

ON GOOD GROUND

A Play in Three Acts

by

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"A sower went out to sow his seed:  
and as he sowed, some fell by the wayside;  
and it was trodden down, and the fowls  
of the air devoured it.  
And some fell upon a rock;  
and as soon as it was sprung up,  
it withered away, because it lacked moisture.  
And some fell among thorns;  
and the thorns sprang up with it  
and choked it.  
And other fell on good ground,  
and sprang up,  
and bare fruit an hundredfold."

Luke 8:4

CAST OF CHARACTERS

LODEY, the mother  
RIPLEY, the eldest son  
GREG, the middle son  
ROBERT, the youngest son  
CARTWRIGHT, Greg's youngest son

TIME

September 1986

ACT ONE: Early evening  
ACT TWO: Afternoon, the next week  
ACT THREE: Early evening, two days later

PLACE

The front porch of a house in Northwest Louisiana

ACT ONE

(The sound of a piano, just slightly out-of-tune, playing a hymn with a kind of honky-tonk gaiety. An unsteady elderly female voice sings.

Lights up on the front porch of a house in Northwest Louisiana. The house is small, one story, and not kept up as well as it might be.

The porch has a rocking chair and a swing. Steps lead down to an expanse of lawn.

Several branches and a part of the trunk of an old apple tree hang over onto the stage. Several apples are rotting on the lawn.

Aside from the hymn, from the house come sounds of children running, laughing, crying; adults in conversation, the drone of a television set.

GREG stands on a stepladder on the porch replacing a bulb in the porch light. He wears a suit, but he's taken off his tie.

LODEY stands behind him, leaning against the door sill. SHE wears a dress she's worn for the first time and she's fresh from the beauty parlor.

The stepladder wobbles)

LODEY

You're gonna fall! You're gonna fall; crack your head wide open.

GREG

Well, sure I am. Least I will if you don't hold onto the damn stepladder.

LODEY

No need to talk like that.

LODEY

'Specially on a day like today.

GREG

'Scuse me, Mama. The durn stepladder. Hold the durn stepladder.

(SHE comes over and holds the ladder)

GREG

Looks to me like there's a short in this wire here.

LODEY

You're gonna electrocute  
yourself! You're gonna touch  
a live wire , fry yourself.  
To a crisp. Now stop fussing  
with it. Just put in the  
bulb and get down off of  
there before you hurt  
yourself.

GREG

I'm gonna have to tape this  
whole thing up.

Mama, it has to be done  
sooner or later.

GREG

Okay, here goes. Tell you what, Mama: if the juice starts  
to go through me, I want you to call my doctor; tell him I  
tried a homemade remedy. Cancel my appointment.

(HE laughs)

LODEY

Shhhh. Hush now, Greg.

(GREG gets off the stepladder)

GREG

Okay, that's it.

(LODEY goes to the door. SHE bends down  
and talks to an offstage child)

LODEY

Is that little old Cartwright? Is it? IS IT?! Is that my  
little baby? Cartwright, honey, turn on that light switch  
there, baby.

(GREG moves upstage and also talks to  
the child)

LODEY

Would you do that for Maw-  
maw? Just hit that switch.  
Billie? Billie, honey, show  
him where it is. No, no, him  
do it. He can do it. Awww,  
he's such a sweetheart.

GREG

No, son, don't come out here.  
Go back to your Mama, son.  
No, you're gonna fall! Don't  
come out here, you're gonna  
fall! Billie, why can't you  
keep an eye on him?

(LODEY opens the screen door and leans  
in)

LODEY

Gimme some sugar, baby. Give your Maw-maw some sugar.

(SHE noisily kisses the offstage child.)

SHE straightens up, looks at the  
lightbulb. GREG does too. A pause)

Okay, darlin'. Go. Go!

(The light goes on)

LODEY (CONTINUED)

Hallelujah! Let there be light!  
(SHE looks back at the door)  
You did it! Thank you, honey!

(The boy laughs and runs away)

GREG

Oh, Mama...

LODEY

And thank you too, Sugar.

(SHE kisses him)

GREG

Mama, look. You gave me the wrong bulb.

LODEY

Well, it looks just fine to me. It's working, ain't it?  
Nothing wrong with that bulb.

(SHE sits in the rocking chair)

GREG

No, Mama, it's white! It's too bright. You want to put a  
yellow bulb in there, else every mosquito in town'll be  
coming over.

LODEY

You leave it be. I want it like that. Every house on  
Mayhew's got a yellow bulb in. I want this one to stand  
out. We put in a yellow bulb, Robert's likely to drive  
right past. I want him to be able to recognize his old  
house without any trouble. Now sit down. Sit on the swing  
and wait with me.

(GREG sits. A pause. LODEY looks up at  
the sky. SHE points)

Look! Look up there, Greg. I wonder if that's him up  
there. He should be touching down any minute now. I'll bet  
that's him.

GREG

Gee, I don't know, Mama. Wave! Wave at it. Somebody waves  
back, it must be him.

(HE laughs, gets up and moves towards  
the door)

Be right back, Mama.

LODEY

Where you goin'? Sit back down with me.

GREG

Left my cigarettes inside. Right back.

LODEY

You don't need those old things. You smoke too much anyway.

GREG

Be right back, Mama. I just need a cigarette.

LODEY

(Muttering:) Well, fine, if an old tobacco butt means more than your Mama, go on in.

GREG

Okay, okay Mama...

(HE sits on the porch railing)

LODEY

Look, look, does that look like a taxi-cab coming this way?

GREG

(Squinting:) Can't tell. Nope. Sounds like it's... yep, Jim Dacey's old Pontiac.

LODEY

Yeah? Well, sit back down, I don't want him to... No, no don't wave at 'em! I've had it with that Edith Dacey. Worked like a nigger helping her with that dumb garage sale two weeks ago - nothing but a lot of old junk that nobody would want anyway - and she don't even have the common decency to stop over here tonight and say goodbye to Earl. That woman ain't got sense to pour pee out of a boot; don't you dare wave at 'em.

GREG

I'm not waving at them, Mama, I'm slapping the goddamn mosquitoes off my arms! They're eating me alive. I warned you!

LODEY

Well, son, they ain't bothering me.

GREG

I guess that's on account of they'd break their little beaks tryin' to get through that thick skin of yours.

(HE laughs. SHE does too)

LODEY

I think we got some of that "Off!" over there under the swing. I think it's over there. Put some of that on you.

(GREG finds the can, sprays it on himself)

Well, I guess I should be heading back inside. I mean, I guess I'm being anti-social sittin' out here when I got a houseful of company inside waiting on me. I guess I should go in.

(A pause. SHE exhales)

Well, I don't want to. Close that door for me, Greg. Don't let 'em see you; just close it.

(HE gets up and closes the heavy oak door into the house)



LODEY (CONTINUED)

Thank you, honey. I'm sorry, it's just too noisy in there. I'm sorry, honey, I love your kids, and I love Ripley's kids with all my heart, I mean it, I really do, I'd do anything for 'em, but I just can't stand all of that noise anymore. Honestly, I wouldn't be at all surprised if Earl just sat up straight in his box and said, "Why don't you all just go on home!" and then shut the lid on himself.

(SHE laughs)

GREG

Come on, Mama, that's not fair. It's not only the kids; Aunt Odie's been banging on that piano for nearly three hours.

LODEY

Well, bless her heart, she's just trying to cheer everybody up, I guess. That woman never had a piano lesson in her life...

GREG

(Overlapping:) I could've told you that...

LODEY

(Overlapping:) ...she just sat herself down at Mama's old piano and taught herself. She got very dedicated to it. I remember she'd come home from school, throw her books down and set herself at the piano and just keep playing 'til dinnertime. Only problem is, Mama's old piano was always out of tune - we never did have enough money to have the man in to fix it - now she thinks that's the way it's supposed to sound. So every tune that woman plays is just a little off-the-hinges. She's doin' it for Earl, though. He used to like her playing. He'd sit there in his chair and I could see the tears come to his eyes when Audrey'd start to play.

GREG

I bet.

LODEY

Said it reminded him of a place he'd go to on weekends with his buddies when he was stationed at Barksdale. They had a guy play the piano in there, they'd make requests and he'd play all their favorite Army songs on this old piano. They'd order a round of beers and when they'd finish a bottle, they'd throw it. Right at the keyboard.

(A pause)

Earl never did care too much for Audrey's singing, though.

(A pause)

Is that car coming this way?

GREG

No, he's turnin' the corner, Mama.

LODEY

Oh. Ummm-hmmm...

GREG

Try to calm yourself down, Mama. If you're that worried about him finding the house, I could still go and pick him up at the airport. There's still plenty of time.

LODEY

(Overlapping:) No, no... I want him to find it all by himself.

GREG

(Overlapping:) Besides, I seriously doubt he'd have any trouble missing the place with forty cars parked outside and every light blazing. Everyone in town must be over here tonight. People I've never seen before in my life are lyin' in my old bed with their shoes off, watchin' T.V. and drinkin' a Dr. Pepper. I think somebody went and put a sign up on the highway saying: "Free food! Free drink! Left here, then three miles."

LODEY

Now that's not true; you know everyone here. Everyone here tonight has been coming here regular since you were a baby. Who don't you know?

GREG

Well who, for example, is that old geezer sitting in the corner not sayin' one word?

LODEY

Who?

GREG

You know. Sitting in the corner. By the kitchen.

LODEY

Lord, honey, I don't know.

GREG

He's under Ripley's high-jump medal.

LODEY

Well, I swear, I don't know who you're talking about.

GREG

I'm telling you, Mama, there is an old man, looking about a hundred and five at the least, sitting in a corner of our living room, drinking a beer and not saying "boo" to anyone. I said hello when he came in tonight even though I didn't know who in hell he was, and he didn't even look at me. He just walked over to Daddy, took a look at him, plopped himself down in the corner and hasn't moved since.

LODEY

You're teasing me. I don't know who you mean.

GREG

Well then, you better go inside, 'cause there's some total stranger in there, drinking all our beer and eating all our chips.

LODEY

What's he look like, honey?

GREG

Well... old. I don't know. He looks old, Mama. He looks like that old snapping turtle that Robert used to keep in that box under the porch steps. He's got an army uniform on.

LODEY

Oh, Alvis! Oh, that's Alvis, honey. I guess you're too young to remember Alvis; he was before your time. Alvis stopped coming 'round long before you were born. He was Best Man at our wedding.

GREG

He's a strange one, Mama.

LODEY

Oh, no, honey. He's not strange at all. I used to think that too, the way he just sits around, not sayin' a word. He's just kinda sad. He and your Daddy were in the service together; they were Army buddies, I guess you'd call 'em. But then the war was over and your Daddy and I got married, poor Alvis didn't have anyone anymore. Didn't have any girlfriends, Lord knows. You think he looks peculiar now. Whew! (SHE laughs) Words can't describe what he looked like then. We've got some pictures, I think - I'll show 'em to you. He didn't have any family either, least as far as I could tell. Well, your Daddy and me moved in here and every night, regular as clockwork, we'd hear Alvis' old Chevy truck pulling up in the driveway. It was always about six o'clock, I remember, because I'd just be setting the table for dinner. Well, Alvis'd come in, we'd say, "Hi there, Alvis," he'd say "Hi," and set himself down in the corner, that same corner he's sitting in now. Your Daddy would offer him a beer, which he'd take, and that would be the end of it. He'd just sit there, not saying one word, until nine o'clock. And then he'd get up, say goodbye and go home. He'd never ask for anything; how he got that one beer to last for three hours, I'll never know. I'd always ask him, "Would you like a little supper, Alvis?" He'd shake his head: No, no he'd already eaten. Your Daddy seemed to take this as a matter of course, not ignoring him really, just never saying anything to him. So I wasn't about to question this behavior, having just married the man, so I kept my mouth shut and accepted it as being natural. Although I always was a little curious as to how they got to be such good buddies if this was the way they were together. Well, this went on every night until the end of our first year together, and Alvis came in one night and after "Hi there, Alvis," I said, "Guess what, Alvis? I found out today that me and Earl are gonna have a baby!" Well, there was silence for a few seconds. Alvis had a weird kind of look on his face, like a surprised look. But not the happy kind, either. Then his face changed. He said, "Well, isn't that wonderful news? Congratulations, Lodey," and he gave me a little kiss on the cheek.

LODEY (CONTINUED)

He gave Earl's hand a shake and he said something like "Well, this is an important day," or something and said "I'll be right back," and he left. But he never did come back. Until tonight, that is.

(A long pause)

GREG

Well? Where did he go?

LODEY

Don't interrupt me, honey. Let me finish my story, then you can ask me questions. Well, when six o'clock came and went the next night and no sign of Alvis, I got a little concerned. Not really worried, I just got used to him and it was like breaking a habit. For a while it just didn't seem right, having dinner without Alvis sittin' in his corner. But Earl didn't seem disturbed in the least. After about two weeks, I finally worked up the nerve to ask him, but Earl just said, "Oh, that's Alvis. You don't know him like I do, Lodey." Something silent seemed to have passed between the two of them and as sure as he was always there at six o'clock on the dot, now he was gone. Eventually, we found out he'd moved over to Monroe and was living there. We'd get a Christmas card every year, nothing about how he was living, what he was doing, just "Merry Christmas. From, Alvis." For a long time it kinda spooked me. So I understand how you feel, honey. Him just sitting there, not saying anything. Just like he had all the answers to every question in this world, but damned if he was gonna share it with you. Or like he had big, dark secret buried deep inside him that no one else would ever know.

(A pause)

But then I realized he was just plain ignorant.

(A long pause)

GREG

I wonder how he found out about Daddy.

LODEY

Oh, it's those Army men. They've got some kind of secret grapevine going between 'em no one else knows about. As soon as one of 'em gets married, has a baby or croaks, the rest of 'em know within a matter of minutes. You know, it's kinda sweet seeing Alvis back in his old corner again...

(SHE cries into a handkerchief)

GREG

Now Mama, don't go getting yourself upset.

(HE puts an arm around her)

LODEY

No honey, I'm not upset. I'm just thinking over good times... remembering them... I don't know, it gets to me.

GREG

Then don't remember, Mama. Think about something else.  
Think about the future.

LODEY

I don't wanna think about  
something else! I wanna sit  
here and remember Earl, and  
if I feel like crying, then  
you just better let me cry!  
Go for a walk. Go over there  
and pickan apple, or  
something...

GREG

No, wait... DON'T think  
about the future. Just don't  
cry.

GREG

I'm sorry, Mama. I was wrong, You're right. If your  
initial impulse was to cry, then by all means I have no  
right to block that impulse. You go right ahead and cry.

LODEY

What in the world kind of nonsense are you talking?

GREG

I'm just saying you should cry if that's what you feel like  
doing.

(From inside the house, we hear a young  
woman's voice calling: "Mama? Mama?  
Where's she go? MAMA?!")

LODEY

Oh Lord, is that Leanna calling me?

(LODEY jumps up and runs off the porch  
onto the lawn)

Please, Greg, stop her. Please don't let her out here.

Forgive me, but I can't face that woman right now.

(GREG has gone to the door and stepped  
inside. The racket from inside quiets.

The piano stops. LODEY paces the lawn)

Oh Lord, now they're all silent and I can hear them all now.

"What's the matter with Mama? Oh, she's not in her right  
head, oh, the strain's been too much for her, oh, she's just  
taking her grief out on us," oh Lord, oh Lord!

(GREG seems to come to an understanding  
offstage and HE closes the door to the  
house)

GREG

It's okay, mama. They won't be comin' out here. They  
understand.

(LODEY turns and starts back to the  
porch)

LODEY

Oh, no, Greg.

(SHE turns her back to the house)

Look. I can see her there behind the curtains.

(SHE gestures vaguely to the windows  
that look out onto the porch)

LODEY (CONTINUED)

Get her outta that room. That's our bedroom. I don't want  
her in there spying on me, snooping through my stuff.

(GREG goes to the window and bangs on  
the glass)

GREG

Come on, Leanna. Get outta there. Go back in the kitchen.  
(A pause. GREG goes to LODEY)  
She's gone. You can come back on the porch now, Mama.

(HE takes her arm and leads her to the  
swing)

LODEY

I tell you here and now, Greg, that woman will surely be the  
death of me; she just makes my blood boil. I know feeling  
this way ain't Christian, but I just can't help it.

(SHE sits and sighs, long and loud)

I'm fine now.

(A pause)

I felt sure that when she and Ripley got their divorce we'd  
seen the end of her. No such luck, as you can plainly tell.  
The nerve of that woman, coming over here. Bringing her new  
husband who must be close to ten years younger than she is,  
just to show off to Ripley what a great catch she got. Poor  
Ripley. I can still see his face when she introduced the  
two of them, with her smiling that little witch smile of  
hers, and that man of hers with more muscles than brains  
shaking Ripley's hand while he's making fun of the size of  
Ripley's belly. I could've spit blood, I felt so bad for  
that boy. But that's enough now. I've said my piece.

(A pause)

(With renewed vigor:) And then she has the gall to bring  
her mother-in-law over here to Earl's funeral, a woman I've  
never set eyes on before and I'm supposed to entertain her  
like she's kin. And her sittin' there telling off-color  
jokes that make me sick to my stomach just inches from poor  
Earl's corpse!

GREG

So tell 'em to go home! Nobody wants 'em here. Ripley  
could care less. This should just be immediate family  
anyway, Mama. Kick 'em all out on their butts!

LODEY

Oh now come on, honey, you know I can't do that. That  
wouldn't be polite.

GREG

Don't do that Mama, don't you do that! They've been here  
all day long and I'm sick of the sound of 'em. Tell 'em  
you've had enough. They're all coming back tomorrow for the  
burial, anyway. Ask them to leave us alone. The food's all  
gone, anyway; Lord knows why they're still hanging around.

LODEY

Well, I do. They're here to say their goodbyes to Earl. They all loved him.

GREG

(Overlapping:) Oh no they're not, Mama! They're here to look at US. They wanna see us cry. They wanna feel sorry for us and I don't like that. Why can't we be alone with him? Why do we have to share all our feelings with everyone? Look at Leanna. Think she gives a good goddamn about Daddy? I want her and everybody else in there out of my house.

LODEY

(Quietly:) Son, this is MY house. And if those people want to be here, then I want them here and I don't want you using that kind of talk in front of me now, here, tonight, with your Daddy lying not twenty feet away. You've just upset me more than anything else tonight. Just leave it be. They're waiting to see Robert, too. Nobody in there's seen him in ten years. They're all looking forward to that, and I won't deprive them of it. After Robert's come, they'll all be goin' home. Now calm down. I don't want you having one of your spells.

GREG

They're not spells, Mama! I'm upset, and I just think you should know that. Why should I have to keep silent all the time?

LODEY

I don't care, I don't care what they are! I don't want you getting upset and I don't want you upsetting me, now leave it be.

(A long silence)

GREG

I just don't understand why you won't let me talk, Mama. It's supposed to be good for me to express these things that bother me, but nobody wants to listen. I guess you don't love me enough to listen.

LODEY

Now don't you start saying things like that, son. You're gonna hurt me; you're gonna make me cry. You wouldn't listen to me when I told you what was the matter with you in the first place, so why should I listen to you now? There was a demon inside of you as sure as I'm sitting here and all the fancy doctors in the world couldn't make that demon come out. I told you that the minute I walked into that hospital room. I could tell just from one look at your face. You're my son, but those were not my son's eyes looking at me from that hospital bed.

GREG

Mama, I was in such a state that whole time, I didn't understand what anybody was saying to me. I didn't know what the hell was wrong with me, but everybody else seemed to have their own idea and went ahead telling me what I should do, what I shouldn't do, which just made it all the more worse. But everything that doctor told me started to make a whole lot of sense. And whether you want to believe it or not, he really has helped me. He made me understand a whole lot of stuff I never understood before.

LODEY

Well, maybe you understand a whole lot better honey, but that demon is still inside there. I can see it and I can hear it; no doctor's gonna get rid of that demon. I don't see any happiness, I don't see any joy in you anymore. Maybe you understand everything perfectly crystal-clear, probably a whole lot better than I do, but honestly honey, I don't see what good it's gonna do you when you haven't got any joy in your life anymore. But I just want you to know that we can get rid of that demon in half an hour's time and I'm right here whenever you want me. All you have to do is ask.

GREG

Well, Mama, you can tell me where I'm supposed to find joy living in a trailer with four kids. Where's the happiness working twenty feet underground welding oil pipes together? Huh, Mama?

LODEY

There's another kind of happiness, honey. I coulda told you you wouldn't find it spending six months in a hospital.

GREG

I'm too old for that kind of stuff, Mama. Santa Claus doesn't fly by here no more. I used to think, oh sure, Ripley and me, we got it made. We were gonna be stars. Everybody else thought so too, and you know it Mama. Why do you think Leanna married Ripley in the first place? She was gonna be friggin' Priscilla Presley. We were gonna have millions and be happy. But that doctor helped me to see that was just a big bag of baloney. He said I was suffering from something called a "self-fulfilling prophesy," which you can't really explain to somebody who doesn't understand this stuff. It sorta means that I didn't really want that stuff in the first place and I should just settle back with what I have now and be satisfied with it. Now that I'm able to understand that, now I have to start understanding how to be happy. That's going to take a little while longer though, he tells me.

LODEY

I guess you know what you're doing, honey. Your Daddy and I always prayed for the best for you and Ripley. And for Robert too.

GREG

I've got a good wife. That's one thing.



LODEY

You do, son. Me and Earl were so joyful that you finally found Billie. Earl loved her very much. And me too. Much more so that Maura and I hope you don't mind me saying this, but it's true. I don't mean anything against Maura, she can do as she likes, Billie is simply just a better woman. I can only wish you'd seen through what Maura really was a little bit sooner. You could've saved yourself a whole lot of trouble. And much as I love those babies... Greg?  
Greg, honey?

(SHE touches his arm, looking straight out into the house)

GREG

What is it, Mama?

LODEY

What is that out in the street? Your eyes are better than mine.

(GREG squints, looking)

GREG

Kenny? Kenny! Get out of the street, son! Go on, go on, get back in the backyard with everyone else! I think he's chasing a ball, Mama. Take the ball in the backyard, Kenny and play back there and stay out of the street, son.

LODEY

Is that Kenny? You better get him out of that street before another car comes along. I think I hear a car coming. Kenny? Kenny, listen to your Maw-maw, go back with everybody else, Sugar. You're scaring your Maw-maw something awful.

(THEIR eyes follow him off)

GREG

He's got the ball now. He's okay. He's okay, Mama.

LODEY

Well, good, he's out of the street at least. Okay, he's all right.

GREG

All those older kids playing back there, you think they'd keep an eye on him.

LODEY

They shouldn't be ball this late, anyway. Somebody could get themselves hurt. You'd think Maura would keep an eye on her kids.

GREG

Things like that just stop my heart, Mama. Isn't that funny? I get so worried about those kids. If anything ever happened to them... I'd just do anything for them...

(HE wipes away tears)

GREG (CONTINUED)

You never did like Maura one least little bit, did you Mama? Not since the day we got married.

LODEY

It's not that, honey. I don't know. I never thought about it.

(A pause)

I DID think she'd at least have the sense to think up some normal names for those kids at the very least.

GREG

What's wrong with their names, Mama? Kenny? Jill? Lots of kids are named Kenny and Jill.

LODEY

Don't you go sticking up for Maura and beat around the bush with me. You know just as well as I do what their birth certificates say. Gillette. Kenmore. When I had to tell my friends my son had named his children after a razor blade and a washing machine, it was an embarrassment.

GREG

We couldn't help that, Mama! You know how difficult that pregnancy was, we were so worried we couldn't think about anything else. We didn't have time to pick out names and then she went into the hospital and it was too late. Maura called me while I was sittin' on the toilet trying my damndest to come up with some names, and those are the ones I came up with, sorry, Mama.

LODEY

At least you and Billie had the sense to pick out a decent name. True, you did name him after somebody on a T.V. show, but at least it really is somebody's name, there really is someone walking around with the name Cartwright, so it's okay.

GREG

Well, I'll give you that, Billie always had a lot more common sense than Maura ever had.

(A long pause)

LODEY

Well, I can only think that plane must be late. It must be almost nine o'clock by now. Getting' colder out here.

GREG

You cold, Mama? Want me to get you a sweater?

LODEY

Are you cold? I've got a chill, but maybe that's just me. I think it's just nerves.

GREG

What you got to be nervous about, Mama?

LODEY

Does this house look terrible to you?

GREG

Terrible? It looks like it always does, Mama. I don't know what you mean.

LODEY

I know that I haven't been able to keep it as well as I should. I can see that maybe it needs some paint. Earl tried his best, God knows. With me working every day, it was just hard for me to try and get anything done. Poor Earl just didn't seem to realize he couldn't do the same things he used to do at thirty. But Lord, that lawn could sure use a mowing, I know that. I just don't Robert being embarrassed coming back to this old house. I can't think of any other reason to wait until his Daddy's passing-on before he decided to come home again, unless he was ashamed of this place. And I realize these bushes here at the side are looking a little seedy. And look at that ladder! Greg, honey, take that ladder off that old apple tree and put it under the house where it belongs. Please Greg, do it now before he gets here.

GREG

Whatever you say, Mama.

(GREG goes onto the lawn, takes the ladder, moves to the side of the porch and slides it under the latticework under the porch. LODEY leans against the porch railing)

LODEY

I can't think how anything's ever going to get done around here from now on.

GREG

Well, Ripley and me will be around to help out. You know if you need anything you can just call on us and we'll be here.

LODEY

Oh, I know you two have got your own lives to live. And I can't think how both of you missed seeing that ladder lying there all this time and didn't think to move it. Lord, I can still see Earl up on that ladder pickin' them apples. Poor old Earl. He just didn't want those old jaybirds to get to those apples before he did. My heart just wants to break thinking of him up there at high noon, no one around to help, pickin' apples like he was still a schoolboy. Having that stroke, falling outta that tree, lying there in the September sun, no one to help him. Cars pass by here all the time at that time of day, you'd think somebody would've seen him. Lord, I knew it, and I was fifteen miles away! I was sittin' in the lunchroom eating an old tuna fish sandwich, and I felt it. Didn't know what I was doing or why, just got in the car and came home.

LODEY (CONTINUED)

And there he was, looking like he was just taking a nap in the sun. Well, I guess nobody's gonna care about picking those apples anymore; they're too sour for eating. Those jaybirds are gonna have a field day.

(GREG comes back up on the porch)

GREG

We're gonna take care of you, Mama, don't you worry about a thing.

(HE puts an arm around her)

LODEY

I'm not worried. I'm just fine, honey. But listen, tomorrow I'd like you and maybe some of the kids to rake up those apples and get them out of here. That smell is starting to make me a little sick to my stomach.

GREG

Sure, Mama. Whatever you want.

(A long pause)

Um... It was good to see Sister Althea here tonight. Haven't seen her in a long time. How's she been doin'?

(LODEY turns and looks at him for a long time. Finally:)

LODEY

Oh... she's just fine.

GREG

She's still with the church, I guess.

LODEY

Yes, son, she is.

(A long pause)

GREG

You always liked it at the church, didn't you, Mama?

(A long pause)

LODEY

I know what you're leading up to, Greg, and I'd rather not talk about that tonight. I have too much on my mind as it is without having to start thinking about that.

(A pause)

She's already asked me if I'd like to come back and I'm gonna tell you the same thing I told her. I'll think about it, and thanks for asking.

GREG

I'm sorry I asked, Mama, sorry I asked.

(HE sits on the swing. A pause. LODEY paces the porch. The piano-playing and hymn-singing start up again)

LODEY

Besides, they like men at that church. They don't want some lady preacher coming in, telling 'em what to do. I'm pretty sure they don't want that. Well, there she goes again! (SHE laughs) Listen to that playing. You ever hear anything like that in your life?

(A pause)

I can tell what she's leading up to, I can tell you that.

GREG

Who?

LODEY

You mark my words, before this night is over, I guarantee you, your Aunt Audrey is going to ask me to move in there with her and your Aunt Doreen.

GREG

Well, maybe that sounds like a good idea, Mama. You think you'll take her up on that?

LODEY

Lord, no! What would I wanna do something like that for? This is where I live. I live right here in this house!

GREG

Don't get excited, Mama. We've all been thinking, we wouldn't have to worry about you, you'd all take care of each other. And maybe you've got too many memories here. Maybe, we thought, you should sell this house.

LODEY

(Overlapping:) Memories! Well, I just guess I DO have memories! You think I wanna get rid of them? You think all my memories will stay behind if I go away? If I decide I'm gonna throw out Earl's old easy chair, doesn't mean I'm throwing away Earl.

GREG

I shouldn't have brought it up.

LODEY

Well, I just don't know what's the matter with everyone. Everyone's telling me what I'm supposed to do with my life from now on. As if y'all know better than me what good for me. Well, I guess I've been doing a pretty fair job of it up 'til now, so what's so different all of a sudden? Do you all think I'm some kind of an invalid or something? And now you have to make all my decisions for me? Do I LOOK any different to you?

GREG

We just thought we'd help; just give you some alternatives. Calm down, Mama.

LODEY

Don't you go telling me to calm down. I'll calm down when I want to.

(A long pause)

GREG

Well, what do you think you are gonna do, Mama?

LODEY

What do you mean, what am I gonna do? I'm gonna sit right here in this rocker and wait for my son.

(And SHE sits)

GREG

You know what I mean.

LODEY

No. No, I do NOT know what you mean. And I don't exactly know what I'm going to do next week or next month or whenever. I don't even know for sure if I'm gonna have bacon with my eggs tomorrow morning. But I DO know what I'm doing right now, and that's sitting here waiting for my son to come home.

(A long, long pause. GREG chews on a fingernail. LODEY keeps her eye on the street)

And listen, honey, please don't do that thing that you do.

GREG

What'd you say, Mama?

LODEY

Now Robert's gonna be upset as it is when he gets here, what with saying goodbye to his Daddy, the long airplane trip, having to smile and be polite to all those people in there, I don't want him upset further. So don't do that thing.

GREG

What thing?

LODEY

You know. That thing. That thing you do.

GREG

Oh, that thing. Have you been sitting in the sun too long? No, Mama, I'm afraid I don't know what "thing" you're talking about.

LODEY

Oh... you know. That thing whenever somebody is the family is around for more'n five minutes and you start in on 'em.

GREG

Start in on 'em? I don't know what you're talking about.

LODEY

Starting in with all that remembering stuff. Like "Remember when I was five years old and you stole my Roy Rogers cap gun and it's hurt me for the rest of my life" kind of thing. Please don't do that tonight, honey.

GREG

Oh, Mama, what do you take me for? No sense at all? Of course I won't.

LODEY

In a few days, maybe, okay. But not now.

GREG

Well, of course not.

(A pause)

I don't do that too much, anyway, do I? Only lately.

LODEY

Well, yeah, honey, I'm sorry I said anything. I didn't want to hurt your feelings or anything, you know I wouldn't want to do that.

GREG

Sure I do, Mama. The doctor thinks it's important, is all. You know, Mama?

LODEY

(Overlapping:) Here comes a taxi-cab. Do you think that's him?

GREG

Well sure, it must be. I can't think why else there'd be a cab on Mayhew this time of night.

(HE stands and waves)

LODEY

No, no, honey! Don't wave! Just sit still. I want to see if he can find the house. I wanna see if he still remembers his old home. Sit still.

(THEY do. A long silence, save for the old piano. THEY look straight out. After a time, ROBERT enters onto the lawn holding two suitcases. HE puts the suitcases down)

(To GREG, a whisper:) Help him.

(GREG goes down onto the lawn)

GREG

Hey, brother...

(THEY lock in an embrace that lasts a good long time. THEY break and ROBERT goes up onto the porch)

ROBERT

Mama...

(THEY too embrace. Tears all around.  
LODEY breaks the embrace and holds  
ROBERT's face in her hands)

LODEY

Your Daddy is waiting for you inside. You go on in to him  
and say goodbye. He doesn't want to leave until he's said  
goodbye to his youngest son.

(SHE turns to GREG)

You two go on in.

(GREG picks up ROBERT's suitcases and  
carries them onto the porch. ROBERT  
holds the door open. GREG exits, ROBERT  
follows. There is a loud "whoop" from  
inside; many shouts of surprise and  
greeting. LODEY steps down off the  
porch onto the lawn. SHE walks under  
the apple tree. SHE picks an apple off  
the ground and takes a bite. SHE looks  
at the sky over the house)

(Softly:) There you are, Earl. I knew you were waiting. I  
knew it. Well, you can go on now, Earl. He's here.

(SHE stands on tip-toe, waves a hand  
over her head as if to a bird)

We'll be all right, Earl. Go on, now... Go on...

SLOW FADE

END OF ACT ONE



ACT TWO

(Lights up. ROBERT sits in the rocker. RIPLEY sits in the swing. It's the next week, early afternoon. RIPLEY wears a bathrobe. Both have coffee. THEY are both watching something across the street)

RIPLEY

She's doing that like she thinks she's pretty.

ROBERT

What is that? What do you call what she's doing?

RIPLEY

Them's called exercises, brother. That's to keep her gorgeous feminine figure. Whew! All the boys down at the Pizza Hut is are gonna go wild when she goes out struttin' on Saturday night.

ROBERT

Are those supposed to be deep knee bends?

Is that a...? What is she DOING? Wait a second. When you do a jumping jack, aren't you supposed to move your feet and arms together? I mean, at the same time?

(THEY both laugh like teenagers)

RIPLEY

And what do you call THAT? That looks like she's trying to dry some fresh nail polish she just put all over her vagina.

ROBERT

Shhh! She's gonna hear us. We gotta cut this out.

RIPLEY

Ooooh, I think Robert's got a crush!

ROBERT

Oh, come on, cut that out! Come on, stop that, Ripley. It's not funny. At all.

RIPLEY

Awww! He doesn't want to hurt her feelings! Awww!

RIPLEY

(Loud:) Robert's in love! Robert's in love!

ROBERT

She's looking over here, she heard you! Ripley, I mean it.

RIPLEY

Ooooh, true romance! Right here on our porch! Love at first sight!

ROBERT

When she comes over here, I'm gonna tell her you've got the hots for her.



RIPLEY

Speaking of legs...

(HE gestures across the street)  
That's for YOUR benefit, brother. (Raises his voice:) He's interested!

ROBERT

Okay, you gotta cut that the fuck out.

RIPLEY

Woo-hoo!

(HE waves)

ROBERT

I'm not the one who dated her in high school.

RIPLEY

Once. One date.

ROBERT

One more than me, brother.

RIPLEY

And that's 'cause I lost a bet.

ROBERT

I think she wants another look at Ripley's Believe it or Not.  
Woo-hoo!

(HE waves)

She's waving back!

RIPLEY

Aww, shit. You win. You win.

(THEY both try to hide their laughter. LODEY  
re-enters with coffee)

Well, bless your heart, Mama. You're a saint.

LODEY

(Overlapping:) Well, I just feel terrible making her do all that cleaning up. She just won't let me do anything.

(SHE sits in the rocker)

RIPLEY

Mama, you're not making Mattie do anything she doesn't want to do, she wants to do it, so let's just put an end to it.

LODEY

Well, she cooked all that greasy food and now she's got all those greasy pots and pans. She shouldn't have to clean that mess up by herself.

RIPLEY

Did you make this coffee, Mama?

LODEY

I am telling you, she won't let me do anything.

RIPLEY

Kinda weak.

LODEY

Well, I tried. She almost yelled at me this morning when I tried to fix Earl's breakfast, but she just...Well, listen to me. I don't even know what I'm saying anymore. I see you finally got those apples off the lawn. That looks a whole lot better now.

(SHE points)

You missed one. I tried to fix breakfast, but she practically yelled at me to get out of my own kitchen. It WAS almost rude, but she's just trying to be a help. I guess.

RIPLEY

Well, this coffee needs a cigarette. I thought I brought them out with me.

LODEY

Well, you can just get off your lazy butt and get them yourself. I'm not going to encourage sinful behavior.

RIPLEY

You're drinking coffee. That's considered a sin.

LODEY

Is not. Only by those crazy Mormons. You don't need those filthy old things. You stay out here with your Mama.

RIPLEY

(Playfully:) You shut up, old woman, I need a smoke.

(HE exits)

LODEY

You smoke too much, anyway.

(A long pause. Suddenly, in an excited whisper:)

I tell you honey, that woman is going to be the death of me. I know she means well, and I know she just wants to help out, but I just don't see how you could eat that breakfast. You ate that stuff down like it was good.

ROBERT

It wasn't so bad, Mama.

LODEY

Oh, it was. It was just terrible. I had to force myself to eat that.

ROBERT

Well, you kept saying how good everything was. And you certainly ate more than your share.

LODEY

Well, I had to, naturally. I wasn't gonna be rude.

(A pause)

I don't know how I could expect anything different from a woman who brings her own ketchup bottle with her wherever she goes.

ROBERT

What?

LODEY

I'm telling you, this is the truth. That woman has a bottle of ketchup in her pocketbook right alongside her compact and her car keys. I myself have been in a restaurant with her and seen her take out that bottle because the kind they were serving just wasn't good enough for her, And these are some pretty nice sit-down places too, not some old hamburger stand. Well, excuse me, but I think that's just plain ignorance. And she puts it on everything under the sun, not just on certain things like normal people. Corn on the cob. I'm sorry, but it's just disgusting.

(A pause)

Now, I don't want you to go around repeating any of this that I'm telling you, but I can't help but think that poor Ripley keeps going on getting himself involved with the wrong type of woman. Of course, Leana we don't even need to mention. You can see how she's just gone and broken his heart and upset everything. Now you won't be going over to see his house, but I just can't describe what a pig-sty Mattie keeps that place in. That's why I don't want her doing the dishes, I'm going to have to wash them all over again, she can't wash a dish without leaving a greasy film all over everything. And the house probably hasn't seen a dust rag since they moved in. Not that I'm surprised with those two going out to the movies every waking minute. Do you know that she tells me that have it timed just right so that when Ripley gets off work and drives up in front of the house, she's waiting at the curb, he opens the door, she jumps in without him even having to slow down probably, and they're off to some stupid movie? They know exactly how long it takes them, the best place to park, how long the coming attractions last and they walk in the doors of that theatre at the exact second the movie is starting?

(A pause)

I don't blame Adrian for picking up and leaving like he done. I just guess I'd do the same thing if my stepmother was dragging my daddy off to the movies and I had to look at that god's-awful rat's nest every day of my life. Everyone running around surprised, "how could he have done it?" I can tell 'em why, it was no surprise to me. I just surprised he didn't do it sooner. Lord, that must've been an embarrassment for him.

(RIPLEY comes back out of the house, smoking)

RIPLEY

Well, there's still no word. You think they'd at least have sense enough to call, knowing we're all here worried sick. I'd always given Leana a little more credit.

LODEY

Oh, I wouldn't.

ROBERT

Oh, they're gonna call. Don't worry about it. Besides, I'm sure it's way too late to stop them anyway.

RIPLEY

I guess... Lord, what a dumb, stupid thing to do.

(A long pause)

LODEY

Well, how's Mattie gettin' along in my kitchen? She almost done in there?

RIPLEY

Oh, yeah, she's just fine, Mama.

LODEY

That sure was some big breakfast.

(A long pause)

Well, you gentlemen will have to excuse me. I have to go vomit.

(SHE exits quickly)

RIPLEY

Listen to that, isn't that just terrible? She's always doing that. She's always tryin' to think up a thousand little ways to criticize Mattie, when Mattie's never done one thing to deserve it.

ROBERT

Mama's just going through a rough time right now. I really wouldn't take anything she says too seriously.

RIPLEY

(Overlapping:) Oh, that's just a big bunch of bullshit.

ROBERT

Ripley.

RIPLEY

Take it easy, she can't hear me. I mean, I know she's had it rough lately, but she's been doing it since the first day we got married. Did the same with Leana all the time too. Just for no reason at all she'd pick on her. She just hates all my wives, it's as simple as that. Hell, we're all going through a rough time, that's no excuse.

ROBERT

You're not still worried?

RIPLEY

Well sure I am. Wouldn't you be worried?

ROBERT

What's the point? It's too late to stop them. You don't even know where they are. Besides, they've probably done it already, what's done is done, you just have to sit back and wait for them to come home.

RIPLEY

Oh, you don't understand. You don't know the kind of stuff that's been going on around here since you left, and really, one phone call a month doesn't begin to tell the story.

ROBERT

I do too know what goes on. Mama tells me everything. I DO know that Adrian is one very disturbed little boy.

RIPLEY

Little? Shows how much you know. Adrian had his fifteenth birthday last month. He's not so little anymore.

ROBERT

He's still little as far as I'm concerned; I don't care how old he is. He acted like a spoiled five year old last night. He's too young to drive a car, you know that. You shouldn't give in to him all the time, he shouldn't be driving around at fifteen years old.

RIPLEY

You sound just like Mama.

ROBERT

Well, I think she's right. Makes sense to me. Treat him like a five year old, he sure as hell is gonna act like one.

RIPLEY

He tried to kill himself three times, goddamn it! You don't know what that's like to live with. You say no to him, you think he's gonna go off and try to kill himself again.

ROBERT

He doesn't wanna die. If he really did, he wouldn't pick such lame methods. He's just trying to draw some attention to himself.

RIPLEY

No, see? You don't know what you're talking about. You wouldn't be saying something like that if you'd seen him after that first time. I've never seen anything so pathetic in all of my life. Him lying there, crying his eyes out, just like to break your heart seeing those deep scratches in his arms. I just couldn't hold back the tears, seeing my own son's blood running out. Have YOU ever looked into someone's eyes after they've tried to open up their veins with a Coca-Cola bottle cap? I remember that day clear as a bell, sitting right here on this porch, hearing Mam inside tryin' to save him, prayin' and shoutin' and cryin' and I swore to myself there and then that I'd never deny him anything, never let him want for anything ever again, anything, just so he'd never try something foolish, just so I wouldn't have to sit on this porch worrying ever again, just so he's be happy. Well, as you can see, it just didn't work.

ROBERT

You can't give him all that he wants. What makes you think you can?

RIPLEY

I just mean that if he asks for something, he should be able to get it, you know, within reason.

ROBERT

Well, he's never going to stop wanting, brother. At least I hope not. But you've got to know that you can't give it to him.

RIPLEY

And I suppose you're saying that that little tramp he's run off with can? Some little fifteen year old baby is gonna give him something his father can't?

ROBERT

I didn't say that.

(A pause)

Well, on second thought, she can give him something you can't.

(HE laughs. RIPLEY hasn't heard)

RIPLEY

What the hell are those two kids gonna do when they get back here, would you mind telling me? Oh, I could see it coming, I could see it in his eyes. I recognized it. I said to him, "Don't make my mistakes. Learn from them, son. Just wait the one more year 'til you graduate." You know he skipped a grade, he's a smart kid, smarter than I ever was. I can see what I mean to him. My words were just good for nothing. Now he's gonna be just another drop-out with no job, no place to live, not a cent in his pocket. I honestly don't know what he thinks he's gonna do. And her! She's just a lazy, good-for-nothing slut, least as far as I can tell. Maybe he'll throw her out on the street to turn a coupla tricks to pay the rent; she might be good for that.

ROBERT

Oh, they'll get over it. I give it a year. Now I don't know her story, but they're just a couple of stupid kids and before long they're gonna realize they did a stupid kid thing.

RIPLEY

What really burns me is Leana's attitude towards this whole thing. She know's what it's like, she's been through it! Driving them to Texas so they can get married. Doesn't she see she's helping them make the same mistakes WE made? That stupid bitch, she probably thinks it's cute.

ROBERT

Adrian's done it to himself. It's out of your hands now.

RIPLEY

I just... don't... understand it. I can almost understand him wanting to kill himself, but THIS... It just seems a whole lot worse. I mean, he wanted things out of this life. He told me so after he tried to kill himself the second time. He wanted to make something out of himself. I can't see why he'd wanna ruin it. 'Cause that's what he's done.

(RIPLEY buries his face in his hands. A pause)



ROBERT

Are you crying?

(A pause)

Look, if you are, I'm going inside, 'cause I don't wanna listen to it.

(A pause)

Look, I'm going in now.

(A pause. HE looks across the street and has an idea)

Ooooooh, she's lookin' at you! She's seeing you crying!

(HE slaps RIPLEY on the knee)

Look! Across the street, she's watching you! She's gonna make fun of you to all her friends 'cause you're crying!

(RIPLEY looks up and across the street and starts to laugh. ROBERT laughs with him)

RIPLEY

(Shouting:) I'm crying 'cause you're so ugly, you fat slut!

ROBERT

Shhhhh!!

(But THEY both roar. LODEY is heard offstage and THEY subside)

LODEY

(Off:) I didn't say they ain't pretty, honey, I just won't eat it.

(SHE enters, holding a bowl of potatoes and a peeler)

Lord, oh Lord.

(SHE throws herself in the rocker)

RIPLEY

Okay, Mama. Now what?

(SHE glares at him. SHE picks up a potato, holds it out to him. Half of it has been peeled, leaving the rest of the skin on, like stripes)

LODEY

Potatoes. Ask her to do a simple thing. (Under her breath:) Woman can't peel a potato; how does she run a family?

(SHE proceeds to peel away the remaining skin, tossing the peelings over the rail of the porch)

ROBERT

What's goin' on, please?

RIPLEY

Oh, she was making Tiger Taters. You leave half the skin on, so it looks pretty. She read about it in a magazine.

LODEY

Well, goodness sakes, sure. I didn't think she'd thought it up all by herself.

RIPLEY

Mama, let her be.

LODEY

(Holding out another potato:) Honey. I told her three times these potatoes were to be boiled and mashed. Who's going to see the fool stripes then, would you tell me?

(SHE peels)

Why does food need to be pretty, anyway? If a potato was meant to be pretty, the Lord would've made 'em that way. It's gonna get all chewed up and up in the same stew anyway, so what's it matter?

RIPLEY

At least let me get you a bag to put those peelings in. You're making a mess.

LODEY

You leave me be, honey. These here is good for my geraniums. This they call mulch.

RIPLEY

Mama, do you think you could find it in yourself to stop pickin' at her for five minutes?

LODEY

(Cutting him off:) Well then, you tell her to stop acting like I'm sittin' in a wheelchair! (Simpering:) "Sit down, Mama. Don't get excited, Mama. Let ME do that, Mama." As if I'm gonna have a seizure from peeling a few potatoes. And then I try to make her feel better by letting her do something, and she does this!

(SHE holds out another potato. Shakes her head, mutters:)

Tiger taters.

RIPLEY

You've never liked anything about her, not since Day One.

LODEY

Now you take that back, you know that is not true. Aren't I always telling her how nice she has her hair done? I'm always commenting on it. That is the truth, that is a beautiful hair-do, I wish I could get mine to do that. Poor woman just can't peel a potato.

RIPLEY

Mattie just wants you to take it easy, Mama. We want you to know that we're here to help you.

LODEY

I know it, I know it Ripley, but I still know how to dial the telephone and I can still drive a car. And if I ever do need help, you will be the first to know.

RIPLEY

We'll take care of you, Mama.

LODEY

I know, sugar.

ROBERT

She doesn't need taking care of, Ripley.

RIPLEY

Never mind your two cents. I can take care of her.

(The telephone rings inside the house)

I better get that.

LODEY

You stay right there. Mattie's inside. She can take care of things.

(The telephone rings)

RIPLEY

It could be Adrian. It could be Leana, letting us know where they are.

LODEY

You'll find out if it's important. You stay here. It's nice: me and you and Robert. Where's Greg?

(The telephone keeps ringing. A pause.  
RIPLEY jumps up, opens the screen door)

RIPLEY

(Shouting:) Dammit, Mattie, answer that phone!

(LODEY smiles. RIPLEY sits back down)

ROBERT

You're gonna take care of her, huh?

RIPLEY

Sure. Me and Greg. We're still here.

( A pause. ROBERT glares at him)

LODEY

Look at those zinnias!

ROBERT

You and Greg. You don't even know what's going on in your own house, you let your kid do just as he pleases, and look at you now. And Greg. He's just as bad with his kids.

RIPLEY

Now hold it, hold it, that is not fair. Don't go comparin' my kids to Greg's kids. His little Kenny is just one messed-up little boy, and that's an acknowledged fact. Ain't that right, Mama?

LODEY

Ooooooh, well...

RIPLEY

I mean, I feel sorry for him. For Greg, I mean. These last couple of years, Kenny has just turned wild on him. Greg can't even stand him in the house anymore. Truly, it's a sin to feel that way about your own son, but in Greg's case, I can understand. Just barely turned fourteen and that boy is always in some kind of trouble; stayin' out 'til three or four o'clock in the morning, acting like he's grown. So Greg'll whup him and he'll go do something else, an' Greg'll whup him even harder, and that makes the kid get even angrier, so he goes out and does something worse. It's gotten so there's no stopping him. Greg's taken to locking him out of the house, just for lack of knowing what else to do.

LODEY

Now honey, let it be.

RIPLEY

Really, Mama. You should see 'em. They don't even fight like father and son, it's like two bullies in a barroom brawl.

LODEY

Now quit. It's between them and the Lord; they've just got to work it out somehow.

(A pause)

I tell you, the one I really feel sorry for the most is Billie. Lately, she's taken to coming over to the house about once a week, just crying her eyes out, she's so scared that one day Greg's just gonna kill that boy.

ROBERT

Well, I wasn't planning on saying anything, but...

(A pause)

Has he ever stolen anything?

(A pause)

Like money?

RIPLEY

(Jumping at it:) Why?

LODEY

Oh, Lord. Sweet Jesus.

RIPLEY

You got money missing?

RIPLEY

Like I said, I wasn't going to say anything. I brought down about five hundred dollars in cash with me. I know I did. And I know the only money I've spent was the fifty dollars from the airport.

LODEY

Fifty dollars? For one taxi? Lord.

ROBERT

Anyway, last night when I checked my wallet, there was only two hundred and fifty dollars in it. I'm not saying he stole it, because I can be kind of careless with money, and that's why I wasn't going to say anything. But I just don't see how I could've spent two hundred dollars without knowing it.

RIPLEY

Kenny did it.

LODEY

Oh Lord, Lord.

RIPLEY

That's surely him. He took it.

ROBERT

Well, my money was in my suitcase. If it was stolen, it could've been anyone. Anybody could've snuck into my room.

LODEY

Nobody here would go in your suitcase!

RIPLEY

It was Kenny. I know when he did it, too. Sunday night.

LODEY

Sunday? When we had the barbecue?

RIPLEY

And remember? He stayed in the house all the time.

LODEY

I did think that was peculiar. All the kids were playing, but he said he wanted to watch T.V. I should have seen it. Any fool knows there's nothing good on T.V. Sunday night.

ROBERT

At one point, I came in to use the bathroom and Kenny was sitting on the sofa, watching something about these flying squirrels in Australia.

LODEY

About what?

ROBERT

I couldn't figure out why that would interest him so much.

LODEY

Maybe for school. A science class, or something.

RIPLEY

Oh Mama, come on. Kenny? Doin' schoolwork? On a Sunday?

ROBERT

And maybe I'm reading into this, but he did look kind of embarrassed when I came in. All flushed and out of breath.

LODEY

Well I can remember many a time when you boys were young I'd come into the room unexpectedly and you'd be embarrassed and flushed and out of breath. But you weren't stealing anything.

ROBERT

(Laughs:) Mama!

RIPLEY

He took that money just as sure as I'm standing here. It's just something he'd do.

LODEY

He made a promise to Greg. Oh, this'll just break his heart.

ROBERT

What I don't understand is, what does he think he's gonna do with it? He can't spend it on anything; people'll know he stole money. I mean, if he walks through the door with a color T.V., people are gonna wonder. It didn't just fall out of the sky.

LODEY

He'll use that money to run away from home, he will. He's always saying he's going to, whenever they have a fight.

RIPLEY

Hell, maybe you shouldn't say anything. That'd be the best present Greg could have.

LODEY

Now hush.

ROBERT

Well, the way I look at it, he needs that money way more than me, so I guess the best thing to do would be to keep my mouth shut.

LODEY

Well, now, honey...

RIPLEY

Wait a second, wait a minute, you're just kidding, right?

LODEY

It wouldn't be honest...

RIPLEY

Just a minute, I'm sorry Mama, let me say something.

LODEY

Well...

RIPLEY

Listen brother, don't you let him get away with something like that. Most surely Greg wouldn't be so understanding if one of MY kids had done it.

LODEY

Now he would, you know he would, honey.

RIPLEY  
You need to teach that kid a lesson! Teach him he can't go  
around stealing money!

ROBERT  
Ripley, calm down.

RIPLEY  
I suppose you'd just let him walk off with three hundred dollars?

ROBERT  
Two hundred.

RIPLEY  
You have to tell Greg. You tell him this minute.

LODEY  
Lord, I was afraid of something like this. Why do you imagine  
Greg is going to do to that boy when he finds out?

(GREG enters from the house)

GREG  
Oh, you all out here?

(Silence)

LODEY  
Mmmmm-hmmmm...

RIPLEY  
Tell him.

(ROBERT shakes his head)

GREG  
(Overlapping:) Listen, Ripley, that was Mona on the phone.

RIPLEY  
Who the hell is Mona?

GREG  
That's Adrian's... um... wife.

RIPLEY  
They did it. Shit, they did it. 'Scuse me, Mama.  
(LODEY "tsks" and shakes her head)  
I guess I better go have a talk with that... little girl.

GREG  
Oh, she's long gone. She said they're on their way home.  
They'll be here for dinner.

(LODEY grunts)

LODEY  
Figures.

GREG

Oh, and Mama: Sister Althea called you. She'd like you to call her back.

LODEY

I'll do that. Thank you, sugar.

GREG

Well...

(A pause. HE stands there. No one says a word)  
What you all talkin' about?

ROBERT

Nothing special.

LODEY

Now Greg honey, I want you to bring these potatoes in to Mattie and tell her to boil 'em up like I told her in that big pot with the blue handles with a teaspoon and a half of salt.

(SHE hands him the bowl)  
Think you can remember that, or do you want me to come in with you.

GREG

Course I can remember that, Mama. You stay here. You rest.

LODEY

Thanks, sugar.

(GREG exits. From inside the house, we hear the same music that played at the top of the act. This song is part of a record album, which plays softly for the rest of the act)

RIPLEY

(After a pause:) Why didn't you say something?

ROBERT

Well now you've got me scared to! He'll kill that poor kid.

RIPLEY

I'm telling you, it's none of your concern what happens. But you have got to tell him.

ROBERT

Mama? Your five cents?

LODEY

Gently. Tell him gently. And get him in a good mood first.

ROBERT

Okay. I will.

RIPLEY

Promise.



ROBERT

What?

RIPLEY

Promise me you'll tell him. Tonight, after dinner.

ROBERT

I'm not gonna promise. The kid didn't know what he was doing.

RIPLEY

Oh, he did too. Sure he knew what he was doing. But I'm telling you, it's not your business.

(A long pause)

Sweet Jesus, listen to that. Mattie went and put on my record. Lord, how embarrassing.

(A pause)

Mama. What am I gonna do with that kid?

LODEY

He's gone and broken your heart, I know, honey. But it's that Leana that makes me want to spit fire. It's not even her child by rights anymore. Where does she get the gall to go and do a thing like that?

RIPLEY

I know. I should've listened to you right from the start. She's always been no good.

LODEY

Well...

RIPLEY

I don't know what they're gonna do.

(A pause)

You know, I've been thinking. They got no money and no place to live. I don't know about her family, but we just don't have room for the both of them at our house.

LODEY

Would you mind telling me what that girl is doing there across the street?

ROBERT

Oh, we think she's taking a sunbath, Mama.

LODEY

Dressed like that? Honey! That is a sin!

(ROBERT laughs)

Not only is it a sin, it's an eyesore.

RIPLEY

I been thinking that maybe, Mama, since you got that extra bedroom here, they could maybe stay with you for a couple of days. You know. Until Adrian finds a job. Then they can start looking for a place of their own.

ROBERT

Am I hearing you correctly?

RIPLEY

No you go about your business, brother. This has nothing to do with you.

ROBERT

I'm just supposed to sit here with my mouth shut and let you do this?

RIPLEY

You got it.

ROBERT

Like hell I will.

LODEY

Honey...

ROBERT

Sorry, Mama. You make all these big noises about how you're gonna take care of Mama, like you got everything under control, you got the world under your thumb.

RIPLEY

I can take care of her.

ROBERT

You're asking her to take care of your kids! You can't even manage your own responsibilities, so you dump 'em off on her. And how long do you think they're gonna end up living here?

RIPLEY

I said only a few days, few weeks, maybe.

ROBERT

Well you know as well as I do that within a month that girl is gonna be pregnant, if she isn't already. And then I guess Mama'll be expected to raise her own great-grandchildren, while you and Mattie go tootling off to the movies. What I can't believe is how surprised you are at all of this. Adrian must have said something, given you some clue that he had this on his mind. My guess is you were too blind to see it. Or you weren't even there. You and Mattie go on livin' your lives, gallivanting all over, you sleep until two in the afternoon. It's four o'clock, and you've still got your bathrobe on! You're never around, yet you act upset when something happens behind your back! You're a joke.

LODEY

Robert Earl, I won't stand for this. You apologize to your brother right now.

RIPLEY

No, Mama, he doesn't need to apologize to me. I'll straighten him out right now. Lookit here...

LODEY

Not in my house, you won't. Not on my porch. You two go down to the bowling alley or the beer hall where they'll put up with you, but you're not gonna do this in front of me.

RIPLEY

You have got one hell of a nerve there, brother, and I don't like sayin' this in front of mama, but I'm not gonna sit still and take this from you, of all people. First off, how I raise my kids is of no concern to you. Or to anyone, not even Mama.

ROBERT

Yeah, and yet you dump 'em on her doorstep.

RIPLEY

You shut up. You just shut your mouth 'til I've finished. I listened to you, now you listen to me. Shut up. I just wanna know where you get off talkin' like this when we haven't seen or heard from you in ten years. Ten years, brother. Oh sure, you give a call every few weeks 'cause you feel like you have to. And mama calls to tell you it's my birthday, so I get a call three days late, and you're too busy to stay on the goddamned phone for more'n five minutes.

LODEY

Ripley, honey...

RIPLEY

Don't lie to me, Mama. I know he doesn't know when my birthday is.

LODEY

I never lied to you in my life. Don't you say that to me.

RIPLEY

So then you decide to put in an appearance and you're not home three days but you're struttin' around like you own the place, telling us how we're doing everything wrong and not only that, but you're gonna tell us how to do it right! Well I tell you, I won't listen. You don't know anything about us, about what goes on around here, you've never had a child in your life, you have never had to support a family, you have never had to look in your own son's face and see him wanting the same things you wanted when you were his age and you can't do a damn thing about it. You don't know how that feels, you never will, you haven't given a good goddamn about us in ten years, so just keep all your ideas and suggestions and opinions to yourself, 'cause what you have to say about us ain't worth the time it takes to listen.

(LODEY jumps out of the rocker)

LODEY

I told you to stop and I mean it.

(SHE slaps his face)

Your Daddy is hearing this! He hears every word you say and his heart is breaking...

(Her voice falters)

LODEY (CONTINUED)

He's feeling that you don't love him no more...

(SHE cries)

...or you wouldn't be saying such things. He's heard you.

RIPLEY

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Mama.

LODEY

Robert Earl, you get on in the house and you slap some cold water in your face and I don't want to see you again until you've got a smile on.

ROBERT

We're sorry.

LODEY

Do as I say.

(RIPLEY stands)

Ripley, you sit right back where you were.

(ROBERT exits. A long pause)

RIPLEY

Oh, Mama. What am I gonna do now?

LODEY

I'll tell you what you're gonna do: you're gonna stop going to the goldurn movies! You an' Mattie ain't no teenagers no more! It's high time you stopped foolin' around. You're nigh onto forty years, son. You stay home and be with your family. Watch your kids grow and take care of 'em the best you can. That's where you belong. Where they need you. Not singin' in some honky-tonk!

RIPLEY

But Mama, I'm a singer. That's what I do.

LODEY

All I'm trying to point out to you, sugar, is that when the day comes that your own children seem like strangers to you, something has gone mighty wrong. All I'm saying is that when you're walking down the road and you turn off all of a sudden there's rocks in your path and it's so overgrown you can't even tell if you're on the road no more and the trees are so thick overhead you can't even see the sky, you don't keep plodding along, tripping over vines and falling in the brambles and getting slapped in the face by the branches. You turn around and try to find your way back. You understand me? You look for the right path and you go on. You go one from there.

RIPLEY

Oh, I don't know, Mama, I don't know. I know you're right. It's just... I've come this far, it's hard to turn around.

LODEY

Well sure it is.

RIPLEY

Maybe... What if you keep going through the brambles and just when you think you can't take it no more, you push aside a branch and you're reached a clearing and everything's beautiful?

LODEY

Well sure honey, but what if you're on your deathbed and still stuck in the briar-patch? Huh? What good did it do you?

(A pause)

I'll tell you a little secret. You heard Greg that Sister Althea called before. Well I tell you, this past week she's been ringing that telephone off the hook, asking me to come back. They need somebody to preach, I got nothin' to worry about anymore, I might just take her up on it. Go back to where I started.

RIPLEY

You're kidding me, Mama.

LODEY

What do you think, honey? What do you think about that?

RIPLEY

Well, you put that out of your head right now, Mama. You can't do that. Who's gonna take care of us? You still got some responsibilities here and I'm not gonna start worrying about you running all over niggertown at all hours of the day and night. You want something to do? There's plenty to do right here: you still got a family. What a fool idea. It's time you sat back and took it easy. You just forget it. I'm sorry, Mama, but we need you right here. That's all.

LODEY

Ripley, honey, I never had the slightest intention of going through with it. I just wanted to see what you'd say.

RIPLEY

Oh... well, good.

LODEY

Maybe now you'll listen to what I'm telling you.

RIPLEY

Well sure, Mama. I do. I always do, but you gotta understand that things are starting to look up. Looking up all the time. I feel like an apple.

LODEY

Feel like what?

RIPLEY

An apple. You want one of these here apples?

(HE walks off the porch and over to the tree)

RIPLEY

They must've fallen off all of the lower branches. They're all up on top.

(HE lifts his arms into the air)  
Nope. Can't get 'em.

(HE picks an apple off the ground and takes a bite)

LODEY

Oh, Ripley! Don't eat those off the ground!

(RIPLEY spits out his mouthful)

RIPLEY

Yuck. These are all mushy.

LODEY

Those on the ground are probably full of worms.

RIPLEY

Taste all mealy.

LODEY

Well, I ain't surprised. That apple's probably been there for weeks.

RIPLEY

I'm gonna try for one of those up there.

(HE jumps in the air, his fingers outstretched. HE misses)

I got me a new agent now, Mama. So it's like I'm just getting started. Sure, it's gonna take some time. But I'm not worried.

(HE jumps for an apple, misses)

I'm playing all these club dates around here so I'm becoming well-known locally. That's real important. Course it's hard without Greg with me. But they love me in Baton Rouge, Mama!

(Another jump. Another miss)

Now before you say anything Mama, I realize that maybe these aren't such high-class joints, but at least I'm someplace. Those people know me. They know my name. Total strangers, people I've never even met, know who I am. They love me in Biloxi!

(Jump. Nothing)

Oh, I give up on it. Too high up.

(HE hoists himself onto the porch railing and balances there. HE looks up at the sky)

You know what I want, Mama? What I really want? Well to be honest, what I REALLY want is to be a big star and have my name on fifty-foot billboards, but what I want right now is just to sing someplace that doesn't smell. I don't want to smell beer and sweat and cigarettes when I'm singin'. I want to walk out onto a stage in a light blue spotlight, you know what I mean, and there's a little bit of applause to welcome me and I smell twelve year-old Scotch. And maybe some fancy sweet liqueur. No, wait, you don't even smell the liquor in the kind of place I'm talking about, 'cause they've got the air conditioners on, keeping it cool, taking out all the smoke. Maybe you can smell some lady's expensive perfume. And that lady is Mattie, wearing diamonds 'cause we can afford 'em now.

## RIPLEY (CONTINUED)

And Adrian can't be here tonight, 'cause he's probably off on a date with Dolly Parton's little sister. And my feet don't stick to the floor in this kind of place 'cause somebody's spilled his beer or somebody's too lazy to go to the spittoon. This place doesn't even have one; these people don't spit. So the floor and the stage is covered with a nice, soft carpet, the kind you could fall asleep on. And my feet feel like they're walking on clouds, like they're walking on air! And the shirt I'm wearing is silk, making me feel real sexy, and I AM sexy; I'm not wearing that cheap stuff they make the shirts out of that you buy at Penney's. And when I finish my song, they don't stomp their feet, kicking up a ruckus, making a lot of rude noise, whistling and howling; they don't make asses out of themselves. They have dignity. They applaud politely.

(A pause)

Wait a second, hold on. Maybe I don't want to play this place after all.

(A pause)

No, wit. Maybe the folks at this place are so nuts about me, they break all the rules of good social behavior and against their better judgement, they all just start screaming and shouting. They can't help themselves. And the management can't believe it; their mouths are hanging open, they've never seen anything like it before. They can do that, can't they? I mean, even though this is a classy place, a kind of uptight establishment here, if they really liked someone enough, they could still go really wild, couldn't they, Mama? I mean, if someone was really good?

## LODEY

Oh, cat hair, Ripley! Sometimes I think I'd be better off just talking to that tree.

(SHE stands and exits. A pause. RIPLEY looks at the apple tree. HE balances on the porch rail, fixes his eyes on an apple. Takes a flying leap, grabs for the apple, misses. ROBERT comes out of the house onto the porch. RIPLEY takes another jump from the ground, misses again. ROBERT laughs)

## ROBERT

Look at you. There must be, what? At least fifteen medals and plaques and ribbons and crap all over the walls inside. All for high-jumping when you were in high school. Now look at you. Can't even get an apple three feet over your head.

## RIPLEY

Look, buddy-boy, if I really wanted to, I could get it in a cinch.

## ROBERT

Sure, sure, sure.

(A long pause)

Sorry about before.

## RIPLEY

It's forgotten, brother.

ROBERT

No, really, I'm so sorry about what I said. I just... I don't know. I got carried away.

RIPLEY

I'm telling you, I can't even remember what was said anymore. Forget it.

ROBERT

Oh. Well, okay.

(RIPLEY jumps, misses. ROBERT sits on the porch steps)

I like this album. It's real good, Ripley.

RIPLEY

This is the last one we did. We finished it, oh, I guess it must be a year by now. It was just as we were finishing the last track that Greg... you know... well, you know.

(HE jumps)

ROBERT

Is it selling?

RIPLEY

Huh?

ROBERT

The album. Have you turned a profit yet?

RIPLEY

Oh, they haven't released it yet.

ROBERT

I thought you finished it a year ago?

RIPLEY

Oh, yeah, well, they just haven't released it here yet. They're selling it over in England. And in Sweden too, I think. Norway or Sweden, someplace like that. See this is some new kind of marketing technique they got now. My agent explained it to me. See, they like this kind of music over there and then they release the album here once you've become a big star in Sweden.

(A pause)

Or Norway. Wherever.

(HE jumps)

ROBERT

You better stop all that jumping around in your bathrobe. You're giving the girl across the street a free show.

RIPLEY

Doesn't matter. She probably don't even know what it is. Probably never saw one before.

(HE jumps in the air)

Whewwwww-oooooo! Lookie, lookie!



(HE laughs as he lands)

RIPLEY (CONTINUED)

You know what I want? What I need? I want Greg back singing with me again. I wish he hadn't just given up all of a sudden, like he did. There's no harmony anymore; I just don't trust anyone else to have my back. It just doesn't sound the same anymore. I can't understand why he would just give up on all we had like he done. (A whisper:) I mean, I know he's been sick and all and I feel sorry for him for all that's happened, but I was sure when he got better we'd just go one like we were. But he's stopped wanting; he doesn't dream anymore like he used to. I try. Every time I talk to him I try to get him stirred up again. All the things that used to get him excited don't work no more. Maybe it's those drugs the doctors have got him on. Can drugs do that to a person? Make them stop wishing? I don't know. Anyway, if I get some money... Wait. Mattie tells me and KEEPS telling me, that's the wrong attitude to take. When I get some money and can do just as I please, I'm gonna get him back again. I swear it. I'll have so much money, he won't be able to afford to turn me down and things'll be the way they should've been.

ROBERT

Unless, of course, Greg feels he's done the right thing.

RIPLEY

Ah, horseshit. Greg isn't feeling anything, from the look of him. He needs somebody to point the way,

ROBERT

Maybe that his trouble, Ripley. You're always sticking your finger in his face, pointing the way.

RIPLEY

Yeah, and you, brother? You mean to tell me you've always done the right thing?

ROBERT

What's that mean?

RIPLEY

You know what I want?

(ROBERT sighs, turns away. GREG comes out of the house)

GREG

Mama asked me to call y'all in to wash up. Dinner's on the table.

ROBERT

Dinner?!

(RIPLEY laughs)

Am I wrong, or didn't we just finish lunch about an hour ago?

GREG

What can I tell you? All I know is Mama's putting food on the table and said "Call your brothers in before it gets cold."

RIPLEY

Old Robert's not used to eating like this. We're gonna have to roll him on home.

ROBERT

Whew. I guess.

(THEY laugh, lightly. A pause)

GREG

You better come in, Ripley. Mama and Mattie had a fight.

RIPLEY

Not again. A big fight?

GREG

Well, she chased Mattie out of the kitchen and now Mattie's locked herself in the toilet, crying.

(A long pause)

So what have you two been doing out here?

RIPLEY

Nothing, really.

ROBERT

Catching up.

GREG

Oh, yeah?

(A long pause)

Well, you better come on in before Mama gets mad.

(HE exits. ROBERT stands and stretches)

RIPLEY

You know what I want? And this is what I really want, more than anything else. You know what it is?

ROBERT

Not a clue, Ripley.

(LODEY comes out of the house)

LODEY

Didn't you hear your brother? Aren't you coming?

ROBERT

Sorry, Mama. We'll be right in.

RIPLEY

We're coming, Mama. Don't get all excited.

(A pause)

LODEY

Well, everything's just going to be ice-cold.

(SHE exits)

ROBERT

I guess we better go in.

RIPLEY

Don't you wanna know what I want?

ROBERT

What, Ripley? What do you want?

RIPLEY

I want the three of us back together again. You and me and Greg. Remember? You on the keyboards, me and Greg on guitar. We were great together, we were something. We were moving up. I could see it, I could feel it, I knew we were gonna make it. But then it all just kinda fell apart.

ROBERT

That old chinaberry tree is still standing, I see. That smell of those old chinaberries takes me right back to when I was a little kid, it's remarkable. I was sure somebody would've chopped it down by now, make way for something else. But there it is, bigger than ever, dropping berries all over. I remember I used to stand underneath it, jumping up and down, stomping, jumping on those berries, turning them to pulp, that sickly-sweet smell flooding the neighborhood. I never will forget the smell of a chinaberry; it takes me right back here. Kinda makes me want to throw up.

(HE exits. RIPLEY jumps down off the porch and yells)

RIPLEY

Be right in, Mama!

(HE looks at the apple tree. HE wraps his arms around a low branch and uses his legs to try to climb up the trunk. His arms aren't strong enough to support his weight and he slips off onto the grass, landing with a thud)

Owwwww. Shit.

(HE rubs his injured back and sheepishly stands up. HE looks across the street at the girl on the lawn. HE points his finger and shouts)

You didn't see that!

BLACKOUT

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

(Another hymn is being played on a piano, similar to the one that played at the top of Act One, but played with a great deal more technique and virtuosity. The sound is a little tinny, as if it was recorded many years ago on not the best equipment. The curtain rises and the recording fades out. RIPLEY is in the swing, swinging. HE kicks his legs up and down like a child, making the swing go higher and higher. HE wears clothes that he might perform his act in. ROBERT staggers out of the house, carrying the two suitcases he arrived with. HE puts them down next to the rocker)

ROBERT

Something's happened.

(RIPLEY brakes the swing)

RIPLEY

What's that?

ROBERT

There's a lot of yelling and noise in the backyard. Can't you hear it?

RIPLEY

You know, I've had an idea sitting here. What if me and Greg was to come up to where you are for a while?

ROBERT

(Overlapping:) Something's going on back there. And I don't think I wanna know what it is.

RIPLEY

I mean, up there maybe we could get some club dates, the three of us. What do you think of that?

ROBERT

You should go back; find out what's going on.

RIPLEY

I mean, I just know my agent would go for something like that. And Mattie'd just love it.

(LODEY flies out of the house. Her face is washed clean, her hair-do is gone; her hair hangs naturally around her shoulders. SHE wears an old pair of slacks and a blouse)

LODEY

Oh Lord, Ripley, here you are, I've been looking all over. It's Adrian. He's gone and jumped off the roof of the garage. We've called the doctor; he's coming.

(RIPLEY jumps out of the swing)

RIPLEY

Oh, Lord. Oh, God.

ROBERT

I told you!

LODEY

Now he's fine, he's just fine, he's just crying a lot. It's only that we think he's broken his wrist. You should come on in and have a look at him. You stay out here, Robert, there's just too many people in there now as it is.

ROBERT

Fine by me.

RIPLEY

(Exiting:) Now why do you go and say he jumped, Mama? He was probably playing and he fell.

LODEY

(Also exiting:) We thought so too, honey, but he's got a note safety-pinned to his shirt says he can't stand it no more.

(THEY're gone. GREG enters from the side of the house)

GREG

Found him. Finally. What's all the excitement?

RIPLEY

(Offstage:) Mama, you get Leana on the phone this instant. I want her over here to see what she's done. (His voice falters) Oh, God. Son? Where are you?

(GREG goes up on the porch)

GREG

What is all this?

ROBERT

Adrian tried to kill himself.

GREG

Again?

ROBERT

(Simultaneously:) Again.  
(A long pause)  
He jumped off the roof.

GREG

He jumped off the roof?! The roof of this house? Well, that's not so far. Is he okay?

ROBERT

No. The roof of the garage.

GREG

Oh.

(A pause)

I'm assuming then that he's okay?

ROBERT

They're thinking he's broken his wrist.

(A pause)

GREG

Lord, Lord, Lord. Well, I tell you, I coulda seen that comin' a mile away. I expected it from somebody who thinks they can support themselves and a wife by working at McDonald's. Speaking of which, where is lovely Mona? Sorry, I can't bring myself to say "his wife."

ROBERT

They had a fight. I guess that's what brought all this on. She's back with her mother in Alexandria.

GREG

Well, here's your money.

(HE reaches into his back pocket, pulls out his wallet)

What was it? Two fifty?

(HE starts counting out bills to ROBERT)

ROBERT

What is this?

GREG

I found Kenny. He was downtown.

ROBERT

Oh, you found him. So he did take it after all? No, wait, it was only two hundred.

(HE hands back some money)

Where did you find him?

GREG

He'd spent most of it already. I was pretty damn sure where he'd be. I went by the back, sound out he's already been there and then I knew. He tried to hide from me, too. Well, I dragged that jackass out of there by his hair and threw him in the car. So he starts bawling like a baby, and I looked at that fistful of hair in my hand that he's so proud of; the girls all love his hair, he spends three goddamn hours in front of the mirror getting it just right. So I dragged him down to the barber's and had it all shaved off.

ROBERT

You shaved off all of his hair?

GREG

Well, not all of it. I had the barber leave some patches so that he's look really stupid and ugly.

ROBERT

Oh no, well, now I wish I hadn't said anything to you about the money.

GREG

Maybe now he'll finally show a little respect. I don't think he'll be so quick to pull a stunt like that again. He's not even gonna wanna leave the house now that his golden locks are gone. I'm putting him to work for me. I'm gonna see that he pays me back every cent of that money.

ROBERT

This is YOUR money? Oh, I don't want it.

GREG

No, you take it.

ROBERT

No, really, I don't need it. You can wait until he pays you back and then you can send me a check. I'm in no hurry to get it back.

GREG

No, I want you to have that. He owes it to you.

ROBERT

Please, I don't need it. It can wait. Please.

(HE gives GREG the money)

GREG

It's gonna take him awhile.

ROBERT

Please, I don't care. I feel just terrible about all of this.

GREG

Don't you worry about it. He had it coming. If it hadn't been you, he'da done somethin' else.

ROBERT

What I don't understand is how he spent that much money that quickly. I hope he bought something good with it.

GREG

I told you he'd been to the bank. He changed it all into quarters and he went down to Bubba's Fun-a-rama. They've got this brand new pinball machine in there and he's just plain determined to get the highest score on it.

ROBERT

Wait a second. What?

GREG

I'm telling you, he was just gonna keep playing until he got the highest score in history.

ROBERT

You're telling me he spend two hundred dollars on a pinball machine?

GREG

A little more. He got his allowance on Friday.

ROBERT

Playing pinball?

GREG

I know you're probably finding it a little difficult to believe, but I see it perfectly. You've got to understand that at this point in his life, that's his ambition. Right now he needs to show all of his friends that he can get the highest score in the history of the place, and he'll do just about anything to get it. I think it's kinda sweet in a way. You know, for a while I was starting to think that he was just not my son. I mean, he does all these wild things, all the time breaking his mother's heart. And mine. I though no son of mine would do such hurtful things. But this: now I see that he's just like me at his age. Never looking around the corner at tomorrow, just living for the moment, just this second. It hurts me, but at least I know he's mine. He's gotta be my son.

(LODEY comes out of the house, holding a flash camera in one hand and dragging RIPLEY with the other. RIPLEY's eyes are red and puffy; he's been crying)

LODEY

I'm sorry honey, I know this is a bad time, but it just occurred to me that I haven't taken one picture of Robert since he's been home and this is my last chance.

RIPLEY

Mama, please. I'm really not much in the mood for having my picture took.

LODEY

This'll take no more than a minute. Sit in the swing next to your brother.

(RIPLEY does, wiping his eyes)

Put your arm around him, Robert, and smile!

(ROBERT does. SHE snaps the picture.

Nothing happens.

Well, this ain't working.

GREG

No, Mama, you have to push this top button. See it there?



LODEY

This here? I don't think so, honey.

GREG

No, Mama! This! This thing here!

LODEY

I've got it, I've got it, leave me be.

ROBERT

(To RIPLEY:) How's Adrian? Is he okay?

(LODEY snaps the picture, the flash explodes.  
RIPLEY stops smiling and bursts into tears)

RIPLEY

We don't know, we don't know. He's just lying there, screaming in pain. Lord, I just want his pain to go away. And that doctor is taking his sweet time in getting here!

LODEY

Now honey, I told you, don't fret so much about it. I tell you, as sure as I'm standing here, that boy's got a demon in him that just doesn't want to come out. Now I want Robert and Greg. Ripley, honey, let your brother sit down.

(RIPLEY stands and GREG takes his place)

Now that evil spirit is hiding where the Lord can't see him, but I can tell he's still in there; now we just got to wait for him to show hisself again and we'll be ready for him. Smile!

(SHE snaps the picture)

You see, the Lord's got him with his defenses down, and he knows it. That's why he's playing games with us. And he knows that the minute he comes back, Jesus is gonna swoop down and cast him out once and for all. Now I want all three of my boys together. Robert, you stand up and get behind the swing. Ripley, go sit down next to Greg.

(THEY follow her instructions)

Now Robert, put your arms around your brothers.

(HE does)

LODEY

That's it. That's perfect. That's just beautiful.

(SHE snaps the picture. A pause)

That's beautiful.

ROBERT

Mama, are you okay?

LODEY

Oh, I'm fine, honey. I guess I'm just winding down after all the excitement this week.

(A pause. SHE snuffles)

I guess my heat's catching up to me.

GREG

Now let's get a picture of you two.

(GREG takes the camera)

Mama, sit down in the swing.

(HE leads her over and sits her in the swing)

Ripley, get up and get out of the way.

(RIPLEY goes and leans against the wall of the house, sobbing)

Robert, sit next to Mama.

(ROBERT does)

This one's gonna be great.

(LODEY and ROBERT put their arms around each other)

GREG

Well, smile!

LODEY

Take the picture, son.

(LODEY and ROBERT don't smile. The flash goes off. LODEY and ROBERT stay in their positions. SHE looks at RIPLEY)

Honey, please stop crying. I'm telling you, he's gonna be okay.

RIPLEY

I've... I don't think I've ever felt so much pain in my whole life.

(HE cries)

LODEY

He'll stay here tonight. And I'll stay up with him. We're gonna wait. The Lord's gonna force that demon up where we can see him and the Lord's gonna scare him so good, he'll never even look back.

RIPLEY

It's just... To see your own son like that... Nobody should ever have to go through this... I didn't even recognize him!

LODEY

That's the demon, honey.

(GREG puts an arm around him)

GREG

You heard Mama. He's gonna be all right.

(RIPLEY pounds the wall of the house)

RIPLEY

I made a promise! I promised him he'd never have to try this again. I told him I'd make sure he was never unhappy.

GREG

You can't make promises like that, fool. I'll go and call the club for you.

RIPLEY

No, you better let me call. I'll tell 'em what's happened.  
(RIPLEY looks at his watch)  
Lord, it's later than I thought. I better start getting ready.

GREG

Getting ready?

RIPLEY

(Wiping his eyes:) I'll bet you, right here and now, that I am going to give the performance of my life.

GREG

You're not. You're not going to start singing.

RIPLEY

With all of this pain inside me, are you kidding? I'm gonna be amazing. I'm gonna cry my heart out in those songs. I'm gonna be... what's the word Mattie uses? Shattering. That's it. I'm gonna be shattering.

(GREG ignores him and goes to LODEY)

GREG

Mama, is Billie still inside? I'm gonna take her on home.

LODEY

Well, bless her heart, she's where she always is; in the toilet, changing some baby's diaper.

(GREG exits, RIPLEY behind him)

RIPLEY

You know something Greg, I was talking to Robert, and I had this wonderful idea.

GREG

Sorry, Ripley, but I think I've had it up to here with your ideas.

(THEY are gone. A pause)

LODEY

Well, I tell you, my teeth are killing me.

(A pause)

Don't suppose I can do anything about that, though. The minute I take 'em out, somebody else'll drop by, wanting dinner. Lord, this past week has been a trial for me. Isn't this just the prettiest time of day? So peaceful. And look at those azaleas. This has been their best year yet. Those little wispy clouds up there make you want to cry, they're so beautiful.

ROBERT

Must be almost time for me to be calling that cab, I guess.

LODEY

Oh, you've still got plenty of time, I'm sure. I'm so sorry we haven't had any time together since you've been home. I'd like to say that I'll save all the news for the next time I see you, but the way things have been going, Lord knows how many years... hopefully it won't be so long the next time.

(SHE begins to cry. ROBERT holds her)

ROBERT

Please, Mama...

LODEY

I'm just telling you, it's just catching up to me, so you're not to pay attention. I knew the minute I slowed down a bit I'd look around and see it's just like it used to be, the three of you. Except now Earl's not here and I knew I'd start bawling. Your silly old Mama. No wonder it's take you so long to come home.

ROBERT

People get side-tracked, Mama. I really didn't mean to stay away so long. I just started saying "maybe next year" and then it just kept getting pushed further and further away. Overnight, it turned to ten years. I'm so sorry.

LODEY

People don't forget to come home by accident! I'm sorry too, I'm proud of you, I am, I know you were busy and it truly did pay off for you up there. Earl and me were very proud.

(A pause)

Jimmy Swann down at the Sentinel got word that you were coming to town and wanted to come by to interview you, but I told him no. I don't know how he found out.

(A pause)

I'm sorry I did that, honey, but I just couldn't handle any more excitement this week. I've had my share.

ROBERT

(Overlapping:) No, I'm glad you did, Mama, thank you. That's the last thing I need. I don't give a damn what this town thinks of me. I've had enough in-depth, no-holds-barred interviews to last the rest of my life. No sooner had I found out about Daddy, but somebody was knocking on my door with a microphone, ready to photograph my initial reaction. I almost don't wanna go home.

LODEY

You ARE home, honey.

ROBERT

I mean where I'm living. I don't wanna go back.

LODEY

I know, honey. I knew what you meant. Lord, Earl would like to slap my face if he should hear me talking to you like this. I can't even count the times he'd just get so mad at me, all those nights you'd call and I'm like to cry my eyes out over the phone for you to come on home, and he'd not say a word to me for the next three days, 'cept "Good morning" or "Good night." I mean, he wanted you home as much as me, but what he wanted even more was for you to be doing exactly what you were doing. I never mean to make you feel sad about not coming home, baby. Because of you, your daddy died a proud man. He'd drive on into town and everybody knew who he was. They all knew he was your father and treated him like visiting royalty. The one thing I guess he wanted most from this life was for his name to mean something, and he was pretty sure he'd never do it. So he was counting, with all his life, on one of his sons. And here's Ripley at forty years old, still singing the same old songs he sang at seventeen and nobody hears him. Oh, he wants what you've got so bad he can taste it, but I don't know, he just didn't get it. You've gotta admire that boy for trying, though. I only wish he'll see the light one of these days and just be content with his wife and his children and see that the Lord just had other plans for him. Then of course there's Greg, who seems to have finally admitted he just wasn't cut out for all the things he dreamed. He's settled down. But I can't say he seems all that happy about it. You're the only one. And I can remember way back to when you were a little child and I could see you wanting things that was just all in vain and I'd tuck you into bed saying, "Don't do it, don't cry for the moon, you'll never get it." But you got back at me, I guess. You did cry. And you truly got it.

ROBERT

Yeah. I got it. Now I just gotta figure out what I'm supposed to do with it.

(A pause)

I don't even know what it means to have it. Sometimes... I start to think it doesn't mean anything, really, especially when I get home and don't even recognize that the old man lying in that coffin used to be my Daddy.

LODEY

You got no score to settle with your Daddy, honey. I'm here to tell you that he left this house a happy man.

ROBERT

Listen, mama, what say we stop this little square dance we're doin'? There sure is some score to settle. And you surely know the reason I didn't come home these past ten years has nothing whatever to do with you crying too much on the phone, or the overgrown azaleas, or too small a house or any of that other nonsense, so why don't we stop all this? I couldn't come home with him still here.

LODEY

Don't say "him." Your Daddy deserves more respect.

ROBERT

Does he? Was I supposed to come home like nothing happened? Pretend he wasn't here? Tell me. What?

(From inside the house, we hear the hymn that was played at the top of the act. After the hymn ends, a large choir of voices begin to sing. After this, we hear LODEY begin to deliver a sermon before a large congregation. This plays under most of the following scene. It should be loud enough to distinguish certain words and phrases when LODEY and ROBERT fall silent, but it shouldn't be a distraction. It should have the quality being a homemade tape recording of a radio broadcast from many years ago)

LODEY

Whew! That scared me. Somebody when and put on one of my old radio shows, will you listen to that? Every Sunday Earl would play one. Somebody must've remembered; they're keeping up the tradition. You see honey, he's still in there. And you will always be welcome in his house. Oh, this is an old one.

ROBERT

Now that he's gone, Mama, I'll come down as much as you'd like.

LODEY

Why do you think your Daddy did what he did?

ROBERT

What's it matter? All I know is he did it. 'Scuse me, Mama. My Daddy. Daddy did it. He threw me out and told me he didn't want me back here, ever. Those were his words. My Daddy's words. "Don't you come back, I don't want you in my house, not 'til I'm dead. You go on, now. Go on." Like I was a hound in the yard. He did that thing he always did, you know, when he'd point his finger in your face and bring his face up close like this, like he was gonna hit you.

LODEY

Ooooh, don't do that, honey, it gives me the willies. You're the image of him.

(SHE shows her arm)

Look. Goose-flesh.

ROBERT

I always thought that was worse than being hit. I never flinched when he hit me. And I never cried. Never. But when he'd do that, the tears would just jump out my eyeballs.

LODEY

You haven't answered me. Why'd he do it?

ROBERT

Don't give me this, Mama. You know why. And "why" don't even matter anymore, it's so long ago. The point is, I just couldn't come home. Even if he had asked me, and he never would've, but if he had, I wouldn't have come home. It's not that I didn't love him, Mama. Don't think that. I loved him. I still do, I love him. He just scared me to death.

LODEY

Well, Praise God he did. Without a little bit of fear in your heart, you ain't goin' nowhere, honey.

ROBERT

What happened to that doctor? Ripley must be having a conniption. You want I should give him another call?

LODEY

No, no... you sit. And don't you dare tell Ripley this, but I didn't call any doctor. No doctor can cure what's wrong with that boy. He's gonna be fine.

(A pause)

You'll be fine, too, my darlin'. You'll be on your way home in a little while. And you forget everything I've said; I don't wanna think you're having any second thoughts, you must go on. I just praise Jesus that Earl was able to see that you didn't belong here long before I saw it.

ROBERT

Awww... bull, Mama. He saw nothing. A blind man drove me to the bus station. If he weren't blind, he woulda seen my tears. He wouldn'ta thrown me out like he did.

LODEY

And I am asking why. Why would he throw out his favorite son?

ROBERT

You know. Why are you putting it to me this way?

LODEY

I'm asking you why.

ROBERT

'Cause he found out about me and Dolores Wesley!

LODEY

What about her?

ROBERT

Come on, Mama. Why do we have to go over all this?

LODEY

Well, maybe because I wanna know your side of things. I've been hearin' Earl's side for the past ten years, it's about time I heard what you've got to say. Hearing his side every Sunday when you'd call, we'd go over it and over it again. Every week when you'd call, he'd go into the bedroom and pick up the extension. We had a signal worked out. He'd pick up the phone extra slowly, so you wouldn't know he was there. Didn't know this, did you!

(A long pause)

ROBERT

No.

LODEY

You also didn't know that he'd put his hand over the mouthpiece so you wouldn't hear him sobbing. But I heard. I heard him crying his heart out in the next room.

ROBERT

What is this, Mama? You trying to get me to think what he did was right? Cut it out.

LODEY

And then you'd hang up the phone and he'd wait for that little click. And he'd shout out "I love you, son, I love you!"

(A pause. ROBERT points to a tear on his cheek)

ROBERT

There. See, Mama? You got what you wanted.

(A pause)

And why couldn't he say that to me? I don't think that's very admirable. In fact, if you wanna know the truth, I think it's plain pig-headed stubborn.

LODEY

This is what I'm aiming at, honey. From what I've been hearing of your side of things, they don't seem to match his.

ROBERT

Did you think they would?

LODEY

Now the way he told it, this one day he gets a call from Dolores Wesley. She wanted to talk to you, but he got it.

ROBERT

And she told him I got her pregnant. She told me.

LODEY

Okay, honey, hush. Let me tell it. So she told him... this news. And he went to the bank, took out the money, gave it to her and then waited for you to come home. You know what I never could figure, though? If she wanted to talk to you so bad, why'd she call at that time of day? When she knew you'd be at work?

(A pause)

So: why did your Daddy do that to you? Huh?

ROBERT

'Cause... I shocked him. 'Cause he couldn't believe his son would do such a terrible thing. 'Cause... I don't know. 'Cause I offended his morality.

LODEY

Morality?! What are you, deaf as a post? Blind as a bat? Morality. What a silly thing to say. A man who drank beer the way he did and cursed like a sailor wouldn't have the gall to judge someone else's morals. Oh, honey, morality had nothing to do with it. He had such pride in his sons. And such hope, too. But Ripley and Greg, they just... Don't you see? You were the



only one left! You stood by and watched your brothers digging their own holes to China and what'd you do? You fell right in with them. No, not fell. You jumped! With both feet. Landed on your butt, I daresay. He just reached in his hand and pulled you out and sent you on your way. Did you ever stop to think what woulda happened if he hadn't thrown you out? I shudder to think. And for what? Dolores Wesley? Whew!

(A pause)

Ida Mae Wesley still turns the other way when I run into her over at the Piggly-Wiggly, but, well, that's no great loss; she never had much to say in the first place.

(A pause)

ROBERT

Oh, Mama... I wish... you hadn't told me any of this.

LODEY

Well, I figured you needed to know how much that man loved you. You didn't seem to know.

ROBERT

No, Mama. It's not that. I wish you didn't tell me 'cause it makes me mad as a hornet. Why couldn't he have told me what he was doin' while he was doin' it? Did he think I couldn't figure things out for myself? Why did he wait until it's too late for him to know what I feel?

LODEY

Oh, he knows, honey, he knows. Don't you worry about that. There's a little bit of him all over the place. He's there in that flower, that bright blue one, you can smell it from over here. He's in that apple tree over there, hangin' on that branch...

ROBERT

I'm getting too old for this kind of thing, Mama, so cut it out. He coulda told me what he was thinking. I would've understood. We coulda talked it out. Instead, he just wanted to be a bully.

LODEY

You know, Robert Earl... sometimes you really are an imbecile. He had to be strong, don't you see? He was afraid of bein' weak. If he'd been understanding about it and you'd had a nice long talk, which never does any good in my opinion, he'd have given in to you and you'd still be here, driving a trailer rig from here to Tallulah, trying to keep up the mortgage payments and hoping Dolores Junior don't need braces. He tried the nice long talk route with Ripley and Greg and, well, you see what happened. They were his practice sons; you were his last chance. He couldn't risk it. You're just like Ripley and Greg, you've all got his blood runnin' through your veins sure enough. But their hearts are weak. Trouble is, with the two of them the blood stops being pumped somewhere around their hearts. It doesn't get pumped into their brains, it doesn't tell their feet where to go.

LODEY (CONTINUED)

Poor Greg. These days he's just like a dried up desert with no oasis in sight. It don't matter which way he turns, it's all the same... and endless stretch, nothing grows there. Ripley: he's just lost in the woods. He knows which way he wants to go all right, but he's bein' held down. And you... well, we don't need to say anything about you. You saw what you wanted and you chased it and you got it. Your Daddy sent his three sons out into the world, you're the only one who got ahold of the brass ring.

(A pause. ROBERT laughs)

ROBERT

Yeah. Problem is, I thought it was gold. You know, when I first got off that plane, I couldn't wait to get back on again. And now, I can't think of a reason in the world to go back. I have nothing back there, really, when you think of it. And here you are, alone. I should be caring for you, I should help my brothers...

LODEY

Honey, we both loved somebody that we both loved very much, but he wants us to go on. Don't try to deny it to me, I can see it. You want to go on, you always have. And we have to go on. We have to. There's nothing else to do.

(On the tape, the congregation stops singing and the sermon begins. For LODEY'S SERMON, see the appendix)

ROBERT

I really thought that coming home again would be the answer. I thought it would help me to get back those feelings that vanished so long ago; those feelings I had when I was young. I can remember so clearly lying in bed at night, trembling in the dark. That old attic fan made noises like evil itself was coming to get me. And there were rustlings in the bushes outside my window that would start my heart pounding. The fear of all those unknown things was... almost wonderful. And I'd pray with all my heart for the morning and the joy of sitting on my Mama's lap while she eats breakfast and the wonder of looking at the clouds moving across the sky and the happiness that overpowers everything when I see my Daddy's car coming into the driveway after a long day at work. But now... I don't know... I can explain everything; they're meaningless now. I know that the attic fan just needs oil and that's why it makes such a horrible noise. And I can guess that it's probably a frog in the bushes outside and I know the morning's coming eventually and I'm way too big to sit on your lap anymore and the clouds move because the earth's rotating on its axis, or whatever the hell it is, and I know Daddy's not coming home anymore.

## LODEY

Well, I'm telling you honey, you better be frightened. You need to have the fear put back in your heart and I am telling you, you better get ready to have the toot scared out of you!

(SHE begins to pace the stage, sometimes languidly, other times rapidly and with great excitement, as if preaching)

The Fear left me heart when I was eighteen years old. I had decided with all my body and soul that I knew what I wanted. Nothing was going to stop me; it ran through the blood in my veins. I knew that come hell or high water, I was going to be a secretary! And my mama, God bless her soul, wanted it for me even more than I wanted it for myself. She just encouraged me no end. I went to typing school three nights a week. All day long I practiced and in three weeks' time I was up to a hundred and twenty words a minute. And this was before those fancy electric jobs arrived, the kind that practically do the work for you. I'm telling you honey, I had a real affinity for it. I took a Gregg shorthand course through the mail and Mama would help me by pretending that she was the boss of the big corporation that I was destined to work for, dictating letters to me. And then I typed them up, I kept the boss' schedule together, I answered all the calls that came in, writing down the names and numbers, even if I knew it was only Aunt Lottie calling from Monroe. We even set up a filing system for the laundry: In box: dirty. Out box: clean. I even made the coffee. We turned our shanty into a multi-million dollar operation! I decided I was going to start in Atlanta, then move to Chicago for a few years and then onto the Big Time in New York City. Mama got me some jobs around town so I could save up enough money for my bus ticket and first month's rent. When I could finally afford it, I picked up two very smart outfits that I could start work in. Honey, I tell you, those days waiting for that bus were the longest and most agonizing of my entire life. I don't think I got more than two hours of sleep that last final week. Then the big day came and I could barely breathe for the thrill! Like a roller-coaster, like flying like a bird, I couldn't even keep down my morning coffee. We drove to the bus stop, Mama and me, and we sat in the car waiting, with me like to jump right through the roof. And we see the bus rounding the corner and I let out a squeal just like one of Cartwright's little playthings, and I turn to Mama and of course the tears are just pouring down my face. And she's not even crying. She just looks at me, calm as could be. "Lodey. Lodey, honey," she says. "Don't go. We need you here. I'm sorry, but if you go, I don't wanna hear from you no more." Well, I just guess THAT stopped me crying. But I got outta that car as fast as I could and I grabbed my suitcase and I ran to that bus, even with the highest heels I've ever worn, I ran. And the bus door opened and this handsome, sun-tanned smiling bus driver with sunglasses on turns around to me and he says, "How far you goin'?" And I just stood there, hearing the motor, smelling the exhaust. And then I just turned on my heel. I heard the door close on my back and I could tell those hinges needed an oiling real bad. And we went home.

LODEY (CONTINUED)

I climbed into bed and I must have stayed there sleeping on and off for three days solid. I had nightmares, I sometimes still do, of hearing that old squeaky bus door and I wake up with the smell of that exhaust and the dust from the wheels peeling away. And on the fourth day, I got up and went into town and sold my bus ticket and I went next door into the Terminal Bar and I had my first whiskey and I bought my first pack of cigarettes. I guess you could say that I never really went back home again. It's just pitiful to think of it now, but your Mama was a floozy, honey.

ROBERT

Oh, please, Mama, don't tell me this. I don't like hearing this.

LODEY

You're gonna know what it means to be scared! Now hush up and listen.

(A pause)

That was my life for the next six months. And I wore those dresses that I bought for my trip. They looked a little strange, I mean they were office attire, not honky-tonk dresses, but I wanted to get SOME use out of them. And there I was one night; me and my girlfriends were in about our fourth honky-tonk that night and I was on my eighth whiskey sour and I was just opening up my second pack of cigarettes and I was keeping an eye on the glorious man in uniform that was sitting alone at the end of the end of the bar. He looks over at me and I give him a little wink, like this: Whew! You shoulda seen your old mama in those days. After a lot of giggling with the old gals, I sidle on up to the bar and I whisper to him that I'm fresh out of dimes. Would he play me a song to get me dancing again? He smiles at me, says he'd be glad to oblige, which he does, and I give him a kiss for the dime and tell him he should see what I do for a quarter. And the music starts rocking the floor and before I know it, my high heels are off, I've kicked 'em high in the air and one of 'em's caught in the chandelier! Then I'm up on the table, kicking my legs up in the air like a jackass, hoisting my skirt up, showing my legs, showing off the fancy underwear I bought for Atlanta and singing at the top of my lungs. All the time keeping my eye on the guy at the bar. And then the lights seem to be getting brighter and I'm looking at them, they're blinding me, and I'm thinking it must be the whiskey sours. And the jukebox is fading away until I can barely hear it. And then I don't hear it. Everything is stock-still. I'm getting just a wee bit scared and I feel the cold sweat breaking out on me, on my forehead, on my hands. Then I begin to make out, in all this blinding light, a figure coming near me, reaching out his hand, a smile, the sweetest smile on his face, coming closer, coming out of the sky and the sweat is gone and I'm warm all over and his hand slowly, lightly, comes to rest on my forehead. Jesus pulled the rug out from underneath me. And I fell off the table onto the floor and I'm gone. All I remember from there is the voices saying, "She's speaking in tongues! Now she's talking in French! She's talking in German!" And I open my eyes and Jesus is holding me, looking back at me. It was the soldier at the end of the bar. That was your Daddy, honey.

LODEY (CONTINUED)

I got saved that night and I got married the next week. And what I'm telling you is don't you dare say that you're not scared, 'cause the minute you say it or try to show it, the Devil knows about it and he's sure gonna come after you. The Devil has the power to just stick his hand up out of the ground and take a firm hold on you. So you look out, or the Devil's gonna come after you!

ROBERT

Stop it, Mama.

LODEY

You think I'm kidding with you? I'm as serious as I can be. His hand's gonna come up out of that grass... Right there!

(SHE points to a spot on the ground by  
ROBERT's feet)

ROBERT

Stop it!

LODEY

He is! He's gonna grab you! He's gonna grab ahold of your leg and pull you down!

ROBERT

Cut it out, Mama! Stop it!

LODEY

And your Daddy can't help you, your Daddy's crying for you because you're telling him you don't believe in him! You've forsaken your Daddy and he can't help you.

ROBERT

MAMA! Please... stop. You're scaring me.

LODEY

You've slapped your Daddy in his face and he's turned his back on you and no one and nothing can help you until you stop resisting and just give in, until you have the fear knocked back into your heart!

(SHE slaps him on the forehead with the heel  
of her hand and HE falls to the ground,  
sobbing. SHE waits a moment and then SHE  
goes to him and takes him in her arms)

ROBERT

I am scared, Mama... I'm scared... I'm so scared...

(HE is shivering)

LODEY

That's all I needed to hear, my baby. Your Daddy loves you; he's not crying anymore. Everything's all right, my darling. I know you're all right now. You're ready to go on. We're both ready to go on. I have to go on, too. I only just realized it this moment. I've only got a little while to get ready. I guess you could use a few minutes alone. I'll go call that taxi cab for you.

(SHE exits into the house. ROBERT, left alone, wipes away his tears and walks over to the apple tree. HE leans against the trunk, looking up into the sky. HE is distracted by something in the street)

ROBERT

Who is that out there? Cartwright? Is that you, honey? Get out of the street, baby, you're gonna get yourself hurt. Come on over here to me.

(There is a pause. Then a LITTLE BOY runs on from the side of the house, giggling. HE runs over to the tree and tries to climb it, unsuccessfully)

What's the matter, sugar? What do you want?

(The LITTLE BOY bends down, picks an apple up off the ground and takes a bite)

Oh, honey, ugh, spit that out. Probably got lots of little worms in it. You wanna eat a lot of ugly little worms. Put that down.

(HE shakes the LITTLE BOY's hand until the apple drops.)

Come on, I'll help you get one.

(HE picks up the LITTLE BOY and hoists him into the air)

There's one. Can't you get it?

(The LITTLE BOY has his arms up in the air, trying to grab an apple with his hands and giggling like mad. GREG comes out of the house)

GREG

What the hell are you two doing?

(ROBERT puts the LITTLE BOY down on the ground)

Come on, Cartwright, we're getting' ready to go on home.

(CARTWRIGHT runs to his father, wraps his arms around one of his legs)

(To ROBERT:) He's getting tired.

(RIPLEY comes out of the house)

RIPLEY

You still here, brother?

ROBERT

I think Mama's calling the cab; should be here soon.

RIPLEY

Well, they tell me I'm sold out. That's good news, I guess. My audience probably thinks you're gonna be there.

(A pause)

Sure wish I could go with you. I think things could really start popping for me if I could just get outta this old town.

ROBERT

Listen, if you ever want to come up, just do it. I've got room for you. You know all you have to do is get on a plane.

RIPLEY

Well, I just might. Thanks, brother.

GREG

He's just sayin' that. You know you won't.

RIPLEY

I might. You don't know me all that well, keep your mouth shut.

GREG

I know you a lot better than you think I do, fool.

(LODEY comes out of the house wearing a long, shimmering white gown, like a choir robe)

RIPLEY

Mama!

GREG

Mama, what the hell have you got on?

LODEY

Don't swear. Sister Althea down at the church has asked me to go preach up there and I've decided to take her up on her offer. I told her no, but I've changed my mind. I called her, and she told me to come on over. We all have to go on.

(A pause)

I don't like what I've been seeing on the T.V. from these new folks say they're talkin' religion. I know they mean well and I'm sure their hearts are in the right place, but... I don't know. They don't know what it means. There's no mystery about it anymore, there's no excitement. I turn on the T.V. and I swear, I can't tell the difference between them and "The Price is Right." So, I figure they could use someone to come along and show 'em how it's done. Shoot, they got all these ladies prancing around, painted up like a bunch of sluts. And they're talkin' Jesus! Oh, some of 'em are kind of sweet, but most of 'em like to make me wanna go and puke.

ROBERT

Good for you, Mama. Don't be scared.

LODEY

Oh, I ain't sayin' I ain't scared!

(SHE laughs. A pause)

RIPLEY

I guess I oughta be sayin' my goodbyes, brother. I'm gonna have to be heading off pretty soon.

(HE comes down off the porch, goes to ROBERT and THEY embrace. THEY hold each other for a long time. Finally, GREG comes over and joins them. Then LODEY comes down off the porch and wraps her arms around all three of them. CARTWRIGHT stays on the porch. HE climbs up on the porch railing and balances like a tightrope walker. The embrace breaks and THEY move apart, look at each other. THEY start to laugh)

LODEY

Isn't this pitiful? There's just nothing left to say.

(A pause. SHE points to CARTWRIGHT)  
And look at him! Greg, honey, you better keep an eye on your kids!

(A car horn honks)

ROBERT

There it is.

(GREG goes to the porch and takes CARTWRIGHT off the railing)

GREG

Come on son, you wanna ride?

(HE puts the BOY over his shoulders and sits him there)

LODEY

I'll get your bags, honey.

(SHE goes up onto the porch)

RIPLEY

I'll get 'em.

(HE beats her to the porch)

GREG

Hell, I'm here, I'll get 'em.

(HE picks up the bags, CARTWRIGHT still on his shoulders, and carries them down to the lawn. )

ROBERT

Thank you, brother.

(A pause)  
Mama...



(The car horn honks again, twice)

LODEY

You go on now, we'll be all right. You go on.

(ROBERT picks up his suitcases and walks straight downstage, as if to walk into the audience. Then, on an impulse, HE drops his bags, runs up to the apple tree and jumps straight up into the air)

Lord, how high!

(HE grabs an apple off one of the branches and tosses it to RIPLEY on the porch. RIPLEY catches it with one hand)

BLACKOUT

THE PLAY IS OVER.



APPENDIX: Lodey's Sermon

LODEY

I want to thank you all for coming by tonight, in spite of the weather. I'm here to tell you what the Lord God told me last night in prayer, what he's told me to pass on to all of these good souls tonight. The Lord is not happy with what he sees, but you know I don't need to tell you that.

THE CROWD

Amen, Sister!

LODEY

All you've got to do is look out that window at that terrible storm that has plagued us since Thursday to know that something is not right. And the Lord showed me in prayer. He told me the words! He led me to the Bible and he led me to the Word!

THE CROWD

Hallelujah!

LODEY

The Lord has beheld a sinful nation, they have forsaken the Lord and they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger! You're askin', what's this woman talkin' about? I'll tell you. How else can you explain the largest number of car accident deaths over this past weekend in our state's history? I saw that in this morning's newspaper and I know. How else do you explain the telephone company building being burnt to the very ground? The Lord has explained it to me. It's right there! And I am here to pass it on to you.

A VOICE IN THE CROWD

Tell it to us!

ANOTHER VOICE

(Overlapping:) Tell us, Sister!

LODEY

There has be a precedence. Isaiah saw it then and I'm seein' it now. Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of Hosts with thunder! And with great noise and storm and tempest and the fire of devouring flame! Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel with wrath and with fierce anger to lay the land desolate! And he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it! Now, and this most importantly, what he says now: For all the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light, the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. Now look, you don't have to be no genius to see that as a true prophesy. Have you seen the moon? Have you been able to see any stars in the sky this past week through all this rain? And I can tell you another thing: it's not getting any better. As sure as I'm standing here before you, we're in for a mighty terrible drought this summer. Isaiah says when the day of the Lord is at hand, the waters shall be desolate, the hay is withered away, the grass faileth, there is no green thing.

LODEY (CONTINUED)

The Lord God of Hosts shall make a consumption in the midst of all the land. He has seen that this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord. The Lord spoke: Awake! Awake, stand up, o Jerusalem! There is none to guide her among all the sons that she has brought forth; neither is there any that taketh her by the hand of all the sons that she has brought up.

(A pause)

Well, I am here. I am here for you. You have ME to tell you what the truth is, to show you where you have gone wrong, and what we are going to do, what the Lord wants us to do, what we must do!

THE CROWD

Amen!

A VOICE

Praise God!

LODEY

But you gotta listen to me, you've gotta help me in this, there's no sense in my doing it alone! Last week after the meeting, some folks came up to me saying "Sister, we don't wanna hear this stuff. You're scaring the children, you're scaring us." So I said to them, "Well, maybe the children aren't meant to hear this, maybe you're right, you leave them at home or send 'em to Sunday School. But you had better listen! And you had better be scared! What do you people want to hear? Do you want me to tell lies to you, tell you everything is all right? Or do you wanna hear the truth?"

A VOICE

The truth, Sister!

LODEY

Answer me! Do you wanna hear the true word of God, or do you wanna hear a pack of lies to make you feel better?

THE CROWD

(Randomly:) The truth, the truth! Tell us the Word, Sister! Praise God! Tell us the Word of the Lord!

LODEY

All right, then.

(A pause)

You know, Isaiah had the same problem. He tells us what the people said to him. "Prophecy not unto us right things; speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits." Now here we have part of the problem. You're all sittin' out there sayin' "Why is the Lord angry with me? What have I done? I go to the church here every Sunday and I try to live by His Word."

A VOICE

I do, Sister!

LODEY

Well, I tell you, most of you in here I know pretty well, and I know you're a good and righteous people. But then there are the ones who come and tell me what I should be preachin'! And despite the Word of Our Lord, and trust in oppression and perverseness. Some of you have not turned against the Word of Our Lord, but have done something that I consider much worse. You have taken him for granted! And you must feel the fear of God deep down in your hearts! You must feel it! Are you scared? Are you?

A VOICE

I am!

ANOTHER VOICE

I'm scared, Sister!

LODEY

You must feel it! Do you? Do you feel the fear?

THE CROWD

I feel it! Yes, Sister, I feel it!

LODEY

Let me tell you a story. Last week, my husband Earl and me were driving over to the grocery store and we were stuck on the highway in a big traffic tie-up. There was an accident on ahead. And I saw a man at the side of the road. He was hitchhiking. And this wasn't one of those highway bums that you see so often. This was a nicely dressed young Negro man in a suit. And I don't know if you remember last Tuesday, but I think the temperature was up around a hundred and five at noontime. And I could see the sweat pouring, just pouring down this poor man's face. And EVERYBODY on that road was ignoring him. They just rolled up their windows and kept on talking like he wasn't there! And it's hundred degree weather! And they'd rather roll up the windows and bake themselves than give this poor man a lift! So I leaned out and I told him to hop in, we'd give him a ride. And the look of gratitude on that man's face was almost enough to make you want to cry. And he got in the back seat. And suddenly, the traffic started to move. He told me the Lord was coming. And soon. And He was displeased with what He had seen goin' on here. He assured me I would be spared. And he thanked me again for my generosity. And I looked as we passed the accident that had held us up and I turned around to speak to him again, and HE WASN'T THERE. He just vanished. And he wasn't on the road, neither. And then I spoke last weekend to another Sister who preaches just north of us here, and she tells me that she had the exact same experience. And it sounded like the same Negro man. As sure as I'm standing here, that man was an angel of the Lord, come down to give us a warning. Now I tell you what this means. The Lord is angriest of all at this kind of behavior. He's not telling us who to hate. I'm not telling you, "This man's a sinner, despise him." I'm not telling you don't do this, don't do that, it's a sin. I'm not telling you what to do on a Saturday night! What the Lord is so disappointed by is just this. The way we look down on our fellow man; the way we judge each other, our inhospitality and rudeness to each other. Why do you think they call him the Lord of Hosts? Hosts! Do you understand me?

THE CROWD

Amen, Sister!

LODEY

Do you know that you are no better than him? And that she is no better than you? And do you know that what he does in private is just no business of yours? And that what she was doing before she moved here shouldn't matter to you at all? It is between her and Our Lord. It is for the Lord to judge if she is righteous, not you. It is this attitude that has angered the Lord. And He says, because the Daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go. Therefore, the Lord will smite with a scab the head of the Daughters of Zion, and will discover their secret parts! The Lord will take away the chains and the bracelets, the bonnets and the ornaments of the legs and the headbands and the earrings and the changeable suits of apparel. And it shall come to pass that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink, and instead of well-set hair, baldness. And a burning instead of beauty! Therefore, the Lord shall have no joy in their young men, neither shall have mercy on the fatherless and widows, for everyone is a hypocrite and an evildoer and every mouth speaks folly.

A VOICE

Save us, Sister!

SEVERAL VOICES

Save us!

(LODEY's voice chokes up)

LODEY

But Isaiah goes on, and this is the point, this is what you must understand, for all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. And this... this is the beauty of Our Lord.

SEVERAL VOICES

Hallelujah!

LODEY

You must not worry, Our Lord tells us. He says, say unto them that are of a fearful heart, be strong; fear not: Behold, you God will come with a vengeance, even God with a recompense, he will come and save you. Look unto me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is none else. Behold, my servants shall sing for joy of heart, but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart and shall howl for vexation of spirit. And what will you do in the day of visitation? And in the desolation which shall come from far? To whom will you flee for help? Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. The voice of him that cries in the wilderness: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for Our God." And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

SEVERAL VOICES

Hallelujah!

LODEY

And the voice said, "Cry." And he said, what shall I cry? And Isaiah says the people will climb to the tops of their houses, and in the streets everyone shall howl, weeping abundantly, and my heart shall cry out, they shall raise up a cry of destruction! Howl ye, for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. The Lord will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity, and He will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and he will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible! And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them, they shall be amazed at one another, their faces shall be as flames. And Isaiah tells his people as I am telling you, my people, now, here, tonight, lift up thy voice with strength! Get thee up into the high mountain, lift it up, be not afraid, say unto the cities, Behold your God!

A VOICE

Hallelujah!

THE CROWD

Amen! Hallelujah!

(VOICES continue to shout praise)

LODEY

Let the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice! Let the inhabitants of the rock sing! Let the shout from the tops of the mountains!

(A long pause)

And the Lord, in His almighty goodness, responds to His people, says to his servants, says to you! And to you and you and you: Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. Praise the Lord!

THE CROWD

Praise the Lord!

LODEY

The Lord says, they shall build houses and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build and another inhabit, they shall not plant and another eat; my people shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them. And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer. And while they are yet speaking, I will hear. Amen.

THE CROWD

Amen!

(A long pause)

LODEY

Now I would like to call forth those who have come tonight to be reunited with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Feel free to come up, come up, those who need the Lord's help.

(The hymn begins to play, people shout "Hallelujah!" and there is the sound of many people getting up and moving towards the altar. This fades out and an ANNOUNCER's voice fades in)

ANNOUNCER

And good evening again, ladies and gentlemen. We are coming to you absolutely live and un-recorded tonight from the Church of the Redeeming Light, where the actual Sunday service is going on as we speak. Sister Lodey is guest preacher tonight, filling in for the vacationing Brother Martin. Let me just take pause to remind you to get yourselves over to the super supper special they're having this week over at Morrison's on Highway Twenty-Five...

(And the machine is clicked off.)