williams too! Whooooo! Talk about your light and dark!

BERNARD

Save some for me, Miss Thang!

PAT

The next card is your immediate future. *(He turns the card)* The lovers! Oooooohhhh! What'd I tell you?

BERNARD

I like that much better than the Devil.

PAT

Careful! There's traps that comes with all matters of the heart. Is the love profane or sacred?

BERNARD

Of what love dost thou speak, girlfriend?

PAT

You know! This person... other than Josh. Is it spiritual or just gonads?

BERNARD

Is there a difference?

PAT

Don't get me wrong, now, I love my gonads, but you gotta have the spiritual, too. One won't get you through without the other. I used to think it was just gonads. All 'nads all the time! That sure made the boys at the truck stop happy. But now I'm sober, I'm trying real hard to take one man at a time, on a deeper level.

(Offstage we hear singing, coming nearer:

*"Leaning, leaning! Safe and secure from all alarms!
Leaning, leaning! Leaning on the everlasting arms!"*

There is a knock on the door.)

Come on in. Ain't nobody here but us girlfriends.

(Luke Douglas comes in the door carrying a boom box.)

Hey there.

LUKE

Good day. Are the Oakses at home?

PAT

No, they drove over to Greenville. They oughta be back soon. Take a load off, baby. I'm Pat, the S.O.B.

LUKE

Beg pardon?

PAT

Significant Other of Birch. Just something we came up with.

LUKE

I see. How' do. I'm Reverend Douglas, Birch and Gladys's Preacher.

PAT

Well, it takes all kinds, don't it?

LUKE

(Referring to Bernard). Well I sure am glad to see Gladys hired some help. She's been working too hard what with moving and the fish fry and all.

(Pat and Bernard look at each other and stifle snickers.)

What are you two ladies up to?

BERNARD

Lawzy, Mr. Preacher Man, Miss Lady be readin' my cards.

LUKE

You don't have to read anything there. It's all pictures.

PAT

Tarot cards, Preacher. Want me to read you next?

LUKE

No, I'll pass. I don't believe in that sort of thing. *(Sits on couch)* "Harken not ye to your diviners, your dreamers, your enchanters nor to your sorcerers..." Jeremiah 27:9.

BERNARD

Miz Pat, what card be next?

PAT

We gotta finish before Miz Gladys comes back and catches you loafin'. *(Winks at Bernard)* The last card is your long term future. *(He turns card)* Death. *(Bernard looks spooked.)* There's many kinds of death. We all go through many cycles of death and rebirth even during one lifetime.

LUKE

I only go through one rebirth until the Lord comes back and calls me home in the rapture. When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

PAT

The card stands for change, the death of the old and birth of the new.

BERNARD

Or it could be just plain old death. The worms are starting to hula, and I'm the sucking pig.

PAT

That's just death of the body. You ain't your body, Bernard. It's temporary. You shed it like a snake sheds its skin. *(Takes his hand. Quietly)* We all die. We all come back. Really, you never go away; you're always here. You just change. Nothing ain't ever finished. Don't be afraid. I love you. I wouldn't lie to you.

(Sound of a car pulling up and car doors slamming. Luke gets up and goes to look out the screen door.)

(Taking a chain from around her neck.) Here, I want you to have this. It's an amulet, a double-terminated

crystal. It emits powerful energies that cleanse your emotions. *(Puts it around Bernard's neck.)* There, now, good. When it rests above your heart like that, it warns you of impending danger.

BERNARD

You're very kind, but I can't take this. It must be valuable. This chain is gold! *(He starts to take it off.)*

PAT

(Stops him) Take it, please. I insist. *(Bernard keeps the chain on.)* There, now. Our souls will always be together.

(Laughter and conversation offstage)

BERNARD

Thank you, Pat. Please, write down your address for me. As soon as I get back to New York, I'll get you those slippers. Size eight, right?

(Holly comes in, followed by Birch, then Gladys, then Josh. They are carrying grocery bags.)

HOLLY

(Trying to get serious) Preacher Douglas! So good to see you!

GLADYS

Luke! This is a surprise.

LUKE

My, my, my. Holly, good to see you, too. You're looking just as pretty as ever *(hugs her - a little too long)*.

JOSH

Who let him in?

BERNARD

Everybody let's himself in around here.

JOSH

It looks like you're feeling better. *(He goes over and puts his arm around Bernard.)*

PAT

You must be Josh. I'm Pat. Me and Bernard's been getting acquainted here.

BIRCH

Holly, this here is Pat. Preacher, I guess you met Pat and Bernard.

LUKE

Bernard?

GLADYS

(Indicating Bernard who bats his eyelashes.) Yes, Josh's friend from New York.

LUKE

I thought... I'm very sorry... *(Embarrassed)* It's not nice to fool people like that.

GLADYS

Pat, how are you this fine morning?

PAT

I'm all right now. I got stung by a bee on my neck this morning. That old Mr. Hughes in the trailer next to me always puts his beer cans out in the trash without rinsing them out. That beer draws the bees and the bees get drunk and start stinging everybody in sight. I'm gonna get him one day. *(Birch starts towards her.)*

BIRCH

(Kisses her neck.) Where the bee sucks, there suck I.

BERNARD

What a romantic sentiment. *(To Josh)* You never talk to me like that.

LUKE

Birch, I got that tape with me.

PAT

(To Birch) What's that you just said?

BIRCH

It's about the only line of Shakespeare I remember from school. One of them damn sonnets.

GLADYS

Birch! The Preacher's here!

PAT

You might know you'd remember it if it's got the word 'suck' in it.

GLADYS

Gracious!

LUKE

Birch, I can play the tape for you, if you like.

HOLLY

Preacher Douglas, you should see Mamma's condo. It's so modern and cute. It has a dishwasher, a garbage disposal, a refrigerator with an ice dispenser on the outside.

LUKE

Y'all want to listen to the tape?

HOLLY

Mama, it's lovely. It's so much nicer than this dump.

GLADYS

Holly, honey, you don't mean it! I know you don't. This isn't a dump. This is home. Your daddy grew up here. You children grew up here. Your Grandpa and Grandma Oaks lived here before us. I love this place. It tears my heart to pieces to leave here.

HOLLY

Of course darling, I didn't mean it that way. I just meant it requires so much upkeep and you deserve something much more modern and convenient. You've earned it.

GLADYS

I did the best I could.

PAT

I love this old house, Miss Gladys. It's got a soul.

LUKE

(Turns on his boom box, loud volume.)

*Oh, how I love Jesus,
Oh, how I love Jesus,
Oh, how I love Jesus,
Because he first loved me.*

(Luke turns the tape off.)

Sherm finished mixing it last night. I picked it up this morning.

GLADYS

That sounds just like the Riverside Boys!

HOLLY

Birch, y'all have gotten so good! I haven't heard you sing in years.

BERNARD

You must be the beautiful baritone voice, Deputy Oaks.

BIRCH

(A little uncomfortable.) Yeah, I'm the baritone.

BERNARD

You sounded lovely, like an angel.

PAT

You hear that, Birch? He should know.

LUKE

(To Bernard) Are you a musician, son?

BERNARD

I teach high school choral music.

LUKE

And what's your professional opinion of the Riverside Boys?

BERNARD

Like a heavenly choir! Nothing I like better than a group of men.

LUKE

(He stares at Bernard, nonplussed, then clears his throat.) Birch, with the right money behind us there's a big future here. Sherm and I sketched out the outlines of a management agreement. I could help you boys. I have a lot of contacts in the Southern Baptist Convention with other congregations, the Baptist book stores, Christian booking agents, TV stations. I love you boys! I could help you out a lot.

BIRCH

Well, we can discuss that later. I think we need to go slow. The music business is tough on amateurs.

LUKE

Amateurs? This is professional stuff! If we can raise some capital, we could distribute this nationally. Who knows, maybe we can cross over, like the Oak Ridge Boys. The sky's the limit. If we get the financial backing we could afford the facilities.

BIRCH

But where we gonna get that kind of cash?

GLADYS

Y'all excuse me. I have to start getting this food ready sometime before the moon turns to blood.

BERNARD

Can I help you with anything, Mrs. Oaks? I'm good in the kitchen.

GLADYS

No! I mean... you're our guest. You just rest up for the festivities. You don't need to lift a finger.

JOSH

There's no danger from handling food. Bernard just wants to help.

BERNARD

I can speak for myself.

PAT

Let me help you.

HOLLY

Yes, Mama, Pat and I will help you. You men can stay here and talk man talk.

BERNARD

Oh, goody!

(Gladys, Holly and Pat exit into the kitchen.)

I guess a circle jerk is out of the question.

LUKE

I want you to think about what I said Birch. It's a great opportunity.

BIRCH

I just want to go slow.

LUKE

It's best to strike while the iron is hot, Birch.

JOSH

Didn't you hear him? He wants to go slow.

LUKE

(Turns to Josh) Well, the prodigal son returns.

JOSH

Spare me.

(Gladys comes back through the swinging door with a tray of cookies.)

LUKE

Gladys, bring hither the fatted calf.

GLADYS

We're having fish. I don't think I have any veal. I brought cookies if anyone feels peckish.

(She puts the cookies down on the table.)

Would you rather have steak, Luke? I have a rabbi in the freezer.

LUKE

No, fish will do fine.

BIRCH

Mama, did you say you had a rabbi in the freezer?

BERNARD

He can slaughter the fatted calf.

GLADYS

No, I have rib eye steaks in the freezer. I'll thaw some out. *(She exits.)*

Act I, Scene 4

JOSH

Let me help you, Mamma. *(He goes after her.)*

(Silence while Birch and Luke look at Bernard)

BERNARD I think I'll go up and change into something less comfortable. *(Curtseys, then exits.)*

LUKE

The world is going to hell in a hand basket, Birch. If one of my boys had turned out like that, I don't know what I'd do. How are your kids doing?

BIRCH

Peggy and Tommy should be here in an hour or so. Jeannie's bringing them by.

LUKE

When's she moving them to Knoxville?

BIRCH

Two weeks. Looks like I'm gonna be on the road a lot, going up to see those kids.

LUKE

Good. It's important they see a strong father figure. What about the schools? Have you checked out the schools they're going to?

BIRCH

Jeannie took care of all that.

LUKE

The public schools today are a moral cesspool. They teach children that the homosexual lifestyle is okay, when it's moral *decay*. They tell them that fornication is good and that condoms will protect them. Condom is just a step away from 'condemn'. *(He takes his note pad out to jot that down.)*

BIRCH

I can't afford private school.

LUKE

Being an absentee parent is devilish hard. Do you pray to God, Birch? Do you pray for guidance?

BIRCH

I don't think God listens to me, Preacher.

LUKE

Paul said "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair." Despair makes you weak. A broken home usually comes from weakness of the father.

BIRCH

Jeannie says it's my fault. I can't fight both of you.

LUKE

Don't fight me, Birch, fight the Devil. God laid down the law about families. Christ is the head of the family. Under Christ comes the husband, who is head of the wife and foremost authority over the children. Social order isn't arbitrary; it's God's great architecture of familial love. When it's broken, society weakens and evil creeps in to take up the slack. It's slipping away, Birch. We have to get it back.

BIRCH

Jeannie didn't exactly think of me as the 'head' of her.

LUKE

Don't blame the woman. She wants a strong man to guide her. It's a lack of strength in men that creates a vacuum, which is filled by the masculinization of women. When the man fails to be strong, Birch, he deprives the woman of her rightful enjoyment of feminine submission. We need a revival of manliness in this country. Like the Promise Keepers.

(Josh enters with a bowl of cabbage wedges and a grater.)

BIRCH

I think I'll get me an orange.

(Josh sees that he is alone with Luke and almost leaves, but decides to sit. For a long period of time there is a very tense silence, broken only by the sound of cabbage being grated. Josh is aware of Luke, but doesn't look at him.)

LUKE

Your mama's been through a lot. She's starting to pull her life together again and get on with things. She's a strong lady, and I admire that, but she's vulnerable. She still needs our protection. I hope you didn't come down here from New York City in the mind of stirring up trouble.

(Silence)

JOSH

I'm not the trouble maker in this room.

(Pause)

I can't believe I used to be afraid of you.

LUKE

Fear God, not me. I'm merely His instrument.

JOSH

You're a dinosaur. No, dinosaurs are much more interesting. You're irrelevant.

LUKE

I'm not irrelevant to your Mother.

(JOSH is silent.)

LUKE

I wasn't irrelevant to your Father.

JOSH

Yeah, you and he were asshole buddies.

LUKE

Bitterness is a sickness, Josh. You can be delivered of what ails you. In God's kingdom love is even more powerful than fear. Your Daddy and I did the best we knew how. He loved you. He begged me to help save you from your own self-destruction.

Our methods were crude, I admit. We know so much more now. We have a ministry of Exodus International; they have one in New York. You can check it out. They help people like you find deliverance from sin through the love of Christ.

JOSH

Look. I don't want to make trouble for Mama. I especially don't want you to make trouble. Let's just pretend neither one of us is here. We don't have to pretend; you could leave.

LUKE

I've made some mistakes, but I love you Josh.

JOSH

We have different ideas about what love is.

LUKE

No matter how deep you're into it, you can always find a way out. There is light. There is hope.
(Luke takes out his notepad and jots that down.)

(Bernard comes downstairs).

BERNARD

Did I come at a bad time? I'll understand if you two want to be alone?

JOSH

You don't go anywhere. By the way, we're pretending he's not here.

BERNARD

He's sitting right there. Kind of hard to ignore.

JOSH

Try.

(Holly comes on with a bowl of boiled eggs to peel.)

HOLLY

Bernard, do you have any relatives in Georgia? I know somebody who looks just like you who works at the Cobb County Courthouse.

BERNARD

Cobb County?

HOLLY

Yes, where I live. Outside of Atlanta.

BERNARD

The Cobb County? The one that passed the infamous anti-gay resolution.

HOLLY

Oh, that. I believe it is more accurately called the "Community Standards" resolution. The news media and all the gay groups just blew that all out of proportion. It was nothing, really.

JOSH

You call it nothing to condemn a whole class of people?

HOLLY

I didn't support the measure. Not everybody in Cobb County is a bigot.

JOSH

Your political party did it. Did you do anything to fight it? Holly, I'm one of the people they voted to condemn!

BERNARD

Speak truth to power, baby!

HOLLY

I don't want to rock the boat. The resolution has no legal force; it's just a viewpoint. We have such a good life in Cobb County. Everything is clean, the houses and yards are lovely. People are polite, even the young people. If we had gay people in Cobb County before, they always kept their private business private, and nobody bothered them.

BERNARD

Do you like your African-Americans to keep their negritude private, as well.

HOLLY

I like everybody to keep everything private! It was all fine until they passed that ordinance condemning the gay lifestyle. All the news people and protesters showed up, people coming out of the closet right and left and making a huge mess.

JOSH

So your opposition to the measure is that it makes a mess. Is there no principle involved?

HOLLY

Josh, I don't support the ordinance. I don't know what else you want me to do? I'm just trying to live my life. All these differences between people make my head hurt.

(Birch comes back in, sucking an orange.)

LUKE

There is indeed a principle involved. In Leviticus 18:22, God said "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination." Again in verse 29,

LUKE AND BERNARD

"For whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people."

BERNARD

Puh-lease! You can stop that right now! You remind me of my father.

LUKE

What does your daddy do?

BERNARD

Let's change the subject.

LUKE

Now, son, don't be ashamed of your Daddy. Whatever he does is fine with me, as long as he does it well and honestly. All labor is worthy.

BERNARD

He's a preacher. A Baptist preacher.

LUKE

Well, now! Where does he preach?

BERNARD

Baltimore. I think I'm needed in the kitchen. *(Starts to leave.)*

LUKE

Wait a minute, son. That's one thing your people and our people have in common, the Baptist church. If we had more good strong, godly black fathers like yours, the minorities wouldn't be in the mess they are now.

BERNARD

Here we go. Let's heap society's burdens on the backs of black men.

LUKE

Not just black men. We need more strong white men, too. Does your father have a large congregation?

BERNARD

Those clichés just keep on coming like the dry heaves. You know, Preacher Man, it's not the size of the congregation that's important; it's how you use it.

LUKE

I'm sorry everything's a joke to you, son. I'm sure you don't talk to your daddy that way.

BERNARD

I don't talk to him at all.

LUKE

I'm sorry you feel that way, son.

BERNARD

I'm not the one who cut off the communication. My father is a very severe man who takes the Old Testament as literally as you do. Those verses you quoted are forever etched on my memory by the hot blood of Jesus like acid on copper.

I'll share a little secret with you, Preacher Man. There is this misconception that some boys turn queer because of a bad relationship with their father. It's really the other way around. Some fathers perceive a difference about their gay sons, even from infancy, and can't deal with it; it terrifies them. They practice every sort of self-deception from neglect to violence. When they finally do come face to face with the truth, the seeds of that repression and distortion come suddenly full bloom.

My father received confirmation that his son is gay the same day he learned that his son has AIDS. On that day, he gathered all of his son's belongings, every photograph of his son, anything in the parsonage that reminded him of his son and buried them in the cemetery behind the church, complete with a funeral service. Leviticus 20:13 - "If a man also lie with mankind as he lieth with womankind, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death." Later, so I'm told, he even went to the expense to buy a tombstone engraved with that verse, his son's name, the date of his son's birth and date of his son's death, which he had determined to be that fateful day, when my former father banished his former son. Yes, Preacher, we need more good strong, godly black fathers like my former father, don't we?

LUKE

It may seem harsh, son, but your father has the faith of Abraham.

BIRCH

Good Lord, Preacher!

BERNARD

It is harsh, and I'm not your son. I'm nobody's son. *(He moves to the piano bench and starts doodling.)*

JOSH

I told you to ignore him.

LUKE

Allow me to finish, please. The faith of Abraham, yes, but in his zeal, he forgot about the grace of Jesus Christ. He's had time to pray on it. Give him another chance. If he's a Godly man, he still loves you, but even Godly men are just men, and thus can be stubborn. Maybe you have to be the one to make the first move.

(Gladys and Pat come through kitchen door with a bushel basket of unshucked ears of corn.)

GLADYS

It's like a dream come true. This is what family is all about, isn't it? Having everybody here together again, having a good time, working toward a common purpose.

(Silence.)

Would anyone care for some tea, or a sandwich?

BIRCH

You just rest, Mama. If we want anything, we'll get it ourselves.

PAT

Bernard, are you okay?

(Bernard groans, then gasps, then doubles over in pain. Everyone stops what they are doing and looks in his direction. Josh puts his arm around his shoulders.)

GLADYS

Josh, is he all right?

JOSH

We could use a glass of water.

HOLLY

Birch, get Bernard some water!

(Birch heads for the kitchen.)

GLADYS

Should we call a doctor?

BERNARD

I'll be okay. It's nothing.

JOSH

Besides, I doubt if the doctors around here would have any clue as to what to do.

HOLLY

That sounds a little snobbish.

JOSH

We should have stayed in New York.

BERNARD

Nonsense. I'm having a wonderful time.

(Birch comes back into the living room and comes over to Bernard carrying a glass of water and two oranges.)

BIRCH

I thought you looked like you could use an orange.

(Birch gives Bernard an orange and starts sucking on one himself.)

JOSH

I don't know. It might be too acidic.

BERNARD

I'm fine. Everything is fine. Leave me alone! *(He starts sucking his orange.)*

(Uncomfortable silence.)

HOLLY

Oh, I told Mamma, but I didn't tell everyone else yet. I'm being considered to be on the jury for the Grand Prix Dressage at the Olympics.

LUKE

Congratulations, Holly. That is wonderful news!

PAT

Grand Prix... Ain't that a car race?

HOLLY

It is a branch of equitation... horsemanship. Dressage. It's like ballet with horses. The horse responds to the most subtle signals from the rider to perform the most graceful and precise movements. I rode dressage for years when I was younger. When my horse and I were in harmony, we both achieved, well I know it sounds silly, but my riding teacher called it a "meditative ecstasy" that separated us from the rest of the world.

PAT

That ain't silly at all. Did you ever just cut loose and ride as free as the wind and feel those muscles rippling against your body?

BERNARD

Oh, yes! Yes! Sleek black muscles undulating between your thighs.

PAT

Hot damn, baby!

GLADYS

Josh didn't tell us you were a horseman, Bernard.

JOSH

This is news to me.

BERNARD

There are horses and then there are horses...

HOLLY

It's hard to explain really. One must experience it. Like fine wine or baroque music, dressage takes years of study and patience and discipline to fully appreciate.

GLADYS

Holly was on the Olympic team in Mexico City in 1968.

HOLLY

I was an alternate.

LUKE

I went to a couple of those horse shows you were in. It was exciting to see you sitting in the saddle. God blessed this girl with a way with horses.

BERNARD

Deputy, this orange is good! *(To Holly.)* We weren't very horsy around my way. My Uncle Naaman used to play the ponies at Pimlico.

LUKE

Naaman? That's a biblical name.

BERNARD

He was a leper, honey.

LUKE

I'd feel more comfortable if you didn't call me "honey".

JOSH

So would I.

BERNARD

Come to think of it, so would I. *(He laughs at himself.)*

PAT

Naaman the Leper dipped hisself seven times in the River Jordan and "his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

JOSH

Let's pack our Speedos and head for Israel.

(Bernard starts playing a Chopin Nocturne.)

HOLLY

Ah, Chopin! I just adore lovely Chopin.

GLADYS

Bernard, you play so well.

PAT

I can play the top part to 'Heart and Soul'.

BIRCH

Can you play any gospel?

(Bernard improvises a few gospel riffs, then settles on "Dem Bones", a song he thinks Birch might know. Throughout this song, others sing along, making mistakes, while Josh fumes.)

BIRCH

Yeah, I know that one...

Ezekiel cried, "Dem dry bones!"

Ezekiel cried, "Dem dry bones!"

Ezekiel cried, "Dem dry bones!"

BERNARD

Now hear the word of the Lord.

BIRCH

The foot bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,

BIRCH, BERNARD AND PAT

The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected to the back bone,
The back bone connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone connected to the head bone,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

PAT

Come on, y'all sing.

(Luke and Gladys join in the chorus, clapping their hands and tapping their feet.)

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun',
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk aroun'
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk aroun'
Oh, hear the word of the Lord.

BIRCH AND BERNARD

Disconnect dem bones, dem dry bones
Disconnect dem bones, dem dry bones
Disconnect dem bones, dem dry bones
Oh hear the word of the Lord!

BIRCH, BERNARD, LUKE, GLADYS PAT AND HOLLY

(Holly can't get all of the words and she has no rhythm, but she tries.)

The head bone connected from the neck bone,
The neck bone connected from the back bone,
The back bone connected from the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected from the knee bone,
The knee bone connected from the leg bone,
The leg bone connected from the foot bone,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

(They all applaud.)

BIRCH

Man, you stroke them grace notes like they was raw nerves! It's the grace notes that make a song.

LUKE

Well while we have everyone in a good mood here I'd like to make an announcement.

BERNARD

(Looking at Josh) Almost everyone...

LUKE

I've known this family for years. I've known you kids since you were babies - I loved your father like a brother. I fought alongside him at Normandy, and I miss him terribly. I know nobody can take his place at the head of this family, but... you see Gladys and I have grown closer since Frances passed, and... well, what I'd like to say is that I've asked your mother for her hand in marriage.

(Overlapping: Bernard: "Uh oh!", Holly: "How lovely!", Birch: "Good God Almighty!")

GLADYS

I told him I need to share this decision with my children.

(Josh flees from the room. Gladys starts after him, but Luke grabs her arm.)

LUKE

Let him go, Gladys.

BERNARD

I don't see why he's upset. What's to be upset about? I've got a Baptist preacher for a daddy, and now I'll have a Baptist preacher for a daddy-in-law. I'm twice blessed! Oranges for everybody!

(Lights fade.)

ACT TWO

Scene 1

(Gladys and Luke sit on the couch and drink coffee.)

GLADYS

I thought Earline and Dot were going to have a set-to there any minute.

LUKE

Looked like fur was going to fly. What had them so riled?

GLADYS

Earline said the vanilla wafers in Dot's banana pudding were soggy.

LUKE

Well, I declare. Sometimes it's the littlest things set people off. I kind of like them soggy. All in all, people seemed to enjoy themselves. Just like the old days: good company, good food. You can always tell the difference between store bought fish and those you catch yourself.

GLADYS

(Alarmed) You can?

LUKE

Yes, indeed. The fish today were definitely home caught.

GLADYS

(Relieved) Well then, I guess you can. I could feel Howard looking down on the whole thing.

LUKE

I think Howard's smiling down on you and me right now. *(He snuggles a little closer to her.)*

(He takes Gladys' hand.) You're a blessing from God to me, Gladys. A man's not complete without the company of a good woman. Our situation's practically biblical. Howard was like a brother to me. *(He kisses her on the cheek.)*

GLADYS

Luke, you've been such a good friend to me. I don't know how I would have gotten through all of this without your support.

LUKE

The gratitude is mutual. You were there with Francis every day at the end. And afterwards, you were a great help to me. Love takes many forms.

GLADYS

Yes it does, thank the Lord.

LUKE

I never felt any bitterness when you picked Howard over me. I understood. I would have picked Howard over me, too.

GLADYS

It wasn't an easy choice. Two handsome war heroes asking for my hand.

LUKE

You were the prettiest girl in the county. You still are.

GLADYS

Oh, stop that!

LUKE

You are! I think things worked out for the best. But you and I have a second chance. All I want now is to take care of you for as long as I live.

(Pause)

Remember when I proposed to you the first time?

GLADYS

In the front seat of a 1939 Desoto Town Coupe.

LUKE

Awwwwww, that was a pretty car! Down to the knobs on the radio. Remember what the radio was playing?

(He sings.)

I'll be loving you Always
With a love that's true Always.
When the things you've planned
Need a helping hand,
I will understand Always.

Always.

Days may not be fair Always,
That's when I'll be there Always.
Not for just an hour,
Not for just a day,
Not for just a year,
But Always.

GLADYS

That's so sweet. So much time has passed. Back then it was just us. Now there are children and grandchildren...

LUKE

Take all the time you need. I'm not going to change the way I feel – the way I've felt for over fifty years.

GLADYS

Josh seemed a little upset. He's probably overwhelmed. Everything's happening so fast.

LUKE

You have to make a decision based on what's right for you. You can't please all the people all the time.

GLADYS

Josh isn't all the people. He's my son.

LUKE

(Nuzzles her.) Your hair smells so good.

GLADYS

I can smell the ozone from the lightning. *(She gets up and crosses to look out the screen door.)* I can't rest when Birch is out on a DUI check at night. You never know when somebody's gonna come by all liquored up and take a shotgun from the rack and... I stay awake until I hear him come through the door.

LUKE

(Gets up and walks to her.) He'll be okay. *(Closes his eyes for a moment.)* There. I just prayed to God to watch over him.

(Luke takes Gladys by the hand and leads her back to the couch.)

GLADYS

I do the same thing every night. Maybe it carries more weight if you have a preacher chime in with you.

LUKE

(Takes a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolds it.) I got quite a few signatures on the petition this afternoon.

GLADYS

I saw you passing that thing around.

LUKE

Gladys, I think you should sign it.

GLADYS

I don't get much involved in politics.

LUKE

This isn't politics. It's about honoring our cultural and religious values. It's hard to argue with that.

GLADYS

I do honor them, but I don't see why I have to sign anything.

LUKE

It's important we let the homosexuals know they're not welcome here.

GLADYS

Josh will always be welcome in my home, Luke. I love him with all my heart.

LUKE

I'm talking about the militants. I love Josh too. Love the sin; hate the sinner.

GLADYS

Isn't it the other way around?

LUKE

I got a little tongue-tied there.

GLADYS

I never understood that anyway. We all fall short of the glory of God. It keeps me occupied just trying to love everybody. I'll leave the hating to others.

LUKE

You're right, Gladys. We certainly don't want to encourage hate of any kind. We've always had homosexuals here, even in the church. It's just that they had the decency to keep it quiet and out of sight. Nowadays the militants want to bring it all out in the open and rub our noses in it. We have to protect the children. Sanctioning this lifestyle will only encourage it.

GLADYS

We never encouraged Josh. He just did it anyway.

LUKE

Somewhere along the way Josh got lost. We can show him the way back. We're learning so much more about how to bring homosexuals back through the love of Jesus Christ.

GLADYS

I just want him to be happy.

LUKE

Me too. But if someone you love is sick, you try to make them well, you don't encourage them to get sicker.

GLADYS

Bernard seems like such a nice boy.

LUKE

That boy better get right with God while he still has a chance.

GLADYS

We had such a nice chat at the fish fry. I told him how I make my orange slice cake and he gave me a wonderful recipe for zucchini bread. He did say something strange, though.

LUKE

Everything that boy says is strange.

GLADYS

I told him we're having a revival next month, and he suggested "Pajama Game".

LUKE

He's one of the militants! One of the ones we have to stop!

GLADYS

(Incredulous) No! Well, you certainly couldn't tell it. But then, I've never *seen* "Pajama Game".

LUKE

He's one of those who openly proclaims pride in who he is. Pride in sin! Pride in abomination! Proverbs 16:18 tell us that "Pride goeth before destruction." Well, he's reaping his destruction now. I tell you, Gladys, I saw so many of them in that vile march in Washington. Parading around indecently, shoving their carnality in everyone's face. Sissified men prancing around practically naked. Stout, manly women exposing their fulsome breasts.

GLADYS

Bernard seemed like such a nice boy. He's Josh's best friend.

LUKE

You're blinded by a mother's love, which is only natural and good. I've been trained to perceive such things. That is why God ordained pastors and created fathers, to protect mothers and children from evil. The homosexual agenda is nothing short of total cultural takeover. They want to stand God's moral order on its head.

GLADYS

And Bernard is behind all of this? He seemed so gentle.

LUKE

They're very clever. Diabolically so. They've passed laws in some states giving them special rights. They demand billions of our dollars to pay for the consequences of their perversion and immorality, draining scarce money from more deserving illnesses.

They've siphoned off tax dollars to fund their pornography. Their next target is the repeal of the age of consent laws. They revel in youth. They need it! They consume youth like vampires suck blood. Without new blood they die out! Don't you see? They can't reproduce, men with men, so they rob families of their children so their kind can go on.

GLADYS

But Bernard is a school teacher.

LUKE

Exactly! When he dies he may leave no natural progeny, but I guarantee you he'll leave many of his former pupils as a twisted legacy of his lechery. . *(Takes out a notebook and pen, writes.)* "Legacy of lechery".

(Thunder)

GLADYS

(Rising and crossing to look out the screen door.) I hope Josh and Bernard get back from their drive soon. The clouds are heavy with rain.

LUKE

I'll leave the petition here for you. You sleep on it. Gladys, I'm sure Josh has good in him yet. There's still a chance we can save him.

(Thunder)

GLADYS

I don't want to talk about it any more. I'd better start closing the windows before it starts to rain.

LUKE

I need to get back and put some finishing touches on tomorrow's sermon. *(Crosses to Gladys.)* I'll see you in church tomorrow. *(Kisses her on the cheek.)*

(Gladys picks up the petition and looks it over then puts it aside as though it were contaminated. Lightning, thunder clap, as lights fade.)

*Scene 2**(Dusk. Josh and Bernard are in the front seat of a car. Josh is driving.)***BERNARD**

I have had quite a day! I had my palm read, got my tarot cards done, got drunk from an orange, led white people in a Negro spiritual, attended a hoedown.

JOSH

I think you really need square dancing for a hoedown.

BERNARD

I had no idea I could eat so much. The food reminded me of home. I got the recipe from your Mama for that delicious orange slice cake.

*(Lightning)***JOSH**

You were belle of the ball today. You and all these white southern ladies, gossiping like magpies.

BERNARD

Ladies of all colors and genders love dirt. I enjoyed singing with your brother this afternoon.

JOSH

Birch would have to go out and shoot a rabbit if he knew you had a crush on him.

BERNARD

I don't have a crush on the Deputy! We share an interest in music; that's all.

JOSH

Did you have to play a religious song? It just encouraged that pompous homophobe.

*(Thunder)***BERNARD**

If church were just music, I'd be there every time the doors were open. There's more soul in one good song than in a hundred preacher sermons.

JOSH

A hundred preacher sermons! Sounds like hell to me.

*(Lightning)***BERNARD**

I take it you won't give your blessing to the union of your Mother and Preacher Man.

JOSH

It's her life. But if she marries him, I won't come back here again.

*(Thunder)***BERNARD**

That would break her heart, Josh. She was bragging on you all day.

JOSH

I have a heart too.

BERNARD

What's up with you and him, anyway?

JOSH

We have issues.

BERNARD

No shit! *(Pause)* Do you know where we are?

JOSH

Yes, I know. By instinct. Most of the landmarks are gone. This used to be all farms, woods, fields. You see ahead on the right? That's a tire factory. It used to be a meadow. I mean a real wild meadow, not like a park. A vast diversity of flora and fauna. Grasses and brush poking through layers and layers of moss, dead, decaying plants and fungi. Thousands of species of insects, spiders, worms, snakes.

BERNARD

You can stop that right now! I don't care for anything wilder than Central Park. Although, the Ramble can get pretty wild.

(Lightning/thunder)

Oh my! That's close.

JOSH

I spent a couple of years exploring that meadow: mapping it out, cataloguing species, collecting rocks. Occasionally I'd find a fossilized plant and I'd be high on that for weeks. Take it home and study it for hours, amazed by this evidence of life that existed millions of years ago - right here!

BERNARD

Oh my. It starts with a little rock, and soon you aren't satisfied until you have big old femurs and T-Rex teeth. First we admitted we were powerless over bones, that our lives had become unmanageable.

JOSH

My name is Josh O, and I'm a bone girl.

(BIG lightning and thunder.)

BERNARD

(To the heavens) Missed us! Obviously he can't hit a moving target.

(Lightning/thunder)

Maybe we should head back.

JOSH

We are. I've been driving in a circle – sort of. This was always one of my favorite things, driving around these empty back roads at night. No particular destination in mind.

BERNARD

Queens on tour! *(Snaps fingers)*

(Lightning/thunder/rain drops)

JOSH

Honeysuckle and wild blackberry as thick as an old lady's perfume. You could drive for hours until you got the feeling the vast expanse was all yours. Yours and the ghosts'.

BERNARD

Careful, the right side of your brain is showing. That house does look haunted. All the houses seem to be hidden behind the trees. Open fields all around it, but the house is tucked away in a grove.

JOSH

They had no air conditioning when they built those houses. The trees kept them cooler in the summer.

They also hid the family secrets. I love those old farm houses.

(Torrential rain starts.)

Wow!

BERNARD

Put up the windows. We're going to need a boat.

JOSH

I can't see to drive. We need to get uphill; this area flash floods a lot.

BERNARD

All this water makes me want to pee.

JOSH

We're not that far from the home. These heavy showers usually don't last long. I have to pull over here.
(Swoosh of wind)

That gust had to be at least 60 miles per hour.

BERNARD

The wind began to switch,
The car to pitch,
And suddenly the hinges began to unhitch.

BOTH JOSH AND BERNARD

And Oh what happened then was rich!

(Pause)

BERNARD

Now that I have you here alone... There's something I have to tell you.

I've met somebody. His name is Kwame, a beautiful African American man. I think I'm in love with him, Josh.

(Silence, except for weather)

JOSH

How long...

BERNARD

We met at Brother to Brother. About a month ago.

JOSH

He works fast.

BERNARD

It was mutual. Just one of those things where everything clicks right off.

JOSH

Where does that leave us?

BERNARD

Stranded in a rain storm. Nothing has changed between us.

JOSH

Excuse the fuck out of me! Something definitely has changed.

BERNARD

You and I are not in love.

(Pause)

JOSH

I love you.

BERNARD

But we're not in love. You take care of me. You look after me. You treat me like an invalid.

JOSH

Would I fuck an invalid?

BERNARD

Yes, you fuck me, but oh so very carefully. I appreciate your care and concern. I really do. But I need passion. I never had a real loving relationship with a black man until Kwame. I grew up around men who liked my piano playing, loved my baking, but couldn't stand *me*. Like my uncle Willie. I once overheard him say to Aunt Florie, when I was staying with them in Pennsylvania one summer, "That kid's a punk. Just a faggoty punk. That's all he is." But the next night at the supper table, it was "Bernard, I just love your cherry pie. Give me another slice." And the neighborhood boys! When they were together, they loved to beat my puny ass, but when they were alone with me, some of the same ones who beat me up would beg me to service their manhood. " Bernard, man, you suck it so good. So much better than Lateesha do." My Daddy... Nobody ever had a loving relationship with my Daddy. I don't even think my Mama did.

JOSH

We all had problems growing up.

BERNARD

But you could pass. You were the jock, the hero. I never could act straight even if I had wanted to. The fact that I didn't want to made it even worse. And do not think it's all paradise in the gay world. Black is just as invisible among the buff, smooth, white Adonises shuttling between Chelsea and The Pines.

JOSH

I have always treated you with respect, even admiration.

BERNARD

I've never noticed you address the issue of race at all.

JOSH

Isn't color blindness the goal?

BERNARD

Is it? Look at me Josh. I'm black. It's not irrelevant. Kwame is teaching me to love my negritude. He's a beautiful dark black man who sets my glands aflutter with paroxysms and secretions, whose strong black hands caress my body with pure energy and light, whose heart beats my blood as my heart beats his, whose mind and soul carry me to an ancestral spiritual home that I've denied myself all of my life.

Josh, you were in love once. You deserve to be in love again, but you're not in love with me. Why don't you look up the baseball hottie - Jose?

JOSH

I don't even know if he's still alive. *(Pause)* Do you love Kwame with scorching tropical passion?

BERNARD

With equatorial abandon. Hot and full, like the earth's girth.

JOSH

What 's our geography?

Act II, Scene 2

BERNARD

North... maybe Nova Scotia. High on the wane of the global curve. Deep green forests and cool clear lakes. Eminently sensible. Perfect, if you're a salmon.

JOSH

I think I may be a salmon. A homo coho.

BERNARD

Well I'm a swordfish, swimming to warmer waters. I need a lover, Josh, not a social worker. You, too, Josh. You deserve some passion. Someone who can set you free.

(Rain has stopped.)

JOSH

I don't know. Sometimes I think I'm not loveable.

BERNARD

Fuck self pity. You'll never find out until you let go and completely love somebody. Now, we really should get back so I can call and change my ticket.

JOSH

Our flight is Monday morning. Are you really in such a rush to get away from me?

BERNARD

I'm going to Baltimore.

JOSH

Do you think that's wise?

BERNARD

Just as wise as your coming here. I need to see my family. I need to face my father and tell him he can't get away with this. His son is about to rise from the grave. Our families are our birthright, Josh. Sometimes I think we're co-conspirators in denying ourselves that birthright. We give up too easily.

And... My father and I have the same blood type. Maybe the marrow of his bones is also match. Now, let's go before I wet my pants.

(Josh starts the ignition. The lights fade.)

Scene 3

(Living room. Low lights come up. Nobody is on stage. Noises come from the kitchen. Josh comes down the stairs, dressed for bed. As he walks towards the kitchen door, Gladys comes out with a slice of cake and a glass of milk. They surprise each other.)

GLADYS

My gracious!

JOSH

I'm sorry. I didn't think anybody else was up. It must be two a.m. I couldn't sleep.

GLADYS

Birch should be getting home soon. I usually put out a snack for him when he works late.

JOSH

Is that orange slice cake?

GLADYS

Sure. You want some?

JOSH

I'd forgotten how good it was. Some things you just can't find in New York, like pimento cheese and sweet tea.

GLADYS

Here, have a seat. There's more in the kitchen for Birch.

JOSH

That was a really violent storm earlier tonight.

GLADYS

The roof is leaking upstairs. I'm glad we already packed the attic things.

(Pause)

JOSH

This is so good.

(Pause)

GLADYS

Did you and Bernard have a nice drive?

JOSH

Everything has changed so much.

GLADYS

Bernard seems like such a nice young man.

JOSH

He's pretty special.

GLADYS

Josh. Where did you go off to this afternoon? When Luke made his announcement.

JOSH

I went over to the field near Twin Springs, where I used to collect specimens. It's a self-serve gas station and convenience store now.

GLADYS

You travel all over the world looking for fossils. Seems like a little field over at Twin Springs wouldn't hold much interest for you.

JOSH

Everything's always worth another look. There's this dinosaur called Oviraptor. It's name is Latin for "egg stealer". When they first discovered it back in the twenties, it was found on a nest of eggs they assumed were from another species. They concluded the Oviraptor was stealing the eggs and eating them.

Just a short while back some of our guys from the Museum were on a dig in Mongolia, in the Gobi desert. They found Oviraptors sitting on nests of eggs, like before, but this time they found fossilized embryos in some of the eggs. It turns out they were Oviraptor eggs, not some other species. So, this animal, with a reputation as a thief and predator was actually a caring mother, protecting its own.

GLADYS

I would have guessed that in the first place.

(Pause)

JOSH

Mama...

GLADYS

Yes, Josh.

JOSH

Do you ever get lonely?

GLADYS

Of course. I get lonely. But I have my family.

JOSH

Would marrying Preacher Douglas make you less lonely?

GLADYS

I'm trying to figure that one out. Luke isn't just a preacher. He's a man. I don't believe everything he preaches anyway.

(Pause)

I guess I'll get more cake and milk for Birch. *(She starts to go, but turns back.)* Josh. You being here makes me less lonely.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 4

(Holly is reading the paper and drinking coffee. A thermos carafe, cream, sugar, cups are nearby. Her Blackberry rings; she checks the caller ID.)

HOLLY

Hey there, hot stuff. Shouldn't you be in church?... Ah, the men's room. I thought I heard water running... You dirty boy!... I hope there's nobody else in there with you... I wish I was there too... Boing? Oh, boing... Is an erection in church a mortal sin? *(Sounds of someone at the top of the stairs.)* Oops! Gotta go. *(She puts the Blackberry down and picks up the newspaper again. Josh comes down the stairs.)*

HOLLY

Good morning, Josh. How are you.

JOSH

Okay.

HOLLY

Almost all the news this morning is about that storm last night. So much damage.

JOSH

We were out driving in it. It was pretty bad.

HOLLY

Coffee?

JOSH

I think not.

HOLLY

It's really good. I brought it up from Atlanta. Arabian Mocha Sanani. It's seventeen dollars a pound.

JOSH

Oh. I'll have some.

HOLLY

There are ham biscuits if you want. If we still lived at home we'd be obese. Mama shoves food in front of you every five minutes.

JOSH

I'm still full from yesterday. How are things down in Atlanta?

HOLLY

Just lovely, thank you.

JOSH

Haynes and Heather okay?

(Pause)

HOLLY

Just lovely... who am I kidding? Nothing's lovely anymore. My child is like an alien to me and my husband is tedious and offensive.

JOSH

Sounds like a normal family life to me.

HOLLY

Josh, I'm having an affair with one of my law partners. Oh my God! What did I just say?

JOSH

Go, girl! Good for you.

HOLLY

It is not good for me! I'm awful. Nothing is the way it's supposed to be.

JOSH

I don't believe in supposed to be. Que sera sera.

HOLLY

It's a big old mess. Wait a minute. You weren't so que sera sera yesterday when the Preacher proposed.

JOSH

I've changed my mind. I'm giving up all desires and expectations. I may even shave my head and join the Hare Krishna's.

HOLLY

What happened to you?

JOSH

I'm tired of being a salmon.

HOLLY

I beg your pardon?

JOSH

Oh, nothing. Bernard and I broke up last night.

HOLLY

I'm so sorry!

JOSH

It wasn't so bad. A little sting and it's over. You should try it with Haynes. I never liked him anyway.

HOLLY

Josh, don't be mean. I never liked him much either.

JOSH

Let's both drop out and start an ashram.

HOLLY

I have responsibilities.

*(Fade out/fade in - passage of time. On fade in, **Holly** is topping off the coffee cups.)*

HOLLY

Josh, dear, I'm a lawyer. I have little use for the truth.

JOSH

You know what they say. The truth shall set you free.

HOLLY

Real freedom is scary. So unstructured. Life is a game and there are rules.

JOSH

Who makes the rules?

HOLLY

They've been passed down. That's what civilization is: an agreed upon set of rules. Without some framework everything is chaos and no one is safe. These days I don't feel so safe most of the time anyway.

JOSH

What if I disagree with the rules? Without some chaos there is no change or growth or creativity or joy.

HOLLY

It's not totally inflexible. Society tolerates some freedom. But there is a center, and the further you get from the center, the less it is tolerated.

JOSH

An inverse proportion. Like gravity.

HOLLY

Exactly. We do live on earth, you know. Gravity keeps us grounded. Except when we go up in lovely airplanes to visit lovely places... on earth.

JOSH

So are you going to end the affair?

HOLLY

Oh no! As long as I'm having a great time, why should I? I will keep it discreet, continue to be a wife to my boring husband - in public at least- and when I am at home, I will retire to my lovely study, with lovely tea rose wallpaper, lovely fresh flowers, lovely dried flowers, lovely silk flowers, and lovely Victorian furniture and ignore the reality outside its walls – except for the rose garden, of course.

JOSH

When did you move in with Elton John?

(Fade out/fade in. Holly pours more coffee.)

JOSH

Why didn't you go with them this morning?

HOLLY

I haven't been to that little old church in years. I don't want to have to talk to all those people and answer questions about what I've been doing all this time. We go to the Episcopal church at home. A large lovely building, with lovely people. The clergy is highly educated and our choir is professional.

JOSH

Are you a believer?

HOLLY

We're Episcopalians. We don't have to believe too hard. What about you, Josh? Are you an atheist?

JOSH

Atheists are certain there is no God. I'm a scientist. Clearly there is some greater power or intelligence than us, but I have no idea what it is. I think it's more spiritually honest to admit we don't know than to make something up. My three favorite words are "I don't know." Religion makes God so small. The real mystery is so much more awesome than a wrathful father figure who rewards the good and punishes the wicked.

HOLLY

Big ideas intimidate most of us. Bible stories, hymns, the Ten Commandments... these are things we can grasp. And they are good. Look at Mama. She's religious and she's the kindest, most loving person I've ever known.

JOSH

She would probably be just as kind and loving without religion. For every kind and loving person in the church there is a monster.

HOLLY

Science has created monstrosities, too. By the way, what is your problem with Luke Douglas?

(Fade out/fade in. Holly is on the phone.)

HOLLY

Yes, Red, I'll tell him to call you. It was lovely seeing you yesterday. You look so good... I will... Okay, bye.

(She pours more coffee.)

I don't see why you're complaining. You have a nice life. You make a decent living doing what you did as a child - playing in the fields.

JOSH

It's a little more than that. You don't think my work has value?

HOLLY

Of course it does. Rich people need somewhere to put their money, and children love dinosaurs.

JOSH

I'm a scientist. I want to contribute to the general knowledge of humankind.

HOLLY

What have you contributed so far?

JOSH

I've just begun. It takes a long time to find something truly original. You can spend an entire career, move mountains of earth to uncover a single important find. And you may never find it. It's the search that matters. So much is unknown. That's why I dig. Before I die, to find one bone, one tooth, one footprint that adds just a little bit of original knowledge - an iota of truth hitherto unknown. A footnote will do. Something that says I was here.

HOLLY

I believe that's what children are for.

JOSH

This is my baby, Holly.

HOLLY

Do you want to know the value of my work? I help to assure that future generations will have an unlimited supply of extinct species to study. Why did the dinosaurs go extinct anyway? Meteors or something, wasn't it?

JOSH

That's one theory. There are several. None can be tested and they all seem inadequate to me.

The Indians knew about the bones out west way before we did. They believed there were giant serpents that roamed the land and burrowed into the earth, and that they were hunted and killed by the Great Spirit with bolts of lightning.

HOLLY

That's silly.

JOSH

It makes as much sense as any other religious belief. Making up something to explain what you don't know.

(Fade out/fade in. More coffee.)

JOSH

But reward and punishment appeal to a baser part of human nature. It seems to me more spiritually pure to do good because it is good than because Daddy will give you a present.

HOLLY

Human beings *have* a base nature Josh. Reward and punishment function as a moral marketplace. We need competition to keep our base nature in balance.

JOSH

Beware of moral marketeers.

HOLLY

Beware of the spiritually pure. It makes me think of beautiful blond smooth faced boys with swastikas on their sleeves.

JOSH

I never thought of myself as a Nazi.

HOLLY

Not yet, but by appealing to your baser emotion of self-esteem, I have made you think about it, which reduces the likelihood of it actually happening. That's how the marketplace works.

My, this caffeine has set my tongue to wagging.

JOSH

Me too. Sort of like "Long Day's Journey Into Night" for overachievers.

HOLLY

Josh, I'd rather our conversation remain private, between us.

(Pause)

JOSH

I bet you are a good lawyer.

HOLLY

And I suspect you're a good scientist.

JOSH

I'm working on it.

HOLLY

Somehow I think we both wound up being what we're supposed to be.

JOSH

That's kind of amazing.

HOLLY

I don't know about Birch. What's he supposed to be?

(Sounds of siren, car doors)

A grown up would be a good start.

(Birch and Pat enter.)

BIRCH

I'm glad y'all are both here. We need to talk before Mama and Preacher Douglas get here.

JOSH

He's coming here again?

PAT

He's bringing your mama home. We left them at the church, commiserating with the Oglesby's. Their place got tore up by the storm.

HOLLY

What's the matter, Birch?

BIRCH

We have to do something about this damn proposal of marriage.

HOLLY

Birch, whatever are you talking about?

BIRCH

Ain't it obvious? He's after her money.

JOSH

I hadn't thought of it, but you're probably right. But that's just the beginning of what he's after.

PAT

Don't you know it!

BIRCH

It didn't hit me until the sermon, when he was talking about the money lenders in the temple. Everything just clicked. You heard him yesterday talking about the quartet and wanting us to go pro. He kept talking about financing and capital. We're not that good. He'd be putting Mama's money down a rat hole, while he takes a nice fat management fee for himself.

HOLLY

I thought y'all sounded lovely, Birch. Maybe he's right. Maybe this is what you're supposed to do.

BIRCH

We're okay for around here, but the music business is tough. We're just not that good. But that's not all. The preacher retires next month. He won't have a place to live anymore and all he gets for money is social security and \$500 a month pension. He didn't start hanging around here all the time until those damn Japanese men started making offers for the land.

HOLLY

It would be easy enough to draw up a pre-nup, maybe put some money in a trust.

PAT

I could make up a "preacher voodoo doll".

JOSH

He won't go along with it. The pre-nuptial agreement, that is. Go ahead with the voodoo doll, though. Hell, skip the doll; let's just stick pins in him.

HOLLY

Why are you so sure he wouldn't go along with a pre-nup?

JOSH

His bible tells him that the man must have ultimate power. Pre-nuptial agreements are equalizers, thus tools of the devil.

BIRCH

He's just so goddamn pushy. He keeps trying to horn in on the quartet's business, telling us what songs to sing and what tempos he likes. I'd love to tell him to go to hell, but he's Sherm's daddy. I just hate the thought of his hands on that money. By all rights that should have been Daddy's money. If he had lived. Right before Daddy went missing, I was helping him plow the cornfield. He stopped the tractor, turned off the engine and turned to me and said, "Birch, I'd like to leave this farm to you. I'm gonna die before your Mama and I want you to farm this land like I did and my Daddy did before me. You'll take care of your Mama, of course, but I want to change my will to give the farm to you."

JOSH

How did he know he was going to die before Mama?

HOLLY

Then the money would have been all yours now.

BIRCH

I told him I didn't want it; I didn't have farming in my blood like he did.

HOLLY

What do you want to do, Birch?

BIRCH

I always wanted to be a truck driver.

PAT

I knew there was a reason I liked you.

BIRCH

I like being out on the open road.

HOLLY

What did Daddy say when you turned him down?

BIRCH

He didn't say anything, just looked out over the fields and then turned away from me. His back was shaking. I could tell he was crying.

HOLLY

Daddy? Crying?

BIRCH

I'm only now beginning to realize how much that hurt him. Josh, don't stay away for too long at a time. It's brutal on Mama. I can tell you from experience that separation from your children is the toughest thing in the world.

PAT

Birch, that's the most I've ever heard you talk about your feelings.

BIRCH

I think I need me an orange, damn it!

PAT

Why don't you try to get through today without one.

BIRCH

Now, hon, a day without an orange is like ...

PAT

You don't even know what it's like, do you?

BIRCH

The hell with it, then. *(Sees the petition on the table.)* What's this? Oh, it's that damn petition Preacher Douglas had at the fish fry yesterday.

JOSH

What kind of petition? *(He picks it up and reads.)*

BIRCH

A group of 'em's trying to get an anti gay resolution passed by the county. He tried to get me to sign this thing. He was passing it around. I just don't think it's the government's business.

JOSH

(Reading) This is unbelievably ignorant.

PAT

You want me to put a hex on it?

JOSH

Who's got a match?

BIRCH

Whatever your hiney-pokers and your bush-hogs want to do is their own damn business. I just don't want to hear about it.

JOSH

How generous of you, Birch!

BIRCH

You know what I mean. It doesn't matter to me. I mean, damn! You're Josh! You'll always be Josh. Everybody needs a little lovin'. Just please don't tell me the details.

(Bernard comes down the stairs with carrying heavy luggage.)

BERNARD

You have no idea how hard it is to combine the strength of Arnold Schwarzenegger with the equipoise of Audrey Hepburn, but somehow I manage.

PAT

Hey there! Love that outfit!

(Sound of another car pulling in. They all look at each other. Birch puts the petition back on the table. They stand and wait for Gladys and Luke to enter through the door.)

GLADYS

Well hey everybody!

PAT

Hey there Miss Gladys?

GLADYS

Pat, did y'all have storms over in Greer?

PAT

Bodacious! You know my neighbor, Mr. Hughes? Well, a bolt of lightning hit his trailer and burnt it to the ground.

(Bernard snaps his fingers.)

I bet he'll rinse out his beer cans from now on.

GLADYS

Bernard! You're all packed?

(Sound of another car pulling in, blowing its horn.)

BERNARD

That must be the limo service.

JOSH

I offered to drive him to the airport...

BERNARD

I can take care of myself, thank you.

GLADYS

What's going on? Are you leaving? I thought...

JOSH

I'll explain later, Mama. Bernard is leaving earlier than planned.

(Car horn.)

BERNARD

(Shaking Gladys' hand) Mrs. Oaks, thank you for your hospitality, and your recipe for orange slice cake. I'm going to make one for my father.

GLADYS

You're welcome, Bernard. Come back anytime and visit. We appreciate you.

BERNARD

Ms. Freeman *(He and Holly exchange nods.)*

BERNARD

(He gives Pat a hug.) Thank you, Pat, for the crystal and everything else.

PAT

It looks like you've made some decisions. Good for you!

BERNARD

(Shakes his hand) Birch, keep that lovely baritone voice in shape.

BIRCH

You can come play piano for our quartet anytime you want.

BERNARD

(Hugs Josh) Scarecrow, I'll miss you most of all.

JOSH

Are you sure you're doing the right thing?

BERNARD

I won't know if I don't try.

JOSH

If things don't work out with Kwame, you always have a place to come to.

BERNARD

Don't wait for me, Josh. Get on with your life. Stop being so passive. Stand up for yourself. Be bold. I'll see you when I get back from Baltimore.

LUKE

Baltimore? Gladys, this boy's going to seek his father's forgiveness.

BERNARD

You're a little confused about who's going to forgive whom.

(Horn blows.)

(Looking at his watch) I don't want to miss that plane. I have a resurrection to get to.

(Car horn. Bernard rushes up to Birch, kisses him quickly on the cheek then runs off stage. Birch wipes his cheek. Josh follows him to the door. We hear Bernard from offstage)

There's no place like home. There's no place like home...

HOLLY

Oh, Birch, I forgot to tell you. Red Duncan has called twice. He said he's been paging you.

BIRCH

He probably wants me to come in to work. I didn't take my beeper with me this morning. He'll have to wait a bit. Mama, Luke, there's something we want to discuss with you...

LUKE

Well, speak up son.

BIRCH

Mama, we think before you two get married, you should have a..

HOLLY

A pre-nuptial agreement.

PAT

(Looks at her watch) Oh, look at the time! And I have a doll to make.

GLADYS

A pre-nuptial agreement? That's for rich people and celebrities. I never knew anyone to have one of those.

BIRCH

But, Mama, you've got over a million dollars! That's rich for around here.

PAT

I think this is probably a private family matter, so I'll just be getting on. *(Takes a crystal from her bag.)* Miss Gladys, I've programmed this crystal to ward off sinister spirits. I want you to have it. It may offer you some protection.

GLADYS

I don't see how. It's not sharp enough to stab anybody with.

PAT

Bye, y'all. Birch, hon, I'll call you tonight. *(She exits.)*

LUKE

Holly, if I'm not mistaken, a pre-nuptial agreement is intended to govern any eventual divorce proceeding, correct?

HOLLY

That's one of its purposes, yes.

LUKE

This is to be a Christian marriage. There will be no divorce.

GLADYS

This discussion is a little premature.

HOLLY

We were thinking that a portion of the money could be put in a trust.

LUKE

I see. Gladys, these children seem to have figured out that you're not going to live forever and they want to protect their inheritance.

BIRCH

We want to protect our mother.

LUKE

What price tag have you put on your blessing?

HOLLY

We haven't discussed particulars. We just think the subject needs to be looked at.

BIRCH

To be honest preacher...

LUKE

By all means, be honest.

BIRCH

I'm just not sure about your intentions.

GLADYS

Josh, how do you feel about this?

JOSH

Do whatever you want.

GLADYS

Joshua, honey, I apologize for whatever I've said or done to upset you.

JOSH

It's nothing you've said or done, Mama.

LUKE

Josh, your bitterness is rooted in sin. I want you to know there is redemption for sin.

JOSH

Please don't bother me with your bullshit!

GLADYS

Josh!

LUKE

Then think of your mother's feelings. Don't destroy her completely. Have a little more compassion for her than you showed for Jean Griffith.

JOSH

I was far kinder to Mrs. Griffith than she ever deserved.

LUKE

You're so lost you have no idea how cruel you were. She expected you to send her son's body back to her from New York. I'll never forget her reaction when all she got back was a box of ashes.

GLADYS

Oh, Lordy! She collapsed like a Chinese fan.

JOSH

It was Jimmy's wish to be cremated; it's in his will. It's the only thing in his will; he had no possessions. She wouldn't have recognized his body anyway.

GLADYS

The body is important, Josh.

LUKE

She brought Jimmy into this world and felt a mother's duty to see he had a proper departure.

JOSH

And ignore him in between? Where was her sense of mother's duty when he was up all night crying because of the pain in his legs. I don't recall her cleaning up after he shit all over himself. Or washing down the walls after a binge of projectile vomiting.

LUKE

Josh, there is solace for your anger in Jesus Christ.

JOSH

Fuck Jesus!

GLADYS

Josh, you don't mean that!

BIRCH

Not literally, he doesn't, Mama. *(He helps her sit.)*

LUKE

(Prays. While he prays, he overlaps with Josh's speeches.) Dear heavenly Father, forgive your child Joshua. Save him from his evil ways...

JOSH

He told me about the torture sessions where you threatened him will hellfire on one side and his father threatened him with castration on the other. Your little exorcisms where you were going to purge him of the faggot demons.

LUKE

Those meetings were prayerful... His parents and I prayed over him to try to save his soul.

JOSH

How did you get them to show up? Free liquor!?

LUKE

(Continues praying) Cast out the Devil that rules his heart and leads him down the path of lewdness and perversion...

JOSH

Do you know where I found him in New York? He was hustling the piers at the end of Christopher Street, staying in a different place every night, sometimes sleeping in the streets.

LUKE

(Prays) Send the Holy Ghost to move in this house, to staunch the lies and return his soul back to you...

JOSH

Taking up with whoever offered him a few bucks and a few minutes of what he thought was love.

LUKE

(Prays) Let the redemptive blood of Jesus flow over his heart and cleanse him of his wicked desires and worldly pride...

JOSH

How was he supposed to have any idea what love was? He never got any at home. When I found him his illness was really starting to show. It was harder and harder for him to get tricks.

LUKE

I admit we failed. We were never able to save him from the life you led him into. But there's still hope for you, Josh.

JOSH

I didn't lead him into anything!

LUKE

You seduced him into a life of sodomy!

JOSH

I cared for him when he was sick. We were never lovers! Not even five years ago, when you and Daddy frightened me away from here with your threats. I'm not afraid of you anymore.

LUKE

Josh, you made a promise to your father.

GLADYS

What are you talking about?

JOSH

Things have been kept from you, Mama.

GLADYS

Things, what things?

JOSH

The truth.

LUKE

Gladys, take great care. The devil is lurking in what this boy says.

GLADYS

Luke, be quiet.

JOSH

The year before I left home, when Jimmy was one of my students, he used to call me to come and get him when his mother and father got liquored up and started smacking each other around. He'd sneak to the corner and I'd pick him up. We'd go to a movie, or just drive around until we thought enough time had passed for things to calm down again. He'd get home and his parents had either left or were passed out.

LUKE

They had a problem. We prayed over it. But Jimmy was a willful child and exaggerated everything.

JOSH

One night, when the call came later than usual, I picked him up and he was in tears. He usually tossed everything off with a joke, but this night was different. We drove for hours. He wouldn't let me take him back home. Every time I drove near his neighborhood, he burst into tears again. He convinced me to let him stay with me for the night. So, we went back to the studio I had built in the loft in the barn and went to bed - and slept, that's all, slept.

GLADYS

Your daddy said you did such a good job building that studio.

JOSH

About one in the morning we were awakened by Mr. Griffith, Preacher Douglas and Daddy, shining flashlights in our eyes. Mr. Griffith thought Jimmy might be with me. He had apparently noticed more through his stupor than I thought.

LUKE

He noticed you were taking his son away from him.

JOSH

Then the preacher started telling Mr. Griffith all the possible things I could be charged with: kidnapping, child molestation, contributing to the delinquency... a litany of offenses that I hadn't committed.

LUKE

You were in an intimate embrace!

JOSH

We were sleeping! Jimmy wanted more but I turned him down

LUKE

He was cradled up against you. You had your arm around him.

JOSH

He was scared and lonely. Nothing happened! I'm sorry to disappoint you Preacher, but nothing happened. You wish it did. You love sin! It gets you so excited you get hard, if that's still possible.

LUKE

(Prays) Lord Jesus, help this boy...

JOSH

I was spooked by their threats. The next day, Daddy and the preacher came to me with what they referred to as Mr. Griffith's generous offer. If I would leave and go far enough away that Jimmy couldn't come under my influence, no charges would be pressed. Daddy even paid for the move.

BIRCH

Why didn't you fight it Josh? If you were innocent we would have stood by you.

JOSH

You wouldn't have. Not then. Daddy didn't. That was the hardest part to take. He wouldn't even hear me out. Daddy surrendered all of his faith in me, and he was wrong. I swallowed all my self respect and left. I was already thinking about going back to grad school anyway. It was a good excuse. I should have been stronger.

GLADYS

I can't believe Howard behaved like that.

LUKE

Gladys, please try to understand. We did what we thought was best for everybody. Josh could have gone to jail.

HOLLY

Not if he didn't do anything.

BIRCH

Yeah!

GLADYS

How could you, Luke?

LUKE

Gladys, you're weak. Being too long without a man can make you weak.

JOSH

Being too long *with* a man can make you weak, too.

LUKE

Gladys, this boy is filled with the devil!

GLADYS

Stop it!

LUKE

Please, Gladys. You need to try to see it in context. I thought I was doing Josh a favor. Tom Griffith was going to press charges.

GLADYS

We would have stood by him.

LUKE

Howard went along with the deal. He thought it was best.

GLADYS

He should have discussed it with me. I should not have been left out of this.

LUKE

We thought we were doing what was best.

GLADYS

Luke, you need to leave now. I need to be with my family.

(He stares at her for a moment, then gets his hat and exits.)

BIRCH

Well. I guess you don't need any "pre" if there ain't gonna be any nuptials.

GLADYS

Birch, please!

BIRCH

I think I'll get me an orange.

GLADYS

Why don't you just get the bottle? You're not fooling anybody.

BIRCH

Well... now that the cat's out of the bag... *(He pulls out a flask and takes a swig.)*

GLADYS

I'm sick and tired of everybody trying to protect me. Lies and half-truths. What else is there? Does anybody need to tell me anything else?

HOLLY

I'm having an affair.

GLADYS

No kidding? Ed Barnhill, right? Just because I'm nice all the time, everybody thinks I'm stupid. I'm not stupid.

I'm as guilty as everybody else. The fish at the fish fry yesterday – they were store bought. We didn't catch them.

HOLLY

Thank God for that. One of my clients has been poisoning that lake for years.

JOSH

I'm sorry, Mama. I should have told you the truth from the start.

GLADYS

Yes, you should have. What I don't understand is how men strong and brave enough to win the war could turn so weak and cowardly.

(Telephone rings. Birch answers.)

BIRCH

Oh, hi Red. Sorry I didn't get back to you. We had a little.... uh huh... uh huh... I see. ...Oh God... okay... Thanks Red. I'll be down there as soon as I can.

(There is an uncomfortable silence as Birch takes a deep, long breath before addressing the family, haltingly.)

Red says they were inspecting the damage the storm did... down at the bridge... the new bridge. Something washed up... They found... remains... bones... a skeleton... From the clothing, Red's pretty sure it's Daddy.

HOLLY

Oh my God!

(Stunned silence.)

BIRCH

He had a... rope and a cinder bock tied around his neck.

GLADYS

My poor Howard.

JOSH

Jesus Christ!

BIRCH

I need to go down to the morgue and ID the remains.

JOSH

I'll go with you.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 5

LUKE

We gather to lay to rest our brother in Christ, Howard Ridley Oaks, devout Christian, decorated patriot, successful farmer, stalwart of the community, faithful husband to Gladys, loving father to Holly, Birch and Joshua, beloved friend.

In John 15:13 Jesus says "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

To those of us who landed at Omaha Beach with Howard, "Bloody Omaha", there was never a doubt that Howard was prepared to lay down his life for his buddies and his country. As German bullets came in torrents from the cliffs, hour on end, Howard led the charge and never flinched. He gave the rest of us courage, and it cemented a bond of brotherhood between us for all time.

Howard never spoke much about what happened in Europe. He never talked much about himself at all. There is one story that stands out in memory, a story I don't think he even told you about, Gladys.

In the days after we hit the shores of France, our unit brought up the rear, tasked with mopping up as the front advanced towards Paris. One day in the French countryside we came upon a farmhouse strikingly similar to the one Howard had grown up in at Oak Grove. The Germans had been holed up there, but had fled the Allied attack. We went to check out the house. It appeared to be completely abandoned when we heard a noise in a closet. Howard went to the closet door, sidearm at the ready. When the door was opened, we saw there huddled in a corner a little boy, no more than five or six years old. He looked as if he hadn't eaten a bite in days and the fear in his eyes - well it melted Howard's heart. While the rest of us inspected the house, Howard gave the boy some of his water and his rations. He tried to speak to him with what little French Howard knew, but the boy uttered not a word. But even without language he and Howard seemed to have a bond so instantaneous it was as if God had meant for their paths to cross. Howard said, "One day I'll have a little boy like this, and if he were alone I would want someone to take care of him." And take care of him he did. For several days the boy rode on Howard's shoulders, ate Howard's rations and slept in his arms at night. Although the boy never spoke, he did laugh when Howard tossed him into the air or tousled his hair. He never told us his name, but Howard called him Mon Ami, my friend.

Eventually we met up with a Red Cross unit. We heard that the fighting was pretty rough the way we were headed, and the boy needed the kind of attention we couldn't give him, so Howard had to turn the boy over to the Red Cross. We never knew, but maybe they were able to track down his family, if they were alive.

That night, the first in several Howard had slept without Mon Ami in his arms, all night Howard cried like a baby. The separation was more than he could bear. It was one more time I knew the depth of compassion and feeling in Howard Oaks.

Back home from the war Howard showed the same capacity for love, first to his beautiful bride, and to each of his three children. He loved so much that it hurt.

(Pause)

Howard Riddley Oaks laid down his life, and we are left behind trying to understand. When the war ended, we came home to build a new world with a clarity of purpose and vision. We knew who we were. We knew right from wrong. God, family and country were palpable, immutable ideals to us. But today I look around and I don't recognize the world I live in, and I wish I had my old friend Howard around to talk to about it.

But there is light; there is hope. We find comfort in an all-knowing God made real to us through the death and resurrection of his only begotten son, Jesus Christ.

As we try to make sense of the life and death of our beloved Howard Oaks, let us seek the peace and unbounded understanding of the Lord.

Please bow your heads as the Riverside Boys sing.

(Singing) Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me.
See, on the portals he's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.
Come home, come home.
Ye who are weary come home.
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling.
Calling O sinner come home.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 6

(Birch, Josh and Gladys seated. Holly is seeing someone out the door.)

HOLLY

(To offstage) Thank you so much, Mrs. Hamby. The peach pie was lovely. It means so much to us. You take care darling. We love you.

BIRCH

I think there were more people there today than the first service. Red said there were over 80 cars in the procession.

HOLLY

(Coming back into living room.) They're all gone. I'm going upstairs to make some calls. Mama, are you okay?

GLADYS

You go on upstairs, dear, and take care of your business. I have the boys here with me.

PAT

(Coming in from kitchen) The dishes are all done and all that food is put away.

GLADYS

Pat, you didn't have to do all of that.

PAT

Don't be silly, Miss Gladys. I love puttering around that old kitchen.

GLADYS

Well, thank you for all your help. We appreciate you.

PAT

(Comes to Gladys, puts her arm around her and kisses the top of her head.) I'll see you tomorrow.

(To Birch) Walk me out to my car.

BIRCH

I'll be back in a minute, Mama.

GLADYS

It's okay, Birch. Josh is right here. *(Birch and Pat exit. Gladys reaches over and takes Josh's hand for a quiet moment.)*

I was just thinking about that morning Birch and I went out in the boat. The red light of daybreak - the way it hit the water - it looked like God had flung a handful of rubies across the surface - like he was skimming stones. All the while knowing what was underneath.

Wasn't it a beautiful service?

JOSH

If you were pleased with it. That's all that matters.

Did Daddy not tell you that story about the boy in France?

GLADYS

No he never did. If it really happened that way. Luke sometimes makes things up for effect.

You look good in your Daddy's suit. He was so handsome when he dressed up. Luke was Howard's best friend. He's a good man at heart. They made mistakes. The world changes so fast; we all have a lot to learn. All of us. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself more

than anybody else.

JOSH

I can't help thinking if I had behaved differently, stood up for myself, Daddy might still be here.

GLADYS

If your Daddy had behaved differently he might still be here. But you might not have gone to graduate school and you seem so happy to be doing what you're doing. If things were different, they'd be different, but they're not.

JOSH

Why does it all have to be so difficult? I don't think that I will ever get my life worked out.

GLADYS

Life doesn't get worked out, Josh. It's just good days and bad days until it ends, hopefully more good than bad. If you can learn to let go of the bad ones and treasure the good ones, you've done all that you can do.

JOSH

I have trouble telling the difference. Is today a good day or a bad day?

GLADYS

A little of both.

(Fade to black.)