

Judgment Days

by Dennis Fisher

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CHARACTERS

Mildred Taylor, 25 - Mother, homemaker, makes pies for sale

William Taylor, infant - son of Hank and Millie

Henry Taylor, 28 - Father, works at clay pipe factory

Agnes Dodd, 39 - Neighbor, air of pathos and unintended humor

Ada Wyatt, 35 - Nurse, Millie's sister

Joe Kamp, 42 - Neighbor, moonshiner

Jerry Dodd, 40 - Agnes' unemployed husband

Hobo 1 - played by same actor as Joe Kamp

Hobo 2 - played by same actor as Jerry Dodd

Production Notes: Characters are midwesterners with rural, as opposed to southern accents.

These are people whose rural upbringing has not provided most of them with a solid grounding in grammatical precision. This should not be portrayed as a lack of intelligence or wisdom.

A baby's cough is a crucial part of the play - it always happens in darkness - how that is handled will require a creative approach by the sound designer. A doll representing the baby must be realistic and have a weak neck and a heavy head that must be supported - like a real baby.

“I do not know whether there are Gods, but
there ought to be.” - Diogenes

ACT 1

SCENE 1

A house in a small town in Illinois, December 31, 1932. MILLIE is preparing a meal in small kitchen with a table and chairs filling much of the room. Next to the table is a simple cradle. As MILLIE goes about her work she occasionally looks into the bassinet and smiles softly. After a time the back door opens and HANK quietly walks in holding a lunch pail. HANK and MILLIE look at each other and MILLIE holds a finger to her lips. HANK and MILLIE stand next to each other looking down at the baby. They smile and look into each others eyes. MILLIE puts her arm around HANK's waist. Lights fade to black.

ACT 1

SCENE 2

MILLIE and HANK are in kitchen that is lit by a kerosene lamp. They are sitting at kitchen table. HANK is holding a book and struggling a bit as he deliberately reads from it.

HANK

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit imped, er, impediments
Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

MILLIE

... That was so beautiful.

HANK

I'm not sure I understand it, but I thought it was pretty too ... Did you pick that out so I'd say somethin' romantic?

MILLIE

(Smiles)

Maybe.

HANK

(raises eyebrows and tilts head)

I don't think I ever read a sonnet before. I *know* I never read a sonnet. The only book we had in the house when I was a kid was the bible. The boys at the clay works would sure give me a hard time if they knew I was readin' Shakespeare.

(Pauses, looks at pages of book)

What exactly is a sonnet?

MILLIE

It's a kind of poem that always has 14 lines.

HANK

Always?

MILLIE

I believe so.

HANK

How come?

MILLIE

Well - would it make you appreciate shoveling coal any more if you knew what wood they use for the shovel's handle?

HANK

They use ash because it gives a little, it ain't as likely to crack as maple. Did you know that?

MILLIE

I didn't know that. I was making a point. Does knowing it make the shoveling experience any different?

HANK

Not really.

MILLIE

Let's just enjoy the poetry and try not to over think it.

HANK

Sure. Sure. You know I'm not a real good reader, and Shakespeare, well - this is not the sort of thing I generally do. I'm so bad at this. You sure this is a good idea?

MILLIE

This isn't just for us. It's for William. He needs to grow up in a house that values culture. Mom and dad didn't have much but they made sure we were readers . . . All that matters to me is that you do your best. This is the start of a wonderful new tradition for us.

HANK

Just don't tell anybody.

MILLIE

(smiles) Too late.

HANK

Aww. Who did you ...

Loud, drunken shouting outside open window - HANK sits upright.

HANK

Son of a bitch!

MILLIE

Language! They do this most nights of the year Henry, did you think they wouldn't drink on New Years Eve?

HANK

I just get so tired of listening to them. I'm sorry. I'm worn out from work. My hands are killin' me ... Firin' the kilns all day - I musta shoveled 10 tons of coal. If they

hurt this bad now I can't imagine how they're gonna feel when I'm 50. How am I gonna pay the bills at 50 or 55 if my hands are crippled?

MILLIE

I wish your hands didn't hurt, but let's try to concentrate on counting our blessings and thinking about our new tradition tonight Hank. That's the best way to start a new year, don't you think?

HANK

When those men came to the door beggin' the other day it sent my thoughts down a dark path I can't get off of. I shouldn't weigh you down you with my worries. I just want you to be happy. If you're happy, I'm happy.

MILLIE

I think keeping me happy is a very good plan. (Smiles) That's the kind of thinking that made me marry you. But no matter how big your troubles, you have blessings to count. Speaking of which, thank heavens for the library that lets us do this. I remember how hard it was to get books before the library opened. I had the best time there looking for books today.

HANK

I know how much you love poetry and how much you wanted to go to Illinois College and learn to be a teacher . . . If only I coulda had the money to send you, but . . .

More shouting and laughing from outside.

HANK

(Exasperated) I am so tired of listening to them night after night. They're gonna wake up the Willie and we'll spend the night walkin' the floor. People are trying to raise families with that nonsense going on and there's nothin' we can do. Nothin'!

MILLIE

Hank.

HANK

You can bet the house that the sheriff and the mayor and every body else that runs the town's over there again. How can people respect the law with this goin' on? Nobody respects the law anymore. The boys at the kilns were talkin' that up in Morgan County gangsters from St. Louis beat some men senseless that was makin' booze. The sheriff put some of 'em in jail. They don't put up with this stuff there.

MILLIE

Hank.

HANK

That ain't the way it is in Greene County. This is a dangerous game they're playin' and it's right across the street from my family. And you know what? We didn't have drunks in the street before the do gooders decided they know what's best for everybody. They decide what's best for all of us and now I got drunks out my door step. People's lives get ruined. It's unforgivable what those men are doin.

MILLIE

Nothing is unforgivable. And if you keep raising your voice, it will be you that wakes up the baby, not the drunks. I'm going to read my poem now.

HANK

(Sighs) This is the book with people talking from the grave?

MILLIE

Every poem in the Spoon River Anthology is from the grave. It's a way to show what people's true joys and regrets were in their lives. It makes me think you should embrace the joys and avoid things you might regret. That why I chose it.

HANK

It's kind of creepy.

MILLIE

The Spoon River empties into the Illinois River just like Apple Creek. It looks just like the places you go hunting. Those people are just like us. Here goes: This one is called "Mrs. Sibley".

"THE secret of the stars-- gravitation.

The secret of the earth-- layers of rock.

The secret of the soil-- to receive seed.

The secret of the seed-- the germ.

The secret of man-- the sower.

The secret of woman-- the soil.

My secret: Under a mound that you shall never find."

What do you think?

HANK

I think I can wait a while to view the world from a grave. I guess I don't understand what most poetry is about - but it sure sounds pretty with you readin' it . . . I wish I could be more romantic, but, well, it's kind of hard for me. It don't, it doesn't come easy for me.

MILLIE

Oh Hank, that's alright. I know what's in your heart. You're a good, good man - even if your language sometimes - well, nobody's perfect. I just don't want William to pick up that sort of speech. We're better than that.

(Pause)

I'm not sure I know what the poems mean either - they just are beautiful and make you think.

HANK

Just like you.

MILLIE

Now *that* is romantic.

More drunken shouting outside.

HANK

Goddammit!

MILLIE puts hand over HANKS mouth.

MILLIE

You couldn't just let me enjoy a beautiful compliment could you? (Sighs) Let's go to bed. We have another full day tomorrow.

Hank starts to talk, thinks better of it.

This next year will be the best ever.

HANK

Given the past few years, it wouldn't take a lot to be better.

MILLIE

Remember that the past year gave us William. The three of us have the most precious gift in the world - each other. I have a wonderful feeling about what the future holds for us. You go on to bed. I'll be there in a minute after I get some things ready to make pies in the morning.

He leaves kitchen as she sits a moment longer.

(Softly) Love looks on tempests and is never shaken.

Lights go down in kitchen as she gets up to work on preparation for next morning, the sound of drunken

noises continues outside. On the other side of stage lights go up and the side of a shed appears in the darkness. The shed has a window, lit from the inside. A figure creeps up to the shed, stands next to the window, and peers inside. The figure furtively watches scene on the other side of the window. The lights and sounds fade.

ACT 1

SCENE 3

In darkness we hear sounds of fire and flickering flames and clanging of metal on rock. Eerie musical tones like a deep humming. HANK is sitting at the kitchen table. He looks at his hands that seem twisted and gnarled.

HANK

My hands. My hands.

He takes a book from his pocket with great difficulty and holds it on top of his hands next to his body. He reads as smoke begins to fill the stage floor)

"And the seven angels came out of the temple, having the seven plagues, clothed in pure and white linen. And one of the four beasts gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials full of the wrath of God, who liveth for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and the seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled."

Why is this the only book we have? ... What makes it a sonnet?

Lights come up on kitchen. Smoke still fills the stage. HANK is holding his hands next to his armpits and trembling. An echoing knock comes from the door. Eerie sounds in the background. HANK stands and gingerly opens the door with both hands, as if his hands are in great pain. Two men silently walk in the room with hats pulled down over their faces, which we can't see. They are dressed in rags, with newspapers stuffed in their jackets and trousers for warmth.

HOBO 1

Do you have any food to spare friend?

HOBO 2

We're starvin' friend. Do you have any food?

HANK

(Anxiety in voice)

I got some root vegetables in the cellar.

HOBO 1

That's all you got friend?

HOBO 2

You got no bread friend?

HOBO 1

Bread. You got no bread?

HANK

I only have one loaf of bread. We need it.

HOBO 1

You have so much friend. We have nothin'.

HOBO 2

Nothin'.

HANK

You got nothin'?

HOBO 1

It's so cold out there. My hands don't work it's so cold.

HOBO 2

For those to whom much is given, much is expected.

HOBO 1
We are dyin' friend.

HOBO 2
Dead.

HOBO 1
Everybody dies.

HOBO 2
Ashes to ashes.

HOBO 1
Dust to dust.

HOBO 2
Clay.

HOBO 1
Dead.

HOBO 2
Unmarked graves.

HOBO 1
No marker.

HOBO 2
Bread, friend?

HANK uses wrists to pick up loaf of bread from table and hands it to HOBO 1 who takes it greedily. Men bow to HANK and remove hats to reveal blank spaces where their faces should be. They and HANK stare at each other as HANK reveals his horror. Men back out door.

HANK

(Hank looks out over the audience) My hands!

(Light suddenly go dark - Blackout)

ACT 1

SCENE 4

Next morning, in the kitchen, Millie smiles and coos into cradle by the table, then begins preparing pies, Hank is getting coal ashes out of stove.

MILLIE

You were really wild eyed when you woke up from that dream last night. You sure you don't want to tell me what it was about?

HANK

Like I said. Nothin. I'm fine. Fine. You know, I wish I made enough so you didn't have to work to make pies every morning for the diner, but I got to tell you, startin' every day with the smell of fresh baked pies is mighty nice. Mighty nice.

(Knock at door.)

MILLIE

That's Agnes. Can you let her in?

HANK

Of course that's Agnes ... Agnuts ... at the door. She's at the door every mornin'. Did you think she was going to skip January 1st because it's a holiday?

MILLIE

I have asked you not to call her by that name. Get the door. She just needs to talk. Her life is so hard.

HANK

Well she *is* nuts. And whose life ain't hard these days?

(opens door and Agnes comes in)

AGNES

Happy New Year!

MILLIE

The same to you Agnes. I hope you are doing well this bright January morning.

HANK

Nods at Agnes, leans over cradle and smiles at baby. Agnes sits down at table and begins talking before she is seated.

AGNES

Well I am worried about my Jerry he was in the shed across the street last night with all the others livin it up goodness they was singin' and makin' a racket most of the night my Jerry was over there with 'em and musta passed out on the floor of the shed like he does sometimes because he didn't come home I don't know where he gets the money to hang out in that shed cause he still ain't found no job it don't seem like he's even looking for a job no more and he ain't had a full time job for more than a year since we been married and I tell him he's got to look for work but he don't listen to me and Myrna oh Myrna is gonna have a baby and she's shamed the family and that stupid boy ain't gonna marry her and I don't know what I'm gonna do. What can I do Millie?

Hank is behind Agnes. He looks at Millie and rolls eyes.

MILLIE

(Sighs and takes a deep breath)

Agnes, somehow things work out. Myrna is your daughter. You have to support her no matter what. When times are tough we have to rely on our Faith.

HANK

We have to rely on ourselves.

MILLIE

Looks at HANK and shakes her head. Gives AGNES a cup of coffee and grabs a rolling pin and begins rolling out dough.

AGNES

I'd kill for a cigarette but I ain't got no money for 'em when Jerry finally came in this mornin' he woke me up and said the mayor and the sheriff and everybody else that's always over there was there and even Vernon Grey was there this time and my Jerry can't stand him so he says he told Grey off and told him to go to hell how's the poetry readin' goin' Hank?

HANK

(Hank looks sternly at Millie and she giggles)

Just great Agnes, just great.

AGNES

I just can't believe what goes on in that shed sometimes and last night seemed wilder than most I wonder what you would have seen lookin' in that shed last night?

HANK

I'm goin' out to the cellar to get some more coal.

(stares at MILLIE as he leaves)

AGNES

Don't Hank want to talk about the goings on in the shed?

MILLIE

I don't have to tell you how much Hank hates drinking and carousing. Some of the men use our back yard as a short cut home and they stop and relieve themselves in the yard after getting drunk and we've found some of them passed out by the chicken coop more than once. Well, you know this. It drives Hank to distraction to find a drunk in the yard, and it makes him crazier that they all will be in the church pews on Sunday morning. He blames Joe Kamp and he and Joe

have had some terrible arguments about the goings on over there.

AGNES

Ohhh. Yes. I seen 'em arguin' and cussing at each other.

MILLIE

(frowns)

I have never seen Grey come and go from that shed, but then I don't watch it all day either.

AGNES

When Jerry worked for Grey there for a time at the law office after he got laid off from the kilns well I tell you everything 'cause I hate secrets but I never told you why he got fired cause he didn't tell me at first 'cause he pretended he was still workin' 'cause he didn't wanna make me worry well he got fired cause he was doing work at Grey's house fixing the back gate and Grey's dog was howling somethin' terrible and he seemed hungry and Jerry took some pork out of their ice box did I tell you they had the best Sears ice box money can buy and Jerry gave it to the dog so she wouldn't be hungry her name was Daisy and Grey found out and knocked Jerry to the ground and then kicked the dog in the stomach right there by the gate why would a man do that Millie? I know men fight each other but why would a man kick a dog? Grey fired Jerry and didn't pay him and there has been bad blood between them real bad blood Jerry hates him.

MILLIE

That just does not sound like Vernon Grey. I know that like a lot of folks in his business he seems to only think about money but that really does not sound like Vernon Grey. Anyway, goodness. I am sorry.

AGNES

I know. It's a burden. Old man Greene's house up on the hill is for sale.

MILLIE

Already? I just heard he passed away. His heart gave out from all the worry.

AGNES

Well if by passed away from his heart givin' out you mean it gave out 'cause he shot hisself in the head with his shotgun 'cause he lost all his money ...

MILLIE

(shocked)

Clyde Greene shot himself? Everyone said he died of a heart attack!

AGNES

Well they don't close caskets because of a heart attack do they, cause heart attacks don't cause your jaw to go missin' and ...

MILLIE

How do you know this?

AGNES

Well I don't want to spread bad news Millie but you know my baby Myrna cleaned the Greene house each week to earn some money but when they lost all *their* money when the dress factory closed they couldn't pay her but she kept cleaning cause she didn't have any thing else to do Mondays then Greene's kids asked her to clean up the mess after he killed hisself and they been good to her so she did and it was awful awful awful that was one bloody heart attack I tell you that (Pause) Myrna found his jawbone behind the dresser now Myrna can't sleep and she don't have no money at all.

MILLIE

Oh my God. How could I not have heard this? No. Oh my God. Mr. Greene killed himself.

AGNES

These are hard times Millie sometimes I don't know what we are gonna to do sometimes I don't know what we are gonna do what are we gonna do Millie? Do you think Roosevelt is goin' to make things better?

ADA, MILLIE'S sister, enters kitchen through back door. She has on heavy coat and a nurse's hat.

ADA

Hello, Millie. Good to see you Agnes. Millie, I just saw Hank outside on my way in and I asked him how he liked readin' poetry last night and he scrunched his face up at me.

MILLIE

Did he say anything?

ADA

He said he enjoyed it very much and to please tell everybody I know. Didn't seem real sincere.

MILLIE

I don't think he is excited about the world knowing that a big, burly working man ends his day with poetry. But I can tell that he really likes it a lot. Men are like children that way.

ADA

Men are like children period.

MILLIE

(laughs)

Can I get you something to get you going this morning?

ADA

I'd kill for a cup of coffee, but that chicory and barley concoction tastes like dishwater to me. Anyway I'm on my way to the coroner's office to help him with an autopsy. If

I just had the fee for the trainin' up in Jacksonville I could get registered and start earnin' real money at the hospital instead of roamin' the town helpin' shut ins and watchin' dead bodies get cut open. You'd think there would be easier ways to earn a livin'... I don't think I want anything on my stomach.

MILLIE

I don't know how you do it.

AGNES

Are you doing Mr. Greene today? Myrna told me all about what happened there in his -

ADA

(cuts AGNES off)

Agnes, I can't talk about things like that. There's such a thing as keepin' a confidence. This ain't gossip. These are legal things.

AGNES

Oh Ada we know what's goin' on you don't have to pretend Greene didn't have no heart attack Myrna found his jawbone . . .

ADA

(sharply cuts AGNES off again)

Don't be talkin' about such things in front of Millie Agnes.

AGNES

I don't know why we can't talk about things I hate hidin' things Myrna's boyfriend is thinkin about joinin' the army and I think he's just doin' it to get out of marryin' her and raisin' the baby with her but he'd rather risk gettin' blown up than bein' a daddy and he just wants to wear a uniform and get out of town.

ADA

Well nobody is gettin' blown up in France right now are they Agnes? Is Myrna sure he is the daddy?

MILLIE

(quickly changing subject)

Well, a man does look good in a uniform.

(points at picture on the wall)

Hank's uncle John was a handsome, handsome man. Hank misses him to this day. They were so close. Sometimes he acts like uncle John died in the trenches just yesterday. So many families have picture's of loved ones on the wall. Thank God there will never be a war like that again. The war to end all wars.

ADA

Is Myrna sure that boy is the daddy?

AGNES

Of course he's the daddy you know ...

ADA

(Interrupts)

Well Myrna has been known to sleep around.

MILLIE

Ada, that is not ...

ADA

(Interrupts again)

Everybody knows that about Myrna.

AGNES

(Indignant)

Don't talk about my Myrna like that.

ADA

Just tellin' it like it is. I thought you hated pretendin'?

HANK bursts through door.

MILLIE

What is it Hank?

(HANK just stares)

HANK

(Takes a deep breath)

The mayor's out back in the yard.

MILLIE

Oh, goodness. Well it's not the first time and it probably won't be the last.

HANK

I think it *is* the last time. He's dead.

(Everyone stares in shock at HANK)

Lights blackout followed by brief sound of baby softly coughing.

ACT 1

SCENE 5

(A week later, MILLIE is in kitchen doing chores baking pies, HANK comes in back door)

HANK

I found a few that weren't frozen.

Gently puts eggs on table that he carried in large kerchief.

MILLIE

Well, I guess we need to count our blessings.

HANK

I found more as hard as the stoneware at the kilns. What are we havin' for supper tonight?

MILLIE

Beans and taters. I made an extra custard pie just for us. I surely wish I had some fresh fruit for pies but I wish I was the Queen of England too, and I don't think either wish is coming true any time soon.

(laughs to self)

Oh, and I'm making some cornbread and I thought we'd open a jar of pickled corn and peppers.

HANK

That'll be good. Good.

(Pause, takes deep breath)

When my dad was a young man there was three different clay pipe and stoneware factories in town. Half the men in town worked at the kilns. Now Ruckels is the last one left. Millie, the word circulatin' at the kilns is that the economy's so bad no one is buying pipe and stoneware and that more layoffs are coming. And now there's pipe made out of somethin' man-made, kind of like Bakelite and pretty

soon people may not even use clay pipe anymore. The kilns will close, the clay mines'll close and all the jobs will go with 'em. It won't be long until the skill it takes to make clay pipe will be as old fashioned and pointless as a, er, as a town crier. Newspapers put them outa business just as surely as bakelite is gonna put my job outa business. I'm afraid I need to think about well, I need to consider options.

MILLIE leans over and picks up baby, holds to shoulder, and pats on back, HANK looks on.

I can't take a chance on not havin' a job. What if the kilns close like the dress factory? I can't take a chance on being like so many others. You know those two men that came to the back door asking for scraps of food last week? They was starvin'.

MILLIE

Were starving.

HANK

Millie, I know you want to be a teacher but this ain't the time, I ain't a student, and I am what I am ... The point is that I've seen men like this too many times now. Their eyes were dead. They were blank. Did you see that their jackets was . . . were stuffed with newspapers to help keep 'em warm? Men are scroungin' through the city dump and box cars are full of men going from town to town looking for work or food or anything.

MILLIE

And we help them when we can. It's our obligation to help the least among us. You *did* help those men and all the others that stop by our doorstep.

HANK

My point is that these people were just like us once. We're all so close to endin' up like that. (Pause) The boys down at the clay works were talkin' about a woman in Maple Heights whose family is in such straits that she is takin' care of, ah, *men's needs* for a loaf a bread.

MILLIE

Men's needs? . . . No. Oh no.

HANK

I've got a family to take care of. It scares the wits out of me that I'll end up like those men who come to the door and I won't be able to provide for you and William . . . This is a man's worst fear....

Well, I talked to Jones down at his monument shop, and he can take me on. It ain't quite as much money as the kilns, but, I don't know if you noticed, even in Hoover's great depression people keep dyin'. It's a business that seems to be great depression proof . . . I've got to think about it.

MILLIE

This is a big decision. This is ... overwhelming. You know Roosevelt will be in charge in just a few months. Maybe things will get better.

HANK

Millie, Roosevelt is just another rich man. He earned his fortune the old fashioned way, by inheritin' it from his daddy. He thinks he knows it all just because his family has money. No rich man is goin' to take care of workin' people. That ain't how it works.

MILLIE

What about the library? Mr. Carnegie gave half the money for the library. He's a rich man.

HANK

And if you remember it almost didn't get built because the folks in town with money didn't want to give for the town's half of gettin' it built.

MILLIE

But it did get built, and now all the kids in town have a place to go read books for free because of a rich man. Just because a man is rich doesn't mean he's the devil.

HANK

That ain't the point. It's a rigged game and the politicians and the rich men play workin' folk for suckers. It was a bunch of rich bankers that made this mess in the first place.

(Pause)

While I was at Jone's shop seein' about the job I saw the monument bein' made for the mayor. He was alive as you or me, then he was gone. .. forever *forever* ... The monument already has his birth and death dates and his family had "We Shall Gather at the River" put on it.

MILLIE

(Closes eyes and recites)

Soon we will reach the silver river, soon our pilgrimage will cease, soon our happy hearts will quiver, with the melody of peace.

HANK

He didn't look that peaceful when I found him out back. If he'd spent more time gathering at the river instead of gathering with the other drunks in Kamp's shed he would be hearing melodies a little clearer about now.

MILLIE

Hank, that's terrible. A little respect for the dead.

(Pause)

Imagine freezing to death alone on the cold hard, ground.

HANK

I don't have to imagine it, I saw it. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. He was a drunk. Fed poison by that bastard Kamp.

MILLIE

Language. Quitting a job when things are the way they are.

HANK

Quitting a job that's doomed, with another job waitin'.

MILLIE

I know you will do what ...

(MILLIE pats baby on back. HANK looks on with concern)

what you think is best.

MILLIE sits down, light begin to fade, MILLIE adjusts her clothing and begins to breast feed the baby - when lights fade completely to black we hear the sound of baby coughing more loudly, seeming to fight for breath for a moment.

ACT 1

SCENE 6

MILLIE sits at kitchen table with crib
beside her. She is reading a book of poetry.

MILLIE

"Chase Henry" by Edgar Lee Masters

"IN life I was the town drunkard;

When I died the priest denied me burial

In holy ground.

The which redounded to my good fortune.

For the Protestants bought this lot,

And buried my body here,

Close to the grave of the banker Nicholas,

And of his wife Priscilla.

Take note, ye prudent and pious souls,

Of the cross--currents in life

Which bring honor to the dead, who lived in shame"

(to herself) Heavens. That is depressing. ... no, I do not
see that one working for this evening. That would just
get Hank stirred up. What's next? I think I'll look
through the sonnets again.

Lights dim to black as she looks through another
book.

ACT 1

SCENE 7

HANK walks past neighbor's shed with lunch pail, towards his house. JOE KAMP is by the shed.

KAMP

Evenin' Taylor.

(HANK ignores him)

How are things at the kilns?

HANK

Go to hell.

KAMP

Taylor, you don't have to like what I do, but we are neighbors.

HANK

You are right, I don't like what you do, we are neighbors, and you can go to hell, which is pretty sure now that you are in the murder business.

KAMP

Murder!?! That ain't fair.

HANK

Fair!?! You killed the mayor just as sure as you put a gun to his head, fillin' him up with illegal booze and lettin' him go out into the freezin' night. If the sheriff and half the courthouse weren't in there buying your poison you'd be in jail right now!

KAMP

Taylor, the mayor had heart trouble. He wasn't a young man. I'm sick at heart that he's gone, but it was just his time. . . I gotta make a livin' like you. I ain't had a steady

job in since I got laid off from the kilns 2 years ago. These are tough times.

HANK

Lots of people make it through tough times without sellin' their souls. You're no different than that woman in Maple Heights who's screwing men for her supper. I want my son to grow up in a neighborhood without black hearted bastards like you showin' him how goddam awful the human race can be.

KAMP

That's about enough Taylor.

HANK

That's Mr. Taylor to you, you miserable sack of shit.

KAMP jumps at HANK and they begin fighting, eventually rolling on the ground, punching and screaming at each other. HANK gets KAMP in a headlock. MILLIE, having heard the commotion, runs into the yard.

MILLIE

(Look of horror on her face)

Stop! ... Stop! For God's sake!.... Stop!!

(Men stop fighting and get up)

You're like children! You should be ashamed.

(Men are looking at the ground)

How do you expect children to behave if they see grown men acting like this?

KAMP

I'm terrible sorry Mildred. I hope ya can forgive me.

(He looks at HANK and turns and goes into shed)

MILLIE

(Looks at HANK with disgust)

My sister is coming over to see William. I am worried sick about him. I *do not* need more worry. I do not need another child to worry about. Men!

Glares at HANK and walks to house - HANK stands in yard and looks upward. Rubs eyes. Shakes head. Walks toward house.

ACT 1

SCENE 8

MILLIE is in kitchen with her sister ADA. ADA has nurse's hat on and is holding baby, listening to his chest.

ADA

His lungs is filled with congestion. That's why he's havin' trouble breathin' and why he is coughin' so much. That is obvious. I am telling you the obvious. He feels a little warm.

MILLIE

Ohhh. I didn't think babies as young as William could get a cold. No.

ADA

That's an old wive's tale. It's silly. A newborn can catch a cold. You got to start to boilin' water, puttin' it in bowl, put it next to him, then put a towel over his face and the bowl. It might loosen the mucous up some. It might not help, but it can't hurt.

MILLIE

Ada, I am beside myself with worry.

ADA

Honey, this is all over town. It's hitting the older folks and the kids hardest. Enough of this. It will work out how it will work out.... How is Hank doing down at the monument shop?

MILLIE

Jones is a good man to work for and the work seems steady. He hinted that maybe Hank might be the right man to take over the business someday . . . wouldn't it be wonderful to have your own business?

ADA

I can't even imagine.

MILLIE

The sad thing is that Hank works on monuments for people he knows, the mayor, Mr. Greene, and, well, it can get burdensome working on tombstones for people you know, even if you don't care for them. Hank did not like the mayor because of his drinking.

ADA

Hank doesn't like anyone who drinks. What is going on with that man?

MILLIE

He thinks it is immoral. It is immoral.

ADA

But he never goes to church.

MILLIE

He has a real problem with people sitting in the pews and knowing they were drinking the night before.

ADA

Well I was in a pew last Sunday and the sermon was about he who is without sin can cast the first stone. Hank might want to consider that. And you can go to church even if Hank doesn't you know.

MILLIE

Maybe someday. I don't know how you deal with the things you see, nursing people and working with the coroner.

ADA

It never gets easy. You see some awful things. It's how I pay the bills. It's how I serve my fellow man. It helps to go to church. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

MILLIE

As soon as I get paid this week for the pies I can give you some money for checkin on William. It is such a relief to have you come nurse him.

ADA

That's silly. He's my nephew.

MILLIE

But I should give you something.

ADA

Don't insult me, sis. If guilt gets ahold of you, go to the church and put it in the collection plate.

MILLIE pats baby on back with desperate look on face.

MILLIE

There must be something else we can do. There has to be.

ADA

Of course there is.

MILLIE

What? What?

ADA

Pray.

Lights fade to black - sound of baby coughing.

ACT 1

SCENE 9

Sound of baby coughing in darkness. Lights come up. MILLIE and AGNES in kitchen. MILLIE is preparing pies. She looks at crib and cringes.

AGNES

I am still reelin' at the thought of the mayor out back there in your yard dead all night, his body getting stiffer and stiffer in the cold, the crows peckin' at his eyes ..

MILLIE

Agnes, stop that!

AGNES

I'm sorry Millie I can't get it out of my head. I can't. No.

MILLIE

(softly)

Did they really peck at his eyes?

AGNES

Well when Hank went to get the sheriff I snuck out back

Stands up and acts out going outside and seeing mayor dead on ground.

and I looked at the mayor cause I was curious and his eyes was gone gone gone and he was a mess his arms was froze akimbo it gave me horrible chills but I had to see him you know Hank would have seen his eyes maybe that is why he didn't let you go in the backyard well it was just awful.

MILLIE

Agnes, I don't want to hear anymore. William's coughing has me on edge.

Millie picks him up with a worried look and pats him on the back.

AGNES

I went to the shed.

MILLIE

What do you mean? You don't drink.

AGNES

I didn't go in I looked in the window on New Years Eve the night the mayor froze I always wondered what went on in there what with my Jerry going there every time he had a little money and with the mayor and the sheriff and everyone else I just wanted to know what goes on in there that has every body goin' there.

MILLIE

But you know what goes on in there. They drink.

AGNES

But just drinkin don't account for all the noise we hear in the dark and why is the mayor and the sheriff hangin' out with Jerry they could buy booze and go home I just wondered if somethin' else had to be goin' on I wanted to know why my Jerry likes bein' there so much it just don't seem like people would be laughin and carryin on that much just on account of drink they gotta be doin' somethin' else.

MILLIE

Drunks don't need a reason to laugh and carry on.

AGNES

My Jerry told me he thought that Vernon Grey probably had something to do with the mayor endin' up in your back yard.

MILLIE

That can't be, don't say that.

AGNES

Jerry says that any man that would kick a dog could do anything anything at all he said that the mayor was so drunk it would have been easy to hit him on the head and take his money and I ain't heard nobody say if the mayor had any money on his cold dead body it could have happened ... it could have.

MILLIE

Agnes you do not know that this is true and you shouldn't be saying such things. It is awful to say such things. Everybody agreed that the mayor just got drunk and passed out and he had a bad heart and it was so cold ...

AGNES

All I know is what Jerry told me.

(Pause)

Well I saw something in there when I was lookin' in the window of the shed I saw something that I couldn't believe you wouldn't believe ...

MILLIE

Agnes. Is this going to upset me? I am already worried sick with William. Be careful what you tell me.

AGNES

You want to know don't you it's goin on just across the street I looked in and I saw the mayor and the sheriff and Grey was there and Jerry and Joe Kamp and some other men all crammed into the shed and they was laughing except for Grey he was kind of watchin' and blank faced and the lantern was flickering and it looked like they was all possessed and their faces was all red and twisted they was laughin' like nothing I had ever seen and that fellow I can't remember his name he was playin' a fiddle and some of them was singin' and shoutin' like they was losin' their minds and there in the middle of it all was a big old galvanized tub filled with home made beer and they was dipping their cups into the tub and pourin' the beer down

their throats and then dipping their cups again and laughin' singin' and laughin'.

MILLIE

I just do not understand Agnes. Why do they do this? What is wrong with men to do this?

AGNES

Well that ain't all Millie. It ain't just men.

MILLIE

Oh heavens, what else? Please do not tell me that women were in there drinking.

AGNES

Sittin' in the middle of that tub of beer they was dippin' their mugs into all shiney faced and laughin like she was possessed was a stark nekkid woman.

MILLIE

No!

AGNES

Do you know who it was?

MILLIE

I DO NOT want to know.

AGNES

It was your sister Ada.

MILLIE

Agnes! That is not true! Dear God, that is not true.

AGNES

They was pawin' her and she was havin' the time of her life laughin' like a mad woman as nekkid as the day she was born. Except she did have her nurses hat on.

MILLIE

(upset)

Agnes go home now.

AGNES

I am just tellin' you what happened you want to know I know you want to know. My Jerry was pawin' her too. I wish I had money for some tobacco.

MILLIE

Go. Now.

MILLIE opens door. AGNES gets up and walks towards door.

AGNES

Don't you want to know?

(MILLIE does not respond)

People want to know things I hate secrets I have lived with secrets my whole life! I HATE SECRETS!

AGNES gets up and leaves muttering as she goes out the door. Millie paces with baby - lights fade to black - sound of baby coughing horribly.

ACT 1

SCENE 10

Evening. ADA, and MILLIE in kitchen, ADA leaning over cradle listening.

ADA

It's worse.

MILLIE

(quietly)

I know.

HANK comes into room holding chamber pots.

HANK

I have got to empty these. . . and check on the chickens.

HANK leaves by back door.

MILLIE

There is something we need to talk about.

ADA

What?

MILLIE

Agnes looked in the shed on New Years Eve.

ADA

(Opens mouth to talk, stops, looks up, pauses, looks down)

What did she tell you?

MILLIE

I think you know what she told me.

ADA

Did she tell Hank?

MILLIE

For heaven's sake no.

ADA

Good.

MILLIE

Yes, good. Hank can never know about this. How could you? You go to church. You pray. You told me to pray. You didn't do anything with those men did you?

ADA

Of course not! I just lost my head for a while and they had a little fun watchin'. A couple of them tried to touch me and I slapped 'em away. Until they grabbed at me it all made me feel good, feel wanted ... I'm 35 years old Millie and I ain't been married. Is somethin' wrong with me? Oh, I wish I hadn't done it.

(Takes deep breath)

Millie, some of us do not see the world as you and Hank do. Nursin' and workin' with the coroner I see things most people don't see. I see where it all ends. I see how it ends no matter what you do, what you think, what you believe. I see it always ends the same way. (pause) I helped Doctor Price do things when a child's about to be born crippled and ain't wanted that made my blood run cold. You don't get over that. That image stays with you forever. Forever. It's why I get carried away with drink sometimes don't you see? To you it's all clear, Millie, you're certain, you see ... you see things in black and white. I see greys, so many greys. But it's all the same in the end. We are born, we live, we die. You can't spend that livin' part thinkin' everybody else is beneath you. You can't spend your life thinkin' your crap don't stink. We are born, we live, we die. Who gives a shit what people do as long as they don't hurt someone else? Who gives a shit!

MILLIE

(Softly)

Language. (Pause) You helped Doctor Price with, with ... that?

ADA

He was so sure it was the right thing to do. It was black and white to him. I'm never that sure ... Millie I love you more than life itself. But you and Hank think you live on some righteous island. You got it all figured out. But you miss that you got to love everybody just for bein' a person, not because of what they do or what they believe. If they ain't hurtin' you, you got to love them. We. Are. All. Made. Of. Flesh. We will someday return to dust. (Pause) I see how it ends.

MILLIE

But there's a heaven. it matters what we do.

ADA

It matters what we do. We got to try to help each other. But to have a little pleasure while we're part of this veil of tears, is that so bad? Does that send you to hell?

MILLIE picks baby up.

Right and wrong is not as simple as you and especially Hank make it out. We are clay.

MILLIE

(Dazed look on face, patting baby on back)

Clay.

HANK comes in with empty chamber pots.

ADA

(Picks up coat)

Life's a shit storm. We still got to try to make the smell bearable.

(Walks out door)

HANK

(puzzled) Why didn't you tell her to watch her language?

Lights fade to black - end of Act 1.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

MILLIE boils water, pours it into bowl on table, carries baby to table, puts towel over bowl and baby's head and rocks baby, singing lullaby and softly crying.

Lights fade to black - sound of baby coughing in darkness.

ACT 2

SCENE 2

MILLIE is in kitchen holding baby. HANK comes in back door holding shotgun in one hand, broken and pointed downward. His other hand holds two squirrels, gutted and cleaned, except tails are intact. He holds them up to show MILLIE.

HANK

We'll be eatin' good tonight.

Puts down gun and squirrels and reaches into pocket and pulls something out.

Look. I found an arrowhead. I can't remember the last time I found one. I was down in the bottom land along Seminary creek where it goes into Apple creek.

MILLIE

(Distracted) That's nice.

HANK

Uncle John used to take me down there to trap mink and muskrats. There's a stand of black walnut trees up on the ridge we used to collect nuts from. In the spring we would hunt for mushrooms a little lower on the ridge. He told me there used to be an Indian village over a hundred years ago just where the streams meet. He said our people used to visit with them when we first came to Illinois. I sure miss that man. He found a bunch of arrowheads down there over the years. . . To think that the Indians lived around here for thousands of years and now it's like they never existed. Just like John. (Pause) Here today, gone tomorrow. The Illini. Where are they now? The men.

MILLIE

The men?

HANK

The word Illinois means the men. John told me. Not just men. It means the most important men.

MILLIE

(Distracted) Every man thinks he is the most important man. I just heated some water. Can you put it in the bowl and get the towel over Willie's head?

HANK fills bowl with hot water, puts towel over baby's head and begins treatment while holding baby. MILLIE holds arrowhead and looks at it, shakes her head and begins to prepare supper while looking back at baby and HANK with a pained expression on her face.

Lights fade to black - sound of baby coughing in darkness.

ACT 2

SCENE 3

Late at night, MILLIE is in kitchen with dim kerosene light, holding baby with towel over it's head. HANK quietly walks in, MILLIE's back is to him, she doesn't notice him. HANK stares at MILLIE and baby, lowers head, puts hands over eyes and rubs. MILLIE soon notices HANK and nods for him to sit down, which he does.

HANK

I didn't know you got up until I rolled over and you weren't there. Is Willie ok?

MILLIE

About the same.

HANK

I ain't got nearly enough sleep lately and when I don't sleep my mind tends to go down dark paths.

MILLIE

I can't remember the last time I got a full night's sleep.

HANK

Millie, do you ever wonder what God is thinkin'?

MILLIE

People can never know what God is thinking. That's just not how it works.

HANK

But Willie is just an innocent baby. He's never done a bad thing. Why would God do this to him? It's beyond me and it's just killin' me. Not knowin' is killin' me.

MILLIE

William is going to be fine soon.

HANK

Come on Millie, you don't know that.

MILLIE

I know that.

HANK

What about the mayor? What about Mr. Greene? You think their families didn't pray to God for them? This life rewards asses that treat people awful and punishes people just tryin' to live their lives. It don't make sense. Why does God bring us into the world just to play games with us? He gives us the gift of life then take it away in awful ways.

MILLIE

People have been trying to figure that out forever. Smarter people than us haven't figured it out, so I don't think we are going to have a breakthrough this evening Hank.

HANK

Millie, you're so positive, so full a life. But you gotta wonder sometimes, don't you? Don't you wonder if there's even a God when you look at Willie sufferin'? Don't you wonder what the hell is goin' on?

MILLIE

Don't forget your language. I wavered after the miscarriages. Since Willie got sick ... I have had some dark moments. But everything happens for a reason, even if we don't know what the reason is. I keep telling myself we are just clay and we've got to have Faith.

HANK

Do ya really believe that?

MILLIE

I've got no choice Hank. Imagine not believing it. It's too horrible to consider.

HANK

Well, I'm considerin' it.

MILLIE

(Pause)

You might be right.

HANK

(Shocked)

What?

MILLIE

My friend Elizabeth got to go to Illinois College. That's why I wanted to go there.

HANK

Her dad owns the grain elevator. He oughta be able to send his kid to college.

MILLIE

Was that comment necessary? She told me about a class she had on religion. She thought it would just tell her more about the things we learned in bible school as kids. But her professor told her about a person called Mary of France that lived long ago. She said that God didn't make man in His image. She said that *man made God* in man's image. I remember thinking how awful it was that someone would go to college and come back with ideas like that in their head. But the more I thought about it, well, it didn't seem that impossible.

HANK

That's what they teach at college?

MILLIE

They think about everything. Mary of France might have been right. But I choose to believe that life is what you make it so I am going to make it a world where God is good and does everything for a reason. That's how we are going to get through this.

HANK

Why have you never told me this before?

MILLIE

It would have served no purpose. I shouldn't have told you now. It isn't really important. I believe what I believe.

HANK

That's what they do at college.

MILLIE

We believe what we must believe.

HANK drops his head, looks back up and becomes lost in thought - lights fade to black - sound of baby coughing and then crying in the darkness.

ACT 2

SCENE 4

Next day. AGNES, ADA and MILLIE are in kitchen, ADA is holding baby, MILLIE looks on anxiously.

AGNES

Millie do you think Hank could get Jerry work down at the monument shop he ain't been able to find anything and we aint got no money and everything is against us and I swear I am so goddamned nervous I couldn't find my ass with four hands.

MILLIE

(sighs)

Language please Agnes. Jones is not hiring. I'm sorry.

AGNES

It just seems like well Hank is so lucky with jobs he always has a job even in these times and Jerry just ain't got no luck at all and maybe Hank could put in a good word for Jerry ...

ADA

(interrupts)

Agnes, Hank can't get him a job.

AGNES

But it ain't fair Jerry was working so hard for Grey and Grey kicked that dog what kind of man kicks a dog and all Jerry did was try to help him and he got fired and didn't get his money and then Grey came over to the shed and won't leave Jerry alone and why can't Hank help him Hank needs to help him cause he is good with getting jobs and ...

ADA

(Exasperated)

Agnes, stop for a second here. Jerry told you he got fired by Vernon Grey?

ADA hands baby to MILLIE who begins to nervously pace with baby.

AGNES

Well Jerry gave Grey's dog some pork cause it was hungry and Grey kicked the dog and fired Jerry and didn't even pay him Jerry was just trying to take care of the dog Grey almost killed that dog back by the back gate and ...

ADA

Mr. Grey is handling Mr. Greene's estate, what there's left of it. He came to the coroner's inquest New Year's Eve while I was there. I talked to Mr. Grey that day. He knows about our acquaintance Agnes. He mentioned to me that Jerry started out doin a fine job working for him.

AGNES

I know he did a good job, he . . .

ADA

Grey didn't kick no dog. He caught Jerry stealing pork out of refrigerator and money out of his wife's household fund. Mr. Grey seemed more upset about the pork than the money.

AGNES

But you seen Grey at the shed. You was there! He was harassin' Jerry.

ADA

There was no harrassin' but Agnes you're right, I was there and I hear that you saw what I was doin that night.

MILLIE

Ada!

MILLIE puts baby in cradle.

ADA

Agnes, I like you, you have a good heart. But you need to wake up. Jerry is an alcoholic. He'll do anything to get booze. Most of us in that shed just want to have some fun, we want to escape the burdens of life for a few hours. Jerry ain't that way. I ain't proud of what I did in that shed, I got carried away, but I don't need to repeat it every day. Jerry wants to spend life drunk. It's what he gets out of bed for in the morning. He is addicted to alcohol.

AGNES

Jerry likes to drink but he tries to work and men like Grey with money and all the luck keep treatin' him like an animal Grey kicked a dog and almost killed it! That is evil! What kind of man starves and kicks a dog?

ADA

God dammit Agnes! Did you not hear what I said?

MILLIE

(weakly)

Language.

ADA

Grey did not kick a dog. He didn't even fire Jerry. When he caught Jerry stealin', Jerry ran off. He's not so far gone that he's immune to shame. Jerry made up that story so you'd feel sorry for him and he could keep playin' you and not mess up his drinkin'.

MILLIE

Please stop.

ADA

Jerry's a good worker as long as he's sober, but that sure as hell don't last long. Grey don't drink. He came to the shed cause he knew Jerry would be there. I sure didn't think he would come and I shamed myself when he saw me. It was all my own fault but if your Jerry wasn't a miserable drunk somebody I respect wouldn't have seen me on one of my worst days ever. Tryin' to convince a man who stole from you to sober up and take his job back strikes me as a lost cause but Mr. Grey is odd that way. Of course Jesus liked a lost cause too.

MILLIE

Please.

AGNES

Grey didn't kick the dog?

ADA

No.

AGNES

Grey didn't keep the money from Jerry?

ADA

No.

AGNES

Jerry stole the pork?

ADA

Yes.

AGNES

What am I goin to do with that man? What am I goin to do? He's been lyin', lyin', lyin'.

The door opens, HANK comes in, holding lunch pail, looks at Agnes, goes to baby and looks on with pained expression.

What am I goin to do?

HANK

What are you going to do about what?

AGNES

Jerry can't keep a job we got no money he's lyin' to me and Ada told me he's stealin' Mrs. Grey's money outa a stone jar and Myrna is gonna have a baby that boy ain't gonna marry her nobody'll give Jerry a job and Hank you got a good job and you won't help Jerry and it just ain't fair it just ain't fair you didn't do nothin' when Jerry got laid off at the kiln. Why won't you help Jerry?

HANK

What? What!? *I'm* not helpin' Jerry? (Hank's voice gets frantic) This is *my* fault? The whole country has gone to hell because the rich bastards have rigged it to live like kings and working people are left to fight over the goddamn crumbs. A baby on the north end of town just died from the same croup my son has and I been carvin' his tomb stone and I'm about to lose my mind from fear. and your pitiful thieving husband's pitiful life is my *fucking* fault!? Ag fucking nuts!

(AGNES recoils)

MILLIE

Hank! Don't ever use that kind of filth in my house! Get out! Get out of this house!

HANK looks at MILLIE with a stricken look and dashes out the door. MILLIE, ADA, and Agnes stare vacantly in stunned silence for 10 seconds.

ADA

(finally) Millie, Hank is wound about as tight as a man can be. You can't be that hard on him.

MILLIE

(Upset)

That word is different. He can never use that word in this house.

ADA

Sis, he has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

MILLIE

And I don't? Nothing excuses that kind of language.

AGNES

He said I'm nuts he thinks I'm crazy I ain't crazy why does me an Jerry always have to get the hind tit on everything?

MILLIE

Agnes, we all need a rest from worry.

AGNES

When are things gonna get better when are things gonna get better do you think Roosevelt is gonna make it better? Why are we always on the hind tit?

AGNES gets up and leaves as if in a daze. MILLIE and ADA look at each other and ADA shakes her head.

Lights fade to black.

ACT 2

SCENE 5

HANK is outside sitting on tree stump. He is hanging his head and obviously upset. Shed is visible behind him. JERRY, smoking a cigarette, walks unsteadily towards shed and sees HANK.

JERRY

Hank. What's a matter? You look like your dog just died. And what the hell are ya doin' outside? It's colder than a well digger's ass out here.

HANK

(Looks up. Surveys JERRY. Responds slowly)

Jerry, I'm just collectin' my thoughts.

JERRY

Dammit Hank I heard about your boy.

HANK

He's not well.

JERRY

Aw hell. Listen, Hank, this oughta cheer ya up. How do you circumcise a fella from Calhoun County?

(Waits for a response. Hank just stares)

Kick his sister in the jaw!

(JERRY laughs loudly - HANK doesn't respond.)

Come on Hank, that's funny. Calhoun County is full a hicks.

HANK

(Ignores joke)

Jerry, sittin' on this stump reminds me of the summer when I was 16 years old. Old man Greene had some timber just off a Seminary creek that he had cut down for lumber. He hired my dad to clear the stumps off a the land. Me and dad worked all summer diggin' and pullin' those stumps. It was the hardest work I ever hope to do in my life. It was so hot I thought I'd die. I was *hopin'* I'd die just to get some rest. At the end of the summer when my dad got paid, my earnings for a summer a back breaking work was two pairs a jeans. For almost three months of clearing tree stumps. Bought 'em big in case I grew any. Jerry, let me tell you, I took care of those jeans. Those jeans lasted me a long, long time.

JERRY

Why are you tellin' me this?

HANK

Have you talked to Agnes?

JERRY

(Indignant)

'Course I talked to Agnes.

HANK

Today?

JERRY

Uh, not today.

HANK

Are you lookin' for a job?

JERRY

I ain't sure that's your business but there ain't no jobs around here. I been thinkin' about goin' to St. Louis or even up to Chicago. There's lots a jobs there. I heard you could make a lotta money there.

HANK

You got a place to stay in Chicago while you look?

JERRY

Ah, no.

HANK

You takin' Agnes and Myrna with you?

JERRY

I don't know, I ain't thought everything out.

HANK

No, I guess you haven't.

JERRY

I heard they might be hirin' up at Eli Bridge in Jacksonville.

HANK

You gotta a way to get the 20 miles to Jacksonville every day for work? You gotta Cadillac I ain't aware of?

JERRY

You're mighty Goddamn nosy Hank.

HANK

Are you headed to Kamp's shed?

(Jerry just stares and doesn't answer)

Jerry, what you pour down your gullet is your business, but where the hell do you get the money to buy drink? I got a steady job and I couldn't afford Kamp's poison on a regular basis if I wanted to. And you can afford tobacco. I just don't get the economics of your habits.

JERRY

Hank, a man just has to set his priorities.

HANK

(calmly)

Well, I gotta listen to Agnes every morning babble about havin' no money and worryin' about where her next meal is comin' from and somehow you have money for drink and tobacco. Most mornings Millie feeds Agnes breakfast outa my pantry. At a minimum it should be you instead of me wife that listens to that endless tale of pain and goddamn heartache every goddamn morning. It seems to me that your priorities are outa whack neighbor.

JERRY

(Takes a deep breath before speaking)

Well, well, well. Well, well, well. You are a righteous prick aren't you Hank? You always thought your shit don't stink.

HANK

(Stands up and looks Jerry directly in the eye)

Jerry, we ain't talkin' about *my* behavior, or the contents of *my* bowels, we're talkin' about you findin' money for drinkin' and smokin' when you can't come up with money to take care of your family. I find that mighty interestin' and not in a good way. As it happens, neighbor, I got the weight of the world on my shoulders worryin' about my son, and I just upset the woman I love more than life itself because of dealin' with the troubles you've created in *your* household, and it would do me a world of good to ease my troubles by your ass.

JERRY

Now wait a minute Hank, don't you be threatenin' me. I'm friends with Vernon Grey and if you touch me I'll sue your ass.

HANK

(Laughs uproarously).

Jerry, you just can't help yourself can you?

JERRY

Whaddaya mean? Why are ya laughin'?

HANK

You've bought your own bullshit for so long you actually believe the crap that comes out of your mouth. I always wondered how you kept your tall tales straight and it turns out that you don't.

JERRY

What are ya talkin' about?

HANK

Jerry, I want to kick your ass, I really do, and seein' as how you're already drunk, I figure it would be extra easy, but I ain't gonna do it. It would only upset Millie more than she already is. She's already mad at me and I couldn't live with myself if I made her more upset. So don't you worry about havin' to call your great *friend* Vernon Grey to sue me into deeper hole than I'm already in. What you should be worryin' about is why Agnes thinks you were laid off at the kilns when we both know you were fired for drinkin' on the job.

JERRY looks at HANK, shakes his head and walks towards the shed.

Hold on a second.

JERRY stops and looks sideways at HANK.

Once you get your bottle, you might want to go talk to Agnes and ask her what she's learned about your dealin's with Mr. Grey.

JERRY

You're an asshole.

HANK

Just ask Agnes about Grey.

JERRY

You don't know nothin' about me and Grey.

(Looks towards HANK but doesn't look him in the eye)

Hank, for the record, I wouldn't piss in your ass if your guts was on fire.

(Jerry walks away again)

HANK

Ask Agnes if it's true that Gray's wife hides her household money in a stoneware jar.

(JERRY stops in his tracks)

I guess when a fella with no prospects likes his drink he has to be clever when it comes to acquirin' cash, huh Jerry?

JERRY turns and stares at HANK, starts to talk, stops, lowers his head.

I can leave for work each mornin' when I get weary of listenin' to Agnes spinnin' her tale of woe, but Millie has to stay. And kind soul that she is, she listens and offers support. Millie knows more about you and your family life than you do - and it ain't pretty friend. You and Agnes don't have a pot to piss in, you're lit up before noon, and here you are headed to buy more booze. Your life is a goddamn mess. You got to do some serious thinkin' 'cause you are fallin' way short as a husband and as a goddamn neighbor.

JERRY, head lowered, walks away from the shed and out of view. HANK watches him walk away, looks up at the sky and sits back down on stump - after a moment JERRY walks back past HANK, head down, doesn't acknowledge HANK, and goes into shed. HANK watches, shakes his head, then gets up and walks back towards his house.

Lights dim.

ACT 2

SCENE 6

MILLIE and ADA still in the kitchen - HANK comes in door.

HANK

(Looks at MILLIE, speaks with a catch in throat)

Please forgive me.

MILLIE

(Hugs HANK)

Of course I forgive you. Just don't use that word in the house. Ever.

HANK

I am out of my mind with worry.

MILLIE

We all are.

ADA

We all are.

HANK

I don't know how much longer ...

MILLIE

We will get through this. Ada, Willie is going to be well isn't he? Please tell us he is going to be well.

ADA

(Pause)

I am not going to sugar coat this. I've nursed a lot of children with this illness, especially this winter. I have seen the way it plays out, the timin'. Tonight will surely

be the night that decides which way William will go. If he makes it through tonight I have hope his health will start to rally. But I am so worried about his lungs, they are terrible congested.

HANK

(Pleading)

Oh no. Ain't there somethin' we can do?

ADA

Keep using the bowl of hot water with a towel over his head to loosen the mucous, keep patting him on the back in the hope he will cough some up. Make sure to keep lots of fluids in him.

HANK

(with desperation in his voice)

You know we been doing that. Ain't there somethin' else? There has to be somethin' else. I'll lose my mind if the worse happens and there was somethin' else I could have done.

ADA

Well ...

HANK

(agitated)

Well what?

ADA

You might not think it's a good idea.

HANK

Dammit what is it!?

(Millie looks up sharply)

MILLIE

What is it Ada?

ADA

Well, there is an elixir that might make a difference. If you could get a hold of this elixir and give William a spoonful it might loosen the mucous enough to help him breathe. He's stranglin' on the mucous.

HANK

What is it!? Where do we get it?! I'll pay anything.

ADA

You can get it across the street. Whiskey.

HANK

(Looks stunned and confused, as does MILLIE. MILLIE gasps)

What!?

ADA

Whiskey can loosen the mucous in his lungs. I've seen it before.

HANK

This don't make sense.

MILLIE

You are serious?

ADA

I've seen it. I've done it. I did it last week in a household not so given to ... Kamp will sell it to you.

HANK

Absolutely not!

MILLIE

Hank ...

HANK

I can't go to Kamp's and ask for whiskey to give to my boy. This can't be. How can you ... Kamp is a worthless piece of No. No. I thought you meant medicine.

ADA

Well, it is medicine in a way. It was used as medicine for ages, until the government decided it wasn't.

MILLIE

Ada, this really might work?

ADA

Do you have any better ideas? I've seen it work.

HANK

I ...

MILLIE

I'm going to go get the whiskey.

(Heads for the door)

HANK

Wait.

(MILLIE stops. HANK moves his head back and forth. Blinks eyes repeatedly. Puts hands to head)

I feel like my head is in a vise. This can't be. You're serious. I feel like I'm bein' tested.

ADA

Maybe you are. Would you rather hang on to your anger, or to your little boy?

HANK and MILLIE look at each other, MILLIE staring intently at HANK, HANK walks to shelf, lifts the lid off of cigar box, takes money out, puts on coat and hat and walks out door - lights fade to black - baby coughing reverberates in the darkness.

ACT 2

SCENE 7

HANK is at shed and knocks on door. KAMP opens door and peers out cautiously.

KAMP

What?

HANK

Can you talk for a minute?

KAMP

Is it gonna end with you screamin' at me like a madman?

HANK

No.

KAMP

(Comes out on porch)

What's on your mind?

HANK

(Takes a deep breath)

Joe, do ya remember my uncle John?

KAMP

(Warily)

I do. I do.

(Pauses)

He was the first from town to die in the war. His name's on the monument in the square. It was the talk of the town when he got shot over there.

HANK

John was my favorite uncle and it about killed me when they told me he wasn't comin' back. The family told everybody he died in battle, in the trenches, that he died a hero. My people take pride in honesty, but they lied about this. They lied.

KAMP

Why are you bringing this up Hank?

HANK

He didn't die a hero. He died in a trench alright, but it was from choking on his own sick. He went to the other side of the world to fight Germans and drunk himself into the next life. It wasn't a bullet but his own vomit that killed him. They tried to hide it from me, but I found out. I lived with this since I was a kid. I worshipped that man and then he threw his life away for a bottle. It kinda hardened my view of drinkin' at an early age.

KAMP

Damn Hank, I had no idea.

HANK

(Hank takes off hat, holds it in his hands)

Joe, I don't know if you know this but I'm working for Jones now, helpin' him with the grave stones.

KAMP

Yeh, I heard that.

HANK

Well today I spent the day in the shop workin' on a new marker. This one was quick. We usually don't get to 'em so soon after, well, after they pass away.

KAMP

Who passed away? I didn't hear nothin.

HANK

A baby boy on the north side of town. I don't know the family, they just moved here a few months ago from Bluffs. Looking at that tombstone all day has just about killed me.

(Pauses. Struggles to maintain his composure)

He had the croup. Almost exactly the same age as my boy. My boy has,

(his voice catches)

my boy has the croup too. The nurse ... Ada ... tells us that tonight is the night that tells the tale ... that he could live or die tonight.

KAMP

Aww, Hank I'm so damn sorry.

HANK

Millie had two miscarriages before Willie was born. We was ...were ... tryin' forever. I don't think I could go on if I don't think I got the strength. It's too much.

KAMP

Hank, I ..

HANK

Kamp Joe ... Ada tells us there is something that might help, that might help clear his lungs before he strangles from the mucous.

(Pause)

How much does a bottle of whiskey cost?

KAMP looks into HANK's eyes, HANK looks down at his hat in his hands. KAMP turns back into the shed and quickly returns with a bottle which he hands to HANK.

What do I owe you Joe?

KAMP

I can't take nothin' for that Hank.

HANK

Please.

KAMP

It is the least I can do.

HANK

After all that has happened between us I owe you a ...

(KAMP cuts him off)

KAMP

Go. I'll pray for the boy. I'll pray.

HANK

Joe . . .

HANK tries to speak, but he can't. KAMP nods. HANK puts on hat, turns back to his house and walks away holding the bottle in both hands - lights fade to black.

ACT 2

SCENE 8

ADA pours water into bowl on table, MILLIE sits next to table, baby on lap, puts towel over bowl and baby's head and rocks baby. HANK walks through door with bottle in hands and goes to table.

HANK

Well, here it is.

ADA

Good.

HANK

You're sure this is what he needs?

ADA

I ain't sure of nothin' ... but it might help, it's helped in other cases.

HANK

In *all* other cases?

ADA

I ain't gettin' into that.

MILLIE

What do you mean?

ADA

Just pour the whiskey Hank.

HANK

(Looks at ADA)

There's a sentence I never thought I'd hear.

HANK closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and gently pours whiskey from bottle into a table spoon. Ada looks on. HANK looks deeply into MILLIE's eyes then moves spoon to baby's lips.

HANK

(Softly)

God in heaven forgive me for this.

MILLIE

It has got to be done.

HANK

Are you sure it's the right thing to do?

ADA

It's the best thing to do.

HANK puts tablespoon of whiskey to baby's lips. Everyone gasps as it hits back of his throat. MILLIE and HANK look on in horror as they realize baby can't catch it's breath. ADA calmly takes baby from MILLIE and begins patting it on the back. It continues to fight to draw a breath.

MILLIE

He can't breathe. Oh my God he is turning purple! He can't breathe!

ADA continues to pat him for what seems like an eternity as he fights to draw breath. HANK collapses to his knees.

HANK

No! What have I done?

MILLIE

He can't breathe!

Lights abruptly go down - stage goes black - MILLIE appears in soft spotlight - book in hand - begins reading - HANK and ADA stand motionless in shadows).

... by Emily Dickinson

"Departed to the judgment,
A mighty afternoon;
Great clouds like ushers leaning,
Creation looking on.

(moving clouds projected behind and above MILLIE)

The flesh surrendered, cancelled,
The bodiless begun;
Two worlds, like audiences, disperse
And leave the soul alone."

(Pause for 3 beats)

... should I use that one? What would Hank think of that one? What does it mean? What do I want it to mean? No. I am not using that one. We will not use that one in this house. No.

Spot slowly goes down as coughing sound appears - starting softly, increasing to a mighty cough crescendo and coughs abruptly stop - after a 5 count of darkness and silence lights go up.

As light returns ADA is wiping babies mouth with small towel, then softly pats the baby's back. HANK and MILLIE hover over ADA and the baby. All three adults watch and listen for 15 seconds.

ADA

(listens to baby's chest)

I'll be. ... He coughed up a plug of mucous. It mighta worked. ...I'll be. . . He hasn't breathed this good in a coupla weeks.

(Listens to baby's chest again)

Look, his color is already coming back.

HANK and MILLIE collapse into each others arms,
MILLIE cries, HANK fights back tears. MILLIE gains her
composure and takes baby from ADA and listens to his
chest.

MILLIE

His lungs sound clear! His lungs sound clear! Thank you
God. Thank you.

She begins crying again - HANK leans to listen to
baby's chest.

HANK

Ohhh. Thank you God.

ADA

(with a sly smile)

Some thanks to Kamp might be in order. The Lord works in
mysterious ways.

HANK

(giddy)

Damn. Damn. Damn.

MILLIE

Lang ...

She stops, pauses and stares into middle distance.
Hugs baby - lights fade to black.

ACT 2

SCENE 9

A week later, evening, light from kerosine lamp. In kitchen, baby sleeping contentedly in bassinet, HANK and MILLIE look down into cradle with smiles, then hug. MILLIE returns to working on a pie.

MILLIE

I want you to get this pie over to Mr. Kamp first thing in the morning. I was able to get ahold of some canned rubarb and strawberry and I know he will love it.

HANK

I know we owe the man, but why don't I get a pie like that?

MILLIE

When you save someone's life you'll get one too.

HANK

Seriously, it'll be my greatest pleasure to take it to Kamp. I gotta admit I'm sure glad I don't have to spend half my day sneering that direction anymore.

MILLIE

Agnes came over this morning, after you left for work.

HANK

God does answer prayers.

MILLIE

Sarcasm does not flatter you Hank. And He does answer prayers.

HANK

I'm sorry. But you know that Agnes wears on me.

MILLIE

She wears on all of us. You know she hadn't come around since Ada told her the truth about Jerry. That poor woman, stuck with that man, and Myrna sleepin' all over town. She's a pitiful soul. But listen to this. She was tellin' me her troubles and out of the blue she said that Vernon Grey had given Jerry another chance. Then she says (MILLIE mimics AGNES' voice) "When Jerry told me Grey had hired him I thought to myself, well, cork my butt and leave it plugged." I about fell off my chair. That woman.

HANK

(Looks at MILLIE quizzically)

I'm surprised you'd repeat that Millie.

MILLIE

It just struck me as really funny. She just needs to talk.

HANK

Well, she manages that. Just don't let her wear you out listenin'. 'Course you know Jerry'll get drunk and lose his job again.

MILLIE

Maybe so. But today he's sober and has a job and today is all there is. We have so much to be thankful for Hank. Being mad at the world wears you down. We need to count our blessings.

HANK

Given what's happened around here I can't disagree with you.

(Loud shouts from direction of the shed)

I'd never have believed it, but I don't think I can ever get upset over that racket again.

MILLIE

Hank I know you have a problem with folks in the pews that were drinkin' the night before, but I think I am going to go to church this Sunday. I can't worry about what other folks can do. I can only sweep in front of my own door. I hope at some point you might come too.

HANK

That's a possibility. (Pause) Millie, I always wanted William to go to college, so he don't have to work with his hands like me. I want it to be easier for him. But if college basically teaches ya that every thing you know is wrong...

MILLIE

Now don't think that. College teaches you to think for yourself. That doesn't mean that you can't end up believing the things you were raised to believe. Maybe it's just a beautiful way to confirm what is right and true.

HANK

That's why I love you. You always find the bright side of things. How did you get so wise?

MILLIE

I chose my mother and father carefully.

(HANK laughs and MILLIE smiles softly)

Are you ready for your poem?

HANK

Sure.

MILLIE hands him book with bookmarked page. They sit down at kitchen table. He reads.

By Emily Dickinson

"If I can stop one heart from breaking,

I shall not live in vain;

If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain."

... Are you trying to tell me something again?

MILLIE

Maybe, again.

HANK

And what would that be?

MILLIE

Sometimes you think you can do it all by yourself Hank.
That is not the way it is. We have got to help each other
in this world.

HANK

I thought you were tellin' me why we have to listen to
Agnes every mornin'

MILLIE

(laughs)

It is not what you see Hank, it is how you see it. It's our
choice. I see Agnes as a soul who needs someone to listen,
not as a burden

Let me read you my poem.

It's by Emily Dickinson too. I guess she's my favorite.

"We play at paste,
Till qualified for pearl,

Then drop the paste,
And deem ourself a fool.

The shapes, though, were similar,
And our new hands
Learned gem-tactics
Practicing sands."

HANK

What in the world does that mean?

MILLIE

I have no idea what it means. But I know what I want it to mean Hank. Isn't that wonderful?

Lights go out in kitchen. Across stage lights come up to dimly illuminate shed. Window in shed gives off glow. Voices of people inside laughing and cursing and clanging mugs. Dim outline of AGNES looking in window. She puts hand to mouth and coughs repeatedly from deep in her lungs. Lights dim and stage darkens. Voices from shed slowly soften to silence.

END OF PLAY